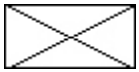


Born Of The Night
The League Series Book 1
Sherrilyn Kenyon

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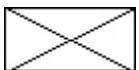
BORN OF FIRE

Awakening from a drugged sleep in a cold cell, the princess Kiara finds herself a prisoner of the merciless marauders who threaten her father's planetary kingdom. Miraculously, a rescuer appears, but behind his fearsome mask is the handsome face of a dark avenger whose outlaw touch sets her very soul aflame.

BORN OF DESIRE

They call him Nemesis. Once a renegade assassin, now a warrior-soldier sworn to protect the innocent from the ruthless mercenaries throughout the galaxies, he has many enemies. Besieged on every side, he knows he is a danger to the beauty he saves from certain death. But the lovely Kiara stirs a hungry longing in his battle-hardened heart, spurring him into a struggle that could restore his honor and heal the wounds of a beleaguered empire—or tear Kiara from his arms forever....

BORN OF THE NIGHT



THERE WAS A PRICE ON HER HEAD, AND FEAR IN HER HEART . . .

Nykyrian grabbed her arm. She was too calm. "You have to leave."

"I can't."

"Pitala and his kind will do anything to accomplish their mission. That includes bombing this theatre and everyone in it. They don't care how many lives they take as long as yours is one of them."

Kiara pulled away from him and walked into the hallway. Her toe struck something solid. She looked down. On the floor were the bodies of her dead guards.

Her screams echoed through the hallway.

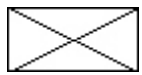
Nykyrian drew her into his arms and cradled her head against his chest. "Don't look," he whispered, his chest tightening into a painful knot of suppressed emotion. He held her while she sobbed. Her hot tears soaked through his shirt, forming chills on his skin. The soft scent of flowers drifted from her hair. He tightened his arms around her, wishing he could have something he could never have, wishing for things he could never give her—like peace, safety, and a better world.

"Everything will be fine," he said soothingly.

"No, it won't," Kiara sobbed.

She had almost died . . .

. . . AND ONLY ONE MAN COULD SAVE HER!



Prologue

"How dare you!" Commander Tiarun Biardi glowered at the Ambassador, his anger barely under his rigid control. In all the years he had ruled the Gouran Empire and sat as President of the Gourish Consulate, he had never felt as weak and helpless as he did now, facing the Probekein Ambassador before him.

Never had he yielded to threats and he had no intention of beginning what could only be a destructive habit.

Tiarun stood, glaring at the source of his agitation. "You can tell your emperor that we *refuse* to allow him access to Miremba IV!"

Calmly, slowly, the ambassador came to his feet, the silk of his robes rustling around the bulk of his form. "We shall have the rights to that outpost, or every member of this Council will feel the bite of Probekein justice." He stared alternately at the eight councilors seated at the round table before him.

From the dim light cast by the overhead lamps, Tiarun saw the color fade from the faces of his peers. His own heart pounded in trepidation.

Each of them knew the ferocity of the Probekeins — a warring race, they lived at the expense of weaker peoples. Even the design of the ambassador's gaudy, blood-colored robes reminded him of a wrongfully conquered planet.

The two men stood staring at each other from opposite ends of the table, neither would look away or blink. Tiarun sensed the Councilors' fear as they thought over the threat. His own fear thundered in his veins like a disease, threatening to rob him of his strength, his will.

Stiffening his spine, Tiarun knew he couldn't allow himself or his government to be subjected to the whims of the ambassador's race, no matter the consequences. It was his duty, along with every member there, to ensure the peaceful existence of all inhabitants of his world. If they gave in now, the Probekeins would think them weak and powerless.

"You may kill me," Tiarun said bravely. "I would rather die than allow you the weapon you intend to build!"

The ambassador gave an evil, lopsided smile. "As a soldier, you have proven your life means little compared to the greater good of your people. But," he paused in his true Probekein melodramatic role, gauging their reactions before he continued, "are you so free with the life of your daughter?"

Tiarun clenched the edge of the table, his knuckles turning white. It took all his self-restraint not to leap across it and strangle the ambassador. "My daughter is an acknowledged performer of the arts and is protected by the Code. You cannot touch her!"

The ambassador scoffed. "No? What of the other members of this Council? Their children are not so protected. But then, neither is yours, Commander. I know of many

who care very little for the Code and its dictates. You will allow us to mine the surata mineral, or your children *will* die."

Tiarun wasn't sure what frightened him more — the ambassador's chilling voice or his icy cold glare. He knew he would not find mercy at the Probekein's hands.

"You cannot threaten us!" Councilor Serela spoke, wiping perspiration from her brow with a lace handkerchief.

A wave of respect rushed through Tiarun. He was grateful the Council continued to support his decision.

The ambassador raked Serela with his glare, then narrowed his eyes at Tiarun. "Do you still oppose our proposal?"

"Most emphatically!"

"Then guard your children well." The ambassador turned with a whirl of his silken robes. His two-man guard fell in beside him like silent specters beside a demon lord.

The door slammed closed behind them.

Tiarun breathed a sigh of relief at the dramatic exit.

"Dear God, protect us," Serela whispered from her chair next to him, a tear sliding down her pallid cheek. "I have only one son."

Tiarun placed a comforting hand on her shoulder while thinking of his own daughter, Kiara. "I move we adjourn this meeting. We should all return to our homes and secure the safety of our children until the Probekeins have found another source for the surata they need."

The Council clearly agreed. The meeting broke up in a state of controlled panic. Tiarun drew a ragged breath. He closed the file before him, watching his friends hurry from the room. He had to find his daughter and protect her. She was the only family he had left. He couldn't stand for Kiara to be killed because of him— as her mother had been.

Fear constricted his throat, making it difficult for him to breathe. His country or his daughter—dear Heaven, what a choice! It made him dizzy.

Determined to keep his precious daughter safe no matter the cost, he left the room.

One

She had been kidnapped!

Kiara Biardi came awake with a scream lodged in her throat as she recalled the events in her darkened hotel room. Someone had come into her room during the late hours and drugged her. Trembling in fear, she could still feel the cold, rough grip moving over her skin, feel the bite of the injector as the drug seeped into her bloodstream. She never had the chance to see who it was, or to even call for help.

Now, her head ached terribly as the last remnants of the drug slowly wore off. An acrid stench filled her senses, choking her with its pungency.

Kiara tried not to breathe deeply and opened her eyes to confront who or whatever held her prisoner.

To her relief, she was alone, lying face down on a rotting mattress. With a grimace of distaste, she pushed herself up and nearly fell as a wave of dizziness buzzed through her head. She caught herself against the wall next to her, a roughened spot of rust scraping the palm of her hand.

"Great," she mumbled. "No equilibrium. What am I supposed to do now, wait patiently until they come back?"

Even as she spoke the words, Kiara knew she wouldn't— couldn't— do that. Her father hadn't reared a stupid daughter, and she had learned many tricks over the years, including the ability to pick a lock.

A smile curved her lips as she headed toward the door on unsteady feet. True, it had been years since she'd picked the locks on her house to sneak outside and meet her friends after curfew, but Kiara was sure she would remember how. She had to.

Kiara ran her hand over the smooth keypad. The lock appeared to be standard military issue— not too different from her father's. In fact . . .

She stopped, a chill rushing over her. *A military lock.* A lump of dread burned in her throat as she realized she wasn't kidnapped for money. She was a political prisoner!

"Oh, Papa," she whispered, wondering what he had gotten them involved in.

This had always been their worst fear, for her to be taken by one of his enemies. Kiara

had never given proper credence to her overprotective father's warnings. Now, she wished she had.

"Stop it," she commanded herself. If her conclusion was correct, then she must free herself and return home before her father jeopardized their government for her.

"This lock will be easy enough," she assured herself with confidence.

Popping her knuckles, she entered a code. The keys beeped melodically as she pressed them in. A light flashed across the top of the pad, displaying her chosen code.

Nothing happened. Kiara tried again.

After almost half an hour of trying, she was ready to give up. "Come on, Kiara," she said aloud. "All you've got is time. There's nothing else for you to do, except sit around and feel sorry for yourself!"

With a sigh, she glanced about the room, noting the inordinate amount of garbage strewn across the floor. Kiara wrinkled her nose in distaste. The thick, steel walls were covered by huge spots of rust and corrosion. She wondered how this craft ever passed space inspection. Surely it wasn't fit enough to carry socks, let alone human occupants.

She turned back to the lock and began pressing more buttons. As the light hummed on again, she heard footsteps approaching in the corridor outside. Kiara bit her lip in indecision. She cast her gaze around searching for a weapon. Only the wilted garbage met her sight. Kiara sighed. The only help the garbage offered was the possibility her kidnappers might faint from the stench.

Clenching her teeth in determination, she tried another code.

* * *

"I think we ought to get some pleasure out of this," a man said, his voice slowly drawing near her room. "Did you see her?"

Kiara swallowed the sudden lump of fear in her throat and backed toward the far wall, her heart pounding while her mind raced to think of something, anything to do.

"I don't know, Chenz," another man spoke. "I think we oughta wait till we get further out. I keep thinking about Poll's message that Nemesis is out to get us. I just think we oughta kill her like we was paid to and forget about her."

Her stomach knotted. They might kill her, but she intended to take a large piece of them with her!

Chenz's laugh echoed in the hallway. The bitter sound sent a shiver down her spine. "Nemesis ain't nothing to fear. We done been paid, I say we ought to enjoy this."

The gears hummed in the door as it slowly slid upward.

Please, God, Kiara begged silently, let them kill me before they rape me.

Two of the nastiest beings she had ever seen walked inside. If she thought the room stank before, that odor couldn't compare to the stench that clung to them. Kiara wondered if they had ever taken a bath in their lives.

She conceded they were human, though neither did honor to their race.

"Looky." Kiara recognized the voice as belonging to Chenz. "The beauty's awake."

She curled her lip at the fat, grimy man. "What do you want of me?" she asked, already knowing the answer, but hoping to gain some time until she could think of a way to escape them.

His lecherous smile answered her.

Kiara stared at him, wondering how he could stand to look at his ugly, warted face long enough to shave. But then, by the amount of stubble on his pudgy jowls, she could tell he didn't look too often.

The man at his side was only a few inches taller. His long, sharp angular features reminded her of one of the beasties her nurse used to frighten her with when she was a child.

Their eyes mirrored a coldness in their souls that chilled her own.

She grasped onto the bedpost, her knuckles protruding. Kiara assessed them, and the distance and time it would take her to get between them and through the door. She was quick and strong, but not enough to break through their hulking forms. At that moment, she wished she were a magician or soldier instead of a scrawny dancer.

"My father will give you any amount you ask if you return me unharmed."

Chenz took a step toward her. "We don't intend to return you at all."

Panic, cold and demanding, welled up inside her, temporarily dimming her eyesight.

Before she could move, Chenz had her by the arm. Fiercely, Kiara clawed at his face. By God, she would have his eyes for this!

He drew his fist back and struck her hard across the face. Kiara reeled backward, falling against the wall. She slid to the floor, stunned. Never in her life had she been struck and the pain throbbing across her cheek and eye was unlike anything she had ever felt.

Only the sound of her nightgown ripping brought her back to the present and her mind away from the pain. With a curse born of desperation, Kiara sent her fist into Chenz's flabby belly. Releasing her, he doubled over in pain.

She kicked at the other man, catching him in the center of his chest. Her nightgown tore more as she scrambled from them. She couldn't allow herself to be raped. She would rather die trying to escape than to docilely submit to them.

Kiara ignored the gaping front of her gown and ran for the door. Someone grabbed her foot. She hit the floor with enough force to knock her breath from her.

Oh God, she had to get away! Kiara clawed at the garbage as they pulled her back toward them.

"You'll pay for that, bitch!" Chenz snapped, wrapping his belt around her throat.

Kiara gasped for air, but the belt bit into the flesh of her neck, choking it from her. Desperately, she tried to pry the leather free from her throat. She kicked her feet and tried to scream. Not even a whisper left her bruised lips.

She was dead, she knew it.

"Kill her, Chenz!" the taller man said, rubbing his chest where she had kicked him.

The belt tightened. Kiara's sight dimmed. She clawed at the belt. Her tongue seemed swollen, almost too large for her mouth. Just as she thought Chenz would finish her, the belt loosened.

Kiara gulped the air into her burning lungs and throat. She rubbed her neck, feeling the welts left by the rough leather.

Chenz wrapped his hands in her long, dark brown hair and reeled her to him. "Your life's nothing to us, girly. But how you treat us in the next few minutes will decide if we kill you quick or make it *real* painful."

She choked at the stench of his breath falling against her cheek. Before she could think of a retort, his wet, scarred lips covered hers. Kiara gagged.

"Why you . . ." He drew back to hit her again.

A sharp lurch in the ship sent them tumbling. A warning buzzer pierced the air. The sharp pulses of sound were punctuated by flashing lights.

"We're being attacked!" the tall man shouted before running out of the room.

Kiara lay on the floor numb from physical pain and fear. Chenz grabbed her by the arm, jerked her to her feet, and pushed her back against the wall. She stared bravely into his eyes, wondering if he would kill her before he left. She was amazed to find her eyes dry.

"I'll finish with you when this is over," he promised, his fingers biting fiercely into her face as he twisted her mouth with his hand. Giving her a lecherous sneer, he released her and ran to join his partner.

The door slammed down, jarring the room. Kiara slid slowly to the floor, her mind too overwrought to think about much of anything except the fate that awaited her when the battle ended.

She was aboard some sort of aircraft with two assassins, in who knew what sector or galaxy, and all of them were now under attack by something probably more cruel than her current hosts.

For the briefest moment, she thought it might be her father with a rescue party. But she knew better. He was still at the consulate meeting and thought her safely guarded in the dance company's hotel rooms.

Tears flooded down her cheeks as she realized the hopelessness of her situation. She would die out here in space, raped and tortured. The only hope she had was that whoever was attacking them, would destroy them.

"Please," she begged in a ragged voice. "Let me die during the fight!"

Her throat tightened as she listened to the sounds of battle. The old walls of the shuttle

creaked ominously. Blasts struck the craft and kept it rocking beneath her.

Kiara stared at the lock, tempted to try and pick it again.

But what good would it do? She could hear the popping of damaged electrical circuits in the hallway. By now, all the power to the doors had been drained and transferred to the ship's weapons and shields.

The lights went out.

Kiara sat in total darkness, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "Be brave," she whispered, her voice lost among the hissing sounds outside. She was a commander's child, and she would meet death calmly, with dignity.

After an eternity of wrecked and tormented nerves, the craft was still. The odor of burning wires and smoke filtered into her room. Kiara coughed from the smoke until her throat burned. She was still alive, though to what purpose or fate, she could only guess.

Hearing the sound of approaching feet, she tensed, but they quickly ran past her room. The tightness of her throat loosened a tiny degree.

She seemed to have aged forty years before she heard someone else outside her door. Her heart pounded in short staccato beats at the sizzling sound of a torch cutting through the steel.

Kiara gripped the bed frame with her left hand and clutched the remnants of her nightgown with her right. Her head was so light from her panic, she feared she might faint.

A loud pop sounded just before a large piece of the door fell in. Her stomach knotted into a cold lump. Light from a torch traveled about the room, stopping as it illuminated her.

Despite the pain of her adjusting eyes, she tried to see beyond the light, to whoever held it, but all she saw was a large, black blob.

The blob stepped through the hole and entered her room.

Kiara tucked her legs under her so she could quickly rise to her feet if she needed to. A trickle of sweat ran down her temple. She tensed, ready to strike out with whatever resistance her battered, tired body could muster.

The overhead lights returned, burning her eyes. Kiara blinked several times and the blob turned into a soldier dressed in a black battlesuit. A dense black helmet covered his face, preventing her from seeing what race he belonged to. No insignia or flag marked his uniform in any way.

Who was he?

She stared at him, still uncertain whether he would help her, or harm her more. Until she knew the answer, she would play docile, lulling him into thinking her harmless. And if he did intend to hurt her, she would knee him where it would do her the most good. But he didn't move closer.

To her surprise, he shut off the torch and placed it on the floor. She prepared to run.

Unaware of her intent, he unstrapped his helmet from the lines securing it to his battlesuit and removed it.

Kiara was amazed by the handsomeness of his face. His long, brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail and two small, silver hoops dangled from his left ear-lobe. His dark eyes moved over her body, measuring her state of disarray.

When he looked back at her face, she saw pity and concern. "I'm Rachol," he said quietly in the Universal language as if coaxing a skittish gimfry. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Kiara believed him. She released her grip on the bed. Another wave of tears washed down her cheeks. She was safe!

The soldier moved toward her cautiously. "Can you understand me?"

She realized his accent was Ritadarion, an allied planet to her own. "Yes," Kiara said, trying to staunch her tears.

He removed his jacket and gently wrapped her in it. "Everything's all right, we'll take you home." He straightened and held his hand out to her.

Kiara placed her tiny, icy hand into his large, warm one. He pulled her to her feet. She took a single step, then crumpled.

In a blurred flash, he knelt beside her. "Are you okay?" his voice was warm with concern.

"I don't understand," she mumbled. "I can't walk!" Another wave of panic tore through her.

"Shh," Rachol soothed. "You're in mild shock. Little wonder after having to be near those two. Don't worry, it'll pass." His hand gripped his ribs as he swept her with a measuring gaze. "I can't carry you," he said after a minute. "I've got a wound healing in my side and if I pick you up, I'll open it."

He lifted her chin until she stared into his kind, dark brown eyes. "Do you trust me?"

For some unknown reason, she did. "Yes."

He nodded and smiled. "I'm going to ask a friend to carry you back to our ship. Promise me you won't faint when he gets here."

Kiara frowned at his words, wondering why he felt it necessary to ask for such a promise. "I don't faint."

Rachol gave her a skeptical look, then pulled out a hand-held communicator from his belt. "Nemesis, I need assistance."

Kiara's blood fled her face. "Nemesis!" she shrieked, pushing herself away from Rachol.

For a moment, she thought she might faint after all. Nemesis was the most feared assassin to ever live. Every known government, including her own, wanted him dead.

"He won't hurt you," Rachol soothed.

Kiara wasn't listening. Instead, she heard the various news reports that aired regularly about the coldblooded, brutal killings Nemesis performed. No one knew what he looked like, who he was. The only people to ever see his face, never lived long enough to tell the authorities. It was rumored he had even killed his own parents when he was a young boy, just for practice.

A large shadow fell over them.

Kiara gulped, her gaze traveling up the hulking form dressed identically to Rachol. At least Nemesis still had his helmet on. Maybe she would live through this . . . maybe. She shook in fear.

To her dismay, Nemesis walked past Rachol and knelt before her. His huge, gloved hand reached out to touch the burning cheek Chenz had struck. She cringed, trying to press herself into the wall behind her and turned her face away.

He dropped his hand before making contact with her cheek.

"She can't walk," Rachol explained.

Nemesis nodded. Without a word, he pulled her into his arms and lifted her as if she weighed nothing more than the communicator at his waist. Kiara trembled, wanting to be back home and not in the arms of the most dangerous being alive.

Reaching the door, Nemesis paused and turned to face Rachol. "Kill them," he said in an electronically distorted voice.

The nonchalant tone tore through her. What kind of being could order someone's death so callously? Not wanting to be near such a creature, she tried to squirm out of his arms. His hold tightened almost to the point of pain.

He carried her out into the hallway to the linking station that joined the two crafts. Rachol continued down the corridor, disappearing from her sight, no doubt on his way to carry out Nemesis' brutal order.

Kiara wanted to call Rachol back. The last thing she desired was to be left alone with this creature, but her mouth was suddenly so dry, she couldn't get even a whisper past her swollen lips.

Once inside their shuttle, Nemesis took her into one of the back rooms which she guessed served as some sort of infirmary. Medical tools and bottles of medicine were carefully placed in a glass cabinet not far from a large bed. The odor of antiseptic stung her nose. Everything was pristine white and orderly, a welcome contrast to her kidnappers' filth.

Kiara glanced up at Nemesis, afraid he might kill her as well. But he seemed to be ignoring her, at least as much as he could, given the fact she was in his arms.

He placed her gently on the bed, then moved to retrieve a blanket from a drawer at the bottom of the cabinet. With a kindness she would never have attributed to a ruthless killer, he wrapped it around her.

Kiara was minutely attuned to him. The light gleaned off his helmet with an eerie sheen.

He seemed larger than a human, taller, stronger. She had no idea what species he belonged to, yet he had to be at least humanoid.

She watched the play of well-defined muscles under his battlesuit as he pressed a panel next to the door and opened the closet.

Who was this assassin? She wasn't the first to ask that question and like the others, she knew she would never know the answer.

He turned around, holding a black battlesuit like the ones he and Rachol wore.

Kiara could feel his eyes on her, they were almost as tangible as a touch. She thought he was about to speak, but the door opened to reveal Rachol.

Unaware of what he had interrupted, Rachol took the battlesuit from Nemesis' hands. "I locked them in their munitions room. If they're quick, they might escape unscathed."

Kiara still sensed Nemesis watching her.

A sharp lunge told her their ship was launching away from her kidnappers' craft.

"Are you taking me home?" she asked.

A dreadful pause greeted her. Finally, Nemesis spoke, "Soon."

Before she could blink her eyes, he was gone.

* * *

Nykyrian locked the door behind him. He knew Rachol's doctoring abilities well enough to guess the dancer would be sedated. An image of Kiara's body outlined by her sheer, torn nightgown scorched him. He could still feel her pressed against his chest.

Forcing his mind to other thoughts, he removed his hot, sticky helmet. He freed his damp, blond hair from the tie holding it at the nape of his neck. With a tired sigh, he pulled his dark glasses from his pocket and moved to join the rest of his crew in the control room at the front of the shuttle.

Dancer Hauk and Darling Crewell were joking with each other when he entered.

"Rachol said we had a guest," Hauk commented to him dryly. "I hope she doesn't come

out of that room and catch a sight of you without your helmet!"

Ignoring him, Nykyrian dropped his helmet on the floor and took the pilot's chair. He ran over their settings, knowing there'd be no corrections. Hauk and Darling were the best.

"Did Chenz and Petiri get away?" Nykyrian asked.

Darling shook his head. "They're asteroid bait."

Nykyrian nodded. Justice was served. Tomorrow Rachol would inform their employer about Chenz's death. Granted it wouldn't bring back the councilor's son, but it would ensure Chenz never decapitated another child.

Putting the matter out of his thoughts, Nykyrian stared out the window at the blackness swirling around them. In the lightless void, an image of Kiara dancing in her last ballet floated before his eyes. He damned the feelings surging through him as he thought about her.

She had always been able to stir his senses. Every time he had seen her dance, she had touched a part of his soul— a part of him he preferred to think was long dead and damned.

If only things were different. If only he were different ...

Nykyrian sighed. He knew better. The way she recoiled from his touch and squirmed in his arms told him what he'd get if he even tried to speak with her.

"Who's the woman?" Hauk finally asked, breaking Nykyrian out of his thoughts.

"Kiara Biardi, the dancer."

Hauk gave a low, appreciative whistle. "What was *she* doing with those space scabs?"

Nykyrian shrugged. "We'll discuss that once we get back to the base and have our meeting."

Within an hour, they began docking at their station. Rachol came from the back, reporting that Kiara was in a sedated sleep. Nykyrian replaced his helmet before heading back to their patient.

After the landing, Nykyrian carried Kiara from the ship. He took her to the upper floor of the Command Center where he charged Mira to care for her until she woke.

Mira was thrilled to be assigned watch duty over such a famous personality. Smiling nervously at Nemesis, she ran to her room to find sleeping attire for Kiara.

Shaking his head at Mira's undue haste to flee his presence, Nykyrian took his precious bundle into one of the sleeping chambers and carefully placed her on the large bed. He covered her with an extra blanket.

As he stepped away from the bed, he heard her whispering in her sleep. Entranced by her melodic voice, he turned back to take a final look at her peacefully resting form.

He stood over her, intoxicated by the smoothness of her features, her pert nose, the high cheekbones, her finely arched brows. Her long, dark brown hair fell in soft ringlets about her. He traced the line of her cheek, tempted to remove his glove and feel the softness he knew her flawless skin would hold.

He sensed Mira's presence as she returned. Looking up, he saw Mira's questioning brown eyes.

Nykyrian ached to kiss Kiara. He almost did. Only the knowledge of Mira's curious stare kept him from removing his helmet and yielding to his burning want.

Some things were not his to feel, or experience.

With a curt nod to Mira, he left the room.

Nykyrian rejoined his friends downstairs, anxious to finish his business and return the dancer before she distracted him further from his obligations.

Quickly, he led his three soldiers to their council chambers, where Jayne was already seated and waiting for them.

The room was covered with a myriad of star charts, maps and computer terminals. Beeps and hisses filled the air as information passed through the equipment. Everything was neat, tidy and efficient, just the way he liked his life.

Nykyrian walked to the printer nearest him and pulled off several sheets of paper.

As he waited for his friends to remove their helmets and take their chairs, Nykyrian

perused the listed items. While he studied the lines, an unbidden image of Kiara drifted before his eyes. Grinding his teeth, he forced his thoughts to business.

Nykyrian gave the small group a cursory glance, took his seat, and placed the stack of papers before him. He turned to Rachol. "I take it the Probekeins hired Chenz and Petiri."

Rachol nodded.

"Send a message to Tiarun Biardi stating that I'll return his daughter. I want him to know the OMG had nothing to do with her abduction." He narrowed his eyes. "I would hate to be shot down for a good deed."

Rachol nodded again, and made a quick note on his computer ledger. "I got the news from one of our spies that the Gouran Consulate fell apart yesterday when the Probekeins threatened to tear apart the Councilors' kids. Eight contracts were drawn up for the terminations. Six children have been found dead, including Councilor Serela's boy we saw last night. I'll make sure word gets around Chenz's death was because of his brutal murder of the kid."

Nykyrian mentally flashed on Serela's tormented face and the sight of the poor, mutilated boy. If Kiara hadn't been aboard Chenz's ship, he would have torn the scab into pieces. "Other than Chenz, who were the others who accepted the Probekeins' contracts?"

"Don't know," Rachol answered.

Nykyrian rubbed his jaw. "What were the negotiations between the Probekeins and Gourans over?"

At Rachol's negative head shake, Nykyrian scowled. "You're supposed to stay informed of all contracts for assassinations. I want you to find out the definite reasons for the killings as well as the name on the last contract and who holds it. My guess is, the murders are over the new weapon the Probekeins are building. If not, we need to know!"

Nykyrian sat back in his chair. "You'd best inform Biardi immediately his daughter is safe. I'm sure he's about crazed over her disappearance."

Rachol stood, moving to comply with Nykyrian's directive.

"I think we should target Emperor Abenbi," Hauk said, watching Rachol leave. "It's time

we showed the Probekeins they can't continue to frighten other governments."

Nykyrian shook his head. "That's not our decision. We had best attend to our contracted hits. Our backlog is already too long. It'll be several weeks before we can take on any new assignments. At this point, it would have to be a major emergency for new hire."

Jayne sighed irritably. "Why don't we expand our number?" she asked, toying with her long, black hair. "Surely out of the multitude we employ, there are a few suitable to doing the physical executions of contracts."

Nykyrian cocked his brow. "Would you trust them at your back? The five of us are friends, have been so for years. Our loyalty to one another is without question. Are you willing to put your life at the disposal of a stranger?"

"Not with the price on my head," Jayne answered. "I suppose you're right."

Rachol returned. "Biardi will be expecting you," he said to Nykyrian. "He also wants a meeting with me. Funny how we're wanted criminals until they need us," Rachol mumbled, sitting down. "I think Biardi's going to propose a contact for Kiara's protection."

Nykyrian's heart quickened. "Did you schedule a meeting?"

"This evening."

Hauk turned around in his chair, a smirk twisting his lips. "I thought we were too backlogged to take on anything new."

Nykyrian shot him a venomous glare. Hauk held his hands up apologetically. Satisfied that Hauk knew better than to question him further, Nykyrian retrieved the sheets from the table and handed them out to the appropriate specialist.

Hauk complained immediately about his schedule. "Why am I always the back-up for Darling and Jayne?" he muttered. "Especially Darling. I wish you would teach him how to breach access codes. He's dangerous!"

"Me dangerous? Last time we went out together, you set off two alarms. For a circuitry engineer, you're seriously lacking."

"Careful human," Hauk warned, showing Darling his fangs. "I might get hungry one of these nights and decide we no longer need a Weapons Tech."

Nykyrian shook his head at their play, knowing they were good friends, but continually harassed one another about their racial differences.

Darling was from Caron, a human system. Hauk was Andarion— an advanced human, predatorial race that sometimes fed on lesser human's meat. A hybrid of the two races, Nykyrian often found himself settling their skirmishes.

Hauk had the traditional Andarion features, an exceptionally handsome face—the Andarions valued physical beauty above everything. Hauk's long, black hair fell in a warrior's braid down his back to his waist. White irises ringed in red, stared laughingly at Darling. The long canine teeth flashed as Hauk smiled. Nykyrian was grateful his own teeth were smaller versions of Hauk's. Still, they were long enough to mark him as a bastard half-breed, especially when combined with his eyes.

"Jayne," Nykyrian said, facing the assassin. "If you need help with your hits, I'll back you. That will free up some of Hauk's time." Jayne gave him a seductive smile. She loved the thrill of hunting and killing the corrupt. Nykyrian remembered a time past when he had shared her enthusiasm, but those days had long fled. Now, he just wanted peace and solitude.

"The number is low this week," Jayne said, scanning her list. "I think I could schedule an opportunity to take out Abenbi." She smiled at Hauk.

Nykyrian shook his head. "Stick with the assigned political assassinations. I want no messages of the Probekein Emperor's murder."

Hauk curled his lip and sat forward in his chair. "He deserves to die!"

Nykyrian tensed at the direct confrontation. "We need solid proof before we act. When I have it, I shall gladly allow you and Jayne to have him," he compromised, unwilling to fight with one of his few true friends. He had enough enemies for that.

Hauk retreated back into his chair.

Nykyrian glanced around at each of them. "We haven't any missions in the near future that will require the entire group. There are some overlaps, note them and plan accordingly. Keep your links open in case of an emergency. Our next meeting is in eight days, the time is noted on your schedule. Good luck," Nykyrian finished more out of habit than necessity.

The members grabbed their helmets and took their leave. Rachol remained seated with

Nykyrian, waiting for the room to clear.

As the door closed, he turned to face Nykyrian. "I don't know if you should accept Biardi's contract. We can't afford liabilities."

Nykyrian hated the way Rachol was able to read him. Though he kept his expressions and moods carefully guarded, Rachol had always possessed an uncanny ability to see past his facade. "I really wish you would stop second guessing my thoughts. We're too back-logged to take on any more. You'll have to apologize to her father. Tell him to call out his Gourish troops to protect her."

Nykyrian stood. He moved to the right wall and pushed the buttons for his change of clothes. "We're not baby sitters," he finished, stripping his battlesuit off.

Rachol turned his back to Nykyrian and continued talking, "You're attracted to her?"

"I'm not blind," Nykyrian snapped. "Can you tell me she holds no appeal for you?"

Rachol laughed. "Oh yeah. But, I also know how many times you've gone to see her dance. Face it, Kip, you're infatuated with the woman, and that's not like you."

"I lust for her, nothing more." Nykyrian replaced the wall. Picking up his boots from the floor, he sat in his chair.

"Nothing more?" Rachol asked, swinging his chair around to face him with a cocked eyebrow.

Nykyrian glowered at him as he jerked his boots on. "This discussion is terminated." He retrieved his glasses from the table and put them on to hide his odd green, human eyes. With one last grimace at Rachol, he left the room.

Nykyrian disregarded Rachol's words. He was a soldier, not some love-besotted fool. All too well, he knew his duties and obligations, nothing would ever distract him from them.

Making his way toward Mira and her post, Nykyrian was glad to shed his Nemesis guise. The birth of Nemesis had been necessity— it left him free to roam without many snipers taking shots at him. And with his hybrid looks, if the authorities were to ever learn the identity of Nemesis, it wouldn't take his enemies long to find him.

For now, people assumed Nykyrian Quiakides to be a minion of the Nemesis; a role that suited him well. As long as his identity was secret, he could maintain a quasi-normal

existence.

He reminded himself that his identity was only one of many reasons he could never involve himself with someone. If he had learned anything in his life, it was that no one could ever be trusted.

People were his friends, until he looked the other way.

Nykyrian stifled the emotions that filled him as he thought of Kiara, and reverted to the soothing emptiness he relied upon.

Two

Once again, Kiara woke to unfamiliar surroundings. She recalled Nemesis and jolted up, her heart lodged painfully in her throat.

Where was she? What had they done with her?

Kiara searched the room hurriedly with her eyes, looking for some clue about her fate.

The dim overhead light reflected against the pale steel walls, giving them a strange, shadowlike appearance. Drawn by a sudden movement in one corner, she focused her eyes on a pudgy, elder woman who watched her from a reclining chair.

"You're safe." The woman smiled sweetly, her aged face that of a kind grandmother. "No one here will hurt you."

The woman's dark brown eyes glowed with honesty and warmth. Kiara trusted her.

Surveying the room as the lights brightened, she noticed the richness of the furnishings. The bed she sat upon was made of dark, carved wood, a rarity few could afford. White gossamer sheers hung over the tall posts, shielding the bed from a stray draft.

Kiara looked back at the woman. "Where am I?" she asked.

"The where isn't important. You'll be home soon now that you're awake." She stood, beaming with a face Kiara recognized as one belonging to a fan. "Are you hungry or thirsty?"

At Kiara's declination, she moved toward the door. "My name's Mira. You stay here and

I'll retrieve your battlesuit."

Kiara watched her leave. In the still quietness of the room, she heard the fierce wind outside and an insistent thumping. Her gaze was drawn to the brightly colored windows on the far wall. An odd-shaped tree blew in the strong wind, knocking branches against the window. Kiara felt every bit as controlled by unseen forces and just as helpless against them.

Kiara sighed, her thoughts turning toward her father. No doubt he was frantically hurling angry curses at his poor soldiers, ordering them out to search every fraction of space for her. Her throat tightened as she prayed these people really intended to return her to Gouran.

The door slid open, startling her from her thoughts.

She turned to see a man entering, not Mira. Kiara pulled the cover to her chin, hesitant toward the stranger, not quite afraid, but definitely grateful for the tiny amount of protection the sheers provided her.

Nykyrian paused. He had assumed Kiara would still be asleep. He should have known better.

Her wide, amber eyes watched him with keen interest. Morbidly, he wondered what they would look like if he were to announce himself as the feared, unholy Nemesis.

But then, he knew all too well what her reaction would be. Her eyes would grow wide in panic, she would no doubt scream in terror, and beg for her life.

He breathed a weary sigh.

Her gaze drifted over him, and his body immediately reacted as if she had caressed him with her hands.

She was the only woman he had wanted in many years. It took all his self-control not to yield to his torturous desire to kiss her and find out how it felt to have her slender arms wrapped tightly about him while he buried himself deep within her. He also felt another need he couldn't quite name.

Kiara's heart raced. The man was tall, dressed all in black. Even through the sheer veil separating them, the silver inlays on his boots and gun-belt shimmered in the light. A thin, black coat trailed to his ankles, pulled back on the left side to show the presence of

a holstered blaster.

The first three buttons of his silk shirt were left undone, displaying the promise of a tanned, well-muscled body. A deep scar ran from the base of his throat along his collarbone, disappearing under the shirt. She had a strong desire to investigate where that scar led.

Even though the top half of his face was covered by dark opaque glasses, she could tell he was extremely handsome. His face, tanned and clean-shaven, held a look of steeled determination. His long, almost white blond hair was braided down his back. By that, she knew he was a warrior of superb skill.

An aura of power and danger emanated from him, intoxicating her. She could almost feel the strength of his body.

"I assume Mira has gone for clothing," he said in an accent she couldn't quite place and a deep-timbred voice that sent shivers along her body.

"You're Andarion," she said, noting his teeth. She was slightly afraid at the revelation.

Nykyrian opened his mouth and ran his tongue over his long, canine teeth. "Don't worry, I don't eat humans," he replied.

Kiara was relieved. "Are you the one who will take me home?" she asked as he came forward to lean against the tall bedpost.

"If you prefer, I can find a human to deliver you."

She considered him for a moment. Maybe it would be safer to have a human escort.

Kiara lowered her gaze down his body, admiring the casual pose. His tight, leather pants emphasized the muscled thighs beneath. Her blood ignited. Never had she been so attracted to a man. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she decided she could tolerate him long enough to return her.

"No, I trust you." Kiara smiled.

"Not wise. I'm not trustworthy," he cautioned, sending a wave of apprehension and curiosity over her.

Their exchange was curtailed as Mira returned, the battlesuit draped over her shoulder.

"Oh Nykyrian," she said in startled alarm. "I didn't know you were here."

Kiara noted Mira's obvious discomfort.

"I'll wait outside," he said, moving to the door.

Mira's frown followed him.

As soon as he was gone, Kiara drew the bed veil to one side and stepped from the bed. Her toes curled away from the chilly floor. "You don't like him?" she asked.

Mira jumped as if she had stepped on her foot. "No," she said in a rush. "It's not that. It's just . . . He's just ... a little odd, I guess." Mira handed her the suit.

Kiara admitted there was something about him that unsettled her as well. "Who is he?"

"Nykyrian ..." Mira paused, her brows knitted. "I have forgotten his last name, very few ever use it. He has a dislike for it."

"How peculiar."

"Yes it is." Mira leaned closer and whispered, "He's a renegade League Assassin."

Kiara's heart stilled. "I didn't think the League allowed their assassins to leave."

Mira shook her head gravely. "They don't. Nykyrian's the only one to ever leave who managed to live beyond a week. I've heard it whispered he was some kind of decorated hero."

Kiara frowned. A hero? "Why did he leave?"

Mira shook her head. "No one knows for sure. He keeps to himself, almost never speaks even when spoken to." Mira sighed. "Actually, most people around here tend to avoid him because he's hybrid."

Kiara's frown deepened. "Hybrid what?"

"Half human, half Andarion."

"How odd."

"Hmmm," Mira mumbled. "I'm sure you'll be fine alone with him. He's the best scout the OMG has."

Kiara digested Mira's gossip as she toyed with the sleeve of her battlesuit. "He doesn't kill anymore?"

"No, at least not to my knowledge." Mira held her hand out to Kiara. "Enough gossip. It's been a great pleasure meeting you, Miss Biardi. I wish you success with your new show."

Smiling, Kiara took Mira's warm, velvety hand and gave a short, smart shake. "It's been an honor to meet you, Mira. Thank you for your kindness. If you ever want to come to the new show, just give me a call and I'll leave you a pass at the door."

"Thank you. I just might do that." Mira's eyes were bright with friendship as she took her leave.

Quickly, Kiara exchanged her gown for the black battlesuit. After she finished lacing the front, she opened the door and entered the corridor to meet her escort. Nykyrian pushed himself away from the far wall.

Kiara blushed as she realized how disheveled she appeared to him. She glanced down at the suit. Obviously designed for a man, it trailed to the ground and fit her like a large sack. Heaven only knew what her face looked like after the way Chenz had played Griball with it.

Her dance promoters would definitely abandon her if they ever glimpsed her in such a state. How many times had they told her she was an image and her image must always be preserved.

Well, it couldn't be helped.

Recovering her lost vanity with a shake of her head, she looked back at her escort.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice reverberating in her mind, scorching her with its rich, refined tone.

Kiara licked her lips, wondering what it would feel like to kiss a dangerous assassin.

She had heard many tales about the League's most prized soldiers. They were a free lot, trained to kill political targets and jealously protected as the League's most valuable

commodity. Kiara wondered what kind of man could defy the nefarious League that protected and intimidated all governments with its military power. Even her own father, who had more courage than most, refused to disobey a League directive.

For a moment, she thought Nykyrian might answer her unconscious summons for a kiss. Then the most incredible thing happened, he moved away.

Kiara frowned in confusion, her cheeks warming from his rejection.

Nykyrian paused a few feet away from her. "Don't just stand there," he chided. "You need to get home. Your father was very worried."

"You called him?" Kiara asked, shocked he would be so considerate.

"Rachol did," he said before continuing down the hallway.

Kiara was miffed by his easy dismissal of her. She had to struggle to keep up with his long strides which rapidly took him down the corridor to a large, landing bay.

Nykyrian led her to a black fighter in the far left corner. They passed several people, but no one spoke a greeting to Nykyrian. Kiara thought about Mira's words. No wonder the man was distant.

He released the cockpit hatch by pressing a button on the side of the craft then placed his hands around her waist to lift her up to the ladder. The heat of his strong hands through the material of her suit, thrilled her. The gentle pressure massaged her skin, and stole her breath.

Stop it, she told herself, he's not the first man to hold you. A small smile curved her lips. No he wasn't, but he was definitely one of the most intriguing.

Finally gaining a modicum of control over her tumultuous emotions, Kiara climbed to the top. She paused in confusion.

She looked down to where Nykyrian stood on the ground, oblivious to her.

Uncertainty filled her as she glanced back at the *one* seat inside the fighter. Was this the correct ship? Where was she supposed to sit, his lap? Warmth rushed through her at the thought.

"Sit forward on the seat," Nykyrian instructed from below as he finally noticed her

hesitation.

She did as ordered.

From her seated position, Kiara saw someone come forward with two helmets and a computer log. Nykyrian quickly signed the log, grabbed the helmets and joined her.

Trying to distract herself from the warm body squeezing in behind her, she studied the ship's controls. The main panel reminded her of a museum piece. She hadn't noticed how old this craft was.

Nykyrian must have noticed her interest, because he said quietly, "It's a Bertraud Trebuchet Fighter."

"I thought they quit making them years ago and the only one to survive was sold to Nemesis."

"We're *good* friends," he said in a strange tone that made her wonder if they were lovers.

Before she could ask him another question, he placed a helmet over her head. Kiara could feel his arms moving behind her and realized he was removing his glasses. Curious, she tried to turn around.

"Don't!" he snapped.

Kiara stiffened.

Her agitation melted as his strong arms came around her to flip the switches in front of her.

With a deafening roar, the engines fired, then settled down to a soft whirl. In the crackling distortion filling her ears, she heard the controller's voice through the intercom in her helmet.

She leaned back. Nykyrian's body jerked at the unexpected contact. A wicked smile curved Kiara's lips. Well, he wasn't quite as oblivious to her as he pretended.

Nykyrian was instantly inflamed by her body pressed against his own. God, he was an idiot! Why didn't he think to borrow Jayne's double-seated fighter? Could he make it to Gouran without his hormones taking over his common sense?

He forced his thoughts from the soft body molded against his and gave full attention to the directive for launch.

The G-force brought her body solidly against his, increasing his discomfort. And his arousal. His hand trembled as he clutched the throttle.

Nykyrian was tempted to abort the launch and avail himself of the woman in his lap. Instead, he availed himself of his famed iron-will.

Within minutes, they cleared the orbit.

Kiara watched as the murky gray planet shrank out of sight. For some inexplicable reason, she felt safe in this stranger's arms. Common sense told her he was a trained military assassin and she should be very much afraid, but her heart discounted her fears. For some insane reason, she didn't think he would ever hurt her.

Shifting in the seat, she heard his sharp intake of breath.

"Sit still," he ordered, his voice hard.

His tone irked her. "What do you expect with me crammed in front of you?" she asked.

"I expect you to sit still."

With a harrumph, Kiara leaned back. Her ire melted as his heart thumped heavily against her shoulder. She became aware of his body heat, of the strong masculine scent of leather and musk. She wanted this man more than she had ever wanted anything.

Kiara sighed, knowing he was beyond her abilities to claim.

Nykyrian felt Kiara relax against him. He knew he should apologize for his curtness. But apologies were not something he had ever concerned himself with. Besides, it was just as well she not like him. There was no hope for anything between them. He reminded himself he had chosen his life carefully, but never had that decision weighed so heavily upon his mind.

They remained silent the rest of the long journey.

Kiara was ecstatic as her world came into view. She heard Nykyrian's deep voice speaking her native Gourish flawlessly, explaining his business to the controller.

The controller's voice cracked as he gave them coordinates.

Kiara blinked, unable to believe her eyes as an air squadron surrounded them. The ships were not a welcoming party, they were military fighters, fully armed and ready to fire.

Nykyrian's arms tightened in expectation. Her heart pounded. What if one of her father's soldiers panicked and fired for no reason? Though the pilots were carefully trained, mistakes happened and she didn't want to be included in a statistics book. "Release the fighters!" she snapped.

"Kiara?" her father's relieved voice burst through her headset. "Angel, are you all right?"

"Papa, please," she begged before a misfire happened. "He is here only to return me. Call your troops off."

Silence greeted her for a few seconds. Finally, her father sighed and recalled his soldiers to base.

Nykyrian's arms relaxed around her as the fighters dropped away.

It took several minutes to reach the main landing bay. The huge glass and masonry structure welcomed Kiara. Never had she experienced such a happy homecoming. The capitol city hummed with activity as they lowered their altitude.

Nykyrian executed a smooth landing inside the bay.

After releasing the canopy, he unbuckled Kiara from her seat. She removed her helmet and turned to face him. She raised a questioning eyebrow as she noted he made no moves to remove his own gear. "Will you not join us for awhile?"

Looking over the side of his fighter, he noted the large gathering of her father's troops. He shook his head. "They look nervous," he said dryly.

Kiara handed him the helmet. "I can never thank you enough for what you've done."

"My pleasure. I live to transport beautiful women."

Kiara thought he was teasing, but his voice never changed. "You are a mystery," she whispered, entranced by him. "Why don't you come to my opening performance tonight? I'll leave you a couple of passes."

He sighed. "No, thank you. You should refrain from performing until the people trying to kill you are found and terminated."

She disregarded his advice. She was home now and everything would be fine.

Impulsively, she leaned forward and kissed the side of his helmet. "Thanks again," she said, then dropped over the side of his ship.

Once her feet touched the ground, she ran to her father's outstretched arms. Her heart was light now that she was safe and returned.

Tiarun had dark, drawn circles under his eyes and he regarded her face with a deep, forbidding frown, tracing the outline of her swollen cheek. Kiara gave him a tight hug. "It doesn't hurt," she assured him.

"The OMG told me they killed the ones responsible."

Kiara trembled at the reminder. "They did."

Tiarun squeezed her to the point she feared her ribs would crack. "You shall have an armed guard in the future. I don't know what possessed the OMG to return you unharmed. But I thank God you're safe."

Safe. Kiara gave a nervous laugh. She found it difficult to believe she had been inside the fabled OMG Center, seen Nemesis, and none of the mercenaries had even threatened her life. Just the same, she wouldn't tell her father about them, about what little she had seen. She owed them that much and more.

Turning around, she watched as Nykyrian secured his hatch. She didn't know anything about him really, but for some reason, she wanted desperately to see him again.

Nykyrian saw Kiara watching him. With a final look at her, he prepared the launch. An ache spread through him as he regretted the necessity of solitude in his life.

He clenched his teeth and launched.

As the tiny planet faded, remorse consumed him. Maybe someday he would be free to pursue a relationship with someone, but he doubted it.

Just once, he would like to know what it felt like to be loved, to be held on the nights when he was confused and hurt.

His eyes narrowed. Not even his real or adoptive families had ever shown him kindness, why would he expect it from anyone else?

What did he need with love and kindness anyway? Those things only made a soldier weak, vulnerable. He shrugged off the melancholy thoughts, turned his ship about and made his way to his own isolated home.

It didn't take long to reach the orange and yellow planet. He docked in the small hangar next to his house.

He pressed the button on his control panel that closed the portal behind his ship, waiting for the artificial air to replace the deadly, natural one, and thought about the trim dancer who invaded his dreams. He sighed, wanting the two things his money and influence couldn't buy him— Kiara's love and acceptance.

When the light came on notifying him it was safe to leave, he exited his fighter.

As soon as he entered his house, his four pets assailed him with happy leaps and licks that banished some of his melancholia.

The lorinas were feline creatures many assumed could never be domesticated. It had taken Nykyrian a long time to make them docile, but as with most beings, once they learned he could be trusted not to hurt or neglect them, they settled into an easy camaraderie.

They were the only balm against loneliness he would allow himself. Rubbing the soft fur of their heads, Nykyrian dropped his helmet by the door. He was grateful it was still night on his planet. With any luck he might be able to get some sleep.

The stars twinkled brightly through the clear ceiling while his home floated placidly above the gaseous world below. It was a peaceful, soothing place that never failed to ease the tension in his muscles or relax his troubled thoughts.

He had purchased the planet several years earlier after deciding he was tired of living in the cramped flats inside noisy, crime-ridden cities. No one but Rachol knew of the house's existence. Here there was no dancer to tempt him. Here he had the solitude he needed.

Wearily, Nykyrian made his way up the stairs to his left. His large, soft bed welcomed him. He pulled the tie from his braid, shook his hair loose, then fell on top of the black fur covers.

He rolled onto his back and lay for hours watching the sky above him. Despite the tranquility of the heavens, there was none for his mind. The lorinas were draped across him, offering him what solace they could. Stroking their fur, he thought of bouncing, dark brown curls as the trim dancer ran to her father.

He swallowed, feeling lonelier than he ever had before.

As the sky began to lighten, he saw a ship zoom overhead. He didn't move while he waited for Rachol to dock and enter.

The lorinas heard the loud crackle of Rachol's engines and jumped from the bed, anxious to greet their other friend. Nykyrian grunted as they used his stomach for a launching pad.

"Kip!" Rachol yelled below, bombarded by the lorinas. "When are you going to chain these mongrels up?"

Running his hand through his unbound hair, Nykyrian sat up. The lorinas ran up the stairs, followed by Rachol.

Nykyrian stacked his pillows up along the wall and reclined against them. "Well?" he asked as Rachol sprawled across the foot of his bed.

"I told Biardi we were booked. The dude offered us a chunk of money though. I was almost tempted to take it and guard her myself. The girl seemed disappointed we refused." He shrugged.

Nykyrian shook his head. As always, Rachol's brief was efficient, short, and comical.

He drew his leg up and draped his arm over his knee. "What are the Probekeins up to?"

"They want the Gourans to relinquish all rights to Miremba IV to them. You were right about it pertaining to the weapon. Seems the Probekeins have need of the resources on that outpost to complete the explosive."

Nykyrian frowned. "I wasn't aware there was any surata on Miremba." His mind ran through all the chemicals the weapon needed, surata was the only one the Probekeins didn't have in their own territories.

Rachol didn't comment. He rolled over and propped himself up on his elbows, staring at the rose and amber streaked sky. "This is really a great view. You should try looking at

it when you're really flagged."

Nykyrian scowled. "You should try it sober."

"That hurt." Rachol laughed. "I'm sober now and I must say it's not nearly as interesting." He shifted his gaze to Nykyrian. "I haven't had a drink in three days. I've been doing well."

"You could do better."

Rachol snorted. "I'll quit *my* drinking on *your* wedding day."

Nykyrian stood, unamused. "I need to eat," he commented absently before heading to the stairs.

"Wait," Rachol called, stopping him. "I thought you might want to know. Pitala and Aksel Bredeh have taken over the contract on Kiara's life. When either one's going to strike, I'm clueless."

Nykyrian went cold. Pitala and Bredeh made Nemesis look meek. "When did you find that out?"

"On my way over here."

Thoughts tumbled through Nykyrian's mind. He couldn't allow Kiara to die. But dear God, how could he protect her, be near her day after day and not go mad with his body's needs?

An image of Kiara lying dead tormented him. He had spent the first half of his life killing and he knew only too well what an assassin, especially Pitala or Bredeh, would do to Kiara before he ended her life. Part of an assassin's job was to make the kill as gruesome as possible to intimidate the victim's relatives and allies.

Nykyrian was now an avenger, not a murderer. When he left the League, he had sworn he would protect the innocent victims chosen by the League and other assassins. He couldn't let her die.

He remembered Rachol reminding him once, a long time ago, that since he left the League he was no longer the law. No, now he was retribution and justice. Retribution usually came too late and justice would not allow Kiara to die over something that didn't even concern her.

Nykyrian stared at Rachol in indecision. It wasn't his job or his responsibility to guard Kiara. He had done his sentence in Hell when he belonged to the League. To be alone with her and not touch her would be an even worse torture for him than the missions he had been forced to execute against his will.

He saw Kiara's soft, trusting eyes, felt her body molded against his.

Nykyrian made his decision.

"Call Biardi."

Three

Kiara stretched her tense joints. She hoped she could give a decent performance tonight, but she doubted it. Four nights had passed since she last experienced untroubled sleep. Every time she tried to rest, she was plagued by thoughts of someone coming after her with a knife, and that, someone inevitably turned into Nykyrian.

With a weary sigh, she went to stare at her reflection, checking her costume for any tell-tale flaws. The tight, red sequined bodysuit clung to her figure, making her regret the large amount of sweets she had eaten that afternoon.

Well, at least her bruises were almost gone. She was a bit surprised the media hadn't questioned her about her battered face. Shrugging her shoulders, she attributed it to the heavy amount of red and gold makeup her costume required. They probably hadn't even noticed.

Kiara made a face at herself and returned to her pacing.

Loneliness filled her as she surveyed the tiny, empty room. Her father thought his absence comforted her. Everyone seemed to think she preferred solitude before a performance, but the truth was very different. She needed company most in the minutes prior to a dance. Just the sound of another voice would alleviate some of the nervousness tearing at her.

She thought of Nykyrian. Would he leave her alone?

Kiara shook her head, wondering what her thoughts were up to. Why did her dreams torment her with him as her stalker and why did her conscious mind see him as her savior?

No answer came.

Nervously, she continued to pace the room. As she neared the door, she heard the muffled voices of her father's guards.

"I tell you, I didn't enlist for this kind of mission. Hell, I almost wish someone would try to kill her just to get rid of the boredom!"

The other guard laughed. "I can think of a better way to end my boredom."

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine having night duty at her place. I envy Yanas and Briqs."

"Yeah, I'd like to show the little dumpling my night stick!"

Aghast at their bantering, Kiara crossed the room and rifled through her bag on the table. Pulling out the small blaster, she made sure it contained a full charge.

At the moment, she didn't know whom she trusted less, the Probekeins or her father's soldiers. She wasn't taking any more chances with her safety.

After she replaced the weapon, she heard a sharp snap outside her door. Kiara turned about to investigate the noise.

A tall shadow fell across her as she neared the door. She laughed nervously.

It couldn't be. She was just imagining the fact that the shadow looked like a giant man. She didn't want to turn around, but she did anyway, then wished she had listened to herself.

If she had thought her last two assassins were ugly, they were nothing compared to this one. Cold, black eyes stared at her from a scarred, human face. A maniacal smile twisted his lips.

Fear paralyzed her. Sweat formed on her body as she waited for him to do something other than stare at her like a rabid lorina.

She looked to her bag on the table he leaned against. Could she get to her blaster?

As if he could read her thoughts, he glanced to the bag. With a swipe of his arm, he

knocked it to the floor. Kiara took a step, then froze as her blaster landed at his feet with a heavy, soul-wrenching thud.

He laughed cruelly and retrieved it in his large paw of a hand.

"Help!" she screamed, knowing the guards outside would come to her rescue.

Clucking his tongue, the assassin shook his head. "They can't hear you. They're dead."

All thoughts left Kiara's mind in a wake of helpless terror. He moved toward her.

Her breathing became labored and rapid. Kiara wished herself out of the room, but her legs wouldn't cooperate. She was dead, she knew it.

Suddenly, her mind and body began working as one. The door! She had to get out and find help. She tossed a chair at the assassin and ran.

Her hand touched the icy knob. She grasped it like a lifeline, but before she could twist it open, a blow struck her across the back, knocking her away.

Dazed, she hit the floor.

Desperately, she wanted to scream again, but her lungs were incapable of anything save the cold rasping breaths rattling in her chest. She pushed herself along the floor in an effort to put more distance between them. Terror twined through her, blinding her eyes.

The assassin grabbed her by the throat, pulled her from the floor and shoved her across the table. Her bottles of perfume and makeup rattled, biting into her back, tearing at her flesh while he tightened his grip. Tears fell uncontrollably as she stared into the assassin's unfeeling face.

Kiara knew she would never leave this room alive.

The assassin held his blaster to her cheek. His twisted laughter was filling her ears as she waited for the final explosive sound that would end her life. She closed her eyes and prayed.

The door burst open with a resounding crash.

"Drop it, Pitala."

Kiara went cold in relief at the deep accent. It was him! Opening her eyes, she turned her head to see her tall, blond savior.

Nykyrian stood calmly in the doorway, his arms braced on either side of the frame.

"I'll kill her, hybrid," Pitala answered in a raspy serpentine voice.

"Then I'll kill you. Release her and you can walk away alive."

Kiara's blood drained from her face. She trembled, wishing they weren't so nonchalant about her life.

Pitala glared at her in indecision.

His blaster moved away from her cheek. She took a shaky breath, offering a prayer of thanks. "Do you think I fear you, half-ling?" Pitala sneered, refusing to release his grip on her throat.

Nykyrian shifted to one side of the door frame. "You really are pathetic. Do you honestly think I intend to stand here waiting for your partner to come up behind me?" He snapped his fingers.

An unconscious man was shoved through the door. Pitala cursed.

"I really hate taking out the trash," Rachol said, joining Nykyrian.

Pitala released her. Kiara rubbed her bruised throat and slid from the table. She jumped in reflex as Pitala moved his weapon toward the pair standing in the doorway.

Before he could aim it at either man, two blasters came out of nowhere to balance their sights at his heart.

"Think," Nykyrian said ominously, clicking back the release of his blaster with his thumb.

Pitala gave a nervous laugh, and held up his hands. "I wouldn't actually try to shoot you. I just wanted to see if you were as good as they say."

"Better," Rachol said, pulling Pitala's blaster from his hand.

Nykyrian holstered his weapon. "Apologize to *Tara* Biardi and you can leave."

Angry, black eyes focused on Kiara with an unspoken promise he would be back. A wave of terror consumed her. "My apologies," he rasped.

Cold sweat beaded on her body as Pitala bent and slapped his partner awake. Within seconds, the pair of assassins were gone.

Her relief at their departure quickly ebbed. "What are *you* doing here?" she asked, not quite certain of Nykyrian and Rachol's intent.

"Saving you," Nykyrian said absently, looking down the corridor.

The words only calmed her to a slight degree. Kiara wasn't sure the danger had passed. The OMG had turned down the contract to protect her. Maybe they had only saved her from Pitala so they could collect the bounty on her life.

Rachol stared at her. "She's not quite in shock, but I bet she faints before you get her home."

Kiara opened her mouth to remind him she didn't faint, but was silenced by Nykyrian returning into the room.

"Did they go out the back?" Rachol asked.

"Yes. Fifty *dorcas* they're setting up an ambush near my ship."

Rachol laughed. "No bet. I know they are. They're too stupid not be obvious and predictable."

Nykyrian nodded. "You know what to do. I'll meet you at rendezvous point and time."

Rachol returned his nod and gave Kiara a cheerful smile.

"Roll and burn," he said to Nykyrian on his way out the door.

Nykyrian turned his attention to Kiara. He wanted desperately to comfort her, but was afraid what he might do if he touched her. Her tears still glistened on her cheeks where they had washed away streaks of her makeup.

His hand tightened around the grip of his blaster. He should have killed Pitala for the grief he caused her. Pushing his emotions back into restraint, Nykyrian retrieved her

cloak from a peg inside the door. "Here," he said, handing the cloak to her. "We need to go."

Kiara swallowed the lump in her throat. For a moment, she was unable to understand the words through the fog clouding her mind. "You mean leave?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I have a show to perform." Her voice sounded hollow even to herself. She had to dance. People had paid too much money to be disappointed. Her promoters would never forgive her if she disappointed the audience.

Nykyrian grabbed her arm as she tried to walk past him. Her lucidity worried him. Had she suffered a breakdown from the attack? She was definitely too calm. "You have to leave the theatre."

"I cannot."

Her voice, haunting in its emptiness, scared him. Nykyrian wanted to shake her. Her amber eyes were glassy, devoid of any emotion. Rachol was right, she was in shock.

"Listen," he said, trying to break through the mild sedation her mind had provided for her. "Pitala and his kind will do anything to accomplish their mission. That includes bombing this building. They don't care how many lives they take as long as yours is one of them. We must leave."

Kiara laughed, not really understanding his words. Pulling away from his grip, she walked into the hallway. Her toe struck something solid. She looked down.

Her numbness left her in a wake of consuming terror. On the floor were the bodies of her guards. Their eyes opened and glazed, red blood seeped through their uniforms.

Her scream echoed through the hallway.

Wincing at the sound, Nykyrian drew her into his arms and cradled her head against his chest. "Don't look," he whispered, his chest tightening into a painful knot of suppressed emotion.

He held her quietly while she sobbed. He had long ceased being horrified by bodies. The only emotion the grisly sight evoked in him was anger over the waste.

Her hot tears soaked through his shirt, forming chills on his skin. The soft scent of flowers drifted from her hair. Her slender arms clutched at him in desperation. He tightened his arms around her shoulders, wishing he could have something she would never give to the likes of him, wishing for things he could never give her— things like safety, and a better world.

"Everything will be fine," he said soothingly.

"No, it won't," Kiara sobbed. Her feelings crashed through her in waves of resounding grief and agony. She could still feel Pitala's blaster at her cheek, see his menacing black eyes.

Oh God, she had almost died!

Kiara cried against Nykyrian's shoulder, clutching him. She needed the safety he offered, the protection. She found a strange comfort in his arms. His heart beat a steady, soothing rhythm under her cheek. A faint smell of leather and musk came from his skin.

Clinging to him, she needed his warmth.

Nykyrian clenched his teeth at her embrace. Never in his life had anyone held him in such a manner. He knew only her emotional state prompted her to touch him at all. If she ever knew who and what he was, she would hate him. just as everyone did.

Swallowing the lump of pain burning in his throat, he pulled away. "We must leave."

Kiara took her cloak from his hand and wrapped it around her. She shielded her eyes from the bodies. For now, she had no choice but to trust this stranger to get her past Pitala. Nykyrian had saved her life, obviously he knew what he was doing.

"Is there another exit besides the back?" he asked.

"The caterers have a separate entrance," she whispered.

"Where?"

"This way." Kiara led him down the corridor, past the reception room.

Entering the kitchen. Kiara became self-conscious. The caterers paused their movements, staring at them with keen interest. Her stomach churned at the smell of baking sweets. For a moment, she feared she'd be sick.

Without breaking stride, Nykyrian led her to the back door and out into the street.

He hailed a transport.

Kiara stepped inside the car, pushing herself as far over in the seat as she could. She just wanted to fade into obscurity and never be bothered or hunted again.

Nykyrian gave her address to the computer.

She went cold with dread. "How do you know where I live?"

"At the moment, all mercenaries know. The Probekeins have been listing your name and address for the last week on their bounty sheets."

Her hands trembled. All this time, she had deluded herself into thinking she was safe. Could her life truly be that precarious?

Her stomach knotted even more as she thought about the dead soldiers. She had killed them. Had it not been for her, they would still be alive.

The Probekeins wanted her dead and anyone near her could be the next victim. "Aren't you afraid to be with me?" she asked quietly.

"Afraid?" he asked in a shocked whisper.

"The next assassin could kill you by accident."

Nykyrian shook his head. "Allow me to assure you, if anyone kills me, it won't be by accident. The contract on your life is paltry when compared to mine."

Kiara nodded, unable to speak around the clump of tears in her throat. Here she sat, next to a true mercenary, a brutal killer if the truth were spoken. Why was he helping her?

"Are you going to kill me?" Her voice shook from the strain and fear of her words.

He sighed. "If I had that intention, I would never have returned you to your father."

"But why are you protecting me? I thought mercenary assassins were only motivated by money."

Nykyrian rubbed his right hand over his left biceps. "You haven't met enough of us to

make that assumption."

Kiara conceded he was right. "You avoided my question. Why are you helping me?"

His hand stopped. He looked away from her. "Maybe I'm a fan."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

Kiara stared at him too shocked and confused to feel anything. Nykyrian sat so still next to her, he seemed ethereal. His blond hair was loose, spilling over his shoulders. As before, the dark glasses obscured his face, giving her no real idea what he looked like.

"Who are you?" she asked, needing to know.

Nykyrian shrugged. "Never figured it out, It takes too much time to think about myself, and time is one luxury I don't own."

Kiara fell silent, thinking, remembering. "I killed those guards you know."

Her words seemed to soften some of his rigidity. "The Probekeins killed them."

Kiara shook her head, her tears spilling down her cheeks. "No, they were protecting *me*."

Nykyrian sighed again and looked in her direction. "They were soldiers. Death is nothing more than the hazards of the business. They knew the risks."

His words cut through her. "How can you be so cold?" she said with a sob. "They were people with families."

Nykyrian stared at her. Even in the flickering, faint light, he saw her tears sparkling against her cheeks. He knew her pain, her guilt.

Again, a need to comfort her consumed him. Pushing his desire away, he looked back out the window. "I'm a soldier. Emotions are bred out of us during training."

Kiara scoffed. "You are a mercenary. There is a difference."

"True. Mercenaries are better paid."

Frustration welled up inside Kiara. How could she ever have thought Nykyrian to be different. He was of the same caliber as Pitala. Would he hold a blaster to her head if given the right amount of money?

The thought chilled her.

Her dreams were a warning to her that she couldn't trust him. Trust belonged to the past. She had trusted the dance company's security to protect her in the hotel and she'd been abducted. She had trusted her father's soldiers and she'd almost been killed. Never again would she be so foolish.

Nykyrian would have to be watched.

The transport stopped outside her building. Nykyrian exited first and scanned the street.

After a minute, he helped her from the car. He shielded her with his body as they crossed the sidewalk and she inserted her key card into the door's lock. When the door opened, he grabbed her arm to keep her from entering the building before he scanned the hallway, then the street.

"You're making me nervous!" she snapped.

"You should be nervous."

Kiara gnashed her teeth in frustration, stepped into the corridor and headed for the lift. "My flat is on the top floor."

"I know."

He infuriated her. If he knew so much, why didn't he lead the way? Oh what she wouldn't give to knock some of his cockiness out of him. "It must thrill you to always be right," she said testily, pushing the number for her floor.

As the doors closed, he faced her. "You can attack me all you wish. I don't give a *minsid* damn whether or not you like me. But you *will* respect me, listen to me, and *obey me!*"

Anger stung her cheeks at his rapid dictation for her behavior. "I'm not yours, you have no ownership papers! My God, I haven't even hired you."

"You haven't, your father has."

Kiara stiffened in confusion. "What's that supposed to mean? I was there when Rachol turned my father's proposal down."

"We reconsidered."

The knot in her stomach loosened. "Why?"

He stepped back from her. "Pitala and Aksel Bredeh."

Kiara frowned. Pitala she knew only too well. "What is Aksel Bredeh?"

"He's another rancid mercenary assassin, *mu Tara*."

She clenched her teeth. "Why do you keep calling me *Tara*? Is it an insult?"

Nykyrian tensed for a moment. "It's Andarion for lady," he said softly and turned away from her.

"Oh," she whispered, curious as to why he chose to call her that after his rough treatment of her.

"Who is Aksel Bredeh?" she asked at last, wondering what there was to the new mercenary that would motivate Nykyrian to help her. Could he be any worse than Pitala? She shivered at the thought. Silence answered her question.

She glared at Nykyrian, awaiting a response. Before she could ask again, the doors opened on her floor.

Nykyrian stepped out and scanned the corridor.

Tempted to shove him and say boo, Kiara bet herself he'd jump twelve feet. Or shoot her, her mind cautioned. If he really were an ex-League Assassin, he was very dangerous if startled.

She reached her door and stopped. "This has been tampered with," she whispered to Nykyrian, seeing a strange device hooked into her card slot.

She swallowed the panic surging through her body. Someone was inside her flat! She could hear them.

Cold fear washed over her.

Nykyrian pulled her behind him then knocked twice.

"Who is it?" a deep growling voice asked from inside.

"The *Tourah* Beast," Nykyrian answered sarcastically. "Open the damn door before I get shot in the hallway!"

"Geez, what a temper," the voice said as the door slid open to reveal a large Andarion male.

Kiara's heart slid into her stomach at the massive form. She had thought Nykyrian to be tall. This man stood a head taller. His long teeth flashed at her.

Was he considering her for dinner?

Nykyrian grabbed her arm and pulled her past the man.

Her eyes widened as she brushed up against the Andarion's chest. The crimson and white eyes sent a chill down her spine. No wonder Nykyrian wore dark glasses. Eyes like those were terrifying.

"Where's Rachol?" another voice drew her attention to her couch.

"On his way," Nykyrian responded.

Kiara stared at the human male reclining on her couch with his feet propped up on her table. His dark auburn hair, almost as long as Nykyrian's, concealed the right side of his face. He seemed completely comfortable in her home.

The sight angered her.

How dare they invade her privacy in such a manner. Her agitation increased when the Andarion returned to her favorite armchair, picked up her bag of friggles from the low table and began munching them!

Seizing the bag, she narrowed her eyes. "This is my home, not some free-house!"

The Andarion looked at Nykyrian, his eyes wide. "She's got spunk," he rasped with a dark laugh. "I bet her meat is equally as spicy."

His gaze returned to her. Kiara took a step back, clutching the bag to her chest.

"You might want to return the food to him," Nykyrian said from behind her. "It's unwise to starve an Andarion. If Hauk decided to nibble on you, there's not much we could do."

Hauk raked her with a measuring stare.

Her anger vanished. Handing the bag back to Hauk, she swallowed the lump in her throat. What had she gotten herself into? How could her father have turned her over to these people?

"They're only teasing you," the red headed man said with a bright smile. "I'm Darling Crewell." He stood and extended his hand to her.

Kiara shook his gloved hand. Something in Darling's manner reminded her of an aristocrat. He seemed easy enough to get along with, unlike the two Andarions.

"The glutton is Dancer Hauk," Darling said as he retook his seat.

"Dancer?" Kiara smiled, amused by the revelation,

"It means killer in Andarion," Hauk snapped.

Darling laughed, a deep throaty sound. "You wish! I believe Nykyrian told me it meant: of beautiful cheeks."

Hauk gave Nykyrian a glare that bordered on murder. Nykyrian shrugged, apparently unconcerned by the hostility. "Well, it does."

Kiara sighed, relieved by their play which took some of coldness out of them and the awkward nervousness out of her.

Darling smiled again. "I'm sorry if we overstepped our bounds. Being the only one here with Hauk, I encouraged him to scrounge for other sources of food."

At least Darling had manners. "It's all right," she assured him. "I'm still upset over what's happened."

Turning around, she faced Nykyrian. He leaned against her bar with his arms folded over his chest. His head was angled toward Darling, but she was sure he was watching her. She could feel his eyes on her. If only he wasn't wearing those blasted glasses.

Did he ever remove them?

"I need to change," she said absently. "I suppose I don't need to tell the three of you to make yourselves comfortable."

Nykyrian smirked.

She really hated those glasses. She would love to be able to read his emotions and moods.

Kiara paused at the entrance to her hall and glanced back at the three men. She was uncomfortable about removing her clothes with strangers milling about.

She looked at Nykyrian's stoic face.

"You don't have to worry about us," he said roughly, reading her thoughts. "Hauk isn't attracted to humans, Darling isn't attracted to women, and I'm . . ." Nykyrian paused.

What could he say? All too well, he remembered the sight of her in the skimpy nightgown. He wanted her more than anything.

Her eyes held the look of expectation. He steadied himself. At the moment, she thought him a hero who had saved her life. He wasn't. The best thing would be to make her hate him now instead of later.

"I'm not interested," he finished.

Kiara's blush deepened at the harsh words spoken before the other two men. Narrowing her eyes, she seethed in her humiliation. How had she ever thought she might want this man? He was despicable.

Without a word, she stomped down the hall to her bedroom and slammed the door.

What had she been thinking when she considered him handsome. He wasn't even human!

Kiara paused. That *must* be his problem.

No, he said Hauk didn't like humans and *he* wasn't interested.

Jerking her costume off, she tossed it. on the bed. Never had she been so embarrassed. Who did he think he was? A mercenary assassin? Hah! He wasn't worthy of such an awe inspiring title. He was just a crude, low-bred gimfry with the manners of a ghoul!

She would show him how little he meant to her. In fact, she'd never even speak to him again.

Kiara belted her robe around her waist and entered the hallway. She stopped and looked back to where Nykyrian still leaned against her bar. Her body trembled in rage.

Nykyrian's skin tingled. He knew he was being watched. Turning his head, he saw Kiara's blazing amber eyes. Good, she hated him. Hatred was one thing he could easily deal with. But then, why did he ache with the knowledge that she despised him? He should be happy.

Shaking himself out of his emotions, he turned back to Hauk. He heard Kiara enter the bathroom. When the water came on, an image of her naked body caressed by the water's spray flashed through his mind.

Against his will, his body responded with a hammering need.

"Are you all right?" Darling asked.

"Tired." Nykyrian cleared his throat. "You were saying you placed scanners outside in the corridor."

"Right. Hauk reworked the communications system to prevent anyone from accessing it. The channels will be clear should you need to contact us."

Nykyrian nodded. "I still intend to use the link."

"Probably for the best," Hauk said. "Once Bredeh learns you're guarding her, he's going to come after you with full arsenal."

"I'm ready."

Hauk snorted. "I wouldn't be so arrogant. He won't stick by League rules and attack you openly. He wants your life more than he wants Kiara's." Hauk crunched a friggle.

Nykyrian shrugged. Aksel was the least of his present concerns.

Nykyrian heard Kiara leave the bathroom. Squelching the desire to look at her, he returned his thoughts to their discussion. "You act as if Aksel wanting me dead is something new. He's been trying to kill me since I was ten."

Hauk snorted. "True, but— "

Kiara's scream echoed in the flat.

Nykyrian went cold. Drawing his blaster, he ran down the corridor to the back room where the sound had come from. Carefully, he entered the studio, then froze.

With a stern frown, he looked at Kiara's rage flushed face. She stood in the center of the room, hands on hips.

"What is going on?" he snapped, angered over her unwarranted shriek.

"What have you done?" she snarled. "Look at my room!" She gestured toward the black blaster shields over her floor length windows. "How dare you people come into *my* home and rearrange *my* furnishings. And what is that thing?"

Holstering his blaster, Nykyrian stared at the opaque window coverings. "It's a blast shield."

Darling and Hauk exchanged wary looks.

"I forgot to mention that," Darling said. "We covered all the windows to keep snipers from seeing a target."

Kiara fumed. "I want you to leave! All of you. Out!"

Nykyrian nodded to Hauk and Darling, excusing them. Without a word, they left.

"I meant you as well."

"I know you did. Get used to me, I'm not leaving."

She walked right up to him, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. "You're fired."

Her audacity almost made him smile. It had been a long time since someone dared stand up to him in anger without a weapon pointed at his head. "You didn't hire me."

Kiara's eyes widened. Never in her life had she been so angry. In fact, it was rare she ever lost her temper. She stared at Nykyrian wishing she were Trisani and could splatter him against her walls with just her thoughts.

"I want you out of my home."

For a brief moment, she thought he winced, but his face quickly turned back hard. He left the studio.

Satisfaction washed over her as she surveyed the empty room. Tomorrow she would have the building's maintenance crew remove the shields. Tonight she would enjoy the peacefulness of being alone and alive.

She wanted her life back and she intended to claim it!

A movement in one of her mirrors caught her attention. Stepping closer to the glass, she recognized Nykyrian in her front room.

She trembled in rage. He hadn't left. In a heated daze, she went to expel him from her life. She was tired of having no control over anything that happened to her. The time had come for people to realize she would tolerate no more encroachments on her freedom!

Reaching the kitchen, Kiara paused, shocked by the sight before her.

He was preparing dinner? Her anger dissolved. Never had she expected a mercenary assassin to cook. "What are you doing?" she asked, subdued.

"I thought you might be hungry, I know I am."

Kiara watched him rinse assorted *brenna* vegetables in her sink. Pulling her cutting block off the wall, he began chopping the vegetables into tiny pieces. "You actually look like you know what you're doing."

He stopped chopping and looked up at her. "Does it surprise you? Even killers need food."

She ignored his obvious barb. "Food yes, but Cretoria? That is what you're making?"

"Yes." He finished chopping the vegetables, then placed them on the counter.

"So, you're a killer and a gourmet."

Nykyrian shrugged while he walked to her cooling unit and pulled out her defrosted *trona* meat. He returned to her counter. "You could say I'm a gourmet killer. Being Andarion, I like my human meat cooked well."

She bit her lip at his even tone that betrayed no hint of emotion. "You told me you don't eat humans."

She was sure the look under his glasses was a sharp glare. Without a word, he began chopping the meat.

Kiara watched the hacking cleaver, and with each thump she cringed. Was she safe alone with him? Her hands trembled. Her father wouldn't have hired him if he thought there would be any danger to her. Right?

If only she could read his thoughts as easily as he seemed to read hers.

"Do you ever remove your glasses?"

"No."

She pursed her lips at his curt response. "Are you embarrassed over your Andarion eyes?" she persisted, trying to figure out why he wanted to wear them inside.

He growled low in his throat. "Nothing about me, bothers me. But my eyes seem to make everyone else damn uncomfortable."

"Even Hauk?"

The cleaver thumped louder. "Especially Hauk."

Kiara wondered at his words. How could an Andarion be made uncomfortable by another of his kind?

Who was this man in her home?

She realized she wouldn't find out. the answer today. "I need to dress," she said quietly, leaving the kitchen.

Thank you, Nykyrian thought to himself. The low-dip in the front of her robe caused him quite a bit of discomfort. Since she had called his attention to the studio, the only thing he had really noticed was the tiny droplets of water clinging to the deep cleft of her breasts.

He vowed to keep his mind on business not Kiara's body.

To help achieve his goal, he switched on the disc player located on the kitchen counter. As he finished placing the meat and vegetables into a dish, he heard Rachol's knock code on the door.

Kiara came running from her room, fastening the last three buttons of her blouse. Nykyrian groaned inwardly, regretting he had ever told her he wasn't interested in her body. No doubt, she figured she could run about naked and not stir him. This was going to be a long mission.

Reining his body back into his rigid control, Nykyrian moved to the door.

Kiara opened it, admitting Rachol and her father.

"Thank God," the Commander said and pulled her into his arms. "When I saw the bodies, I was terrified you were hurt."

Another wave of panic threatened to consume Kiara as she thought over her near death. "Luckily Nykyrian and Rachol were there," she said.

Tiarun released her and faced Nykyrian. "I thought you people were going to wait until tomorrow before starting your protection."

"Had we waited, she would be dead," Nykyrian said with his usual nonchalance, making Kiara wonder if anything ever set his temper off, or elicited any other "normal" response.

Her father tensed before nodding at Nykyrian's callous words. "I wanted to tell you about this," he said to Kiara, rubbing her arm tenderly. "I was waiting until after your performance. I didn't want to upset you."

"I'm not upset," she lied, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

Tiarun gave her a grim smile. He looked back at Nykyrian with the stern frown that never failed to intimidate Kiara. "I do have misgivings about this. I warned Nemesis, now I warn you. Should anything happen to her, I won't rest until I have destroyed every member of the OMG."

Nykyrian had to stifle his disbelieving snort. "We're professionals. Kiara is safer with us than she would ever be with you," he replied calmly.

Tiarun narrowed his eyes in a way that made Nykyrian want to growl in response. "She'd

better be. I intend to keep in constant contact." Tiarun pulled Kiara back into his arms, giving her a tight hug. "I hate to leave, but I need to get back to the base and deal with the reporters and paperwork over what happened tonight. If you need me. call."

"I will," she promised, kissing his cheek.

"I'll check on you when I get home."

"Okay." Reluctantly, she closed the door behind him.

Kiara frowned at the mocking expression on Rachol's face as he walked to Nykyrian.

"Parental worries? Yuck!" Rachol shuddered.

Nykyrian shoved his shoulder. "Don't mock."

"Come on, Kip. Doesn't it give you the *boowahs*?"

Kiara stared at Rachol, curious about his words, angered over the way he acted about her father's concern. "Don't your parents ever worry over either of you?" she asked acidly.

"What parents?" Rachol returned.

A ripple of shock went through Kiara. "Are they dead?"

"Careful," Nykyrian said, returning to the kitchen. "You might not want an answer."

Frowning, she tried to understand his cryptic response. "What do you mean?"

"Kip wasn't born, he was spawned." Rachol smiled.

Now she was completely confused. "Who's Kip?"

Rachol indicated Nykyrian with his thumb.

"You were a tubey?"

Nykyrian glanced up from his dinner preparations. "Rachol has a brain disorder that causes him to lie most of the time. Ignore him."

So Nykyrian wasn't a test-tube baby. This really didn't make a bit of sense. "But neither

of you has parents?"

Nykyrian grimaced. "We're orphans."

"That's what I asked to begin with," Kiara said, watching Rachol take a seat on one of her stools.

They ignored her agitated voice.

"Are you staying for dinner?" Nykyrian asked, handing Rachol a glass of *spara* juice.

"Do you mind?" Rachol asked Kiara.

"No," she said, surprised by the honesty of the statement.

For some reason, she liked Rachol despite his unorthodox looks. His dark brown hair was pulled back into a short ponytail. His brown eyes were ringed in black eye-liner, giving him the look of a feral hunting beast. Two silver hoops hung from his left earlobe.

He was definitely not the type of man who attracted her, but she had to admit, he was oddly handsome.

Kiara shifted her gaze to Nykyrian as he talked with Rachol. He seemed far more at ease with Rachol than he had with his other two friends.

As Rachol made another joke, she realized Nykyrian never smiled or laughed. She couldn't remember ever seeing him do either. For some reason, she wanted to see his lips curl up and hear his laugh.

What could take away someone's laughter?

Her chest tightened as she considered the life he must have lived. No parents, no laughter, a League Assassin. In truth, it was a miracle he was still alive.

She wanted to solve the enigma before her.

Nykyrian might not be interested in her, but she had a deep curiosity about him. And she had never been one to leave a mystery unsolved. Kiara promised herself in the coming days, she would delve into his mind and find out what there was underneath those glasses and his distant manner.

Four

Kiara was talking to her father over the telelink when Rachol took his leave. Nykyrian listened to her soft voice drifting from her room. The silken, dulcet tone pierced him. Forcing his mind to business as he had promised himself, he retrieved his portable computer terminal from the bag Hauk had left for him on the floor.

Nykyrian took a seat on the couch and unzipped the terminal. Kiara's laugh rippled, causing a bittersweet pain to twist his stomach. He clenched his fists and ran through the litany his adoptive father had forced him to recite while growing up— He was a warrior, a killer. He didn't need anyone. He was stronger alone.

His thoughts back on his job, he switched on the terminal. The bright blue screen glared, causing him to flinch. His eyes burned from the strain of wearing his glasses indoors, but despite the pain, he didn't dare remove them around Kiara.

Maybe he should have assigned Rachol watch duty tonight. This mission was bound to be his undoing.

He had spent the entire dinner wanting her, feeling her presence next to him. If only he hadn't allowed her to touch him at the theatre, he might have been able to banish her from his thoughts.

Nykyrian scoffed at himself. Who was he trying to fool? Since the first performance he had seen her in, he hadn't been able to banish her from his thoughts. She had haunted his dreams like a stalking phantom out to steal his rotting soul.

He sighed wearily. This mission was definitely not what he needed to help him get her out of his mind. He heard her finish her conversation. She entered the front room with a warm smile on her face as she looked at him. Nykyrian's blood raced in heated response to her gentle look.

"Is Rachol gone?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yes," he said, forcing himself to concentrate on his work.

Kiara sat in her favorite chair, across from him. Her father's dire words echoed in her ears. He had warned her of the OMG's ferocity, telling her they killed on contract without emotions.

Watching Nykyrian closely, she tried to read his thoughts. Though his face didn't betray any tell-tale signs of feelings, She knew he had them. No one was totally devoid of emotions.

Nykyrian's own words drifted through her mind. *Emotions are bred out of us during training.* She still refused to believe he was emotionless. Were that true, he wouldn't have comforted her while she cried.

A wicked smile curved her lips as she studied his lean, muscular build. She had seen and been held by many men who constantly worked to improve their physical appearance, but none of them had ever appealed to her as much as the man before her now. A man whose distance annoyed her.

She wasn't used to having to fight for someone's attention. Usually, she fought to escape it. Kiara wondered if maybe that was part of her attraction for him— the old hard-to-get routine.

But as she studied him, she realized even if that were part of it, there was much more to her desire than just the challenge of the aloof. There was something about him that called out to her like a hurt child needing comfort. Kiara almost laughed aloud at the thought. She stared at Nykyrian, his jaw tense, his features blank. No, there didn't appear to be anything about him even close to frail.

So why did she feel this way? "What are you working on?" she finally asked.

He growled a low warning in his throat that made her a bit uneasy. "I have a lot of work that needs to be finished. I'm not here to be sociable. I'm here only to protect you."

Kiara folded her arms around her leg and rested her chin on her knee. She watched his flying fingers, the keys of the terminal clicking beneath them. "But since you're here . . ." His fingers stopped, the sudden silence echoed around her, increasing her discomfort. "I just thought you might as well tell me something about yourself. We could end up spending days together, weeks, and I for— "

"Fine," he snapped, cutting her off.

Kiara hid her triumphant smile behind her knee, but she was sure her eyes glowed in mischief.

Nykyrian sat back and defensively crossed his arms over his chest. "If it will solace your mind, I will allow you to ask eight questions about me. After that, you'll never again ask

me another thing about my past, or my friends, and you'll remain quiet and let me finish what I'm doing."

The sharp, clipped words irked her. She stared at him, trying to think of things that would give her some advantage over him. "Okay," she said, as she thought of the first one. "What's your surname?"

"One, Quiakides."

Surprise widened her eyes. "As in the universally famed and acclaimed Commander Huwin Quiakides of the Intergalactic League of Peacekeepers?"

He sighed. "Two, yes."

"Was he your father?"

She thought she noticed his teeth clench before he answered, "Three, yes."

Kiara gave an unladylike snort. "That doesn't count. You should have said that when I asked the second question."

He shrugged in an aggravating manner of disinterest. "Be specific. Anything counts."

Kiara sat for a minute, thinking over what little information Mira had given her while she had been in the OMG's base. "If he was your father, why did you leave the League?"

This time, she definitely saw the angry tick in his jaw as his features hardened. "How did you know I was in the League?"

Kiara gulped at the harsh, deadly tone. At that moment, she could easily imagine him tearing someone into pieces and she had no desire for that someone to be either her or Mira. "I just heard it somewhere. It is true, isn't it? You were a League Assassin?"

Some of the tenseness left his lips, and she wondered why. "Four, yes."

Kiara was getting tired of him numbering his answers. "You know, you could try and be a little friendlier."

"I'm not paid to be nice. I'm paid to kill."

A lump of dread closed her throat at the thought. "Do you like to kill?" she asked, her

throat growing tighter by the heartbeat.

Kiara witnessed the first visible, emotional response from him— he winced as if she had struck him. His breathing became labored in anger and he slammed the terminal closed with a sharp snap before he tossed it aside. Without a word, he left the room.

Kiara sat in her chair for several minutes, wondering about his reaction. Since he brought the subject of his killings up so often, why would her question bother him? She went to find out.

He stood in front of the blast shields in her studio, She watched him from the doorway as he slid his hand over the plastic panels as if looking for a hole. He appeared calm.

"You said you would answer my questions," she said softly, wishing she could see inside him for a minute and find out why he was so distant.

He dropped his hand. "I didn't expect you to ask that one."

She rubbed the chills from her arms. "Why not?"

Nykyrian crossed the room to stand before her. His nearness intoxicated her more than a thousand cups of larna could ever do. For a moment, she thought he might actually touch her, but he remained less than a foot from her—just close enough to warm her with his body heat, with an intangible wall so thick around him, she didn't dare reach out and touch him the way her heart cried for her to.

"Why would you care how anything makes me feel?" His soft voice seemed somehow humble, searching.

She swallowed the clump of assorted emotions churning inside her. "I don't know, I just do."

He took a deep breath and turned around. "Do you practice in here?"

Kiara frowned at the unexpected question, wondering what had prompted it. "Yes."

He walked over to the mirrors and touched the barre. "Do you enjoy what you do?"

The question caught her off guard. She frowned again, thinking about the answer. "I never really thought about it," she said. "Dancing was all I ever wanted to do, so I guess I must enjoy it."

His grip tightened on the barre. "Or do you just do it because someone expected you to?"

A chill crept up her back. "What makes you think that?"

Nykyrian turned around and faced her. "The pictures you have in the main room. Most of them are of you as a child, dressed for dance recitals. You don't look old enough in any of them to make a life-shaping decision. I would say you dance because you were told it was what you *should* do with your talents."

The truth in his words cut through her consciousness. How could he see something about her that she had never even noticed? "Are you always this acute?"

He shrugged. "In my business, it pays to know and understand people. It keeps me alive."

Kiara ran his words through her mind. And in that moment she had her first insight into him. "Is that why you do what you? Because someone told you, you should be an assassin?"

Silence answered her.

"You still owe me six answers."

"Four answers," he corrected acidly, folding his arms over his chest. "And I've answered enough questions for tonight."

He walked past her and Kiara knew the subject was closed as firmly as if it were held in trust by League Protectors. With a weary sigh, she realized she didn't know much more about him now than she had in the beginning.

Frustrated, she returned to the main room where he was once again occupied with his terminal.

"Will it disturb you if I turn on the viewer?"

"No," he answered curtly, his fingers not even hesitating in their rapid beat.

Returning to her chair, Kiara picked up the control and began flipping through the channels. She listened more to Nykyrian The Tough than to her programs. Even though he appeared oblivious to her, she sensed the rigid wall of defenses he had closed around himself. Somewhere, there had to be a chink.

But did she really want to find it?

Kiara swallowed in trepidation as she considered what it would mean to her life if he were to open himself up to her. He was a wanted criminal to most governments. If people associated her with Nykyrian on a social level, she would be barred from the theatre. She had spent too many years carving her career to just toss it to the wind for some handsome man. Even one as delectable as her guard.

No, she couldn't allow all the time and energy she had spent building herself up to just lose it all now. She would allow Nykyrian to remain aloof and distanced, as much for her sake as his.

She switched off the viewer. "I'm going to bed."

Nykyrian stopped his typing and listened to her walking down the hallway to her room. He closed the terminal to ease some of the ache from his eyes and allowed the rigidity to leave his body as he relaxed back against the couch.

The sounds of Kiara preparing for bed formed a strange comfort to his soul. He removed his glasses, balanced them on his knee, then rubbed his burning eyes until they adjusted to the light. His soul didn't need comfort, it needed solitude.

His job— to protect, not seduce.

Contrary to his thoughts and noble code, an image of Kiara holding him flashed across his mind. Enough! he roared at his treacherous thoughts and instantly the image vanished.

Nykyrian placed his glasses on the low table and stretched out on the couch, listening to the soothing, empty silence surrounding him. He drew strength from it and swore to keep his thoughts on the men tracking Kiara, not on his seducing her.

* * *

Kiara woke from troubled sleep. Once more her dreams had tormented her with the sight of Nykyrian killing her. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she pulled her robe on and went to the kitchen to get her ritual glass of *spara* juice.

At the entrance to the kitchen, she paused in shock. On the kitchen table placed before her chair sat a warmer with a full breakfast and a glass of *spara* juice. Amazed at the

fare, she looked over to Nykyrian who sat on a bar stool reading a stack of papers. He was, as usual, completely oblivious to her.

"Impressive," she said, retrieving a piece of toast from the warmer. Her tastebuds reeled at the strange, sharp spices he had added to the bread. "Very impressive."

He ignored her compliments. "What do you have to do today?" he asked in a gruff voice that set her teeth at odds.

Kiara swallowed a sip of juice. "I have rehearsal this afternoon, then my performance—"

"No," he interrupted. "No performances or rehearsals."

She sat the juice down on the table and stared agape at him. "You're insane if you think you can keep me from dancing."

He put the papers on the counter and stood. "Next time, they'll bomb the building to get you."

She smirked. "How do you know?"

"I would."

His deadpan voice frightened her more than anything else he could have said. Kiara swallowed the lump burning in her throat. "This is my career you're talking about. A missed performance could end it."

"Death would be a much more permanent end to it."

Well she couldn't argue with that logic. "What am I supposed to do? Stay imprisoned here, waiting for the next assassin to come in and kill me? Why not just bomb this building and have done with it?"

Nykyrian didn't so much as twitch a muscle as he responded in his low, unwavering voice, "League rules."

Kiara stiffened in confusion. "What?"

"The League forbids a free-assassin to detonate a bomb in a housing building."

She laughed at the absurdity of the idea of paid killers following a code of honor. "You mean assassins actually have rules to follow? Why should someone who kills for a living give a damn about some League ordinance?"

Still no visible reaction from Nykyrian The Tough. "If you had ever disobeyed the League, you wouldn't ask that question."

She moved closer to him and leaned against the bar. "What's that supposed to mean? Are you speaking from your own experience?"

He moved away from her. "Very few free-assassins have the ability to outwit League Assassins. Despite the corruption inherent in their own system, the League does try to keep some type of law over the free-assassins to make sure they don't become more powerful than the fat bureaucrats."

Kiara pursed her lips. That didn't answer her second question at all.

She studied Nykyrian, finding it amusing that he allowed someone to govern his behavior. She cocked a disbelieving eyebrow at him. "And you abide by these laws?"

"When it suits me to."

Kiara clutched her robe closed. The underlining threat of his words was not lost on her. She had been right, he respected no man's rules, except his own.

She cleared her throat and quickly changed the subject. "Can I at least go shopping? I have a birthday present to buy for a friend of mine."

He went perfectly still and she wondered why her question bothered him. "If we must," he said at last. "I suppose you want to go today."

Kiara narrowed her eyes at him. "Well, with my pressing schedule, I don't know. I think I might be able to schedule it between my luncheon and party."

He didn't even bother to smirk at her sarcasm. "Go get dressed. It'll be better to go before the afternoon crowds start swarming."

With a sigh, Kiara retrieved her juice and a slice of *grasdin* then headed to her bedroom.

It didn't take her long to shower and dress, but before she finished, she heard Rachol talking with Nykyrian in the main room. They spoke a strange language she couldn't

understand even though she listened very carefully for her name or any other word she might recognize.

Well at least Nykyrian's harshness seemed to fade a tad around Rachol. She would like to see some reaction from her bodyguard other than shrugs and clipped retorts.

A wicked smile curved her lips. Before her common sense could rear its ugly presence, she changed clothes. If there was one thing she had learned in her adulthood, it was that men loved her lean, muscular body. Maybe a little sight of it just might wring some form of reaction out of Nykyrian.

She pulled on a pair of tight black slacks and the low-cut matching blazer that hugged her curves in just the right way. Kiara tucked a white scarf into the deep décolleté to disguise the fact she didn't wear a blouse.

This was the outfit that had gotten her noticed by some of the most desirable men in the universe. She couldn't wait to see how Nykyrian would fare against it! Slipping her feet into a pair of low-heeled boots, she went to join him and Rachol.

As she entered the main room, Nykyrian looked up from his conversation and didn't so much as prolong a word, let alone trail off in the startled appreciation she usually received from men when she dressed this way.

Rachol turned around in his chair and almost fell out of it. He cleared his throat. "Whoa," he said, looking back at Nykyrian.

"Thank you," she said with a disappointed sigh.

Nykyrian came to his feet, still refusing to acknowledge her dress. "Are you ready?"

Grinding her teeth together in disappointed frustration, she nodded. She thought Nykyrian would at least take her arm to keep her near him, but all he did was open the door and scan the corridor before waving her out of the apartment.

"Is Rachol staying here?" she asked, noting he didn't move from his chair.

Rachol's laugh answered her. "Yeah, Kip gets to guard you and I get to house-sit. Life bites the big *tee-tawa*."

She frowned. "The big what?"

"We won't be gone long," Nykyrian cut in before Rachol could answer. He shut and locked her door.

"That was rude," she chastised.

Instead of the sharp, angry barb she expected, he brushed his hand through his long, unbraided hair. "Don't ask Rachol what half his vocabulary means. Most of it's acronyms that you're better off not knowing the meaning to."

She laughed, grateful some of his usual tenseness was missing. "*Tee-tawa?*"

He pressed the button for the lift. "That one I don't even know the meaning to, but my guess is it's not fitting for mixed company."

The doors opened with a soft whir. "So what's your favorite Racholism?" she asked, stepping into the lift.

A corner of his mouth twitched. For a moment, Kiara thought he might actually smile, but he just tucked his hands inside the pockets of his long, black coat and the doors closed with a ping. "*Duwad,*" he said at last.

She smiled. "Which means?"

"Dude with a death wish."

Kiara thought about that for a moment and why Rachol would have come up with it. "Conceived for you?"

"Kip was conceived for me."

She wondered how he could keep his voice so flat when he spoke. She doubted she could do it so well even with years of practice. "And what does Kip mean?"

"*Keyaya imporus petana.*"

She listened to the strange language roll from his lips like warm liquid on a cold day, the sound soothing her like a lullaby. "Am I supposed to know what that means?" she asked, stepping out of the lift, into the lobby.

"The answer is another of your allotted questions about me, *mu Tara.*" He walked outside and hailed a transport.

Kiara walked up to him deliberately invading his personal space. To her surprise, he didn't back away. "I still would like to know."

A transport pulled up to the curb, its brakes squealing. He opened the door for her. "It's Ritadarion for brother in spirit."

She sat in the seat. "And are you?" she asked, typing her destination into the transport's system before inserting her debit card.

"In many ways."

She felt the wall seal shut around him. True to her inquisitive nature, she couldn't help probing the boundaries of the wall. "How are you brothers in spirit?"

He turned away from her and studied the blurred scenery whirling past the car. At first she didn't think he would answer, then finally he sighed. "Like most beings of a similar past, we bonded to each other, understand each other."

She probed the wall a little further. "Most beings can understand others if things are explained to them."

He snorted. "Were that true, war wouldn't exist."

Kiara considered that for a moment and decided it was true enough. "How can you assess situations so easily?" She paused barely a heartbeat before answering for him. "Let me guess, more survival skills."

He remained awkwardly quiet. If not for his rubbing his biceps, she would have thought him a statue. Kiara sighed, wishing she knew how to deduce his feelings and past the way he did hers. Sitting back in the seat, she tried to enjoy the rest of the ride.

Nykyrian smelled her exotic perfume and yearned to bury his lips in the sweet, scented flesh of her neck. He found it difficult to breathe with her so close. It would be so easy to share his past with her, lose himself in her charm and wit. His body throbbed with desire and for a moment, he wanted to pull her into his arms and take what he needed most.

Steeling himself, he dared a glance at her. His breath caught in his throat. Her arms were crossed over her chest in annoyance as she stared out the window, and displayed to his casual glance was the top swell of her breasts covered by the black lace of her

undergarment.

His hand ached to touch her, his loins tightened. Nykyrian shifted in the seat and drew a trembling breath. He had to get away from her. He didn't need her for anything. He didn't need anyone, period.

Finally, the car stopped in front of the shopping complex.

Kiara slid out of the car behind him. She studied the already thronging crowd over his shoulder. "Looks like they got an early start as well."

His answer was a grunt.

Well at least she was making some improvement, it wasn't his usual growl. Without thinking, Kiara took his hand to lead him to a nearby shop. He snatched his hand away from her as if she had stuck it inside a blazing fire.

"Don't ever touch me," he said in the most growling, intimidating voice she had ever heard.

She swallowed the fear choking her. "Sorry," she apologized weakly. "I didn't think."

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his coat without saying anything more.

Shrugging off his distemper, she started toward her favorite store. Nykyrian stayed a step behind and eyed the crowd like a mother gimfry guarding her young.

As they entered the store, Kiara became acutely aware of the reactions he inspired around them.

She glanced about, noticing the way mothers snatched up the hands of their children, pulling them out of Nykyrian's path, and other patrons who eyed him in fear. Her heart ached as she overheard some of the hate-filled whispers—"Killer, cannibal." She looked up at Nykyrian's face, and she could tell he heard them as well by the hard, tight line of his lips.

Trying her best to ignore the imbeciles and their prejudice, she made her way to the women's section.

It took several minutes before Kiara could find a clerk to wait on her. "Excuse me," she finally said, cornering one before the woman could escape to another department. "Do

you have this jacket in a size twelve?" she asked, holding up the present for the clerk's inspection.

The clerk's eyes drifted over her shoulder to where Nykyrian had withdrawn and Kiara wanted to shake the woman for the unwarranted fear. The clerk's gaze returned to Kiara and the jacket. "I think so," she said, her voice trembling.

She took it from Kiara's hand and disappeared into the back. Kiara's eyes narrowed in anger. Looking around, she couldn't believe the way people stared and for once, it wasn't because of her fame.

After a minute, the clerk returned with the right size. "Will this be all, ma'am?"

Kiara nodded, her teeth clenched.

After ringing the order, the clerk leaned over the counter and whispered, "Where did you find an Andarion? I've never seen one on Gouran before. Aren't you afraid to be with him?"

Kiara tossed a strand of hair over her shoulder as if she were obviously stupid. "Why no, I'm not afraid, he's already had his daily feeding."

"What do you feed him?" the clerk asked, fear heavy in her voice.

Kiara glared, unable to believe the nerve. Snatching up her package, she left the store. She started toward another shop, then reconsidered. By the tenseness of Nykyrian's jaw, she could tell he wanted an end to this expedition. It actually amazed her he didn't say something to that effect.

"I'm ready to go home now," she whispered, her throat tight in sympathetic pain.

"Not so much fun with me around. I should have sent Rachol with you."

She stiffened at the simple way he stated the fact as if it didn't bother him in the least. "Do people always act this way around you?"

He shrugged as if it were just a normal occurrence to be overlooked. "You should have seen the reactions when I wore a League uniform."

Kiara stared at the sidewalk while he hailed another transport. "Do Andarions react the same way to you?"

He choked.

She looked up in startled amazement that her question had wrung such an unnatural response from him. "I think that was a negative answer."

He took a deep breath and faced her. "Humans fear me because they think I'm going to feed on them at any minute, Andarions look at me like a pitiful, weak *giakon*."

"Like I know what that means," she said bitterly.

"A castrated coward."

Her mouth formed a small *o*. Her hair rippled from a sudden breeze as a transport pulled up to the curb. Stepping inside, she thought about his words.

Depressed, she leaned back against the cold seat. No wonder he closed himself off from people. He was caught in the middle of all the hatred and fear of both races. "Has anyone ever attacked you for your mixed blood?"

"You can deduce that without my help."

She sighed at his flat, emotionless tone. "Why are people so stupid?" she asked rhetorically.

His voice surprised her. "They fear for themselves. I'm a reminder humans and Andarions aren't two separate species, but derived from the same genetic make-up. Unfortunately, neither race wants to admit it could possibly be anything like the other. I quit blaming them for it years ago. Now I just try to avoid mingling with them. It makes life easier to live."

Coldness consumed her as she thought about what it would have been like growing up an anathema to everyone. "What about your parents?" she asked. "How did they cope?"

He took a deep breath. "My mother abandoned me when I was five."

"And the commander?"

"He adopted me."

Kiara smiled. She vaguely remembered Nykyrian's father from a few of the political trips he had made to Gouran when she was a child. "He must have loved you dearly."

"Never assume anything."

This time, there was no mistaking the emotion in his voice. Hatred, cold and simple. She trembled, trying to remember what Huwin was like, but all she could recall was the image of a kind man who patted her on the head while speaking with her father.

She wanted to reach out and soothe away Nykyrian's pain. Kiara couldn't imagine what it must have been like for him. Her parents would have torn anyone apart who looked at her the way people did Nykyrian. She couldn't believe a mother would give up her child for any reason.

Kiara sat in silence the rest of the way home, her mind mulling over her lessons for the day.

* * *

When they returned to her flat, Rachol looked up from where he lay on the couch watching the viewer, shock etched on his face. "That didn't take long. I've never known a woman not to take at least half a day to shop for anything."

"I can't imagine why the trip was so short," Nykyrian said in a sarcastic voice that made Kiara take a second look at him.

Rachol laughed, switching off the viewer and sitting up. "You should try smiling. I think it would take the edge off people."

Nykyrian doffed his long, black coat and draped it over a chair. "Actually, they mistake it for an attempt to bite. Once my teeth are bared, they quake in fear. I've even seen a few lose control of their bodily functions."

Rachol laughed even harder.

Kiara didn't find it amusing in the least. She sat her bag by her chair and moved to the closet to get wrapping paper and tape.

"Do you want me to relieve you tonight?"

Kiara paused at Rachol's question. Biting her lip, she looked at Nykyrian.

He continued to face Rachol. "No," he said to her immediate relief. "I think I can handle everything. You know how lightly I sleep."

Rachol snorted and glanced at Kiara. "If you come out while he's sleeping, don't touch him or make any sudden moves. He's been known to bite."

She pulled the tape off the top shelf. "I'll take care," she said absently.

Rachol lifted a questioning brow. "What, no fear?"

She shrugged and plopped her bundle of wrapping supplies on the floor. "I'm the daughter of a soldier. My father comes awake with a blaster aimed at your head if you disturb him from his sleep."

Rachol gave Nykyrian a knowing smile. "And I thought it was just you and your idiosyncrasies."

Nykyrian shrugged and sat in the other chair across from the couch. "I've told you not to think. It's just a waste of your time."

Kiara looked up, startled by the barb. There was a tiny lifting of the corners of Nykyrian's mouth that might actually be a smile. She glanced at Rachol who took the words in stride.

"Well, I guess I should be going. I've got a psycho to track." Rachol hesitated for a moment, casting her a sheepish glance before looking back at Nykyrian. "Are we still planning on tomorrow?"

"We can't. Everyone's scheduled tomorrow."

Rachol scratched his head. "Then when are we going to do it?"

Kiara pursed her lips, wishing she knew what they were talking about.

"Hauk's free the next day. He can watch Kiara."

Rachol nodded. "I'll have Hauk come over then the first thing." He gave Kiara an encouraging smile. "You two be careful and don't let the *diras* get you."

Kiara waited until Rachol left before questioning Nykyrian. "Why are you leaving?"

"I've got a few things to take care of."

She unrolled the wrapping paper and cut a square large enough for the box. "Can't

Darling stay with me instead of Hauk?"

His head snapped toward her. She saw his breathing intensify as if her question outraged him. Too late, she realized her mistake. "It's not because he's Andarion," she said quietly, wrapping the paper around the box. "Even you have to admit Hauk's not the nicest person around."

He relaxed. "I guess not," he said with a sigh. "Darling has his own things to do. Hauk just likes to intimidate people. Stand up to him and he'll back down."

"Or, have me fricasseed by the time you return."

"There's always that possibility."

With a grimace, Kiara pulled the tape off with a loud screech.

Hours passed quickly while Nykyrian worked and Kiara tried to find some way to occupy her time. Reluctantly, Kiara finally called the dance company to inform them of her temporary withdrawal from the show.

She lay on her bed, listening to the clacking of computer keys as Nykyrian worked on whatever seemed to occupy him. If only she could put him out of her mind as easily as he seemed to do her.

After awhile, she got up and went to the studio to practice. She might not be able to perform for the next few weeks, but she couldn't afford to let her muscles stiffen.

In spite of Nykyrian's efforts to concentrate on paperwork, the sound of Kiara's dance music lured him out of his cocoon like Tyna lured Brilar to his early demise. Without conscious effort, he found himself walking down the corridor to the studio.

His breathing stopped as he saw her in all her graceful glory twirling about the room. Chills ran down the length of his body. What he wouldn't give or do for the right to peel the tight exercise suit off her lithe body and make love to her for the rest of the night. He gripped the wood of the door frame until his knuckles turned white.

Kiara turned about and caught a sudden flash of silver. She almost stumbled as she realized Nykyrian was watching her. "I'm sorry," she said, taking deep, calming breaths, unsure of what made her more breathless, her exercise or his obvious interest. "I didn't realize you were there."

She reached to turn off the disc player.

"Don't stop," he said with an odd note she couldn't quite place.

Kiara let the next song begin. She walked up to him on her toes. Intending to awe him with her pirouette, she gasped as her foot gave way under her weight.

Nykyrian caught her before she fell. The sudden impact of strong muscles surrounding her, stole her breath.

"Are you okay?"

She smiled at the warm concern in his voice. "It's my foot. I think I might have hurt it."

He eased her to the floor. Kiara wished she could think of some way to keep his arms around her, but his warmth vacated her and left her longing.

With deft movements, he unlaced her shoe and pulled it free. A hiss escaped his lips. Her eyes widened at the emotional display. "My God, what happened to your foot?"

Kiara wiggled her toes and looked down at the member expecting to see it broken or swollen. Instead, it looked quite normal to her. "There's nothing wrong with it."

He brushed his fingers over the ball of her foot as if he held a holy relic. Chills crept up her legs despite the burning sensation she felt where his hands touched her,

"You've got more blisters on your foot than I've got scars ..." his voice trailed off.

Kiara gave a half laugh. "It's a hazard of *my* business," she answered. "I'm used to them. They only hurt when they bleed."

His grip tightened. "You shouldn't do this to yourself. I'm sure it hurts like Hell."

She studied his face which was bent away from her while he examined her foot. "Why would you care how anything makes me feel?" she asked, deciding she liked using his words against him.

He looked up at her. "I don't know, I just do."

Warmth flooded her body. She leaned over to kiss him. For a moment, she thought she'd succeed, then he pulled away and released her foot.

"You should take a few days and let those blisters heal. At the rate you're going, you'll end up crippled by the time you're thirty."

Disgruntled, Kiara unlaced her other shoe. "Why is it I have a feeling someone has said that to you?" she asked, snatching the shoe off.

"In my case, it wasn't crippled, it was dead." he said and was gone.

Dread gnawed at her stomach as she stared after him. The blasé delivery chilled her. It had sounded almost as if he wanted to die.

Why do you care? her mind screamed at her. You are a dancer, he is a killer, the two are not compatible. But then, why did she feel so much attraction for him? Sighing for lack of an answer, she got up and went to shower.

Nykyrian heard the shower come on. He walked to the door and leaned his head against the panel, wanting, aching for the courage to enter the room, to feel her arms wrapped around him.

No, his mind screamed. You don't need this. What kind of life could he offer her? A bullet in the back one day because some asshole wanted vengeance on him? He had no choice but to remain alone. There was no room in his life for anyone.

He wanted . . .

Nykyrian sighed. He refused to think about what he wanted. His wants were unimportant. He had a job to do and that's exactly what he was going to do. Protect her, nothing more.

He pushed himself away from the door and returned to the main room.

After a few minutes, Kiara came out and bid him goodnight. Once again, he heard her move about in her room as she prepared for bed. He trembled with desire.

With a curse, he snatched his boots off. In morbid retaliation to remind himself of what he was, he checked the retractable blades hidden in his boots. The cold steel shot out, glinting in the light. He fingered the blades, feeling the razor-sharp edge scrape against his skin. He was a killer, that was the only destiny he had.

Satisfied that he had himself controlled where Kiara was concerned, he pushed the blades back into their hidden compartment and set the boots on the floor next to the

couch. With a sigh, he tossed the glasses to the table. His eyes watered from the light as he rubbed the pain.

He heard Kiara's bed squeak under her weight. A lump of longing closed his throat. He clenched his teeth in frustration. Doffing his shirt, he settled down on the couch to sleep. She moved again. His body continued to throb in a sweet ache for Kiara, despite all the arguments he constantly gave to himself why-he shouldn't want her near him.

After lying there for several minutes unable to get comfortable, he finally yielded to his parched throat. At least it was one need he could quench. He headed to the kitchen. Grabbing the *spara* juice from the cooling unit, he poured himself a glass.

Kiara's door opened.

Nykyrian froze. He glanced to the low table in the main room and realized too late he was too far from his glasses to get them on before she saw him. Having no choice but to wait, Nykyrian gripped the glass tightly.

Kiara yawned as she plodded down the hallway, belting her robe closed. She stopped as she reached the opening to the kitchen, her eyes riveted to Nykyrian's bare back.

More deep, white scars crisscrossed his tanned well-muscled flesh than she could count. Her heart twisted at the sight. How much pain had he suffered? Were all of them war wounds?

She crossed the room, aching to touch him, to soothe the skin puckered by the welts. Her hand reached out, but she stopped it before she touched him. He wouldn't like that and he was too old for her to coddle.

"I was thirsty," she whispered in an awkward apology.

Without facing her or a single comment, Nykyrian pulled a glass down and handed it to her over his shoulder.

As she poured her juice, Kiara realized he was missing his glasses. She was so surprised by that fact, she forgot what she was doing. Juice spilled over the rim of her glass, soaking the sleeve of her robe and splashing up against her feet and legs. Gasping, she plopped the glass and juice down on the cabinet and reached for a towel.

"I'll clean it up," he growled.

Kiara's hand trembled as she tossed the towel back to the counter. She tried to see his face, but he turned away.

She took the hint. Despite the overwhelming curiosity, she grabbed her juice and left.

Kiara raced to her room where she shook with emotions she couldn't quite name and wasn't even sure if she wanted to know what they were or what they signified.

Nykyrian wiped up the sticky juice, his thoughts and emotions churning. He wished for the strength it would take to trust Kiara. But experience had taught him that no one could be trusted.

He would have her assassins tracked down soon and hand them over to her father. With Bredeh and Pitala out of action, no one else would dare accept a contract on her life knowing the OMG protected her. Then he would be free to return to his life. Alone.

An ache twisted through him worse than any physical pain he had ever experienced. Clenching his teeth, he vowed to himself to see Bredeh and Pitala caught soon.

Five

Kiara paced the floor of her bedroom, completely stir-crazy and it wasn't even noon yet! What was she supposed to do? Spend the next however many days, weeks, months it took before the Probekeins recalled their dogs wearing a trail in her carpet?

"I mean face it," she said aloud. "This is asking too much of a person!"

There was nothing on the viewer worth watching, her friends were either working or busy, she was tired of her disks, Nykyrian ignored her, yet what else was there for her to do?

Even prisoners were treated better! At least they were assigned jobs to make the day go faster. This kind of restriction was what had forced her from her father's home. And frankly, she just couldn't stand not having anything to do.

In a huff, she went to find Nykyrian and vent some of her frustration. Just as she expected, he sat there on her couch, hammering at the keys of his terminal in perfect harmony with his isolation. She wanted to throw something at him.

"I've had it!"

He stopped typing and looked up from the screen, his face impassive.

If he weren't wearing his glasses, she bet he'd be cocking his eyebrow at her. "I told you yesterday, I can't just stay here without something to do. I'm bored."

He looked back at his screen. "While you're standing there hands on hips, why don't you stomp your foot and pout like a good little spoiled girl."

Kiara narrowed her eyes and dropped her arms to her sides. His words infuriated her. "I don't pout!"

The snort that answered her really made her want to bounce something off his head. Piqued at him, her confinement, and life in general, Kiara sat stiffly in her chair. "Can't we please do something? If I stay here any longer, I'll go *bended*."

He sighed and closed his terminal. "What would *mu Tara* like to do, go shopping again?"

Despite the deadpan voice, she caught the sarcasm. "Not hardly."

"Then what?"

Kiara thought for a minute. There had to be something they could do that wouldn't endanger their lives, or where people wouldn't gawk at her guard.

Tiyana's party!

Kiara smiled, remembering why they had gone shopping yesterday. "My best friend's birthday party is this afternoon. We could go to it!"

"A birthday party?"

Dread was obvious in his voice. Kiara stared at him, wondering why such a simple occasion would wring an emotional response from him. "Well, why not? It's in a housing building, the only people invited are friends and business associates. Tiyana said it would be just a small gathering."

He growled.

Kiara smiled the smile that always bent her father to her will. "Please?"

He growled again and for a moment, Kiara thought he'd deny her. "If it will keep you from going *bended*, all right. But," he said, interrupting her beaming smile. "We are only going to stay for one hour. No longer."

She pursed her lips. "Well it beats staying here the whole day," she said with a sigh. Rising from her chair, she watched him return to his work. "It's at four-thirty."

This time, he didn't even bother to growl, he just ignored her.

Sighing wearily, Kiara made her way to her room where she decided she could spend the next few hours catching up on her reading.

* * *

Kiara smoothed her dress with her hands, double checking to make sure she looked fine for the party. Tiyana had warned her a group of promoters would be there, and a disillusioned promoter could damage her career as much as death. In the dancing business, image was everything. Opening the door to her room, she went to find her sullen guard.

Once again, Rachol was there to house-sit as he so grudgingly called it. To her the effort seemed a waste of his time. She couldn't imagine why they needed someone to stay in her flat all the time. But she wasn't willing to argue, she was too relieved to finally be going outside the confines of her four-room flat.

The two of them leaned over the computer terminal which sat on her counter, absorbed. They spoke in their weird language, oblivious to her.

Kiara took a deep breath. This was the first time in her life she actually blended into the background and she found the experience horrible, if not somewhat humbling. What did she have to do, run through the house nude to capture their attention? "Excuse me?" she said.

They looked up simultaneously.

"We're going to be late."

Nykyrian pushed himself away from the counter. "Get started on it," he said to Rachol.

Rachol nodded, a seductive smile on his face as he stared at her.

Without another word, Kiara retrieved Tiyana's present from the kitchen table and walked to the door. Nykyrian walked past her and opened the door for her.

"We won't be gone long," he told Rachol.

Kiara bit the caustic remark she wanted to utter. She promised herself she was going to enjoy herself at the party, no matter what.

Tiyana's flat was just two streets over. She and Tiyana had been classmates and best friends at several academies while growing up, and as adults they both danced for the same company. When Kiara had first starting looking for her own place to live, Tiyana had insisted she live close by so they could continue their lengthy gossip sessions and late-night food binges.

Doing her best to ignore Nykyrian and his latest dour mood, Kiara rang the bell. After a brief wait, Tiyana opened the door, her beautiful face beaming as she recognized Kiara. "Sweetie!" she exclaimed, drawing Kiara into a fierce hug. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come."

Kiara smiled, pulling out of the hug before Tiyana broke her ribs, to stare at Tiyana's bright green eyes. Tiyana was everything she had always wanted to be— tall, blond, voluptuous, gorgeous and sophisticated, not to mention strong. "How could I miss it?" Kiara said happily. "It's not everyday you turn twenty-six."

Tiyana shuddered and put her finger to her own perfectly rouged lips. "Don't say that so loud," she whispered conspiratorially, flipping a long blond curl over her shoulder. "I've told all the promoters I'm twenty-two. If they ever found out how close to thirty I am ..."
She held her hand up to her head like a blaster and pretended to pull the trigger.

Kiara laughed at the gesture. "Do me the same favor and we'll call it even!"

"Done!" Tiyana said, pulling her into another hug.

Kiara felt Tiyana stiffen. "Who's your date?" she whispered.

Kiara moved away from Tiyana to stare up at Nykyrian. "He's not my date, he's my bodyguard."

Tiyana's eyes widened. "Your father must be up to his old tricks."

Kiara nodded.

Tiyana smiled a dazzling smile at Nykyrian, but he didn't acknowledge Tiyana in the slightest way. Kiara couldn't resist feeling a bit satisfied that Nykyrian seemed as immune to Tiyana's charms as he was to hers.

A frown of disappointment flitted across Tiyana's face, only to quickly disappear. She turned back to face Kiara. "Well I can't blame your father for being neurotic after the way those guys broke into your hotel room, and then that night at the theatre." Tiyana shook her head.

"Enough!" Tiyana said, interrupting herself, and dragging Kiara into the house by her hand. "Come on in." Tiyana shut the door behind Nykyrian. "I think you know everyone here, if not, just give me a wink and I'll introduce you."

Tiyana pulled Kiara to her and whispered in her ear, "Paulus is here and he's drunk, so be warned."

Kiara rolled her eyes. Paulus was every dancer's nightmare. His father had made a fortune with his media company before becoming an art sponsor and as a result, Paulus thought he should have the privilege to sleep with any dancer who caught his fancy. Kiara cringed in distaste.

Well she had always managed to avoid him in the past, by now she was used to prying his wandering hands off her body.

With a final smile, a quick hug and grasping her latest present, Tiyana floated off into the crowd.

Kiara searched the huge gathering for friendly faces. So much for Tiyana's word that she had invited just a "few" friends and associates. It looked like everyone Tiyana had ever spoken with was here.

Kiara glanced back at Nykyrian. "How do we do this?" she asked.

Instead of looking at her, he scanned the crowd. "I'm not going to hover over you like a buzzard." Kiara noted the irritation in his voice and wondered what upset him more, the fact she had drawn him along to this soiree, or the fact that they were forced into a large thronging mass of people. "Just don't get out of my sight."

Kiara smirked. "That sounds like hovering to me."

He didn't respond.

Fine, Kiara thought, heading off to the punch bowl. He's a grown killer, he can fend for himself.

"Kiara Biardi!"

Kiara spun around to face Elfa Dicuti, her understudy. "Hi Elfie, how are you?"

Elfa gave her one of those famous fake smiles. "Just fine. I can't tell you how sorry I am you had to pull out of the show. I feel just terrible about it."

I bet. "So how's the show going?"

This time, Kiara suspected the smile might be real. "Great." Elfa's eyes drifted to where Nykyrian leaned against the far wall. "Didn't you come with that Andarion?"

Kiara picked up a cup of punch, wanting to toss it at the little blonde. "Yes, I did."

A scheming look crossed Elfa's face. "The promoters might not like that." Kiara detected a hopeful note under the girl's tone. "Have you been dating him long?"

Gripping her cup tightly, Kiara swallowed her mouthful of punch. "I'm not dating him at all. He's my bodyguard."

"Well honey, he can guard my body any time!"

Kiara turned around at the voice in her ear. "Shera!" she said, relieved to find another friendly face in the shark-infested waters.

Shera pulled her into her arms for a quick hug. "Now don't wrinkle me," Shera said, pulling away. "Some of us have to work at looking good, isn't that right, Elfie?"

Elfa puffed up to the point Kiara thought she might burst. Narrowing her eyes, she left them without so much as a polite "excuse me."

Kiara laughed with Shera, her favorite costume designer. Shera was always good for depression and worry. "I'm glad you're here," she said, squeezing Shera's hand.

"Did I have a choice?" Shera asked, gesturing dramatically like a diva. "Tiyana threatened my life if I missed this." Turning serious, Shera pulled Kiara off to the side, away from the nearest group of people. "Is that gorgeous hunk of man really your bodyguard?"

Kiara nodded.

Shera's smile was wide and hungry. "Girlfriend, were I you, I'd be at home doing a little sheet dance with that boy!"

Kiara laughed, looking over to where Nykyrian stood apparently oblivious to the people around him, knowing he was watching everyone intensely. "I'm afraid he's not interested."

Shera laughed, her face a mask of comedy. "Then I'd find a way to make him interested!"

Kiara shook her head, grateful to be laughing so much again. "You are incorrigible."

Shera shrugged in an unconcerned manner. "I always say incorrigibility is good for the soul, but sex is infinitely better!"

Kiara rolled her eyes.

"Seriously though," Shera said, looking back in the direction Elfa had disappeared. "I wanted to warn you about your understudy."

Kiara's laughter died. "What?" she asked, fear closing around her.

"Little two-face got a fantastic review last night and since then, she's been going around telling promoters and directors that a certain dancer is past her prime."

"I'll kill her!" Kiara slammed her cup down on the table and started toward Elfa.

Shera grabbed her arm. "Not now," she said in Kiara's ear. "There are too many promoters here. If you start something, she'll tell them you're too temperamental and impossible to work with."

Kiara clenched her fists at her sides, wanting to jerk every strand of bleached blond hair out of Elfa's head.

Shera patted her arm. "The best way to get back at her is to return to the show as quickly as possible. I promise you her review was nothing compared to the ones you receive." Shera's laugh returned. "Besides, think of this, I had to let your costume out two sizes to accommodate her fat butt!"

In spite of herself and her anger, Kiara laughed. "Did you really?"

Shera nodded. "And red isn't that girl's color."

* * *

Kiara retrieved her punch from the table and reluctantly allowed Shera to drift off.

Looking over to Nykyrian, she wanted to smile at him as she recalled Shera's words. He was definitely the most handsome man at the party even with those glasses obscuring the majority of his face. And she would like very much to do a sheet dance with him, if he would only cooperate.

"Aw, there you are. Tiyana told me you were here."

Kiara cringed. It wasn't Paulus, it was worse. Wicmon, her own show's promoter, the one man she couldn't afford to be rude to no matter what.

"Hi," she said, smiling her prettiest smile.

Wicmon took her hand and placed a sloppy kiss over her knuckles. "I was so disappointed you pulled out of the show," he said, a lecherous look on his face. "I had so hoped to become better acquainted with you."

Kiara tried to tactfully withdraw her hand, but his grip tightened. She admitted he was handsome, if he just didn't have that cold, calculating look behind his clear blue eyes. And at the moment, she felt like a cornered gimfry. How was she going to extract herself from him without offending him?

Fretting, she looked up to see Nykyrian moving toward them. A smile curved her lips as he stopped next to them. "Kiara, Tiyana was looking for you."

Anger clouded Wicmon's eyes at the interruption. He turned around, then took a step back.

Kiara stifled her laughter at his reaction. No doubt he had assumed Nykyrian would be another dancer he could intimidate. As it was, all he could do was gape.

"If you'll excuse me, Wicmon," she said, side-stepping him, her heart pounding in relief.

"Thank you," she whispered to Nykyrian as soon as they were out of Wicmon's hearing.

"How did you know to come over?"

He shrugged. "You looked uncomfortable."

With adoring eyes at his concern and action, she stared up at him. She ached to kiss him for his kindness. "I owe you."

Now, he looked uncomfortable. Without a word and to her greatest dismay, he moved away from her. Kiara wanted to stamp her foot in frustration. How could he be so kind one moment, then aloof the next?

In extreme aggravation, she started toward the balcony. Out of the crowd, a rough hand gripped her elbow. Kiara was tempted to cry out, but assumed it was just another promoter.

"I knew we'd meet again."

Her blood drained from her face as her heart pounded. Pitala. Two thoughts shot through her mind at the same time. One was the fear he would kill her, the other was the fear she would live and this episode would end her career.

She felt a sharp jab in her ribs.

"Walk outside to the hallway like you want to talk to me. No sudden moves or I pull the trigger and spray your guts all over your friend's flat."

Kiara nodded, her heart lodged in her throat. She looked about for Nykyrian, but he seemed to have vanished. What kind of protector was he? Sweat beaded on her body as she moved to do what she had been told.

She prayed no one would approach them. Glancing sideways, she noticed Pitala was dressed in an expensive suit, his hair tied back into a sleek ponytail. To the casual observer, he would pass for either an aristocrat or a wealthy promoter.

Fear choked her as tears gathered in her eyes. Fiercely, she bit her bottom lip to keep from screaming or begging for help.

Kiara neared the door. A trickle of sweat ran down her temple. If she crossed the threshold, she knew Pitala would kill her. If she struggled inside Tiyana's flat, everyone would see— the promoters, the directors, everyone.

Her life or her career? She chewed her lip in indecision. Without her career, what kind of life would she have? With that final thought, she opened the door.

Pitala pushed her through, then slammed the door shut behind him. Kiara hit the floor. Her entire body trembling, she looked up to where Pitala was turning around to face her and then she saw Nykyrian hiding beside the door.

He grabbed Pitala's blaster from his hand and brought his own blaster up under the man's chin. "I'm only going to say this once," Nykyrian said, his voice lethal. "Kiara is under the protection of the OMG. If you harm her, threaten her, even look at her again, you're going to have a visit from Nemesis. A visit you will long regret and remember."

Even Kiara cringed at the threat.

Nykyrian's lips curled into a ferocious snarl. "You'll find your partner down the hall locked in a storage closet. Take him and leave. And if you value all the pieces of your body remaining in their current positions, you'll revoke your contract on her life tomorrow." He clicked back the release of his gun. "Do you understand?"

Sweat covered Pitala's face. "My retraction will be posted tomorrow. I swear it."

Nykyrian replaced the latch on his blaster. "Good," he said, shoving Pitala away from him.

Kiara watched the assassin hurry down the hall away from them. She looked up at her savior, her breathing labored, her head light in panic.

Nykyrian holstered his blaster, then held his hand out to her. She grasped it with her shaking hands, and he gently pulled her off the floor. "I'm sorry I didn't help you sooner," he said quietly. "But I didn't think you wanted your friends to know what was going on." Before he could move away and before she could stop herself, she put her arms around him and hugged his lean waist with all the relief coursing through her body. "Most of them aren't my friends," she said, coming to the awful realization. "They're back-biting, two-faced, soulless mongrels who aren't much better than Pitala."

Kiara leaned her cheek against his chest, listening to the soothing sound of his heartbeat. Though his body was rigid, he made no moves to push her away. She trembled, knowing Nykyrian would never let anyone hurt her. She was safe with him.

Nykyrian held her against him, reveling in the feel of her arms holding him close. At the moment, it would be so easy to forget his past, forget himself and stay with her. But he

couldn't. He knew that.

Her arms tightened around him and she leaned her head back. Unconsciously, he moved to kiss her, then caught himself just before he complied. Her breath fell against his lips and it took all of his self-control not to complete the one thing he wanted to do most.

"We have to get you home," he said, pulling away.

Heat stung Kiara's cheeks. Dejected, she nodded, trying to still her trembling limbs.

Why did she bother? Nykyrian wasn't interested in her in the least. If she had any dignity at all, she would forget him and just go on with her life ignoring him as easily as he ignored her.

"Fine," she said, her voice shaking from the tears she was trying hard not to shed.

Without a word, he led her down the hall, checking every few steps to make sure Pitala wasn't lurking after them. Kiara was strangely numb as she followed, her thoughts drifting over the entire party and assault.

Maybe she was just getting older. Maybe it was the fear of what had happened with Pitala, happening during the party for all the promoters to see. That must be why she didn't enjoy herself today, why Elfa's biting comments cut her more this afternoon than they had last year when her understudy had said the same thing. Kiara couldn't ever remember having a worse time in her life.

She studied Nykyrian's back as he led her out of the building. At least there was now one less assassin after her. With any luck, Nemesis would be able to bully the rest of her pursuers into leaving her alone, then she could return to her old life. Couldn't she?

Kiara swallowed the clump of tears. She was just tired. A little sleep and everything would be fine. She'd be fine.

* * *

Sitting in her favorite chair, Kiara watched Nykyrian clean his blaster, her mind still numb over Pitala's attack.

Death had become a morbid fascination for her as she watched Nykyrian break down the parts of his weapon, carefully wiping each piece with a clean, white cloth and a pungent-

smelling solution.

Since Rachol left, Nykyrian hadn't spoken, and after two hours of silence, Kiara was nearly *bended*.

He changed the battery pack, the sharp click raising the hair on the back of her neck. "Why didn't you kill Pitala?" she asked, her quiet voice seeming like a shout after all the quietness.

He screwed another piece back into the blaster. "Would you rather I had?"

A chill stole up her arms. "No," she said, rubbing the chill away. "It just seems strange to me that you allowed him to get away twice."

Nykyrian sighed. "If I killed everyone who annoyed me, everyone I've ever met would be haunting me for the crime of murder."

Kiara nodded in understanding. "No doubt I'd be at the top of your kill list."

He looked up at her, but said nothing, his face unreadable.

She watched him put the blaster back together, his hands running through the procedure with practiced ease. It was a strange ballet, mesmerizing. "When you decided to quit the League, how did you do it? Did you just tell them no thanks, or what?"

He grimaced, slamming a piece of the grip back into its position. "Why do you want to know?"

She shrugged, an image of the promoters running through her mind and how they'd react if she told them to go roast their parts like she'd wanted to many times in the past.

"Curiosity. You still owe me four answers."

"Three," he corrected, before blowing down the barrel of his blaster.

Kiara gave him a sad smile. "Okay, three. So how did you leave?"

He set the blaster down on the table between them. He leaned back on her couch and appeared to stare straight at her. "I walked out of the assignment chambers one afternoon and never went back."

She frowned. For some reason, she hadn't imagined it would be that easy to leave the

League. "Why?"

"They wanted me to kill a friend."

Shock rippled through her and she repeated her earlier question, "Why?"

He swallowed and looked away. "A false charge of treason had been leveled against him, and his government wanted him executed."

Kiara bit her lip, considering his words. "How do you know he was innocent? If a court found him guilty— "

"No court was involved," Nykyrian interrupted her. "For a large enough fee, the League will convict and execute anyone."

Her throat tightened in fear. "So the League doesn't really protect anyone."

"Only the fat politicians who run it."

Her stomach knotted at the thought. "Why doesn't someone stop them?"

Nykyrian shrugged like he found the whole matter boring. "Who knows?"

In a daze at her newfound knowledge, Kiara got out of her chair and headed to her room. She paused at the hallway, looking back to where Nykyrian sat on her couch.

"Nykyrian?"

Kiara waited until he faced her. "When you left the League, did it feel good?"

He looked away from her and for a moment, she thought he'd just ignore her. "It felt great."

She nodded, her heart hanging heavy with just one more thing she needed to ask. Finally, she found the courage she needed to bring it up. "Do you ever think of dying?"

He rubbed his hand across his jaw. "Do you?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. "I never did until a little while ago." Her tears poured down her cheeks. "I'm so afraid of it!" she sobbed.

Covering her trembling lips with her hand, she ran down the hallway to the safety of her room. Kiara threw herself across the bed, her sobs wracking her body. She didn't want to die, not now, not ever. There was so much more she wanted to do, to experience.

Suddenly, she found Nykyrian's arms around her, pulling her into his lap. He sat on the edge of her bed, holding her against him like she was a small child who had broken its favorite toy. She leaned her head against his shoulder and sobbed out her grief.

Nykyrian remained silent, comforting her, holding her, brushing her hair from her cheek, rocking her gently in his arms. Never had Kiara felt so protected. She didn't know how long she cried, but when she finally pulled away, the silk of his shirt clung to his chest where her tears had fallen.

"I'm sorry," she said with a sniff, wiping the back of her hand over her cheeks.

He moved her hand and wiped the moisture away for her. "Feeling better?" he asked in a gruff voice. Kiara nodded. "This isn't like me," she whispered, reveling in the feel of his warm, strong hands moving over her icy cheeks.

"It's understandable. You're not used to people holding blasters to your head."

She swallowed her tears, wishing once more she could see his face, read his thoughts. "Are you?"

He took a deep breath, his hand tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "It's happened more than twice." Kiara stared at him. In so many ways he was a complete stranger, yet they sat now like old lovers. She burned for him, ached to kiss his lips, but knew if she tried, he would push her away again and end this peaceful moment. And she desperately didn't want it to end. "Aren't you afraid of dying?" she asked, stifling the next wave of tears that threatened to fall. "That one day, you won't escape when someone puts a blaster to your head?"

His arms tensed around her. For a moment, she feared he would get up and leave. When his answer came, it wasn't what she expected. "The only thing I fear is growing old."

"What's wrong with growing old?" she asked, aching to touch his cheek.

"Nothing," he said, his voice hoarse. "Unless you do it alone."

Her heart wrenched, then to her utmost disappointment, he stood. He reached down and fingered her cheek like he was touching precious china. "No one's going to harm you.

On my life, I'll keep you safe," he said, then was gone.

Kiara's heart pounded at the audible sincerity behind his words. Her cheek burned in the memory of his fingers. There was so much more she wanted to say to him, to ask him, but she didn't know how.

He was so contradictory. In one minute he pulled away and snapped if she dared to even touch his hand, then the next he held her like a treasured love and comforted her tears.

Kiara drew a trembling breath, wishing for the nerve it would take to strip her clothes from her body and go out to the main room where Nykyrian slept. Shera had done that to gain her last lover and had told Kiara it was a never-fail ploy to be used when she really wanted someone. But Kiara couldn't do that, she was a coward.

Sighing, she leaned back on her bed, imagining what it would be like to have Nykyrian by her side, making love to her, soothing her fears all night long.

He was still on her mind when she finally drifted off into a fitful sleep.

When Kiara awoke, Nykyrian was gone. She had rushed from her bed to see him before he left, but she was too late. Hauk sat on her couch, munching what was left of her friggles.

Giving him a shy, disappointed smile, she went to dress. Kiara took her time, wishing she had stayed in bed and slept through the hulking Andarion's guardianship of her. She held no desire to spend the day under his glares and threats.

When she returned to the main room, Hauk had a plate of muffins waiting for her. She lifted a questioning brow, shocked by the gesture.

"They're not as good as Nykyrian's, but they won't kill you either," he said gruffly as if being friendly with her embarrassed him.

"I thought you hated me?" she asked, retrieving a muffin.

He shrugged and flipped stations on her viewer. "I hate over-privileged people in general. You just happen to fall into that category."

She swallowed her bite of muffin. "Nykyrian didn't strike me as being exactly poor. As the son of a wealthy, respected commander I would think he falls into your category as well."

A harrumph was all that answered her.

After a moment, he snarled. "I don't suppose you have a better way of occupying our time? There's nothing on that's even good enough to rot my brain with."

Kiara laughed, understanding his mood all too well. "Other than eat friggles and humans, what do you like to do?"

Hauk stood and towered over her. "Anything beats talking."

She sighed at the underlying hostility in his words and indicated the closet in the hallway with her thumb. "I have some games."

Without a word, he moved to the closet and began rummaging through her things. He emerged with a wide smile, his fangs flashing. "Tareba!" he exclaimed, pulling out the strategy game. "Would you mind playing?"

Kiara smiled in disbelief at his exuberance. "Of course not," she said.

He was like a child with a new toy as he pulled out the pieces and set up the board.

A smile curled her lips at his enthusiasm. "Where'd Nykyrian go?" she asked while she watched him.

He looked up from the box with a stern frown. "Did you ask him?"

"Didn't have time."

The frown lessened. "He went to get information about the people after you."

She licked her lips, trying to bolster her courage enough to ask the next question. "Why is Aksel Bredeh so important to Nykyrian?"

"What do you care?" he barked.

Kiara glared at him, her cheeks warming in anger over his unwarranted hostility. "You guys have to be the most defensive group alive. *Mia kitana*, can't I ever get a simple answer out of any of you?"

Hauk laughed deep in his throat, a sound that she found far from comforting. "You're right. We are a prone to evasiveness. You should play Questions with them sometime.

I've never seen anyone hedge an inquiry better than Nykyrian and Rachol."

It was magical the way his personality changed from coarse to friendly. "I'm not even sure what went on between Aksel and Nykyrian. Then again, there's not much I am sure about where Nykyrian is concerned except for the fact he would die for me."

She frowned at the newfound knowledge. "Why do you say that?"

"He's taken enough shots protecting my hulking ass over the years."

Kiara watched him finish setting up the game, thinking about what he said. "Have you ever seen him smile?"

Hauk closed the box, his eyes carefully shuttered.

"No."

His response brought an ache to her chest. She used her next ploy to gain more tidbits about Nykyrian from him. "How long have you known him?"

Hauk gave her a cold stare. "Since he was nine."

She dropped her jaw in shock, his revelation pouring through her. "And you don't know him well enough to have ever seen him smile?"

Hauk shrugged. "He doesn't smile. Hell, he barely speaks. It was worse when he was a kid. At least now he doesn't glare and hiss every time someone speaks to him."

Kiara's heart lurched at the thought. Nykyrian was a strange fascination for her—the more she learned about his past, the more she wanted to know all about him. "Then you've seen his eyes," she said, hoping to find out why Nykyrian hid them.

Hauk sat perfectly still and watched her. "Yes, I have."

"What do they look like? Yours?"

"If he wants you to know, he'll take his glasses off. Were I you, I wouldn't wait on that day."

Kiara sat back on her heels, gnashing her teeth in frustration. At this rate, she'd die of old age before any of these tight-lipped misers gave her any information about their beloved

companion.

Well fine, she'd just have to see if she could get a glimpse of Nykyrian's eyes by herself. She never could stand a mystery and she wasn't about to leave this one unsolved!

Six

Kiara and Hauk were watching a comedy when Nykyrian returned. She looked up at him with a smile, but he didn't even bother to glance in her direction. Disappointed, she shifted her gaze to Hauk who offered her an apologetic shrug before standing.

"Well, I guess it's time for this baby-sitter to evaporate," Hauk said, nodding to Nykyrian. "Beware of her roast," he said before leaving them.

Nykyrian looked at her. "What was that about?" he asked gruffly.

Kiara shrugged. "He told me he liked it. Would you care for any? I left a warmer on the stove." She tossed the pillow from her lap and uncurled her legs.

"I'll get it," he said, dropping his pack by the door.

He was acting strange, even for him. Kiara watched him move slowly to the kitchen, a deep frown on her face. What had happened?

Several minutes went by as she waited for him to rejoin her, but he stayed in the kitchen out of her sight. Worried and curious, she went to check on him.

He sat at the table, his food untouched. His head was propped against one arm and he appeared to be staring at the table as if something had his mind transfixed.

"Is something wrong?" Kiara asked.

Immediately, he straightened up and retrieved a fork. "I'm just tired," he said before taking a bite.

Kiara sat down across from him. Drawing her legs up in the chair, she propped her chin on her knees. "Hauk and I spent the afternoon playing games," she said, trying to bring him into conversation and out of the melancholia he seemed to be wallowing in. "Do you play any?"

His grip tightened on the fork. "No."

Exasperated, she glared at him. "You don't have to bark at me. I was just— "

"Look," Nykyrian interrupted her, making her jump in surprise at the sharp tone. "I'm in no mood to be sociable. Why can't you leave me in peace!"

Sputtering in indignation, Kiara came to her feet. She rounded the table to stand next to his chair. "You know, I'm getting really sick of this abuse. If we have to be together constantly, the least you could do is be civil."

Nykyrian came to his feet with a loud scraping of chair leg against her porcelain floor. His lips snarled at her, his breathing labored. "Why do you continue to pursue me when you know I have no interest in you as a woman? Are you incapable of having a man in your home without having him in your bed?"

She had never had words cut her so deeply in her life. Before she could think, she slapped him as hard across the face as she could.

He didn't even flinch. He just stood there, motionless. She couldn't even detect the rise and fall of his chest. Kiara was horrified by her actions. Her palm stung from the blow. She had never in her life struck anyone for anything.

"Forgive me," she gasped, cupping his face in her hands.

He pushed her hands away. "Don't touch me," he growled in a low, fierce voice.

She opened her mouth to speak, but a sharp knock on the door silenced her. Nykyrian went to open it.

Kiara stood in the kitchen, gripping the counter as a multitude of emotions tore through her. What had made her do such a thing? His insult rang in her ears, reminding her the action was justified. Wasn't it?

A lump in her throat, she moved towards the front room to see who was here and what was going on. She hovered in the hallway, watching Rachol unbutton and peel Nykyrian's shirt back.

Her brow knitted at the way his hands tenderly moved over Nykyrian's body. Nykyrian didn't protest in the least. Instead of snapping at Rachol, he just looked down at him.

Rachol cursed before moving away. Kiara went cold as she realized Rachol's hands were covered in blood.

"How'd you reopen the damn thing?" he barked at Nykyrian.

Kiara walked forward, wanting to help, her stomach twisting over the wound.

At her movement, Nykyrian faced her. "Go away," he snarled, baring his teeth to her.

Swallowing her fear at his reaction, she ran down the hallway to her room, tears streaming down her face.

* * *

"That wasn't necessary," Rachol said, pushing Nykyrian toward the couch.

Nykyrian didn't say anything. It took all his concentration just to remain conscious from the throbbing, heated agony splitting his side. Breathing was getting harder by the heartbeat.

He tensed as Rachol struck a nerve, but said nothing. He thought about what he'd said to Kiara and wished he could take it back. But then, there were many things he regretted.

He could use the pain as an excuse, but that was all it would be— an excuse. Nykyrian clenched his teeth at his stupidity. What did it matter?

"I'm going to give you some Synethol," Rachol said, straightening up. "I know you hate it, but it'll help you heal a lot faster and this is one time I can't afford for you to be nursing a wound."

Nykyrian nodded, knowing Rachol was right.

Wearily, he watched Rachol wipe the blood from his hands and rummage through his pack until he found the injector.

Rachol rolled back the sleeve of his shirt. Exposing the crook of Nykyrian's elbow, he positioned the injector over the skin. "I'll stay over tonight. I just hope Kiara has a sleeping bag." He pressed the trigger.

The needle bit into Nykyrian's arm and the thick syrup moved into his skin with painful slowness. He pulled his glasses off and handed them to Rachol. "Tell her I'm sorry for what I said" he whispered, the drug making his vision cloudy.

Rachol frowned at Nykyrian. It was the first time he had ever known Kip to apologize to

anyone, for anything. What had he interrupted?

Tossing the injector back into his pack, he rechecked Nykyrian's bandage. A red stain was already creeping back through the white cloth. He cursed. The little dancer had almost cost Nykyrian his life and he would like to tear her into pieces for it.

Kip was the only family he had in this life and by God, he wasn't just going to lie back and watch the only friend/family he had ever known die because of some *harita*.

In an angry stride, Rachol walked down the hall to Kiara's room. He pounded on the door, using the wood as a good scapegoat for his mood.

"Come in."

Rachol heard the tears in her voice and hesitated, all the anger draining out of him. He'd always been a fool for a crying woman. Clenching his teeth, he opened the door.

Curled up into a small ball on the bed, she looked about as pitiful as anything he had ever seen, and he had seen a lot of misery growing up on the streets. He cleared his throat of the strange emotions gathered there to choke him. "I need to get some blankets or a sleeping bag or something."

With a sniff, she wiped the tears from her face. "Are you staying over tonight?"

He nodded.

She came to her feet and went to a closet across the room from him. Against his normal code to enter no one's threshold without an invitation, Rachol crossed the room.

Kiara handed him a pile of blankets and two pillows. "Nykyrian never asked for any," she whispered, her voice laced with more tears and agony than he could stand.

"Yeah, well, he doesn't ask for much, period, besides he doesn't usually sleep with covers."

Glumly, she nodded her head.

Rachol cursed under his breath. "Don't look at me with those doleful eyes. Geez, you remind me of a condemned man in court."

Tears fell down her cheeks. Rachol groaned and dropped the blankets. "C'mon," he said,

leading her back to her bed. "Tell me what happened."

She gave him a startled, hurt look.

Rachol felt like a louse as he sat down on the mattress. Hell, he hadn't done anything wrong, why should he feel awful? "Kip wanted me to tell you he was sorry for whatever he said. Knowing him, it was probably something brutal, but don't take it to your soul. When he's wounded, he's as snappish as a wild lorina."

Kiara's wide amber eyes watched him. Tears sparkled on her dark lashes. "What happened tonight?" she asked in a baleful whisper. "How did he get hurt?"

His anger built as he remembered their mission. Coming to his feet, Rachol paced beside her bed. "We went to meet with an informant. Unfortunately, some of Bredeh's dogs beat us to him. By the time we got there, the bastards had taken the guy's kid as hostage."

Needing to vent some of his anger, he slammed his fist into the wall. Pain erupted through his knuckles, numbing his hand, but it didn't help ease the ache in his conscience.

"Rachol?"

He couldn't mistake the fear in Kiara's voice as she stared at him with widened eyes. "Sorry," he said in a half humble apology. "I just get so damned angry about life and how it plays that ..." His voice trailed off. He sighed wearily. "They killed the kid's dad right in front of him."

"Rachol, I'm sorry." Kiara left the bed and headed for him.

Rachol backed away and shook his head. "Don't touch me," he said, sidestepping her.

She held her hand to her mouth and appeared to be fighting off another round of tears. "That's what Nykyrian said."

He nodded in understanding. "We're not really ogres," Rachol said, wondering why he bothered to explain anything to her.

She returned to her bed and sat cross-legged. Her large, pain-filled amber eyes stared at him. "You just don't like to be touched."

"Exactly."

Her sobs racked her body and wrenched his soul. "Hey now, don't do that," he said, raking his hand through his hair. "Have pity on me, I can't stand a weeping female."

She clutched her pillow to her stomach and cried as if her heart were breaking. "But why, why can't I touch him, why can't I touch you?"

Rachol stood for a moment, trying to think of some way to make her understand. His gaze drifted to the shelf beside the door and the *griata* statuettes that lined it. Moving to them, he took one off the shelf.

"Here," he said, handing it to her. "Tell me what you see."

She looked at him as if he were crazed. "It's just one of my— "

"No, I mean really look at it."

He watched her graceful fingers play across the hard planes of the little boy standing beside his dog.

"When you hold it," he explained, "It's sharp, cold, and we both know *griata* is one of the hardest substances in existence."

She nodded, a tiny smile playing across her lips as she realized his point. "It's also the most brittle. One wrong hit on the wrong side and it crumbles into pieces."

Rachol turned away from her. "So nature has given *griata* a tiny shell that covers it to keep it safe. Before you can claim the treasure, you have to carefully remove the shield."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, reminding him of a little girl he knew a long time ago. "Part of your shell is not touching," she whispered.

"You got it. It's easy to stay distant if you don't rely on anyone for anything, including creature comforts like touching."

She cast him a doubting look. "Are you really that jaded?"

He shrugged. "I'm a lot more brittle than Kip. All things given proper credit, my life has been a hell of a lot easier than his. Instead of a *griata*, he's more like a *torna*."

"What's a *torna*?"

"It's a rare flower grown on Ritadaria. If you try to pick the blossom, the leaves wrap around you and strangle you to death."

Horrified by his words, she stared at him.

He shrugged. "You asked." Stooping, he retrieved the blankets from the floor. "I hate blankets," he muttered, leaving her alone to dwell on his words.

* * *

Nykyrian woke first.

Quietly, he stepped over Rachol's sleeping body, his glasses forgotten. The pain in his side had ebbed to a dull ache, a sad reminder of the life lost last night by a moment of carelessness. He clenched his teeth thinking of the informant, blaming himself for the whole affair.

As he reached the bathroom door, Kiara's door opened. Before he could think to avert his eyes, she saw them.

Kiara's mouth dropped. The eyes staring at her were nothing like she had imagined. They were clear and the lightest, prettiest shade of green with just a hint of a brown band around the edge of the iris.

His eyes were human and beautiful.

Her throat tightened in happiness. Those eyes gave her the first true glimpse of his soul. In them, she saw all the mistrust, anger and bitterness. She felt as if she were seeing him naked. Kiara ached to take him into her arms and soothe away all the pain swirling in those magnificent eyes.

Biting her lip, she shifted her gaze to take in his entire face. There, she had no surprise. He was every bit as handsome as she'd suspected.

He blinked and looked away, seemingly embarrassed. "I'm sorry about what I said last night," he whispered, meeting her gaze for a moment to show her his sincerity before he looked away again.

She cleared her throat of the sudden thrill that choked her from his apology. "Rachol told

me. I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have hit you, it was wrong."

He shrugged and moved into the bathroom.

Kiara trembled in her newfound knowledge. Without his glasses, he wasn't a fearsome phantom to haunt her dreams. He was a mortal man who could be wounded and loved. She gasped at her thoughts. Love? That's not what she wanted from him. Was it?

No longer feeling satisfied, she started breakfast.

* * *

Nykyrian's hands shook as he dragged them over his face. Well, at least he wouldn't have anymore eye strain. She had finally seen him.

Now it would begin. The initial pity would be first — poor deformed half-ling, then the worst part, the eventual hatred of his mixed blood, of the fact that he bore too many characteristics of both races.

People had never seen anything more in him than the antithesis of their own traits, not realizing or caring he could be hurt by their scorn.

Clenching his teeth, he ripped the bandage from his side, taking a small amount of satisfaction from the throbbing protest of his skin. Physical pain was easy to deal with and it took his mind off other things.

Disrobing, he stepped into the shower.

The water burned as it slid against his wound. Despite the pain, an image of Kiara tormented him. "No!" he hissed, hitting the wall with his palm.

She didn't deserve him. She needed someone free to love her entirely, not a man who had divided loyalties, wanted by authorities and criminals. He saw all the lonely nights she would spend while he pursued his missions, tormented by fears of his being killed.

Kiara would be better off with someone else. He couldn't allow himself to love her. Ever.

* * *

Kiara smiled at Nykyrian despite her warnings to herself to remain aloof. "I'm just going to have to get used to you all over again," she said, handing him a plate.

He didn't comment.

She filled a plate for herself and sat across from him. His wet, white hair was combed off his face. His eyes, with their long, dark lashes, absolutely fascinated her. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Like I've been shot," he replied dryly.

She smiled. "Gee, I wonder why?"

He glanced up at her, then quickly looked back at his food. "I'm surprised you're speaking to me after what I said to you last night."

She shrugged. "My father tutored me well on amnesia. He always claimed it was a necessary ingredient for friendship." She cleared her throat and said in deep voice, "Kiara, my angel, no matter how long you live or how good a friend you've got, someone's always going to say or do something they didn't mean to do. And if they're truly your friend, you'd better forgive and forget."

Nykyrian sipped his juice. "Your father's wise."

"Good day!" Rachol yawned, stretching as he entered the kitchen. "What smells so good?"

"*Frisanian* tarts," Kiara said, returning his smile.

He walked over to the warmer and pulled a couple off. Rachol turned around and smiled. "If you want a man in your life, call me anytime."

Kiara laughed, amazed at how handsome he was without the eyeliner ringing his eyes, or hoops in his ears. But then, he wasn't nearly as gorgeous as Nykyrian.

"Will I be blessed with both of you today?" Kiara bit into her fruit.

Rachol sat next to her. "Cursed would be a more concise description. In which case, I reply affirmatively." He smiled at Nykyrian. "Kip will no doubt, and you can see proof by the look on his face, object to my hanging around."

"I don't need a nursemaid," Nykyrian said quietly. "Well, in my case it's a nurseman. So don't bother with your usual bluster, I'm committed."

"You should be."

Kiara burst into laughter at Nykyrian's even-toned response.

Rachol sputtered. "Kiara, please. Don't encourage him to abuse me, he does enough damage on his own."

Nykyrian put his fork down and eyed Rachol with a dark frown. "You know, I always wondered what it would feel like to strangle a Ritadarion."

Kiara glanced to Rachol, not sure if Nykyrian was joking.

Rachol continued to smile. "You missed your chance three years ago on Tondara."

"And never got over it."

Kiara continued to listen to their banter. She was amazed at how well they got along and was certain Nykyrian wouldn't allow anyone else to treat him so lightly. After a few minutes, Nykyrian excused himself and went to the main room.

"Is he really all right?" Kiara whispered to Rachol.

Rachol leaned down to her. "Whispering does absolutely no good around him, he can hear from miles away. It's one of those damnable Andarion traits."

Rachol straightened and continued talking, "He's just sullen as a swollen gimfry." He popped his knuckles. "So what trouble shall we get into?"

"I thought you had too much to do to be troubled in this place." Nykyrian's voice traveled into the kitchen without him shouting.

Kiara raised her eyebrows, surprised he really could hear them.

Rachol winked at her. "I do, but you're crazed if you think I'm leaving this sweet thing in your surly presence."

Nykyrian said something else in that strange language he used with Rachol.

Kiara looked at Rachol and saw his eyes widen before he shot from the kitchen.

"Bredeh's coming for her," Nykyrian said in Ritadarion to Rachol. He glanced up to see Kiara join them from the kitchen.

"Do you think he'll bomb the building?"

Nykyrian nodded, his stomach tightening at the thought. "We've got to move her. Call her father on the telelink, tell him he has less than a half hour to get here and see her before we leave. Scramble the message."

Rachol nodded and moved to comply. Nykyrian beckoned Kiara to come to him. She hesitated for a moment, before walking forward.

Taking a stylus and computer ledger, Nykyrian wrote his commands for her: "We have reason to believe we're being monitored. I need you to pack enough clothes for several days. We have to move quickly."

Her eyes widened as she read the note. "Oh God," she whispered and ran from the room.

Kiara trembled in fear. Who was monitoring them? Was it this mysterious Aksel? She opened her bedroom door and heard Rachol arguing with her father over the telelink next to her bed. Through the view screen, she could see the worry in her father's face as he glared at Rachol. Cold, clammy sweat chilled her hands.

"Father," she said, as she stepped into range for the viewer and interrupted his long list of what he intended to do to Rachol. "Everything is fine. I trust them completely."

"I don't," he snapped, eyeing Rachol with a murderous glare.

"Trust my instincts," she said, placing a hand on Rachol's shoulder to prove her words. She was a bit surprised Rachol didn't protest.

Instead of calming her father, the gesture seemed to push his anger to full boil. "Don't you dare move her until I get there, or you'll wish to God you had stayed in whatever hole you crawled from!" He cut the transmission.

"Geez," Rachol snorted. "What a grouch."

"He's just worried about me."

Rachol scratched the stubble on his cheek. "Yeah, well, the man needs a couple of drinks."

Before Kiara could reply, Nykyrian leaned through the door and tossed Rachol his blaster. "The attack's already started."

Kiara went cold. Nykyrian stepped back and Rachol ran to the front.

"I'm scared," she whispered, half expecting to drop into a faint at any moment.

"Don't be," Nykyrian reassured her. "They've got to come through me and I'm no easy obstacle." He held his blaster in his left hand and stretched his right hand out to her.

Without hesitation, she placed her icy hand into his large, warm one. She knew she was safe.

He pulled her with him out into the hallway. They crouched together beside the bar. Nykyrian surrounded her with warmth, her back against his chest. She could smell the clean scent of soap from his skin.

Rachol hid behind the chair closest to the door. Kiara stared at the laser cutting through the door, remembering her brief time on board her kidnapper's shuttle.

She swallowed her panic, telling herself Nykyrian was here this time and he would see her to safety. As if he knew her thoughts, he rubbed a comforting hand down her arm. She stared at his left hand held out near her face and watched him click back the release of his blaster. Waiting.

The hissing of the torch grew louder.

"When they come through, be prepared to run," Nykyrian whispered to her, his warm breath stirring her hair and raising a chill on her cheek.

She nodded.

"Meet me at the usual rendezvous," he shouted to Rachol over the sound of her door splintering.

Kiara's heart pounded in her ears, deafening her to all other sounds. The charred stench stuck in her throat and choked her. Fear restricted her vision and all she could focus on was the weakening door that separated them from the men who wanted to kill her.

Where was the building's security? She prayed.

With a cloud of smoke and a loud triumphant shout, a group of men came through the door. Rachol fired, killing the first two.

Rachol made a holy gesture to his lips and ran into the chaos of the hallway. She couldn't believe her eyes. Nykyrian wrapped his right arm around her waist like a safety belt, then pulled her to her feet.

She trembled in fear, praying she wouldn't trip and cost them their lives. Nykyrian held her against him, his body shielding her from the blasters' fire. She stumbled against him as he led her into the smoke infested hallway.

He fired his blaster, his arm tightened around her. In spite of her fear, she wanted to see what was happening.

"Don't look," Nykyrian said before pulling her around behind him. "God, I hate this job," he snarled, spinning around and firing at something behind them.

He pulled her down the corridor, away from the lift. Kicking open the stairwell, he scanned the stairs, then pushed her through the door. He pulled a device from his pocket and used it to seal the door closed behind them.

"Wait here, I need— "

"Don't leave me!" Kiara gasped, desperately grabbing onto him.

He clenched his teeth. Taking a deep breath, he took her hand and led her down the stairs and into the landing bay in the basement of the building.

Her legs trembling, Kiara stumbled twice. "Leave me," she said, as he helped to her feet. "They'll let you go."

Nykyrian snorted at her words. "Believe me, Aksel would much rather hang my scalp in his house than yours. Just calm down, you're doing fine."

"How can you be so damned calm?" she snapped.

He shrugged and continued leading her behind the docked shuttles. "Either we'll make it, or they'll kill us. If they kill us, they can't torture us. It's a win-win situation."

For some reason, Kiara didn't subscribe to that philosophy. Then, she heard them. Her heart pounded as she realized someone was approaching! Nykyrian covered her lips with his finger and motioned her into the shadows of the landing bay.

As the soldier paused several yards away, Nykyrian removed his finger from her lips. "Listen," he whispered in her ear, "I have to leave you alone. I have to clear the sentries from my ship, okay?"

She rubbed the chills on her arms. "I'm scared."

He nodded. "Me, too," he said, and was gone.

Kiara crouched down behind the fighter, straining her ears to hear what was going on. Footsteps returned and she pressed herself deeper into the shadows.

Nykyrian moved atop the ships as silent as the specter for which he was named. From his hearing, he deduced there were three soldiers in the bay, two together and one roaming about. Taking a deep breath, he checked the setting and charge of his blaster to make sure he had enough juice to get them out of here alive.

The cold lump of dread he had always hated to feel, sat in his stomach like a rock. Well, time to do business. He rolled off the ship and came to a standing position between the two soldiers.

One guard faced him, the man's mouth falling open and moving spastically like a fish. The man gurgled before bringing his weapon up. Nykyrian fired, then spun about to catch the second guard before the soldier could shoot him in the back. A chill raised the hair on the back of his neck. "I've got her, hybrid!"

Nykyrian clenched his teeth in anger and frustration, it wasn't Aksel, but worse. His demented younger brother.

"Turn yourself over to Aksel, and I might let her go."

"Yeah, right," Nykyrian muttered, resetting his blaster. "And I'm a one-legged dung dealer."

Damn! How had Arast doubled back behind him and found her? His hearing was not what it used to be. Nykyrian skirted around the ships to where the idiot stood, his blaster aimed at Kiara's head. "Hybrid!"

"Nykyrian, run!" Kiara shouted. Arast tightened his grip around her throat. "Another word, *harita* and I'll snap your neck," he hissed.

Nykyrian knew he had one chance and one chance only. "You want a piece of me?" he asked, his voice echoing in the bay.

Arast turned around, looking for the direction it came from. Nykyrian watched, his hands trembling in fear for Kiara's life.

"Where are you, hybrid?"

"Let her go and put your weapon down."

"And let you shoot me?" Arast laughed sadistically. "I'm not stupid."

"About as smart as my boots," Nykyrian whispered, doubting his own intelligence for letting the imbecile get the upper hand.

Clenching his teeth in determination, Nykyrian slid his blaster across the floor. The hollow, piercing sound of metal against pavement grated against Nykyrian's ears. Arast wanted much more than just to kill him, and Kiara was only icing on the *gundry*.

Nykyrian had always known it would come to this one day. "Let her go and you'll get the chance you've been waiting for," he shouted, watching Arast carefully.

Arast slung Kiara away from him. Not waiting for the bastard to shoot her, or to throw down his weapon, which would be a miracle anyway, Nykyrian launched himself from the shadows, straight at his target,

Kiara screamed as the two men entwined. They moved so quickly, all she could see was a blur of color, black and brown moving in a dreadful dance, Nykyrian's life balancing on the outcome. She rubbed her throat in nervous strokes of her fingers, barely feeling the welts left by the assassin's cruel hands.

A flash of light fired. Nykyrian cursed. The assassin came to his feet and angled his blaster at Nykyrian, but before he could fire, Nykyrian caught him about the head and twisted. She recognized the sound of grinding bone a split second before blood gushed out of the soldier's mouth and he crumpled slowly to the ground.

Horrified, she stared at Nykyrian as he stooped over the man's body, feeling for a pulse. He had killed with his bare hands! Nykyrian came to his feet.

Kiara's heart pounded in fear. For the first time, she fully realized what he was and what he could do. The stench of blood clung to him, choking her.

"Come on," Nykyrian said, holding his hand out to her. "The others will be here shortly."

Her illusions shattered, tears ran down her cheeks in two icy paths.

"Kiara!" Nykyrian snapped, grabbing her arm and pulling her to his ship. "We have to leave."

Somehow, she managed to climb up the ladder and seat herself in the cockpit of his ship. Her heart hammered in her chest as he joined her.

He had just strapped them in, when his body went rigid.

Kiara looked up to see more soldiers entering the bay. Nykyrian flipped switches in front of her. The engines of their ship fired with a deafening roar.

Transfixed by the large group of assassins, Kiara stared at them. One man stood out at the head of the soldiers, glaring at her and Nykyrian with a handsome, cold face that mirrored cruelty and hatred.

Aksel stared at his two targets, knowing Nykyrian had once more slipped from his grasp as the Arcana flew out of the bay. "Dammit!" he shouted.

It was then, he noticed the body of his brother. His teeth chattered in rage and hatred. "Find them!" he snarled to his soldiers. "I will have that hybrid's life, or your own!"

Shoving his men from his path, Aksel made his way back to his own ship. This was far from over. He would claim Nykyrian's life no matter what!

Seven

Kiara trembled in shock and fear. Over and over, she saw Nykyrian break the soldier's neck, heard the bone splintering, the blood . . .

They had just landed outside the building where Rachol lived. The scent of warm, sticky blood clung to her. The assassin's blood from where Nykyrian had killed him, she thought, her stomach twisting. She tried to rise from the seat, but her limbs wouldn't

move.

Gently, Nykyrian wrapped his arms around her and carried her into Rachol's flat. Kiara wanted the strength to push him away, to bathe the smell of blood from her body. But just then, it took all her strength to keep her mind from replaying the entire fight, her ears from hearing once more the final macabre snap of bone.

Nykyrian placed her on the couch. Sitting next to her, he rubbed her cold hands. Kiara's mind protested. "Don't touch me!" she shouted, pushing him away. "My God, you killed that man with your bare hands!"

His hands stiffened on hers, then he moved away without a word.

Kiara leaned against the arm of the couch and cried. Granted they had both talked about his profession many times, Nykyrian had even made jokes about it, but the reality of what he could do had never really struck her, until now.

Nykyrian stared at her quaking shoulders, wanting to comfort her, but knowing he couldn't. He thought about Arast and his gut knotted. Guilt consumed him. Since he, Aksel and Arast had left the League, he had done his best to avoid them, knowing what would happen if they ever found each other.

His throat tightened as he listened to her cry. He had known what Kiara's reaction would be to him once she realized what he really was. She hated him. At least now she would be easier to guard. She wouldn't bother making attempts at friendship.

Still, her tears tore through him. He watched her shaking shoulders and his heart thudded a hollow, empty beat against his ribs. He should have refused the contract.

The door opened. Nykyrian spun about at the sound, his blaster leveling at the figure.

Rachol held up his hands. "Whoa, friend!"

Nykyrian closed his eyes and holstered his blaster. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Rachol shook his head, a knowing smile on his lips. "Whatever you did to Aksel, you got him screaming mad. He's sent his men all over looking for you." He paused as he noticed Kiara. "Is she all right?"

Nykyrian shook his head, his guilt mounting. "I killed Arast in the bay before we left."

Rachol paled. "You what? Are you okay?"

He shrugged, not sure of anything at the moment. "I've got some things to do. Get her to safety."

Kiara heard Nykyrian leave, but she didn't bother looking up. She wasn't sure she liked Rachol anymore at that time than she did Nykyrian. Dear God, between the two of them, how many men had they killed?

"Here."

She jumped as Rachol handed her a glass of *brika*. "I don't drink intoxicants," she said, sniffing.

"It'll help," he said, pressing it into her hand. Without further argument, she tossed the scorching liquid down her throat where it burned a path to her stomach. She gasped, her eyes watering.

She handed the glass back to Rachol and studied his pensive face. Was he as soulless as Nykyrian?

A new knot formed in her throat. No one could do what Nykyrian did and still have a soul, or even be normal. As far as she could tell, killing that man had been nothing more to him than tying his shoelaces!

Rachol sighed, interrupting her thoughts. "If you like, we can send you back to your father. But I warn you, it'll mean your life if we do."

She looked up at him, her eyes burning from all the tears she had cried. "I would rather take my chances with my father's men. I trust them."

"I thought you trusted us."

"I did."

His eyes narrowed. By the look on his face, she thought he might like to strangle her. Instead, he curled his lip into a fierce snarl. "Why don't you quit feeling sorry for yourself. I'm just a little tired of it."

Warmth rushed to her cheeks. "How dare you!"

Rachol leaned over the arm of the couch, forcing her to lean back. He braced his arms on each side of her, penning her in. She didn't like being cornered. His eyes blazed and for a moment, she thought he might actually strike her.

"You think you're so unsullied. How dare you sit there like some queen dispensing her will on others. If you would get off your *dais* long enough to live, you might realize other people have feelings and needs besides you!"

His breath fell against her cheek in angry pulses that punctuated each biting word. "I —"

"You what?" he sneered. "Do you know who Aksel Bredeh and Arast are?"

She shook her head, no longer even caring.

"Nykyrian's brothers."

Her breath left her body in shock. "No," she whispered, numbed disbelief washing over her.

Rachol pushed himself away from her and walked toward the bar that separated the main room from the kitchen. "Oh yeah. Right now, wherever the hell Kip is, he's not in good shape. You think you hurt, imagine how he feels. He has spent the last few years avoiding them, allowing people to call him a coward, to prevent from happening what you caused today!"

Her temper flared at his accusation. "You can't blame this on me!"

Rachol curled his lip. "Who else? If not for your spoiled little butt, he wouldn't have been anywhere near them today."

Her hands shook as she clutched them in her lap, thinking about his words. "How could he kill his own brother?" she whispered, unable to comprehend such a thing.

Rachol shook his head. "Stop it, please," he snarled. "Don't waste pity on Arast. If he had been given the chance, he would have raped you, cut you into little pieces and fed you to his dogs. And that's nice compared to what he would've done to Nykyrian."

Kiara stared at him, wondering if he were telling her the truth. No, she couldn't believe anyone could be that cruel to their own brother. Nykyrian was the demon, not Arast. "I don't understand how you can say such a thing."

"No, you don't and you don't even try to."

She stiffened her spine. "How can I when all of you close me out."

To her surprise, shock rippled across his face before he gave a half laugh. "I guess that's true enough."

She rubbed her forehead where a small ache was beginning to throb. "So what does it take to understand him, or you for that matter?"

Rachol snorted. "I doubt you ever could."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt you can even imagine the kind of homes Kip and I grew up in. They don't exist in the candy-coated worlds of little spoiled girls."

His patronizing voice set her temper ablaze. "I'm not a child anymore."

"Then why are you acting like one?"

She glared at him. "I suppose killing a man is mature."

"It beats the hell out of self-pity."

Kiara sat there, staring at him, his words hanging in the air between them like a pall. He broke eye contact and moved to the bar. He picked up a bottle of *brika* and poured a large glass full.

For several seconds he stared at it, then cursed and emptied it into the sink. "Self-pity," he mumbled so low, Kiara wondered if she had even heard him. He refilled the glass with water and took a deep draught.

A sudden realization struck her as she watched the envious way he stared at the bottle of alcohol. "You have a drinking problem, don't you?" she asked, wondering what other surprises awaited her about Nykyrian and Rachol.

He tipped the glass of water to her. "No problem really until I sober up. Makes Kip crazed though. You ever want to really set his temper off, let him smell alcohol on my breath. He hates self-destructive habits."

Her anger faltered. "Are you a *duwad*?" He smiled at her, his dark eyes twinkling. "That had to come from Kip."

She nodded, wondering how he could wax from anger to humor so quickly.

Rachol sat the glass down and ran his hand over the condensation on the outside of it. "No, I'm too much of a coward to openly try and kill myself. Alcohol is just a good way to numb myself until nature takes care of it for me."

A loud knock pounded on the door. Kiara gasped, fearing Aksel had found them.

"You wonder why I drink," Rachol said, pulling his blaster from the holster.

"Stay down," he warned her, creeping toward the door. He flicked on the console then breathed a sigh of relief. He holstered his blaster.

Taking that as a sign it was a friendly caller, Kiara sat up. Rachol opened the door and hauled Darling into the flat by his arm.

"Hey!" Darling snapped. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Aksel's after us," Rachol said, locking the door.

Darling looked at her and nodded a greeting. "No wonder Nykyrian was so skittish."

Kiara stared at the black eye marring the exposed side of Darling's face. His eye was red and the whole cheek swollen.

"My God," Rachol said, finally seeing it, too. "What happened to you?"

Darling signed. "What d'you think?"

"I swear I'm going to kill that *boowah* someday."

Darling gave a bitter laugh. "Kip said almost the same thing. Anyway, he sent me here to get that disk you've been working on for Aksel's base on Oksana."

Rachol frowned. "Why?"

"As if he would tell me?"

Rachol rubbed his hands over his face like he had a headache to match Kiara's. "It's in the safe in my room." Rachol met Kiara's eyes. "Darling, I hate to be rude, but I've got to get her to safety before you know who figures out where I live. Lock my door and don't forget to hook up my scanner."

"Done."

Rachol held his hand out to her. "Are you staying with us your queenship?"

Kiara took his hand, not really sure if what she did was for the best. "For now." He pulled her to her feet and they headed toward the door.

Kiara waited until they were in Rachol's ship and out of the planet's orbit before she spoke, "What happened to Darling's eye?"

Rachol stiffened while he flipped switches on his console. "Arturo."

She frowned. "Family?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said with a sigh. "His stepfather turned legal guardian."

Kiara thought the matter over, her heart pounding in sympathetic pain. "Why doesn't Darling just leave home?"

Rachol took a deep breath. "He can't. According to Caronese law, he's a minor until his twenty-sixth birthday. Three years from now." Rachol turned the ship to the right. "Does his eye shock you?"

"No," Kiara said. "What shocks me is the fact he allows Arturo to beat him."

Rachol sighed again. "That's a long story I'm sure Darling doesn't want you to know."

She nodded, not really sure she wanted to know either. "Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Kip's house."

In spite of her better sense, her heartbeat raced. "I'm surprised he would dare allow me near it."

"Me, too." Rachol shifted in the seat. "You're the only person besides me who's seen it."

She frowned in confusion. "Then why are you taking me there?"

"Because he told me to."

With that simple statement of loyalty, she remained quiet and watched the stars zoom past outside the window.

It didn't take long to reach the planet. Kiara stared at the swirling orange and yellow mists. It seemed so peaceful and isolated. Rachol landed outside a house that was almost as large as her entire building. He docked in the bay and pressed a button.

"We have to wait for the bay to pressurize and a breathable atmosphere to mix."

She didn't respond. Instead, she concentrated on the huge, empty bay.

After a couple of minutes, they left the craft. "Stand back," Rachol warned before opening the door.

Kiara frowned at his cautioning, then was bombarded by a huge lorina. The animal jumped up on her, licking her cheek with its large, rough tongue. Three more danced around them.

"I hate these things," Rachol hissed, pushing them away from him. "They think they're lap pets."

Kiara smiled, petting the one licking her arm. "Are there just the four?"

"Yeah. Believe me, four's plenty. Come on in and make yourself cozy. There's no telling when Kip'll return."

Rachol walked through the house switching on lights with a hand control. "This is the kitchen," he said, showing her the gleaming white area to the right of the door. "Kip's room is up those stairs, along with the bathroom."

Kiara looked around. The entire place was spotless. Nothing was out of place.

"Everything in the house, is wired to this," he said, holding the control out to her. "You can lighten the ceiling to see the sky, and the same for the upstairs wall where Nykyrian sleeps."

She listened to Rachol ramble as he showed her the two rooms in the back, an exercise room and a viewing room.

"This is an impressive place," she breathed. "I didn't realize he had so much money."

"You wouldn't believe his account balances if I showed you the statement," Rachol mumbled, heading to a desk at the rear of the main room. "Look, I have some things to do. Wander about, or whatever."

Kiara rubbed her arms, her eyes scanning the sparse, but luxurious furnishings. The main room contained two cream couches, a low table, the expensive wood desk where Rachol worked and not much else.

The room she most wanted to see was one she was certain Rachol wouldn't like, or show to her— the bedroom. People usually kept the most telling items about themselves in their bedrooms.

Maybe later.

"Are there any files or books to read?" she asked.

"Yeah, check the closet behind me."

She opened the closet and froze. She gave a low whistle at the quantity and variety of books concealed inside. "Does he read all these languages?"

"And more," Rachol commented absently. "He graduated top of his class at Pontari Academy with a degree in Translation and Interpretations."

Adequately impressed, she pulled down one of the Gourish volumes of poetry. "Rachol?"

She waited until he looked up at her. "Can I ask a personal question?"

"About me or Kip?"

She clutched the book to her for courage. "Well, both of you really."

He looked back at the computer screen for several seconds and chewed his bottom lip. "Let's hear it, then I'll decide."

Kiara steadied herself against the couch, mentally bolstering herself to hear what his reply might be. "What was so horrible with your pasts that both of you are so closed to other people?"

Rachol took a deep breath before swiveling his chair around to face her. He folded his arms over his chest, his eyes carefully averted. "In my case, my mother abandoned me and my sister to our father when I was three. My father was Bynan Verlaine, the infamous spy/thief."

She gripped the book, noting the hatred in Rachol's voice as he spoke about his father. She knew the story behind the Bynan Verlaine only too well. His career and political trial had been one of the most publicized events in her lifetime.

"He was executed when I was ten."

"I'm sorry," she said, rubbing her thumb down the ridged, leather spine of the book.

He shrugged. "Don't be, I wasn't."

She watched him for a moment, his brown eyes, locked onto her face, betrayed no hint of what he was feeling. "And your sister?"

His gaze hardened. "She killed herself six months before my father was caught and tried."

Kiara closed her eyes, a wave of pain washing over her. "So you had no one."

He nodded, his face as stoic as Nykyrian's. "Grew up on the street with a cardboard box for a house."

She digested the news slowly, realizing just how lucky she had been. "So how'd you meet Nykyrian?"

Rachol laughed aloud and unfolded his arms. "I tried to pick his pocket."

An amused smile twitched Kiara's lips. "You didn't?"

Rachol scratched his ear, a wide smile splitting his face. "Oh yeah. I couldn't believe it when he bought me dinner instead of beating the hell out of me."

Warmth flooded her at the thought of Nykyrian's kindness. "You've known him ever

since?"

"In a manner of speaking. I don't think anyone really knows him at all."

A loud crackling engine sounded outside in the bay. Kiara bit her bottom lip, realizing Nykyrian had returned. She looked down at her arm where some blood had dried. Flicking it off, she was no longer sure what she felt about Nykyrian, or herself.

The door opened. Nykyrian paused in the doorway, his eyes locked on hers. He slid the backpack off his shoulder, dropping it on the floor along with his helmet. The lorinas circled around him and rubbed against his legs. He patted them, staring at her all the while. She didn't know how to break the tense silence. Luckily, Rachol did it for her.

"Where've you been?"

Nykyrian broke eye contact and walked past her to rest beside the desk. He leaned on one arm and studied the screen. "Information gathering," he said quietly, his eyes scanning the screen. Rachol glanced up at her. "Did you find anything interesting?"

Nykyrian pressed a couple of keys. "Arturo's address," he said and straightened.

Rachol shifted in his chair. "Is that it?" he asked pointing to the screen.

"Yes."

Rachol smiled at Kiara. "Did you beat the hell out of him?"

Nykyrian looked at her sheepishly. Guilt consumed Kiara as she realized why he hesitated.

"No," he said at last. "Darling made me promise I wouldn't do anything. But I didn't say you or Hauk wouldn't."

Rachol laughed. "Thanks for the bait. I never could resist bullying a bully."

Nykyrian moved to stand on the other side of the couch, staring at her. There was so much Kiara wanted to say to him, but she couldn't bring herself to do it in front of Rachol. She ached to apologize for her stupidity and her words to Nykyrian after he had saved her worthless life.

"Rachol and I have business to discuss," he said in a sharp tone that cut her deeply. "If

you don't mind, we need to be alone."

She nodded in dejection and headed to the viewing room. Opening the door, she wanted to cry. What had she done to him by a few callous, stupid words? Kiara remembered the way he had held onto her during the fight, the way he had protected her. Rachol was right, she was a spoiled brat who didn't realize just how fortunate a life she had.

Sighing, she sat the book down on the white couch and walked to the screen on the wall. A disk cabinet sat catty-corner to it. She opened the door and flipped through Nykyrian's video disks. A smile curved her lips as she recognized several disks were of her past performances. Warmth flooded her body. Despite his constant denials of interest, she must hold some fascination for him to have bothered purchasing her disks.

When she found the group labeled private, her heart stopped. She pulled out a handful and stared at the cold pieces of metal that could tell her more in a few minutes than a year spent with the tight-lipped men around her.

The overhead light glinted across the disks in a bright rainbow of colors. Her conscience told her to put them back, that she had no right to pry into his past, but she was too compelled to see what they contained.

Tucking her conscience away, Kiara inserted her handful into the machine. She picked up the control and switched on the viewer. With a satisfied smile, she plopped down on the sofa to see just what his horrible secrets were.

The fuzzy lines cleared into the face of a young boy. Her smile widened as she recognized Nykyrian around the age of ten. He sat at a dinner table with two other blond boys who appeared to be a few years older.

"There now," a woman's voice said off camera.

"Why're we doing this?" the oldest boy whined.

"It's Nykyrian's birthday," she said, stepping around the camera to straighten Nykyrian's shirt collar. Nykyrian didn't budge, he just stared absently at the tabletop, a huge black eye on his left cheek.

"We don't celebrate his birthday," the younger boy said, kicking at Nykyrian's chair.

Nykyrian didn't move. He continued to sit there, staring at the table as if transfixed by some dream.

"Arast, Aksel" the woman snapped, shaking her finger at the boys. "How many times have I told you not to pick on him? You're twice his size!"

Aksel stood up. "Just because you're his psycho whatever doesn't mean you can tell me what to do."

"Besides," Arast whined, shoving his plate away from him, the food spilling over the edges. "He's a freak. Why don't you take him back to wherever they found him."

The nurse tried to calm them down, but they wouldn't listen. Before she could stop them, Aksel pushed Nykyrian from the chair and Arast kicked him in the ribs. Nykyrian fought against them without tears or words. The nurse disappeared.

Kiara clenched her teeth at the fierce blows Aksel and Arast delivered, amazed Nykyrian didn't cry or whimper. He stood his ground, but the two of them were too much for him to defend himself against.

After a moment, the nurse returned with Commander Quiakides by her side.

"Boys!" he said, clapping his hands as he moved to stand in front of the nurse. Instantly, they released Nykyrian.

"What's going on here?" the Commander demanded, his sharp glare piercing the group.

"He's been in my stuff again, Dad," Aksel said defensively. "I'm getting tired of it, too."

The nurse blustered behind the Commander. "That has nothing to do with— "

"Enough," the Commander said, interrupting her. "I will not have conflict in my house. Leave me with Nykyrian."

Kiara's gaze fell to where Nykyrian sat quietly studying the pattern on the porcelain floor. He hadn't bothered to stand. The room cleared and the Commander snatched Nykyrian off the floor by his arm with a grip and force that made Kiara cringe in reflex.

"Have you been in their rooms again?"

Nykyrian remained silent.

"Answer me," the Commander snarled, shaking him.

Nykyrian looked at him with a cold hatred that chilled Kiara. The Commander's response was much more active, he backhanded him. Nykyrian didn't flinch or cry out. That knowledge hurt Kiara more than the brutal action.

"You are a hybrid animal," the Commander snarled. "Not even your own parents wanted you! You're lucky anyone would have you at all! You will either respect this home and my rules or find yourself back in the work home, chained to the wall!"

The words burned through Kiara, she couldn't watch it anymore. She switched the disk.

The next disk was Nykyrian a few years older at about fifteen. He practiced in an exercise room with his brothers. Kiara's heart was heavy as she watched the brutal way they trained. If Nykyrian missed a single defense, he caught a severe blow from one of them.

His gorgeous blond hair was cropped close to his head and a long, pink scar ran down the back of his neck, along his spine.

The Commander entered and Kiara thought she glimpsed a glimmer of pride in his eyes as he watched his sons.

Suddenly, without reason, Nykyrian dropped his weapon and fell to his knees. His breathing labored, he clutched at his head as if some intolerable pain tore through his skull.

Seeing the Commander, Aksel dropped his weapon, laughed, then clapped Arast on his back and the two of them left the room.

Huwin moved to stand before Nykyrian, legs braced wide apart. He tapped his silver-handled cane on the floor in a short staccato rhythm. Nykyrian dropped his hands from his head and lifted his face to stare a bitter hatred at his father.

"Does your injury still pain you?" Huwin asked in an almost caring voice. Nykyrian remained silent.

Huwin tapped the cane nearer to Nykyrian. The sound stopped. He grabbed Nykyrian's hair and pulled him to his feet. Nykyrian didn't even grimace. "I have received some distressing information about you," Huwin said, his grip tightening its hold. "Something about you and Ambassador Krila's daughter." Nykyrian just stared at him.

Huwin lifted his cane and angled the sharp handle toward Nykyrian's eyes. "Is it true?"

"No," Nykyrian spat.

Huwin released him. "Good. Your blood is tainted. The only thing you're fit for is killing. I want no more rumors about any women. The only thing a woman could possibly want with you is my money and I won't have any bastard, half-bred offspring of yours enjoying what I've spent my life building!"

Nykyrian opened his mouth to speak and received a vicious backhand.

"Remember my words."

"What are you doing!"

Kiara jumped at Nykyrian's snarl. Heat stung her cheeks at being caught in her snooping.

Rushing forward, Nykyrian cut the power to the viewer. His sharp glare pierced her.

She averted her eyes in guilt. "I just wanted to see what you were like," she whispered.

He ran his hand over his biceps, his gaze still locked on her. Kiara could swear his hand trembled.

"I don't ever want you to watch any of my personal files again." he said in a ragged whisper. In anger, he stormed from the room.

Despondency, guilt and pain claimed her as she sat holding the control in her hand. She hadn't meant to hurt him, she had only wanted to see what his childhood was like. Now she understood only too well why he kept it hidden. Drawing a ragged sigh, she went to find him and apologize for everything.

Kiara hesitated in the hallway just before entering the main room. Nykyrian sat at the desk, holding his head in his hands, looking more miserable than anything she had ever seen. Kiara looked about for Rachol, but he must have left. She moved forward, knelt beside his chair and placed her hand on his thigh. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

Nykyrian looked at her apologetic face. He couldn't believe she had found his files. Bitter, agonizing memories tore through him. All the times in his life he had needed someone to talk to, to hold him, flashed before his mind and he felt like crying. But what was the use?

He glanced at the pain on Kiara's face as she watched him. There he saw the sincere

caring he had always craved. A desire burned inside him to take her in his arms and find the solace he needed. He was sure she would give him the peace his soul cried out for.

How easy it would be to trust just this one person. Kiara seemed so loving the way she looked up at him as if she wanted to soothe his agony. He needed her warmth, her touch, her love. His mind screamed out a brutal denial. He couldn't trust her, he couldn't trust anyone.

For once, he didn't listen to the voice inside him and all the warnings it shouted. He reached out his hand, shaking with the force of his emotions, to her.

Eight

Nykyrian's hand stopped inches from her face. Smiling at the gesture, Kiara clasped his hand in both of hers and kissed his icy fingertips. His hand trembled as she held onto it. Indecision darkened his light green eyes.

Kiara waited, stroking the strong tendons of his hand, praying he would hold her.

He buried his other hand under her hair, his fingers lightly stroking her scalp, causing chills to form all the way down her body. Desire erupted inside her, and she knew tonight she wouldn't, couldn't, let him go. Tomorrow would probably separate them, but she would have tonight no matter what.

His arms tightened and he pulled her up to him. His lips claimed hers with a passion born of desperate need. Kiara moaned with the pleasure of it. She heard his ragged breathing as he nipped her lips with his teeth. Opening her mouth, she welcomed his warmth, his touch.

He slid from his chair, his hands working magic on her body. Everywhere he touched, she burned, aching for more. Her heart thundered as she ran her hands down the soft silk of his shirt, delighting in the way his hard muscles flexed beneath her fingertips.

She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything.

Nykyrian buried his lips in Kiara's neck, inhaling the sweet fragrance of her exotic perfume. He shook with the force of his need and lost himself in the first true bliss he could recall ever feeling.

Her welcoming arms held him to her in a gentle embrace he had never thought to feel. Desire surged through his veins like liquid fire. He clung to her in desperation, needing

her, wanting her.

Chills formed under the warmth of her hands across his back. He gasped as her tongue played along the tendons of his neck, her teeth gently nipping. He closed his eyes to the sensation, reveling in it. Reclaiming her lips, he kissed her deeply. For the first time in his life, he felt loved, wanted.

Kiara's body throbbed in an aching need that demanded the feel of his naked body against hers. She ran her fingers under the collar of his shirt, but that didn't appease her, it only whetted her appetite more. She moaned in pleasure as he moved his hand over her breast, down her stomach and underneath the hem of her dress. Chills formed beneath his hand as he stroked the skin of her stomach. Kiara kissed him fiercely, wanting to keep him with her.

With a low groan, Nykyrian pulled away, damning himself for his actions. His breath came in labored gasps as he stood. He stared at Kiara's confused eyes, his body throbbing in painful arousal. What was he doing?

Running trembling hands through his hair, he couldn't believe what he had done, would have done, and for that matter, still wanted to do with the tiny dancer.

"I'm sorry."

Kiara blinked, his apology confusing her more than the emotions swirling inside her. "For what?" she asked.

He closed his eyes and turned around. "I had no right to touch you," he whispered.

Kiara's heart lurched at his pain-filled words.

Walking to him, she ran her hand over his back. "You have more right than anyone else," she said, gripping his upper arm and turning him around to face her.

He stared at her with those marvelous, beautiful eyes. She ran her hand down his cheek, her palm scraped by his whiskers. "I want you."

Pain clouded his eyes. He tore away from her as if her touch burned him. "You pity me. I don't need it, or want it."

"Don't tell me what I feel!" She crossed the floor to stand in front of him.

He tried to move away again, but she grabbed his arm and kept him by her. "You can't walk away from me, I won't let you."

His jaw tensed. "Maybe I don't want you."

One corner of her mouth lifted. She remembered the number of disks in his cabinet of her performances, the look on his face as he reached out to her just moments ago. "If that were true, you would stay still and not keep moving away from me. Face it, soldier, you want me more than anything!"

His glare intensified. "That's a rather arrogant assumption for you to make."

Her smile spread across her face. "Isn't it though?"

Humor sparkled in his eyes as he stared at her, then it faded. "You don't want me. You sure as hell don't need me."

Kiara closed her eyes in frustration and prayed for some divine aid to help her get through to him. "Why do you think that?"

He turned away and grabbed his long, black coat from the couch where he had draped it. "You're safe here. I'll be back in a little while."

Desperation filled her. If he left without this settled, she knew he would be gone from her forever. "By God, hybrid," she shouted. "Don't you walk away from me!"

The murderous look he gave her when he turned around caused her to take a step back. He clenched his hand at his side and she had the distinct feeling he wanted to kill her.

"I thought soldiers were trained to meet conflict, not run," she said, unwilling to back down completely.

He glared at her.

"What is it about me that frightens you?"

He didn't answer.

Kiara wanted to scream in frustration. Could it be true he really didn't want her?

"I'll be back later," he said and headed for the door.

In a bright epiphany, Kiara remembered the scenes in the disks and realized what he was doing and why he wouldn't let anyone, not even Rachol, close to him. "Why do you think you can't be loved?"

He froze.

"That's it, isn't it?" she asked, tempted to laugh at the absurdity of the idea. "Somewhere you got the idea that no one can love you. Well, I do and I'm not going to let you leave me!" Her eyes widened as she realized what had slipped out of her mouth. Horrified at what she'd said, Kiara bit her lip. Where had that come from?

Nykyrian turned around slowly. A gamut of emotions played across his face as he received her words.

A glimmer of hope sparked inside her, but Kiara knew she had to move slowly. Closing the gap between them, she placed her hand on his cheek. He didn't move away.

"I love you," Kiara said with conviction, realizing exactly why she had said what she did.

Nykyrian drew her into his arms, crushing her against him. Her cheek pressed against his chest, she heard the pounding beat of his heart, felt his warmth surrounding her. And she never wanted to leave this spot of paradise. Here she was safe, here she belonged.

"I need you." His ragged whisper thrilled her.

She looked up at his passion-darkened eyes and saw the depth of his love for her. "Let me love you, Nykyrian," she pleaded.

His arms tightened around her and he picked her up from the floor and headed for the stairs.

"Your wound," she gasped, afraid he would hurt himself again.

"I'm fine," he said. And then the most wondrous thing happened, he smiled.

Kiara stared agape. "You've got dimples!"

Instantly, the smile vanished. "I know."

"They're beautiful!" Kiara laughed. "Show them to me again." She fingered his cheek,

trying to get another smile from him.

He tossed her on the bed, then stretched out on top of her, pinning her to the mattress in a way that excited her. He stared into her eyes and smiled again.

"It feels weird," Nykyrian said after a minute. "I'm sure it looks stupid."

Kiara laughed at him. "It looks wonderful. Rachol was right, you should smile more often."

He picked her hand up and kissed the palm. His warm breath sent a chill up her arm.

"What's your middle name?" she asked suddenly.

He released her hand and stared at her as if she had turned purple. "What?"

"Your middle name?"

He frowned. "Why?"

She toyed with a strand of his blond hair, delighting in the softness of it. "I want to know everything about you and that seemed like a good starting place."

He shook his head at her, his blond hair cupping his face. "Caesare."

She smiled, running her fingertip along his the curves of his mouth. "Nykyrian Caesare Quiakides. It has a noble ring to it."

A brief moment of pain flashed over his features. It crossed his face so quickly, she wondered if she had imagined it.

Then he looked back at her with those wonderful, green eyes. "Do you want me to darken the room?" he asked.

Heat crept over her cheeks. "Please."

He rolled away from her and reached for a control on the table next to his bed.

The lights went out and the ceiling above her head faded to transparency. A thousand stars twinkled brightly, their light bathing the room in a soft, white glow. "It looks like a dream," she whispered, awed by the beauty. "No wonder you like it here."

He pulled his boots off. "They're not half as beautiful as you are."

His voice was so low, Kiara wondered if he said it, or she imagined it. She sat up and leaned against his back. His sharp intake of breath brought a smile to her face. She ran her hands down his arms, delighting in the sensation of his muscles tensing under her hands.

All four lorinas hit the bed at once. The biggest one butted at Kiara, trying to separate her from Nykyrian.

Nykyrian mumbled a curse. "Pixley, down!" he ordered the big one.

"I didn't know they had names," Kiara said, stroking the smallest one behind the ears.

Nykyrian nodded. "The one your petting is Cintara, Pixley is the biggest, Ulf is the one with the white patch and the other is Ilyse," he said, pushing Pixley down the stairs.

Once he cleared them from the room, he locked the door.

"How long have you had them?"

"Eight years," he said, pulling his shirt off over his head.

Shyness overcame Kiara as she watched the play of well-defined muscles. Her mouth dried at the tanned flesh she wanted to run her hands across. She saw the dragon and dagger tattoo under his left collarbone, the mark of a League Assassin. Somehow, his career no longer bothered her.

The bed dipped under his weight. He stretched out beside her, his head propped on his hand as he studied her with an intensity she found unsettling.

Kiara mimicked the gesture. She lay there watching him, afraid to touch him for fear he would change his mind and leave. After several seconds, he reached his hand out and touched her hair, spreading it out along the black fur covers.

Kiara smiled warmly, her heartbeat quickening. In spite of all the scars crossing his chest, she thought Nykyrian had the most handsome body she had ever seen. She touched the worst-looking scar that ran along his collarbone, just above the tattoo. It looked as if something had dug a huge claw into his neck. Sadness welled up in her throat, choking her breath as she thought of all the pain he had suffered in his life.

Nykyrian pulled his hand away from her hair. "You've changed your mind."

The despondency in his voice wrenched a sob from her. "No," she whispered.

He frowned, smoothing a curl from her cheek, stroking her cheekbone with his thumb. "You look so sad."

She held his hand to her cheek, reveling in the feel of his callused palm against her skin. She moved his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckles. "I wish I could take away your pain," she whispered. "I wish I could go back to when you were born and take you somewhere safe. Far away from all the people who hurt you."

His eyes were liquid. "You're doing that now." He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

Kiara welcomed the feel of him pressing her down on the mattress. His lips traveled over her body, blazing a trail of fire where they touched. Nykyrian lifted the hem of her dress and placed a kiss on her stomach. Kiara clutched his head to her in dizzy ecstasy.

Nykyrian marveled at the feel of her silken flesh. He delighted in the way she quivered from his slightest touch and whispered his name. He had waited his entire life to feel this wanted. He wasn't disappointed.

Kiara forgot her shyness as he removed her dress and let it fall to the floor. She watched him explore her body, each nerve alive and attuned to him. She laughed and jerked as his lips and whiskers tickled her flesh.

He locked eyes with hers before leaving her and removing his pants.

She lowered her gaze down his magnificent body, warmth singeing her cheeks. She had never seen a real live naked man before and she delighted in the sight of this incredible specimen.

Kiara leaned over him and ran her hand down the scars of his chest to the small trail of hair below his bellybutton. Nykyrian closed his eyes and drew a ragged breath. When her hand moved lower, he gasped.

"You're mine now," she said devilishly, nipping his neck. "I'll never let go of you."

He grunted then freed her *corslet*. Her breath caught as he moved his hands over her exposed breasts. Sharp heat pulsed in her veins until she wanted to shout with the bitter-sweet ache.

His mouth replaced his hands on her breasts and his warm breath drove her to an even dizzier height. She leaned her head back, surrendering herself to him, to the night. His strong, warm hands circled her waist and roamed up her spine.

Gently, he leaned her back against the mattress, his kiss deepening. Kiara twined her fingers in the soft strands of white hair, holding him to her.

Groaning, Nykyrian pulled away and removed her underpants. He lay fully against her. Kiara smiled at him, never wanting him to stop the sweet torture.

"You are beautiful," he whispered, then reclaimed her lips.

Kiara returned his kiss with all her passion and opened her legs to him. He accepted her invitation with a heated moan. Kiara gasped at the sudden pain that ripped through her pleasure as he entered her.

Nykyrian's body went rigidly still against her. He paused and looked at her in confusion as he realized she was a virgin.

"Love me," she whispered, smoothing the frown from his face with her fingers.

He clenched his teeth and for a moment, she feared he would leave her. She wrapped her legs around him and held him close.

Finally, he began to slowly rock his hips against hers. "Tell me if it hurts," he whispered.

After a time, the pain ebbed and was replaced by a new pleasure. Kiara breathed heavily as he moved faster. She ran her hands over his shoulders, feeling the strength of him. He was hers and she intended to keep him with her no matter what.

A new demand built inside her. Kiara rocked her hips against his. She matched his rhythm, amazed at the sharp, intensifying pleasure. Just when she thought she couldn't stand anymore, her world exploded into a titillation she had never dreamed of.

Nykyrian buried his face in her hair and joined her release. He breathed in the sweet fragrance of the silken strands. Her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him, obliterated all the pain in his soul. Her hand played in his hair, holding him against her.

He lay there unable to believe it was real. He expected to wake at any moment and find himself alone and that the entire night had been nothing more than a cruel dream. But

then he wondered if the reality of this night would be even more cruel than the dream.

"What are you thinking?" Kiara asked, sensing his distance again.

"Nothing," he said and moved away from her.

She frowned, watching him walk to the bathroom. In a few seconds, he returned to sit on the edge of the bed. He wouldn't meet her gaze. Instead, he moved her legs apart and washed the blood from her thighs with a warm washcloth. The dark frown on his face worried her.

"What is wrong?" she demanded.

He looked up at her, his eyes blank. "Why?"

She mirrored his stern frown. "Why what?"

"Why did you let me be the first? I wouldn't have touched you had I known."

She smiled. "That's why I didn't tell you, silly." Kiara touched his cheek.

She could tell by his face, her answer didn't appease him. "I love you," she said softly. "I've never felt this way about anyone."

He looked so sad, she ached. Why wouldn't he let her inside him? How could he close her out after what they'd shared?

Nykyrian got up and went back to the bathroom. Kiara listened to the running water, wanting to scream. When he returned a moment later, he still wore a deep, somber frown.

"If you don't wipe that grimace off your face, soldier, I just might shoot you!"

His eyes softened a degree. "I'm sorry," he said, lying back on the bed.

He pulled her into his arms and held her close. Kiara listened to his heartbeat, wishing she knew a way to really reach him, to make him understand that she needed him, loved him. For now, she would give him what she could and hope that one day soon he would realize she could be trusted inside his cozy world of solitude.

* * *

Tiarun surveyed the damaged apartment in fury. As every second passed without a trace of Kiara, his anger tripled. He would kill those bastards even if it meant his life!

"Commander?" His second in command approached him timidly. "I've issued the contracts out on the lives of Rachol and Nykyrian."

"Good," he growled. "I want their hearts brought to me in a box!"

Tiarun narrowed his eyes at his soldier. "Seal off this area. I want no one near Kiara's things." With that, he left the apartment.

The road home was arduous for Tiarun. He ached with guilt knowing he had handed his precious daughter over to her executioners.

Tears flowed down his cheeks as his mind replayed images of his wife Lasa, her gentle laugh and the sound of the blaster that had ended her life. At least Lasa's death had been quick and painless. God only knew what those bastards were doing to his beautiful angel.

If only he hadn't been so over-protective, maybe Kiara would have continued to live at home with him. It was his fault. He should have given her the freedom she wanted. If only he could have her back, he would never again allow her to leave his sight.

In quiet desperation, he prayed. She had to come home to him. He couldn't live with himself if she died because of his stupid ideals.

Entering his home, he ripped the pictures off the wall, trying to vent the anguished guilt and helplessness in his soul. Someway, somehow, he vowed he would kill Nykyrian.

* * *

Nykyrian watched the sky pinken. Kiara, still asleep, snored softly beside him. He didn't want to move, but he had too many things to do to lie in bed any longer. As gently as he could, he pulled her arms away from him and slid out of bed.

He watched Kiara situate herself on the mattress, her hips wiggling provocatively. A smile played at the edges of his mouth. He covered her with a sheet then darkened the ceiling against the dawning sun.

Kiara was beautiful in his bed.

Reluctantly, he moved to the bathroom to shower. His mind castigated him for what he had done last night. It was wrong to love her. She belonged to the day, to warmth and sunshine. Her world was light and wonderful, filled with love and laughter.

And he was born of night. His mother was the darkness, her cold embrace was all he had a right to crave. Just as the sun destroyed the night, he was sure Kiara's love would destroy him, provided his enemies didn't kill her first. He refused to watch her die.

A lump burned raw in his throat, his heart pleading with him to let her stay with him, but he wouldn't listen to that part of him anymore. He would treasure the memory of last night forever, but that would be all.

He quickly bathed, dressed and headed downstairs without looking at her tempting form.

The lorinas assailed him downstairs, unhappy about being banned from his room. Sighing, he told himself they loved him enough, what did he need with someone else?

He deafened his mind to the answer.

Nykyrian grabbed a glass of juice and headed to his work. Switching on the computer terminal, he ran his hand through his wet hair. Without paying much attention, he scanned the new contracts. He drank his juice and switched the screen. He choked. Blinking his eyes, he couldn't believe what he saw.

"Shit!" he snarled, reaching for his link.

It took several nerve wrenching minutes before Rachol answered with a menacing curse. "I told you Hauk, I'm not going. You can roast your overgrown— "

"Rachol, it's me."

Nykyrian heard a yawn over the link. "Do you know what time it is here?"

Nykyrian didn't bother answering his question. "Biardi has issued a death contract on both of us. Clear your flat."

"I clear my flat for nothing!"

Nykyrian stifled a laugh at Rachol's outrage. The man loved his place. "Not even Aksel or Shahara?"

He heard Rachol knock something off his bedside table, no doubt bolting upright in shock. "Shahara Dagan?"

"Yeah."

"Does Cailen know his sister's coming after us?"

"I doubt it. But it doesn't matter. I need you to get information about the two of them and where they're living. As much money as Biardi's offered and after I terminated Arast, Aksel's not going to stop until my brains are mush-meat."

"Yeah, no kidding. I'll be there shortly."

Nykyrian tossed the link away and rechecked the contract. It made all the other contracts on his life look like jokes. Biardi had given his enemies full immunity from any prosecution which meant they could forget League rules and come after him unbarred. His stomach twisted.

This was just great. Now Kiara was in more danger than ever before. Her father had to have the I.Q. of a *spara* fruit to do something this stupid. Biardi just might end up the death of his own daughter. Just what the hell was he supposed to do now?

"With a frown like that, you could frighten small children and elders," Kiara said, startling him.

"I didn't know you were awake," he said and flipped the screen.

Kiara was puzzled by his distant mood. "Is something wrong?"

He sat back and eyed her. "Your father wants me dead."

Her mouth dropped in shock. He had to be kidding. "What?" she asked, crossing the floor to stand beside his desk.

Nykyrian punched up the contract and pulled her around the desk to read it. "For that amount of money, I'm tempted to turn myself in and collect it!"

Kiara tensed. "You're not funny," she snapped, unable to believe her father would be so ruthless. The contract described how her father wanted Nykyrian executed in minute detail. "How could he do such a thing?" she whispered.

Nykyrian looked at her, his eyes blank. "He's worried over you. Given the condition we left your flat in yesterday, who knows what he thinks has happened to you."

She wanted to scream at the injustice of the contract. "I need to call him. Do you have a telelink?"

He shook his head. "Never needed one."

Exasperated, Kiara rubbed her arms. "We've got to get a hold of him before someone acts on this contract!"

"I don't think your father's going to listen to you right now."

Kiara frowned. "Well take me to him, I can explain."

"Look at the contract. I'm pretty sure he thinks we've killed you. If I go near his airspace, the man is going to shoot me out of the sky long before you have a chance to say a word."

Kiara chewed her thumbnail, trying to think of some way to end this nightmare. "So what are you going to do?"

He sat back in his chair and sighed. "I'm taking you shopping as soon as Rachol gets here."

Her hand fell away from her lips as numbed disbelief coursed through her. "You're what? You can't be serious."

He shrugged. "You don't have any clothes." Kiara was incredulous. "Nor do I have a debit card," she said sarcastically. "Am I supposed to believe you have this contract out on you, I have one out on me, and all you want to do about either of them, is go shopping—which you hate. Are you insane?"

A smile twitched around his lips. "Where I'm taking you, it won't matter. We'll be safe enough."

Duwad, her mind screamed. He didn't seem the least bit concerned over the contract on his life. "If I get shot, or you get killed, I'll never forgive you!"

"If I'm dead, it won't matter."

His blasé tone made her want to slap him again.

In an angry huff, she turned around and went upstairs to change her clothes. "What does he care anyway," she mumbled, swallowing the clump of tears in her throat as she jerked her dress off the floor of the bedroom. "If he doesn't care about his life, why should you?"

A hand touched her shoulder. She gasped and spun about, unable to believe he had followed her so quietly. Nykyrian touched her cheek, his eyes apologetic.

"I'm sorry."

Kiara held his hand at her cheek and nodded. "I couldn't stand it if you were hurt because of me," she whispered. A single tear fell down her cheek. Nykyrian caught it with his finger and wiped away the moisture.

Kiara received his hungry kiss. He held her to him in a tight embrace that told her how much he cared. His lips slid across hers in a raw demanding insistence that stole her breath and made her body ache for more. The sound of an engine outside in the bay, broke them apart.

"Rachol," Nykyrian said as he pulled away. He headed for the stairs.

"Nykyrian?" Kiara waited until he faced her. "I love you."

He closed his eyes as if the words hurt him. Without responding, he turned around and left her standing in his room, Pixley rubbing up against her leg.

Kiara sighed, afraid of how all this would work itself out. It seemed as if all things worked against her. What did she want? With Nykyrian, she would be banned from the theatre. Without him, she would be lost.

"Oh bother," she mumbled and headed to the shower.

Rachol came through the door with enough anger to burst his seams. "I want blood!" he said, crossing the room to where Nykyrian sat at his desk. "Two of Aksel's dogs cornered me near Tondara. They shot me!" he shouted incredulously. "Those bastards actually shot a hole in my stabilizer the size of Mirala!"

Nykyrian just stared at him.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

"Were you hurt?"

Rachol shifted, some of his anger diminishing. "No."

"Then why are you having a fit?"

Rachol laughed. "I don't know, it just felt right."

Nykyrian shook his head at him. "Was there much damage done to your ship?"

Rachol sighed and moved to stand behind Nykyrian where he could read over his shoulder. There was something going on with his friend, and Rachol couldn't quite place what it was. "No, not really. Just enough to really make me mad."

Rachol's eyes widened as he scanned the contract. "Holy geez," he breathed. "Biardi's not playing around with that."

"No, he's not."

Rachol took a deep breath. "So what are we going to do about it? My vote is we terminate the *gratter*." Nykyrian gave him a menacing glare. "He deserves it," Rachol said defensively.

"Yeah well, we can't go around assassinating respected officials."

Rachol snorted, wishing they could. "I think we should forget this protection crap and jettison Kiara back on a remote shuttle." He moved to lie down on one of the sofas.

The door upstairs opened. The softened look on Nykyrian's face as he stared up at the dancer made Rachol grind his teeth. He glanced up from the couch and caught Kiara's blush, and in that moment, he knew what the two of them had been up to. "Aw God," he muttered.

Nykyrian shot him a lethal glare. "Please deny it," Rachol begged. Kiara's blush deepened.

Rachol slung his feet over the couch and stood. "Have you lost all your brains?"

Nykyrian came to his feet and Rachol recognized the angry twitch in his jaw. "It's none

of your concern."

Clenching his teeth, Rachol backed down. "Fine," he snapped, glaring at Kiara with all the malice he felt.

"Kiara and I have a few things to do this morning. I need you to stay here and work on locating Aksel and Shahara. When I get back, we'll repair your ship."

Rachol wanted to strangle some sense into his friend. It wasn't like Nykyrian to toss safety to the wind for anything, especially a woman.

"Fine," Rachol said, knowing this wasn't the time to start a heavy debate, but he promised himself he would talk sense into Kip even if he had to shoot him. "I need a new plate for my rear thruster."

"No problem," Nykyrian said, heading up the stairs. "I need to change, then we'll leave."

Rachol turned his glare to Kiara.

After a few seconds, Nykyrian called down to him. "I need you to find an address for Aksel's wife. Her name is Driana Bredeh, she should be in the Solaras System."

Rachol frowned. "I didn't know that scab was married," he muttered.

Kiara walked around the couch, a strange look on her face as she neared him. "Why are Aksel and Nykyrian at odds with one another?"

Rachol shrugged. "Commander Huwin's eldest and favorite son died in battle. For whatever reason, he didn't think Aksel or Arast were soldier material so he decided to adopt another son."

Rachol glanced up the stairs, wondering if Nykyrian could hear him. Maliciously, he decided he didn't care and continued, "Huwin found Nykyrian in a work home. From the moment Aksel met Kip, he hated him. Then when Nykyrian graduated top of his class and went into the League as the youngest commissioned officer in history, Aksel couldn't take it. He's been mental toward Kip ever since."

Kiara opened her mouth to ask him another question, but Nykyrian returned. Rachol recognized the warning in Kip's eyes that he should keep his tongue still around Kiara. A vengeful smile curved his lips as he silently dared Kip to say anything.

At least Kip wore his usual street clothes, the long black coat that concealed his blaster, his glasses and the silver inlaid boots with retractable blades.

Rachol knew Kip could take care of himself, but he still wished Nykyrian would see reason and stop this crap with Kiara before it was too late for all of them. Nykyrian held his hand out to Kiara and Rachol cursed under his breath.

With his temper barely restrained, Rachol watched the two of them leave. Stroking Ilyse's head, he listened to the engines fire outside.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he whispered to himself. "Most of all, I hope she's worth it."

Even as he said the words, Rachol had a strange premonition Nykyrian was headed for death.

Nine

"Where are we?" Kiara asked as they docked inside a brightly lighted bay on a planet she had never seen before.

"The city of Verta," Nykyrian said, switching off his engines.

"Verta?" Kiara repeated, a thrill rushing through her. She had always wanted to visit the infamous shops lining Paraf Run, but her father had always claimed it would be far too dangerous. Every manner of questionable merchandise— including slaves— was bought and sold here by some of the universe's most dangerous beings.

"Are you sure this is safe?" she asked.

Nykyrian released the hatch. "Very. I'm well known here and no one is stupid enough to cross me."

An impish thought occurred to her and she couldn't resist asking, "What if some high-ranking aristocrat sees me and demands my *private* services?"

His hands tensed around her safety strap. "I'd rip his heart out and feed it to him."

Kiara wasn't sure if she liked his answer. She swallowed as an image of Arast's death played through her mind.

After freeing her of the safety straps, Nykyrian helped her down and led the way out of the bay, into a crowded street. "Stay with me," he said, wrapping an arm possessively about her waist.

Kiara scanned the street, amazed at the variety of beings and cultures represented. She saw everything from wealthy princesses arrayed in the finest materials available, to filthy street urchins who barely wore enough to cover their nudity. One bedraggled little boy ran past them.

Nykyrian released her. "Jana!" he shouted and the boy skidded to a halt.

Kiara watched in amazement as Nykyrian showed the boy to a hiding place barely a heartbeat before an angry Keeper rounded a corner, his club swinging. The Keeper looked in all directions, then spied them.

He pushed his way through the crowd, glaring at Nykyrian. "Have you seen Jana The Thief?" he snapped.

Nykyrian crossed his arms over his chest. "No, why?"

By the Keeper's face, Kiara could tell the man thought Nykyrian was lying, but he said nothing more. With a grimace in her direction, he slowly made his way down the street.

Kiara bit her bottom lip, wondering what was going on. Nykyrian reached into the shadows and pulled the boy out by his arm.

"What were you doing?" Nykyrian demanded in a firm, yet gentle voice.

The boy looked sheepishly at her. "I didn't do nothing, Nykyrian, I swear it on my life!"

Nykyrian's stern face softened. "What did they accuse you of doing?"

The boy licked his lips and lowered his head. His thin shoulders shook and Kiara realized he was crying. "Me mama died two days ago," he sobbed. "They want to take me to a work home."

That familiar, angry twitch began in Nykyrian's jaw.

To her utter amazement, he pulled the dirty little boy into his arms and held him. "It's all right, Jana. I won't let them do that to you."

A lump choked Kiara as she watched the tender way he lifted the boy in his arms. Jana's thin little arms encircled him while he sobbed against Nykyrian's neck.

"For a man without emotions, you seem caring enough to me," she said, pushing a lock of matted hair from Jana's dirt-smudged cheek.

Nykyrian didn't comment. Instead, he led her down a small alley to the back of a shop. He removed his glasses and knocked on the rear door where they waited until an attractive, elderwoman appeared.

"Nykyrian!" she breathed happily, pushing open the screen door to look him up and down like a mother seeing her son after a long absence.

Suddenly, Kiara recognized the woman as the nurse who had tended Nykyrian in the first disk she'd viewed the day before.

"Hi Orinthe. May we come in?" he asked, glancing at Kiara.

"You know you're welcome here any time!" she said with a smile and opened the door wider.

Nykyrian stood back and allowed Kiara to enter first. The elderwoman led her through an immaculate storeroom of foodstuffs and into a small lounge to the right. Jana had stopped crying and was looking around at the food with such longing, it made Kiara want to cry for him.

Nykyrian sat Jana down in one of four chairs that encircled a small, round table. Orinthe reached up on a shelf and brought out a bowl of fruit and pastries. With a tender smile, she sat it before Jana who eagerly tore into it.

A strange look crossed Orinthe's face as she watched Jana. "He reminds me of another boy I knew a long time ago," she said to Nykyrian.

Nykyrian didn't move. He sat still for several seconds watching Jana. "He needs a home," he said after a long pause. "I didn't know where else to take him." Orinthe nodded. "I could use help here in the office. My regular errand boy quit three days ago and I haven't had the time to look for another."

Jana looked up from his food, his eyes wide. "Stay here?" he asked in awe. "With all this food?"

Orinthe's bright smile warmed Kiara's heart. "And you can eat as much as you can hold!"

Jana looked from Nykyrian to Orinthe in brilliant happiness.

"Of course," she said seriously. "You'll have to keep yourself clean and wash behind your ears." Jana wrinkled his nose. "But I can eat all this?"

"As much as you can hold," Orinthe repeated. Jana smiled.

"Nykyrian," Orinthe said, rising to her feet. "Can you help him upstairs and get him clean."

"Sure," he said, then helped Jana carry his fruit pastries out of the room.

Kiara smiled after them, her heart pounding in pride and love at Nykyrian's tenderness.

Orinthe turned her faded blue eyes to Kiara with a probing stare that told Kiara she wouldn't be able to hide anything from the wise elderwoman. "Are you Nykyrian's woman?" she asked quietly. Kiara sighed. "I doubt it."

Orinthe laughed at her words, her eyes twinkling. "Well if it solaces you any, you're the first woman I've ever seen him with." She wiped a damp cloth over the surface of the table, removing the crumbs Jana had left behind in his eagerness to eat his fill. "What's your name, child?"

"Kiara."

Her smile widened. "A name as beautiful as the one who bears it."

"Thank you," she said, her cheeks warming.

Orinthe folded the cloth and sat it on the table before them.

Kiara watched the kind elderwoman, a thousand questions swirling in her mind about Nykyrian. "You were Nykyrian's nurse, weren't you?"

Orinthe bit her bottom lip, then stood and closed the door to the upper room where Nykyrian had taken Jana. She returned to her chair, motioning for Kiara to lean closer to her. "He can hear you, you know."

Kiara smiled, remembering only too well Nykyrian's extraordinary hearing.

"I was his psychoanalyst," Orinthe said, keeping her voice low. "After his adoption, he needed help adjusting into a family."

Kiara frowned. "Why?"

Orinthe sat back in her chair, her eyes glazing over with memories. She took a deep breath and fretfully glanced at the closed door. "When I first met Nykyrian, I had never seen a child in the state he was in. Nor have I seen one since."

Kiara chewed her nail, listening attentively, waiting for the elderwoman to continue.

When it seemed Orinthe was content to let the subject drop, Kiara prompted her. "What kind of state?"

Orinthe's lips trembled. She shook her head, her gray eyes seemed troubled. "You cannot imagine. He had been kept chained to a wall in a child's work home, allowed only garbage and water for nourishment. The workers feared giving him meat. They thought the taste of it might drive his Andarion blood into a feeding frenzy. I suppose they thought it best to keep him under heel and starving." She shook her head. "He had bruises covering his entire body, horrible physical scars from past atrocities I can only guess about."

Orinthe drew a trembling breath and looked into Kiara's eyes. "He was so skinny and hostile to anyone who came near him. It took me weeks just to touch him without him hissing and striking out at me. He just stayed curled up in a ball on the floor, warily watching, refusing to speak."

Tears welled up in Kiara's eyes. "They chained him to the wall?" she asked, unable to comprehend any of Orinthe's words, but most especially that. "Why?"

Orinthe shook her head. "They were afraid he would harm the other children. It was a human work home." Her hands trembled as she fidgeted with the damp cloth. "The scar on his neck that travels along his collarbone is from the chain they used."

Kiara bit her lip, a tear sliding down her cheek. She opened her mouth to ask more, but Nykyrian returned. Quickly, she wiped the moisture from her cheek.

He stood over Orinthe's chair and placed a hand on her shoulder. Orinthe covered it with her own hand. "Jana's taking a nap."

"Good," she said with a tender smile. "I'll let him sleep until dinner."

Nykyrian withdrew his hand. "I'll transfer funds to your account for him."

Orinthe sputtered at his words. "You'll do no such thing! Heaven knows you give me more than enough as it is!"

For a moment, Kiara thought he actually blushed. He swallowed, glanced at her, then looked back at Orinthe. "Thank you for taking Jana in. If he gives you any trouble, call me and I'll talk to him."

Orinthe smiled tenderly, her love for Nykyrian shining in her eyes.

Nykyrian held his hand out to Kiara. Rising, Kiara tucked her hand into his.

A frown covered Orinthe's face. "You're not leaving now?"

He nodded before replacing his glasses. "If you need anything, call me or Rachol."

Orinthe sighed in a way that made Kiara think Nykyrian's words embarrassed her. She looked up at Nykyrian and her friendly, warm smile returned. "You take care of yourself and this pretty lady. The two of you make a handsome couple."

Kiara smiled at the gentle woman. "Thank you."

By Nykyrian's face, Kiara could tell the compliment made him uncomfortable. "I'll check on the two of you in a couple of weeks."

Orinthe nodded and showed them to the door.

Nykyrian led the way back down the street. Kiara watched his rigid spine and knew something was bothering him. "What's wrong now?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I wish Orinthe hadn't told you what she did."

Kiara's stomach twisted. Was there anything that ever got past this man's hearing? "I wish you had told me yourself."

Nykyrian hesitated and looked down at her. Kiara wished he didn't have his glasses on so she could read his mood, his emotions.

After a moment, he shifted. "Why do you want to know about my childhood? I prefer not to think about those days. They're gone and forgotten."

Kiara scoffed. "Forgotten? Were that true, you wouldn't be so distant to me. Why can't you let me inside you?"

His jaw tensed and he glanced around at the thronging crowd. "This isn't the place to be having an intimate discussion. Leave this line of interrogation before I lose any more patience." Kiara sighed, wanting to strangle him.

In awkward silence, she followed him into a large shopping complex at the end of the street. Her aggravation was forgotten as she stared at the gamut of merchandise dazzling her eyes. Everywhere she looked, bright colors greeted her gaze.

Nykyrian led her to a lift where they got off on the second floor. Huge glass counters were filled with accessories and trims. Clothing styles were hung over abstract mannequins, showing how they might look on various life-forms.

Kiara glanced around at the luxurious fabrics, then realized the upper floor contained the most expensive items in the store. "There were several attractive dresses below," she said, awed by the price tags.

Nykyrian caught her arm as she started to turn around, his jaw tense. "I'm more than capable of supplying you with several wardrobes from the items up here."

"But- "

"But nothing, *mu Tara*. Start shopping."

Kiara bit her lip in agitation, unwilling to give in so easily. "This really isn't— "

"Kiara," he growled low in his throat.

She sighed in a huff. "Fine. When you're bankrupt, remember I tried to stop you."

A smile curved his lips. Entranced by those gorgeous dimples, Kiara wished she could keep him smiling and make him laugh.

"Kiara Biardi!"

Kiara turned around to face an excited salesclerk. The young woman stared at her with

huge, excited brown eyes.

"Oh my God, I love you!" she gushed. "I saw *Silent Prayer* last year and thought it was the best thing ever produced! You are the best!"

Kiara smiled, warmed by the compliment, but the woman's words seemed to annoy Nykyrian even more. He dropped his firm grip from her elbow.

"Thank you," Kiara said to the clerk, wondering what Nykyrian's problem was now.

"My name is Terra and whatever you need, just let me know. Oh my God. I can't wait to tell my mother, she'll never believe this!"

Kiara glanced at Nykyrian to see how he was taking the clerk's continuing adoration. Now, he just watched them, his features stoic.

Kiara allowed the clerk to take her by the arm and show her a variety of pieces. For all the generosity of her father, Kiara realized she had never seen such extravagant materials. Each piece was light and airy with the most delicate, silky texture.

Terra explained that many of the fabrics were from non-human worlds, brought to the store only by an exorbitant price. Kiara glanced over her shoulder, unsure how much Nykyrian was willing to spend on her clothes.

"I like that one," he said, indicating the one Terra held. "Don't worry about the price, just buy whatever you need."

Terra smiled at him. "If you're not counting coins, I have an even better line in the back!"

At his nod, she moved them to the exclusive lines.

Despite her reluctance, Nykyrian and Terra fitted Kiara with enough clothes to last two months. As Terra left to place the order, Kiara narrowed her eyes at Nykyrian. "I can't believe you spent so much on me!"

He shrugged.

"Dammit Nykyrian, I can't take all of this." She wished she could see his eyes. Instead, her angry reflection glared back at her from the dark lenses. Terra returned with her computer ledger and Nykyrian quickly signed his name and indicated where the

packages were to be delivered.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked, handing the ledger back to Terra.

Kiara clenched her teeth. "Not hardly."

With a nod to Terra, he took Kiara's arm and led her from the store. "We need to get Rachol's part next."

Kiara remained silent throughout the transaction in the part's store. All she wanted was to know a few answers to the billion questions she had about the man she had given herself to. Why wouldn't he just talk to her?

"Are you hungry?" he asked as they left the store, Rachol's part tucked securely under his arm.

"Yes," she answered sullenly, her stomach rumbling at the thought.

He took her hand and led her across the busy street to a small cafe. Her hand burned at his touch and her anger vanished. Kiara's heart pounded and at the moment, she wished they were back at home, alone.

As they stepped up onto the curb, Kiara noticed a small group of Andarions watching them.

Nykyrian stiffened, noting them as well. "Do you know Prince Jullien?" he asked in a brittle voice.

"That's who he is!" Kiara exclaimed, relieved to know why the short, pudgy Andarion looked so familiar.

Noticing the firm set of Nykyrian's jaw, she wondered what animosity he had to the man. Was there anyone, or anything for that matter, Nykyrian didn't object to?

Nykyrian seated them in the rear of the restaurant, his back against the wall so he could scan the occupants. Suddenly, his body tensed and she detected the smallest hint of his lips curling in anger. Kiara turned around to see what had him upset now, and saw Jullien making his way toward them, his large guards following only a step behind.

Without a word of courtesy, Jullien took a seat beside Kiara and lifted her hand in his soft, fat palm. Kiara stifled her cringe at the white flesh, wondering what made the

prince think she had any desire to be touched by him. The last thing she needed at that moment was an adoring admirer salivating over her. Especially this prince who had pursued her incessantly last year when she had performed at his father's command on Triosa.

"*Tarn Biardi*, it is a pleasure to see you again." Jullien smiled a confident smile that told her how much arrogance the ugly thing possessed.

She smiled stiffly. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Your Highness," she replied, wishing she could think of a way to get him out of her face.

His fingers stroked hers as he stared into her eyes with a desire that churned her stomach. As he was flipping a lock of coal black hair from his shoulder, his smile turned seductive. His obvious vanity annoyed her. As fat and ugly as he was, he'd be lucky to find a concubine willing to service his needs. No doubt he thought himself quite a catch because of his wealth and money.

Kiara glanced at Nykyrian. He looked calm except for his tense hands which clutched the menu, and she had the distinct feeling it was taking all his self-control not to leap at Jullien and strangle the prince. Facing Jullien, she met his gaze and had to stifle a shudder at his mutated greenish-brown eyes ringed in blood red.

His smile widened. "I've spoken with my father about bringing you back to Triosa to perform. He is as enthralled with your beauty and talent almost as much as I." Jullien almost scintillated in satisfaction.

Nykyrian lowered the menu. "Emperor Aros is exceedingly generous to say such things," he gritted out between clenched teeth.

Jullien raised a disbelieving eyebrow and turned around in his chair to face Nykyrian. Kiara held her breath, unsure of what would follow. No one spoke to a prince unless acknowledged beforehand.

"I wasn't aware you had been spoken to," Jullien said in a voice Kiara knew would set Nykyrian's temper blazing.

Nykyrian's lips curled into a fierce snarl. "I don't recognize your higher order of rules."

Jullien's eyes narrowed and for a moment, Kiara thought he might call his guards to arrest Nykyrian. "You are one of my subjects. I demand proper respect!"

"*Titana tu.*"

Kiara didn't know what Nykyrian's deadpan response was, but by the amount of color suffusing the prince's cheeks, she knew it was not polite. She prayed Nykyrian calmed down before Jullien's Andarion guards attacked him.

"I have never known an Andarion to bleach their hair a *giakon* color," Jullien sneered.

Kiara held her breath, fearing Nykyrian's response.

"Better than being fat, you rounded— "

"Your Highness," Kiara interrupted before the tensing guards could launch themselves at Nykyrian. "I would be honored to perform on Triosa. If you contact my manager, I'm sure something can be arranged." She offered Jullien a false smile.

Jullien glared intensely at Nykyrian. "Very well, *mu Tarn*. I have no desire to further embarrass you." Jullien stood, his eyes locked on Nykyrian's face.

Nykyrian sat there, his arms folded across his chest as if nothing in the universe was wrong. Kiara waited until Jullien had left before she narrowed her own eyes at Nykyrian. "That was unbelievably rude!"

"I get worse with age."

Kiara's palm itched to slap him. She had never been so angry at one person in her life. "Why did you attack him that way? What has he ever done to offend you?"

"He was born."

Nykyrian's aloofness wore at her nerves. Kiara sat back in her chair. "Fine," she snapped.

Kiara continued to stare at his stoic face until she couldn't bear it any longer. "I'm tired of you locking me out. I might as well go after Jullien. I'm sure he would gladly welcome me!"

The look that crossed Nykyrian's face startled her. For a moment, she thought about apologizing, but her anger held fast. He had started this argument, let him deal with her foul mood.

"You would probably enjoy having his bastard children," Nykyrian snarled in a vicious whisper. "Don't flatter yourself for one minute into thinking he would have you as anything more than his kept mistress."

The insult brought a blush of rage to her cheeks. "How dare you! Do you think you could do better? I haven't seen any woman want you at all!"

The moment the words left her lips and her brain registered them, Kiara gasped. She couldn't believe she had said that. How many times had her father warned her to keep her mouth closed when she was angry?

"Nykyrian," she said softly. "I'm so sorry." He sat there unmoving until she feared she would scream.

"I think we should leave," he said, standing. Kiara looked up at him. There appeared to be no anger in his face or body.

Worse, Kiara detected she had hurt him deeply by her callous, stupid comment. "What are your feelings toward me?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I think you know."

She shook her head. "No, I don't. One minute you hold me as if you fear I'm going to leave you, then the next you snap and hiss like you want me to leave."

Without answering, he turned and walked out of the cafe. Groaning with frustration, Kiara joined him. Never had she been so confused. She wanted to shake her fist at him, beat him, shake him, soothe him and even more terrifying to her, make love to him.

She clenched her teeth in frustration. Did he feel the same way about her? Was that why he was doing this, because he was every bit as confused by his emotions as she was by hers? Why couldn't he just talk to her and tell her what bothered him, why he did what he did?

Nykyrian kept glancing back over his shoulder to make sure Kiara was still behind him. He regretted his words. For that matter, he regretted his life. He knew he should explain his feelings to her, but he wasn't sure if he could stand the barrage of emotions that would batter his soul if he released all the pain in his past. No, she would be much better off not knowing anything about him. It wasn't too late for her to find someone else. Someone who . . . A lump formed in his stomach. He couldn't stand the thought of going back to a life without her. What was he going to do?

Kiara stared at Nykyrian's back, wondering if he ever felt anything at all. All she wanted was one sign from him that he cared, that he could love her. Her heart pounded. Was that asking so very much?

They picked up her packages and made their way back to Nykyrian's house. Kiara remained silent, her emotions clumped in a tight knot in her throat.

Rachol appeared amused by their hostility as he helped unload the fighter. The only words Nykyrian spoke to her were to tell her where to store her clothes. Other than that, he grabbed a toolbox and made his way out to the bay to work on Rachol's ship.

In angry, irate jerks, Kiara pulled her clothes out of the bags and boxes, and set about putting them away. As each second passed, she became angrier and angrier at herself for caring what Nykyrian thought anyway. She was acting like some love-sick teenager. If he didn't want her, fine. She could easily find someone else.

Her heart sank at the thought. She didn't want anyone else. She wanted Nykyrian. Ignoring her new clothes on the bed, she curled up on the mattress and sobbed out the misery burning in her soul.

"So what did you two do today?" Rachol asked, helping Nykyrian jerk open the panel on his stabilizer.

"Nothing," Nykyrian said. "Did you find Driana's address."

Rachol nodded, his eyes probing Nykyrian in a way that always made him want to throw something at the man.

Rachol handed him a power wrench. "I also found out some interesting tidbits about you and Driana."

Nykyrian narrowed his eyes. He definitely wanted to throw something at Rachol. "You weren't supposed to go into her personal file, or mine for that matter."

Rachol shrugged and unwrapped the new part. "Couldn't resist."

Nykyrian held his breath, waiting for Rachol to build up enough courage to ask him the next question.

Sure enough, he found his courage. "So how did she end up married to Aksel and not you?"

Nykyrian loosened the plate's bolt, his mind whirling with memories he didn't like to think about. "Her father and the Commander thought he'd make a better husband."

"Yeah, but- "

"Enough!" Nykyrian roared. "I don't want to think about this anymore. It was a long time ago. Leave it alone."

* * *

Kiara stroked Ilyse's ears, wiping the tears from her face. A few weeks ago, she had known who she was and what she wanted. Now, she wasn't sure of anything. Why was she so attracted to a man who didn't seem to care about her at all? True enough he had bedded her, but that was not love.

With a trembling sigh, she pushed herself off the bed and started folding her clothes. She didn't understand why Nykyrian did anything. Why did he buy her so much, then push her away?

He had been so tender last night, she had been sure he loved her, needed her. Then the morning had dawned and again he was distant. Clenching her teeth against the miserable pain in her breast, she pushed the button to open the closet door.

A flash of light from the windows caught her attention and she looked out the clear wall next to the closed off bathroom to see Nykyrian and Rachol working on Rachol's ship. Rachol's voice was muffled, but clearly audible as they talked, and for once, they spoke in a language she could understand.

"I hope you've thought about this," Rachol said, tossing a tool up to Nykyrian.

Nykyrian caught it. "Kiara is my concern."

"No, she's all of ours. My God, with one word, she could destroy you. Hell, all of us for that matter."

Nykyrian grimaced as he tugged on a part. "So could you."

Rachol shook his head. "You know better than that. Be reasonable. We've worked too hard for what we have for you to just toss it away because of some *harita*. If all you want is a good— " Rachol barely had time to dodge the tool that flew past his head.

Nykyrian jumped off the ship and grabbed Rachol by the collar of his shirt. Kiara held her breath, afraid of what he might do.

"Don't ever insult her again!" he snarled, his hands tightening around Rachol's shirt. "It's my life I risk, not yours."

Anger clouded Rachol's face and for a moment, Kiara feared they might begin fighting. "God dammit Kip, don't do this. You're all I've got. She's not worth your life, don't you understand? We need you. I need you."

More tears fell down Kiara's cheeks as she watched Nykyrian release Rachol.

Nykyrian stood there, watching him, his face unreadable. After several seconds, he sighed. "I've had so many people dictate my life for me. I'm tired of doing what's expected. I thought you of all people would understand what it's like to want something and then once you get it, not let go."

Rachol shook his head, his lips in a tight line. "C'mon, you know better than this. Since when are women reliable? They leave the first time anything gets difficult."

Nykyrian snorted. "That's not true."

Rachol's eyebrows lifted. "Isn't it? She'll never leave the theatre to be with you. And you can't live out in the open. If you try, you know how long it'll take before a League Assassin cuts your throat."

Nykyrian slammed his hand into the side of the ship. The hollow sound echoed in the bay, through Kiara's mind. "I've spent my entire life listening to people tell me why I can't be loved." The bitterness in his voice tore through Kiara. "I always told myself that I didn't care, or need anyone to love me."

Nykyrian raked his hand through his hair and leveled his gaze on Rachol. "It was a lie, you know. I do care and I want Kiara. If it costs me my life to be with her, it doesn't matter. I've already lived past my prime anyway. I wake every morning with more pain in my joints than the day before. If I have to die, I'd rather die knowing someone loved me, just once."

Kiara barely heard the end of his words. Sobs raked her body as she sank to the floor. Burying her head in her hands, she cried. He loved her.

She didn't know how she was going to reach him, but she promised herself that someday soon, she would, she had to. Her happiness hinged on her ability to claim him fully, to make him admit to *her* just how much he did care.

Ten

Nykyrian stepped out of the shower and dried himself off. Maybe Rachol was right, maybe Kiara would be his death. But then death had been something he had craved most of his life anyway. With a tired sigh, he wrapped the towel around his hips and opened the door. He froze.

Kiara lay on the bed in a filmy black negligee, her hair combed out around her. His blood raced at the sight. He steeled himself. "I thought you were downstairs," he said, trying to remain distant, knowing it was futile.

He reached to retrieve his clothes from the bed. Her silken hand covered his. Nykyrian's flesh burned at the gentle touch, he wanted her surrounding him more than he had ever wanted anything. His gaze traveled from her hand, up her perfect arm, to the beauty of her face. Her soft, amber eyes sparkled in the dim light of the room.

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier today," she whispered. "For all I know, Jullien deserved everything you said and more. I tend to say things when I'm angry, things I seldom mean."

Nykyrian was tempted to apologize as well, but he couldn't bring the words past his lips. He dropped the towel and pulled his clothes from the bed. Kiara's face turned bright red before she averted her eyes from his body.

Pulling on his clothes, he studied her profile. True he had been with women who were more beautiful than she, but none of them had ever made him feel so much at ease, or soothed the ache inside him.

There was so much he wanted to tell her and so much he feared telling her. He took a deep breath. Either way, there were things she had to know, he owed her that much.

Kiara looked back at Nykyrian when the bed dipped under his weight. He was dressed and staring at her with a strange look. She sat up, wondering if he would bother telling her what had him upset now.

He reached his hand out and toyed with several of the curls laying on her shoulder. "You have the most beautiful hair," he said in a ragged voice that set her blood on fire.

She smiled, taking his hand in hers. Kiara opened her mouth to speak, but he placed a finger on her lips. "I have some things to tell you and I need you to listen."

She swallowed, curious about his grave tone. He stared at her for the longest time as if he wanted to memorize her face. "I'm not what you think. No," he said, cupping her cheek as she started to protest. "Listen. I've done a lot of things in my life that I regret." He looked away from her and his hand fell away. Emptiness consumed her, Kiara wanted desperately to bring his warm touch back to her skin. To tell him she didn't care about his past, that he could never do anything to drive her away.

Nykyrian sighed, his gaze still focused on the wall. "I used to tell myself what I did was right, that the killings I performed protected governments and innocent lives." The angry twitch beat a determined rhythm in his cheek. "Then I learned the truth."

He stood and paced the floor around the bed in angry strides. Kiara's heart pounded in sympathetic pain and she wished once more she could soothe him.

Nykyrian looked up at her, his eyes troubled. "I can't explain to you how it felt to realize everything about you was a lie and everything you had been doing for six years was immoral and wrong."

"That's why you quit the League?"

He nodded.

A smile curved her lips, tears gathering in her eyes. Her heart hammered against her ribs and love spread through her.

"That's when I became Nemesis."

Her smile faded as he faced her and his words penetrated her thoughts. "What!"

"I'm Nemesis."

Kiara's mind went numb. Over and over, she heard the news broadcasts informing the public of the grisly killings. She sprang from the bed, cold terror washing over her. Dear God, she was in the house alone with a brutal killer!

Nykyrian caught her by the arms as she tried to run down the stairs. "Kiara, listen to me."

"No!" she shrieked, struggling against him. "My God, you rip people into pieces! You . . . You eat pieces of them before you dump their bodies!"

Nykyrian closed his eyes and released her. Without another word, he left her alone in the room.

Kiara sank to the floor, unable to believe his declaration. Nemesis. Dear God, what had she involved herself in? No wonder Rachol was so afraid of her. With this knowledge, she could hand Nykyrian over to the authorities and put an end to all the brutal assassinations. Everything she had thought about him was a lie. He was a killer, a cold-blooded, ruthless killer!

An image of Jana flashed through her mind. The way Nykyrian had protected, then soothed the child before carrying him to safety. *I'm scared too*, she heard Nykyrian whisper the day he saved her from Aksel. *He had been chained to the wall*, Orinthe said in her ear.

Kiara took a deep breath to slow the pounding beat of her heart. Nykyrian had trusted her. He had given her the most sought-after secret in the universe.

She sat on the floor for close to an hour, trying to sift through her warring emotions. Part of her wanted her to do the right thing and turn him in, but her heart and soul wouldn't let her. Nykyrian wasn't a brutal killer, she knew that. Deep inside her, she saw the part of him who had saved a starving boy off the street, who helped Rachol, who guarded her. There was more to his being Nemesis than the reports given by the news. Standing up, Kiara went to find Nykyrian and the truth behind his facade.

She found him in the exercise room, stripped to his waist, pounding a weight bag. Each blow he delivered to the bag was one in studied fury. She could feel his anger and pain as if it were her own.

"Nykyrian," she said softly.

He hesitated, looking over at her. The bag swung back, knocking him sideways. He let out a loud grunt and pushed the bag away from him. Kiara stifled her laughter over the shocked look on his face.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded in a fierce voice, striking the bag again with his fist. "I might get blood on you."

She swallowed the knot in her throat as he turned to deliver a succession of fast, angry

blows to the bag.

Kiara watched his hands pound into the rough canvas. "I'm sorry for my reaction, but what did you expect?"

His hand flew into the bag with a heavy thud that caused the chains suspending it from the ceiling to rattle. "I don't expect a damned thing from you. Just take your prissy," he pounded the bag, "spoiled," another forceful blow, "ass out of my sight before I show you just what Nemesis *is* capable of."

Kiara's common sense told her to leave, that he was too angry to talk to, but she couldn't. Before she could rethink her actions, she crossed the room and pushed him away from the bag. He gave her an astonished look. The bag swung in an arc between them.

"You are going to talk to me!"

Nykyrian snorted. "Or what? Don't think for one minute you can do anything to me someone else hasn't done already."

Kiara lowered her gaze from his face as pain consumed her, wanting some way to break through his overdeveloped defenses. Then she saw his knuckles. She gasped at the blood dripping from his hands.

"What did you do?" she asked, crossing the distance between them to take his bleeding, swollen knuckles into her own hands.

"It doesn't hurt," he mumbled, trying to pull them away.

Kiara held on tightly. With a fierce frown she studied his eyes and there she saw his agony. He closed his eyes and pulled away.

"Nykyrian, talk to me, please. I swear I'll listen. I know you aren't capable of tearing someone apart."

Instead of the soothing effect she expected, her words angered him more. He spun on her with a snarl, pushing her back against the wall, his light eyes raging with emotions she couldn't decipher. Kiara gulped in fear, her whole body shaking.

"Do you really think I couldn't tear someone into pieces?" he ground out in rage. "I was trained to tear men apart so fast that they had the opportunity to see whatever organ I ripped out of them before they hit the floor dead!" His arms, braced on either side of her,

tensed. "Have you ever held a beating heart in your hand? Felt the warm, sticky blood slide between your fingers while it pulsed."

Tears rolled down Kiara's cheeks. He had to have a soul, she had seen him do too many things that contradicted such brutality. "I asked you once if you enjoyed killing." She took a deep breath. "Do you?" He looked away from her.

For a moment, she didn't think he would answer, then he shook his head. "I hated it," he whispered, pushing himself away from her. "Every damned minute of it."

A glimmer of hope shot through her. "You haven't assassinated anyone since you left the League, have you?" He rubbed his right biceps, his hand hesitating over the League tattoo. "No."

Satisfaction tore through her and left her trembling. Kiara hesitated, remembering the news reports. "Then where has your reputation come from?" He looked at her, a tiny smile on his lips. "Jayne." A ripple of shock jolted through Kiara. "Jayne?" she repeated.

He nodded. "An ex-Hyshian assassin. She does the killing and I take the blame. It keeps her safe. The only crime she's wanted for is smuggling and espionage."

A knot formed in Kiara's throat as she considered his words. "So she's free to kill, and if you're caught, they'll execute you for something you're not guilty of."

He shook his head. "Not hardly. I've committed enough assassinations while working for the League to warrant all the death contracts signed on my life."

"But those were legal assassinations."

He scoffed. "Legal, but far more corrupt and immoral than anything Jayne has done."

Kiara digested his words, her heart pounding for him.

He leaned against the wall, watching her with hooded eyes. "I don't care if you turn me in, but I want you to swear to me you'll never betray Hauk, Rachol, Darling, or Jayne."

Kiara sniffed back her tears. "I would never betray any of you."

Nykyrian nodded. He started to push himself away from the wall, but Kiara caught him with her hand. There were so many other missing pieces in his puzzle she had to know the answers to. "Why does Aksel hate you so much?"

Nykyrian took her hand from his chest and played with her fingers, sending a chill up her arm. It surprised her when he bothered to answer her plea. "He was angry at the Commander for adopting me. Since he couldn't take it out on the Commander, he turned his malice on me."

"Didn't Huwin ever try to stop it?"

Nykyrian shook his head. "He didn't want a son, he already had Aksel and Arast. What he wanted was a legend to stand out in the League's archives. He wanted his surname to inspire terror into anyone who heard it."

"Is that why Aksel changed his last name?"

Pain flashed behind his eyes for a brief moment, then was gone. "No, Aksel did that so no one would think he was related to a hybrid *giakon*."

Kiara ran her hand over the scar along his collarbone. "So much pain," she whispered, watching the chill bumps spring up beneath her fingers.

He looked down at her with agony-filled eyes that brought an ache to her chest. Nykyrian took her hands and turned them upward. "In your palms, I have placed my life, my secrets," he whispered, his breath falling against her cheek, tingling her skin. "I give you freedom to leave me at any time. I'm not easy to love, I know. All I ask is that you always keep your silence, if not for me, then for the families of the others you'd destroy."

Tears fell uncontrollably down her cheeks, dripping from her chin. "I could never hurt you," she said, cupping his face in her hands.

His lips covered hers. The taste of her salty tears burned her lips as he kissed her passionately. Kiara welcomed the feel of his warm mouth, the hunger of his need for her. She clutched him to her, needing the feel of his body.

Kiara ran her hands over the hard, muscled flesh of his ribs. To her shock, Nykyrian laughed. She stilled her hands and looked up at his face. "Was that a laugh?" she gasped.

A smile curved his lips. "I think I'm ticklish," he said in amazement.

Devilishly, Kiara ran her hands back over his ribs. His rich, throaty laughter filled her ears with its melody and her heart with happiness. She kept tickling him, delighting in the way he squirmed.

"Mercy," he cried at last.

"Okay," she said and kissed his cheek.

He pulled her to him, his eyes serious. "Don't ever leave me," he said in a ragged voice that tore through her.

"I will never leave you," she promised with all the love coursing through her body.

In one deft movement, he pulled her dress from her body and lowered her to the floor. Kiara welcomed the feel of his skin against hers. She caressed the hard tendons of his back, wanting to keep him with her forever.

A loud whistle rent the air. Nykyrian looked up with a jerk.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"The link," he said, worry heavy in his voice.

Kiara pulled her dress to her and watched him sprint out of the room. Donning her clothes, she went after him. Nykyrian sat on the couch, his back to her.

"Darling just stumbled into my flat." Kiara recognized Rachol's voice. "He's in bad shape. I can defend myself against Aksel, but if they come here while I've got Darling, they'll tear him apart."

Kiara placed a comforting hand on Nykyrian's shoulder. He looked at her with a tender smile. "Bring Darling here," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"It's the only place where he'll be safe while he heals."

"All right. We'll be there shortly."

Nykyrian switched the link off and tossed it back on the low table. He rubbed his hands over his face, a deep grimace lining his features.

"What is it?" Kiara asked, brushing her fingers through his hair.

"Arturo has beaten Darling up again. I should have torn *him* into pieces."

Kiara knelt on the floor and placed her chin on his shoulder. "Will Darling be all right?"

"I hope so," he whispered, rubbing the arm she had wrapped around his neck.

Kiara placed a kiss on his bare shoulder. "Are you always plagued with so many problems?"

He gave a short laugh. "All things considered, it's been a slow week." He pulled her around the arm of the couch and sat her in his lap. "What have you done to me, woman? If Rachol hears me laugh, he really will have a fit."

She brushed a strand of his hair over his shoulder. "Let him get used to it. I like the sound of your laughter too much to let you hide it."

He kissed her tenderly.

Pulling away, he studied her eyes. "Luckily the walls upstairs are sound proof. I don't think a guest will be too much of a burden."

His devilish smile brought heat to her cheeks. Before she could respond, he stood her on her feet and went to retrieve his shirt. Kiara wasn't sure what she made of this new Nykyrian. But she decided she definitely liked him.

* * *

They ended up in the viewing room, waiting on Rachol and Darling to arrive. Kiara was stunned when Nykyrian laid his head in her lap and stretched out across the couch. She played with his soft hair as they sat quietly in the dark, watching the flickering images.

Kiara had what she wanted. He trusted her. A lump constricted her throat as she looked down at him. His long eyelashes fluttered. She pulled his hair away from his neck to see the short, baby hairs curling around his nape. Using her fingernails, she gently brushed them. Chills formed on his neck and he closed his eyes with a sigh. With her fingertip, she traced the line of his cheek and lips. Turning, he opened his eyes to meet hers. The love inside the light green eyes scorched her.

He reached his hand out and brought her head down to his to receive his impassioned kiss. Kiara moaned, her body igniting at his touch. His arms tensed.

Rachol's engines thundered in the bay.

"Remember this position for future reference," Nykyrian whispered against her lips, his warm breath causing chills to spread down her body.

He stood and she wanted to curse in frustration. Gathering her tumultuous emotions, Kiara followed him to the door. They waited several minutes before the door finally opened. Kiara gasped.

Rachol supported Darling by his shoulder. Darling was slumped heavily against Rachol's side, unable to walk without assistance. Darling's face, bloodied and bruised, could barely be recognized. His left arm dangled in an awkward position and Kiara realized it was broken.

Nykyrian cursed, then swung Darling up in his arms. Rachol ran ahead to the viewing room. Kiara followed behind them, her heart twisting at the sight of Darling's beaten condition.

Rachol had pulled the bed out of the couch by the time they got there. "Let me pull up the sheet," he mumbled.

"To hell with the sheet," Nykyrian snarled. "I'll buy a new couch if I have to."

Rachol nodded, then met Kiara's eyes. The hostility in his gaze made her take a step back.

Oblivious to the hate-filled look, Nykyrian laid Darling down. Rachol broke eye contact with her to tend to Darling. Kiara stood in the doorway, the lorinas curling around her legs, her limbs trembling in fear and sympathy.

She frowned as she saw for the first time why Darling kept his hair over the left side of his face. A deep, white scar traveled down his face from hairline to chin. Kiara couldn't imagine what had happened to him to leave such a vicious scar.

Her throat tightened at the amount of blood covering him. Never in her life had she seen anyone so abused. She glanced at Nykyrian, his jaw stiff, and wondered how many times he had been beaten into a similar condition.

"I'm going to kill Arturo," Nykyrian ground out between clenched teeth.

Darling reached out and touched Nykyrian's arm. "Leave him alone," he whispered through his swollen lips.

Kiara sobbed, imagining how much pain Darling must be in. She couldn't believe he was still conscious.

Rachol injected painkiller into Darling's arm, then moved to set the break. Kiara stared, wondering why Darling didn't cry out or grimace. He just lay there so quiet and still. He didn't look real. Yet she knew he was still conscious by his open eyes that stared at the ceiling.

Nykyrian looked up at her. He crossed the floor, took her by the elbow, and led her out of the room. "I think it would be best if you went upstairs and waited for me."

Kiara nodded. "Is he going to be all right?"

Nykyrian brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "He'll be fine," he said before giving her a quick kiss on the lips.

Kiara started up the stairs, then paused. "Nykyrian?" She waited until he turned around to look at her. "I hope you do get revenge on Arturo." And with that, she headed to the bedroom.

Almost an hour later, Nykyrian joined her in the bed. Without a word, he pulled her into his arms and held her close, his face buried in her neck. His warm breath caressed her nape through her hair.

Kiara wished for the words to make him feel better, to ease some of the tenseness in his muscles which surrounded her.

"How's he doing?" she asked in a small whisper.

Nykyrian sighed and pulled back from her neck. He stroked her bare arm with his hand. "He's asleep. He'll be fine, all things considered."

Kiara bit her lip, her throat tight. "Do you know what I've been thinking about while I lay here?"

A short laugh rumbled behind her, bringing a tiny thrill to her body despite the seriousness of her mood. "I can't imagine," Nykyrian said, kissing the lobe of her ear.

Kiara caught his hand in hers and brought it to her cheek. "Life," she said, stroking his strong fingers.

She felt him stiffen around her.

Kiara closed her eyes and held his warm hand closer to her. "I've been thinking about how much I wanted to leave my father's house growing up, because he never respected me or my privacy." She sighed, her thoughts tripping over each other. "I always thought he was cruel to check up on me and intimidate my friends. He would never let me out of his sight without siccing one of his soldiers on me." She swallowed the clump of tears that gathered in her throat. "I was so stupid. My mother used to tell me my life wasn't so horrible, now I fully understand what she meant. God, I've been so blind, so sheltered."

His hand tightened around hers and he raised it to his lips where he placed a gentle kiss on her fingers. "I'm glad your father protected you. I wouldn't want to have to kill him, too."

Kiara gave a bitter-sweet laugh. "All I wanted growing up was to be free." She rolled over onto her back and faced him. "Is that what you wanted, to be free of your father?"

His eyes darkened. "Truthfully?"

She nodded.

"All I wanted was to die like a man, without tears or pleading."

Kiara's tears fell from the corners of her eyes, dripping down into her hairline. "And now?" she whispered.

He wiped the tears from her hair and kissed her. His lips trailed over her body with an insistence she couldn't deny. Kiara welcomed him to her as he pulled her gown from her body. He made love to her slowly, with the stars twinkling all around them. Afterwards, he held her tightly in his arms, soothing all the guilt from her in the way only he could do.

It wasn't until later Kiara realized he had never answered her question.

To Kiara's amazement, Darling left his bed the next morning. His movements were slow and studied, but he was able to get about by himself. After seeing him the night before, Kiara had been certain Darling would be bedridden for days.

"I always wondered where you lived," Darling said to Nykyrian. Darling sat at the kitchen table eating muffins with Kiara. "Now that I know how nice it is, I'll be sure to pass the info on to the rest of the group. This will make a nice resting place for us."

Nykyrian looked up from his desk, a smile twitching the edges of his lips. "Finish your food before I finish what Arturo started."

Rachol checked the lorinas' feeder in the kitchen. "Where are the mongrels?"

"They're confused by all the people. Last I saw of them, they were hiding out in the bedroom," Nykyrian answered.

"They don't bite, do they?" Darling asked.

"I'm the only thing that bites in this house," Nykyrian said, scanning his documents.

Kiara had to stifle a laugh at his dry response. Her neck still tingled from the bite he had given her last night after he joined her in bed.

Darling scratched at his plaster cast. "What are we doing today?"

Rachol crossed the room to join Nykyrian. "You are going to rest."

Nykyrian stood up and donned his long black coat. "And since you're here, you can keep Kiara company while we go after a couple of Aksel's men."

Kiara's heart stopped beating. "I wish you wouldn't."

Nykyrian sighed. "I know, but we have to."

Rachol grabbed his bag off the floor and gave Kiara a nasty glare. His glare intensified as Nykyrian pulled her into his arms to kiss her good-bye. With a heated curse, Rachol entered the bay.

"We'll be back around dark," Nykyrian said, squeezing her arm reassuringly.

Kiara watched him leave, her heart heavy with fear and worry.

"Should I ask about what I just saw?"

Darling's voice distracted her from her thoughts. Kiara shrugged.

A tiny smile curved one corner of his mouth. "Now that I think about it, I slept on the couch with Rachol. The only other bed is the one upstairs." Darling stared at her with an intensity she found a bit disturbing. "Just where did Nykyrian spend the night?" He

raised his eyebrows several times.

Laughing at his expression, Kiara took a seat across from him. "Why are you so interested?"

Darling mimicked her shrug. "I've had a crush on Nykyrian for years. If not for fear of my life, I would have made a pass at him long ago."

Kiara watched the way Darling cut up his food with one hand. "May I ask a personal question?"

He looked up at her. "Why am I homosexual?"

She smiled. "No, that's none of my business."

He saluted her with his fork. "At least you have more manners than the average being. So what's your question?"

"How did you get the scar on your face?" He went so still, Kiara wished she could take the question back. Self-consciously, Darling put his fork down and rubbed the cheek covered by his hair. "It's disgusting, isn't it?"

"No," she answered honestly. "But it is deep."

Darling sighed. "Yeah, you should have seen it sixteen operations ago."

Kiara's eyes widened in shock. "What happened?"

He shrugged as if the matter didn't really bother him. "My eldest brother. We got into a fight a few years ago and this," he tucked his hair behind his ear to display the scar, "is what happened."

"Your brother?" Kiara was aghast. Didn't any of them have a happy childhood? Darling nodded. "Kylar was always a bastard."

Compassion welled up inside her as she surveyed the scar. "You know, you're still very handsome."

He gave her a look that told her he thought she had lost her mind.

"You're very generous," he said quietly. "Most people curl their lips and run."

"Most people are idiots."

He laughed. "True enough." Darling turned serious. He sat back in his chair and studied her face for several minutes. "I want you to promise me something."

Kiara glanced sideways, her mind thinking of several things he might want from her. "What?"

"I want you to take care of Nykyrian. I can't explain it, but he's different now that you're here. Happier, I guess. He doesn't seem so serious and emotionless anymore." Darling's eyes narrowed into an intense stare that probed her soul. "I want you to promise me you won't hurt him."

Kiara smiled. "I would never hurt him."

Darling nodded. "Good, now let's go digging around and see what kind of trouble we can find."

Kiara laughed, happy to find Darling such an easy person to befriend. Leading him to the book closet, she tried to keep her mind from worrying over Nykyrian and the trouble *he* might find.

* * *

Hours later, Nykyrian and Rachol sat in the back room of the Bended Maiden sipping drinks. Nykyrian's head pounded from a huge headache.

They continued to review their findings for the afternoon, to little avail. Nykyrian sighed. All he wanted was an end to this whole stupid, dangerous affair with Kiara safe by his side. Agitated at the apparent futility of his wish, he sifted through the sheets of print-outs that lined the tabletop.

The bare, tan walls kept out the noise of the clientele in the bar area. Antilles brought them another round of drinks. Nykyrian watched the elder man fight his way around all the boxes and barrels that stored his supplies.

Antilles smiled, as he was setting their drinks on the table. "It's good to have the two of you back. It's been too long."

Nykyrian nodded his head in appreciation and handed him payment for the drinks.

"Has Ryn arrived?" Rachol asked.

Nykyrian could tell by the way Rachol shuffled papers that he was bored with their wait.

Antilles offered Rachol an apologetic smile. "He hasn't yet, but I promise to send him back here as soon as he does."

When they were alone again, Rachol let out his own heavy sigh. "Shahara is my main worry. Aksel comes in full force, blasters blazing. She slips up from behind and drives a blade into your lung. Lethal *harita*."

Nykyrian nodded, knowing all too well the female assassin's reputation. "I'll go to Tondara tonight and try to find Driana. She'll gladly give me Aksel's plans."

Rachol shook his head. "From my reports, I'm surprised Aksel hasn't killed her. Everything I have says they hate each other." Rachol yawned.

Nykyrian sipped his drink, thinking about Driana. "Aksel won't kill her because of her trust fund. If they divorce or she dies under mysterious circumstances, all her money reverts to her family. Aksel's too greedy to let something like hatred interfere with his wealth."

"Why are you talking about that scum?"

Nykyrian looked up to see Ryn approaching them. Ryn's red hair was a shade darker than Darling's, but his eyes were an identical shade of blue.

"We were discussing ways to kill him," Rachol muttered before guzzling his glass of water.

Ryn shook his head at him. "So how's my renegade brother?" he asked Nykyrian, taking a seat.

Knowing Darling wouldn't want his brother, who couldn't help him anyway, informed about his condition, Nykyrian lied. "He's fine."

"Good." Ryn took a seat and handed Nykyrian a copy of the Probekein's latest contract on Kiara's life. "That hasn't been posted yet," he said, adjusting the voluminous yards of his imperial robes. "All I could find out was Biardi told Emperor Abenbi to burn in a very uncomfortable position for a long time. Abenbi refuses to call the contract off, even if Biardi gives him the *surata*."

"I could've learned that through a terminal," Rachol smirked.

Ryn frowned at Nykyrian. "What did you do to put him in such a hostile mood?" he asked, then continued before an answer could be given. "Abenbi also wants the weapon to go after the Fremick territory. He feels since they're his neighbor, they should be part of his territories. I really wish you guys would put a stop to him."

"Pay our fee." Rachol glared.

Ryn returned the gesture. "That's all I know," he said in an irritated voice. "I hope it helped."

At Rachol's scoff, Ryn faced Nykyrian. "You should keep him on a leash."

Nykyrian barely had time to grab Rachol's arm before his fist made contact with the ambassador's chin. "Calm down!" he snapped.

Grudgingly, Rachol retook his seat.

"Your information did help," Nykyrian said, shaking Ryn's hand before the ambassador took his leave.

"We waited all this time for that?" Rachol sneered.

Nykyrian jerked the papers off the table. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Rachol came to his feet. "You slept with her last night! I waited up half the night hoping you would come back downstairs. But you didn't."

Nykyrian sighed. "I know where I spent the night."

Rachol's eyes narrowed. "When she betrays us, just remember I warned you."

Nykyrian clenched his teeth, tempted to send Rachol flying. "How could I forget, since you'll no doubt remind me every day of my life."

Rachol stared at him and from the clenched fists he kept at his side, Nykyrian knew he wanted to knock his head from his shoulders.

"It's your funeral," Rachol said before gathering up his papers and leaving the room.

With Rachol's dire warnings echoing in his head, Nykyrian made his way slowly to his ship. Maybe Rachol was right. Things had been going too good. His life never went smoothly. Just when things seemed to improve, something always happened to mess it up.

Nykyrian climbed aboard his ship. He sat in the leather seat, thinking. His thumb played across the shifter. A bad feeling crept along his spine.

Checking his power and fuel levels, Nykyrian didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Still the feeling of trouble to come persisted. If he had learned anything in his life, it was to always trust his instincts and now those instincts were buzzing loudly in alarm.

Something awful was definitely going to happen.

Eleven

Nykyrian, Darling and Hauk stood in the main room of Nykyrian's house. Nykyrian continued to doubt his sanity in allowing Kiara to go to Tondara with them. If only she hadn't pleaded with those big amber eyes, he might have been able to stand fast and make her stay behind. But dammit, he couldn't.

"Your advice didn't help," Hauk said darkly, eyeing the stairs.

Nykyrian turned around to see Kiara descending. As he had requested, she pulled her hair severely back from her face and left it in a thick ponytail to trail down her back in soft ringlets. The old, ragged battlesuit that added inches to her waist, didn't deter from her beauty in the least.

"What else can we do?" Darling asked, looking at Nykyrian as if he knew the answer.

"Put something over her head," Hauk suggested.

Kiara's face flushed bright pink. "Why don't you wear something over your head, you big— "

"That's it," Nykyrian said, interrupting her before she said something to enrage Hauk. "Keep her mad!"

Kiara stared in confusion as Nykyrian dashed past her, up the stairs and returned with a thick, padded leather jacket. "I already look like a shuttle-craft," she said with a pout. "If I wear this, I'll look like I weigh three times my size."

Nykyrian winked. "That's the idea."

Kiara pursed her lips, no longer sure if she should go with them. When Darling had told her what type of club it was, her curiosity had gotten the best of her.

While Nykyrian helped her into the jacket, her gaze drifted over his body. Kiara burned with desire. Nykyrian wore tight leather pants and an oversized leather jacket without a shirt beneath it. His tanned, muscled flesh begged her hand to touch him. If not for Hauk and Darling, she would pull him back up stairs and yield to the burning need inside her. She licked her dry lips as she met Nykyrian's eyes. Color stained Nykyrian's cheeks at her hungry look.

Hauk's laugh rang out. "That may actually be the first time in my life I've seen that boy blush!" Nykyrian cast him a dark scowl. Hauk took a step back, still laughing.

Muttering a curse about the Andarion, Nykyrian untied Kiara's hair and gently plaited it into three braids, then the three into one. He stood up the collar of her jacket and turned her to face Darling and Hauk.

"Now what do you think?" he asked.

Hauk shook his head. "I still think she's too damned attractive. She's going to get us killed!"

"Relax," Darling said. "Shahara goes there all the time and no one ever bothers her."

Hauk snorted. "That's because she'd kill you for nothing more than asking her the time of day."

Kiara looked at Nykyrian, afraid he would listen to them. After a lifetime spent with restrictions on her freedom, she desperately wanted to see a real smuggler's / criminal's dive.

Nykyrian shook his head at Hauk. "We'll watch her closely," he said, taking her hand.

* * *

Time passed quickly for Kiara as they made their way to the large planet known as Touras and the thriving port city called Tondara.

They docked outside the grimmest bay Kiara had ever seen. As the hatch raised, she

choked on the pungent odor of rotting garbage and body odor. Maybe she should have listened to Hauk and stayed home after all. This place was disgusting!

Nykyrian unstrapped her. "You'll have to jump down unassisted. Act like you know what you're doing and if anyone looks at you, snarl."

"Are you serious?"

"Very."

She definitely wanted to go home. With a long sigh, she got out and did just as he told her. When her feet hit the pavement, pain jarred through her knees.

Kiara shrieked as several unidentifiable species of vermin squeaked past her feet, rushing under a nearby garbage heap. Several beings turned to stare at her with interest. Kiara gulped, looking up to see Nykyrian jumping down beside her.

He gave the onlookers a fierce scowl, then muttered under his breath, "I hate jumping down on pavement. It kills my knees."

Kiara squelched her laughter. Darling and Hauk joined them.

"Looks crowded," Darling said, perusing the ships crowded inside the bay.

Hauk narrowed his eyes. "I think we should turn back before we get pulverized."

Nykyrian pushed Hauk toward the entrance.

Kiara's limbs trembled at the bedraggled individuals watching them approach the door. They seemed a little too intent on sizing up her companions.

"Don't meet anyone's gaze," Nykyrian warned, wrapping an arm possessively around her.

Kiara nodded, a lump of fear blocking her words from leaving her throat. When the doors opened, she flinched. Loud music blared at a level that pulsed in her body like a second heartbeat.

Her curiosity faded in the wake of panic. After being with Nykyrian and his group, she had mistakenly thought most smugglers were similar to them, but she was wrong. The men, women and aliens moving inside the dark club were the roughest, most

intimidating individuals she had ever seen and she had no doubt any of them would kill someone for nothing more than looking at them askance.

Dim lights blinked overhead. The stench of cheap alcohol lodged in her throat. Creatures tumbled over one another, shoving, picking fights. Her legs trembled.

Nykyrian paid their fee. "You won't be hurt as long as you stay with us," he shouted in her ear over the noise, pulling her into the crowd.

Hauk put his hand on her shoulder, letting her know he was behind her. Literally.

"There's a table up ahead!" Darling shouted, bobbing in the crowd to get to it.

Kiara breathed a sigh of relief as she made it to the table unscathed. At least in the table section it didn't appear nearly as crowded. When they were all seated, an unknown species brought them drinks.

"She's new," it lisped between bubbled lips. "What does she favor?"

"Grenna," Nykyrian replied.

The server appeared to smile, but Kiara couldn't quite tell with the strangely shaped lips. "It's good to see you again, warrior. I had begun to worry if someone had gotten in a lucky shot at you boys."

Nykyrian smirked. "You know better than that, Vrasna."

Vrasna looked up at Kiara in a way that made Kiara want to sink under the table. "Is she yours?"

Nykyrian nodded.

Vrasna squeezed his shoulder. "I'll pass that around."

Kiara watched the creature leave. "What was that?" she asked, studying how graceful Vrasna moved on four legs.

One corner of Nykyrian's mouth lifted. "You can't pronounce it, but she's female." Nykyrian handed her his drink.

Kiara took a small sip, then gasped as the tart, thick liquid burned a hole in her tongue.

Tears stung her eyes.

"Nasty, isn't it?" Darling asked, handing her his glass of water.

Grateful for his concern, Kiara took a large gulp trying to diminish the fire in her mouth.

"I found her," Nykyrian shouted to Hauk. "Guard Kiara with your life!"

Kiara looked up as Nykyrian left them, her heart pounding in fear and worry. She didn't know who he was after, she just hoped Nykyrian wasn't running into danger.

She watched him cross the room and meet up with an extremely attractive blond woman. Her eyes narrowed. Jealousy gnawed at her so fiercely, she was tempted to push her way through the crowd to claim him. Then, when Nykyrian led the wench off to the back, she burned even more.

Hauk's rumbling laugh filled her ears. "Relax," he said. "Nykyrian needs information, nothing more."

He better, Kiara thought, still not satisfied.

After a few minutes, Hauk excused himself to chase after an old friend. Darling moved to sit beside her. He covered her shaking hands with his own and gave a tender squeeze for encouragement.

"Darling!"

Kiara jumped at the sound in her ear. A tall, handsome man sat down in the chair on the other side of Darling.

"You look like hell, buddy."

Kiara studied the man's gorgeous face. Ebony eyebrows slashed above merry, hazel eyes, parallel to his cheeks. His dark hair was shoulder length and worn in a small ponytail.

He whispered something in Darling's ear, then looked over at her. A seductive smile curved his lips and Kiara wondered how many women had swooned to it. "Greetings, beautiful." He extended his hand to her.

Glancing at Darling, Kiara waited for him to verify the man's friendship.

"Kiara, this is my best friend, Caillen Dagan, smuggler extraordinaire and lady-killer extreme," Darling shouted.

Gingerly, she shook Caillen's hand. He raised her hand to his lips and placed a warm kiss across her knuckles. Releasing her hand, he met her eyes, one corner of his mouth lifting in a way Kiara was sure would have set most women off into giggles.

"Kiara Biardi?" Caillen asked in surprise.

At her nod, his smile widened. "Whoa. It's an even greater privilege to swap drinks with you!"

Darling shoved Caillen's shoulder. "Don't start on her," he warned. Darling turned to face Kiara. "Caillen's harmless enough, he just thinks every woman breathing is dying to crawl into his bed."

"Most are," Caillen answered with an infectious laugh.

"Hi Caillen!" an attractive red head said, leaning over Caillen's shoulder to kiss his cheek.

Caillen wrinkled his nose and sent the woman away. Kiara looked at Darling who was giving Caillen a disbelieving stare.

"I think that may be the first time since you hit puberty you've let a beautiful woman get away unmolested!"

Caillen snorted. "Yeah well, Lila's a ubiquitous slut. Someone should paint an x on her back and mark it this side down."

Kiara's eyes widened at his crude response.

Caillen shrugged, that irresistible smile back in place. "Sorry about that," he said to Kiara before taking a gulp of Darling's water. "I tend to let my manners slip at the damndest times."

Suddenly, Caillen leaned across the table and gave her a seductive grin. "I hope you're not Darling's date."

"She's Nykyrian's," Darling answered for her.

Caillen's face blanched. "I'm out of here," he said, bolting to his feet. He turned around and glared at Darling. "Why didn't you tell me he was here, that I was making passes at his female. Geez Darling, what're you trying to do, get me disemboweled?"

Darling shrugged, a smile splitting his face. "Actually, I enjoyed watching you embarrass yourself."

"Hah, hah," Caillen said, casting Kiara a sheepish look. His face turned serious. "Arturo came by Kasen's a little while ago asking about you. I told him you were visiting Ryn. I don't think he believed me so watch your back."

"I will."

With a nod to them, Caillen drifted off into the crowd.

Kiara looked at Darling a smile on her face. "That was an interesting human."

Darling nodded. "Worth his weight in comic relief."

Kiara twisted the straw in Nykyrian's glass with her fingers. "I thought Nykyrian was your best-friend."

Darling leaned back in his chair and studied her face. "Nykyrian protects me and I love him for it, but he's too serious. Caillen on the other hand takes life in stride, always with a joke about it." He shrugged and reached for his water. "I don't know, he just makes me laugh."

Kiara nodded, understanding all too well the importance of laughter. "Are you and Caillen lovers?"

Darling shook his head and laughed. "No, Caillen is strictly heterosexual." He glanced around the crowd. "Are you still nervous?"

Kiara took a deep breath. "A little," she said, but inside she knew it was a lot more.

Darling picked her hand up off the table and traced the line of her fingers.

"Touching," a malevolent voice snarled between them.

Darling released her hand and rose to his feet. "What are you doing here?" he snapped.

The man glaring in rage was a handsome, older man. A few faint lines marred his cruel mouth. His graying, sandy brown hair was cropped short and steely blue eyes raked her with a cold stare.

"Feeling heterosexual tonight?" he sneered, grabbing Darling by the arm in a rough grip that made Kiara cringe in response to it. "You were not supposed to leave the house until I told you to!"

Kiara gulped, this must be Arturo. Panicking, she looked through the crowd trying to find Nykyrian, Hauk or Caillen, but she didn't see anyone who looked familiar.

"Why don't you just leave," Darling shouted, his temper out of control. "I told you I wasn't coming home anymore."

Arturo's response was a vicious backhand. Darling fell against the table, upturning it. Without thinking, Kiara ran forward and shoved Arturo away from Darling. She barely budged him.

With a ringing curse, he slapped her hard, knocking her backward into a group of men. Ignoring her stinging cheek, Kiara pushed herself off the floor, intending to return to the fight, but found herself surrounded by a group of smelly humans.

"Excuse me," she said, trying to break through them.

"Just where do you think you're going?" one of them asked, a snide smile on his face.

"I don't think she's going anywhere," another answered before grabbing her by the waist and pulling her back into the center of the group.

Terror engulfed her, she had to do something. Kiara fought against the man's hold, clawing at his hands. With a heated curse, he slung her over his shoulders. Kiara shrieked and screamed, but couldn't get free.

She glanced up and saw Arturo dragging Darling through the rear door. She renewed her struggle with vigor. She had to help him!

The man holding her laughed at her attempts and bounced her hard against his shoulder. Her breath left her with a loud, painful *whoosh*. Pulling at his hair, she clawed at his exposed neck.

He took her outside to the landing bay and threw her onto the filthy ground where she

landed with a solid thud. Kiara moaned at the pain twining through her body, her ribs and back ached to the point she feared they were broken.

"You'll pay for that, *harita*," the man snarled, drawing a huge dagger out of his boot.

Kiara shook all over, her mind seeing Chenz coming after her again with his cruel blade moving over her body.

The others in his group surrounded her. She had nowhere to run. Gulping in fear, she studied the shining blade. The blade glinted as he raised it. Too panicked to move, Kiara waited for it to descend. Suddenly, it was snatched from his hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" Nykyrian snarled, balancing the knife under the man's chin.

A bead of sweat ran down the man's temple. "This is human's business, Andarion."

The cold look on Nykyrian's face sent a shiver down Kiara's throbbing spine. "She is my mate, scab. What you do with her *is* my business."

Kiara saw the man shake uncontrollably. He looked to her, to Nykyrian, then back at her. "You're his mate?" he squeaked.

"Yes," Kiara answered with conviction, trembling with relief that Nykyrian had saved her life. Again.

Nykyrian dragged the knife under the man's chin, leaving a small trail of blood before extending his hand to Kiara. Grabbing it like a lifeline, she allowed him to pull her to her feet.

"I'm sorry," the man spoke in a hurry, wiping the blood from his chin with the back of his hand. "She crashed into us. I had no idea. I mean . . . Well— "

"I suggest you leave," Nykyrian snarled, showing the man his teeth.

The group ran faster than Kiara could believe. Shaking with her emotions, Kiara buried her head in Nykyrian's shoulder laughing in hysterical relief. "Had you said boo, I think they would have died of fright!"

Nykyrian held her against him, his arms soothing away the shaking in her limbs. "What happened?" he whispered against her hair.

Kiara drew a trembling breath. "Hauk saw someone he knew. Then Darling and I were talking . . . Arturo showed up. He's got Darling!"

Nykyrian's body went rigid. "Where'd they go?"

"Out the back door."

Nykyrian pulled her by the arm back into the club and through the crowd. As they passed Hauk, Nykyrian grabbed him with a furious curse. They burst through the back door. Nykyrian paced around, scanning the area.

"Remind me later to kill you," he said bitterly to Hauk, his face contorted in rage.

"What's happened?" Hauk asked in confusion, looking at Kiara.

Nykyrian curled his lip. "Nothing of any great importance. Arturo has Darling."

"Shit!" Hauk raked his hands through his hair. "Where do you think they went?"

"I have no idea."

Caillen came running through the back door. "Where's Darling?" he asked Nykyrian.

"Arturo has him."

Caillen let out a curse that brought heat to Kiara's cheeks. "Kasen just told me she saw them together a little while ago. So help me, I'm going to throttle that woman!"

"Do you have any idea where Arturo would take him?" Nykyrian asked Caillen, taking Kiara's hand.

"Maybe."

Nykyrian pulled out his link and called Rachol and Jayne to start a search. He tossed his link to Caillen. "Keep in touch with them. I'll take Kiara home, then join the search."

"How will we keep up with you?" Caillen asked, tucking the link into his belt.

"I have Darling's link at home."

Guilt gnawed at Kiara while Nykyrian led her to his ship. If not for her getting into

trouble again, Nykyrian might have been able to get to Darling in time.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as they launched out of the bay.

"You didn't do anything," Nykyrian said with a sigh. "I should have known better than to leave Hauk with the two of you. Sometimes he just doesn't think."

Kiara remained quiet the rest of the trip, her thoughts whirling over what had happened. She prayed for Darling's safety.

Nykyrian rushed her inside his house, grabbed the link and was gone before she could even wish him luck. Her heart heavy, Kiara made her way up to bed.

She lay for hours watching the stars twinkling above her head, praying for all their lives. When she saw Nykyrian's fighter fly over, her heart pounded in relief. Grabbing her robe, she dashed downstairs to wait for him to enter. The lorinas curled about her legs, mewling softly.

Exhausted, Nykyrian came through the door. He dropped his helmet to the floor and opened his arms to receive her tight squeeze. "We found him," he said in a tired voice.

"I hope you beat Arturo to pieces."

Nykyrian held out one of his hands. The knuckles were swollen and bloody. "I did my best."

Kiara smiled, brushing a lock of his hair from his face. "Where's Darling?"

Nykyrian moved away from her and stretched as he walked to the stairs. "He's staying with Jayne and her husband."

* * *

He paused on the second step and turned to face her. "I'd give anything if you'd carry me upstairs."

Kiara laughed. "Come on, soldier. Move it!" Kiara pushed him from behind.

A groan escaped him as her hand slid between his thighs. "If you keep doing that, I might revive myself after all."

"Listen to you" she admonished. "And after the way you ran after that blonde tonight."

Nykyrian threw himself across the bed. "I needed information." He yawned into the pillow.

Kiara shook her head. "If the universe could see Nemesis right now, I doubt they'd find you such a terrible threat."

She waited for him to respond.

"Nykyrian?" Kiara leaned over him and realized he was asleep.

A smile curved her lips. Darling had told her he would get tired like this. Sighing, she turned out the lights. Kiara tugged his clothes from him, folded them neatly, and placed them in his closet.

A warm tingle pulsed in her breast as she watched him in the dull glow of the room. He looked so peaceful. She prayed he would have one night free from his nightmares. But she knew better.

She always knew which nights he actually slept. On those nights she would hear him call for his mother, cursing her, crying for her, or he would remember his missions and come awake trembling. Kiara wondered if he remembered any of his dreams. If he did, he never mentioned them to her later.

Pulling his hair from his cheek, she kissed the stubbly area. She would never leave him.

Kiara spread a blanket over him, then crawled into bed by his side and wrapped her arms about him. With a contented sigh, she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Kiara brushed her hair, her cheeks warming at Nykyrian's lustful stare. He leaned back on the bed, a knowing smile on his lips. "Do you realize you married me last night?"

Her hand stopped mid-stroke. "I what?"

He nodded. "Andarion law states that any two people who profess, uncoerced, to be mates before another individual, are married."

A warm thrill shot through her. "Are you serious?" she gasped, lowering the brush.

He looked away from her, his face stoic. "I take it you want a divorce."

Kiara bit her bottom lip, a smile curving her lips. "Let me think this over. I kind of like the thought of being *Tara Nemesis*." Kiara sat next to him on the bed. "Is that really all it takes?"

He touched her cheek, his hand burning a trail along her chin. "It is. Andarions aren't big on illustrious ceremonies." He sipped his juice.

Kiara sat back in a pretended huff. "Well, I never thought my wedding day would be so uneventful."

He smiled. "A divorce is just as easy to acquire."

She shook her head, her curls tumbling down in her face. "Oh no. You're stuck with me now!"

Nykyrian's warm hand moved to cup her cheek. The look on his face was one she couldn't place, and it worried her.

"What's wrong?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I thought I'd take you to your father today."

Surprise jolted her. She studied his lovely green eyes, not entirely sure she wanted to go home. "My father might shoot you if he finds out we're married," she said with a smile, running her hand under the blanket.

When her hand closed around him, he snorted his juice up his nose. Kiara laughed.

"That was mean," he accused.

She bit her lip, giving him her most seductive smile. "Is the marriage legal without consummation?"

Nykyrian sat the juice on his nightstand. Before Kiara could blink, he had her pinned on her back, to the mattress. She welcomed his kiss, the strength of his hands on her body. He trailed kisses to her ear, gently nibbling the lobe. Chills shot white hot through her body.

Everywhere he touched, she ached in pleasure. She dug her heels into the mattress and

arched her back to meet him. Never had she felt so desired, so alive.

Kiara ran her hands over the planes of his back, feeling the scars. He belonged to her and no one would ever take him away, she would make sure of it.

"Now," she gasped, pulling his lips to hers.

Obedying her, he parted her legs with his knees. Kiara moaned as he entered her. She reveled in the feel of him and the knowledge that they belonged together.

Her release came quickly. "I love you," she said, stroking his hair from his face.

His answer was a deep, magical kiss.

He lay on top of her, his strong body melding to hers. Kiara forgot about her career, her life. All she wanted was Nykyrian.

They lay silently for several minutes. Kiara felt his heartbeat slow down to a normal thud. She kissed the salty flesh of his neck, reveling in the heady scent of musk that seemed to be a part of him.

"Care to join me for a bath?" he asked.

Kiara smiled. "I'd love to."

It didn't take long for them to bathe and dress. Almost too soon, they were in the fighter and headed to Gouran. Kiara dreaded meeting her father. She didn't know how he would react to their news, but she was sure it wouldn't be gracious.

When Gouran came into sight, she wanted to urge Nykyrian to turn them around. But she knew she couldn't. Her father was worried about her. She just prayed he would listen to reason and not jail Nykyrian immediately upon their arrival. A hundred fighters surrounded them as they entered Gourish airspace.

"Do you think your father's upset?" Nykyrian asked.

She could have done without his sarcasm. Kiara stared aghast at the number of ships.

"Drop your shield and disengage your main thruster," the controller ordered.

Nykyrian tensed as a warning light went off notifying them they were targeted by

another ship's weapons system. "There's no need in this hostility," he said calmly.

"You'll know hostility after you land, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Her father's loud shout echoed in her ears. "Papa, everything's fine," Kiara said, praying he would calm down.

"Angel?" His voice quivered. "Thank God you're alive."

The knot in her stomach coiled tighter. "See, everything's fine," she said in a low voice, not sure who their words were meant to reassure, her or Nykyrian.

They landed inside the main landing bay. Kiara trembled in apprehension. When her father was this angry, he was not reasonable. It looked to her like a thousand guns were angled on them from a large crowd of soldiers standing inside the bay.

"Send Kiara down first!" her father shouted.

Nykyrian's strong hands unstrapped her helmet and her safety straps. "It's all right," he whispered. "Do what he says."

Kiara nodded. Her head light with panic, fear, and anger, she descended the ladder. She moved slowly toward her father, unable to believe all the soldiers gathered. "What is the meaning of this?"

Tiarun placed two icy hands on her cheeks, then drew into his arms in a crushing embrace. She hugged him back, thinking he must be calmer now that he was sure she was fine.

"Papa, it's time you stopped this." She watched Nykyrian being removed from his ship by a blaster pointed at his head.

"You're right, angel." He smiled at her. "It is time to put a stop to this. Someone has to."

His arms tightened around her as he looked up at his men. "Shoot him!"

Her father's order tore through her.

"NO!" she screamed, trying to pull free.

Her father's grip tightened and she spun around. Her father held her by her arms,

preventing her from running to Nykyrian. "No!" she screamed again, but it went unheeded. Light erupted inside the bay. Nykyrian recoiled from the shots.

Kiara went cold. No sound would leave her lips as she crumbled to the floor, a denial screaming inside her soul, her father's hands still locked on her, preventing her from running to her husband.

"He's dead," a soldier said, straightening up from the floor where Nykyrian lay.

Kiara couldn't breathe. She wanted to die. It was a mistake, it had to be. Sobs choked her body as excruciating agony tore through her soul.

"Dispose of the body. Troops dismissed." Kiara stared at her father, unable to believe he could be so cold, so callous.

"I hate you," she screamed as he moved to help her rise. She struggled in his arms to no use. Despite her unwillingness to leave the bay, her father dragged her out, oblivious to her pain.

Two soldiers waited for the bay to clear. Nykyrian did his best not to breathe deeply. He ached more now than he ever had in his life. At least four shots had hit him at almost point-blank range.

"We're dead," Tameron whispered. "If Biardi finds out about this, he'll have my balls."

Once again in his life, Nykyrian thanked God for the loyalty of his OMG members. There were times when spies were extremely valuable.

"Just how the hell are we supposed to get you and your fighter out?" Tameron asked, scanning the bay nervously.

Nykyrian closed his eyes against a wave of pain. "Tell control you're driving my fighter out on remote to get rid of it and me," he whispered.

Tameron smiled. "Brilliant."

Nykyrian forced himself to remain limp as they picked him up and dumped him into the seat of his fighter. Kiara's screams echoed in his ears and he wished for a way to let her know he was all right, in a manner of speaking anyway.

Pain erupted through his body and for a moment, he feared he might pass out. His

fighter lurched as they jettisoned it by remote.

Blood covered him to the point he couldn't figure out where he was wounded. He waited until he had cleared orbit before he sat up and took control of his craft. Pain clouded his mind, dulling his thoughts. Every second seemed to bring more throbbing agony than the one before it. By the time he reached home, it was all he could do to move at all.

Nykyrian staggered out of his ship, his eyesight dimming. He had to call Rachol and get help with his wounds. At this rate, he might bleed to death within the hour. Despite the sweat covering his body, he was freezing. He opened the door to his house, blood smearing over the white controls.

He pulled his helmet free and let it fall from his numbed hands. The lorinas ran forward, confused by the smell of blood. He had to get help. He had to get back to Kiara.

Nykyrian took a step forward and fell to his knees.

He tried to rise, but pain kept him still. He had to move, he had to. His last conscious thought was of a tiny dancer who had promised never to leave him.

Twelve

"The contract has been repealed!"

Kiara barely heard the jubilant shout of her best friend, Tiyana. Instead, she stared at the performance calendar in her lap, unable to believe six weeks had passed since she saw Nykyrian killed.

Over and over her mind replayed the scene, the sounds, the pain.

"Kiara, didn't you hear me?" Tiyana asked, patting the arm of the chair Kiara sat in. "You can return to the theatre!"

"I heard you," she replied with a wistful sigh.

Tiyana calmed down and took a seat in the identical, white, wrought-iron chair across from her.

Kiara used to love sitting in the well-manicured garden behind her father's house, the smell of all the flowers blooming around her, sunlight warming her skin, not doing anything except breathing the sweet air, gossiping with Tiyana. But not anymore. Now it

all seemed boring, unfulfilling.

Kiara saw Tiyana look up over Kiara's shoulder and shake her pretty blond head, and by that action she knew her father must be standing behind her. She didn't bother to look. She really couldn't care less where her father was.

"Tiyana," he said roughly. "Could you excuse us for a moment?"

"Sure, Commander." She stood and touched Kiara's hand. "I'll be back in a minute. Do you want anything?"

Kiara shook her head, stifling a sob. The only thing she wanted was her husband and nothing could get Nykyrian back for her. With a trembling breath, Kiara looked away from her father as he took Tiyana's chair.

"Angel."

"Don't call me that!" she snapped, unable to ever forgive him for what he had done, and all the things he had said to her since *that* day.

He took a deep breath and extended a long, manila folder to her. "I got your medical report back. I wish to God I could kill all those bastards for what they did to you!"

Kiara narrowed her eyes, wanting to claw his eyes out for the statement. She refused to take the folder from his hand. She didn't want anything from him. Ever.

Her father thought she had been raped by all of the OMG men and no matter how much she tried to explain what had happened between her and Nykyrian, her father kept saying she had been brainwashed.

Why wouldn't he listen to her? How many times had she tried to tell him no one did anything to her she didn't want done?

"You're pregnant," her father said at last, his voice bitter.

Kiara's mouth opened and for the first time in weeks, she felt like laughing.

"The doctor said he can terminate the pregnancy without any problems."

"He will not!" she snapped, coming to her feet.

Tiarun stood, his face dark. "Be reasonable. A child will end your career. Is that what you want?" he asked, grabbing her arm and giving her a sharp shake. "Why would you want to give up your life because of some bastard seed?"

Kiara trembled in rage and jerked her arm free of his grasp. Never in her life had she wanted to strike her father, but at the moment she doubted anything else would give her more satisfaction. "It was my husband you killed. My baby is not a bastard! It's all I have left, all I ..." Her words broke off into a sob and she ran from the garden.

When she got to her room, she threw herself across her bed and sobbed into her pillows. All she wanted was to go back to their last day together. To touch Nykyrian one more time. Instead, she touched her stomach where the last piece of him flourished. She would give their baby all the love she wanted to give to Nykyrian, all the love Nykyrian had been denied his entire life.

* * *

"Are you going to return to the theatre?"

Kiara stopped mid stride on the busy street of shops and faced Tiyana. "I've told you a thousand times I'm through dancing."

"But why?" she insisted in a voice that made Kiara want to shake her.

Kiara sighed, running her hand over her flat belly, longing for the day when she would see proof of her baby. "There are other things more important to me now."

"Such as?"

She stiffened. "My baby for one."

"You can dance for a few more months, you know." Tiyana grabbed her arm and started walking down the street again. "You really should rethink all this. My God, I'd sell my soul for your fame."

Kiara opened her mouth to reply she would sell her soul to have Nykyrian back, but as she looked up, she saw Darling eating lunch inside the cafe they were passing. Shock riveted her to the sidewalk.

Without another word to Tiyana, she pulled her arm free and doubled back, a strange happy thrill rushing through her. Kiara entered the cafe, and hesitated. She blinked, still

not sure her eyes were working.

"Darling?" she asked, nearing his table.

Darling looked up, startled. "Kiara?" he said, a smile spreading across his face as he stood. "I've been wondering what happened to you!"

Kiara wrapped her arms around him, bursting with happiness at finally seeing one of Nykyrian's friends again. "I wanted to see you, but I didn't know how to get in touch with any of you! What are you doing here?"

Darling smiled and gave her a tight squeeze. "Waiting on Cailen."

"Kiara?"

Kiara turned around and beamed a smile at Tiyaana. "Tiyaana, this is my friend, Darling."

They shook hands and Darling pulled a chair out for her. "It's really good to see you. After the way Nykyrian's been lately, I had started to think— "

"What?" Kiara gasped, the blood fleeing her face as cold dread crept along her spine. It couldn't be possible. Surely she hadn't heard him correctly.

Darling looked at her and his face turned the shade of his hair.

"Nykyrian's alive?" Kiara asked, half relieved and half enraged.

"I wasn't supposed to let that slip," Darling murmured.

Kiara's heart lurched. She couldn't believe it. No, it wasn't true. If Nykyrian lived, he would have come for her. "I saw him killed," she insisted, remembering the sight of Nykyrian recoiling from the blasts, of his still body lying in blood, the sound of the soldier's voice claiming he was dead.

Darling licked his lips and glanced at Tiyaana. "He was severely wounded, but a couple of OMG members helped him get home."

Kiara gripped the edge of the table with trembling hands, her thoughts tumbling through her mind. Nykyrian was alive and he didn't want her. All this time, she had told herself he loved her, yet he hadn't even bothered to tell her he was alive!

She ground her teeth together in rage. "I see," she said at last, her voice as icy as the bitter feeling consuming her.

She stood and extended her hand to Darling. "It was nice seeing you today. I wish I could spend more time with you, but I'm afraid I have to call my manager and accept a job."

Kiara sensed Tiyana's confusion as Kiara rushed out of the cafe and back into the crowded street, Tiyana hot on her heels.

"What gives?" Tiyana asked, glancing back in the direction of the cafe. "Who was that guy?"

Kiara seethed. "He's no one." She stormed off through the crowd, wishing she could see Nykyrian again so she could shoot him herself! "I can't believe I wasted my time and effort! My career!"

"What?"

Kiara glared at Tiyana. "Nothing. I'm fine and I'm coming out of retirement!"

* * *

Nykyrian stroked Ulf's soft belly while he watched a taped performance of one of Kiara's ballets. His heart was heavy. He knew he should go after her—needed to go after her, he corrected himself— but he couldn't.

And if being without Kiara wasn't hell enough, Rachol was missing, too. His flat had been torn apart and no one had any clue who had done it. They had been searching for weeks, but no one could find a trace to Rachol's whereabouts.

Pain gripped him and Nykyrian tossed back another gulp of *grenna*. He was alone just like he had always wanted to be. But he had never guessed just how painful true solitude was. He sighed in weary frustration. Kiara was performing tonight on Gouran.

A sliver of satisfaction crept over him. His threats had worked. Nemesis had been able to intimidate the Probekeins enough to where they revoked their contract. Kiara had her life back. A life that didn't need or deserve him.

There was so much he wished he could tell Kiara. If he could just touch her body one last time . . .

Aw hell, what did it matter? He had spent his whole life wishing for what could've been. As Rachel would say if he were here, Nykyrian had two choices. He could either continue to wallow in his useless self-pity or he could try to see Kiara. Neither option seemed promising at the moment. Sighing again, Nykyrian went to refill his glass.

* * *

Lights flashed in Kiara's face, blinding her. She turned her head away and made a few quotable responses to the reporters as she pried her way between them to her dressing room.

After her brief, mysterious disappearance, she seemed to be the hottest topic in the media. Well let them gossip. What did she care anyway? Just wait until they learned about her baby, then they really would swarm her for juicy tidbits.

With a weary sigh, she fell into her room and closed the door against the overzealous reporters. Leaning against the door, she took several calming breaths.

She wondered how she had ever enjoyed dancing, and if she would ever enjoy it again. All the back-biting politics and eager young dancers out to bring a performer down, all the two-faced promoters who wanted to make a *sola* with one hand and shove the other down her dress. She was tired of it.

Pushing herself away from the door, she grabbed a towel from her dressing table and wiped the perspiration from her brow.

"Kiara?"

She froze, knowing the voice that continued to haunt her dreams. Nykyrian stepped out of the shadows. She stared at him, noting the dark circles under his eyes, the tenseness around his lips. Stubble lined his handsome face as if he hadn't shaved in several days.

Despite her anger and pain, her body throbbed with desire. How could she still want to make love to him after what he had done to her? He had abandoned her and their baby without so much as a good-bye!

"What do you want?" she snapped.

He reached his hand out to touch her, then drew it back. "I wanted to explain."

She turned away and jerked the zipper down the back of her costume, cursing as it

caught in her hair and ripped out several strands. "I don't want to hear it!" she snarled, facing him. "You let me think you were dead!"

As expected, his face was impassive.

Tears coursed down Kiara's cheeks at the memory of his supposed death, and her temper flamed even higher. "I thought you were dead because of me! How could you do such a thing?"

He looked away and brushed his hand through his hair. "Don't you think I suffered?" His voice was a faint, impartial whisper that barely reached her. "I almost did die."

"I wished to God you had!"

His jaw twitched, but he showed no other reaction. Without a word, he disappeared through the open doors of the balcony. Kiara told herself she was glad he was gone. She didn't want to see him after what he had done. He had left *her*. Her heart didn't listen.

"Nykyrian!" she called, running to the balcony, but it was too late.

The street below was as empty as her soul, her life.

A light breeze rippled through her hair while she stood there trying to find him, reminding her of gentle fingers that used to play there instead.

* * *

Kiara took a deep breath, relieved to finally be finished with the talk-show interview. Her father and Tiyana walked down the station's glaring white hallway by her side, chatting away about the success of her return to the theatre, their feet tapping a solemn rhythm on the gray porcelain floor.

Kiara rubbed the chills from her arms. What she wouldn't give to go back to the solitude and peace she had at Nykyrian's. She missed making love to him with the stars twinkling over them.

"Are you all right?" her father asked, his voice warm in concern.

Her father had become much more understanding in the last few weeks, but he still refused to call the baby anything more personal than "it." Kiara had ceased to be angry with her father. Now her anger stayed focused on another source, one who had gorgeous

blond hair and dimples, one she would really like to kill.

"Just tired," she said, shifting her cloak around her shoulders.

Kiara caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned just in time to see the blaster level at her chest. A scream rippled up through her lungs as her father pushed her out of the way. Pain, intense and throbbing, burst across her arm as she fell on the floor. More shots fired, but she couldn't tell what was going on from her position under her father. Shouts filled the hallway and someone ran past her.

"Kiara?"

She blinked at Nykyrian's voice, the pain of her arm forgotten.

Her father rolled off of her with a snarl. Kiara tried to push herself away from Nykyrian, but he reached out and grabbed her arm in a steel hold she couldn't break.

"Release her!" her father roared, trying to pry Nykyrian's hand from her.

Nykyrian shook her father away and hauled her to her feet by her arm. With a feral curse, her father moved back towards them.

"Don't," Nykyrian said, leveling his blaster at her father's chest.

Her father froze, confusion in his eyes over what he should do.

Kiara struggled fiercely against Nykyrian's hold until she saw the blood covering her upper body. Cold dread and fear consumed her. Her baby!

"I've been shot?" she gasped, unable to comprehend why she didn't feel more pain.

Nykyrian lifted her up off the floor, tossed her over his shoulder and sprinted down the hallway. More shots were fired at them. In stunned disbelief at what was happening, Kiara remained silent, praying her wound wouldn't endanger her baby.

Out of nowhere, Hauk appeared, firing his blaster. "I've got you covered," he shouted to Nykyrian. "Get her out of here."

Kiara felt Nykyrian hesitate for only a second before he opened the stairwell and ran down it as fast as he could with her slumped over him.

She squirmed, trying to get free. "Let go of me!" she shouted at last.

He paid no attention to her. Nykyrian finally put her down next to his ship, but his right hand stayed firmly on her arm while he holstered his blaster with his left.

Kiara fought against him, striking out at his arm with all her might. "I'm not going with you."

"Like hell you're not," he snapped, pulling her up against him so she couldn't hit him anymore. "Aksel's men have this place surrounded. Their mission is to capture *you!*"

"You're lying! There's no contract on me. I'm safe!"

The venomous look in his eyes chilled her. "It's me he's after and you're the bait he's going to use to lure me with."

Her blood left her cheeks. For a moment she thought he might be lying, but the cold seriousness of his face warned her of the truth. Numbed, she allowed him to push her up into his fighter and speed them away from Gouran.

"Where are you taking me?" she whispered, trying to staunch the blood coursing down her arm. "I need a doctor."

His rough hands ripped her dress away from the wound on her shoulder. "It's a flesh wound," he said, pulling a piece of cloth out from under their seat. "Hold this on it. It'll stop bleeding before we get home."

Kiara's lips trembled. He was angry, proof of it was in his hardened voice as he talked. What had she done to *him*? She was the one with the right to be mad!

"I want to go home to Gouran," she insisted.

His hand tightened around his shifter. "You can't."

Kiara didn't bother arguing with him. She knew she'd get back home no matter what. She wasn't about to stay with him, not after he had abandoned her!

It took forever to get to his house. The hostile silence wore on her nerves, but Kiara knew breaking it would be even worse than bearing it.

Nykyrian led the way into the house. He didn't bother looking at her, or helping her with

her wound. Kiara clenched her teeth in aggravation. She stood in the doorway between the bay and his house, her legs caressed by the lorinas.

Without looking at her, Nykyrian opened a closet in the kitchen and retrieved a medical bag. "Here," he said, pulling out antiseptic and a white cloth. He placed them on the table before heading up the stairs.

Kiara moved forward into the room, her body numb from everything that had happened to her.

Nykyrian paused in the doorway of his bedroom and turned to face her. Not a single emotion was portrayed from any pore of his body to signal her what was going through his mind. "You are to sleep in the viewing room," he said absently, then closed the door behind him with a loud thud.

Kiara gripped the bottle of antiseptic, wanting to throw it at his head. How dare he treat her this way! Fuming, she quickly set about tending her wound, all the while cursing the man upstairs.

It didn't take her long to clean the wound and bandage it. Nykyrian had been right, it wasn't much more than a scratch. With a heated glare at the dark walls upstairs, she made her way to the viewing room.

She paused in the doorway, seeing one of her gowns on the pulled-out bed. Even in anger, he watched out for her. Kiara's throat tightened. It would be so easy to rush upstairs and pound on the door until he opened it, but she couldn't.

God how she wanted him, burned for him. But he didn't care for her. If he did, he would never have allowed her to go through all those weeks of misery thinking he was dead. If only she knew what to do, what to say. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she sat on the edge of the bed, praying for some miracle that would smooth out the tattered edges of her life.

* * *

Nykyrian watched the stars above him. Kiara was finally quiet after hours of crying and cursing his soul. He tipped the bottle of alcohol back against his lips, letting the liquid burn down his throat. Rachol had been right, the stars were a hell of a lot more interesting when you were flagged than sober.

He sighed, aching for a friend he knew was dead, aching for a woman he knew he

couldn't have. If Driana hadn't contacted Hauk this afternoon, Kiara would now be dead and it would have been all his fault. God, if he had been two seconds later this afternoon, she'd be captured or dead. His gut twisted. He took another swig of grena. What a life.

Before he could stop himself, he left the room and headed down the stairs to Kiara's bed. He pushed open the door of the viewing room, careful not to make a sound.

His breathing intensified and desire pounded in his veins, demanding he do something more than just stand here like a gaping fool. But he knew tonight he wouldn't listen to the part of him that loved Kiara, that part of him which would die for her.

Bitter longing welled up inside him as he watched her chest rise and fall in peaceful sleep. She was lying on her side, her curly hair fanning out behind her.

His hand tingled with the memory of what those strands felt like. Nykyrian clenched his teeth. His body throbbed and for a moment, he feared he might yield to his wants after all.

"Nykyrian?" Kiara whispered, opening her eyes to look up at him with a pitiful, sad face.

He gripped the door frame in indecision. He had to let her go. Aksel was just one of a hundred assassins who would do anything to bring him down. Anything.

"Go back to sleep," he snarled and slammed the door.

Kiara stared at the portal, her heart breaking. Why had he come to her? Why did she care?

She placed her hand over her stomach, tempted to tell him about the baby, but she couldn't. With his present temperament, who knew how he would react. The last thing she needed was an even more irate assassin roaming around the house while she slept.

Besides, it was her child she nurtured. A remembrance of a happy time she doubted would ever return.

* * *

"Aren't you ready yet?" Nykyrian growled as Kiara plaited the last piece of her hair.

"Stop snapping at me!"

So he glared at her instead.

Kiara ground her teeth together in aggravation. All he had done since he roughly woke her up was snap and hiss. "Where are you taking me anyway?"

"Out."

Disgusted, Kiara sighed. "You're such a fountain of information. Maybe you should consider a job in the media."

By his face, she could tell her sarcasm struck home. "If you're through making asinine comments, I'm supposed to be meeting someone."

Kiara froze. "Why are you taking me along?"

Anger and hatred blazed at her from his light green eyes. She took a step back, afraid of him. "Rachol's gone," he snarled. "I have no idea who knows about my house now. If I leave you here, with my luck someone will find you."

She frowned at him. "Rachol's gone?" she repeated, her body going numb. "What do you mean?"

Nykyrian pulled his coat on with irate jerks. "I mean he's vanished. No one has seen him in weeks and his flat was torn to pieces. We're assuming someone acted on your father's contract and killed him. I suppose I should go to your father's house to see if Rachol's head has been delivered to him as he requested."

"No," she whispered, unable to believe it. Tears gathered in her eyes as she thought about how much pain Nykyrian must be feeling, despite the coldness in his voice while he spoke.

Nykyrian curled his lip at her, his eyes blazing. "I wish I had killed your father instead of saving you."

Kiara sobbed at the bitterness in his voice. "Then why didn't you?"

"I don't know!" he roared. "I don't know why I do anything anymore."

Kiara reached to touch him, but he turned away. "Just get into the fighter and leave me alone."

Tears fell down her cheeks as she obeyed his order. She knew she should be mad at him, curse him, something. But at the moment all she could do was see images of Rachol teasing him. They had been family, brothers in spirit.

She sniffed back her tears.

Kiara watched the stars zoom past as they flew to a destination she didn't even bother to ask about. She was tired of being snapped at. All she wanted was a day of peace. To go back to the days before Nykyrian was shot.

Nykyrian landed with a jolt. Kiara gasped, her body aching. She frowned at him wondering about the rough landing, but held her tongue.

Without a word, he led her from the bay, out into a small row of houses. Kiara looked around, trying to get her bearings, but nothing seemed familiar.

She followed him down several back streets before he finally came to a large, white house. He glanced up and down the street in a manner that reminded her of the night he had first started protecting her, then he knocked sharply on the door.

He pushed her to the side of the door and unholstered his blaster.

The door opened to display the attractive blonde from the club. "If you like, you may search the entire place," the woman smirked, opening the door wide enough for them to enter. "I'm sick of the way you guys go around expecting an ambush."

Kiara didn't miss the underlying hatred in the woman's voice.

Nykyrian pushed Kiara into the house. Curiously, she glanced about the main room. A child sat on the floor, looking up at them with large, luminous green eyes. Her eyes widened even more as she studied Nykyrian, and she clutched her rag doll to her chest.

"I'm not dangerous," he said in a gentle voice, brushing his fingers over the girl's hair in a way that made Kiara yearn to tell him about their child.

The girl looked to her mother for confirmation.

"He's a good man, Thia. Now run along to your room."

The girl shot from the floor like a doom squad was hot on her heels. Kiara frowned, wondering why a child so young would be that afraid of strangers.

Driana held her hand out to the couch. "You two have a seat, and I'll go get the disks."

Kiara didn't move. Instead, she watched the odd way Nykyrian stared after the little girl.

"How old is she, Driana?" Nykyrian faced the woman with a stern frown.

Kiara wondered at the strange emotion darkening his face. Driana shifted uncomfortably under his stare. "Is she mine?" he asked and Kiara felt her world tilt.

Kiara's eyes widened as she looked back at Driana, and the beautiful grace ingrained in the woman's face and mannerisms.

"No," Driana replied.

Nykyrian sighed. "You never could lie worth a damn. Your nose always crinkles."

Self-consciously, Driana rubbed her fingers across the bridge of her nose. Tears gathered in Driana's eyes as she looked back at Nykyrian. "Thia knows Aksel isn't her father. I couldn't bear the thought of her calling *him* Papa."

Nykyrian met Kiara's gaze. What she wouldn't give to know what thoughts were playing through his mind. For that matter, she wished she could sort through her own feelings about this discovery.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nykyrian asked, his voice brittle.

Anger clouded Driana's eyes. "To what purpose? After what your father did to you when he found out we were lovers, I didn't dare tell anyone I was pregnant. I still have nightmares over the beating you received." She rubbed her arms and looked at the floor. "Aksel isn't sure you're the father. He suspects. I have no idea what he'd do to her if he ever learned the truth."

"Is she why you asked me here?"

Driana glanced at Kiara. "Who is she?"

"My wife."

Kiara jumped in alarm, surprised he would bother claiming her after the way he'd treated her since he saved her at the station.

Driana nodded glumly, tears spilling down her cheeks. "No wonder Aksel's been trying to get to her. He raved all night because he couldn't get her yesterday."

Kiara wanted to say something to make everything better, to soothe some of the pain in Driana's voice, but couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound patronizing.

"Can I spend time with Thia?" Nykyrian asked, picking up a picture of his daughter from the low table.

Driana wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I would like that. Aksel has her afraid of everything. He reminds me so much of your father." Driana broke off into a sob. "I think I might be able to arrange something in a week or so." She faced Kiara. "That is, if you don't mind."

Kiara glanced at Nykyrian who was studying her intently. "I don't mind at all," she said, amazed by the honesty of the response.

Driana nodded. "If you want, you can see her now while I get the disks."

Kiara followed Nykyrian as Driana led them down the hallway to a back bedroom. As they entered, Thia jumped up from her miniature desk with a startled gasp.

"Oh Mama," she breathed, covering her chest with a tiny hand.

Kiara saw Nykyrian tense at the gesture.

"Thia, these are some friends of mine. Will you keep them company while I do something."

"Okay," she said, returning to her chair.

Driana smiled at them, then made her way out of the room. Kiara stayed in the doorway, not wanting to impose on Nykyrian's precious time with his daughter.

She bit her lip, knowing this would enable her to tell how receptive he would be to her own condition. Reflexively, she rubbed her hand across her stomach.

Thia scratched her head, studying Nykyrian's tall stature. "Are you a friend of Aksel's?"

"No," he answered, sitting down on the floor.

"Good."

Nykyrian rubbed his right biceps and by that gesture, Kiara knew he was uncomfortable. "Don't you like Aksel?"

She shook her head, her blond hair tumbling while she continued to write on a tablet. "He's mean to Mama."

Nykyrian glanced around to Kiara. She offered him a smile of encouragement. He gave her a strange look she didn't understand and turned back to face Thia.

He brushed his hand over a stack of books piled next to her desk. Picking one up, he thumbed through it. "Do you read these?" he asked, replacing it on the stack.

Thia shifted indignantly in her chair as if his question insulted her. "Yes," she said, making a note on the ledger. "I study languages in school, but no one other than my instructors can talk to me in them."

Nykyrian said something Kiara couldn't understand.

Thia's eyes widened as she responded in the same language. Warmth rushed through Kiara when Thia smiled and displayed a set of dimples identical to Nykyrian's.

"How many languages do you know?" Thia breathed, using her native language in her sudden excitement.

"I've never really counted." He smiled and Kiara's anger for what he had done to her melted. "But if you wish, I could help you with them. I've lived on a lot of the planets where these languages are spoken."

"Were they beautiful?" Thia breathed, her eyes dreamy. "Aksel won't let me leave here." A frown flitted across her face, then disappeared behind another smile. "I've only seen holograms and stills of those places. At night, I like to dream about visiting them when I'm big."

Nykyrian touched her tiny hand and Kiara thought she might burst into tears. This was the Nykyrian she had fallen in love with. The gentle, kind man who would do anything for the ones he cared about.

"I'll tell you a secret," he said, leaning closer to Thia. "Those places aren't half as beautiful as you!"

Laughing, Thia pulled her chair closer to him. "You're nicer than most of the people who visit Mama."

"Aksel's coming!" Driana's shout broke through their conversation.

Kiara looked at Nykyrian, her heart pounding in fear. When he glanced up from Thia, she saw he was torn between leaving and staying. He met her gaze, then stood.

"Is there a back way out?" he asked.

"The balcony behind you."

Nykyrian opened the door and helped Kiara through. Driana handed him the disks. He paused for a moment, staring at Thia. "I'll be back for her."

Driana nodded. "I'm counting on it."

They made it safely down the trellis and to the street below. Kiara breathed a sigh of relief. She looked at Nykyrian, but as usual, he gave her no clue about what he was feeling. He took her arm and led her back toward their ship. At least this time, his grip was gentle.

"So you're a papa," Kiara said with a warm smile. "How does that make you feel?"

After the tender way he had spoken with Thia, Kiara expected him to beam with satisfaction, to smile, to be happy, but what she got was a deep growl.

His hand tightened on her arm. "I feel like hell," he ground out in a maddened voice.

A chill went down Kiara's spine. She rubbed her hand across her stomach. "Why do you say that?"

He stopped in the alley and glared at her. "A child is the last thing I need in my life. One more helpless person depending on me to protect them. I can't even protect myself, Rachol ..." His voice trailed off.

Kiara shifted nervously, wishing for something she could say to soothe the pain in his eyes.

"I'm not fit to be a parent. What's she supposed to do, introduce me to her friends, 'Hi, this is my dad. He's wanted dead by more governments than I can count!' "

Kiara stiffened in reaction to his words. "You don't have to be so sarcastic."

He shook his head. "Come on Kiara, even you aren't that naive. Aksel's after you to get to me. What do you think my enemies will do if they ever learn I have a young daughter? Her life won't be worth a *sola*."

Kiara let his words fall over her and with each one she cringed a little more. What if Thia were her child? What if Nykyrian were right, and someone did take her baby from her to use against him, how could she stand it? She couldn't. She would rather they tear out her heart than touch her baby.

Her heart pounding in agonized beats, she realized she had to make a decision. Her husband or her baby. She couldn't have both, Nykyrian's world was too harsh for that. Swallowing the lump of remorse in her throat, she knew what her answer must be. She'd have to shelter her child from the truth just as Driana had done with Thia.

Nykyrian could never know about their baby, and she could never live with him as his wife.

Thirteen

Kiara's head ached. They had just left Rachol's flat and the destruction of his home burned raw in her mind. Everything had been torn apart, not even the mattress had been left intact. Her throat tightened with fear and apprehension, reminding her just why she would have to give up her husband.

What had happened to Rachol?

Nykyrian stayed two steps ahead of her and she felt like a forgotten slave as she hurried along behind him, searching for words to make him feel better, knowing none existed.

"Why did you tell Driana we were married?" she asked. At least she could have an answer to one of her many questions.

Nykyrian stopped and turned around to face her. He wore his glasses again. Kiara wished she could glimpse what emotions were coursing through him. His body betrayed nothing.

"By Andarion law, you are free to marry as many husbands as you choose. I told Driana about us in case Aksel kills me, you are now entitled to my estate."

Kiara's stomach twisted at the blasé way he spoke about his death. "Why not tell Darling or Hauk?"

"They're outlaws, *mu Tara*. Driana is the daughter of a well-connected ambassador. All you have to do is contact her after my demise and everything I own is yours."

Tears gathered in her eyes, but she refused to cry on the street. "I don't want your money," she said between clenched teeth, angered he would be so callous about his life and her future.

He didn't move. "Fine. Let the banks have it then. I really couldn't care less."

Turning around, he continued down the street. Kiara cursed him, wanting to tear his heart out, provided he had one. She was beginning to doubt he could care about much of anything.

"Kyrian?"

Kiara almost walked into Nykyrian he stopped so suddenly. His body went rigid. Kiara frowned wondering what had him so upset. Scanning the street, she saw a beautiful Andarion lady rushing out of a shop, toward them.

The Andarion woman stopped just before them, her face a cross between disbelief, agony, and joy. She was almost as tall as Nykyrian. Her red and white eyes scanned Nykyrian's body in a possessive manner Kiara didn't like. The woman's long, black hair was partially concealed by a golden diadem that framed the fragile, pale features of her face.

"Kyrian?" she said again and reached a graceful hand out to Nykyrian, but she jerked it back before she touched him.

He stood ramrod stiff, not acknowledging the woman in the least.

Another Andarion lady appeared out of the shop, followed by her guards. "Cairistiona!" she said sternly, relief underlining the severe tone. "Don't ever leave like that again!" She placed her arms around the woman's shoulders and tried to walk her away from them.

"No!" Cairistiona said, wrenching her arms from her. "It's my Kyrian, can't you see?"

The woman looked up at Kiara and Nykyrian. "I'm sorry," she said in a soft voice. "She's

not been right since her son died as a child." She put her arms back on Cairistiona and patted her gently. "Come along Carie, he's not Nykyrian, you know that."

Kiara's blood left her cheeks. She placed her hand on Nykyrian's arm and felt the degree of tenseness in his body.

Cairistiona looked up at him, her red and white eyes pleading. "Tell her who you are!" she said, gesturing to the woman beside her.

Nykyrian started to move away, but Kiara grabbed him. "You know her, don't you?" she asked, wishing she could see his eyes.

"Let go of me," he snapped.

Kiara glanced at the woman holding Cairistiona. "Is she your mother?"

The woman gasped.

"Nykyrian, answer me!" Kiara demanded, wishing she had the strength to shake him.

Nykyrian stared at Kiara, his stomach knotted. This couldn't be happening. He remembered all too well his mother putting him on the shuttle that took him to the work home. Her happy smile as she told him to be a good boy and do as he was told. He hated her. He wanted to kill her.

"Kyrian?"

He cringed at his mother's voice, the voice he had yearned to hear for so many years. What did she want from him? Absolution? Forget it, he wasn't in a forgiving mood!

"I don't have a mother," he sneered. "I never had one."

Oblivious to the staring passers-by, Cairistiona burst into tears.

Nykyrian tried to move past Kiara, but she held fast. At the moment, he wanted to kill her, too. "Let go of me," he said in a low tone that never failed to intimidate people. For once, it didn't work. She just stared at him with those damned beautiful amber eyes, demanding with them that he do something he knew would only hurt him more.

Kiara looked at Cairistiona. "Was your son named Nykyrian Caesare?"

Nykyrian's arms flexed threateningly underneath her hands, but Kiara ignored the warning.

The woman holding Cairistiona paled.

"Yes!" Cairistiona said, her eyes never leaving Nykyrian's rigid back.

"He's half human, half Andarion, with gorgeous, clear, light green eyes?"

"Kiara!" Nykyrian growled low in his throat.

Kiara ignored him.

Cairistiona's tears dripped from her chin. "Yes," she said, her voice trembling.

Nykyrian pulled away from her.

In one last move to defy him for his own good, Kiara stood on her tiptoes and pulled his glasses off his face. The look he gave her made her take a step back.

"Oh God," the woman gasped as she saw his face. Her hands fell away from Cairistiona.

Cairistiona let out a happy laugh, covering her mouth with a shaking hand. "I knew you were alive!" she said, as giddy as a child during a festival.

Nykyrian just continued to glare at Kiara as if he could kill her.

The other woman moved forward, staring at him with disbelief etched into her beautiful face. "You're supposed to be dead!" She looked at Kiara with her red and white eyes. "I saw the body." Her gaze shifted back to Nykyrian. "I was there when they buried you." Cairistiona stepped forward and touched Nykyrian's cheek, her hand trembling. "I told you then that boy wasn't my Kyrian! But you wouldn't listen. All of you thought I was crazy." She bit her quivering lip. "They wouldn't even allow me to search for you."

Nykyrian stood rigid still while she touched his face and Kiara knew he wanted to leave, wanted to run away, but she couldn't let him. This was the only way she knew to silence his nightmares. He could deny it all he liked, but she knew he still yearned for his mother's love.

Nykyrian bared his fangs, anger darkening his eyes. "Don't lie to me! You didn't want twins to half your empire. You kept Jullien by your side and sent *me* away!"

Realization struck Kiara so hard, it stole her breath. She took a step back, glancing at Cairistiona, Nykyrian and the other woman. It couldn't be.

Her gaze drifted to the women's expensive, imperial robes, the imperial guards. Her throat dried. The woman before her was Princess Cairistiona, the lady holding her was Princess Tylie, which made Nykyrian . . .

Nykyrian barely caught Kiara as she fainted.

"Oh my," Tylie said, glancing around the street. "Is she all right?"

Nykyrian clenched his teeth, fear pouring over him. He couldn't imagine what was wrong with Kiara. "I don't know," he said, swinging Kiara's limp body up into his arms.

"Our shuttle's docked behind this building. Cairistiona's doctor is on board," Tylie said, glancing at his mother. "That would probably be the closest place to take her for care."

Nykyrian glared at his aunt, wanting to get as far away from them as he could. But Kiara came first. He nodded and followed them around the building. His mother kept looking back at him, her smile wide. Every time he saw her, he was torn between welcoming it and wanting to curse.

It seemed an eternity before they were on board the shuttle and the Andarion doctor came out of the back, complaining about serving a human patient. The prejudice ate at Nykyrian's tolerance and he wanted to backhand the man.

Gently, Nykyrian laid Kiara in a soft, cushioned seat. His heart thudded in his chest as he watched her pale beauty, aching for her to wake so they could leave these people.

The doctor shooed him away so he could examine Kiara without a lot of interference. To Nykyrian's extreme annoyance, his mother grabbed his arm and pulled him to the back of the shuttle where she and Tylie could talk to him.

"Who is the woman?" Tylie asked, glancing over the seat to watch the doctor.

"My wife," he said coldly.

His mother smiled. "You're married!"

He just glared at her. It cut him that his own mother didn't know the most basic

information about him.

Tylie looked back at him. "What happened to you? After we sent you off to school, we were told you died in a fire."

Nykyrian curled his lip. "You never sent me to school, so don't bother lying."

His mother and aunt exchanged puzzled frowns.

Cairistiona touched his hand. "I put you on the shuttle myself. You were sent to Pontari Academy," she said slowly as if talking to an idiot.

A chill crept over Nykyrian.

He tried to remember why his mother had sent him away, but he couldn't recall all the details. All he could remember was her smiling and waving at him, her tender voice telling him to behave. He looked deep into her eyes, trying to find the answer. Could she be telling the truth? No, his mind screamed. It was a lie, it had to be.

His temper boiled. "I was sent to a human work home!" he snarled, glaring at them.

Both of their faces lost color.

"Mother," Tylie breathed. "Dear God, I never thought she would do something so horrible."

Nykyrian's frown deepened. "What are you talking about?"

Tears gathered in Cairistiona's eyes as she clutched at her necklace. "She always hated you. She said Jullien could pass for an Andarion, but you would always look too human."

"It was her idea for you to go to Pontari," Tylie interjected. "She thought you would be better off with humans."

The bitter anger in his aunt's voice surprised him.

"Everything was a lie. And all this time we kept you," Tylie turned to face his mother, "drugged so you wouldn't search for him. How did you know he was alive?"

Cairistiona offered Nykyrian a shaky smile. "I just did."

Nykyrian sat in shock, not knowing what to believe anymore. He stared at his feet, trying to sort through all the emotions tumbling through him, rage, pain, grief, loss.

"Mother's committed a terrible crime!" Tylie said at last. "What are we going to do?"

Cairistiona shook her head. She looked at Nykyrian with eyes that tore through all the defenses he kept around his heart, his soul. He wanted to cry, but he knew he wouldn't. He had passed the point of tears years ago.

His mother clutched her hands in her lap, all the while studying his face. "What did they do to you in the work home?" his mother asked, her voice shaking.

Nykyrian shrugged, not wanting to remember. There was nothing she could do to ease the ache or correct the wrong. Only Kiara seemed able to do that. "I was adopted," he said at last, deciding that would be the easiest thing to disclose.

His mother smiled. "By good people?"

A lump closed his throat and he stifled the urge to snarl. "Commander Huwin Quiakides."

His mother's smile widened. "My father knew him well. They went through League training together." She rubbed her hand over his in a gentle caress that tightened the knot in his throat. "Are you a soldier?"

Nykyrian looked at her, his soul on fire from grief and he wanted to hurt her. "I was. Now I'm a free-assassin."

The look of shock on her face didn't give him the satisfaction he had thought it would.

Before she could respond, the doctor cleared his throat. Nykyrian looked up over the seat, worried about his wife. "Is she all right?"

The doctor smiled. "Oh yes. She must have had a shock. Not unusual for a woman in her condition. I've heard many human women faint when expecting."

"When expecting what?" Nykyrian asked and then a second later, understanding dawned on him and he thought he might faint, too.

The doctor's eyes widened. "Didn't you know she was pregnant?"

Walls closed in around Nykyrian's mind, sealing the light and air from him. He was trapped.

Dear God, what had he done?

Nykyrian stared at his mother's face, wishing he could feel the same happiness she beamed. Instead, all he could think of was how many people were out to kill him. He had signed Kiara's death contract more effectively than if he had hired the assassins himself.

"Nykyrian?" his mother said, a worried frown on her face. "Didn't you know?"

He shook his head, wishing he had never been born, had never touched Kiara.

"What's wrong?" his mother asked.

Nykyrian didn't know how to answer. What was he going to do? "Is she awake?" he asked the doctor.

"Not yet, but I could revive her if you like."

"Please."

His mother's cold hand touched his cheek. "Are you leaving us?" Her voice trembled.

"I have to."

Large tears rolled down her cheeks and he finally understood how Rachol felt when he saw a woman cry.

"You don't plan on coming back to me, do you?"

He clenched his teeth in anger and pain. "What do you want from me? I'm past the age for a mother's coddling."

Sobs racked her body and Nykyrian felt like a cretin. Tylie held his mother close, rocking her back and forth.

"Would you meet us for dinner?" Tylie asked suddenly.

Nykyrian looked away from his aunt's tender expression. Before his common sense

could intervene, his mouth answered, "Sure."

His mother sniffed back her tears and offered him a shaky smile. "Meet us tonight. Spend just a few hours with us and if you decide you don't want to see us anymore, then I will content myself with the few hours I did have."

Nykyrian's heart lurched. He was definitely an ass. "All right. Where do you want me to meet you?"

His mother smiled. "Here at Camry's. Do you know the place?"

Nykyrian nodded.

"Six-thirty?"

"I'll be there," Nykyrian said, looking up as Kiara joined them. Her face, pale and pinched, worried him. "How are you feeling?" he asked, rising to his feet.

She rubbed her arms. "A little shaky."

With a good-bye to his mother and aunt, Nykyrian wrapped his arm round Kiara's shoulders and helped her from the shuttle. He remained silent until they were inside his fighter and headed back to his house.

"Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

Kiara went cold at his deadpan question. "How did you find out?"

His hand jerked at the throttle and Kiara wondered what his first reaction to the news had been.

"The doctor told me."

"Oh," she said, wishing she could have seen his face when he received the news. "Are you happy?"

"What do you think?"

Her heart sank. She remembered his rage at finding Thia and she knew this didn't thrill him half as much as that. "So what does this mean to us?" she asked, afraid of the answer, but needing to know.

His body tensed around her. She felt his heart pounding under her shoulder blade. She wanted so much to comfort him, but knew she couldn't.

"What do you want to do about it?" he asked quietly, no emotions betrayed by his voice.

Tears gathered in her eyes. What she wanted was to live with him and raise her family like her parents had done. To watch him play with their child, teach it all the languages he knew, hold it when it cried and needed soothing.

But all that was a futile dream. "I was planning to raise the baby on Gouran."

"Probably for the best," he said in that deadpan voice that set her temper on fire. "Once I finish with Aksel, no one else will bother you. I know Driana won't tell anyone about you and I'm sure my mother won't either."

Kiara's stomach churned with dread and pain. "Will I ever see you?"

Nykyrian tensed at her question. He couldn't stand the thought of living without her, of returning to his solitude. Even now, he wanted to make love to Kiara so badly he thought he'd go mad with his need. If he were to ever see her with his child, he knew he would forget his common sense, his survival skills, and stay with her. But he couldn't. He couldn't risk her life, the life of their baby, for his selfish wants.

"No."

A sob caught in Kiara's throat. She had known his answer before she asked the question. Once he killed Aksel, she would lose him forever. Her soul screamed in pain. She didn't want to live without him, she wasn't even sure if she could.

All her hopes vanquished, Kiara sat in his lap wishing for a solution she knew would never come.

* * *

Jullien sat in the security room of the embassy, his temper boiling. He had known his mother and aunt were up to something by the furtive glances they had cast about the hallway before they secreted themselves in the study.

He had learned a long time ago to beware his aunt's treachery. She seemed to delight in getting him into trouble. Now as he listened to them talking about his brother, he realized just how dangerous a position he was in.

His grandmother had told him the whole story about his brother several years ago. Like her, he had assumed Nykyrian was dead. God knows, his grandmother had paid enough money to the work home to see his brother starved and abused.

No one should have survived the treatment Nykyrian was supposed to have received! He knew better than to trust a hireling. If you wanted something done right, you had to do it yourself!

He clenched his fists in anger. If his mother and aunt had their way, they would reinstate Nykyrian back into the empire. He would have to split all his inheritance!

Jullien tapped his fingers against the wooden desk, his mind whirling with thoughts. They had to be stopped. He was the heir to the Trioson and Andarion empires. By God, he would tolerate no encroacher.

But what could he do?

His knees shook with nervous energy as he plotted. He would secure his position as sole heir no matter the cost.

* * *

Kiara adjusted the black lace of her negligee then fluffed a few wisps of her hair around her face.

Nykyrian was downstairs clicking away on his terminal. They still had four hours before they were to meet his mother for dinner and she had decided she was tired of yearning for him. She smoothed the silk of her gown, grateful for once she didn't show any sign of her pregnancy.

Any day, Nykyrian might have Aksel, and send her away. When that happened, all she would have were her memories. She knew she would spend the rest of her life aching for him. Well, she was with him now and she had no intention of beginning her hell any earlier than necessary. With her resolve firm, she opened the door and headed for the stairs.

Nykyrian's neck tingled like someone was watching him. He looked up from his terminal to see Kiara standing on the stairs, her long hair swirling about her lithe body. His breath caught in his throat. She wore the skimpiest negligee he had ever seen and his body erupted with burning desire. NO! he told himself, but his body was already up and moving toward her.

Hesitantly, he reached his hand out to touch the creamy flesh above the décolleté. He knew what he did was wrong, but he couldn't stop himself. He was drawn to her against all his reasons that told him this was suicide.

Kiara sensed his defenses, but she had breached them enough times to know what she had to do to keep him from pulling away. She ran her hand over the stubble of his cheeks and buried it in the silken, white hair. Her hand tingled. He closed his eyes and kissed the inside of her elbow. Giddiness welled up inside Kiara. She had won this battle, if only she could win the campaign.

His leaving her alone the past weeks didn't matter. Even the pain over him not coming for her was gone. Kiara doubted if Nykyrian could ever do anything she wouldn't forgive. She needed him, loved him, and she would take what he was capable of giving, and pray for a time when he would be free to give her more.

His arms closed around her in a bone-crushing embrace. Kiara clutched him, wishing they could stay this way forever, her heart breaking because they couldn't.

Nykyrian picked her up and carried her back upstairs. Kiara leaned her head against his shoulder. "I love you," she whispered, knowing he wouldn't respond. Instead, he kissed her deeply, with more passion than she had ever experienced.

Nykyrian tossed her on the bed. Kiara welcomed the feel of his strong, exploring hands as they played a brilliant, sharp melody across her tingling flesh. His lips trailed along her arms, the top of her breasts, delighting her with building erotic waves that washed over her pulsing body.

She wanted him. Running her hands down his body, she peeled his clothes off, kissing each piece of his strong, bronze flesh that she bared. His soft, firm skin moved under her lips as she nipped the salty flesh, wanting to lose herself to him forever.

She ran her tongue over his hip bone and he shuddered under her with a fierce groan. A smile curved her lips as she continued to suckle the skin over the sensitive bone. His sharp intake of breath sent a thrill through her. He reached his hands down and lifted her up to his lips where he kissed her fiercely, his tongue dancing across her lips, her throat.

Nykyrian jerked her gown off, over her head. His hands returned to play across her breasts, their touch burning her with their restrained strength. His eyes glowed warmly as he stared at her. Kiara thought he wanted to say something, but instead, he dipped his head down to her neck and nipped her throat, sending waves of chills over her.

Her body throbbed for him, ached for him. She ran her hand over the scars on his back, wishing she could breach the scars of his mind until he admitted she meant something to him, that he did love her. Her throat tightened in pain. Even if he did, they both knew he would have to let her go.

In desperation to banish the reality of life, she pulled his lips to hers and urged him to soothe the one ache of her body that he could. She gasped as he slid into her, holding him close, reveling in the brief time they did have.

They made love slowly as the sun set on their isolated little planet. Kiara welcomed the feel of his strength in her and around her.

She touched his face, trying to memorize every perfect line. She gripped him tightly as she found her physical release. Nykyrian joined her. His arms tightened around her ribs to the point she couldn't breathe, but at the moment, she didn't really want to.

He pulled away from her and opened his mouth to speak. Kiara waited, hoping it would be the words she longed to hear from him.

The link's whistle rent the air. "Nykyrian!"

He frowned at her before reaching for his link on the bedside table. "Caillen? How the hell did you get another one of our links?"

"I found this one at Shahara's along with a contract signed by her for yours and Rachol's lives. I haven't seen her, Rachol, or Kasen for weeks. I came over here to find Shahara, and I find all this. Just what the hell's going on?"

Kiara studied Nykyrian's frown. "Do you think Rachol's alive?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Where are you?"

"Shahara's flat."

"Is there anything else of Rachol's there?"

The pause stretched out. Nykyrian's body tensed under her hands.

"Yeah. I've got his flight jacket. You don't think Shahara's hurt him, do you?"

Nykyrian clenched his teeth and looked at Kiara. "How should I know, she's your sister."

"If she'd killed him, she wouldn't have taken trophies. That's not her way. They have to be together."

Nykyrian sighed, whether from relief or frustration, Kiara couldn't tell. "I've got somewhere I need to be in a few hours. Why don't you meet me at Jayne's around ten and we can try and figure out this mess."

"All right. I'll keep trying to contact Shahara and Kasen until then."

Nykyrian tossed the link aside and rubbed his hands across his face. "It just keeps getting thicker," he mumbled.

Kiara frowned. "Isn't this good news?" she asked, stroking his hair away from his face. "Rachol's alive."

Nykyrian sighed. "Who knows what this means."

Kiara grabbed the pillow from the bed, and lobbed it upside his head. "Lighten up!"

He stared at her in startled amazement.

"You deserved it," she said defensively. "If you say one more negative thing, I'll wallop you again!"

One corner of his mouth lifted. Before she could figure out what that signified, he had her down on the bed tickling her.

Kiara laughed, her sides aching. "Enough!" she said, trying to squirm out from under him.

He quit tickling her. His breath fell against her cheek, his naked body pressing against hers. "I don't know how I'm going to let you go," he whispered in a ragged voice.

"Then don't," she said, toying with the blond hair cascading over his shoulders. "You don't have to."

His eyes went dead. "We both know that's impossible."

Kiara traced the line of his lips. "I bet if someone had told you six months ago that you would smile for me, you'd have said the same thing."

Nykyrian moved to pull away, but Kiara wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him close to her. "I'm not giving up on you. I have a feeling people have done that your entire life. I intend to fight for you, Nykyrian. I'll die for you if I have to."

"That's what I fear," he said quietly, and slipped out of her hold.

Kiara lay there, listening to him enter the bathroom. Her heart beat a painful rhythm in her breast. She had always thought love was supposed to be easy. Why hadn't someone warned her that love didn't answer all of life's problems, it just created more.

Turning over onto her side, she heard him enter the shower. There had to be some way for them to be together. She vowed to herself to find that way, no matter what.

Fourteen

The line at Camry's was huge, as usual. Kiara's stomach rumbled hungrily. She dreaded the long wait. Pausing at the end of the line, she was surprised when Nykyrian tugged her elbow and led her to the front.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

Nykyrian gave her a shuttered stare. "I can't stand on the street. Too many people would like to shoot me."

His low, evenly toned voice cut through her. He seemed to delight in constantly reminding her of the precariousness of his life and how many people were looking to end it. Granted he had been a little nicer since they made love, but he was still being difficult.

With a sigh, Kiara followed after him, shocked when he led her straight inside the restaurant. She caught the angry glare of the people who were waiting before them. Heat crept up her cheeks.

The maitre d' looked up from his podium, his smile bright. "How nice to see you Commander, your party is waiting."

Kiara gazed from the maitre d' back to Nykyrian. A sharp jolt of surprise from the maitre d's words rippled through her. "Commander?" she asked.

Nykyrian shrugged. "My rank in the League."

"You were a commander?" she gasped, amazed he had attained such a high rank.

The maitre d' smiled at her. "He saved my son's life at the Battle of Wymon!"

Nykyrian shifted in discomfort. "Hardly. All I did was warn him of an incoming bomb."

The maitre d' smiled. "Had you not, he'd be dead now."

Nykyrian rolled his eyes at Kiara. She stifled her laughter. At least Nykyrian appeared to be in a better mood now than a little while ago. She was still shocked she had actually managed to drag him out of the house. The entire trip here, she had expected him to turn about and return home.

"I took the liberty of having your favorite dish prepared for you and your wife. The others have already placed their orders," the maitre d' said, before leading them through the dining room.

Kiara followed the maitre d' past the intricate rows of crowded tables. He led her to the back of the restaurant where the private dining rooms were reserved for prominent guests.

A twinge of discomfort ran along her spine as she remembered the fact her husband was a prince. She wasn't sure if she cared for the idea at all.

The maitre d' opened a door and ushered them in. Kiara hesitated as she recognized Emperor Aros seated at the table with Nykyrian's mother and aunt.

She barely heard the faint curse Nykyrian muttered under his breath. Looking over her shoulder in concern, Kiara saw the anger burning in his eyes. Obviously, Nykyrian wasn't quite ready to meet his father.

Cairistiona smiled and came to her feet. "There you are," she breathed happily. "We had begun to worry you had changed your mind."

Nykyrian couldn't have betrayed any fewer emotions if he were a statue. Kiara was tempted to kick him. The maitre d' excused himself and left them to a modicum of privacy.

Aros rose more slowly. He clutched his hands in a way that told Kiara he wasn't used to

being uncertain about himself. "I hope you don't mind my presence. When Carie told me she had found you, I insisted that I attend as well."

Kiara took Nykyrian's hand and gave an encouraging squeeze. His fingers were icy cold. She could almost swear they trembled. For several awkward seconds, no one spoke.

Nykyrian finally broke the tense silence. "This is my wife, Kiara." Aros smiled. "We've already met, but it is a pleasure to see you again."

Kiara returned his smile as she curtsied. "It's an honor to see you again, Your Majesty."

Aros blustered gruffly. "None of that, my dear. You're family now. I hate all that posturing and bowing anyway. It's demeaning!"

Kiara laughed at his words, feeling a little more at ease about the dinner.

Aros pulled a chair out next to him for Kiara. "Come child, have a seat. You shouldn't be standing."

Kiara glanced at Nykyrian to see how he was dealing with his newfound family. As usual, she couldn't tell. Without a word, she moved toward his father and the chair Aros held for her. His mother and aunt exchanged worried frowns and each kept looking at Nykyrian nervously while he seated himself in a chair next to Kiara's.

Kiara took a deep breath, wondering what she could do to helpfully interfere, but not enrage Nykyrian to the point where he would get up and leave.

"We will no doubt have beautiful grandchildren, wouldn't you say, Carie?" the emperor asked, pushing Kiara's seat up to the table.

Cairistiona smiled. "They will be the envy of everyone," she agreed.

Nykyrian shifted uncomfortably beside her. Kiara placed her hand over the one he held in his lap. He looked up at her with something that appeared to be pride.

They remained quiet while their meals were brought in and placed before them.

Nykyrian held Kiara's soothing hand while berating himself for coming along on this stupid expedition. He didn't know these people, and he wasn't really sure he even wanted to. Worse, his temper was slipping.

He had wanted this moment for most of his life. A brief chance meeting where he could talk to his parents, have them look at him with love, have them accept him. Now that he had it, Nykyrian didn't know what to do with it.

"I know this must be hard for you," Aros said after the room cleared of servers. "You must know I didn't know you were alive. If I had even suspected, I would have torn the universe apart looking for you."

Nykyrian took a sip of his drink, tempted to curl his lip and make a caustic reply. He remembered Thia.

No one had told him about her, and to her knowledge he was just as guilty of abandoning her. For all Nykyrian knew, Thia harbored the same feelings of rejection and isolation. The revelation almost choked him. How could he blame his parents for the same thing he had done to his own child?

"I don't blame you." Nykyrian caught Kiara's astonished look. "Why don't we forget the past and just start with this moment and go forward."

Aros saluted him with his glass. "I regret the lost years. I can tell they are one of my greatest losses."

Nykyrian snorted, looking straight at Kiara. "You were probably better off. I was a rotten child who spent weeks sulking."

Kiara smiled. "Some things never change."

His parents laughed.

Grateful for Nykyrian's changed mood, Kiara wondered what had caused it. He was so handsome sitting next to her, she beamed with pride. Leaning toward him, she whispered in his ear.

"I'll show you," Nykyrian said, scooting his chair back.

Kiara blushed at the stares she collected. She seemed to be going to the rest room every few seconds lately. "Just tell me where it is and I can find it."

He shook his head. "It's too crowded. I don't think you should go out there alone."

Kiara's face felt so hot, she feared it would explode. "I can go alone," she said, stressing

the words. "I'll be right back."

She could tell by the tense line of his jaw, he wanted to argue some more. "Don't be long."

Kiara smiled, relieved he had yielded. "You won't even have time to miss me."

Excusing herself from his parents, she made her way out the door. It didn't take her long to find her way through the dining room and to the restrooms.

As Kiara left the bathroom, she smiled at the maitre d' as he passed by her, leading another set of guests. Happy her husband was behaving and not being too sullen, she made her way back through their dining room. "Kiara?" She stopped, wondering who had called her.

Turning around, she tried to locate the source of the familiar voice. Kiara's heart stopped as she recognized Jullien seated at a table with another man. Why wasn't he in their room with his parents?

She started to head back to the dining room without acknowledging him, but her conscience wouldn't let her. As Aros had said, she was family now and she couldn't be rude.

Jullien crossed the floor, stopping right in front of her. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon," he said warmly. He took her hand and placed a wet kiss over her knuckles. Kiara stifled her shudder.

His smile was warm enough, but she wondered at the coldness behind his eyes. "I realize you must be here with someone," Jullien said, looking around the room. "But could you take a moment to say hello to my friend. He's a fan of yours and he's dying for a chance to meet you."

She tried to pull away, but his hand tightened around hers. "I promised not to— "

"It'll only take a moment," he begged with those eerie eyes. "Please?"

Reminding herself this was her brother-in-law and a royal prince, she nodded her head.

Jullien gave her a warm smile and led her back to his table. "This is the woman I was telling you about."

The man stood and slowly turned to face Kiara. Her heart hammered in fear.

"You!" she gasped, recognizing the man who had glared at them that day in the bay of her flat— Aksel Bredeh.

He pressed a small blaster into her stomach. "Act like you're happy to see me," he said in a low menacing tone. "Or the chef will have fresh human entrails to serve the hybrid. Smile," he suggested.

Kiara wanted to spit in his face, scratch out his eyes, anything other than go along with him. But what choice did she have? She had no doubt that he would kill her if she so much as twitched.

One day, she would learn to listen when someone cautioned her not to do something! Provided she survived this, her mind taunted her.

"I owe you," Aksel said to Jullien before narrowing his gray eyes on Kiara. "Walk slowly to the outside door."

Nykyrian looked up from his food expecting to see Kiara enter, instead it was the frightened maitre d'.

"Commander!" he said, his voice and hands shaking. "Your wife just left with a friend of Prince Jullien's. I don't think she went willingly."

Coldness gripped Nykyrian's soul and he tightened his hands into fists.

He heard his mother's gasp of fright and his father's curse. But that was all he heard before he concentrated on the raw anger pulsing through his body. He drew strength from it, because he knew he was going to kill someone over this.

Nykyrian ran for the door, pulling his blaster from his holster. As he crossed the dining room looking for his target, diners screamed, ducked, and ran.

He left the restaurant and headed for the nearby landing bay. Nothing. Not a sign of Kiara anywhere. His grip tightened on his blaster. Nykyrian clicked back the release.

Jullien.

With that single thought burning in his mind, he made his way back through the restaurant to the area where his parents had the bastard cornered.

Blind rage clouded his eyes. All Nykyrian wanted to do was rip out Jullien's heart and feed it to him.

With one fist, Nykyrian picked his brother up from the floor and hurled him across the table. Serving ware shattered and scattered, the icy tinkling sound mimicking the coldness consuming him.

Nemesis was awake and demanded to be appeased.

Nykyrian pulled Jullien off the floor by his neck. "Where is she?"

Jullien tried to claw Nykyrian's hand from his throat. Nykyrian tightened his grip. He wanted to see the fat weasel crawl. "Your life hinges on how fast you answer me, you bastard!"

Two of Jullien's guards moved toward them.

Nykyrian switched his blaster to stun and shot them before they could get near him and the fat slob he dangled from his fist like a frightened gimfry. Nykyrian looked at his parents to see if they would interfere. They just stared at him as if he were an animal. So be it. Kiara was all that mattered to him. To hell with anything else. Nykyrian clicked the blaster to kill and held it under Jullien's chin.

"Answer me, or the next sound you hear will be your brains hitting the wall behind you."

Sweat covered Jullien's pudgy jowls. "Aksel has her. I don't know where he's taking her."

Shock at his unexpected answer was the only thing that saved Jullien's life. Numb, Nykyrian released him. The room seemed to tilt. *Aksel has her*, the words echoed in his mind like a forgotten nightmare.

His father reached out to touch him. Nykyrian moved away with a snarl. He glared at his father with all the hatred scorching, blistering his soul.

"She's the only reason I came tonight," Nykyrian said, narrowing his eyes at his father. "If something happens to her, I want you to know I'm coming back for Jullien, and when I finish with him there won't be enough left to flush."

Spurred by his agony and rage, Nykyrian left his parents standing next to his brother, watching him with disappointed eyes. To Hell with them. Let them comfort Jullien. He

didn't need their love. He didn't need anyone or anything except Kiara.

Nykyrian pushed the bell at Jayne's house. He wiped the tears falling down his cheeks, stunned he would cry now. All the times he had been beaten, wounded, and cursed not one tear had ever fallen. Now he couldn't seem to stop them.

He would gladly trade his life for Kiara's. Whatever it took, he would see her safe.

Jayne opened the door, then stood back, her mouth falling open. Nykyrian disregarded her shock, no longer caring who saw how much the tiny dancer meant to him.

"Aksel has Kiara," Nykyrian said in a ragged, hate-filled voice.

Darling and Caillen came to their feet from the couch. Jayne pulled him into her house and pushed him toward the kitchen table. Dazed, Nykyrian sat in the first chair he reached. Nothing seemed real. It was all like a terrifying nightmare.

He looked at Caillen. "Did you find out anything more about Rachol?"

"He's with my sisters, but I don't know where."

Nykyrian nodded, wishing Rachol were there to help plan this damned thing. His emotions were too tangled. He couldn't think straight. All he could think of was Kiara.

Nykyrian ran his hands over his face, his tears finally stopping. "Darling, I need you to get those disks you picked up from Rachol, along with the ones I got from Driana. With any luck— "

The bell sounded again.

For the second time that night, Nykyrian's world spun. Driana stood outside, clutching Thia to her breast, the child wrapped in a bloodstained blanket. The side of Driana's face was swollen and red.

"He's gone crazy," Driana said, holding Thia tightly.

Nykyrian shot out of his chair and crossed the room to see if his daughter were still alive, his heart lodged painfully in his throat as his fear tripled.

Nykyrian pulled the blanket back and let out a fierce curse. Thia was covered in more bruises than her mother. She turned her little head to look at him, but couldn't open her

eyes for the bruises.

"I didn't think he'd stop beating her," Driana said, then broke off into heavy sobs.

Gingerly, Nykyrian pulled his daughter to him and rocked her. He was going to kill Aksel tonight.

"It's all right," he said to Thia, swallowing the wave of tears gathering in his throat. "No one's ever going to hurt you again."

Hadrian, Jayne's husband, came forward to take Thia. "I'll take care of her."

Nykyrian was immobilized by the turbulent state of his emotions. As much as he had hated in the past, nothing had ever prepared him for this burning ache in his soul that begged for appeasement.

Reluctantly, he released Thia to Hadrian, knowing Hadrian would be able to tend her injuries.

"Where is he?" Nykyrian asked Driana.

"He's gone to his base on Oksana. He thinks he's safe there."

"And Kiara?"

"She's with him."

Nykyrian's lip curled into a snarl. He motioned for Darling, Jayne and Cailen to come with him. They would get Hauk, and before the end of the night, he would put an end to Aksel, one way or another.

* * *

Kiara strained against the manacles holding her hands above her head against the wall. She had to get free! She met Aksel's gaze from where he sat across the room with two of his men, gambling to see who would be the first to rape her. A knowing smile curved his lips before he doubled his bet.

Kiara looked away. Her heart pounded as she struggled against the chains. She had to get away from him.

Aksel looked up once more from his card game and again leered at her, seeming to delight in the way she fought helplessly against her binders. Kiara shivered.

She prayed for release, but she also prayed for Nykyrian not to come near this place to save her. One too many times, Aksel had told her what he wanted to do to her husband. If he captured Nykyrian, Aksel would torture him to death.

Kiara couldn't understand such an intolerable hatred, and after being with Aksel, she was sure she would never ask him to find out why. The man was totally *bended*.

The door behind Aksel opened. Kiara looked up to see Driana entering, her face red and swollen. Driana met her gaze and Kiara saw the sympathy in the blond woman's eyes.

"Aksel, I need to speak with you. Alone."

Aksel curled his lip. "Can't you see we're in the middle of a game here?"

Driana moved forward with determined steps and upturned the table. She leveled a rifle at Aksel's head. "Tell them to leave."

Aksel's twisted laughter filled the room. "Sure. Boys, if you'll excuse us, my wife," he mocked at the title, "would like to say a few words to me."

Kiara swallowed the lump in her throat and watched as the two soldiers walked from the room, their own laughs trailing behind them as they said something in a language Kiara couldn't understand.

Aksel leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest as he watched his wife, his confidence all too apparent. "What is it you want, dumpling?" Despite the endearment, Kiara didn't miss the raw hatred and threat in his voice.

"No one hurts my baby and lives," Driana snarled. "I'm going to kill you, you *giakon*." She clicked back the hammer on the rifle.

Aksel moved so fast, Kiara barely saw his arms uncoil from his chest before he had the gun out of Driana's hands. "You stupid *harita*," he said, jabbing the stock into her stomach.

Kiara cringed in reflex. Driana slumped to the floor, clutching her middle as she cried out in pain.

He pulled Driana up by the hair. "Where's Thia?"

Driana glared at him and even from her distance across the room, Kiara recognized the hatred burning in the blue eyes. "I gave her to her father."

Aksel's chest pulsated with his deep, angry breaths as he looked up at Kiara. "The hybrid?" he screeched.

Kiara winced at the tone, unable to believe a man could make it.

"Yes," Driana said. "He was a better man and lover at sixteen than you'll ever be!"

Aksel lifted the stock up and brought it down across Driana's back with a dull, heavy thud. Driana screamed, falling to the floor. Kiara buried her head in her arms and tried to block out the sound of the blows that followed in rapid succession. Finally, Driana's screams stopped. Kiara raised her head and saw Driana lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Her stomach twisted. For a moment, she thought she'd be sick.

Aksel walked toward her like a prowling lorina. He tossed the blood covered rifle onto the overturned table.

Aksel's eyes were a stormy gray as he raked his gaze over Kiara's body and curled his lips back like the sight of her disgusted him. "Did Nykyrian ever tell you how they train assassins for the League?"

He was mad! Kiara stared at him in disbelief, unable to comprehend his friendly tone after what he had just done to his wife.

Aksel reached out a cold hand and touched her cheek. "They take you for three months and keep you isolated," he continued, disregarding her attempts to pull away. "You're sent into holo-rooms where they play your worst fears over and over again until you no longer fear anything."

His fingers traced the line of her chin. Kiara shivered, wishing she could do something other than stand before him in helpless expectation.

Having no other recourse, she spit at him. A smile curved his lips at her reaction. He wiped his cheek, his eyes never wavering from hers.

As if she hadn't done a thing, Aksel continued talking in that eerie, deadpan voice. "They only feed you raw meat and while you eat it, they play tapes of dying victims

begging for their lives."

He held his hand out in front of her face. Kiara took a step back, the wall blocking her retreat.

"With this hand, I could rip your throat out." He snatched her closer to him and placed his hand over her neck. Kiara waited for him to demonstrate his point. But he didn't.

Instead, his cold voice droned on, "The hybrid could tear out your heart with *his* bare hands. Does that excite you?"

"You sicken me!"

Aksel gave her a twisted smile, his hand stroking her cheek. "Did Nykyrian tell you he killed two instructors before he finished training? He did, you know." His hand fell away and he turned her to face him, his hands resting on her hips. "He was always better at killing, but I was the one who enjoyed it the most!"

His laughter rang out, chilling Kiara.

"Nykyrian would sit for hours after a mission, staring into space, feeling guilty," he sneered the word like it was the worst thing imaginable. "I was a true warrior. I went out afterwards celebrating my glory."

His hands tightened around her waist. Kiara bit her lips, wanting somehow to strike out at him.

"So why did *my* father brag about his half-bred foundling?" Aksel snarled, his face a mask of contorted rage. "It wasn't my kills he talked about with pride. It was always Nykyrian's. Always Nykyrian's!"

Kiara cried out as his hands bit into her flesh.

Aksel shoved her back against the wall with a solid thud that knocked her breath from her. He leaned his body against hers and she could feel his desire bulging against her stomach. Sweat beaded on her body as Kiara feared his next move. He ripped the top of her dress open. Kiara screamed, struggling against him in desperation.

"I should take you now," Aksel said in a ragged whisper, running his hand over the top of her corslet, oblivious to her cringing. "But I won't. That wouldn't be any fun." He stepped back and smiled at her. "When the hybrid comes for you, I have a special place

for him to watch me rape you. Then you can watch me cut off pieces of his body until there's nothing left but his ear which I shall gladly give to you as a token to remember him by."

"You're insane!" Kiara said, kicking out at him with her legs.

"I've never known an assassin who wasn't," he said with a laugh, then strolled casually out of the room.

Sobs racked Kiara's body. She pulled against her chains, but all she succeeded in doing was tearing the flesh off her wrists. There had to be some way she could escape. Some way she could warn Nykyrian.

Fervently, she prayed for an answer.

Fifteen

Nykyrian and Caillen sat in the council room of the OMG's base, reviewing data about Oksana. Hauk paced the floor behind them, his boots clicking an eerie beat against the porcelain floor that ate at Nykyrian's tolerance. Jayne and Darling sat across the room, listening to him and Caillen argue battle procedures.

Nykyrian clenched his teeth in frustration, sat back in his chair and stared at the statistic sheets in front of him. A frontal assault would end in complete annihilation, and a covert attack was almost as risky. Aksel's men knew each other well enough to spot a stranger immediately. At this rate, they'd never get Kiara out alive.

Caillen sat back in his chair, a smile spreading across his face as he drummed his fingers against the table. "You know, I've been making deliveries to Netan Raananah. If I were to fake a shipment to him, I could smuggle you guys into Aksel's base."

Nykyrian frowned. "How could you get us through the scanners?"

Caillen tilted his chair back on two legs and put his hands behind his head, that cocky grin Nykyrian despised, breaking across his face. "You're going to regret everything nasty you've ever said about my ship. The *Malta* is equipped with special jammers no system in existence can pick up on. They'll have to do a personal inspection to verify my cargo." He laughed. "Remember guys, I am a *third* generation smuggler!"

Hauk snorted. "Yeah well, once we're in, they're not going to just let us sail right back out. The *Malia* is too fragile and slow to outrun a fighter."

Caillen rubbed his jaw as he thought about Hauk's words. "Her cargo hold will carry two fighters, plus passengers."

Nykyrian nodded in agreement. This was the first plan they had come up with that stood even a breath of a chance. "That's it, then."

Darling cocked his eyebrow at Nykyrian. "Aren't you forgetting something? How do we get out once we're in there?"

Nykyrian studied Darling's face. A million thoughts passed through his mind. "It's me they want. You and Caillen will stay on board the *Malia* and monitor Aksel's men and the base's corridors. Hauk will grab Kiara, get her inside his fighter, and take her to safety. Jayne will be waiting to cover them once they're out of Oksana's orbit."

"And what about you?" Hauk asked roughly.

"I'm bait. I'll fly out in the opposite direction with my fighter. The bulk of Aksel's troops will follow me." Nykyrian narrowed his eyes at Hauk. "You will not engage any fighter at any time. You will keep your engines full throttle. Let Jayne take care of whatever follows you."

Nykyrian looked back at Caillen. "You and Darling need to rig additional power to the *Malia* to make sure she can get out as fast as you can pilot her. She's too big to dogfight."

Nykyrian tossed the print-outs to Darling. "Aksel will probably be holding Kiara in his office. I'll need a dummy bomb. Can you do it within the hour?"

"Is my hair red?"

Nykyrian stood. "Then we prepare."

Jayne, Caillen, and Darling left. Hauk stayed behind with a face that reminded Nykyrian of Rachol's doom-and-gloom attitude. Disregarding him, Nykyrian pulled his Nemesis gear from the closet.

"You're not planning on coming back, are you?"

Nykyrian paused. With a deep sigh, he pulled his boots out of the closet and sat them on the floor. "I'm good, but no one's good enough to survive the number of fighters that'll

be after me."

Hauk tapped his fingers against the tabletop in a pulsing rhythm that set Nykyrian's teeth on edge. "Why not send Kiara back in the *Malia* and let me fly out with you to fight?"

Nykyrian unbuttoned his shirt. "The *Malia* might get caught. I trust Darling and Cailen to make their way safely home. I *need* you to see Kiara makes it back to her father intact."

"I'd rather keep you alive."

"Kiara is my life," Nykyrian whispered. He sat down in his chair and placed his head in his hands.

This was the only way that made sense. If he were dead, Kiara would be free, he would be free. Strangely, he felt no remorse. Somehow it felt right.

Nykyrian looked at the ring on his smallest finger, the ring he had bought before he went to see Kiara the first time after her father shot him, the ring he had intended to give her as a wedding band, but couldn't bring himself to do it. The rows of red griata stones, surrounded by a gold band, glinted in the dim light.

He pulled the ring off and handed it to Hauk. "I want you to give this to Kiara."

Hauk studied it, then looked at him with a severe frown. "This is a wedding ring."

"I know. We were married according to Andarion custom a few months ago."

Hauk closed his eyes and Nykyrian knew he wanted to curse.

"I'm depending on you to make sure she's recognized as my widow." Nykyrian licked his suddenly dry lips. "If I don't get the chance, tell her I love her, that I've always loved her."

Hauk's eyes teared. "I can't do this," he said in a ragged voice.

Nykyrian cleared his throat of the lump. "We've had too many missions together for you to soften now."

Hauk clenched his teeth and looked away. "You always planned to come back from those missions."

Nykyrian scoffed. "Not really. This is the first time in my life I actually want to return alive. Pretty damned ironic, isn't it?"

Hauk fastened the ring inside his pocket. "What do you want me to tell Rachol?"

Nykyrian smirked, jerking his boots off. "Ask him where the hell he was when I needed him most."

Hauk's eyes widened incredulously.

Nykyrian chuckled. "I'm only kidding. If you said that, he'd start drinking again. Since he was the driving force behind the OMG, I leave it for him to run." Nykyrian stood and reached for his clothes. "Also tell him the lorinas are his to coddle."

Hauk laughed. "He might dig up your body just to shoot you for that!"

Nykyrian paused at the thought. He just hoped Aksel left enough of him *to* bury.

* * *

Caillen sat at the control panel of the *Malia*, waiting for clearance to enter Aksel's base. He smiled at the six crates of damson, Nykyrian had graciously donated to add realism to the scam.

The orange light on his board flashed, warning him the probe scanners were on. Pushing in a series of buttons, he smiled as the jammers hummed on.

"Take that you *swixtas*." He laughed.

"*Malia* cleared," the controller's voice echoed. "Dock in bay eight."

Caillen complied. He loved his job. There was nothing like extreme danger to get the blood pumping and the brain juices flowing.

Several soldiers stood by, waiting to board his ship. Caillen shook his head, and double-checked the settings on his control panel.

He walked past where Nykyrian and the rest were hidden, wasting time. The longer the guards had to wait, the more anxious they'd become. It was a childish ploy, but it always served to unnerve sentries. With a prayer for success, Caillen slowly lowered the ramp. He opened the hatch and stared down the barrel of a laser rifle.

"Problem?" he asked calmly.

"We're expecting Quiakides," the helmeted soldier snarled.

Caillen burst into laughter. "Is that you, Marek?"

The soldier shifted nervously before pulling his helmet off. "Yes."

Caillen shoved the barrel away from his face and sauntered back inside his ship. The other soldiers filed on board and set about searching his cargo. "Buy a clue. What would I be doing with Quiakides? Hasn't anyone bothered to tell you we don't get along?"

"You run missions for him."

Caillen dropped his mouth sarcastically. "Duh! I'd run missions for the devil as long as he pays me on time."

"That's why we're searching you."

Caillen laughed again. "Like Quiakides can't afford a better mode of transportation than this dilapidated junk heap. Forget a clue, buy a brain."

Marek glanced around the ship. "Where's Kasen?"

Caillen shrugged. "Off with Shahara."

The other soldiers returned, shaking their heads. "He's clean."

Marek nodded. "You looking for Netan?"

"Yeah, where is he?"

"He's with Aksel," Marek said, replacing his helmet. "I'll tell him you're here."

Caillen took a deep breath, grateful the ruse had worked. "Do it. I don't have a lot of patience. If he doesn't get here quick, I'm leaving."

Marek motioned his group of soldiers off the ship.

"Hey," Caillen mischievously called down the ramp after him. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to lock my systems down while I wait. I just can't trust you mercenaries,

you guys are a rotten group."

He saw Marek stiffen, but he didn't say a word in reply.

Caillen smiled in self-satisfaction. He locked the hatch, then ran to free the group from their hiding panels in the walls.

Darling moved to the front to monitor communications.

"You'll have to rush," Caillen said to Nykyrian who checked his blaster's charge level. "If Netan stays on board too long, they'll get suspicious."

Nykyrian nodded, his stomach knotting. He had to succeed. Looking at Hauk, they took positions on opposite sides of the hatch, ready to pounce.

Their wait was short. Netan must have really been in the mood to get flagged. As it was, he ended up unnaturally unconscious.

Caillen opened the hatch just enough for Nykyrian and Hauk to squeeze through. Nykyrian's heart pounded against his ribs. He had to get Kiara out.

With practiced ease, they made their way out of the bay and down the hallway, Darling instructing their path via a headset and map inside the *Malta*.

Darling's voice talking to him in his headset soothed some of the tenseness out of him. Nykyrian knew he could rely on his friends to get Kiara to safety.

"Two more corridors, then Aksel's office is on your left," Darling instructed.

Hauk moved.

"Wait!" Darling warned.

Nykyrian's heart skipped a beat.

"One being coming down the hall up ahead. There's a door behind you Kip, use it."

Nykyrian led the way into the dark room. "I hate this," he hissed to Hauk.

Hauk nodded in agreement.

After a few seconds, Darling's voice returned. "Clear all the way. Move."

Nykyrian opened the door. They made their way to Aksel's office. He tried the door's security code, but it wouldn't budge. "Damn!"

"What?" Hauk asked, scanning the hallway.

"Aksel must have changed codes." Stifling his temper, Nykyrian quickly rewired the lock and raised the door.

Nykyrian saw Kiara first. Her jubilant face looked up at him with adoring eyes that cut through to his soul. He ran across the room and jerked the chains out of their hook in the ceiling. Relief coursed through him as he picked the locks and freed her wrists from the metal cuffs.

His eyes hardened as he noticed the tear in her dress. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," she sobbed, holding him close. "He was waiting for you."

Nykyrian kissed her, his arms tight around her waist while he thanked God she was safe. She trembled in his arms like a frightened gimfry and he vowed once more to see Aksel pay for this with his life!

"Come on, we don't have time!" Hauk said from behind him.

Nykyrian moved away from her. Hauk was right. Pulling his jacket off, he wrapped it around Kiara.

"Where's Aksel?" Nykyrian asked her.

"I don't know," she whispered, touching his face. "He left a few minutes ago."

Hauk cleared his throat and pulled at Nykyrian's shoulder. "You need to see this."

Nykyrian turned around, then went numb. For the first time, he noticed Driana lying on the floor. He crossed the room to stand over Driana's body.

"She's dead," Hauk confirmed, stooping to feel for her pulse.

Nykyrian looked back at Kiara in confusion over the grisly sight. "What happened?"

Kiara covered her trembling lips with her hands. "She tried to kill Aksel, and he beat her to death."

Nykyrian moved back to Kiara. She fell against him, shaking. Nykyrian held her tightly, knowing this would be his last time to ever touch her. "You're safe now, *shona*. But we have to hurry."

Handing Kiara over to Hauk's arms, he adjusted his headset. "Darling, report."

"You're clear the whole way back."

He nodded to Hauk. "Get her home."

Hauk hesitated. He gave Nykyrian a look that told him how reluctant Hauk was to leave him to his own defenses. "Walk with peace," Hauk said quietly before dragging Kiara out of the room behind him.

Nykyrian thought over the old League phrase. He finally understood how an assassin could walk in peace. With a sigh, he welcomed the peaceful slumber of death. He gave them a good head start. Hauk would take care of Kiara.

This was the only solution.

"Walk with peace," he repeated and opened the door. Nykyrian ran down the hallway back toward the bay.

"Kip, to the right!" Darling's voice shouted.

Nykyrian whirled, his hand drawing his blaster. Too late. The shot ripped through his shoulder with a painful sear. Returning the fire, Nykyrian watched the soldier crumple.

Alarms blared and flashed all around him. Nykyrian ran full speed, trying to get to his ship before the area was sealed off. The blast shield to the bay rumbled closed. Falling into a roll, Nykyrian barely made it under the heavy steel before the huge door slammed shut with a loud crash.

Unfortunately, he stopped rolling right at Aksel's feet.

"Still predictable," Aksel sneered, clicking back the release of his blaster as he looked at Nykyrian disgustedly. "I knew one day your sense of valor and fair play would be your death."

Nykyrian rose slowly to his feet.

"Kiara's safe," Darling said in his ear. "Detonation in four . . . three . . ."

"You're so disappointing," Aksel said, leveling his blaster at Nykyrian's head.

The gun and dummy charge fired simultaneously. Nykyrian dodged the blaster's shot, then rushed Aksel. Catching Aksel about the waist, he tumbled to the ground. Aksel brought his legs up and kicked Nykyrian back. Aksel threw himself on top of Nykyrian at the same moment Hauk launched his fighter.

Nykyrian took advantage of the distraction and landed a solid fist into Aksel's jaw. With a curse, Aksel reeled backward. Not waiting to see Aksel land, Nykyrian bolted to the *Malta*. As quickly as he could, Nykyrian climbed up the small manhole underneath the craft.

"Shields up!" Caillen called.

Nykyrian lay on the floor, his shoulder throbbing.

"They're scrambling fighters," Darling warned.

Forcing the pain from his mind, Nykyrian knew he had to launch before they went after Kiara.

Within seconds, he was inside the *Arcana*, his engines roaring. He launched and flew off in the opposite direction from Hauk.

"Fighters are changing course and heading straight for you. Three remain after Hauk," Darling said. "It looks safe for us, we're out of here."

Nykyrian's heart pounded. He knew Jayne could handle three fighters with little trouble, but his scanners glowed almost solid white from the amount of ships trailing him.

"Surrender!" Aksel's voice snarled through his comlink.

Nykyrian slowed his speed. This was what he had always wanted. A warrior's funeral. He would die like a man, in a brief burst of light. "I don't think so."

"You're outnumbered," Aksel said. "I have twenty ships after you!"

Nykyrian snorted in bitter amusement. "Do you want me to applaud your math skills? You have to catch me first, and I don't think you have one pilot capable of it," Nykyrian goaded, knowing Aksel would break away from the squadron and engage him one on one

"Talk about predictable," Nykyrian whispered as Aksel's fighter broke formation and dropped in behind him.

He turned his ship about and prepared for the fight. Kiara would be safe. An icy, calm lucidity descended on him. Aksel shot first.

Nykyrian barely had time to dodge the blast of color that skidded past his ship into the darkness of space. Three more shots were fired in rapid pulses. Nykyrian gripped his shifter, the leather of his gloves creaking.

The other fighters were moving in. He had to destroy Aksel first. Only then would Kiara be safe. Taking the opening, Nykyrian fired his ion canon.

In one brief flash of orange light, Aksel's ship disintegrated. Nykyrian took a deep breath. The rest of the fighters surrounded him.

* * *

Kiara twitched in Hauk's lap. "We have to go back!" she shouted, her limbs trembling in fear.

"My orders are to get you to safety," he reiterated for the fifth time and for the fifth time, Kiara wanted to choke him.

"Don't you care?"

His hand jerked the throttle, the ship listed sideways in response. "I care more than you can imagine, but I also made a promise to him, and I'd open a vein before I'd break it!" With another angry jerk, he righted their craft.

Kiara sat back, her tears scalding her cheeks. "He's out there alone," she whispered, feeling sick to her stomach.

"Jayne's gone back for him. He'll be all right."

Kiara heard the doubt underlying his words. She prayed as hard as she could. Nykyrian had to come back, he had to. She blinked in semi-relief as Gouran finally came into view.

"Commander Biardi?" Hauk asked.

"Yes." Kiara recognized the worried voice of her father.

"I have Kiara, but I need a squadron of fighters. One of our pilots is in danger. If I send you the coordinates, will you assist us?"

Silence greeted the request.

Kiara's anger built to a dizzying height. "Father, if you love me at all, you will do what he asks."

"Very well."

In unison, they breathed a sigh of relief.

Hauk programmed the information into the computer. As they neared Gouran's bay, they were passed by a squadron of fighters on their way to help Nykyrian.

Tiarun met them in the hanger after they docked. Kiara threw herself into his arms, grateful for the support, but wishing it was Nykyrian who held her.

Hauk jumped down from his ship and approached her father in steady, predatory strides. "Sir, I request another ship to join your troops. I haven't the fuel to return in mine."

Her father glanced at her, his arms tightening around her shoulders. To her relief, he nodded. "There are three ships fully fueled on the other side of yours."

Hauk gave a curt nod before heading off to them.

"Hauk!" Kiara ran after him.

He paused and waited until she caught up to him. Her lips trembled as she stared at his Andarion eyes. There was only one thing she wanted, one thing left to wish for. "Bring Nykyrian back to me."

He looked past her shoulder to where her father stood. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a griata ring and handed it to her. "Nykyrian wanted me to give you this."

Kiara bit back her tears as she stared at the beautiful wedding ring Hauk dropped into her palm.

"He also wanted me to tell you he loves you."

Her tears broke into a soul-wrenching sob. "Please save him," she cried, throwing her arms around Hauk's neck. "He has to come home!"

Hauk nodded, then unwound her arms and darted to the nearest fighter.

Kiara slid the cold ring onto her third finger, her fears and worries choking her. The ring was a perfect fit, just like Nykyrian's love.

She turned around and joined her father, wishing she were a little girl again and he could make everything all right just by kissing her hurt and holding her close. But to her deepest regret, those days were long past.

"Let me take you home," her father said quietly, draping his arm over her shoulders.

Kiara shook her head. "I have to know what's going on. Take me to the control room."

Despite a skeptical look, he did as she asked.

Silent, Kiara sat listening to the pilots' voices as they engaged Aksel's men. She prayed for a miracle.

Hauk thought he would never get to the battle. In a weird way, he was right. By the time he met up with the squadron, the battle was over. His heart thundered as he surveyed the ships, looking for Nykyrian's.

Flicking open the channel to ask Jayne about Nykyrian's fate, he spied the *Arcana*. Four Gourish fighters surrounded the disabled craft.

"Nykyrian?" His heart lodged painfully in his throat.

". . . Fine . . . Hurt . . ."

Frowning, Hauk surveyed the damage done to Nykyrian's ship. Sparks popped, only to

be extinguished in the vacuum of space. From what he could see, it appeared only one engine was functioning. He had no idea how Nykyrian could land the ship in its current condition. "Do you need a tractor beam to help you land?"

"No . . . Ship . . . Destroy . . ."

Hauk could barely understand the broken, garbled words. He let out a fierce curse, remembering the ship couldn't be pulled in. If they tried, it would self-destruct.

One of the Gourish fighters almost hit the *Arcana* as it listed to one side. Hauk clenched his teeth. Nykyrian wasn't going to make it back.

Nykyrian remained silent. His communications system was malfunctioning and he could only catch snatches of conversations from the pilots around him. He couldn't believe he was still alive. After he had killed Aksel, the rest of Aksel's men had blasted a dozen or more holes in his ship.

A strange catharsis had formed in his mind after the battle, and somehow all his past sins ceased to bother him.

He stared at his control panel which was lit up by every warning system on board. It was a miracle he even had enough directionals left to fly with.

He thought about Kiara and their baby. If he could have one wish, it would be to see his baby born, to hold Kiara one last time. He sighed, a knot forming in his chest. From the beginning, he had known some things were not his to have.

The planet loomed before him.

He rubbed his hand down his injured arm. Blood soaked his uniform, but it no longer seemed to ache. Nykyrian stared at Gouran, wondering if Tiarun would order him detonated before he neared the bay. Most governments would. It was standard practice to prevent damage to valuable bays.

Nykyrian leaned his head back on the seat. His ears buzzed from the radio's static, but even so, he could swear he heard the tender, dulcet tone of Kiara's voice calling his name.

He headed into the bay, his hands automatically running through the landing procedure. Flipping switches and pulling gears, he couldn't get the fighter to slow at all. A chill ran over him as he entered the hanger at full speed.

In one last effort to save his life, he pulled the ejection switch over his head. The force of the seat's propulsion shot him up, but not fast enough for him to clear the rear stabilizer. The impact sent him into blackness.

Kiara came to her feet with a scream, her mind unable to believe what her eyes registered.

Nykyrian's ship embedded, then tore a hole through the bay's outer wall. Burning red and gold flames licked the craft and the length of the bay's floor and walls, explosions erupting all over. Fire units descended to extinguish the blaze.

"I knew I should have detonated that ship," her father growled beside her.

Horrified, Kiara gaped at him, then ran from the room. Her feet carried her into the heat of the bay as she shook from the emotions tearing at her. The scorching blaze stung her nose with its pungent odor and made her eyes water. She coughed, searching the wreckage with desperate eyes. Pieces of Nykyrian's ship were scattered everywhere. For a moment, she thought she would collapse.

There was nothing left whole. Nothing. Kiara fell to her knees, gripping the edge of the wall until her hand was numb. Pain racked her soul and she wanted to die. This couldn't be real. It wasn't supposed to end this way!

Her gaze drifted over the scattered pieces, the fire-bots, the flames, down the bay to the opening. Kiara blinked. It couldn't be.

A glimmer of hope sprouted as she saw Nykyrian lying at the opening of the bay. He was alive! Finding strength from an unknown source, she ran to him.

"Oh God!" she gasped, standing over his body. Kiara sank to her knees by his side, afraid to touch him. He lay on his back, perfectly still. His helmet was cracked and blistered.

Kiara reached a trembling hand out to touch the gaping wound in his side. Nykyrian's chest didn't appear to be moving at all. There was so much blood. Her lips twitched as panicked terror engulfed her.

Hauk knelt on the opposite side. He didn't look at her while he unfastened the lines securing Nykyrian's helmet to his uniform. When he removed it, her world tilted.

"No!" she cried, seeing the bluish tinge to Nykyrian's skin. She grasped his cold hand

which had somehow come free of its glove, to her breast and wiped the blood from Nykyrian's icy cheek.

A medical unit surrounded them, forcing Kiara away. In a daze, she staggered back, her mind too overwhelmed by grief and pain to think.

Hauk began shouting, but his words were unintelligible to her, as was everything happening around her. A fog clouded her hearing, her sight, and for a moment, she wondered if this was what death felt like.

Suddenly, her father was there, holding her.

For some reason, her tears stopped and a strange lucidity invaded her grief as she watched the medics rip open Nykyrian's uniform and attach a series of machines to him. It was like watching actors in a play moving to a script she didn't know the ending to. None of it seemed real.

Kiara looked at her father. "You should call his parents and tell them," she said in a hollow voice. "Emperor Aros and Princess Cairistiona. Please tell them. I ... I don't think I can."

By the look on her father's face, Kiara knew he thought she had gone mad. Maybe she had.

"Please call them," she said again. "I have to go with him." Her heart shattering into tiny pieces, Kiara entered the medical unit and went with them to the hospital.

Sixteen

Kiara sat in the waiting room of the hospital staring out the window. Nykyrian had been in surgery for over six hours, and as each new second ticked by, Kiara felt her hopes diminish with it.

Thia lay asleep in her lap, tears still nestled in her closed lashes. Telling the little girl about her mother's death and about the father she'd only met once, had been one of the hardest things Kiara had ever done.

She sighed, looking around the room. Jayne sat across from her, along with Cailen and Darling. Hauk just paced the hallway, saying nothing.

Nykyrian's parents were huddled with her father at the other end of the room. They were a somber group and Kiara couldn't help but wonder what Nykyrian would say if he could see them.

She held her left hand up before her, letting the dawning rays of the sun play across the red griata stones. She would give up everything she owned and ever aspired to if she could have Nykyrian back with her. She didn't even care if he were crippled, just as long as she had *him*.

Kiara drew a trembling breath. She held Thia close as a balm against her grief, and smoothed the ruffled blond curls off her little, chubby cheeks.

The doors opened at the end of the waiting room.

She looked up expecting to see the doctor, shocked to see Rachol entering the waiting room with a gorgeous redheaded woman. Caillen got up and stopped the redhead before she reached her. Rachol came straight to Kiara and knelt at her feet.

"How are you doing?" he asked, concern etched into his face as he gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"Not very well," she answered, tears coursing down her cheeks.

His lips trembled. "I'm so sorry. I should have been there. I could've stopped him."

Kiara touched his cheek with a gentle caress. She knew Rachol ached as much as she did. "You know better, Rachol. Nykyrian's far too stubborn to have listened to you. I have a feeling if you were there, you'd be lying in the operating room next to him."

Rachol nodded, his lips in a tense line. "I guess you're right."

The redhead came forward hesitantly. "Rachol," she spoke in a soft, lilting accent. "I'm not very good with hospitals. Are you going to be all right?"

Rachol looked up at her, his eyes dark in pain. "Sure," he said, and took a seat beside Kiara.

The redhead nodded. "I'll be back in a little bit to check on you. If you need me, I'll be at my flat."

Kiara followed the woman's graceful walk with her eyes. The redhead's carriage

reminded her of a dancer. "Who is she?" she asked Rachol.

He sighed. "Shahara Dagan."

Kiara's eyes widened in surprise. "The assassin who was out to kill you and Nykyrian?"

He nodded with a weary sigh. "It's a long story," he answered and leaned his head back against the wall.

They were forced to wait another hour before a doctor finally came out. He stopped at Hauk who pointed him back to Kiara. Kiara watched the doctor move toward her with cold apprehension, her heart pounding in fear at what he might say. Rachol held her hand.

"Mistress Quiakides?"

Kiara nodded, unable to speak past the lump blocking her throat.

"He's out of surgery, but he's still got a long fight ahead of him. There was a lot of damage done." His somber, pity-filled eyes tore at her. "In all honesty, I don't know how he's lived until now. I've never seen anyone survive surgery with the type of injuries he's sustained."

With every word, Kiara's throat tightened more.

"If you like, you may stay in his room," the doctor said quietly. "It might increase his chance of survival if someone he's close to stays with him."

"Can he hear me?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"I doubt he can understand you, but he'll know you're there."

Jayne took Thia from her arms. "I'll take her home to stay with my children. When he's better, I'll bring her back."

Kiara offered her a shaky smile, grateful for the kindness.

"I'll go with you," Rachol said from beside her.

Patting Rachol's hand, Kiara stood and followed the doctor, Rachol by her side. Hauk relayed the doctor's words to the rest of the waiting group.

The doctor opened the door to Nykyrian's room. Kiara was tempted to scream, only her tight, parched throat kept any sound from leaving her lips. Nykyrian lay on the bed with a gamut of wires and tubes linking his body into several machines. He looked so pale. Kiara trembled, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"We had to wire his nervous system back together," the doctor said, pulling a chair out for her. "There's a good chance he'll be paralyzed if he wakes." The doctor cleared his throat. "If he makes it through the day, he should have a good chance for recovery."

Rachol pulled him outside. Hearing the door close behind them, Kiara made her way to the bed.

"Nykyrian," she whispered, her tears falling down her cheeks, dripping onto his arm. "Don't leave me." She touched the spot on his cold skin where her tears fell, "I won't forgive you if you leave me alone."

She stared at his beautiful face which was swollen and red where they had fused skin back together over his injuries.

Gingerly, she ran her fingers over his finely arched brows, wishing he would open his eyes and look at her. At the moment, she would even be grateful for one of his fierce snarls.

The door opened and Rachol and Hauk came in. Reluctantly, Kiara released Nykyrian's hand and sat in the chair by the bed to wait and pray for improvement.

The week passed slowly as Kiara waited for a sign of recovery. Everyone had urged her at different times to leave the room for a little while and sleep in a decent bed, or eat a hot meal, but she wouldn't, couldn't, do it.

On the eighth day, she dozed fretfully in her chair. A soft moan woke her. Kiara jolted up, her heart pounding. She looked over to Nykyrian who stared at her with open eyes. Crying in delight, she rushed to him.

"Nykyrian!" she sobbed, tears of relief falling down her cheeks. "How do you feel?"

He swallowed and tried to clear his throat. "Like I just fought a Tourah beast and lost," he rasped. He tried to smile for her, but couldn't quite make it.

Kiara didn't mind. At the moment, she thought she could fly. Biting her lip, she stared at the gorgeous green eyes she had feared he would never open again.

"I'll get the doctor," she said, squeezing his hand before dashing from the room.

Once outside, she hurriedly spread the news to his friends and family, seeking the doctor as fast as she could.

She returned to her husband. His parents hovered over him with well wishes and love. Warmth rushed over her at the sight.

The doctor shooed them out.

With one last smile to her Nykyrian, Kiara followed his parents out of the room. Everyone chattered enthusiastically while they waited to hear the doctor's final verdict. Kiara bit her nails, praying for Nykyrian.

An hour later, the doctor left the room with a wide smile. Her heart pounded with hope. "He'll be fine," the doctor said, stopping before her. "In fact, he should be able to walk normally after a few therapy sessions. He's a very lucky man."

No, Kiara thought to herself, I'm a lucky woman. She was weak with relief as her father drew her into his arms and held her tightly.

There was a God and he loved her!

Smiling, Kiara grabbed Cairistiona's hand and squeezed.

* * *

Kiara watched Nykyrian wrestle on the floor with Thia, her heart light at the way Nykyrian "helped" Thia with her homework. Somehow their lessons always ended up in play.

Kiara smiled, knowing he was a good father and a wonderful husband.

Sunlight poured brightly through the doors of the palace's library. Six months had passed since Nykyrian left the hospital, and during that time, they had left the cozy little house nestled among the stars to live with Nykyrian's father, where Nykyrian claimed she and Thia had protection from the *boowahs* who might harm them.

The two of them laughed as they rolled around on the floor. Thia shrieked, then ran away, the lorinas following her as she sprinted up the stairs.

A wide smile curved Kiara's lips as she met Nykyrian's gaze. "You must have tickled her."

Nykyrian laughed. Grabbing his cane, he pulled himself to his feet. He still walked with a pronounced limp, but he was alive and well.

"Are you glad Thia's with us?" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

Kiara grunted as her rounded belly collided with his firm, muscular chest. She was two weeks overdue. "At the moment, I wish this one would join us."

Nykyrian's dimples flashed.

Kiara touched the deep indentations, hoping their baby had a set as well. "I'm happy Thia's here. She told me yesterday she wanted a brother this time, so he could help her beat you up, and a sister the next time, so she would have someone to play dolls with."

One corner of his mouth lifted. "I'm willing to accommodate her."

Warm happiness consumed Kiara. "I am too. At least as long as I don't have to raise them without you."

His arms tightened around her. "I'm retired. I swear I'll never take another mission again."

Kiara gave him a doubting stare. "Not even if Rachol comes in and begs you?"

He kissed her lightly on the lips. "I love you," he whispered.

Kiara's breath caught in her throat. Her lips trembled as he finally spoke the words she needed to hear. "What?" she said, wanting him to repeat them.

"I love you, *mu shona*, and I will never again leave you."

Kiara smiled at him, knowing that this time, they were together forever.