



Sweet Surrender (The Pruxnae #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The moment mercenary-soldier Jos Q'Mhel lays eyes on former Queen's Guard Tyelu af Alna, he knows he has to have her, no matter the cost.

When he follows her to a conference devoted to tackling the growing alien threat, he pursues her relentlessly, despite objections from his fellow Q-mercs. The Lady Warrior has ice running through her veins, they say, and if Jos isn't careful, Tyelu could shatter his heart.

Tyelu has reservations of her own. Jos is a spacer through and through, called by duty and honor to protect those who can't protect themselves. But watching her brother find love with his kidnapped bride ignited a bone-deep loneliness within her. Jos, at least, isn't scared off by her haughty reserve, by the secrets in her past, or by the cousin who wants nothing more than to steal Tyelu's place as her father's successor.

But even as they work to overcome the barriers they face, another looms before them: the deadly alien monsters known as Sweepers have ramped up their attacks on ships and planets alike, placing Tyelu and Jos in a danger so great, it threatens to destroy them both.

Can they trust each other long enough to find love, or will they forever be torn apart by the ravages of war?

Don't miss this exciting Space Opera Romance!

Total Pages (Source): 24

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Seventeen Standard Days Ago

Garla System, near the planet Tersii

The Yarinska's cargo bay was a teeming mass of thick-limbed Sweepers and blaring sirens. Tyelu af Alna, former Queen's Guard, heir to the kafh of Myunad Province, ducked behind a plasteen crate filled with the belongings of an entire Tersii family, fumbling with her blaster's battery pack.

Kraden Sweepers. The journey from Abyw, her home planet, to her new next sister's planet had been uneventful, peaceful even, a simple trade run. Drop off wood for reconstruction of the Sweeper-devastated towns, pick up refugees, especially much-needed women of child-bearing age, and go back home again.

Nothing was ever as easy as it should be.

Sweepers had ambushed them near a trading post built into the terrain of a quasi-habitable moon, or maybe they'd ambushed the Sweepers. Tyelu wasn't clear on the details and she really didn't care. Her adopted brother Ryn was on the other side of the cargo bay attempting to stem the tide of Sweepers flooding onto Yarinska, and here she, a trained warrior, sat fighting to get her best weapon in working order.

Thank Fryw Mother Jakuv couldn't see her now.

Enel ab Awd, the second of three Pruxn? onboard Yarinska, stumbled over the cargo bay's hatch and skidded across the floor toward her, and barely missed being fried by fire from a handheld laser cannon. He flopped down beside her and stuffed his blaster

into her lap. “Here,” he said. “I’ll handle the battery packs if you’ll do the shooting.”

Tyelu slid a side-eyed glance at him. Every Pruxn? trained in the warrior arts to one degree or another, if for no other reason than to triumph at the Choosing when the time came to take a mate. She’d had special training, true, thanks to her mother’s heritage, and even spent time in the personal guard of Banam’s Queen during her time on Zinod, her mother’s home world.

But for a Pruxn? male to hand over a working weapon? It was nearly unthinkable.

Enel took the broken blaster from her without another word, and Tyelu let it go. They were in the middle of a crisis. She could rag him about the weapon later.

Ziri Mokuru, Ryn’s mate, appeared in the cargo bay’s open hatch, her slate blue eyes wide in her too pale face. “Ryn!” she screamed as she launched herself into the cargo bay.

Tyelu peeked over the top of the crate and muttered a curse under her breath. A Sweeper had pierced Ryn through his chest with a metal-plated tentacle and held her brother high off the ground. Ryn hung limply, his arms and legs dangling as blood dripped steadily out of the wound.

Without thinking, Tyelu aimed the fresh blaster and popped off a short burst. Red light streaked past Ziri’s head and thumped into the Sweeper, knocking it back a pace. Ziri flinched to the side, away from Ryn.

“Don’t stop!” Tyelu yelled. “Get Ryn out of the way. I’ll hold off these kraden Sweepers.”

Tyelu aimed more carefully after that, beginning with the Sweepers closest to her fallen brother and his mate, and steadily worked her way outward from there. Her

battery pack sizzled out of charge after a dozen well-placed shots. Enel dutifully held up the other blaster, and she exchanged one weapon for the other and fired again.

A crackling voice came over the intercom, barely audible over the screams of Sweepers. “Yarinska , cease fire and prepare to be boarded.”

Tyelu leaned her head back and whooped a war cry into the cacophony. “It’s about time.”

Enel muttered something beside her, but she was too relieved to care. Half a dozen humanoids popped into existence within the cargo bay, their matte gray armor rendering them nearly invisible in the chaos. Q mercenaries. Well, that was going to cost Ryn a pretty penny. Maybe some of the kafhs would cover it, considering the precious cargo Yarinska carried.

Marriage-minded female settlers, enough to mate fifty or more Pruxn?, willing women with strong backs and open hearts, some with daughters of their own. On a planet where female children were rarely conceived and even more rarely birthed, such a group would be a godsend.

The mercenaries made quick work of the Sweepers. As soon as the last alien had fallen, one of the mercenaries peeled off from the group and headed toward Ryn. Four others spread out and began prodding Sweepers.

The seventh clipped his weapon to his thigh, retracted his helmet, and ran a gloved hand over dark brown hair, ruffling it into spikes. He glanced around the cargo bay, then homed in on Tyelu, his gaze flat and even. “Jos Q’Mhel. We heard your distress call.”

Tyelu stood and skirted the container, ignoring Enel’s like movements. “Tyelu af Alna of Abyw. We appreciate your help, Q’Mhel.”

“Sweepers,” he said, as if that explained everything.

She shrugged. What did it matter how the mercenaries got there as long as they helped?

A moment later, she stood two ceg away from the Q’Mhel. He was tall, half a head taller than her at least, and she was no dainty maiden. His shoulders were broad under the fitted armor, his body finely honed, and his eyes bore into hers, steady and calm in the snowy complexion of his rectangular face.

Green eyes, murky like the River Mikto as it curled sluggishly around Elaria, the capital city of Banam.

Tyelu’s heart tightened in her chest and a nervous flutter settled in her stomach. She tamped down both reactions. The Q’Mhel was an attractive man, but he was a mercenary, a spacer through and through. She’d be a fool to let her heart fall to one such as him.

To cover her momentary lapse, she said, “These attacks are getting more frequent.”

The Q’Mhel rolled one armored shoulder and his gaze slid to the fallen Sweepers scattered throughout the cargo bay. “We’re working on it.”

Enel stepped up beside Tyelu and gently grasped her elbow. “The Tersii.”

Tyelu arched an eyebrow at the Q’Mhel. “We have civilians on board, refugees bound to Abyw from Tersii.”

The Q’Mhel’s gaze swung back to hers, and something flickered briefly in his beautiful eyes. “It’s safe enough now, if they’re willing to help with cleanup.”

Enel nodded. "I'll see to it."

As soon as he turned and left, the Q'Mhel said, "Your mate?"

Tyelu snorted out a laugh. "Hardly. He's a friend, here chasing after a mate of his own."

A slow smile tilted his mouth, barely touching his oddly colored eyes. "Not you?"

"No, not me."

"Good," he said, then the smile abruptly slid from his face and his gaze went distant. He touched the fingertips of one hand to his ear, nodded once, and said, "Excuse me."

He swiveled away from her without another word and strode through the dead Sweepers littering the cargo bay's floor. One by one, his team members fell in behind him. They reached the far side of the cargo bay and stopped in a spot free from debris and the dead. The Q'Mhel turned and faced her, slipped his helmet on, and then the six mercenaries winked out of sight.

Tyelu shook her head as she crossed the cargo bay, heading toward her fallen brother. Just before Q'Mhel's helmet covered his face, she could've sworn he winked at her. No matter. That was the last she'd see of him, and good riddance. She wanted a mate, but not so desperately she had to settle for a space drunk Q-merc with more arrogance than sense.

That settled, Tyelu knelt beside her brother and picked up where the mercenary-medic had left off, and shoved Jos Q'Mhel and his intriguing green eyes right out of her head.

The Present

Forro, on the planet Domor, Salah System

Jos Q'Mhel stood at attention just inside the doorway of the massive conference room. A long, elliptical table perched squarely in the middle, surrounded by twenty delegates representing a like number of planets in this sector. All had been attacked recently by the Sweepers and all were equally concerned about the escalation and timing of those attacks.

He'd burned every favor owed him to have his dal assigned to this duty.

His implant buzzed gently. Jos touched two fingers to a point just in front of his ear, activating it, and was completely unsurprised when his First spoke.

"Clear skies," Magda Bur-D'ga said, her rough voice harsh. "What are we doing on this backwater planet again?"

Jos tongued his sub-vocal speaker. "Guarding Q's delegate to these talks."

"Any griyet dal could do that. What're we doing here?"

"Chasing atmosphere," Gav D'ga, another member of the dal, chimed in. "The Q'Mhel's got a hard-on for a lubber."

"Cut it," Jos said. "We're on duty."

"Duty being eyes on a certain blonde," Gav said, evoking muted laughter from the other d'gas.

After a moment, Magda broke through. "You heard the Q'Mhel. Cut it, spacers."

The laughter died away as Jos glanced across the room at her and nodded so slightly,

no one else would notice. Magda was small in stature, square of shoulder, and large in fight. She wore her nearly orange hair spiked high in front and cropped close to her scalp around the sides, displaying the intricate scars ritually burned into her skin by the cult her parents had sold her to when she was a youngling, barely old enough to walk. It had taken her a long time to escape the cult, and when she had, she'd run straight and true to the Q.

Or as straight and true as a stowaway could run.

Jos had met her three seasons after his own training began. She'd somehow figured out who was in charge of letting off-worlders train with the Q and had camped out on that person's stoop waiting for a chance to beg an interview. Jos had found her instead, and they'd been friends ever since.

No, not friends. Friendship could fade away. What stretched between him and Magda, the loyalty and devotion, the dedication to each other and to their duty, that could never be broken.

Across the room, beyond the table of diplomats and rulers, Tyelu af Alna stood behind Abyw's tyrl, next to a glowering man of similar coloring. Jos's heart skipped a beat, and his implant's medsensor beeped a warning.

Jos ignored it. Gav was right: Jos had angled for this detail specifically so he could meet the lovely Pruxn? woman again. He'd never used his rank within Q's ruling class to snag an assignment before, and never would again.

But this woman...

Jos glanced at her, taking in the white-blond hair tightly coiled into a knot at her nape, the haughty set of her chin and shoulders, the eyes raking the room, and his heart skipped another beat. This woman was worth the risk.

His comm buzzed.

“Careful there, Q’Mhel,” Magda said. “Next thing, you’ll be planting your boots in dirt permanent like. Ain’t no way for a spacer to live.”

Jos chose not to react to the gentle teasing. Instead, he said, “Eyes up and open, Mags.”

She made a rude noise and closed the line.

Jos nearly smiled, maybe would’ve if his helmet were up, guarding his expression.

He clicked his implant and queried the members of his dal for a sound off. They were scattered over the grounds, with him and Magda standing guard in the meeting and the others stationed at various strategic points, watching for trouble.

He didn’t expect any, but considering that the planetary delegates were here to discuss the Sweeper problem, trouble could arise when they least expected it.

Across the way, Tyelu’s gaze slipped by. Had her eyes paused a tick too long as they swept across him?

No matter. She’d be in his bed by the end of the negotiations. Of that he had no doubt.

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Tyelu strode down the hallway, admiring the sleek, sophisticated lines of the Domorian architecture in an attempt to quell her irritation. Kraden meeting had barely gotten past the greeting phase when the Domorian in charge had called for a short break.

Time to change the guards anyway. Sigun had opted to attend the meetings himself. Given that he, as tyrl, headed the power structure on Abyw, the Council of Kafhs thought he should have a rotating force of guards, and had then pulled together a quasi-guard force from their own children and heirs.

As if any Pruxn? worthy of the name needed such protection.

Tyelu shook her head on a sigh. She'd needed to get off Abyw for a while. It was better than watching her brother Ryn and his mate Ziri cement their relationship, daily reminding Tyelu of her own failure in matters of the heart.

She'd tried, hadn't she? Tyelu flexed her fingers, easing some of the useless emotions roiling around in her gut. She'd tried to find a mate, scoured Abyw in the doing. A wasted effort. No one had truly caught her fancy.

Her heart clenched as eyes the color of the River Mikto popped into her mind. One man had caught her fancy, but not on Abyw, and not a man suitable to be her mate. What would a spacer like Jos Q'Mhel know of love?

Tyelu stopped in the middle of the corridor and glanced around. Her preoccupation had caused her to miss the lift to her level, and thoughts of him had swept her purpose right out of her head.

None of which would've happened if her father hadn't sent her here.

Cursing under her breath, she pivoted sharply on a booted heel and retraced her steps, found the appropriate lift, and stepped inside. Her father had his reasons, the prime one having to do with his desire to retire soon from his position as the kafh of Myunad Province. She was one of the natural choices to take his place, and not only because she was his daughter. Her time with the elite Queen's Guard on her mother's homeworld had taught her much about leadership and strategy, two qualities she could put to good use as a kafh.

The question was, did she truly want that responsibility?

Some would say that she, as a rare Abyw-born woman, was too precious a resource to risk in such a position.

Tyelu did not agree. Pruxn? women were bred for strength, or stolen because of it, as her mother had been, in the hopes of begetting children sturdy enough to endure the harsh Abywian climate.

The Q'Mhel would breed strong children.

She ignored the heat gathering in her loins and stepped out onto her level, right in front of her cousin Kodh ab Urga. Kodh, like many Pruxn? men, stood tall and proud, his burly strength evident beneath the tight-fitting uniform he wore. His dark blonde hair hung loose around his shoulders, save for two thin braids dangling from his temple.

He stared down at her past the slight bump in his thin nose. "Running late for your next shopping trip?"

Tyelu made a half-hearted effort to control an automatic snarl. Her father would

caution patience, her mother wisdom.

Tyelu wanted to rip him apart. Kodh had goaded and poked at her since they were children, more so since her return from her duty on Banam in the Queen's Guard. Being an adult hadn't changed his abrasive nature, merely the tactics he employed and the motivation behind his behavior. It was common knowledge that Kodh, as the son of Gared's eldest brother, coveted the position his uncle held over Myunad Provence. For some reason, he'd gotten it into his head that he was the better candidate to replace Tyelu's father.

But it wasn't up to Kodh. It was up to Gared, and he welcomed all interested parties, and a few reluctant ones as well.

Tyelu allowed her lips to curl into a disdainful smile. "Run along, Kodh. I haven't the time to babysit you."

She turned and walked away, proffering the insult of an unguarded back. Let him goad and poke. What did she care?

"One day, cousin," he said softly.

Tyelu sniffed. The implied threat merited neither comment nor action.

She continued down the hallway, basking in the soft light shining through the windows lining the corridor's curved outer wall. Outside, the day seemed bright and inviting. Forro, the host city, spread out across the coastal plain. White buildings decorated with long ribbons of greenery merged into sandy beaches abutting the nearly purple waters of Domor's sole ocean.

Tyelu paused outside her door, admiring the view. It had all the appearances of paradise. Such a beautiful, peaceful world had birthed the Domorians, an alien

species known for their calm temperaments and diplomatic demeanors.

Had Abyw's harsher clime been responsible for her own barbed personality, the restlessness she'd felt even as a child?

She shook her head. No. The Pruxn? were generally a warm, genial population. Quick to laugh, slow to anger, and nonetheless fiercely protective. Defenders, yes, but outside of the times when they were forced to seek mates off world, they did not instigate trouble.

Generally being the key word.

A flock of tiny, winged creatures flew by beyond the windowed wall. Tyelu followed their path through the crisply clear sky until they disappeared, then palmed her door open and stepped inside.

Lights rose gently, illuminating the living area and a man wearing the matte armor of a Q-merc standing at the far window with his back to her.

Tyelu closed the door, scowling. "How did you get in here?"

"Trade secret," Jos said without turning around. "From here, you have an excellent view of the entrance to the diplomatic section and the gardens where the diplomats prefer to gather."

That's why she'd chosen this room, though that was her own trade secret.

"It's a lovely room," she said in a tone her brother would recognize as a shade too calm. "What are you doing here?"

"That's obvious," Jos replied. "I wanted to see you."

“You saw me earlier, at the opening rounds.”

“In private.”

“Then you could have asked me to join you elsewhere.”

“But elsewhere doesn’t give me insight into your character and personality.”

What could he possibly learn about her from a room she would occupy for such a short time? “Do you ever take that armor off?”

As soon as the question popped out of her mouth, Tyelu wished it hadn’t. Think before you speak . Or at least control the temper behind her words.

Jos half-turned toward her, just enough for her to catch his faint smile. “Not while I’m on duty.”

His statement aroused genuine curiosity. The Q were such a mysterious people that they hid the location of their homeworld from outsiders. Getting to it, applying for training with them, were incredibly difficult tasks, possibly by design. Their mercenary-soldiers were elite units, some of the best-trained in this section of the galaxy. Even the Queen’s Guard couldn’t match them.

Tyelu strode across the room and sank into an oddly shaped couch the color of Domor’s sandy beaches. “Are you ever off duty?”

“Are you asking because you’re curious about the Q or because you want to spend time with me?”

Her heart leapt at the question, and she bit her tongue. “Are all Q’Mhel’s as forward as you?”

His smile stretched into a flirtatious grin. “You don’t have to worry about other Q’Mhels, princess.”

“I am not a princess,” she said, a dangerous edge underscoring the flat statement.

“It’s all in the attitude.” He turned fully forward, facing her. “Invite me to sit with you.”

“Why would I offer hospitality to an intruder?”

“Because this intruder saved your brother from a Sweeper.”

Tyelu huffed out a breath. The arrival of Jos’s dal on Yarinska had been timely, true. But how had he known her brother was on the ship?

“I can see your mind working,” Jos murmured. “Invite me to sit with you.”

She swept a hand to the other seating unit. “You’re free to sit if you wish.”

“Not there. Next to you.”

She huffed out another breath, this one accompanied by a short laugh. “What’s the difference?”

In two strides, he’d crossed the room to stand over her, not quite menacing, though his smile had slid away. “The difference, princess, is that from here, I can smell that subtle perfume you’re wearing, feel the warmth of your skin, hear the soft murmur of your heart.”

That heart tripped into a heady rhythm at his nearness, and her skin flushed. She curled her hand into a fist to keep it in her lap. “You demand much, for an uninvited

guest.”

“But not an unwelcome one.” He leaned near and slid an armored fingertip down her nose. “Beautiful. Prickly. Intriguing.”

The armor had been as warm as her skin, not the cold, impersonal alloy she’d expected. It startled her into a flirtatious, “Me or the yinga?”

He laughed and drew away. “Both. Have sex with me.”

The question halted the warm arousal growing in her gut as effectively as stepping into an Abywian winter. “I don’t have casual sex with strangers.”

“Who said anything about casual? I was hoping for a temporary alliance. Mutually beneficial.”

Her eyes narrowed and a spark of temper flared. “In other words, casual sex.”

He leaned over her again, putting their faces inches apart. “Fascinating. Do your eyes always brighten when you’re angry?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she bit out. “Are you finished insulting me?”

He cupped her face in his hand. “Never would I insult you, Tyelu af Alna.”

His lips brushed across her forehead, then he stepped back and, on some cue she couldn’t discern, disappeared.

Tyelu sucked in a shaky breath and slumped into the couch. No wonder his eyes haunted her. How could she forget a man such as him? Insolent, overbearing Q’Mhel.

Unaccountably, she smiled.

Jos popped into norm space in the transport deck of Apedemak , a cruiser outfitted specifically for the small, strategic missions carried out by independent dals. The crews of such ships had their own command structure within the Q's mercenary-soldier force, but when on missions, the captain answered to the dal's Q'Mhel.

For all intents and purposes, this was Jos's ship. So long as he bore the title of Q'Mhel, he could use it as he pleased.

Of course, he thought wryly, if he used Apedemak for anything other than official Q business, he'd be stripped of the Q'Mhel title, ousted from the Q-mercs, and possibly kicked off world by his family. Even his grandmother, the current taq, and his uncle, the High Commander of Q Command, couldn't save him from his parents' wrath.

The captain waited on the ship's transport deck, behind the crew member manning it. Gage Coppev was a slender man in his mid-thirties with a keen duty to service stamped into his sharp features. He ran an efficient ship, did Coppev. Jos had never had cause to complain, and even considered the other man a friend.

Jos retracted his helmet. "You have a report, Captain?"

Coppev stepped forward and smiled grimly. "Our sweeps indicate a nest of Sweeper ships skirting the edges of this system. One parent ship, three child ships, by the size of them."

Jos's mouth tightened. "Any indications that they're headed toward us?"

"Negative." Coppev hesitated, then added, "Our scans of local communications indicate no chatter between other ships or the Domorians regarding the nest."

“Surely others are doing sweeps. That’s the entire reason for the summit.”

“Others aren’t as paranoid as the Q.”

Jos grunted at that. He suspected Tyelu was, judging by the wariness in her expression when he’d propositioned her. “Send an alert. Carefully worded. We don’t want to start a panic.”

Coppev nodded once. “How’re the negotiations going?”

“I’ll let you know when we get past the meet and greet.”

“Ah, the Domorians. Ever patient in their diplomacy.”

“Laugh all you want. You’re not the one standing guard while some twenty seasoned diplomats exchange pleasantries.”

“It’s not our usual duty,” Coppev agreed mildly. “Rumor has it we’re here for another reason.”

Jos glanced at the crew member studiously gazing at the transport display, as if his captain and his Q’Mhel weren’t venturing into private territory.

“Duty takes many forms,” Jos replied, just as mildly.

“Aye,” Coppev said, his eyes sparkling. “It does.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing pressing.”

“Back to guard duty, then. Let me know if those Sweepers change course.”

“Will do.”

Coppev stepped back. Jos triggered his helmet and transported himself planetside.

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Tyelu spent a long hour standing at her window, watching the comings and goings of the diplomats below behind privacy glass. She was torn between amusement and outrage. The Q'Mhel wanted a temporary liaison, did he? Had he truly thought she would give herself so cheaply? How dare he!

Clearly, the poor delusional man needed a lesson on her true value, not to mention one on manners.

But the outrage was short lived, subsumed by the discontent she'd sunk into well before Ryn stole his beloved bride and entered her into the Choosing. At Tyelu's age, most women were married and tending their own families, not running around the galaxy guarding planetary rulers.

It's not that she didn't want a family. Tyelu shifted her shoulders restlessly against the window. Of course, she wanted a mate and children. But she also wanted more. Adventure and meaning and knowing at the end of her days that she'd been a part of something monumental.

Would succeeding her father as kafh fulfill that need within her?

Tyelu's comm unit beeped. She touched it and said, "Tyelu af Alna."

"Tyrl Sigun has called a meeting," an impersonal voice said. "All planet-side personnel are to meet him outside the main meeting room immediately."

"On my way," Tyelu said and tapped the unit off.

With another sigh, she pushed away from the window and exited her lodgings. A few moments later, she came to a halt outside the conference room. Not long after, Kodh appeared. Tyelu studiously ignored him. They might have been paired together as bodyguards to the tyrl, but that didn't mean they had to chitchat.

Before Tyelu could sink into her thoughts again, Sigun exited the conference room, engaged in deep, quietly voiced conversation with Luden Moko, the representative from Tersii and the father of Tyelu's next sister, Ziri. Sigun stood nearly a head taller than the leanly built Tersii, who wasn't exactly a short man, and his face bore the scars of run ins with Sweepers and brigands, accumulated over his long life. The Tyrl could still swing a battle axe when needed, and had been known to wade into disagreements and physically separate the combatants.

For all that, his gentle heart was reflected in the kindness gleaming from his pale blue eyes when he gazed upon his family and trusted friends. His fierceness was reserved for his enemies.

The two men concluded their conversation. Luden nodded and smiled at Tyelu as he passed, trailing a stout Q-merc bodyguard in that ubiquitous matte gray armor they wore.

Sigun glanced at Tyelu and Kodh, his expression grim. "This way," he said.

Tyelu nodded and fell in behind the current guards, ignoring Kodh at her back. Sigun led them to a small chamber not far from the larger one he'd just left. This room was arranged more like a classroom, with a lectern placed on one side facing rows of chairs. Other shifts of his guards were standing around the room, talking quietly or gazing out the windows, as were the two advisors who'd traveled with the tyrl from Abyw.

Sigun waved the door shut, strode to the front of the room, and bade everyone to take

a seat, his advisors bracketing him at a discrete distance. The polite geniality Sigun had worn in front of the other diplomats had fallen away, to be replaced by a grimness Tyelu had rarely witnessed from him.

“We’ve received news,” Sigun began wearily. “A group of Sweeper ships has been spotted at the edge of the system.”

Tyelu’s skin tightened along her spine as murmurs broke out among the room’s occupants. Her one encounter with the Sweepers had been less than pleasant and not something she wished to repeat. If they came looking for trouble, however, she was more than willing to meet like with like.

“Word has been spread,” Sigun continued, “among the delegates here as well as to surrounding systems. A Q-merc unit has been dispatched to trail the Sweepers and gather intelligence about their reasons for being nearby. Our own ships have finetuned their sensors and are monitoring the Sweepers’ progress out-system.”

Had that been why Jos had left her quarters so abruptly? Was his dal the one tailing the Sweepers even now?

And was that, she thought with disgust, a measure of concern for him growing in her gut?

Sigun waved off the questions being lobbed at him. “When we know more, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, we’re safe enough where we are. Those now on duty should remain alert. Those not actively guarding my esteemed personage—” Sigun’s mouth twisted into a wry smile. “—should add weapons training to their normal off-duty activities.”

Tyelu’s own lips twisted into a disdainful sneer. As if she ever stopped training. Her mother, the former Queen’s Guard, had seen to that, and her father had never resisted.

Better to be prepared, he'd told her more than once.

Gared's own scars had not shown as boldly as Sigun's. They were buried deeper, in his heart, caused by the loss of his oldest sons in a Sweeper raid before Tyelu was born. Her adopted brother Ryn had been stolen from his family in a Sweeper raid, after he witnessed them being brutally murdered by the ruthless aliens.

Yes, Tyelu thought grimly, her family had lost much to the Sweepers. If the vicious aliens dared attack again, she'd make certain they didn't live long enough to regret it.

Before they dispersed, Sigun drew Tyelu aside. "The Domorians have planned a formal dinner tomorrow evening."

Tyelu nodded. "I saw the duty roster."

"Do you have something appropriate to wear?"

Tyelu tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in a look that would've sent less hardy men running for cover. "Have you asked the other guards that question?"

Sigun chuckled softly. "The other guards didn't appear at their father's official pact-swearing looking like they'd mucked out the entire province's barns."

"I was fourteen," she said, hiding her own amusement behind mock indignation. "I've learned a thing or two about formalwear since then."

"And about rebellion," he pointed out, his humor unchanged.

"True."

"Ah, if only I had a grandson your age." Sigun sighed and patted her shoulder. "Your

father and I regret not sealing our friendship with such an alliance.”

“As do I,” Tyelu murmured, quite truthfully. A grandson of Sigun’s would’ve been a healthy match for her, if his children had lived to provide them. Strong, kind, intelligent. Yes, a man with such a lineage would’ve suited her well. Perhaps with such a match, she would not now be roaming Abyw, and the galaxy, aimlessly searching for something her homeworld appeared to lack: the one man who could earn her heart and tend it well.

One of Sigun’s advisors doubled back with a question for the tyrl. Tyelu left them with a respectful nod. Her mother had had the foresight to talk Tyelu into packing formalwear, but Tyelu was of a mind for something new, something no one had seen her wear before.

Jos had never seen her in any of her formalwear, a traitorous voice whispered in her mind.

Though the thought rankled—When had she ever dressed for anyone’s pleasure save her own?—she wasn’t so quick to dismiss it. The Q’Mhel needed a lesson. Perhaps this was the way to deliver it.

She checked local time, then accessed a directory of local services and found a dress shop catering to off-worlders. A thin, devilish smile curved Tyelu’s mouth. Perfect. And she had just enough time to visit it before her next shift began.

Still smiling, she retrieved directions and followed them through the building into the heart of Forro’s business district.

The next evening, Jos traded his armor for dress blacks as he readied for that evening’s dinner. Q’s lead diplomat, Layne Bilal, had insisted on his presence at the formal event, in part as her escort, in part because his family was so well-connected

on Q.

He would've been there anyway as part of her protection detail. That he couldn't seek refuge behind his armor during the event irritated him. He'd eschewed politics for precisely this reason, though as a Q'Mhel, a position he'd earned despite his family's connections, he was occasionally required to attend such events.

Jos checked the black matte insignia designating his rank, pinned on either side of his tunic's collar, and admitted to himself that he wasn't irritated because of the dinner. He was irritated because he hadn't spotted his beautiful Pruxn? since sneaking into her quarters the day before.

She wasn't avoiding him. He'd simply been too busy since learning of the Sweepers' proximity to seek her out. His dal's sister unit had been sent chasing after that nest, leaving their contract as security to the Tersii diplomat to Jos's dal. Jos had split his unit in two, with Magda, his First, over the second half as guard to the Tersii contingent. Not a difficult duty, though it did strain his dal's resources a mite until another dal could be summoned from Q for the Tersii.

Then both sets of delegates had had to be reassured, more than once. Preparing for this party—and Jos could think of no better word for it—had strained his patience.

“Who better to accompany me than the Q'Mhel on duty?” Jos murmured, echoing Bilal's words to him.

He'd bitten his tongue and done his job without complaint, as was expected of a highly trained Q-merc.

Now, he wished he'd had at least one chance to see Tyelu since then.

Jos triggered his comm and checked in with Seni, who was in charge of the remainder

of the dal while Jos was distracted with diplomatic duties, and then Magda.

“All’s well, Q’Mhel,” Magda said. “No need to worry about us while you eat dainty sandwiches and hobnob with your betters.”

“Careful there, Mags, or I’ll switch duties with you.”

“Now, there’s a threat if ever I heard one.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Oh, aye, Jos. I’ll let you know every time someone sneezes. That’s about the most action we’ll see unless those Sweepers decide to turn around and meet us in the open. Griyet lubbers ain’t got a clue how to step over the line, do they?”

Nor would they dare. Appearances must be maintained, after all.

The sentiment rang through his mind in his grandmother’s sternly strict voice. Thank the stars he’d had another alternative to a swift climb from babe to taq.

“Need an excuse to get outta there?” Magda continued. “Happy to create a distraction, ‘specially if it shakes those lubbers up a mite.”

“No distractions,” Jos said firmly. The only distraction he wanted right now was one Magda had no control over. And he’d be the one to deal with Bilal’s coldly voiced disapproval, if his d’gas misbehaved. “Go do your duty. We’ll touch base when this is over.”

Magda signed off, and Jos reluctantly turned toward the door to his planet-side quarters.

The dinner was being held in a large banquet hall on the same floor as the main conference room, next to the inner courtyard that Tyelu's room had such an excellent view of. When he arrived and showed his credentials, he noticed that the courtyard, too, had been decorated and roped into service. Diplomats and attachés from various species mingled among the meticulously planned garden. Servants wove in between, skirting the inner fountain as they offered drinks and hors d'oeuvres to anyone standing still.

Jos toggled on a schematic of the grounds and building, layered over his view, then checked the positions of his dal and other security teams, noting the placement of each against the other. Wonderful technology, implants, he thought wryly. Installation hurt like taking three plasma slugs to the chest, but it was worth every credit spent on the procedure, and then some.

He spotted Bilal talking to one of the other human diplomats and joined them, holding back discretely as he surreptitiously scanned the grounds over a glass of wine imported from Zinod. He tuned out their conversation, a careful probing of resources Jos took to be a precursor to a trade agreement.

Not his area of expertise.

Now, if they wanted to discuss the Sweeper threat or the appalling lack of coordination between the diplomats' security units and Domor's own security, he'd be happy to contribute.

The diplomat slipped away, and Bilal turned to Jos, her gaze sharp in the haughty rectangle of her face. Bilal was a cousin of some sort on his grandmother's side, and had been shunted, like his grandmother, into the political sphere from a very young age. "Duty," she'd told Jos once, when he'd asked why she'd endured the family pressure. As if that single word explained her entire life.

For some, it did. Had he not opted for an alternative path of service in lieu of the political duty so many in his family chose?

Bilal took the glass of wine from him and sipped delicately. “Parched already, and it’s just begun. Chin up, Q’Mhel. Your boredom is showing.”

He grunted and flagged down a servant, retrieved fresh wine for them both. “I’d rather be chasing Sweepers through an asteroid field.”

“I’d rather be reading a good book.” She sipped again, her eyes shrewd above the rim of the wineglass. “I’ve managed to secure a promise for a later meeting on a new trade route and several delegates have inquired about contracting for additional security provided by our mercenary-soldiers. If nothing else, we should walk away from these meetings with solid connections.”

Before Jos could reply, she lowered her glass, and her mouth curved into its polite, official smile. “Ah, look. The Pruxn? tyrl wants a word, most likely about potential matches between our women soldiers and Pruxn? men.”

Jos’s heart skipped a beat, triggering a griyet med alert. He shut it off as he turned, deftly making room for Sigun and his retinue. Behind the giant tyrl, Jos spotted a familiar head of golden hair, and when Sigun stopped and Tyelu stepped to the side, fully revealed, she filled Jos’s vision.

The Tyelu he’d seen when his dal ‘ported onto her brother’s ship had been every bit the soldier. Cool, calm, deadly. That was the Tyelu that had shown up here as part of the tyrl’s security.

This Tyelu was...enchanted.

Her hair was piled on top of her head in some intricate arrangement that must have

taken three people and a few days to accomplish. Slender blue crystals dangled from her ears, matching the simple necklace at her throat. The folds of a diaphanous, silver dress clung to her body from shoulder to knee and draped onto the floor, one side slit to mid-thigh. She lifted her eyes to his and thread-thin streaks of green shot through the dress's fabric.

Jos abandoned Bilal with a courteous nod and stepped around Sigun as the two began a polite dance of diplomacy. He settled beside Tyelu, as close to her as propriety allowed. "Did you choose that dress with me in mind?"

Tyelu glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes, her earrings swaying against her neck. "Why would I do anything with you in mind?"

"Because you're trying to seduce me."

"I think you're forgetting who propositioned whom."

He hadn't forgotten and didn't want her to forget either. Dipping his head toward hers, he murmured, "Dance with me later."

Her eyes flashed and blood-red streaks trickled through the dress, joining the green. "I'm on duty."

"One dance. We can discuss our alliance and our mutual love of that dress, then I can sneak into your quarters and help you out of it."

"Careful," she said lightly. "The elders will hear, and then we'll both be in trouble."

Sigun and Bilal parted, and the tyrl moved away. Tyelu followed, sauntering behind the Pruxn? king-leader as if she didn't have a blaster holstered on her thigh, hidden beneath the fabric of her dress.

He sighed as he watched her walk away, ridiculously happy to have stolen a moment with her.

Bilal positioned herself beside him, facing the retreating Pruxn?. “I could make her a part of the trade agreement, if you like.”

Jos shook his head. “I can get my own women, Layne.”

“Never doubted you for a minute,” she murmured. “By the by, they’re seated at our table during the meal. At least we’ll have that to look forward to, yes?”

Jos narrowed his gaze on Tyelu as Bilal walked away and was joined by her assistant. Yes, that was something to look forward to.

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Tyelu spent a mind-numbingly boring hour listening to Sigun make small talk with other dignitaries while deftly avoiding being drawn into the conversations herself. How did the tyrl stand such inconsequential inanities?

And why had she ever thought she wanted such a position herself?

Kodh, on the other hand, seemed to revel in the discussions, blending into them with none of his usual arrogance. Tyelu was impressed despite herself. The sentiment irritated her no end.

Bah! Let her cousin angle for the kafh, then. What was it to her?

The only distraction she had, the only pleasure, came by way of the covert looks Jos shot her. A light flirt, she decided, and what could that hurt? He was handsome, for a spacer, and the feel of his admiring gaze sent a thrill of awareness through her, reflected in the emotionally sensitive fabric of her Domorian-made dress.

The thrill of the chase. She vowed to enjoy it until he caught her.

If she let him catch her.

She was saved from complete boredom by the representative from Banam, the largest and most powerful nation on Zinod, her mother's home world. Creti Flenig had retired from the Queen's Guard into the diplomatic corps and worked her way up from there. She and Tyelu's mother had trained together, would've served together if Tyelu's father hadn't stolen Alna away from her duty. Still, the dishonor had not permanently stained Alna's family. Tyelu had taken her mother's place when she

came of age and had been welcomed as a true daughter of Banam, though she'd been born on Abyw.

Creti swooped down on Tyelu now and took her firmly by the arms. Laugh lines radiated from her dark eyes and her mouth twitched into ready humor.

“My daughter!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been trying to get you alone this entire wretched time.”

Tyelu laughed and kissed the other woman’s cheek. “We could always slip away and make merry.”

“That was always my line to your mother,” Creti said ruefully. “I’ll never forgive Gared for stealing her from me.”

“I’m not sure she’s forgiven him yet either.”

Creti laughed and tucked Tyelu’s arm through hers, leading her through the crowd in a rambling walk. “I see you’ve made your own conquest.”

Tyelu’s gaze flicked automatically to Jos. He was standing behind the Q representative, looking squarely at Tyelu. Her heart fluttered once, and she told it firmly to behave.

Tyelu turned away, not before she caught his saucy wink. “I have no idea what you mean.”

Creti harrumphed. “If you’re going to take your father’s place, you’ll need to learn to lie better, my child.”

“I’m not sure I want it.”

Surprise flashed across Creti's expression, then melted away. "Truth. Yet your parents have been grooming you for the position since birth."

Tyelu snagged a flute of champagne from a passing server and sipped it, giving the emotions roiling in her gut time to subside. "My parents," she said at last, "have always encouraged me to follow my own path."

"One can do both, as your mother did."

"Some can do both. She found a way to make it work."

"And you fear you may not." Creti nodded at another diplomat as she deftly steered Tyelu away. "Time has a way of bringing us what we need, Tyelu."

"Does it?" Tyelu shook her head, sipped the champagne. "I don't know what I need."

"You do," Creti said, then when Tyelu shook her head again, added, "If not that, then what you want. What do you want, my child?"

Tyelu's gaze flew to Jos once more and met his. As soon as she realized what she'd done, what she'd given away, she slipped her arm out of Creti's and turned her back on him. "I don't know."

Creti gave her a knowing look. "Don't deny that part of yourself. Promise me."

Humor rose within Tyelu, chasing away the doubts, that incessant need for him growing seditiously in her veins. "The last time I made you a promise, I ended up riding the backside of a welun through Zinod's jungles. My bottom still bears the bruises."

Creti laughed. "Nonsense, child. That was years ago. Now, introduce me to that

handsome cousin of yours. I'm not above a light flirt with a man half my age."

Tyelu snorted out a laugh, but dutifully led her mother's oldest friend through the crowd toward Sigun and Kodh. Creti could handle herself, and it served Kodh right to have the incorrigible flirt absorbing his attention for the evening.

Over the meal, Tyelu took a seat to Jos's left, at the opposite end of the table, forcing him to turn his head and look past the Q ambassador to see her. They'd been seated at a rectangular table with two other diplomatic units, Luden Moko and his assistant, and the lone attaché from Opal, a planet on the far side of the sector.

The distance did not keep Jos from flirting with her, albeit using hot, teasing looks rather than words. Tyelu felt safe with the Q ambassador and her assistant between them. At least that kept her from having to speak with him directly.

The conversation inevitably turned to the Sweeper ships spotted so recently at the edge of the system. Over a light dessert, a tart made of exotic fruits, Luden said, "Any word from your sister dal about the Sweepers, Q'Mhel?"

Conversations faltered at the table and everyone turned toward Jos, waiting expectantly for his response.

He set his fork down and dabbed a linen napkin to his mouth before speaking. "The nest fled when the dal's ship approached."

The diplomat from Opal leaned forward, his round eyes dark against iridescent skin close in color to Tyelu's dress. "They gave chase, surely."

Jos nodded once. "Of course. We couldn't leave a nest that size free to attack innocent civilians."

“Yet the nest has not been caught.”

Jos’s expression was so neutral, Tyelu wondered if he’d taken offense at the Opalite’s matter of fact statement.

“The ships are evenly matched in speed, Honorable Sir. Even Q technology occasionally meets its match.”

Layne Bilal raised her glass in a toast. “Not for long, I swear it. We shall eradicate the Sweeper threat if it takes every last ship in the Q-merc fleet!”

Sigun and Luden raised their glasses, and the Opalite diplomat subsided, apparently satisfied.

The music floating through the room changed tenor. Jos laid his napkin beside his plate and stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I saved this dance for the most beautiful woman in the room.”

Tyelu’s heart fluttered, and her hand tightened on her fork. He’d dared make an assignation with another woman?

Then Jos stopped beside her and offered his hand, his eyes twinkling hotly. “Shall we?”

Her pique fled as quickly as it had arisen, and she easily ignored the speculative looks directed their way by their dining companions. Mutely, Tyelu set her fork and napkin aside, and placed her hand in Jos’s. A moment later, they were on the temporary dance floor laid out in front of the string quartet, joined by a few brave couples.

Jos twirled her into his arms, holding her at a proper distance as they waltzed around the edge of the floor. “Alone at last.”

She laughed. “Hardly. We’re surrounded by people.”

“Are we? I see only you.”

She scoffed even as her heart melted. When had she gotten so soft?

Sternly, Tyelu hardened her gaze, if not her heart. “Do you think I’m so easy, then?”

He stopped abruptly and pulled her into a half dip, his mouth so close to hers, she could feel each of his breaths on her lips. “I think you’re as ready for a kiss as I am.”

Her hand, she realized, had gone automatically to his neck, holding him there as a counterbalance to the dip. His skin was warm above his dress uniform’s stiff collar. It tempted her to explore him, to brush her palm upward and test the softness of his hair. To undo the buttons holding his uniform coat together and test the hardness of the body it concealed. The thought stole her breath.

“We’re making a scene,” she murmured.

A slow smile spread across his mouth. “Tyelu, princess, we’ve only just begun.”

He eased her upright and twirled them into an intricate series of steps. When they settled into the basic waltz again, Tyelu tweaked his ear lobe with her fingertips as a reprimand, and because she could.

“What makes you think I want you?” she said.

“You’re dancing with me, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps I wanted to avoid the potential fuss of rejecting you.”

He arched one eyebrow, his green eyes merry. “You want me to believe you were being diplomatic?”

“Isn’t that our entire purpose here, to indulge in carefully phrased chitchat in the hope of solving our mutual problems?”

“You don’t strike me as a woman who does anything she doesn’t want to do.”

He had her there. Tyelu tossed her head. “You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.”

“Hardly.”

“And what I don’t know, I’m willing to learn.” He lowered his head toward hers, his gaze on her mouth. “I wanted you the moment I saw you.”

As she had wanted him, even knowing he was a spacer through and through, and bound to break her heart. She opened her mouth to rebuff him, to push him away, to save her heart from another doomed tumble into oblivion.

“Just a moment,” he said as his mouth hardened and his gaze drifted to a spot over her shoulder.

Soft beeps sounded around the room, one from her comm, she realized. Deftly, she disentangled herself from Jos and activated it, her gaze scanning the room in search of Sigun. Just as her eyes met his, their communications officer said, into her comm, the words every planet-bound being dreaded to hear.

“Sweepers on approach to Domor.”

Tyelu stepped toward Sigun, ever mindful of her duty.

Jos snagged her arm. “Wait. We need to talk.”

She glanced down at his hand on her arm, then shot him a haughty look. “This is not the times to allow your hormones free rein, Q’Mhel.”

“Hormones,” he said, his voice deceptively mild. “Come here.”

He guided her firmly off the dance floor into an alcove surrounded by gauzy fabric and fern-like greenery, and pressed her back against the wall, pinning her there with his body touching hers from chest to knees. “You have a low opinion of me, princess.”

Her hands had gone automatically to his chest, not to push him away, but to feel him, to learn him. The gesture should’ve alarmed her. “I don’t know you well enough to have an opinion.”

“Yes, you do.” He sighed as he brushed his cheek against hers. “My dal has been recalled. We’re joining our sister dal in the fight against the Sweepers.”

Her fingers curled against his coat. “When?”

“Now.”

She bit her lip, holding in an automatic protest. Concern slipped out instead. “Be safe.”

She felt his smile against her skin, then he shifted against her and his mouth was on hers, stealing a gentle kiss. This, her heart shouted, and she cursed Creti for being right, for knowing what Tyelu needed before she knew it herself, even as she gave

into the need and melted into him.

Jos drew back on a muttered curse and touched his forehead to hers. “When I get back, we’ll do that again.”

He pressed his mouth to the pulse pounding under her jaw, then stepped into the chaos of the room beyond them.

Tyelu touched her fingers to her mouth and exhaled a shaky breath. She could still feel his hands on her waist, his mouth on her throat, the length of his body pressed against hers. One kiss, she thought, breathless. One kiss and everything had changed.

She sucked air into her lungs and pushed herself away from the wall. Duty first. Later, she could ponder what to do about Jos Q’Mhel and his bone-melting kisses.

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Jos met Magda on his way through the corridor to his quarters.

She fell in beside him, her weapon held at the ready, always. Seldom were the Q without at least one weapon. Jos might have been denied his primary blaster during the party, but he still carried a small arsenal hidden within and under his dress blacks, atop the skinsuit frag-armor no respectable Q was without. It wouldn't protect him from a direct hit, but it did provide some defense against spalling and it diffused all but the highest settings on energy weapons.

Magda, on the other hand, wore a full complement of armor, from the skinsuit out, with her helmet retracted into her torso sheath. "How's the princess?"

"Is the dal ready to deploy?"

"Touchy."

He gave her a look.

She capitulated with a smirk. "Five by, Q'Mhel. The dal's armed and loaded. Cap'n Coppev's ready on your mark."

"We're up as soon as you and I come aboard. Transport up now. I'm right behind you."

"Roger that."

Magda stepped abruptly to the side, put her back against a wall, and triggered her

transport. A moment later, she disappeared. Jos broke into a jog, silently cursing Layne Bilal's insistence on him as an escort, which required him to ditch his armor and primary weapons.

At least he'd had some time with Tyelu.

He allowed himself a small smile as he swung into his quarters and suited up, more than pleased with her response to his kiss.

A few minutes later, now geared as a Q-merc should be, he materialized aboard Apedemak, all thoughts of the gorgeous Pruxn walled off where they wouldn't distract him. He found Magda on the bridge with Captain Coppev, coordinating a strategy with the other in-system Q-merc teams and any other offense-capable ships.

"Status?" he said.

Magda looked up from the navigational display and the nervous ensign manning it. "The Sweepers' ships are coming in hard and fast."

"Too fast," Gage murmured. The captain tapped a fingertip against a series of points on the nav display, outlining a rough arc. "They're right on top of us. Best guess? They're going to swing around Domor and come in on the far side, away from the main planetary defenses."

"Asteroid blasters, mostly," Magda said, shaking her head. "When will these lubbers learn?"

"The Domorians are a peaceful society," Jos reminded her. "They don't need much of a defense."

"Except against Sweepers."

“And they have us.” Gage crossed his arms and tapped one thumb against his lower lip. “They’re aiming for a landing.”

Jos grunted. “Probably. Have the Domorians and the diplomatic units been warned?”

“Yes. They’re taking precautions now.”

Magda stepped back, her eyebrows furrowed. “I hate that we’re stretched so thin. Our primary mission is to guard the Tersii delegation and look pretty for Bilal, not engage in combat with Sweepers.”

Jos clapped her on the shoulder. “Needs must. Do we have a plan?”

“Downloading now and sending to you.” Magda tapped her left ear, then nodded. “Intercept course?”

“Affirmative,” Gage said. “Now get off my bridge so we can get this party started.”

Jos shot him a roguish grin. “Aye aye, captain.”

Gage snorted as he turned back to his duties.

Jos and Magda exited the bridge, crowded against each other in the narrow confines of the passageway. They bumped out of the way for the ship’s crew, and finally stepped into the transport deck where the rest of the dal waited, talking quietly among themselves.

Jos examined each d’ga in turn as their conversations died and they faced him: Zhu, an expert marksman; Emler, their rough and ready tactical specialist, the bonding tattoos of his deceased mate clearly visible above the neck of his armor; Seni, the dal’s medic and the only other female next to Magda; Gav, their communications

specialist; and Harak, with his affinity for explosions, sanctioned or not.

Jos had personally assembled this dal when he'd earned his leadership tabs and advanced to the rank of Q'Mhel. It had taken exactly six missions for them to bond into a cohesive unit. An effective one, too. This dal had one of the highest success scores of currently operating dals.

Some credited Jos's leadership, but he knew the truth. He'd surrounded himself with highly skilled mercs who knew how to put the mission above themselves and work together as a team.

A trait he'd make a point of embracing whenever his thoughts drifted to his beautiful Pruxn?.

"Listen up," he said. "We're the tail end of the battle."

A collective groan rose from the mercs. Gav, ever the smartass, rolled his bright green eyes. "Woo! Cleanup crew! Bring on the mops!"

Seni slid her armored fingers over the hilt of her holstered blaster. "I can kill him this time, right? Just one shot'll put him right out of his misery."

"And us," Harak added.

"No killing today," Magda said, then muttered under her breath, "Unfortunately."

Gav shot her a dimpled smile. "You know you love me."

Jos talked over Magda's snort of laughter. "Focus now, play later. Looks like the Sweepers are aiming for the far side of the planet."

Quickly, he outlined enough of the plan for them to have a good grasp of the situation so each one could do what dals did best: act independently to create the best outcome for their client.

Or, in this case, every lubber stranded on the planet below.

When he was finished, they synced their neural implants, falling into silence as they swapped ideas through their dedicated comm system. When they'd nailed down a plan, Jos pushed it to Magda for cleanup and redistribution.

Then they stood at the ready, waiting for the other actors to play their roles.

Tyelu jogged down the hallway toward the conference room where Sigun waited along with the Tersii delegation, Layne Bilal of Q, and a handful of other diplomatic units who'd hired Q-mercs as their security.

Why the Pruxn? had been chosen to guard them had not been revealed to her, though she was sure there was a reason. Possibly because they'd brought more than enough security to go around.

Plus, every Pruxn? learned how to fight from an early age, male and female alike. No one wanted to be bested during the Choosing and risk losing their favored mate to another. They weren't as fierce as the Q-mercs, but they could hold their own in most situations.

Tyelu's duties as a Queen's Guard, one of the fabled Lady Warriors of Banam, had earned her the unenviable job of coordinating the defense of those diplomats, while her cousin Kodh served as a liaison between the Pruxn?'s motley group and the Domorian military command, such as it was.

As she understood it, Domor's primary defense was a rail cannon used primarily for

asteroid deflection.

Kraden lubbers.

A good planetary defense force comprised of good, old-fashioned military ships would've nipped the Sweeper problem in the bud. Of course, the in-system Q-mercs could've done the same thing if someone had thought of it while the Sweepers' ships skirted the system.

One of the Q-mercs probably had thought of it. But that would've entailed pulling them off planet, away from their primary charges, and the Q were known for honoring their contracts. It was one of the things that made them the dominant military force in the sector, the other being their extraordinary combat skills.

Jos Q'Mhel and his dal being a prime example of exactly how deadly Q-mercs could be.

A tiny thrill shivered down her spine. She stifled it before it could grow beyond her control, then put him, his beautiful green eyes, and his sexy kisses firmly out of her mind.

When she slipped into the conference room, Sigun beckoned her toward the far end where he stood with Luden Moko and Layne Bilal. Tyelu walked over and nodded respectfully to the tyrl and the two diplomats.

"We've had word," Layne said without preamble. "Our Q-mercs are swinging outward to meet the Sweepers before they can reach Domor. I have every confidence they will succeed."

"Every confidence, yes," Sigun agreed. "But a little preparation never hurt anyone. I've appointed Tyelu to oversee our security. She's one of our fiercest warriors."

Layne arched an eyebrow at Tyelu. “A female warrior on a planet where men steal their brides?”

“Aye. She’s the native-born daughter of a kafh and trained with the Queen’s Guard on Zinod.” Sigun’s lined face creased into a mischievous grin. “And she’s one of the most eligible women on Abyw. Her father despairs of finding her a mate she can’t best.”

Tyelu pressed her lips together to keep a snarl off her face. “We should discuss your security arrangements, Tyrl Sigun.”

Layne waved that away. “We have time. The Q’Mhel will see to that. He’s single, too, you know, and quite a catch in his own right. Tell me, Sigun. Would her father be open to a match?”

Sigun opened his mouth, and Tyelu jumped in before he could tell the diplomats exactly how eager her father was for her to settle down. “Security first.”

Ludo coughed into his fist, not quite hiding a smile. “Yes, let’s discuss security. We Tersii aren’t quite as laid back about such situations as our more militaristic neighbors. My poor aide is beside himself with worry.”

“As he should be,” Tyelu countered coolly. “The belnyin—”

“Belnyin?” Layne asked.

“Sweepers, honored lady. They’re a ruthless species. Merciless, often mindless. My own next-brother spent years as a slave on one of their parent ships. He bears the marks of their cruelty to this day.”

“Ryn contracted with my daughter, Ziri,” Ludo said. “They jumped straight into a

nest not long after meeting, and again during a cargo run between Tersi and Abyw. I shudder to think what would've happened if they hadn't managed to escape."

Layne turned a speculative gaze on Tyelu. "As I recall, our Q'Mhel intervened during that cargo run."

"He did, honored lady," Tyelu said stiffly, then changed the subject, not caring whether the abrupt shift startled or offended anyone. "Domor's shielding should prevent person-to-land transporting for anyone possessing the capability, which Sweepers don't. Our defense will therefore center on protecting against landing parties. Some of the child ships are small enough to evade the Domorian's rail gun, and they can house as many as fifty to seventy-five fully grown male Sweepers, depending on how many family units are aboard."

Tyelu didn't miss the pointed glance shared by Sigun and Layne. She simply chose to ignore it. Her job was security, not acting as a bargaining chip for some diplomatic folderal.

And by Wode, she could secure her own mate.

Quickly, she focused on her briefing, before her irritation over the conversation overruled good sense.

Jos rode out the first part of the battle in the ship's transport deck, following updates via a detached tablet to save his armor's power. The nest of Sweepers had been bigger than they'd thought and just as problematic. Several had been disabled before they could hit Domor's atmosphere, but two smaller ships had slipped from behind Domor's larger moon, skirted the main force, and angled toward landfall.

Jos set the tablet aside and began a final check of his armor, a silent signal for his dal to do the same. Before he could finish, his comm alerted and Captain Coppev spoke.

“You’re up, Q’Mhel,” Gage said. “Where do you want me to put you?”

“Cargo bay, if you can,” Jos replied. “Otherwise, any large open space. We’ll sort it out from there.”

“Roger that. Transport on your mark.”

Jos glanced at each member of his dal in turn, waited until they’d activated their helmets and given him the thumbs up.

Magda’s helmet closed over her face and locked in, and she slapped Jos on the back with a gloved hand. “Just call us the mops.”

Groans and a few muttered curses sounded over the comm.

Jos shook his head, made sure his own helmet was locked. “We go in as one, we come out as one.”

The d’gas raised a battle cry, and on a sharp exhale Jos said, “Mark.”

The world snapped out of existence and back in again with a dizzying speed. Jos brought his blaster up as he materialized in a cargo bay in the middle of a knot of male Sweepers a good ceg taller than him, so close to two that his armor brushed their skin. He cursed the transport engineer’s daring even as a part of him admired the pinpoint accuracy of the dal’s materialization.

Then the Sweepers realized what was happening and drew back weapons and metal-encased secondary limbs, roaring their unhappiness.

Jos had already elbowed clear and started firing, taking down the three closest to him before they could swing their weapons around. A secondary limb’s tip hit him and

bounced away, another attempted to curl around one of his legs. He shot it at the base before it could yank him off his feet, then more Sweepers charged. His training took over and he countered in a well-honed rhythm of defense and offense as the dal moved outward, gradually ending the threat posed by this particular Sweeper nest.

When it was over, he walked among the oozing bodies of Sweepers sprawled throughout the ship, making sure each one was well and truly dead.

Magda jogged over to him, took one look at his armor, and whistled low into the comm. “Took a coupla hits, didn’t you?”

He glanced down and spotted a massive dent above his ribs. As soon as he noticed it, the pain kicked in and he hissed out a curse aimed at whatever Sweeper had managed to sneak one of those metal-tipped secondary limbs under his guard. No, wait. One had kicked him with a tree-like leg, knocking him halfway across the bay. That would account for the dent anyway.

He rolled his shoulders, winced at a twinge under the dent. “Good thing I brought a spare kit.”

“Good thing,” Magda agreed mildly. “Status report says you’re bleeding.”

“Am not,” he said, then he glanced at the status report and cursed again. His skin was punctured and already bruising, and one of his ribs had a hairline fracture. He noted the measures his med system and armor had already taken and said, “Tis but a scratch. Any other injuries?”

Magda shook her head. “Coupla bruises. Some dented armor. Seni’s comm’s down. Emler thinks it’s an easy fix. Gav’s getting a headcount of the dead for posterity’s sake.”

“Where’s Harak?”

She grinned. “Trying to find something to blow up.”

Jos grunted. “Call the captain and have him send a pilot over. Ship’s still in good shape. Good salvage for the Domorians. Try not to let Harak blow a hole in the hull.”

“Party pooper,” she said, and put her back to the bay’s surprisingly clean metal wall.

Jos did a visual check of his dal, then headed toward where Emler and Seni huddled, likely trying to repair her comm. As he walked, he checked the situation with the rest of the fleet, such as it was, and allowed himself a single moment to remember the kiss he’d shared with the fierce Pruxn? waiting for him planetside.

His comm chirped and Magda said, “Benar Q’Mhel’s dal needs help on another ship. Seems it was marked as a child ship and it ain’t.”

Jos sighed. So much for another kiss from his prickly princess. “Emler, status on Seni’s comms.”

Emler glanced around and gave Jos the thumbs up as Seni patted her ear and mirrored the other d’ga’s a-ok.

By the time the dal was ready to transport, the pain in Jos’s side had numbed to a dull throb thanks to a fresh influx of painkillers, and all thoughts of Tyelu had been carefully tucked away.

Tyelu allowed her duties to consume her attention for the duration of the Sweepers’ attack. At Sigun’s request, available vid feed of the battle was displayed on one wall of the most secure room Tyelu could find. She’d posted guards outside and stationed herself and three other highly trained Pruxn? inside the room with the diplomats, as a

measure of last resort.

The Q delegate lounged in a chair facing the feed, sipping a cocktail as the battle played out. Luden Moko and his aide appeared less sanguine as they fidgeted in their own chairs and spoke quietly with the Opalite envoy, who'd opted to join them rather than attempting to flee the system as some diplomatic details had done.

Tyelu thought them fools for trying. Better to mount a defense here and hope the Sweepers landed elsewhere than to meet them in space, their natural environment, where the advantage was theirs.

Sigun wandered over to Tyelu's station by the sole entrance, his gaze on Bilal. "She seems completely unconcerned over the outcome."

Tyelu shrugged one shoulder. "Our combined defense is doing well."

"Nothing's landed yet anyway." He folded his hands behind his back, mimicking Tyelu's stance, and rocked back on his heels. "The final days of this season's Choosing are close at hand."

She shot him a sharp glance. "So?"

"The Q'Mhel would make a good mate."

"That again," she said flatly.

"There's still time. Ah." Sigun tapped his ear-comm. "Kodh says the Q-mercs have been transported aboard Sweeper ships."

Nerves fluttered in Tyelu's stomach. She refused to acknowledge them. "We're safe enough here."

“I’ve known you too long to be fooled by your demeanor. You’re worried about him.”

Tyelu gritted her teeth together. “I’m worried about Sweepers landing.”

“Bilal was right. It won’t get that far.” Sigun lifted his hand to the vid feed and the battle playing out overhead. “Your Q’Mhel will see to that.”

“He’s not—”

“Tyelu.”

She pressed her lips together, containing a hot retort, and was relieved when Layne turned and beckoned Sigun over, effectively postponing, if not ending, the conversation.

Later, when it became clear that the Sweeper threat had been averted, Tyelu assigned two guards to escort each diplomatic unit to their respective quarters. She took the Tersii contingent not out of cowardice but fatigue: if Sigun or Bilal pushed her about Jos, Tyelu feared what might pop out of her mouth in an unguarded moment.

When she at last settled into her own quarters, she stripped down and showered, and fell into bed and a deep sleep.

She woke abruptly, automatically coming to alertness as she scanned her surroundings without moving. Light from Domor’s twin moons streamed through the window she’d been too tired to shade, giving her a clear, near-daylight view of her room. No shadows shifted at the edges of the room, no figures were illuminated in the moonglow.

A footstep fell in the living room, then an armored man stepped into the moonlight

carrying the stench of mechanical oil and Sweepers.

She put a hand to her nose and sat up, grimacing. “You could’ve washed that stink off before popping in.”

Jos’s helmet retracted, and he glanced down at his body. “I came straight here.”

That nervous fluttering started again, joined by twists of emotion Tyelu couldn’t name. “You’re ok?”

He grinned and eased a step closer. “Worried about me?”

She snorted. “Hardly. Why are you here?”

“You know why.”

He took another step toward her, and she held up her free hand. “Stop right there, merc. You’re not getting that Sweeper stink all over me.”

“Help me get my armor off and we won’t have to worry about it.”

“Not for all the vud on Abyw.”

“What about for a kiss?”

She sucked in a short breath. Oh, now, that was tempting, though she’d crawl naked and unarmed through Zinod’s jungles before she showed him how much. “Dream on, spacer. Now go away. I have watch in a few hours.”

“You’re a hard woman, Tyelu.”

“Yes,” she said as she settled back on her bed. “I am.”

He laughed and his helmet slid over his head. “I’m going to enjoy catching you.”

He winked out of sight, and she closed her eyes and murmured, “Not if I catch you first.”

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The next few days proved chaotic. With more than a quarter of the original diplomats gone, the talks faltered and ground to a near halt.

Tyelu would've bet that fewer talking heads guaranteed something would get done, but it hadn't turned out that way. No one wanted to move forward with so many planetary representatives missing.

Meanwhile, Domor had grudgingly claimed salvage rights on the ruins of the Sweeper ships in orbit around the planet, if only to clear its upper atmosphere of debris. As soon as Tyelu learned of that, she sent a message to Ryn and Ziri, letting them know that the Domorians were willing to split profits with enterprising salvagers.

It wasn't Ryn's usual fare, but he had a ship and could easily contract with other Pruxn? possessing the necessary salvage skills.

And having Ryn's ship, Yarinska , in orbit might ease the restless itch growing between Tyelu's shoulder blades.

It wasn't just the boredom of being planetside with nothing to do but watch over a bunch of skittish diplomats. It was having Jos's gaze on her whenever they were in the same room together, watching his eyes light with a seductive flare when he spotted her, having her skin go hot and tingly just from the weight of his look, and not being able to do anything about it.

She drew on the patience and discipline learned during her years in Banam as a Lady Warrior. Hard-won patience, not a natural trait, but one honed over time. She could

afford to choose the right moment, though it galled her to have to wait.

Until then, she had duties to perform, not all of them related to her position as one of Sigun's guards. Gared, her father, sent a message requesting her aid on a matter of governance. Luden Moko cornered her one evening for a long discussion of Abyw's exportable goods, including wool and the timber Tersi sorely needed for rebuilding after a recent Sweeper attack. When Ryn and Ziri arrived, they insisted on having meals together whenever Tyelu could make time around her duties.

And then there was Magda Bur-D'ga, Jos's right-hand merc. The other woman leveled a hard stare at Tyelu whenever they met, a challenging, hands-off look Tyelu recognized easily. Whatever tentative emotions stretched between her and Jos, it was no one's business, not even his dal's.

So she arched an eyebrow and stared back, meeting that challenge head on. Magda would have to be dealt with, eventually, but not until after Tyelu had figured out what to do with Jos.

At last, Sigun announced that the talks had been postponed and the Pruxnae contingent would be leaving in two Domorian days. Most of the remaining diplomatic units from other planets would be abandoning the talks then as well. The Domorians, ever eager to celebrate, hosted a dinner the night before and hired a band hastily cobbled up from among the salvagers who'd shown up in force as soon as word got out about the Sweepers' defeat.

Tyelu had no time to find another dress for the event and couldn't quite muster any interest in wearing the formalwear she'd brought from home. She opted instead for the dress she'd purchased on Domor. As soon as she pulled it on, the shimmery fabric took on a red hue shot through with hints of deep purple. Not the colors she usually favored, but appropriate for her mood. Conflicted, excited anticipation.

She sucked in a sharp breath and placed a steadying palm over the nerves creating havoc in her stomach. Kraden spacer. That's what she got for letting him pursue her.

She assigned other guards to protect Sigun for the evening, leaving her free to meet Ryn and Ziri in the building's lobby amid a lush indoor garden. Ryn had dressed in the Pruxn? fashion, his outer layers covering him from head to toe. Ziri had opted for an arm-baring gown from Tersi, her home planet, in a shade matching her slate-blue eyes, beautifully setting off her red-gold hair.

Ryn slung one arm around Tyelu's shoulders, his dark eyes mischievous through the small gap left by his coverings. "Domorian dress?"

Tyelu hid her nerves behind a scowl. "Yes. And?"

Ziri rolled her eyes at them, then leaned into Tyelu for a brief, tentative hug. "Father has been raving about you. He says your input on the lumber trade will ensure that Tersi can rebuild without going into debt."

Tyelu waved that off. "He asked. I answered. Nothing more."

Ryn squeezed her shoulders. "Take the compliment, Tyelu."

"Who says I didn't?"

"Prickly as ever." He shot Ziri a gaze Tyelu couldn't interpret, then added, "The trade agreement will work favorably for us. Loden insisted that we handle part of the trade ourselves. Ziri wants to buy another ship to handle the contract."

"The revenue from a second ship will allow us to purchase land from our neighbor. He wants to resettle on Tersi, where his new mate lives." She shared a secret smile with Ryn. "Without your help negotiating a new trade treaty, it would've taken us

years.”

Music drifted to them from the makeshift ballroom, and Tyelu deftly changed the subject to a topic more comfortable than her brother and next-sister’s gratitude. Something infinitely more comfortable than the love they so easily shared.

She turned a haughty glare on Ryn. “You’re not wearing that to dinner.”

He replied with an easy grin. “That’s exactly what Ziri said.”

Ziri glanced her fingertips along Tyelu’s forearm. “Don’t worry. He’s wearing a suit under there.”

“A dinner suit, not armor,” he clarified.

Across the way, Jos strolled into view escorting the Q diplomat. The nerves in Tyelu’s stomach writhed uncomfortably and a more pleasant warmth tingled over her skin.

Ziri’s eyes widened. “I really want a dress that does that.”

Tyelu glanced down at her dress and was appalled at the deep red color it had turned, clearly displaying her passion for the kraden spacer, and at the most inopportune time. As if he’d sensed the change, Jos turned toward her. His gaze raked down her body, and when his gaze met hers, his smile was a slow, seductive promise.

She stiffened her spine and lifted her chin, challenging him despite the trembling in her knees. Oh, how some part of her wanted to give in! But giving in was a weakness, and she refused to accommodate such within herself.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Tyelu put her back to Jos and met Ryn’s

laughing gaze with one daring him to comment on the dress's change. "You may freshen up in my quarters."

Quickly, she reminded them of how to get to and access her quarters. When she turned toward the ballroom again, Jos had disappeared. The nerves dancing in her stomach stubbornly refused to do the same.

Jos slipped away from his table with a polite bow. Their Domorian hosts had, for whatever reason, changed the seating for tonight's dinner. The Pruxn? and Q had been placed on opposite sides of the hall, and Jos had been forced to take a seat with his back to the other planet's diplomatic party.

He was eager to dance with Tyelu again.

He threaded through the still-seated crowd now, in time to the lively reel played by the musicians at the far end of the room. Tyelu had also taken a seat with her back to the Q delegation, probably on purpose. The thought made him grin. Such a stubborn, prickly woman. Why that aroused him, he had no idea. Yet here he was, sporting a dick at half mast, his blood nearly boiling at the thought of touching her.

Her light perfume teased him before he reached her, some indefinable scent that only aroused him more. When he stopped beside her, she half turned toward him, her lowered lashes hiding that brilliant blue gaze from him. Conversations around the table slowly petered out, but he was aware of only her.

Without speaking, he placed his left hand behind his back and held the other out toward her, his upturned palm an unspoken invitation. Her lashes fluttered, and his stomach clenched around a knot of sudden nerves. Would she refuse him now, after the kiss they'd shared?

Quietly, she dropped her napkin to the table, stood, and placed her hand in his.

“Q’Mhel.”

“My lady,” he said, and couldn’t resist lifting her fingertips to his mouth, pressing another kiss there, breathing in the slight widening of her eyes, the unsteady thrum of her pulse against his thumb. His nerves vanished as abruptly as they’d appeared, washed away by a flood of triumph and the certain knowledge that she felt the heat growing between them.

He led her past the diners, still seated around their tables, and onto the dance floor in front of the makeshift bandstand. She stepped willingly into his arms, allowing him to pull her closer than propriety dictated. Much closer than he had during their first dance. Not as close as he wanted her to be. If he had his way, the next time they met it would be skin to skin.

He settled into a slow and easy box step, nearly intoxicated by the slight weight of her hand on his shoulder, her body erratically brushing his as they moved to the music cushioning them from the crowd. Unable to resist the lure of her silky-smooth skin, he dipped his head and whispered into her ear. “Sorry about last night.”

“What’s to be sorry for?” A faint smile curved her lips. “Other than transporting into my room uninvited.”

“The stink,” he said, matching her smile with a grin. “I’m not apologizing for being there.”

“You should’ve washed off first.”

“Would you have let me stay?”

Her chin tilted up and their gazes clashed. “I had duty a few hours later.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It most certainly is.” The words held the sharp challenge he’d come to expect from her, but they were softened when she disengaged her hand from his and brushed her fingertips across the jump wings pinned to his chest above nearly two dozen small, round studs. “You parachute out of perfectly good spacecraft?”

“Occasionally.”

Her fingers drifted lower. “And these buttons.”

He shrugged, unwilling to admit that he’d pinned them there for her benefit. “Awards. Commendations.”

“You’ve been a Q-merc for a long time.”

“Long enough. You were a Queen’s Guard?”

“A long time ago, yes, beginning in my youth. My mother promised my service to her queen, when my father abducted her from her duty.”

“For the Choosing?”

“Yes.”

He twirled her in a half circle, just to shake that implacable look off her face, and was rewarded with a knowing smile and the challenging tilt of her stubborn chin. “Have you kidnapped a man for the Choosing?”

Her smile faded and she glanced away, her expression stony. “If I had, we wouldn’t be dancing now.”

“Pruxn? men must be fools to overlook a woman like you.”

“Is this part of your seduction? Flatter me with outrageous compliments until I melt at your hallowed feet?”

The words held enough pain to tweak his heart. Gently, he slowed their steps to a shuffle and tucked her more tightly against his body, pressing her closer with a hand at the dip of her waist, just above the folds of her dress’s skirt. “Need me to call you princess again?”

She laughed and relaxed against him, and rested her cheek against his shoulder. “We really shouldn’t dance like this. People will talk.”

“Griyet lubbers,” he grumbled.

“Griyet diplomats,” she reminded him. “Our employers.”

“We’re not always on the clock, Tyelu.” Unable to resist, he pressed a lingering kiss against her temple, another to the high arch of her cheek. “Leave your door unlocked.”

“We’ve hours yet until we can slip away.”

“Not hours. As soon as dinner is cleared away. Promise me.”

She drew back and gazed up at him, her eyes searching his. “I make no promises.”

“Make this one anyway.”

Her fingers trailed over his jump wings as the music ended and she stepped away.

“Do not fail me, Q’Mhel.”

He tilted his head in a solemn bow and watched her whirl off the dance floor in an elegant swirl of deep red fabric. Only when she had reseated herself did he allow himself to savor the small victory of her surrender.

Tyelu stood at her quarters' windows, overlooking Forro's glittering streets. Night had set before she'd managed to slip away from her duties, and now she waited, like a fool, for a kraden spacer.

Why, though? Why did she wait for him, when she'd never waited for another? What about Jos Q'Mhel made her heart race and her breath catch?

Why him?

The door chimed before she could sort through the tumultuous feelings tumbling through her faster than she could catalog them.

"Enter," she said without turning, and watched the reflection of the door sliding open in the window. He still wore his dress blacks, still stood as erect and commanding as a man of his rank and status should.

Her heart skipped a beat, claiming another breath. She forced her expression to remain calm as he strode across the room and stopped behind her, not quite touching her.

His gaze clashed with hers in the window's reflection. "Have I mentioned how much I love this dress?"

"It's just a dress," she countered coolly.

"Not on you." He trailed a finger down her bare spine and hooked it in the dip of fabric covering her lower back. "On you, it's a frekking piece of art."

She dipped her head, hiding a small, pleased smile. “Such a way with words.”

“I know what I like.”

His hands found her waist, and he cupped it lightly as he dipped his head and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the side of her throat. His lips were soft against her skin, his tongue a rough rasp as he licked the spot he’d kissed and pulled her into his strength.

Her limbs weakened on a rush of tingling heat, and she cursed herself for rolling her head to the side, allowing his talented mouth better access. Cursed herself for leaning into him, for enjoying the feel of him at her back, for wanting him so much it took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to turn and touch him in return.

Deftly, his fingers released the hidden closure holding the back of her dress together. She stiffened against him, expecting him to take advantage of her weakness, waiting for his hands to slide inside the thin folds of fabric and touch her more intimately. Was she ready for the unspoken promise she’d made when she’d agreed to meet him here? Could she commit herself to a brief affair with a man of the sword, however passionate it might be, when she yearned for a deeper connection?

Jos wrapped his arms around her and pressed a chaste kiss to her temple. “We can go as slow as you need.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then we can find something else to do. Entertainment vids, maybe. There’s a bar a coupla blocks from here that caters to humans.”

And just like that, her doubts dissipated. She covered his hands with hers and guided one to her thigh. “Are you backing down?” she challenged.

He groaned and buried his face in her throat. “You’re the most frustrating, interesting, bedeviling woman I’ve ever met.”

“Not beautiful?”

“You know you are.” His fingers slowly gathered the skirt of her dress into a bunch at her thigh, lifting the hem, and his other hand slid under the fabric and found her core. He moaned low against her throat. “If I’d known you weren’t wearing anything under this dress while we were dancing, we wouldn’t have made it off the dance floor.”

She laughed huskily, then gasped as he flicked his fingertips across her clit. “I thought we were going slow.”

“Changed my mind. Don’t think I can wait.”

Abruptly, he turned her around and backed her into the glass, lifted her thigh with one hand while his other fumbled with the fastenings of his pants and his mouth found hers, sliding across her lips in a roughly savage kiss, then the head of his erection pressed against her core, and he broke the kiss and lowered his forehead to hers, his panted breaths feathering across her kiss-swollen lips.

“Tell me you want me,” he demanded.

She cupped his cheek, unable to resist the hot need in his gaze, and said, simply, “Yes.”

“Thank frek.”

Her laugh morphed into a breathy gasp as he pushed into her, stretching her deliciously.

“Gods’ mercy,” he breathed. “Frekking tight, can’t...stop... frek , need you.”

Need . Yes, that was it. She needed him, desperately, had since the first moment they’d met, there on Yarinska , surrounded by chaos. Hadn’t she suspected then how it would be between them? Hadn’t she known , and in the knowing, fought the inevitable?

She curled one hand around his nape and opened for him, relaxing into his thrusts, straining into him as he filled her. He trailed hot kisses across her mouth, nipped her lips sharply, and she coaxed his tongue into her mouth with her own, eager for him now as he pushed them both ever higher with every thrust of his body against hers. Every nerve in her body lit with the molten heat of his touch.

This man , she thought dimly. How had he known what she needed?

“Jos,” she breathed.

“So wet,” he replied, then his fingers found her clit and tweaked it in a rhythm counter to his thrusts, and her body tightened around him and she arched into him, her fingernails digging into his skin as she shattered into a haze of ecstasy and heat, crying his name into the room’s darkness, barely aware of him pulling out of her and lifting her into his arms, high against his chest, his words a guttural murmur of pleasure and praise.

When her senses returned to her and her heart had calmed to a dull thud in her chest, she realized that he’d carried her into her bedroom and laid her on the bed. He stood now beside her, his expression like granite, his erection glimmering wetly in the faint light cast through the windows by Domor’s rising moons.

A hint of nerves shot through the languid heat loosening her limbs, and she curled her fingers into the bed’s coverlet, all too aware of how she must look to him, with her

hair falling out of its pins and her dress pooled over her thighs. She could still feel him there, inside her, could still feel the rawness of his need, the urgent heat of his hands skimming roughly over her skin.

“You didn’t find release,” she said, and hated the questioning lilt betraying her own insecurities. Her weakness. Hated, in that moment, the desire throbbing between her thighs and low in her gut, in the sensitive peaks of her nipples and the softening of her body, hated the hard control he’d clung to when her own had shattered under his masterful touch.

Hated those minute betrayals, but could not hate him for giving them to her.

One corner of his mouth lifted into a smile she couldn’t interpret. “Not yet.”

Her gaze dropped to his rigid length and the evidence of her own release. Of her own need. As if he could read her thoughts, he lifted one hand and stroked it over that wetness, spreading it along the hard length his cock. A drop of precum dribbled from the tip, and a low, satisfied moan rumbled out of him.

“Take off your dress,” he gritted out.

Her eyes flew to him, widening at the heat in his gaze, the command in his voice.

“Why?”

“Because I’m not finished with you, princess. Not by a long shot.”

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His words melted the uncertainty clinging to her, and she pushed off the bed and stood facing him. “You first.”

One corner of his mouth curled into a half smile as he gazed down at her, his eyes a pure, deep, molten green. “Race you?”

She laughed, delighted by the challenge. “We did that the first time.”

“Whatever works.”

“Slower,” she said, even as her fingers traced the hidden closures of his tunic, deftly unfastening each one in turn. When the two halves draped free, she slid her hands inside and scraped her fingernails gently down the hard plane of his abdomen over his black skinsuit.

He shuddered, though his hands remained where they were, one at his side, the other languidly stroking his erection. “That doesn’t feel slow.”

“Slower than before.” She peered at him through lowered lashes, her own mouth curved into a coy smile, and slid one hand down to cover his. “I liked it.”

A long breath shuddered out of him. His hand flipped out from under hers and pressed her fingers around his hardness, and he backed her into the bed and followed her down, then he slid into her again, and it was like coming home after months away. Years, even, she thought dimly as his weight pressed her into the bed and his mouth found hers. They arched into each other again and again, tender now, slow and easy and so achingly beautiful, she gasped his name into his mouth as he clasped her

hands in his and pushed her high, and they shattered together in a sweet, primal, dizzying rush.

And in the aftermath, before her heart settled and the gentle savagery of his touch faded, she knew down to her bones, just knew, that she'd never be the same again.

He took her again before tearing himself away from the seductive temptation of her body. Of her , Jos corrected, even as they settled into the bed, naked now, and Tyelu draped herself across his sweat-slicked body. Her fingertips traced a light trail across his chest, stirring a contentment so deep, he was tempted to dive in and live there forever.

Had he ever felt this way about a woman? Had one ever moved him the way his princess did?

She scraped her fingernails lightly across his abdomen, eliciting from him a smile and a reflexive throb of desire.

“Careful,” he murmured.

She dug her nails in lightly, and he felt her smile against his chest. “Too rough for the tough little merc?”

“Never.”

Her roaming hand paused, then drifted below his waist, and she laughed huskily. “I see.”

“Vixen,” he growled.

“You expected less?”

No, he thought. He hadn't. This right here, her draped across him, teasing him, pushing every boundary she could find? That's exactly what he'd wanted from her.

And he wanted more.

Her hand rested now on his chest, over the slow thud of his heartbeat. He captured it, kissed her fingertips, brushed another across the top of her head.

"We need to talk, princess."

She stiffened. "Bored already?"

The question startled him enough that when she tugged on her hand, he let it slip away. "Where did that come from?"

Instead of replying, she rolled away from him and sat on the edge of the bed, her spine rigid. He took the briefest moment to admire the curve of her back, the soft swell of her ass, then pushed upright and knelt behind her, with her between his thighs and his hands on her shoulders. Her skin was soft, velvety, and so tempting he had to quash an impulse to bury his face against her throat.

Doing that would probably get his head removed from his body.

He dropped a kiss to her shoulder, hiding a grin the windows might reflect to her. Feisty little vixen.

"My dal is being pulled from babysitting duty for another recon of the system. Don't know how long it'll take, but after, I want to see you again."

She half turned toward him, giving him the barest glimpse of her downturned profile.

"Truly?"

Was that a thread of uncertainty in her voice? Did she really not understand how much he wanted her, what he'd do to have her again?

Something loosened in his chest. Incredibly, his body reacted, growing hard against her back, and suddenly, he realized he didn't know what she'd say, whether she'd agree to meet him again or turn him away.

“Say you want that, too,” he said, his voice colder, more savage, than he'd meant.

She hesitated long enough for his fingers to tighten on her shoulders. “My father has requested that I sit in on the next Thing.” At his questioning look, she added, “A local court slash province business meeting.”

“When?”

“Upon my return to Abyw.” Another hesitation, then she twisted her face toward his and gazed up at him, her face set carefully in an inscrutable expression. “He wishes my aid in hearing the grievances brought before him as kafh.”

He accessed the Q's databanks through his implant and scrolled through their intelligence on Abyw's leadership. Gared ab Einif enig Alna, Tyelu's father, was the governor, of sorts, of an Abyewian province and a trusted member of Tyrl Sigun's court. He had the tyrl's ear, which should make Jos's family happy. As Ambassador Bilal had pointed out repeatedly, Q had been looking for a way to ally with the Pruxn?. She, at least, would see Jos's relationship with Tyelu as god-sent.

But they were only at the beginning now. It was much too early to place such a heavy burden on him or Tyelu.

“How long will that take?” he said.

“A few days, perhaps. Then he’ll attend the Council of Kafhs.”

“And he wants you with him.”

“Yes.”

So her father was grooming his only daughter for a leadership position. Layne would find that interesting. Not that he’d tell her. She had her own spies. Let them do their jobs.

Meanwhile, he still had to convince Tyelu to see him again.

She turned away again and relaxed into him. “Kodh claims I’d make a terrible kafh.”

“Kodh?”

“My cousin, the son of my father’s eldest brother. He’s here as a member of Sigun’s honor guard. Tall, brooding, condescending?”

Ah, yes, Jos thought. The arrogant ass his dal had done their level best to avoid.

“And he thinks he’d make a better leader?” he said.

Her shoulders twitched under his hands, then she said, softly, “I’d like to think I’d be the better choice.”

“Then why the hesitation?”

In the silence that followed, her fingers crept to his hands and pulled one around her upper chest. She rested her head in the crook of his arm and sighed. “My mother committed me to service in the Queen’s Guard before my birth, when she and my

father first met. I was young when she sent me to Zinod alone the first time, no more than a handful of standard years. It felt as if a part of me had been severed.”

His heart cracked at the undercurrent of pain in her voice, and he reacted unthinkingly, drawing her closer to him, soothing her with a soft kiss and the skim of one hand up and down her arm. An odd familiarity filled him, reminding him of the day his father had left him at the Academy the first time. He couldn't have been much older that day than she was when she began her own military training.

Part of him insisted that it was different for the Q. They knew from birth what price they'd pay for the stability and success of their people. Had Tyelu's parents instilled her with that same sense of duty, or had she been torn between her mother's world and her father's, the world into which she'd been born?

“In my second year,” she continued, “an assassin made it into the queen's own chambers. Her guard stopped him. Creti Flenig, the captain of the Queen's Guard at that time. You may remember meeting her at one of the receptions.”

“I do,” he murmured. The Lady Warrior had reminded him of Tyelu. Not in looks, no; the two women were as different as the sun is from the sky. But in their manner? The tilt of their heads, the canny calculation hiding behind polite smiles. Yes, there they bore a startling resemblance.

“When the assassin was brought before the queen to hear his sentence, we were there. All of the trainees.” She pressed her mouth to his arm, then said, “Do you know much of Banam's customs?”

“Enough,” he replied. “He was sentenced to death?”

“And executed on the spot. Creti beheaded him with her own sword. I will never forget the spray of blood, the hot reek of death. Some of the girls vomited, right there

in the throne room.”

Her voice had gone quiet, distant with memory, as if she were reliving what must have been a horrifying moment for a young child. Even the Q did not force death upon their cadets at such a young age.

“Not you,” he guessed.

“No. I felt nothing at all,” she said quietly, and for some inexplicable reason, she trembled. “Not nothing. I was glad Creti had killed him, glad the traitor was dead.”

“That’s not unusual. You were a child in service to the queen.”

“No! You don’t understand.” She pulled away and stood with her back to him, beautifully outlined by the light of Domor’s moons shining through the windows in front of her. Her hands clenched into fists, then relaxed, and she shuddered again. “I wished it had been me wielding the sword, me shedding his blood and feeding it to the gods as an atonement for his sins. Me, a child who could barely lift a dagger in her own defense! I hated his family for breeding a traitor, for allowing a viper to grow in their midst, and I vowed then that I would never allow such treason to take root in my presence.

“His sister was one of my classmates. We shared a dorm room. All of our training class did.”

His gut tightened. “What did you do?”

“She was cleared of all wrongdoing.”

“Tyelu,” he growled.

“Yet, someone had to have let the assassin in. The matter was never mentioned again among the lower training classes, but despite our trainers’ insistence that she had done nothing wrong, I was convinced she had. So, I sabotaged her. Not at first, no. At first it was just...besting her at tests, outmaneuvering her on the mat, quietly separating her from any friends she managed to make. I made a study of her. Eventually, I came to know her better than even her own traitorous rot of a family did.”

A chill slid down his spine. He stood and walked to her, and wrapped his arms around her, his front to her back. That fine tremor still ran through her body. She stiffened again and tried to break his hold, and he held on, knowing deep in his gut that she hadn’t yet reached the worst of it.

“I broke her,” she said on a bitter laugh, “Systematically, over years, I took an innocent little girl and beat her down, and I did it by playing inside the rules, until our final test. And then I used everything I’d ever learned about her, every skill I possessed, and I made kraden sure she didn’t walk off the mat on her own, that she would never be in a position to threaten the queen again. Afterward, I thrilled in the victory, certain I had destroyed the seed that could one day bear fruit to another traitor.

“It’s not unusual for such things to occur. The training to become a Queen’s Guard is brutal. No one questioned what happened, and she withdrew her candidacy, likely knowing she’d never be accepted into the elite units.”

“But?”

Tyelu inhaled slowly and exhaled on a string of words. “After I became a Lady Warrior, I was assigned to the Archives for a Zinod year. And I discovered that she truly had been innocent. Another had allied with the traitor, a trusted cook who’d been part of the queen’s staff since she was a girl herself. We trainees had not been

privy to the cook's demise. I don't know why. If I had known, perhaps I would've made peace with the girl instead of hounding her until she bled.

"When Creti retired the captaincy, the queen offered me the spot. I declined. A leader who lacks compassion and mercy quickly becomes a tyrant, and I could not besmirch my family's reputation that way."

"You let her live," he pointed out.

"Only because killing her would have meant my expulsion, and possibly my own death." Tyelu shook her head, and when she spoke again, her voice held enough bitter regret to make him flinch. "No, I am unsuited to leadership. Better Kodh as a soft tyrant than a woman who wields malice as casually as I."

He blew out a rude epithet. "You forget that I've met Kodh."

"So?"

"Do you kick helpless animals and scream at young children?"

She tilted her head back against his arm until their eyes met and arched a nearly white eyebrow. "Does he?"

"The point," he said patiently, "is that you don't, which proves you have more compassion than you believe."

She scoffed and shifted restlessly against him.

Jos skimmed his teeth lightly down her neck, a mild, teasing rebuke. "Your father knows you better or he wouldn't have chosen you as his successor."

“Now you know my father’s will?” she said lightly.

“You’d try the patience of the gods, princess.”

“I’d give it a shot anyway.” She turned in his embrace, still holding his gaze, a faint flicker of some unnamed emotion lighting her blue eyes. “You think I should allow my father to groom me for the kafh.”

“I think you have a good heart,” he corrected gently. “And that you shouldn’t turn down an opportunity to lead your people because of one mistake you made as a child.”

“A horrible—”

He cut her off with a hard kiss. When she softened against him, he drew back long enough to add, “A mistake you made for the right reasons. Your heart is pure, Tyelu, your instincts sound. Trust yourself. I know you’ll do the right thing.”

She stared up at him for a long moment, her expression yet again the mask of the warrior she’d been for so long, the warrior still living in her heart and spirit. Finally, she said, “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

He growled and picked her up, then tossed her onto the bed and followed her down, ignoring her outraged squawk as he covered her body with his, holding her right where he wanted her. “Say you’ll meet me again.”

She tilted her chin at a challenging angle. “Why should I?”

“Because you want me.” He smiled and slid his erection along her wetness. “Say it so I can please you again before duty calls me away.”

Her mouth curved into a mischievous, knowing smile. “The sex is that good?”

He captured her chin with one hand. “You know it’s not just sex.”

To his surprise, she clasped his hand in hers and pressed a light kiss to his palm. “Love me before you leave.”

She hadn’t meant to say it like that. He could see that much in her expression. But she had said it, and in the saying had rendered him helpless.

“As you wish,” he murmured, then he made love to her until Domor’s moons set and he could no longer ignore the summons recalling his dal back to duty.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Habit had Tyelu waking early, despite the lack of sleep. She sat up and stretched, easing the twinges and aches caused by a night of Jos's single-minded attention. A feline smile curved her mouth. He'd made a worthy lover. And, she hoped, a discreet one.

What had possessed her to share such intimate secrets with him?

The smile faded as she shoved the blanket away and rolled off the bed. Through the window, skimmers streaked across Domor's morning skies, startling the tiny, winged creature building a nest in one corner of the outer windowpane.

Tyelu frowned at the creature, not really seeing its antics. Jos had promised to meet with her again, yet she couldn't shake her lack of trust. Men were, in her experience, fickle, selfish creatures, interested solely in sating their own lust. She chose her lovers carefully and had many fewer than most believed precisely because so many of the men she met quickly proved themselves lacking in honor or respect.

Or in patience, a trait her family claimed anyone needed before attempting to deal with her.

Tyelu pushed the thought away as she strolled into the bathing area and readied herself for the long day ahead. The tyrl would be leaving today. She must oversee that and her own departure. Ryn had invited her to journey home on Yarinska . She had half a mind to join him, if only to escape Kodh's sneering presence. Sigun wouldn't need her once he left, so why not travel back to Abyw in the relative peace of her brother's ship?

The ship he'd used to steal his beloved bride.

Tyelu's frown deepened. There, her brother had shown more courage than she. Had she ever been tempted to steal a mate of her own, as Ryn and so many others before him had?

Jos , her mind whispered as she stepped into the shower and ducked her head under the hot spray. The Q-merc had tempted her from the moment he and his dal had popped onto Yarinska , when Ryn, Ziri, and their passengers had needed help the most. But did she truly want to...

The answer hit her before the question finished forming in her mind. Yes, she wanted to present him at the Choosing, to have him fight for her as no man had ever dared.

Did he want her enough to bother? Would he understand the significance of her stealing him away and honor the traditions of her people?

The water ran cold before she found an answer, leaving her dissatisfied and grumpy. She dressed quickly and stormed out of her rooms, leveling an icy stare on the few humans she passed. She'd nearly reached Sigun's quarters when she met Luden Moko and his assistant, escorted by Magda Bur-D'ga and two other members of Jos's dal. The Q-mercs wore full armor and held weapons at the ready, though their helmets were retracted, allowing Tyelu a clear view of the hard stare Magda directed at her.

Tyelu allowed a small, satisfied smile to curve her mouth. If the other woman wanted to challenge her, Tyelu was happy to oblige.

Luden smiled at Tyelu as the group approached and stopped next to her. "I was just trying to reach Ziri," he said. "We're departing this afternoon. Have you seen her?"

Tyelu wrestled enough of her irritation down to answer respectfully, for her brother's sake if not for diplomacy. "No, sir. I have to call Ryn later. Would you like me to pass on a message?"

"No, no. I'm sure she'll contact me when she has a spare moment." He dipped his head in a respectful nod. "We'll be journeying to Abyw ourselves before too long. I hope to see you then."

Tyelu returned his salute. "It would be my honor."

She stepped aside to allow the party room to pass.

Magda jerked her chin at the other mercs and lingered behind. As soon as they were out of hearing range, she rounded on Tyelu, her mouth set in a fierce frown. "You have no idea what you're meddling in, princess."

That last word held enough mockery to sting. Jos could call her that. No one else could, especially not one of his little minions.

Tyelu arched a cool eyebrow at the other woman. "Nor do you, Bur-D'ga."

"He's not a plaything."

"I never said he was," Tyelu countered. "Interesting that you think of him that way. Jealous, little merc?"

Magda's expression hardened. "Tell you what, princess. Ask Emler what happens when a Q-merc gives over his heart."

The Bur-D'ga stormed off, leaving Tyelu staring after her bemusedly.

“Who in the heavens is Emler?” she wondered. One of their dal, no doubt, in which case Tyelu vowed to avoid them all whenever possible.

All except Jos, naturally. Him she intended to keep.

But what to do about him? If she allowed him to jet off around the galaxy chasing Sweepers, it could be months before she saw him again. His feelings might fade during their time apart, and that would not do.

Now that she'd felt his singular touch, she wanted more, so much more a fragile hope filled her at the thought. She wanted to see him again, to convince him to fight for her, to stand among the other men and women in the inner circle of the Choosing grounds and watch with pride as he battled his way through kin and foe alike to claim her.

Tyelu shook her head as she mentally reviewed the laws governing the Choosing. The Pruxn? had formulated strict rules to prevent abuse. There was a reason each planetary system was visited no less than once every one-hundred-and-fifty Standard years. To the best of her knowledge, the Q home world had never been targeted. It was too well guarded, its location a shadowy myth to outsiders, all but the highest diplomats and rulers. Sigun likely knew where it was...

Tyelu frowned. He'd remarked on the Choosing a few days back. What was it he'd said again?

The final days of this season's Choosing are close at hand. The Q'Mhel would make a good mate.

There's still time.

But the next Choosing concerned mates stolen from Tersii, Ziri's home world, which

was still recovering from a devastating Sweeper attack. Not all of the mates-to-be had had to be stolen. Some had voluntarily resettled on Abyw, on the hope that they'd find a home there. Some had, an event even Tyelu found pleasing.

The fact remained that this Choosing season concerned Tersi, not Q. The two systems could be light years apart, for all she knew.

A low-level headache erupted behind her eyes. Tyelu sighed. Her ruminations might come to naught if the man in question failed to keep his promise to her. As much as it hurt to think so, she would never consider forcing herself on an unwilling partner. Her heart had been dinged enough already.

No, Ryn and her father might have been courageous enough to risk stealing and wooing an unknown bride, but here Tyelu's normally prodigious courage failed. If Jos didn't want her, she would forget him and hunt for another.

But if he did want her, if he came to her again, willingly...

In that case, it became a matter of how to get him to Abyw, and how to keep him there long enough for the Choosing to take place.

She pushed the headache down, veered down a different corridor, and located an open public comm unit. Quickly, she contacted Creti's quarters, and was relieved when the other woman answered.

Without preamble, Tyelu said, "I need advice."

A hint of amusement lighted Creti's dark eyes. "Does this have anything to do with a certain handsome Q'Mhel?"

Tyelu nodded tersely.

“Don’t worry, darling. I have just the thing. I’ll courier it to your quarters within the half hour.”

“Thank you.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

Tyelu nodded again, then cut the connection and stalked purposefully toward the tyrl’s quarters. If Jos truly wanted her, nothing would stop her from claiming him, not even the trivial matter of the law.

Jos cleaned out his planetside quarters, affixed transporter chips to anything he didn’t need right away, and sent it to his ship. He thought hard about dropping by and seeing Tyelu again, but duty won out over need. If he juggled duty well, he could wrangle a spare quarter hour to see her before his dal left the system to ferret out the Sweepers that had attacked Domorian space.

Fortunately, he could hand security concerns for the Tersii diplomats off to another unit beforehand. He’d handled plenty of guard duty in his time. That wasn’t the problem. No, the problem was that guard duty didn’t consume enough of his attention to suppress thoughts of a certain princess. She popped into his mind so frequently, it was a wonder he’d gotten his frekking gear packed.

He located his dal via his implant and opted to transport to their location, saving time better spent elsewhere. On his haughty Lady Warrior, for one. He smiled now, thinking of the way she’d come apart for him, her icy glare replaced by enough heat to melt him where he stood. His dick twitched to life behind his armor, and he swore at it good-naturedly.

By the stars, she was potent. And he intended to have her again as soon as he could arrange it.

He doublechecked his land-locked quarters, then triggered a transport. A moment later, he popped into an empty area in Forro's spaceport, close to his dal and the Tersii delegation. He headed toward the Tersii ship's berth and found Magda supervising security while the Tersii loaded their baggage and cargo. Another dal waited patiently to the side, well out of the way. Awaiting him, no doubt.

His dal's helmets were down. Jos examined them carefully as he approached, the ones he could see. Magda had scattered the dal strategically around the ship, with herself and Emler guarding the boarding tube. To the casual observer, she no doubt appeared coolly focused on the job at hand, but Jos noticed a tiny tic in the corner of her mouth that spelled trouble.

Two guesses where the trouble came from.

He heaved a sigh as he crossed the last few paces to where she stood, positioning himself out of her direct range of sight and motion. "All's well?"

"Aye, Q'Mhel," she replied, her steely gaze flitting between the many people milling around and into the ship. "Five by."

Her voice held that flat tone he'd come to associate with an itchy need to chase action. "We'll be in the thick of it soon enough."

She snorted. "Lubbers sure are taking their time."

"Not everyone was born with a knife in their hand."

"Including a certain princess?" she muttered.

Ah. There it was, the root of the problem.

His shoulders relaxed, and he allowed himself a small smile. “Jealous?”

“Of that piece of frippery?” she sputtered, her gaze never leaving her duty.

“Of the fact that I found a bedmate and you’re still looking.”

On the other side of the boarding tube, Emler hid a laugh behind a cough. Magda speared him with a brief glare before turning it on Jos.

“She’ll break your heart,” she said flatly.

“You’re assuming I have a heart to break.” Though he suspected Tyelu had already wormed her way into what little heart he had left. He shook the thought off and clapped Magda lightly on the shoulder. “Chin up, spacer. We’ve got a Sweeper’s nest to wipe out.”

“Thank the frekking stars. My sea legs were getting wobbly.”

He left her there to finish out the rotation while he coordinated handing off security to another dal.

What felt like hours later, Jos rotated his shoulders under his armor, flexing out the stiffness. The Tersi contingent had dragged their heels loading, boarding, and clearing Domor’s laughably light customs regs.

Once they were under another dal’s protection and underway, his dal had turned their attention to coordinating with the larger fleet for a run at the Sweepers. Q headquarters had politely but firmly waved away offers of aid from non-Q civilians and military units, if only for the sake of expediency. The Q-mercs already in Domorian space had the leg up there, saving everyone a lot of time and aggravation, including Jos himself.

His last mission briefing ended, giving him a slender window of opportunity to say goodbye to Tyelu. She hadn't so much as pinged his comm, unlike every other lover he'd ever had. Maybe she was busy, too. Maybe she'd had her fill of a certain spacer.

His mouth twisted into a grim smile as he located the tracking beacon he'd slipped into the lining of her duffel. If so, he intended to disabuse her of that notion, firmly and at length if necessary.

The beacon blipped on his tracker. He noted the location—still in her quarters—routed it to Apedemak's transport deck, found a quiet corner, and 'ported directly to her.

She was standing once again at the windows overlooking the quad below, her fingers toying with a charm affixed to the necklace she wore. She'd changed out of the uniform of a tyrl security officer into the informal dress of Abyw: sturdy dun-colored breeches topped by a rustic, midnight blue hand-knit sweater, clothes more suited for physical labor than travel or guard duty.

He knew she'd felt his presence, maybe seen his image reflected in the window. Yet she didn't turn or speak, merely stood there looking as elegant and cold as the glaciers capping Abyw's polar reaches.

"We're leaving soon," he said softly.

"Me, too." Her fingers tightened on the charm, then tucked it safely beneath her sweater, and at last, she turned toward him. "Ryn and Ziri invited me to travel home with them, on their ship. We're carrying cargo back for trade. Always has an eye on the bottom line, does our Ziri."

Her voice held an uncharacteristic touch of melancholy. Despite his intention to make her come to him, he found himself crossing the distance between them until he stood

a bare hands breadth from her.

“You know how to reach me?” he said.

A faint smile touched her mouth and flitted away, though her lashes remained lowered, hiding her beautiful blue eyes from him. “Of course. There’s only one Jos Q’Mhel.”

“I’ll be done before you know it.” Unable to resist, he reached up and tucked a wispy strand of her silky hair away. “I’ve got some leave stored up. There’s this place I want to show you.”

“On Q?”

“Yeah.”

“No one’s allowed on Q except the Q.”

“Family’s allowed. Friends.” He wrapped his hand around her nape, under the loose waterfall of her silky hair, and willed her to look at him, to snap and snarl and demand. “Lovers.”

“Is that what I am? Your lover?”

“Stubborn griyet lover,” he growled, and at last her eyes flashed up to his and he saw in them the spirit he’d come to admire.

“Is that so?” she said, one eyebrow arched.

“Aye, princess.” He lowered his head, brushed his lips across hers. “Give your lover a kiss and wish him to hurry home.”

She leaned into him, obliging him so sweetly he forgot, for a moment, the duty calling him away from her, forgot the time and the problems awaiting his attention, forgot everything but the sweet taste of her mouth and the gentle pressure of her touch.

She dropped back on her heels, breaking the kiss, and rested her forehead on his armored chest. “I wish you didn’t have to leave.”

“Stars, Tyelu. Do you think leaving you is easy?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed and her arms tightened around him. “But I do know what duty feels like. I just hope you can forgive me for taking you from it.”

“What—” he said, then something popped and his armor went dead, taking his interface and comms with it. His implant fritzed, shooting lightning-sharp pain through his body, and he staggered back and fell to one knee on the floor.

He forced his head up against a second wave of pain, forced himself to meet her gaze. “What did you do?” he gritted out.

“Breathe, Jos.” Tyelu squatted in front of him, her expression set in a hard mask, though her words were soft and distant. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t know it would hurt you.”

Another wave of pain washed over him, dragging him under a tide of blackness that carried him far, far away from the woman who’d just betrayed him.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

An insistent ping woke Jos. Out of long-engrained habit, he kept his eyes closed while assessing his situation. The last thing he remembered was Tyelu bending over him, her eyes as frozen as the tundra where she'd been born. Pain, too, though that had passed, leaving him foggy and a big woozy. He was lying on something soft, his arms were stretched above his head, and unless he was sorely mistaken, metal cuffs encircled his wrists.

The steady thrum of an engine reverberated through the floor beneath him, and he bit back a curse. Unless his dal was playing a joke on him, he was not on Apedemak on his way to his assigned mission. That much was clear from the thrum of the engines.

Raw emotion roiled through him. He couldn't decide how much of it was fury and how much betrayal, not that it mattered. Tyelu had played him, but to what end?

The tiny part of his brain still operating logically fed him a hint, and it only infuriated him more. She'd frekking kidnapped him? Right before a mission whose outcome could have sector-wide consequences? What in the stars had she been thinking?

Gentle fingers pressed against his forehead, skimmed down his cheek, and checked the pulse under this jaw. The fleeting touch retreated before he could muster his senses. When he opened his eyes, Tyelu had her back to a metal wall on the far side of the room with her eyes closed and her arms crossed over her chest.

“Why?” he gritted out.

Her eyes flew open, those beautiful blue eyes that reminded him so much of home. “You're an intelligent man. Figure it out.”

“Tyelu.”

The near growl didn't faze her in the least. Her chin tilted at a challenging angle, the very one he enjoyed seeing so much, and her gaze held a firm chill. “Q'Mhel.”

“Do you know what you've done?”

“Yes,” she replied, entirely too calmly for the fury burning through his words. “I have legally, under Pruxn? law, kidnapped a highly desirable mate in order to present him at this season's Choosing.”

Jos's hands clenched into fists. It was all he could do to hold back a snarl. “You have no legal claim to me, according to your own raiding laws.”

If anything, the set of her mouth became even more stubborn. “Do you think me so stupid as to have stolen an ineligible mate?”

No, he didn't think she was stupid. He'd never been attracted to slow-witted women, and Tyelu was far from that. But he wondered if she truly understood the pickle they were both in now because of her impetuosity.

That soft ping chimed again, and he realized, finally, what it was. A slow, grim smile curved his mouth. Just to poke at her, he rattled the chains cuffing him to the wall above the bed where lay. “You can't hold me.”

“Watch me,” she shot back.

He activated his comms and said, “Magda. Where are you?”

Tyelu arched an eyebrow.

Within shooting distance , came his First's response. Please let me shoot that frigid bitch out of the sky .

And take me with her? Aloud, he added, "Do not fire. I'm assuming this is a private vessel manned by civilians."

You're assuming right. But maybe just one shot across the bow?

The righteous snark came through loud and clear, breaking Jos's fury. "Can you 'port me out?"

No can do. We can't get a firm lock on your position. Can't risk taking part of the ship with you.

Then don't risk it. Give me five and I'll get back with a better solution.

If you spend even a tik of that time making nice with the princess—

Jos cut her off before she could finish that thought. Tyelu hadn't moved an iota during his brief conversation with Magda. Why that engendered a feeling of pride in her, he had no clue. He was furious with her, as any Q-merc in his right mind would be, and she just stood there unmoving, watching him search for a solution.

As if he hadn't wiggled his way out of tighter spots than this before.

"Finished chatting with your girlie?" she said, her voice as smooth and cool as her expression.

"What did you do to my armor?" he countered.

Her smile unfurled in a sensual curl of those delectable lips, shooting heat straight to

his dick. “Proprietary information.”

He snorted. “I can still transport out.”

“No, you can’t. Not without help.” She heaved a sigh and the smile fell away. “But if one of your d’gas wants to check on you, they can transport into the cargo bay.”

“Mighty generous of you, princess.”

“Make sure it’s the medic.”

She turned on a booted heel and exited the room. He rattled the chains again, just to tweak her nose. Manacles, for stars’ sake. What kind of griyet lubber did that?

The answer sighed out of him as he twisted around to get a good look at them. The Pruxn?, that’s who, and he could only blame himself for being here. He’d known exactly what she was when he approached her, knew even now, with the hot taint of fury lingering in his blood, that she wouldn’t have taken him if she thought they weren’t a good match.

No, this was on him, just as figuring out whether he wanted to stay or go was on him.

For a brief moment, temptation flared, luring him with the promise of a future he’d scarce dared to hope for. A beautiful woman to love, a home, children with sky blue eyes and enough gumption to keep him on his toes the remainder of his days. His heart softened, and he laughed softly.

She’d done a number on him, hadn’t she? Enough so that he’d already talked himself out of his anger.

Frek.

He shook his head and, reluctantly, contacted Magda. She wasn't the dal's medic, but her being here might save his skin and Tyelu's both.

Because duty be damned, he knew what he wanted to do, and it had nothing to do with leaving Tyelu behind.

Tyelu walked out of her quarters on Yarinska without a backward glance. What did it matter? The contempt in Jos's expression had burned itself into her mind.

Her knees threatened to give way, and she yanked herself back under control. A Lady Warrior, even one no longer actively serving the queen, did not succumb to such trivialities as a devastating emotional blow. Jos's anger would cool. She had to believe it, else everything she'd done to keep him would be for nothing.

She met Ziri in the corridor outside the cargo bay, kneeling in front of an open panel. Ziri's coveralls were wet in random places, and she cursed good naturedly at the pipes showing through the opening.

Ziri glanced up, her sunny smile dimming as she caught sight of Tyelu. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Tyelu lied, and was proud at how even her voice sounded. "Why?"

"You've gone three shades of pale."

Ah. Good to know.

Tyelu inhaled a fortifying breath and pinched some color into her cheeks. "Better?"

"A little," Ziri said, still frowning. "Does this have anything to do with our unexpected passenger?"

Tyelu only just hid a wince. Unsure how to answer, she shrugged. “One more guest incoming. Nothing to worry about.”

Ziri put down the wrench in her hand and straightened away from the open panel. “Are you sure everything’s ok?”

“Positive.”

“Hmm. I’ll go fetch Ryn, just in case.”

“That’s not—” Tyelu began, but Ziri waved a hand at her and headed toward the bridge.

“Just what I need,” Tyelu muttered at her next-sister’s back. “More people interfering.”

She straightened her spine and slapped the cargo bay hatch open, then stepped in to find a fully armored Q-merc nestled inside the one spot not filled by cargo, helmet down, the end of a nasty looking blaster pointed at Tyelu’s chest.

She arched an eyebrow at the mercenary-soldier. “Lower your weapon, or I’ll open the bay’s doors and let the black have you.”

“Try it and I’ll shoot you now,” the Q-merc said.

Tyelu recognized Magda Bur-D’ga’s voice and smiled coldly. “And start a war between the Q and the Pruxn?? I think not.”

“Like you haven’t already. Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you’ve started?”

She scoffed. “A union between our peoples will go a long way toward cementing diplomatic ties.”

“Not when you’ve stolen the frekking taq’s grandson.”

Tyelu froze and, against her will, her eyes widened. Jos, the grandson of Q’s hereditary ruler?

Magda chuckled nastily as she lowered her weapon and retracted her helmet. “I guess you don’t know him as well as you thought.”

Tyelu hardened her expression. “Not that it’s any of your business. Now, run along home, like a good little dog.”

Footsteps rang behind her, then Ryn said, “Tyelu, you’re needed on the bridge. Bur-D’ga, Ziri will take you where you need to go. Your time is limited. Make the most of it. And don’t even try to steal Tyelu’s candidate away, or I’ll hunt you down myself.”

Magda nodded stiffly as Ziri slipped into the cargo bay.

Ryn grabbed Tyelu’s arm and all but dragged her into the corridor. As soon as they were out of hearing range, he hissed, “You really landed us in a mess this time, sister.”

She wrenched her arm out of his hold and hissed back. “I didn’t know he was the taq’s grandson.”

Ryn grunted and followed her onto the bridge. “Sigun’s been trying to contact you. Father, too. Apparently, you’ve kicked up a diplomatic storm.”

She snorted at that. “As if you wouldn’t have for Ziri.”

“I would do a lot more than that for her,” he said softly. “Which is why I’m supporting you in this. Don’t let them bully you into giving him back, interplanetary incident or not.”

Her heart melted at his unexpected support, and tears welled up. On a wild impulse, she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed tight. Thank Fryw her parents had taken Ryn in when they’d found him!

Ryn patted her back awkwardly, then eased away. “I should check on the Bur-D’ga. She seems like the type to take advantage when your back is turned.”

“She will at that,” Tyelu said, grimacing. “I’ll handle this. And Ryn? Don’t worry about your reputation. I’ll make sure this isn’t pinned on you and Ziri.”

He nodded sharply and left, and she heaved a sigh. Time to face the consequences, she thought, then flicked on the comm and contacted home.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Jos squirmed on the bed, watching his fingers fumble with the manacle's lock as a knot of frustration roiled in his gut. Tyelu had left him in his skinsuit, the frag armor worn under his outer armor, likely not realizing it had small, useful items tucked into easily accessible pockets. Small items like a length of stiff wire, good for picking locks, among other things.

The wire slipped, his fingers scraped across the manacles' sharp edges, and he cursed, irritated to his core. He hadn't decided yet what he'd do once he got the frekking things unlocked. Magda had probably already transported into the cargo bay, and she was on a tear. She wanted him to go straight to Apedemak and file kidnapping charges against Tyelu and the ship's owners.

Which would only make things worse. He was not going to drag himself, Tyelu, their families, and their governments through that kind of diplomatic mess, even to assuage his own anger.

He didn't want to punish her. He wanted to steal her away, lock her in a bedroom, and tease her with his mouth and hands until she begged him to slide into her.

Or, better, turn her over his lap and spank her tight little ass until she begged him to make her come.

Couldn't do either if he deliberately dropped them in a sea of red tape.

No, that wasn't the way to handle this situation, or her, and that's where his normally decisive mind faltered. Part of him, the pissed off part, wanted to 'port away and never see her again.

The other part was seriously contemplating the alternatives.

One of the manacle's locks clicked open, freeing his left hand just as the room's hatch opened. Magda stepped in ahead of Tyelu's brother's mate. Jos recognized her as Luden Moko's daughter, had known in the back of his mind that Tyelu was somehow connected to the Tersii diplomat, but until that moment, he hadn't fully realized precisely how.

Great, he thought sourly. Yet another complication.

Ziri shot him and Magda a stern look. "Don't try to 'port him out."

Magda grunted, her gaze following the other woman as she slipped out of the room. As soon as the door slid shut again, she rounded on Jos. "Say the word and we're outtie."

The other cuff popped open. Jos shook his hands free of the manacles and sat up, rubbing the sting out of his wrists. "You can break through their jamming?"

"Not the point. She had no right—"

"Apparently, she does. Under Pruxn? law, anyway."

Magda's dark eyebrows snapped into a scowl. "Since when does the Q bow to Pruxn? dogs?"

"Since Taq Zhina wants an alliance with them. My grandmother has been dropping increasingly blatant hints about wanting to dandle the next generation on her knees."

Magda flinched.

Jos smiled grimly. “Exactly. How efficient to’ve been kidnapped by a Pruxn? with Tyelu’s connections. Did you bring my gear?”

“Thought I’d try to get you out first.”

He held up his now-unchained hands. “Got that covered. Where’s the cargo bay?”

“To the right, over one corridor, down the nearest ladder. Why? Are you going back with me?”

“Just long enough to grab my gear and arrange leave.”

And smooth over any diplomatic entanglements, if he could. His grandmother had likely defaulted to haughty taq the moment she’d learned he’d been taken. Tyrl Sigun had probably been on the receiving end of her initial rant, but that was for show. Jos had no doubt she’d subside as soon as she got her way.

Which might include Jos being shackled with a Pruxn? mate. His grandmother would undoubtedly get a kick out of the irony.

Magda’s jaw dropped. “You’re letting that b—”

Jos’s glare cut her short. “Show some respect for me, if not my future mate.”

She stared at him for a long moment, a muscle working in her jaw. “I can’t believe it. She must’ve dug her hooks in deep.”

“You have no idea,” he muttered.

But he’d known the moment he’d spotted her how special she was. From the moment he’d transported into that cargo bay and seen her ducking behind crates, firing well-

aimed shots at Sweepers, he'd wanted her so badly he could taste it. So badly, in fact, that he'd chased her halfway across the sector and taken griyet guard duty just to see her again. Put himself in her path until she'd agreed to see him, seduced her with hot glances and the unwavering determination of a Q'Mhel.

Frek. No wonder she'd kidnapped him. He'd all but begged her to.

And he wasn't even bitter about it. Her timing could use some work. That was, he realized, where his real anger lay. She'd stolen him from his duty at the worst moment possible, just when they had a lead on a dangerous nest of Sweepers.

But deep down, maybe he'd wanted her to try to claim him, to force his hand on the mating issue. No, not force. Despite what he'd said to Magda about not having a heart, he'd known what place he wanted Tyelu to fill in his life, even if he hadn't fully plotted the steps to get there. Why else would he be willing to grovel to two governments and Q Command if not to keep her?

She hadn't even kissed him properly before frying his armor. That really did piss him off. The least she could've done before dropping him to his knees was give him a decent kiss.

He followed Magda out of Tyelu's quarters toward the cargo bay. They hadn't made it ten steps into the next corridor over when Magda hissed out a triumphant breath.

"Jammer's gone," she said. "You want, we can transport over now."

Before he could decide, he caught the sound of soft, steady footsteps, then Tyelu appeared in the corridor.

Her eyes glittered like sunlight on a glacier. "Where are you going?"

“Where’s my armor?” he countered, his voice as hard as hers.

Her chin came up. “Safe. Again, where are you going?”

“To do my duty.”

He glanced at Magda, and she grinned, wrapped a gloved hand around his upper arm, and cued the transport. The last thing he saw before they disappeared was raw grief flashing across Tyelu’s expression.

Tyelu sat on the bridge wrapped in a quilt, sipping a capped mug of hot tea, her gaze on the viewscreen. While Jos had been cozied up with his harpy of a Bur-D’ga, she’d been defending them both from her father and Sigun. Gared had asked her if she knew what she was doing. She’d answered with a surety she didn’t feel, placating him well enough for him to turn the conversation toward other matters.

Sigun had been more direct. “This could drag us into a war we can ill afford with Sweeper attacks on the rise. Would you have us defend our home on two fronts, from them and the Q?”

The blunt statement had made her cringe inwardly. Yes, her timing had been unfortunate, but who knew when the Sweeper threat would be eliminated? Was she supposed to wait forever?

She shook her head, sipped the tea warming her hands. Strike when the opportunity presents itself. That had always been her strong suit. Waiting was not. Never had been, never would be.

When she’d told Sigun that, he’d leveled a hard stare on her. “You will explain yourself to me. In person, with the Q’Mhel in tow. Pray Wode his grandmother can be placated. Ambassador Bilal has already hinted that his absence may threaten the

treaty she and I negotiated on Domor.”

Tyelu snuggled deeper into her blanket, her refuge. Her maneuverings had been for nothing. Jos had left without a single word. The look on his face when he'd transported away...

Her heart ached just remembering it. She'd hoped so much for love, had already fallen far enough for his leaving to mangle what was left of her heart into pulp.

So. She had misread the situation after all. Yet again, a man had rejected her, one in a long line of potential suitors, this one to a spaceship that had promptly disappeared from Yarinska's scanners. His armor still lay in storage, fully functional now as far as she knew. The device Creti had given her to disable it had done the job. Wouldn't the Q love to get their hands on that!

Tyelu had hidden it away, safe from prying eyes. As soon as she made planet fall, she'd courier it back to her mother's oldest friend with a note on its effectiveness.

Too bad it hadn't thawed Jos's heart.

A blip on the navigation scanner alerted her. She sat forward, her own heart filled with an improbable hope. Was that Jos's ship? Had he returned to her?

Then she got a good look at the data coming in and the hope evaporated. It looked like a large transport. FTL capable apparently, as it had just jumped into the Ursine system where Ryn and Ziri had detoured to trade some of the scrap they'd scavenged from around Domor. Yarinska was still half a Standard day's journey from Lodem and its orbital shipyard, outside the more well-traveled shipping lanes to give Ziri time to contact buyers.

The ship, whatever it was, had a dirty engine, though. It was leaking atmosphere and

energy both. Surely even a pirate would staunch those leaks.

A second blip appeared near the transport, then a third and fourth, and Tyelu's gut twisted. No, that wasn't pirates. It was something exponentially more dangerous. She sent a pre-recorded mayday to Lodem, hit the in-ship comms, and said, "Sweepers on our tail."

As soon as the message was sent, she threw off the blanket, set her tea in a secure spot, and retrieved the weapons Ryn stashed on the bridge. Yarinska was too far out for aid to reach them quickly. If the Sweepers spotted the lone ship, they'd veer away from Lodem and attack.

Tyelu gritted her teeth. A full nest of Sweepers. Just her kraden luck. Those stars-forsaken diplomatic talks hadn't accomplished a single thing. Sweepers still haunted the sector's sky lanes, stronger and nastier than ever.

By the time Ryn reached the bridge, she'd strapped a blaster to each thigh, tucked battery packs into every available pocket, and held another blaster in her hand.

"I've got the cargo bay," she said. That's where the Sweepers would hit first, by attempting to dock there. It was the easiest way to board, save molecular transport which Sweepers did not possess, a small mercy for which everyone else in the sector was deeply grateful. After the last Sweeper attack on the ship, Ryn and Ziri had added as many defenses as they could afford. Unfortunately, Sweepers were persistent. If there was a way into Yarinska, they'd find it.

If there wasn't, they'd happily rip a hole in the hull to make one, passengers and cargo be damned.

Ryn nodded. "Ziri's on her way here. If they attack, she'll take the helm and weapons control, and I'll meet you in the cargo bay."

Tyelu nodded sharply, took a step toward the exit hatch.

Ryn caught her arm. “Be careful.”

“You, too,” she said softly. She looped an arm around his neck and hugged him hard, then slipped away before he could comment.

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Jos spent a brutal hour calming his grandmother down. It was the initial worry of not knowing who had taken him or why, he decided. Once she fully understood the Pruxn? connection, her rancor had become show. He finally told her, more bluntly than he'd intended, that at least this way she'd get those great-grands she'd been prodding him to have.

The sly gleam in her eyes had been hard to miss.

Q Command was not so easily placated. His uncle, the current High Commander, had called personally to chew Jos out. Only after a lengthy tirade in which the High Commander had threatened to bring Jos up on charges ranging from dereliction of duty to high treason, none of which were applicable, had he calmed down. Jos had remained silent and steely jawed throughout, the only appropriate reaction a Q-merc could have when a superior officer went on a rampage.

As soon as his uncle had calmed, Jos had looked him dead in the eye and requested leave.

It had been granted with a cold smile.

He sensed his grandmother's hand there as well. Stars, the things he endured for Tyelu.

After, he'd officially filed for emergency leave through the proper channels and packed his gear. The only thing left to do was brief his dal. They would continue searching for Sweepers under Magda's command while he played footsie with the princess, as his First had put it.

He was doing more than playing footsie and Magda knew it. How far he was willing to take it remained to be seen. As far as participating in a Pruxn? Choosing? Yes, he would fight for Tyelu there. They melded well enough to risk a long-term commitment, and her connections assured a good political fit. Love had nothing to do with that, though he suspected his heart would fall for his prickly princess, if he let it.

Maybe it already had.

But would he go so far as to seal their mating with his own culture's rituals? Would he take the mating marks for her, the tattoos etched into each mate's flesh with Domorian ink to bind them forever? Would he risk such a deep bond, the way Emler had, knowing that if he or Tyelu died, as Emler's mate had died, that the other would feel that death as if it were their own? Knowing that the surviving mate would have to endure that pain for the rest of their natural life?

Could he truly ask Tyelu to go through that ritual when he threw himself headlong into danger on official orders and whim alike?

His internal comms pinged a request for a connection with Captain Coppev. Jos opened it in voice mode. "What is it, Gage?"

"We've spotted a large nest of Sweepers. One mother ship, two children."

Jos swore under his breath. Frekking Sweepers. "Where?"

"They just jumped in system."

"How long until contact?"

"Too long, Jos. We intercepted a mayday from Yarinska . They're the closest target to the nest."

Jos's heart leapt into his throat. Tyelu . And his frekking armor was still on her brother's ship.

“What are your orders, Q'Mhel?” Gage said.

“Transport me to Yarinska . Let Magda decide how to handle the rest. I'm officially on leave as of half an hour ago.”

“Enjoy the honeymoon.”

Jos grabbed his gear, one bag in each hand, and braced himself for transport. Funny guy, that Coppev. His timing was just as bad as Tyelu's.

Just before the transport, he caught the beginning of a ship wide announcement.

“Alert, alert! Sweepers attacking a private—”

He didn't need to hear the rest to know how much danger Tyelu and her family were in.

Tyelu hunkered down in the cargo bay, hoping against hope that someone could respond to their mayday in time to render aid. A faint, wistful longing sighed out of her. Jos and his dal would come in handy right now. Too bad he'd disappeared without a trace.

A loud clank echoed through the hull, and Tyelu cut her emotions off at the root. She'd never taken on three Sweeper ships on her own. Not many had outside of a well-staffed army, let alone a single retired Queen's Guard armed with three handheld blasters and eight extra battery packs.

So, she would make do, fighting as hard as she could to give Ryn and Ziri a chance.

If she could just hold the Sweepers off long enough for help to arrive. If Ziri could hold their course toward Lodem. If a stray ship heard their mayday and answered it.

If, if, if.

Tyelu thought of one more: if they made it through this alive, she would personally see to it that Yarinska was outfitted with enough weaponry to fend off even three Sweeper ships.

The electric zing of a too-close transport raised the hairs on the back of her neck. She jerked around, blaster primed and ready, and watched Jos shimmer into view holding a duffel in each hand, the lines of his face set in granite.

The sight shocked her so much, she blurted out the first thing to pop into her head. “You came back!”

“I always meant to.”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

His expression wobbled before settling into grim lines. “I’m sorry. I thought you’d figured it out already.”

Her heart fluttered hopefully against her ribs. “Figured what out?”

“That I will always come back for you.”

He dropped his gear, yanked her into his arms, and kissed her hard, one hand tangling in her hair, the other around her waist. His mouth explored her with a practiced insistence, as if he knew exactly when to press and when to draw back, when to touch his tongue to hers, when to suck her lower lip into his mouth and bite.

Her knees went weak, and her fingers curled against the steady thud of his heartbeat, and she savored each rough press of his lips to hers, each flicker of his tongue, the warm, comforting strength of his body against hers. It felt like years since that kiss on Domor, forever even, and she cherished each moment of the embrace, knowing full well it could be their last.

When he drew back, tears pricked her eyes, whether from relief or affection, she couldn't say.

He groaned and touched his forehead to hers, his breath washing over her mouth in short, sharp puffs. "Next time, wait until I'm finished kissing you before kidnapping me."

A laugh sputtered out of her, and she kissed him again. "I'll do that. I shouldn't forgive you, you know. That was a horrible way to leave."

"I know, princess. I'm sorry." He kissed her tenderly, rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. "Will forgive me?"

Yes, she would. She'd already forgiven him for leaving without a word or promise of return. She, who never forgave anyone outside of her family, had forgiven him merely because he'd asked it of her.

She traced the firm line of his jaw, ran a thumb over his lower lip. "If I told you that I'm beginning to care about you, would you leave me again?"

"If I did, I'd turn around and come right back. You can't get rid of me that easily." He grinned against her touch, nipped her thumb, and a wicked gleam glinted in his murky green eyes. "When this is over, you're going to chain me to your bed and have your wicked way with me. Consider it a condition of my return. One of us has to be chained to the bed."

She laughed again, high on his touch, on the rare affection roiling through her, on the relief of his return. They'd made no promises to each other, yet, but she could not quite rein in the hope welling within her.

"I'd planned on it." Another clang hit the hull, this one louder, and she rocked back on her heels. "Kraden Sweepers."

"Tell me you hid my armor nearby."

"Over there, in a packing crate." Reluctantly, she stepped back and pointed to it as another clang rang through the air. "Hurry. That's their third harpoon. One more and they'll go for the airlock."

He dropped another kiss to her mouth and one to her throat, then pivoted away. "Don't worry, lover. We'll handle it."

Yes, she thought. They would. How bad could it be? A child ship could hold, what? Fifty to seventy males? But that mother ship had two such children. They couldn't all hold be that large. Sweepers were too aggressive to congregate in those numbers. If luck was on their side, and Tyelu prayed Fryw it was, then the attacking ship held the fewest Sweepers and not too many of them at that.

While she'd been calculating their odds, Jos had located the packing crate and started pulling out his armor.

"Make yourself useful, princess," he called. "That second bag is loaded with weapons."

She blew him a kiss. "You say the sweetest things, Q'Mhel."

His grin warmed her as much as his kiss had.

The bags held weapons, gear, clothing, and toiletries. She left his personal items be. Candidate for the Choosing or not, he had a right to privacy. She was more interested in the weapons anyway. The weapons a man chose revealed as much about his character as his actions.

Jos had apparently come prepared for a fight. She recognized the wickedly efficient long-barreled blaster as one of his service weapons and set it aside for him, along with two of the three battery packs included in the bag. The third, she tried to lock in, only to have it jam.

Jos appeared at her back, his movements so silent she hadn't caught them over the ship's hum, the clang of Sweepers, and the boom of Yarinska's cannon.

He leaned down, reached over her shoulder, and fiddled with the control mechanism on one side of his blaster, above the trigger. "It's locked to my print, but you can load it now. Be a good girl and I'll get you one of your own."

She twisted around and shot him a wicked grin. "I'm very good."

"That you are."

He rewarded her with a kiss, then she turned back to his portable cache. Would she ever get enough of him?

The answer seemed so obvious, she wondered why she'd bothered asking. No, she would never get enough of Jos Q'Mhel. Bribing her with weapons wasn't necessary.

Though it didn't hurt.

She riffled through the remaining weapons, drawing out those she knew he carried on him into battle, and chose some for her own use. A flash-bang for distractions, a hefty

knife sheathed conveniently enough in a thigh holster. She'd just strapped it on when her nape started tingling.

She reached for her blaster as she turned, catching sight of Jos across the way, halfway into his armor. Another boom of the cannon, then the bay fell eerily quiet. Tyelu searched the shadowed space, her blaster at the ready. An odd, strangling noise reached her ears, clearly audible over the engine's hum. She caught movement in the shadows, heard the noise again, and swung her gaze toward it.

There, not five ceg away, the monstrous head of a Sweeper rose above the twisted hull of a demolished ship. But how had it gotten into the cargo bay? The airlock was closed, the atmosphere intact.

It groaned and wiggled, and the salvaged hull shifted, giving Tyelu a sickening glimpse of its body fused with the scrap metal.

"They can transport," she whispered hoarsely. "By Wode, they figured out how to 'port from ship to ship."

"Frek," Jos said. "Call for h—"

Lights shimmered in the bay, reaching into every corner. When they dimmed, Sweepers filled the space, dozens upon dozens of the creatures. Many had materialized into scavenged metal and broken engines, becoming part of them. Others had materialized in the rare open spaces. The stench of dung and filth wafted through the air, stinging Tyelu's eyes, and the cries of the wounded rose to a fevered pitch, rivaled only by the battle calls of the remaining Sweepers.

Including the one right in front of Tyelu, a girthy male supported by thick legs, his metal-tipped tentacles weaving around him. This one wore rough leather pants and a matching coat dotted with shiny studs, an outfit she'd never seen on a Sweeper.

She managed to get off two shots, each a solid hit, before one of those tentacles slapped her blaster away, knocking her to the floor. Blaster fire hit it from the side just as Ryn popped through the open hatch, his own blaster blazing, and Tyelu pulled a second blaster from its holster and fired.

It wasn't enough to penetrate the alien's metal-studded outfit. The Sweeper stomped toward Tyelu, shrugging off every hit it took. She pulled the knife and slashed at the tentacles it thrust at her. The knife snagged on a metal tip, something wrapped around her ankle. The Sweeper aimed a leering grin at her as it snapped one of the studs decorating its coat.

Light flickered around them, and her gut twisted into a horrified knot.

“Tyelu!” Jos roared.

Then the light pulled her into darkness, away from Jos and the relative safety of her brother's ship.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Tyelu woke to a glimmering twilight, prone against a cold, hard floor. A devil danced merrily in her head and a sonorous bell rang in her ears. The overwhelming stench of unwashed flesh and rotten organic matter did not help.

She closed her eyes, gingerly prodded the ache, and located a gash on the back of her skull. Kraden Sweeper had probably dropped her from a height. They were strong, but callous. Ryn bore the scars proving it.

A gentle hand stroked her free hand, easing the pain. “A-dommoro fye!”

Do you speak Domorian?

“Niya,” Tyelu whispered. Not enough. In Galactic Basic, she said, “Where are we?”

“The Sweepers have gathered us into a hold.”

Tyelu relaxed a little despite the circumstances, relieved that whoever sat beside her also spoke GB. “A child ship?”

“I believe so. There are fewer...childbearing ones.”

“Females?”

“As you say.”

A thud sounded nearby. Tyelu risked opening one eye and nearly winced at the pain caused by the dim lighting. Still, that one peek had been enough. A leather-coat

bedecked male Sweeper plodded down a corridor lined with cages, one of which held her and the Domorian. Most of the cages were empty, but a few held other prisoners. All women, she noted grimly, which did not bode well for any of the captives.

Slowly, carefully, she slid her hands down her body, probing for weapons. Her blasters were gone, the extra battery packs were not. Her fingertips grazed the hilt of Jos's knife, and she smiled despite the pain.

One weapon wouldn't be enough to take on a whole ship of Sweepers, child ship or not. But she had an ace up her sleeve, her very own pet Q'Mhel. True, he might still be pissed at her for kidnapping him, but he wouldn't abandon her to the less than tender mercies of Sweepers.

The Sweeper approached, its beady eyes jerking from side to side. Tyelu allowed her own eyes to slide shut and squeezed the Domorian's hand as a silent reassurance. She needed to conserve her energy, wait for the proper moment to present itself.

And when she struck? This motley nest of Sweepers would discover exactly how dangerous a Lady Warrior could be.

When the Sweeper curled a tentacle around Tyelu's leg and triggered a jump, Jos's heart dropped to his knees. "Tyelu!" he screamed as he leapt for her.

Too late. The two blinked out of the cargo bay as more Sweepers surged toward Jos and Ryn.

Raw rage throbbed through Jos's veins, dimming his vision to only what lay ahead of him. With ruthless efficiency, he stepped into the first Sweeper and punched it hard over its heart. The Sweeper staggered back into its companion, sending them both stumbling into the scrap metal stuffed into the cargo bay.

“Blaster!” Tyelu’s brother yelled.

Jos turned and caught the weapon Ryn threw at him, swung it around, and pressed the tip against the first downed Sweeper, right where he’d punched it. One shot killed it. A second shot fried the next Sweeper’s skull matter.

Half a dozen more shambled along the narrow pathways winding through the cargo, ignoring the Sweepers embedded in the valuable scrap. Jos faced them head on, eager to cut them down. The quicker he cleared Yarinska , the quicker he could go after Tyelu. The longer they had her, the harder she’d be to find. And Magda didn’t know she’d been taken, so she wouldn’t be looking for her. Wouldn’t know not to fire on the Sweeper ships. Wouldn’t know that when that Sweeper had taken Tyelu, it had taken part of him with her.

Stars and firmament. He’d gone and fallen in love with her.

The shock of realization tempered his rage, draining some of the bloodlust clouding his vision. The cargo bay came into sharp focus as he slaughtered the last of the mobile Sweepers. They were stacked two high all around him, the stench of their hot blood a rank sting in his nostrils. Ryn moved among the scrap, grimly delivering a kill shot to each of the trapped Sweepers.

A tremor ran through Jos’s hands and he realized he only had half his armor on. The other half, the torso where his meds were stored, lay on the other side of the cargo bay where he’d dropped it when Tyelu had been taken. The important half, he realized numbly, the half that delivered a steady flow of drugs to counter the effects of adrenaline and battle fatigue. The adrenaline was the problem here. Mixed with terror and love, it packed a doozy of a punch.

He limped toward his discarded armor, heard Ryn’s quiet footsteps behind him.

“Kraden Sweepers,” the other man muttered. “Gonna be a mess to clean up. You’re going after Tyelu?”

Jos nodded. “I have to. We’ve got a date at the next Choosing, and I aim for us both to be there.”

Ryn huffed out a half laugh. “Never thought I’d see the day when Tyelu dragged a man onto the Choosing grounds.”

Jos grunted, all he could manage around the urgent rage lingering in his blood. He’d already formulated a rough plan. Contact Magda, rescue Tyelu, kiss the ever-loving stars out of her.

Now, if he could just get into his armor.

Tyelu waited in the near darkness of the Sweeper ship’s hold, one hand wrapped around the hilt of Jos’s knife, the other clutched to the bosom of Kresl, her Domorian cellmate. Once her headache had dulled, Tyelu could focus well enough to recognize the tiny female as one of Domor’s junior diplomatic attachés. Coaxing a name out of the young female had taken more patience than Tyelu had to spare, but she’d gritted her teeth and persisted. The poor girl hadn’t managed to get more than a few tense words out before fear shut her down.

Now, Kresl huddled beside Tyelu, raw terror leaking out of her mind, infecting the hold’s other occupants. When Tyelu realized that the fear knotting her gut was coming from the Domorian, she’d fallen back on years of discipline, shutting her mind and emotions to the tiny female’s influence.

Domorians were not warriors. Tyelu tried to temper her patience in light of that simple fact.

The hours wore on. A Sweeper plodded dully between the cages, its beady-eyed gaze sliding over every woman there, regardless of species or beauty.

Tyelu didn't bother wondering why the Sweepers had taken only females. Some species could interbreed with the menacing alien species. Woe unto those females. They would be forced to mate with a Sweeper until they grew large with child, if they survived that long. Giving birth to a monstrous hybrid might kill them anyway. If not that, then Sweeper females certainly would, after stealing their newborn away to raise as a slave or a breeder.

Tyelu steeled herself against the revulsion shuddering through her. The rare human could interbreed with a Sweeper. Domorians, on the other hand, were highly compatible with Sweepers, but often too fragile to survive the brutality of a Sweeper mating.

She smoothed her hand over the knife's hilt, watching the guard beneath lowered lids. Where was Jos? What was taking him so long?

The thought had not fully formed in her mind when an armored Q-merc popped into existence not three ceg away, blaster up.

Jos . Thank Fryw.

The Sweeper guard turned ponderously on its trunk-like legs, growling menacingly. Its tentacles swept out, thrashing against Jos as he fired point-blank into the guard's chest. One tentacle brushed Jos's hands, the blaster fire hit the guard's coat and ricocheted off, and a chorus of frightened screams rose above the ship's grunting engines.

Tyelu rolled into a crouch, landing near the cage's lock. The sudden movement sent a wave of dizziness through her skull, threatening to drown her. She clenched her eyes

shut, forced the dizziness back. When she opened her eyes again, Jos had dropped his blaster and was attacking the Sweeper guard with a wickedly sharp dagger.

The hold's hatch creaked open. Two additional Sweepers crossed the threshold. Beyond them, Tyelu caught a glimpse of blaster fire and armor-clad Q-mercs amid the chaos of close quarters combat. As she worked on the cage's locking system, one of the new Sweeper's froze, then was dragged backward through the hatch by a Q-merc. The merc turned a blank-faced helmet toward Tyelu and nodded, then dove back into battle before she could respond.

Jos materialized in front of her. "Stand back!"

Tyelu scuttled out of the way as he raised the butt end of his blaster and pounded it against the lock. Electricity sparked, then the door clicked open. As soon as it opened, Jos whirled and jumped straight into fending off the other Sweeper.

Tyelu grabbed Kresl's hand and shoved her out the door. "Get the rest out!"

The Domorian stumbled through the cage while Tyelu weighed her options. Knife against Sweeper. How much use would she really be?

With a vicious curse, she vaulted the downed Sweeper and started hacking away at the locks for the cages across the aisle. Two or three hits with the knife's hilt did the trick. The room held only ten cages, but some were stuffed with females of all races, sizes, and shapes. Tyelu pointed them to the back of the room against what she thought might be the outer hull, away from the fighting in the room beyond.

Jos had taken down the Sweeper he was fighting and was countering a trio of younger males who'd somehow lumbered through the battle raging outside the prison hold. In a break barely long enough to take a breath, he kicked a small bag her way. She ducked a stray tentacle thrown at her and picked the bag up. It jangled in her hands,

and when she opened it, she saw why: it held a few dozen loose transport chips.

She whooped and tossed the closed bag to the Domorian, shouting, "One each. Take them and go!"

Jos finished off the third of the trio with a dagger to its rancid heart, then backed toward where she stood halfway down the hold. "You, too, princess. I want you well out of danger while we mop up here."

"Forget it, spacer," she retorted. "Give me a blaster and I'll help."

His helmet retracted, baring his scowl. "Don't argue with me, Tyelu. You're wounded."

She lifted her chin and stared him down. "So are you, or did you miss the tentacle-sized hole in your armor?"

He glanced down and swore roundly. "It's just a scratch. Barely hurts at all."

"That's because your armor's pumping meds into your bloodstream." She edged closer, close enough to cup his jaw in her hand. "Sweeper at hind left, spacer."

"Frekking Sweeper." Without looking, he swung his blaster around one-handed and shot it squarely in the chest. "I can't concentrate when you're in danger."

"Yes, I can see how well you don't concentrate by the way you dropped that one without looking. Sweeper at demi-hind right."

He whirled and shot the entering Sweeper twice, then turned back as it swayed, dazed, and stumbled into the hatch's frame. "Look. I didn't even kill that one. See how much of a distraction you are?"

“Forget it, Q’Mhel. I’m not leaving you to fight alone.” Never would she do so, though she certainly was not sharing that thought with him.

“I’m not alone. We’re two dals strong here.”

“Sweeper at—”

“Fine,” he growled as he turned and took out the approaching Sweeper. “But when we get out of this, you owe me. Stars, I love that bloodthirsty gleam in your eye.”

Abruptly, he pressed a hard kiss to her mouth, then pushed his spare blaster into her hands and jumped back into the fight, his helmet covering his head as he walked.

“Tyelu?” Kresl called.

Tyelu bit her tongue against a curse as she whirled on the cowering women. “What are you waiting for, a gilded invitation? Go!”

The women murmured among themselves, casting nervous looks at her as the first among them accepted transport chips and popped away.

She ignored them as she checked the blaster and waded into battle herself. Not for every star in the universe was she letting Jos have all the fun.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Mop up took a while, so long, time bled into a different day. When battle assessment came on scene after the Sweeper threat was eliminated, they estimated that the Sweeper mother ship and attached child ships had contained over two hundred prime fighting males as well as thirty distinct harems, most on the mother ship.

Not exactly a small nest.

After, Jos all but threatened to tie Tyelu up and transport her back to Yarinska with a chip if she didn't go on her own. She went, but only after leveling an icily mutinous glare on him.

She'd make him pay for that, no doubt. Maybe it made him crazy, but he was looking forward to it.

She'd waded into battle uttering a whooping battle cry, a blaster in one hand and a knife in the other. The scream had made more than a few Sweepers pause, which made him wonder if they'd encountered Banam's famous Queen's Guard before. The renowned Lady Warriors weren't known for going easy on their enemies. Tyelu certainly had no qualms about taking out the Sweepers that had kidnapped her. She'd left a trail of dead and dismembered bodies behind her, nearly as many as Jos had, and he was better equipped.

Just thinking on it made his blood race. Stars, what a woman.

Magda waded through the icky goo coating the deck, her helmet retracted, drying blood splattered across her face over two separate welts. "Your princess isn't too bad in a pinch. I'll give her that."

“She’s a trained warrior,” he reminded his first, his voice neutral thanks to the drugs pumping through his system. “And she took care of her own.”

“Last I checked, you could take care of yourself.”

“Everybody can use a friend at their back.”

Magda grunted as her gaze drifted over the mess they’d made. “This lot’ll be spaced and the ship salvaged.”

“Offer a percentage to Yarinska for hauling it in. You and the dal have better places to be.”

“Ayup. Already got a message about a nest in the next system over. You coming with?”

He flashed a grin at her. “I’m officially on leave.”

Her mouth twisted into a grimace. “Frekking lovebirds. I can’t believe you’re keeping her.”

“More like she’s keeping me.”

“And you’re letting her, which is just a bad.”

He clapped her on the shoulder. “Someday, you’ll get bitten by that bug, Magda.”

She shot him a horrified look. “Bite your tongue, spacer. I’d rather eat a raw Sweeper than fall in love.”

He laughed and went with her to check on the rest of his dal, then ‘ported back to

Apedemak to download the after-battle paperwork and cleaned up while he was there. He didn't want to bring any more stink near Tyelu unless he had to.

Finally, after what felt like three years of his life, he checked in with Captain Coppev a final time and 'ported back to Yarinska .

While he'd been bogged down in mopping up, Yarinska 's crew had been busy doing their own cleaning. Partly, anyway. They'd limped into orbit around Lodem and begun offloading cargo and Sweeper corpses alike. By the time Jos arrived, Coppev had already sealed a deal with Ryn and Ziri to salvage the Sweeper ships for a percentage of the take.

Tyelu's next-sister greeted him now as he swung out of the nearly empty cargo bay into the corridor on his way to Tyelu's quarters.

"The man of the hour," Ziri said, beaming a smile at him. "Thank you for rescuing our Tyelu."

Jos accepted her easy hug with a bemused smile of his own. "She mostly rescued herself."

"But she didn't think to offer us a lucrative salvage contract." Ziri blew out a sigh as she swiped a loose strand of red-gold hair out of her eyes. "Unfortunately, we're going to have to bring in some help. Yarinska just isn't big enough to handle the salvage on three ships that size."

"It'll still bring a pretty profit."

"Ah, now you're thinking like a Pruxn?. Tyelu's wearing a hole on the bridge, if you want to speak with her."

His heart leapt at her name and his gaze drifted automatically in that direction. “Let me stow my gear.”

“Do you need directions?”

He couldn't tell her that his implant held specs on nearly every class of ship, including Yarinska's. Proprietary information, though quite a few could make an educated guess about that based solely on how easily Q-mercs slipped in and out of their assigned missions.

“I'm good,” he said, “thanks.”

“There's food in the galley, if you're hungry.”

She stepped over the hatch's threshold into the cargo bay, disappearing among the remaining salvage. While he'd been away, someone had scrubbed most of the Sweeper stink out of the bay, making it a little easier to work in there.

Jos rolled his shoulders and wove through the ship's narrow corridors. He arrived at Tyelu's quarters at the same time she rounded the corner leading to the bridge.

She froze, her blue eyes icy. “You took your sweet time, Q'Mhel.”

“Dial it down, princess, or you'll take a turn in those manacles.”

“I'd like to see you—”

He dropped his gear and scooped her up in one movement, crushing her against him as he swallowed her startled yelp with a hot, demanding kiss. She curled her fingers against his armor, and dimly, he was thankful he'd taken the time to clean it before donning it for the 'port over.

She thumped a fist against his chest and wrested her mouth away, glaring. “What was that for?”

He touched his forehead to hers, one corner of his mouth tilted into a smile. “Missed you.”

“Oh. Then I suppose I’ll need another.”

“And another, and another,” he agreed, and let her help him out of his armor and into as many kisses as she wanted, until they were both completely satisfied.

Ziri roped them into work all too soon, pushing salvaged metal out of the cargo bay to make room for more. Thankfully after a sound rest period. Sleep had been all too scarce of late. The past few days had melted together, blending into one long era in Tyelu’s mind.

She didn’t mind the work itself, but she was all too aware of time slipping through her fingers. Her father expected her to take her seat at his side during his next Thing. The season’s final Choosing took place shortly after that. Jos couldn’t stay with her forever. At some point, he had to return to duty, and where did that leave her? Alone again on a planet enduring a return to an icy winter?

Of course, she couldn’t travel with him. And she wasn’t going to whine about him fulfilling his duty.

Which left her stuck not knowing exactly when she’d see him again once the Choosing passed.

She slapped a palm against a particularly troublesome hunk of scrap metal. Kraden feelings. Kraden heart . If she hadn’t been in such a rush to keep him, if she’d thought the matter through instead of diving in headfirst...

He came up behind her and braced his hands against the offending metal, boxing her in without touching her. “Problem, princess?”

She sucked in her lower lip, which had come perilously close to pouting. “Ziri says we’re stuck here a few more days.”

“You’ve got someplace to be?”

The dry humor in his voice both irritated and aroused her. How did he do that?

“You know very well where we need to be, spacer,” she snapped. “Kindly move before I do it for you.”

“Since when did Lady Warriors give away their plan of attack?”

She huffed out an annoyed breath, refusing to respond to his teasing.

He crowded closer to her, letting his body brush against her back. Heat radiated off his skin, surrounding her with the raw masculine scent of sweat and machine oil. For a moment, she was tempted to turn to him, to give in to the ever-present need burning in her blood. A need for his quiet strength, a craving for the centering calm she felt whenever he was near.

He nipped her earlobe with sharp teeth and whispered, “Your ass has been begging me to spank it since we rolled out of bed.”

She whirled then, her eyes sparking. “Do not dare, Q’Mhel.”

His easy grin only irritated, and aroused, her more. “Maybe later. We’ve got a ship to catch.”

“We’re on a ship. Or did that escape your notice?”

“Another ship. A faster ship, one that’ll get us to Abyw in less than a day.”

“You’ve arranged passage already?”

“What do you think?”

She examined his expression, watched it soften into tenderness. He edged closer to her, impossibly close, and traced a fingertip along her jaw, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

Her gaze dropped to the sensual curve of his mouth, and she murmured, “I never know what to make of you.”

“Likewise, princess. Should keep things interesting, yeah?”

Before she could agree, he pressed a slow, soft kiss to her lips, one hand grazing her hip through the coveralls she’d borrowed from Ziri, and she realized that she was beginning to trust him.

The thought shook her to her core. Love was one thing. Trust was something else. The very idea terrified her. Aside from her father and brother, and perhaps Sigun, men were not to be trusted. Had she not learned that lesson from the first man to break her heart and all the ones who’d come after? The smallest measure of openness inevitably led to pain.

Yet somehow, she’d found a way to trust this man.

Jos broke the kiss, as if he’d felt the turmoil raging within her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.” He sighed and eased away from her, his expression once more the shuttered mask of a Q’Mhel. “Shake a leg, princess. We’ll have to run to catch that ship.”

She nodded mutely and followed him out of the cargo bay, miserable at the loss of his touch.

The ship he’d booked them on only deepened her misery. Kartikeya was a state-of-the-art Q courier armed to the teeth.

It also carried Jos’s grandmother Zhina, Q’s current Taq.

Tyelu had only had time to stuff some of her clothes in a bag before Jos whisked them both off Yarinska . She reeked of shipside work. By the curl of Zhina’s upper lip when Jos introduced them, Tyelu guessed his grandmother could tell, and disapproved.

Tyelu kept her chin high and her gaze level, matching Zhina stare for stare. The woman looked decades younger than her age, no older than Tyelu’s own mother, save for the silky white hair she’d bound tightly at her nape. Her features held the beauty of her youth, and her eyes were the same shape and color as Jos’s.

Pity , Tyelu thought dispassionately. She’d always loved Jos’s eyes.

“When we arrive at Sigun’s court,” Zhina said coldly, “you will explain yourself, child.”

“Lady Warrior,” Tyelu corrected, just as coldly. “And if you have not discerned why I claimed your grandson, you’re not fit to—”

Jos, standing beside her, clapped a hand over her mouth, though humor twitched his lips into a near smile.

Zhina arched a single eyebrow. “Save your fire for the Choosing, Tyelu af Alna. Go now. I should like some small measure of peace before we arrive at the ball of ice you Pruxn? call a planet.”

Jos herded Tyelu away with a respectful, “Grandmother.” Once they were out of earshot, he dropped his hand and pinned her against a wall, heedless of the people squeezing by them in the ship’s narrow corridors. “Don’t push your luck, Tyelu. She has the power to separate us forever.”

A prickle of fear ran down her spine, and she narrowed her eyes. “You could’ve warned me about her beforehand.”

“And miss all the fun?”

“That was not fun,” she retorted flatly. “Parading you through the streets of Hrelum in chains—”

“No.”

She bared her teeth in a vicious smile. “Tradition. Be sure to wear your armor so everyone recognizes you as a Q-merc.”

He swore roundly under his breath, much more mildly than she would’ve. His reaction eroded the edge off her fear, tempering her mood. She cupped his cheek tenderly, remembering the way he’d kissed her before they’d left her brother’s ship.

“For me?” she asked sweetly.

His murky green eyes heated, and he growled in the back of his throat. “Only for you, lover.”

She rewarded him with a kiss and let him coax her into visiting the galley for a snack before they reached the icy climes of home.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Jos walked through the streets of Hrelum, shivering despite his armor's valiant attempts to keep him warm. The sprawling town looked like a holo of a time long past. Wooden buildings lined the wide streets, framed by rugged mountains in the near distance. Animal drawn wagons ambled along the causeways, sharing them with pedestrians and hovercars alike. Smoke drifted from chimneys, curling along the buildings' roofs under thick, low-hanging clouds. The sun's heat failed to penetrate the cloud cover, casting a dreary midday pall over the town.

"Snow later," Tyelu had told him casually as they left his grandmother's ship. "A good early autumn snow."

He clamped his teeth together and relaxed, hoping to ease the shivering, or at least keep his dignity intact. Bad enough that she was leading him through the streets in chains. He refused to surrender his pride because of his temporary servitude.

While he'd worn armor for this little ignominious jaunt, Tyelu had dressed in only three layers: a thin set of body-covering underclothes, her outer street clothes, and a knee-length jacket lined with fur. A wide, handknit scarf had gone over that, wrapped around her head and shoulders until only the brilliant blue of her eyes showed.

She'd left her hands bare to the elements. Her skin reddened under the persistent brush of the icy wind sweeping through the town. How she stood it, he didn't know. He trained bare skinned in space-cold conditions and could tolerate Hrelum's chill only by drawing on the wells of discipline beaten into him by decades of rigid training.

The walk was thankfully brief, ending not in a private home, but at a public building

in the center of town. Several people stood on the steps, talking quietly among themselves. Jos recognized Sigun, the Pruxn? tyrl, and guessed at least two of the others were Tyelu's parents. As he and Tyelu approached, more people crowded onto the stairs, swelling to a number representing at least half the town's adult population.

His grandmother had opted to follow them on foot along with her guard, only adding to the spectacle. Jos wished she'd gone ahead of them so she, at least, wouldn't have to subject her old bones to the biting cold.

Now, she skirted them briskly and glided up the stairs toward Sigun with the grace of an accomplished warrior. Sigun greeted her tersely, then dropped a chastising glare on Tyelu before leading Zhina inside.

Tyelu maintained an even stride until they entered the building's welcoming warmth. Sigun, Zhina, and several others had clustered around the beautifully crafted chairs set on a slightly raised dais at the far end of the main room. Otherwise, the room was empty of furniture, though lit by a cheerful light cast by lamps placed along the wooden walls.

Tyelu paused near the chairs as the crowd filed in around them, keeping a respectful distance. Jos stopped a few paces behind her, close enough to participate, if needed, far enough away for the chains stretching between them to be visible.

Give them a show , he thought wryly, then could've kicked himself for testing the fates.

"Father," Tyelu began, nodding respectfully to a bearded gentleman standing to Sigun's left. Gared, Jos presumed, the kafh of this province. "Mother," she added with a nod to the woman standing to her father's left, a woman who could've been Tyelu's twin if not for the subtle gray streaking her blonde hair. "I present to you Jos Q'Mhel, my candidate for the next Choosing."

Tyelu's cousin Kodh stood to one side, his mouth curled in an arrogant sneer. Jos recognized a few others as part of the tyrl's honor guard.

And noticed that Tyelu didn't bother including her cousin in her introductions.

"Welcome, Jos Q'Mhel," Gared said, his eyes twinkling despite the solemn expression he wore. "My beautiful bride Alna, Tyelu's mother."

Alna stared at him with the same haughty expression Tyelu turned on him all too often. Now he knew where she got it from.

"Have you the right to present this man as a candidate?" Sigun said, his voice rolling across the long, narrow room. "He is not a member of this Choosing's chosen planets."

"No, my tyrl."

"You contravene our laws?"

"No, my tyrl." To Jos's shock, she dropped to her knees and bowed her head. "I beg leave to explain."

Sigun gazed at her for long moments as those present whispered among themselves. When the murmurs grew too loud, he said, "Very well. Explain."

"During a recent diplomatic discourse, Jos Q'Mhel and his dal were contracted as security for Luden Moko. Ambassador Moko represents his home world Tersi, the primary subject of this season's Choosing. As the contracted employee of such a representative, Jos Q'Mhel and his dal became subject to the laws governing sesquicentennial marital raidings as if they were citizens of the target planet." She quoted three relevant cases which previously had been judged sound, including one

weighed by Tyrl Sigun himself. “Thus do I present him as a lawful candidate for the Choosing based upon our own laws and traditions, both in spirit and rule.”

Sigun stroked his beard, then bent toward Gared and sought the other man’s counsel. They exchanged a terse spate of words, tempting Jos to tap into his armor’s audio system. He’d dearly love to know what they were saying.

Before temptation got the better of him, Sigun turned to Jos. “What say you, Q’Mhel? Do you recognize the justness of Pruxn? law?”

Tyelu’s hand tightened on the chains until her knuckles turned white.

She’s scared , he thought, surprised. Why? Does she really think I’ll repudiate her now, after everything we’ve been through? Doesn’t she trust that I’ll support her in this?

“I do, Tyrl Sigun,” he said.

His grandmother straightened at Sigun’s right. “I do not,” she said flatly. “This woman stole my grandson, a valued member of our military, from his duty. She drugged him, kidnapped him, and held him chained to her bed.”

Sigun glanced at her, the barest trace of amusement lighting his eyes. “As every good Pruxn? does, Taq.”

Muted chuckles sounded around the room, attesting to Pruxn? traditions.

“He is not Pruxn?,” she snapped. “He is third in line to the taq.”

Jos bit back a curse. She’d had to bring that up. “Taking a Pruxn? bride does not negate my right of inheritance, Grandmother.”

“It does, however, make for a good alliance,” Sigun said, his voice deceptively mild.

“His first duty lies to his people,” Taq Zhina insisted. “Allow him to finish out his contract, then if this woman still longs to marry him, she can present him as a candidate at another Choosing.”

“Respectfully,” Tyelu said quietly. “The next Choosing is a full year away and covers no territories to which Jos is attached. I would have no rights to him then and, under our laws, no authority to court or claim him. Either I present him for this Choosing, or I must give him up forever.”

“Not forever. He could very well come back to claim you.” Zhina sniffed as if she doubted such a thing could occur. “If he wishes.”

Sigun waved that off with a slash of his fist. “He’s here now. The Choosing begins in three days. As I understand it, he’s taken a long overdue leave to allow Tyelu’s suit to proceed.”

“I have, Tyrl Sigun,” Jos agreed.

“The Sweeper threat—” Zhina began.

“Will be dealt with by us all,” Sigun reminded her. “I accept your reasoning, Tyelu af Alna. Now unchain the Q’Mhel before you start a war.”

Another round of laughter filled the room, this one easier.

Tyelu stood and obediently unlocked the manacles binding Jos’s wrists, her gaze lowered. When his hands were free, he retracted his helmet and turned her face to his.

“You did well,” he said.

She shrugged off his praise. The skin around her eyes had tightened, giving her a haunted look. “My parents will likely expect you to stay with them.”

“And where will you be?”

“At my home, outside town.”

“You’ll take me there?”

“If we have time.” She inhaled a shuddering breath and swayed into him. “I would very much like it if you’d accept it as your home, too.”

Alna swept toward them before he could respond, and Tyelu turned away, her shoulders unusually stiff beneath her jacket.

They gave Jos no time to comfort or confront her. Gared bade his leave from Sigun, who’d fallen into deep conversation with Zhina, then swooped down on the trio and ushered them outside again. Jos walked beside Tyelu this time, trailing her parents along winding streets until they reached a comfortable home tucked away in a quieter section of town.

Their bags had been carried ahead, Jos’s here, Tyelu’s to her home. Tyelu showed him around the lower level with its spacious kitchen and comfortable living and work areas, then led him upstairs to the room her parents had set aside for his use. While he peeled out of his armor and stored it, she knelt before a metal box resting on a thin layer of stone and started a fire.

“Sorry about the chill,” she said. “Mother told me she thought you might prefer to stay with me.”

“The place outside town?”

“Yes.”

“What would normally happen?”

“You would stay here, with my family, until the Choosing.” Her mouth curved into a wicked smile. “Propriety.”

He shucked his boots and set them aside, then dropped onto the edge of the room’s sole bed wearing only his skinsuit. “You’ve been quiet.”

She scoffed at that. “I’ve done nothing but talk since we arrived.”

“Not to me.”

“Do you need me to talk?”

“I need to know what you’re thinking.”

She turned where she knelt and arched a perfectly formed eyebrow at him. “Isn’t that usually what women want from men?”

“It goes both ways,” he said easily, despite the restlessness growing within him. The meeting with Sigun and Zhina had gone their way. They could move forward now with the Choosing. She should be happy about that.

Fire caught inside the stove. Tyelu tended it carefully, feeding it until it blazed. Finally, she eased the door closed and stood, brushing her palms together. “Father wants to speak with you. If we’ve enough daylight, we can drive to my home after.”

“And tonight?”

She wrinkled her nose into an adorable grimace. “Tonight, you’ll meet some of the single and widowed women who’re looking for a husband.”

“So I have a choice, then.”

“Not if you value your hide.”

She said it dryly enough to spark a grin from him.

“It’s tradition,” she explained, and relented enough to join him on the bed. “If you’d rather have another—”

He pounced, pushing her back on the bed and rolling on top of her before she could shove him away. “You know better than that.”

“Do I?”

“What do I have to do to prove it?”

The humor bled out of her expression, and she regarded him tenderly, sadly. “You can’t prove love. You can’t earn it. It just is.”

His heart thudded hard, unaccountably. “Do you love me?”

“Jos,” she murmured. “You know you have my heart, enough of it for me to risk everything by claiming you in such an unusual manner.”

No, he hadn’t, not really. But to hear her say it, to know some measure of what she felt, filled him with a raw brand of affection he’d rarely known.

His body reacted, hardening against his will. Not the time, he wanted to tell it.

Especially when a throat cleared behind him.

He glanced around. Tyelu's mother stood in the open doorway, her expression stony. Jos nearly winced. Caught red handed trying to seduce her daughter. That should make for an interesting dinner.

"Gared wants to speak with you, Q'Mhel," Alna said. "Tyelu, you're needed elsewhere."

Jos slid away from Tyelu and helped her off the bed, keeping his own expression tightly controlled. "I'll be down in a few."

"See that you are."

Alna left as Tyelu flashed a wry grin at him.

"Don't worry, spacer," she said. "I'll sneak in tonight."

"Great," he muttered. "That's not going to help me get this raging hard-on under control."

She winked saucily and sashayed out, and he dropped back on the bed and stared at the wooden beams bracing the ceiling, willing his body back under control.

When that didn't work, he stripped to his waist, threw the window open, and leaned into the bitter cold. Puffy snowflakes drifted lazily from the leaden sky. Snow had already covered the ground in a layer of white, softening the edges of buildings and trees. The wind had died down, at least, and the snow deadened the noise drifting from the nearby streets.

His nose grew cold and every breath created a cloud of fog. It was peaceful here.

Quiet. On the ship, something was always going on. People running through the corridors, instruments alerting in loud beeps, communications splitting the air, creating a steady cacophony that had, over time, become easy to ignore.

Battle was worse. The pzzt-pzzt of blasters, the screams of the wounded and dying, the thud of ships ramming together; or on land, the rat-a-tat-tat of hard ammo popping out of a machine gun, the ear-ringing flood of explosions, the constant stream of commands relayed into his ear by his superiors.

And always, always, the knowledge that this moment might be his last.

His heart constricted in his chest, not for himself, but for Tyelu. Having found her, he was loath to let her go, even to duty and the rapacious thirst of the Reaper's scythe against his throat. The last thing he wanted was for her to have to deal with his death, to mourn his life, to grieve for the time lost to them.

How could he put her through knowing that with every mission, he might not come back?

But she'd known what he was when they met, just as he'd known what she was. Being a warrior herself, a fighter in spirit and training, wouldn't she understand the risks?

She stepped out of the house's entrance into the snow, bundled in layers of clothing, a folded leather carryall in her hands. His skin had grown numb, his limbs stiff, yet he couldn't quite dampen the languid heat stirring his blood.

A man could spend his entire life loving a woman like her.

She glanced up and caught him leaning out the window, shook her head and pulled her scarf below her mouth. "Get back inside before you catch cold."

“I already have,” he said, grinning madly. “Come catch it with me.”

She laughed and pulled her scarf up, and disappeared around the corner, heading toward the center of town.

A shiver wracked his body, and he decided, just this once, to take her advice.

A few minutes later, Jos jogged down the stairs, now dressed comfortably in Pruxn? style, in clothes Tyelu had left out for him. Alna sat at a spinning wheel near the giant stone hearth, twisting wool roving into yarn. She glanced up when he reached the bottom landing and jerked her chin at a stoneware mug set on a low table.

“Drink,” she commanded.

Being no fool, he took the mug. The stoneware was warm against his snow-chilled palms and held a dark, fragrant liquid. He took a cautious sip and savored the taste of rich chocolate, spice, and spirits on his tongue.

He sipped again, more deeply this time, then raised his mug to her. “Thank you. It’s delicious.”

She snorted indelicately, never pausing in their work. “Thin blooded spacer like you needs a good hefty drink. You’re naught but skin and bones.”

If she’d meant to insult him, it didn’t work. He hid his amusement behind another sip. “Gared was looking for me?”

“Aye. He’s in the back yard, waiting for you to quit making moon eyes at my daughter.”

“Moons and stars,” he affirmed mildly.

She shot him a sharp look, her eyes like shards of blue ice. “Is that so.”

“Only when she can’t see me.”

That drew a laugh from her. “Go on, then. Gared’s looking for you. He’s out back, through there.”

She jerked her chin toward the doorway opposite the entrance, then turned back to her work.

Dismissed like a raw cadet. Even on leave, he couldn’t escape the command structure.

The doorway led to a homey kitchen. A wooden trough as long as his arm sat atop an island workspace near the cookstove, covered in a homespun dishtowel. Curious, he lifted one corner of the towel and peered at a smooth lump of dough.

“Don’t touch the bread,” Alna called.

He chuckled softly to himself, left his mug beside the bread bowl, and stepped outside into a fenced in yard. The roofs and upper stories of neighboring houses rose above the fence’s wooden spikes, and beyond that, white fields stretched to the craggy mountains in the distance.

Gared was on the left side of the yard next to a shed filled with neatly chopped wood. He wore only the loose shirt and trousers common to the locals, the former rolled up to his elbows, the latter tucked into sturdy boots. Strands of gray shot through his hair and beard, and the muscles of his forearms flexed with every swing of his axe.

Jos skirted the yard, well out of reach of that sharp-edged axe, and came at the other man from an angle Gared could easily see. The snow lay thickly on the ground now,

though it fell more lightly, joining the remnants of previous snowfalls packed into the shadows. Wind cut across the yard, chilling Jos to the bone, and he wished ruefully for thicker blood or a wind-proof coat.

“Almost there,” Gared said, grunting as the axe neatly split a log in two. “Wanted a word with you.”

Jos hummed a response, then bent and started throwing the split wood onto the pile under the shed. The movement warmed his muscles, easing the chill gripping him. “Does it usually snow this late here?”

“Late? Boy, we have snow here all year ‘round.”

“No crops?”

“Not this far north. Down near the equator, where that wretch Sigun lives, that’s where you’ll find the crops.” The axe rose and fell on another grunt, and split wood fell away from the stand. “Don’t know how he stands the heat myself.”

Jos bit back a laugh. “Alna was spinning yarn?”

“Molnog. Their wool’s prized for its warmth. You’re wearing some of it now.”

“Tyelu gave it to me.”

“Did she, now.” Gared paused long enough to eye Jos’s outfit. “Looks like something she wove herself.”

Tyelu, a weaver? Now, that was a shock, both good and bad. She was skilled, clearly; his clothes were sturdy and well-made, comfortable and warm when the wind stilled. But it made him realize how little he knew about her, outside of her character and

skills as a warrior. Former warrior, he corrected, not that she'd allowed herself to grow rusty. Far from it. He'd stand by her in a fight any day, though he hoped he never had to again.

She could handle herself. That wasn't the problem. He just refused to risk her in battle, if it could be avoided.

But there was time, he thought as he finished stowing the pile of wood Gared had split. Time for them to know each other. Time for him to learn these sweet little secrets she hadn't yet shared. At least three more days until his leave ended, maybe four.

He sucked in a lungful of cold air as the smallness of their stay here hit him. Frek, it wasn't enough time. He wanted all of it, every last morsel, every breath, every everything .

"You've the look of a man well-besotted," Gared said, his eyes crinkled into a smile. "I hope that's my daughter you're thinking on."

"Who else?" Jos said. "You wanted to speak with me?"

"It's customary for a family to train a candidate for the Choosing, but I figured a Q'Mhel could handle himself."

"Depends on the rules."

"You won't be able to take your armor in, not even that fancy onesie you wear underneath it."

Q's R&D would be appalled to hear Jos's cutting-edge skinsuit called a onesie . "I expected that."

Gared thwacked the axe's blade into the stand one-handed and crossed his arms over his massive chest. "You know you'll be fighting her family?"

Jos mirrored the other man's wide-legged stance. "Do you plan on keeping me from her?"

"Me?" Gared's eyebrows rose perilously high on his forehead. "No, not me. Not her mother. Ziri's gone soft on you, and she'll temper Ryn's judgment, though he owes Tyelu for threatening to stand in Ziri's way at their Choosing."

Jos kept his expression even. So. Another thing he didn't know about his bride to be. "Who should I worry about, then?"

"Not many of the men around here would dare challenge you for Tyelu. She's a hellcat at times."

"Feisty," Jos agreed mildly. He happened to like that about her. Mostly.

"Aye, she is that. The one person who might stand against you is her cousin Kodh. My nephew."

"I've met him."

"Then you know they're rivals of a sort."

"I know she doesn't particularly care for him," Jos said carefully, feeling Gared out.

"It goes deeper than that. Not from childhood, no. They were friendly enough then. But in the last few years when I started hinting about leaving the responsibilities of kafh to my heir..."

“Kodh wants the kafh?”

Gared glanced away, gazing at the sky, his forehead wrinkling as snow clung to his hair and shoulders. “He believes he should have it as the only child of my elder brother.”

“And what do you think?”

“Being a kafh requires a delicate touch. It takes a deep-seated sense of mercy and compassion, but also the strength to pass a harsh judgment when necessary.”

The chill running down Jos’s spine had nothing to do with the cold. “Tyelu has plenty of strength.”

“But does she have compassion?” A hint of sadness flickered across the older man’s expression.

“I think she might surprise you there.” Jos threw the last bits of cut wood onto the pile, suppressing a shiver. Griyet weather. “Anything else I should know?”

“Well,” Gared said, stroking his beard. A hint of mischief lit the man’s eyes. “There’s the bride price.”

“The bride price,” Jos repeated slowly.

“A dowry of sorts, usually paid by the claimant to the candidate.”

“She’s going to pay me for kidnapping me?”

“It’s usually the men doing the kidnapping and the men doing the paying, and the men turning over their assets for the woman to manage.”

Jos stared at him, momentarily nonplused. “A good chunk of my assets are entailed.”

“Wouldn’t worry about it, if I were you. The two of you can work that out, in your own way. Tyelu’s got a bit of a reputation for shopping, but she’s a keen eye on making a profit, too.” Gared brushed ice off his eyelashes with the heel of his palm. “Best get inside. If you catch cold, the women’ll never forgive me.”

“I’m not likely to catch cold, old man,” Jos muttered.

Gared clapped Jos on the back, sending him stumbling against the wood pile. “That’s the spirit, lad. Don’t worry. My wife’ll see to feeding you up. Makes a mean bovi stew, she does. Taught her how myself.”

Jos followed him inside, shaking the snow off as he went, his mind chewing on his conversation with Tyelu’s father and what the other man hadn’t said.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

After the day's final meal, Tyelu lingered in the kitchen helping her parents clean. Jos was entertaining two Tersi widows in the living room, the last in a ceg or so of women who'd dropped by to assess him as a potential husband. They'd been dropping by all afternoon, since word had gotten 'round about Tyelu being hauled in front of not one but two planetary leaders for kidnapping the Q'Mhel.

The audacity, she thought, and bit the inside of her cheek against a smile.

Her father threw her another assessing look, as if he expected her to burst into a temper at any moment.

Surprisingly, the women attempting to plead their cases to Jos caused her not the slightest amount of concern. Tyelu had deliberately tried to muster a smidge of jealousy. Shouldn't she feel at least a hint of that old, reliable monster?

But the jealousy refused to appear. She'd floated through the day in a pleasantly bemused state, baffling everyone around her, even Jos.

Gared slung a muscled arm around her shoulders and jogged her against his side. "Come now, daughter. You've been too sweet today. What mischief's running through that pretty head of yours?"

Tyelu's mother flipped a towel at him. "Leave her be, husband. Isn't it enough that she's happy?"

"That's what worries me," he muttered. "Promise you won't do any permanent damage when you go out there."

Tyelu's eyebrows arched high. "To who?"

"To anyone."

She laughed at his morose tone. "I'm not planning on doing any damage."

"There, now," Alna said tartly. "She's promised."

"Why don't I believe her?" Gared raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if pleading for intervention from the gods. "He's a good lad. Strong, if a bit scrawny."

"He's not scrawny," Tyelu said, exasperated. "There's plenty of muscle on him."

Alna's eyes twinkled merrily. "And you'd know, is that it?"

Tyelu huffed out a laugh and turned back to the dishes. "I'd hoped to find time to take him over to my property today."

The main door closed, and the outer room quietened by one female voice.

"That one didn't last long," Alna said.

Tyelu bit the inside of her cheek again. Kraden smile just wouldn't stay away. "Maybe if he'd quit being so graphic about his work, the women wouldn't leave so quickly."

"He does it a-purpose," Gared growled. "Never seen a man so anxious to get rid of a pretty woman."

Alna cut a sly look toward Tyelu. "He's already got one handful. What does he need with another?"

“And a good handful she is,” Gared agreed, smiling down at his daughter. “The best of the lot.”

The praise warmed her through and through. She stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to her father’s cheek, and laughed when he caught her in a whirling hug. For a moment, she felt like a little girl again, safe in the arms of the man who loved her best. Her parents had endured so many hardships. Losing two sons in a Sweeper raid, gaining another lost and frightened little boy, nursing him back to health and sanity. And then Tyelu’s wilder years, when she’d returned from her duties on Banam and drifted aimlessly without purpose or meaning.

Until Jos had popped into her life and saved them all.

“Stop that, you two,” Alna scolded just as the front door opened again.

Familiar voices filled the living room. Gared dropped Tyelu with a grin, then the three of them left the kitchen to greet Ryn and Ziri. To Tyelu’s surprise, Enel ab Awd and his son stood just behind her brother and his wife, unwrapping layers of outer clothing. Enel was a big man, as most Pruxn? were, strong of heart and fair of face. A quiet man. He’d lost his wife not long after their son’s birth and had yet to find another.

She studied him now, appraising him as a woman should. Enel had a strong kinship tie to Sigun. He owned two extensive properties, one near the capital, inherited from his parents, the other nearby. And he’d done well with his holdings, too, increasing them steadily until they were a rival for her parents’. He knew when to let a woman fight her own battles, as she recalled from their recent run-in with the Sweepers, which counted for a lot. Any woman should be pleased to call him mate.

He'd tried for Ziri, though to hear Alna tell it, Ryn had already won Ziri’s heart by then. And while single Pruxn? women were scarce, the recent influx of Tersii

refugees had eased some of the strain. Several had already found good husbands on the Choosing field. Why shouldn't Enel find a good wife among the remainder?

Jos stepped into Tyelu's line of sight, his eyes hot against his impassive expression. "See something you like?"

"What? Oh!" She shook her head. "Just playing matchmaker. Have you met Enel?"

"Am I going to have to fight him off?"

Tyelu threw back her head and laughed, catching every eye in the room. When her amusement died enough for her to speak, she peeked around Jos and said, "Enel, would you like to fight for me in the Choosing?"

"Respectfully, Lady Tyelu, you're a good woman in your own way," he replied, rather solemnly, "but I'd rather be trampled by a herd of bovi."

Everyone snickered, including Ziri, who shot Tyelu an apologetic glance.

Tyelu paid their amusement no mind. She twined her fingers with Jos's and glanced up at him through her eyelashes. "Does that ease your mind, Q'Mhel?"

"I guess it'll have to," he grumbled.

"There's fresh made pie," Alna said. "Everyone's welcome."

They all tramped back to the kitchen for some of her mother's pie, squeezing around the farmhouse table, even the woman who'd been courting Jos. A young Pruxn? widow, as it happened, who'd dared inciting Tyelu's wrath more to find out what was being done about the Sweepers than to find a new husband. Her's had been killed when Sweepers attacked his ship during a cargo run, leaving her to rear two toddlers

and manage a tiny holding on her own.

Once pie was served, the talk turned, as it usually did, to molnog. Molnog breeding, molnog wool, molnog wool colors, molnog prices in the current market. Sheering molnog for their prized fleece, turning it into the many handmade products Abyw was famous for.

Tyelu turned to Jos, sure that her family's obsession with the domesticated animal would make his eyes glaze over, and caught him staring down at her. The look on his face made little birds flap around in her stomach.

“What is it?” she murmured.

“I was picturing you in a sweater the color of Ziri's eyes,” he whispered against her ear. “And now I'm not sure I can stand up in polite company.”

She all but melted into him. “Leave your window unlatched tonight.”

“Believe me, I will.”

She turned back to the broader conversation, her cheeks flushed warm, and caught her mother's gaze. Alna's mouth twitched into a knowing smile before Gared drew her into the debate over how feasible breeding for lighter colors would be.

Tyelu snuck her hand into Jos's under cover of the table, letting him anchor her as the conversation washed over them both.

The conversation lingered well into the evening. Guests straggled out as the night wore on, the widow to tend her children, whom she'd left with her mother; Enel and his son to their local holding; Ryn and Ziri to theirs. Jos helped tidy up after them, then stretched into a mighty yawn and took his leave.

Tyelu waited long enough to satisfy propriety before wishing her parents a good night. She wrapped her outer garments lightly around her and let herself out, meeting the bracing cold head on. The night had darkened under another bank of snow-heavy clouds. Already, miniscule snowflakes drifted down around her, melting into her coat and scarf.

She veered away from her hovercar and around the side of her parents' home, shimmied up to the second story using the toeholds she and Ryn had worn into the wood and rock. Ryn, mostly. She'd spent too many years studying under the heavy hand of Mother Jakuv. But she'd used them later, when she'd come home and found Hrelum too small a cage for her warrior soul.

Once at the top, she tapped on Jos's window, then tested the latch. It opened before she could do more, and Jos reached through and hauled her up and over the sill. His mouth came down on hers as he nudged the window closed.

Mindful of the thin curtain separating his temporary room from the hallway, she wrested herself away and whispered, "Hush. They'll hear."

"Don't care," he muttered hoarsely. "I need you."

She could hear how much he needed her, feel how much in the rough, desperate way he backed her toward the bed, his mouth moving over hers as he shoved her clothes aside and fell on his knees before her. He dragged a hot kiss over her bare stomach, then found her core and she cupped his shoulders as he drove her relentlessly into a delightfully ragged orgasm with his lips and tongue and fingers.

Still standing, she thought dimly, biting her mouth to stifle her gasping breaths.

When he was done tormenting her, he kissed his way up her body and buried his face in her throat. "Stars, what you do to me."

“I haven’t done anything yet,” she whispered, and he groaned at the heavy promise in her voice.

After they’d loved each other as thoroughly as time allowed, they burrowed under the heavy quilts piled upon the bed. He pulled her into the curve of his body, and they slept deeply until Gared’s quiet footsteps woke her at the start of the new day.

She tried to slip out of bed without waking Jos. His hand caught hers before she’d made it out of the covers.

“Where are you going?” he whispered.

“Chores. Shower.” She flipped her wrist, breaking his hold, and slipped her fingers into his hand. “Today’s the local Thing.”

“I know. Are you ready for it?”

No, she thought, and forced the denial away. “It’s going to be a long day. Make sure you eat a good meal when you go down.”

“You and your family,” he grumbled. “Always trying to fatten me up.”

The laughter in his voice brought a smile to her face. It stayed with her long after she’d snuck out his window and down the side of the house again. Even the thought of what lay ahead failed to puncture her happiness.

Until it came time to dress.

Her happiness, that deep contentment she felt around Jos, withered as she rummaged through her clothes, considering what to wear. It was just a Thing, she thought as she pulled out and discarded trousers and dresses and sweaters and traditional tunics. Just

a Thing where she'd be both judge and jury, and possibly the executioner.

Her hands slowed and she was drawn, relentlessly, inevitably, to the wooden chest placed at the end of her bed. Hesitant, she knelt before it and opened the heavy lid. There rested layers of quilts and woolen blankets tucked around keepsakes and memories. She dug through them carefully, pushing aside the dragon her mother had knit for her and her first wooden toy, carved by her father when she was little more than a glint in his eye.

Beneath them lay the life she'd set aside when she left Banam, the embroidered sleeveless tunic, its slender black belt, the matching pants and knee-high boots. And under them, the ritual sword she'd carried, a symbol of the queen's justice.

Judge. Jury. Executioner.

Had she not played all three in her life? Did her hands and heart not carry enough blood and grief?

The weight of that life pressed down upon her, and she bowed her head beneath it, allowing it to bury her as she'd buried her sword in this chest, hiding it away so she could find some small measure of peace. Her father expected this from her, expected her to pick up her armor and take her place by his side, mediating the province's problems as if she understood how to render judgment blindly, dispassionately, objectively.

Her hands trembled against the chest. I can't do this, she thought. I can't be what he needs me to be. I can't lift my sword and take another life. I cannot judge another life as I judged my classmate, a poor, innocent girl who was guilty of nothing more than being born into the wrong family.

But what of Jos and the relationship growing between them? What would he think of

her, the man she'd grown to love, if she deflected her duty and slunk away like a coward? Jos, who revered duty so much. Jos, who had willingly placed himself between her and danger, and would again. Jos, who would willingly sacrifice so much more if she asked it of him.

Coward , she thought bitterly, unaware of the tears trickling down her cheeks. How dare you shy away from duty when your people need you?

For the Thing was not merely trials and remediations; it was more than settlement and redemption. It was the law that bound her people together, the structure allowing them to work harmoniously toward a greater good. Her father's firm hand had allowed Myunad Province to flourish. The Hrela prospered as many of their neighbors did not, eking out a profitable and healthy existence upon the winter-bound land. Thriving where others struggled to survive.

How could she turn her back on her father's legacy? How could she return to the aimless, purposeless life she'd lived after returning here, to her home?

She sucked in a calming breath and, steadier now, drew her Queen's Guard uniform from the chest. There came a time in every warrior's life when the sword must be laid aside. And there also came a time when the sword must be, once again, taken in hand.

She hefted her sword and measured its weight against her palm, testing the balance and strength of the finely crafted blade. Tomorrow, she could rest, but today...

Today she must resume the mantle of the warrior her parents and people needed her to be.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

On the way to the great hall with Tyelu's family, Jos turned off yet another security alert. He'd left the notifications on so he could keep up with the Sweeper situation and his dal's role in it. Magda had been filing regular reports to him. Sweeper activity hadn't just increased; it had exploded. The dals were being called from one hotspot to another with a barely adequate time to rest in between.

He ground his teeth together as they entered the hall. Nothing he could do about it until after the Choosing. Once it was done, he'd have to make a decision on whether to take the full amount of leave he'd requested or rejoin the fight.

Jos took his place to one side of the great hall next to Tyelu's family: Ryn, her brother and friend; his gentle wife Ziri; Alna, the matriarch who guided them all; and a few cousins whose names he'd committed to memory. His grandmother had chosen to mingle among the crowd near the main entrance, and he hoped she stayed there, well out of Tyelu's line of sight. The last thing his bride-to-be needed was the pressure of knowing Zhina was there, silently weighing her every word and deed.

Tyelu had gone straight from her house to the hall, skipping the somber family meal. A steely glint had lit her father's eyes that morning at first meal, and Jos recognized the resolute duty directing Gared's actions.

The other man had taken the middle chair on the dais lifted barely thigh high above the gathered crowd. Tyelu's cousin Kodh sat at Gared's left, dressed in proper Pruxn? fashion, while Tyelu sat to her father's right. She'd worn her Queen's Guard robes, baring her supple arms to the hall's chill. The stark white of her tunic set her apart from the more muted clothing worn by the townsfolk, and the sheathed sword resting against the chair paid witness to her purpose. She'd bound her hair into an intricate

braid fastened at the nape of her neck, leaving two thin braids to dangle from her left temple past the graceful line of her jaw. Her face had set into smooth, dispassionate porcelain, reflecting no emotion onto the people waiting to be heard.

Something stirred deep inside him. Like recognizing like, as one warrior recognizes another on the battlefield.

And something else as well, a niggling concern over the blank mask she wore. Here was the Tyelu of their first meeting, the ice princess Magda had sneered at. The lack of warmth in Tyelu's expression chilled him as surely as the wind.

She had come prepared for death today. Jos hoped fervently, almost desperately, that she would not be forced to play the Reaper among her people.

She glanced dispassionately across the crowd. Their gazes met, and in hers he saw the same steely resolve reflected in her father's expression. She faced forward again without acknowledging him, without flickering into the challenging smile he'd come to crave, without showing a hint of the love and trust she'd given him so freely just that morning.

Jos took a half step toward her, drawn by a deep-seated instinct to protect her, to shelter her from the pain that had built the fortress in which she dwelled.

Alna laid a hand on his arm, halting him. "As much as I wish it," she murmured, "neither you nor I can take this burden from her. She must endure it on her own."

"I know," he said. "But I don't have to like it."

Alna's expression softened into a kind smile. "I had my doubts about you, Q'Mhel. You spacers are a hard lot, tethered only to duty and the great reaches between the stars. I wondered if you could ever love my daughter as much as she deserved, if you

could see the tender heart she hides behind that icy wall she's built around herself."

"I see her heart." And loved her for it, though he refused to share that with anyone before he'd told Tyelu herself.

Alna patted his arm and let it drop to her side. "You'll do, Jos. You'll do very well indeed."

Gared stood then, and the crowd fell silent. "Bring the first matter forward."

And there, the long day began.

The crowd bore witness while one matter after another was brought before the kafh. Most of it was harmless enough. Petty boundary disputes, reports of growth and trade, requests for a new road or the widening of an existing one. Taxes were paid and carefully entered into a paper ledger by an elected official. The former jail keeper had been swept away by an avalanche; three citizens were appointed to oversee the election of a new one. The schoolhouse had become crowded with the children of Tersii refugees. Another citizen committee was appointed to expand it, with funding for materials coming out of the province's reserve funds. Volunteers could choose to defray some of the next quarter's taxes by lending their labor to the project.

On and on it went, an endless tedium that made Jos thankful he would never rise to taq. Gared presided over it all with a calm demeanor and a firm hand, requesting input from Tyelu and Koth in an almost idle manner. For her part, Tyelu seemed alert and attentive, her input terse but thoughtful. She sat regally in the simple wooden chair, her spine stiff, her shoulders back, unwilted by the unrelenting stream of matters presented before her father.

When the province's business and civilian matters were satisfactorily dealt with, the criminal trials began.

It started simply enough, with a young man named Gunthar, a transient who'd been accused of theft. He was brought in wearing wrist manacles by a volunteer, since, as Alna reminded him in a whispered aside, the former jailer had died. The young man's accusers—an older married couple, Tyorna and Freth, who owned a local bakery—went first, describing the theft of several loaves of bread over three days. The accused was allowed a defense, then witnesses stepped forward until everyone who had a say in the matter had spoken.

To Jos, it sounded very much as if the young man was guilty. He'd been orphaned, lost his home in another province to his father's debt, and lacked the training to secure even an apprenticeship. He'd been passing through on his way to find work in the capital and been caught by a recent storm. Every word the young man uttered had been mumbled into his shirt.

Gared passed the sentencing to Kodh, who turned cold eyes on the accused.

“The law is clear,” Kodh said, his deep voice ringing through the room. “The punishment for petty thievery is the loss of the non-dominant hand and a fine equal to the value of the property stolen.”

Jos pressed his lips together, holding in a rough exclamation. The gathered crowd didn't bother. Low murmurs rose among them, some angry, many accompanied by a shaking head.

Gared held up a hand, silencing them. “Tyelu, what say you?”

She turned an equally cold gaze on Gunthar and stared at him until the boy began to fidget, assessing him much longer than Kodh had. Her gaze flicked to Jos, then she said, “My cousin chooses to cite the old laws, yet his own grandfather favored a more just punishment.”

Here, the crowd nodded approvingly, and again, Gared raised a hand for silence.

Tyelu continued. “The loss of a hand could prohibit this young man from finding a suitable occupation, miring him in poverty for the remainder of his life. He would then become a burden to the good people of Hrela, a beggar lacking purpose and the means to care for himself. Is this the outcome my cousin wishes to force upon both the accused and his community?”

Kodh scoffed. “Even Tyrl Sigun has favored such a punishment.”

“For larger crimes,” Tyelu countered, her voice ringing above the crowd. “The theft of a few loaves of bread hardly justifies forfeiting a hand, though the bread in question is surely the best in all of Abyw, save my mother’s.”

That drew chuckles from the crowd and reluctant smiles from the accusers.

Tyelu acknowledged them with a nod. “We must bear in mind Dyendana’s Maxim: let the punishment fit the crime. For this reason, I recommend that the accused be apprenticed to the accusers for the duration of six months or until his debt to them has been repaid. By agreeing to this punishment, they also agree to provide fit room and board. He, in turn, agrees to apply himself industriously to his labors.”

“That’s not a punishment,” Kodh growled. “It’s a reward.”

“I’m not finished!” Tyelu said without looking at him. “Theft harms us all, not only the accused. To atone for his crime, the accused must also donate one day of his week to the community. We’ve already discussed several ways in which idle hands could be useful.”

The crowd murmured among themselves again, weighing the judgment. One man in the back yelled, “Aye, he could be put to good use fixing the hole in the tavern’s

roof.”

Several men guffawed at that.

Gared stood, silencing the room, and looked at the accusers. “What say you?”

Tyorna nodded, her mouth firmed resolutely. “Lady Tyelu has the right of it. The boy doesn’t deserve to lose a hand over an empty belly. We’ll take him in.”

Gunthar’s legs wobbled. “Thank you, milady. I’ll serve you well.”

Tyelu leaned forward and beckoned him closer. “See that you do,” she said, her voice low but clear. “No more stealing. If you’ve a problem, bring it to your mistress and she’ll see to it. If your problem lies with your mistress and master, bring it to my father.”

The young man’s gaze fell on Tyelu’s sword, and he nodded furiously. “Yes, milady.”

“That settles it,” Gared said. “Scribe, record the outcome. Bring the next matter forward.”

Kodh’s expression turned sour, but he didn’t protest the verdict.

Alna leaned close to Jos and whispered, “Tyelu did well there. Freth’s joints have become too stiff for the work, and their children have all moved away. Most of the young people living here prefer their own farms over the rigors of a town business. If Gunthar works hard and they like him well enough, Tyorna and Freth could keep him on until he earns enough to buy the bakery outright. Otherwise, they’ll have to close it in a few years. It’s too much work for Tyorna on her own.”

Jos acknowledged the explanation with a thoughtful nod. Tyelu's judgment did sound less like punishment than a reward, but Kodh's suggestion had been too harsh, in Jos's mind. On Q, crime, while rare, was met with a punishment more akin to what Tyelu had suggested. Military service, a forced apprenticeship. Not mercy or compassion, but justice. As she'd said: let the punishment fit the crime.

Myunad Province also had little crime. The handful of cases brought before Gared consisted of little more than the first one. Tyelu's father alternated asking her or Kodh first which punishment would be fitting. On one the cousins agreed, once Kodh's more strict judgment was followed, and once more Tyelu's was accepted.

When the final criminal matter, a murder, was brought forward, the crowd grew hushed on their own, staring at the accused with looks ranging from pity to anger. The accused, a local rancher named Pyol, was a lean man roughly Tyelu's age with shaggy brown hair and a scruffy beard. A woman and two children pushed through the crowd and stood apart from him to the side, her arms draped across the youngsters' shoulders. The accuser was another woman of a like age, neatly dressed as many of the other women were in a long, homespun, split-sided tunic over matching trousers tucked into fur-lined boots. She wore a dark blue scarf over her hair and sorrow had carved rough lines into her face. An infant lay cradled in her arms, swathed in a matching blanket.

Gared began the trial by addressing her, asking her to relay her charges against the accused. As before, Pyol was given a chance to defend himself, then witnesses for both sides were brought forward. Between them, the events were laid out: Pyol and his closest friend Thrayn, the accuser's husband, had just returned from a profitable trip to market in Pr?thum, the capital city. To celebrate, they'd gone to the Dragon's Tail, Hrelum's tavern. One pint turned to another, and soon the pair had gotten drunk.

The next bit wasn't quite clear. No one remembered exactly how it started, but Pyol and Thrayn began arguing, some claimed over how to divide the proceeds from their

recent success at the market, others over Pyol's treatment of his wife, Thrayn's sister. Specifically, Pyol had visited a brothel while they were away.

At that revelation, shame bloomed across his wife's stony expression.

Pyol and Thrayn's argument devolved into a physical fight, ending when Pyol swung a glass pint into his brother-in-law's temple, killing him on the spot.

Once the testimony was finished, Gared stood and called for opinions from the crowd. A few cried mercy. Most cried guilty. Gared nodded and sat, then asked Kodh what judgment he would render.

Kodh glanced across his uncle at Tyelu. "Would you call for community service here as well, little cousin?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Having trouble remembering the law?"

Kodh flushed and his forehead furrowed into a glare. "The punishment for murder is death and a Wodegeld."

Alna whispered, "The forfeiture of all assets to the victim's family, including the wife's dowry and any properties inherited from her family."

Jos whistled softly. It seemed fitting, in a way. Thrayn's widow now had to replace her husband's labor and income. On the other hand, Pyol's wife would lose everything.

Gared turned to Tyelu. "What say you?"

Tyelu stared at him for a long moment, her expression completely unmoving. Finally, she turned her attention to the accused and then to his family. Once again, her gaze

flicked to Jos and away before she spoke.

“The punishment for murder is death,” she agreed, “and it’s clear that murder has been committed. However, I beg leniency in the application of the Wodegeld. A just settlement must be made upon the widow from the perpetrator’s holdings. The wife’s assets should be exempt from consideration, for she committed no crime. Surely my cousin, in all his wisdom, can agree that her only guilt is that of association.”

A few in the crowd coughed and shuffled their feet.

Kodh merely nodded stiffly. “The crime belongs only to the accused. His wife and children would be left destitute if their entire fortune were confiscated, and we have but one bakery in Hrelum.”

Alna huffed an impatient sound through her nose. “Idiot children, swiping at each other when there’s work to be done.”

Jos pressed his lips together, hiding a grim smile.

Gared stood and glanced over the crowd. “What say you?”

“Justice,” some called, while others cried, “Death.” One woman yelled, “Wodegeld is Wodegeld, no exceptions.” But she was shouted down by the rest.

“So be it,” Gared said. “Death to the accused. Enough Wodegeld to satisfy the widow and her child. The accused’s family keeps the rest.”

He reached behind his chair for the broadaxe resting against it.

Tyelu stood and caught her father’s hand in hers. “I rendered the chosen judgment. I must carry out the sentence.”

Gared nodded solemnly and sat down while Tyelu drew her sword from its scabbard and descended the dais.

She went first to the widow and spoke quietly with her for a moment. Jos couldn't hear what was said, but the people gathered behind the widow nodded respectfully as the two women talked. When their conversation was finished, Tyelu touched the widow's shoulder, then cupped the sleeping infant's swaddled head.

She dropped her hand and walked across the hall to the accused's family, accompanied by the silent stares of the townsfolk. To the wife, she said, "The children are too young to watch this. Will you allow my brother's wife to take them outside for a bit?"

The woman nodded. "Thank you, Lady Tyelu."

"You would do the same for me." Tyelu hesitated for a bare moment, then added, "Would you like to say goodbye?"

The raw grief on the woman's face touched Jos to his core. "We did earlier."

Tyelu nodded once, sharply, then beckoned Ziri forward and herded the children off. When they were well away, she turned to the accused and knelt before him. Again, she spoke softly. Pyol replied and swiped tears off his cheeks with tightly bound hands. Tyelu rose, taking Pyol's gaze with her. In a swift, swiftless movement, she stepped back and swung her sword two-handed, severing Pyol's head from his body with one stroke. She waited until his lifeless body slumped to the floor before facing Jos.

"Justice is mercy," she said, and resumed her place at her father's side, blood sliding off the sharp blade of her sword.

Tyelu rejoined her father and cousin on the platform, her nape prickling as every eye in the hall followed her journey. Gared stared down at her with both pride and concern. She retrieved the cloth she'd brought to clean her sword and wiped Pyol's blood off the blade, only half her attention on the proceedings.

She felt curiously empty now, hollowed out by the long day spent guarding her expression, monitoring every thought and word. More blood spilt by her blade, but better her hands should be sullied than an innocent Hrela's.

Gared closed the proceedings with a reminder of tomorrow's events. The final day of this season's Choosing, followed by a brief funeral for Pyol. Tyelu could nearly feel Jos's gaze on her. She kept her own gaze on her sword, meticulously cleaning it for later storage.

Wode willing, she wouldn't need it again for a long, long time to come.

Once the Thing broke up, Gared clapped her and Kodh on their shoulders. "You did well, both of you. A fair hearing to one and all."

"To the Dragon's Tail now?" Kodh asked.

Tyelu felt her lip curl into a snarl and ruthlessly smoothed out her expression. What he really wanted to ask was whether her father had decided on his successor. Thank Fryw her cousin had enough tact to leave that question unvoiced.

"Aye, I think it best," Gared replied. "Best to remind Hrelum that we're their neighbors and friends."

"I need a moment to change," Tyelu said. "If we're to go as neighbors, I'd like to look the part."

Kodh stared down his nose at her, a muted smugness marring his otherwise flawless beauty. “Will your candidate be tagging along?”

“If he wants.”

Jos’s hand touched her lower back and he said, “I’m happy to.”

She hadn’t heard him approach over the noise of the lingering crowd, but now noticed her mother standing at her father’s side, just in front of Ryn and Ziri. Even Enel had joined them, and Jos’s grandmother. Tyelu hadn’t realized the taq was in attendance.

“Then it’s settled,” Alna said. “We’ll regroup at the tavern.”

The group broke apart then, most of them following the dwindling crowd for the exit, skirting the two widows scrubbing Pyol’s blood from the wooden floor while others carefully wrapped the body for the funerary rites. Kodh lingered as Tyelu sheathed her sword and picked up her jacket while Jos drew his grandmother into conversation at the dais’s foot.

“Did you think having them here would be in your favor?” her cousin said. “That it would make you more worthy to lead?”

Tyelu swung around to see who he was talking about, then arched an eyebrow, refusing to be bated into losing her temper. “Zhina came on her own. I had no idea she’d be here.”

“And the Q’Mhel?”

“He’s my mate. Did you expect him to stay at home twiddling his thumbs when there’s business to take care of?”

Kodh's mouth twisted into a sneer. "He's not your mate yet, little cousin, and I can guarantee you the people don't want an outsider interfering in our business."

Tyelu scoffed. "My mother's an outsider. So is yours. So are nearly half the adults in Hrelum. Don't be such a blind, blithering idiot, Kodh."

"Don't you count on having that Q'Mhel at your back. He has no sway here."

"I don't need him to."

"Don't you?" Kodh sketched a mock salute at her. "I'll see you at the Choosing field tomorrow."

Jos parted from his grandmother and approached thoughtfully, his gaze on Kodh's departing back. "He's up to something."

"Probably." Tyelu sighed and tucked her hand into Jos's. "I really do need to change. Care to help?"

Heat lit his eyes, turning them dark green. "Do we have to go to the tavern?"

"Unfortunately, yes. We need to be seen among the people, not above them."

"Then you'd better change without my help."

She laughed and pressed a soft kiss to his mouth. "Spoilsport."

"Realist."

"I won't be long."

She stepped away from him and found the satchel she'd stowed behind her chair. She'd made it only a few steps toward the public bathroom when Jos spoke again.

“He’s wrong, you know. Kodh.”

Tyelu turned back to Jos. “Oh?”

“The people here respect what you did today. You don’t need me by your side to rule effectively.”

She did, though. He’d tempered her judgment without saying a word, just by standing there with her family, silently reminding her to set the warrior aside and remain human. Didn’t he see that?

“I—” When words failed her, she shook her head. “Feel free to go ahead, if you’d rather.”

“I’ll wait.”

She nodded and fled, albeit with a measured stride. There, she thought. That’s done. Relief unraveled inside her, filling the void the day’s proceedings had created. She hurried through changing and rejoined Jos, ever aware of the Choosing looming over them both.

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The night brought a fresh layer of snow and a chill carried down the ice-capped mountains by a vicious wind. Snowflakes flurried in the frosty air, and even Tyelu's cold-inured family shivered when they were caught out in the raw weather.

Gared delayed the Choosing until the warmest part of the day, after the midday meal, though even then Jos saw little difference between the two. The temperature hovered above freezing long enough to turn the snowy fields into an icy slush.

"Unusually cold for this time of year," Gared said as they piled into one of the family's hovercars.

"Brutally cold," Alna agreed. She turned a sympathetic face to Jos. "You'll make a quick run of it. No one should stand in your way, though I dare say more than a few women will stand behind Tyelu, hoping you'll pick them instead."

Jos wasn't worried about those other women. They were of no consequence to him.

He could, however, think of two people who might try to stop him from reaching the inner circle: his grandmother and Kodh. He steeled himself for either confrontation. Kodh had a wicked temper to go along with his bulk and longer reach. Zhina would start with words, but she might not stop there, especially since words hadn't separated him from Tyelu yet. She wanted a strong alliance with the Pruxn?. She just wasn't willing to sacrifice her grandson to get it.

Too bad. Tyelu was his choice. That should be crystal clear to everyone by the end of the Choosing.

“I don’t know,” Ryn deadpanned, drawing Jos from his thoughts. “I was thinking of challenging him.”

Ziri poked her husband in the ribs. “Leave your sister be. She deserves a chance at happiness.”

Ryn sighed heftily and shot a merry wink at Jos over the top of Ziri’s head.

Jos managed a grim smile in response, then began centering himself for the challenge ahead.

By the time they reached the Choosing field on the outskirts of Hrelum, candidates and townsfolk alike ambled around the outer edges. Jos stepped out of the hovercar into the bitter air, wishing he could’ve worn his skinsuit under his clothing. The heavy jacket Ryn had leant him kept the wind from biting into his skin, but once the Choosing started, Jos would have only layers of street clothes to protect him from the cold.

He feared it wouldn’t be nearly enough to stave off frostbite. Frekking snow. When this was done and the Sweeper mess taken care of, he was taking Tyelu to a nice warm beach on a planet where the locals didn’t even have a word for snow.

Alna led him to a spot along the outer ring while Gared, Ryn, and Ziri joined Tyelu in the inner circle. Jos eyed her now, searching her face and posture. She’d snuck out of his bed at daybreak, or what would’ve been daybreak if the sun weren’t hidden behind a perpetual cloud cover. They hadn’t mentioned the Choosing, hadn’t speculated over what the day might hold. Q Command had been blasting increasingly urgent updates on the general channels, and even Magda seemed concerned when Jos checked in with her that morning.

A heavy weight settled in his gut. He was going to have to go back. Maybe not today

or tomorrow, but soon. The Sweeper situation had rapidly gone from a pesky nuisance just a few months ago to all hands on deck. No one had figured out why or how the alien menace had managed to escalate so quickly.

Alna lightly touched his elbow. “You seem lightyears away.”

He intercepted another notification through his implant and cut off alerts for all but the most urgent messages. “Sweeper updates. My dal is out there fighting them right now.”

“And you’re here fighting for Tyelu.” She tucked her hands into her jacket’s pockets and faced the inner ring, her breath fogging the air. “Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

Her eyebrows arched high. “Don’t even need to think about it?”

“Not even a little.”

“Does she know how you feel about her?”

Jos followed her gaze to Tyelu, and his heart tightened the way it always did when he looked at her. “Not yet.” And frek it all, he’d sworn to tell her first. Why hadn’t he said it this morning while she’d snuggled so trustingly against him?

“She loves you,” Alna said.

“I know.”

“I never thought she would. Her heart seemed so bitter when she returned from Banam. She’s changed since Ryn found Ziri. Since she met you.” Alna reached up

and brushed snow out of his hair, her mouth curved into a gentle smile. “You know what to do?”

“Fight my way through. Take Tyelu home with me.”

She laughed. “May the gods allow you that ease. Kodh is on the field today. He fights dirty. I thought no one would hinder your path to her. Would that I had been right.”

“I’m a Q’Mhel,” Jos said simply. “I fight to live.”

And today, he fought for Tyelu, for the love that had formed so quickly between them. For the future she represented and the home he’d dreamed of having someday, when duty no longer bled him dry one battle at a time.

Alna nodded and took his borrowed jacket, then slipped through the crowd toward the inner circle.

Jos tucked his hands into his armpits and waited for the start to be called.

Tyelu stood in the center of the Choosing field, assessing the candidates and the crowd. This being the final day of this season’s Choosing, a larger than usual number of candidates waited beyond the outer ring and the inner ring had grown crowded with hopefuls.

A number of those hopefuls were women hoping to catch Jos’s eye. Even a few days ago, the thought would’ve brought jealousy or irritation, but now she found only amusement. Those women wasted their time here. They had no chance with Jos. Even if she weren’t sure of his intentions, she would be sure to intervene before he could choose another.

She had mellowed, yes, but not to the point of complacency.

He had handled himself well the previous evening, enduring the ever-present discussions of livestock and timber with the good grace of a diplomat. Of course, he'd likely endured worse during dinners with his family. Here, at least, he could dispense with formality and meet people on an even ground.

What had surprised her were the number of Hrela who'd approached her after the Thing, quietly thanking her for her part in it or sharing their sorrow over the matter between Pyol and Thrayn. Tyelu knew she'd made the right call. Her father would not have allowed such a judgment to be rendered if it were not well-justified by law and precedence.

And still, when the numbness wore off, after the relief of getting through the day waned, she had grieved as well. It might shock the townsfolk to learn that she could both carry out such a harsh sentence and mourn the loss of life, too. If that fight hadn't ended in bloodshed, if Pyol had tempered his actions...

She sighed and forced her mind to the matter at hand, shedding any thoughts of a past that could not be changed.

Ziri tucked her mittened hand into the crook of Tyelu's elbow. "I can't believe how much colder it is now than when Ryn and I went through this."

Guilt reared its ugly head, poking at Tyelu until she frowned. "I thought you might choose to oppose Jos today."

Ziri laughed. "As if I had a chance of stopping a Q'Mhel. No, I won't stand in your way."

"Even though I stood in yours?"

"Ah, but you're not that woman anymore, are you?"

“Suppose I am,” Tyelu said, a haughty challenge in her voice. “Suppose I’m jealous of Ryn finding a mate so quickly and merely seek to one up him?”

Ziri made a rude noise. “If that were the case, Jos wouldn’t be on the other side of this field. He’s no fool, that one. He’d see right through any pretense.”

“You think he sees me clearly?”

“I think he loves you.” Ziri laid her head on Tyelu’s shoulder and squeezed her arm tight. “A man like that doesn’t give his heart lightly. I think he just might be good enough for you, yes?”

“The question is whether I’m good enough for him.”

“If you weren’t, he wouldn’t be here.”

“You see things so clearly, sister.”

“Not always. Look how long it took me to choose Ryn, when he’d already chosen me. He’s a good man, too, your brother. I could’ve looked the universe over twice and still not found another like him.”

Tyelu murmured an assent. Ryn was a good man, grown strong and wise out of the broken, scarred child her parents had taken in so many years ago. She’d been wrong to stand between him and the love he’d found with Ziri. Perhaps one day, he could forgive her that sin.

Midfield, a familiar bulky figure moved into view. Tyelu muttered a curse and straightened away from Ziri.

“What?” the other woman said, her slate blue eyes pinched with worry.

“Kodh,” Tyelu muttered. “My cousin is a fool if he thinks he’ll stop Jos.”

“I’m betting on Jos,” Ziri said firmly. “Though Kodh is taller and carries more muscle.”

“Jos has plenty of muscle,” Tyelu said, exasperated. “Why does everyone in my family think he’s too lean?”

Ziri laughed, drawing Ryn’s gaze. To him, she said, “Tyelu thinks Jos is plenty muscled.”

Ryn snorted derisively, then faced forward again, making Ziri laugh again.

Tyelu bit back another curse and focused yet again on the figure of the Q’Mhel waiting across the field.

A loud clanking came from the center of the field, raising a raucous cheer from the gathered crowd.

Jos let the mostly female candidates race ahead of him. They were no threat, and he had no intention of drawing one of them into Kodh’s path. The other man had settled halfway between Jos and Tyelu, his mouth drawn into a cold, challenging smile.

So be it, Jos thought as he shut his emotions down. Let Kodh run on anger and bitterness. He would be met with the vicious focus of a trained Q’Mhel.

When the bulk of the other candidates had cleared the midfield, Jos broke into a jog, not bothering with the pretense of finding a path around Tyelu’s cousin. Kodh stepped forward to meet him, his arms stretched out at his sides. He’d shucked his shirt, baring his burly chest to the frigid weather, and pulled his dark blond hair back, leaving two thin war braids to swing against his jaw.

Three steps away, Jos feinted a kick to the left, then ducked right under Kodh's mighty reach. He popped three quick jabs into the larger man's exposed ribs, deflected Kodh's backswing with a blow that would've broken a smaller man's arm.

Counterpunch to win, a technique Jos had learned through repeated, painful demonstrations.

Kodh shook him off and swung around, snarling. "Your Q-merc tricks won't work on me."

"Sure they will," Jos said flatly. "I'm giving you one chance. Walk away now."

"Or what?"

Jos merely looked at him, refusing to answer, allowing Kodh to draw his own conclusions.

Kodh leapt forward in a surprisingly agile attack, and Jos countered, turning every defensive move into a crushing offensive blow. While they fought, he studied the other man's strengths and weaknesses. Kodh was not the largest man Jos had ever fought. He wasn't even the largest Pruxn? Jos knew. Gared topped his nephew, barely, and Sigun was perhaps a hand's span taller.

But Kodh was younger, he was stronger, and he'd let his anger build into a fighting rage. He was a dangerous opponent, which only motivated Jos to put him down as quickly as he could.

The field itself proved to be as much of a threat as Kodh. The two of them slipped and slid through muddy ground and icy slush alike. Kodh mis stepped, his feet went out from under him, and he landed flat on his back. The force of the landing drove a grunt out of him.

Jos stepped back, only too aware of the danger. If Kodh managed to bring him down, he might not gain the leverage to escape. Better to control the timing, if they were going to roll around in the half-thawed snowpack.

He watched Kodh roll over and push onto his feet, waited for the other man to shake ice out of his hair. “Ready to yield?” Jos taunted.

Kodh laughed. “Because of a little ice bath like that? How’re your hands, outlander? Are they numb yet from the cold?”

More than numb, Jos thought, but that was a small price to pay for getting to beat on Kodh. “Are we here to talk or fight?”

Kodh laughed again, pairing it with a jab-kick combo. Jos took the jab, caught the kick, and drove his body down on Kodh’s knee. The joint popped, and Kodh roared as he collapsed. Jos followed him to the half-frozen earth this time, grappling for control of Kodh’s upward arm. As soon as he’d wrapped his arm around Kodh’s chest, the other man rolled onto his back and slammed his head into Jos’s face. The blow dazed Jos, but he’d taken worse blows and trained through worse pain. He wrapped his legs around Kodh’s waist and dug his heels in hard, one into Kodh’s genitals. Kodh yelled and struck back again. Jos was ready for him this time and had already turned his head away. Kodh’s weight was slowly crushing the breath out of him, and the wet snow had already seeped through his clothes and numbed his skin. He punched Kodh’s face with one hand as he lifted his hips and drove his heel down Kodh’s thigh, evading Kodh’s counter grapples, twisting to keep himself on the bottom in a position of control. Jos managed to snake one arm around Kodh’s throat, applying firm pressure with the other hand.

Kodh reached back and jabbed at Jos’s eyes, narrowly missing blinding him.

Jos shook him off and yanked hard against Kodh’s throat. “Yield!”

“Never,” Kodh snarled.

He landed an elbow against Jos’s ribs. Jos felt one crack, and used his counter-pressure hand to punch down onto Kodh’s nose, breaking it. Kodh roared and wiggled around, pushed off the ground with Jos clinging to his back, and jumped backward. Jos let go and pushed away, just clearing Kodh’s body as the other man hit the ground hard back first, winding himself. Jos scrambled across the soggy earth and braced a knee against Kodh’s windpipe, stopping just shy of crushing it.

“Yield,” he gritted out, blinking blood out of his eyes.

Kodh glared up at him, one hand on Jos’s thigh. Whatever he saw in Jos’s expression leached the fight out of him.

“You’ll fight to the death for her, won’t you?” Kodh said, his voice hoarse and stark.

“I will do whatever it takes to keep her,” Jos agreed. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“I yield, Q’Mhel.”

Jos pushed off of him and staggered away. “Stay down until I’m clear.”

Kodh nodded, his mouth twisted into a bitter snarl.

A persistent alert finally penetrated Jos’s tightly controlled focus. He clicked into the message and was unsurprised to see a general recall of all able-bodied personnel to active duty, no exceptions.

Frek. There went the rest of his leave. Tyelu was going to be pissed.

With a sigh, he walked a few steps backward, carefully checking his surroundings

while making sure Kodh didn't attack him again. To his relief, most of the other candidates had made it to the inner circle and claimed their chosen mate. Tyelu stood to one side surrounded by her family, her long, white-blond hair blowing loose in the snarling wind. Snow drifted in the air, not enough to worry about, and the cold finally bit through his warrior high and chilled him to the bone.

His grandmother stepped into his line of sight, her chin held high.

Jos stopped out of arm's reach. "Why are you here?"

"By rights, where else would I be?"

"I'll fight you, if I have to," he warned.

"Fight your own grandmother, your taq?" She tucked her hands behind her back, staring down her regal nose at him, unbent by the frigid wind. "Do you love her?"

He nodded once, sharply.

"Then I suppose I'll have to be satisfied. You could do worse."

He barked out a harsh laugh. "But not much better."

"On that, I'll agree. I'll expect great-grandchildren soon. I'm not getting any younger, you know."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Good. Did you receive the general recall?"

"Yes. I'll return to duty as soon as I can arrange transportation."

“You may travel with me, if you wish. It’s time for me to return to my duties as well, though I can’t say my sojourn here has been without benefit.” Her mouth quirked at the corners, then sobered abruptly. “Will Tyelu be joining us?”

“I don’t know,” he said softly. He knew what he wanted, but not whether he could ask her to forsake her life here for him. “Thank you.”

He walked past her, refusing to limp though the damage Kodh had inflicted was beginning to take its toll. Nothing Jos hadn’t lived through before. Nothing that wouldn’t heal, given enough time and medical attention.

Jos cast a last look at Kodh. Tyelu’s cousin sat upright surrounded by a medic and others. He nodded once, and Jos continued walking toward Tyelu.

When he reached her, Ryn stepped between them.

Jos sighed wearily. “You, too?”

Ryn shook his head, sending his own war braids swinging against his jawline. “Anyone who fights as hard for her as you did deserves to claim her. Be good to her, Jos. Her heart’s more tender than she realizes.”

Jos nodded and clapped Ryn on the shoulder as he moved aside, then he opened his arms as wide as his cracked rib would allow. Tyelu stepped into his embrace, gingerly cradling her head against his shoulder.

“You’re hurt,” she murmured.

“I’ll heal,” he replied. “I guess there’s only one thing to do now.”

She drew back and searched his face. “What?”

“I choose you, Tyelu. Let’s go home.”

He captured her mouth in a gentle kiss to the cheers and playful jeers of her family. He’d have to tell her he’d been recalled, but not just yet. Let her have this one moment where she felt completely and totally loved.

Home .

The word echoed in Tyelu's mind like a tolling bell, eliciting the strangest feeling within her. Hope. Love. Comfort. No other word matched home. She'd lived long enough away from hers to understand the difference.

She took Jos to her parents, measured his grim expression against their desire to celebrate, and quietly gathered his things while her mother tended Jos's wounds. Soldier he might be, but even he couldn't go forever without rest and food. When Gared left for Pyol's funeral, Tyelu begged leave from duty. Her father agreed without argument.

Even after Jos cleaned up, an urgency lingered in his gaze. "We need to go," he whispered to her. "Say goodbye while you can."

An odd way to put it, but this was his day as much as hers. They said their goodbyes and left, hurrying between the entrance and her hovercar in weather that had grown mercifully mellow, a calm before the coming storm.

Before they'd even reached her home, Jos was answering calls through his implant. In one of the rare pauses between conversations, she said, "What's wrong?"

"I'll explain when we get to your house." He muttered a curse as he touched his jaw. "Need coordinates. Yes? I know. Uh-hm. We're going as fast as we can."

"I can go faster," she murmured. Her vehicle traveled above the road, not on it. Otherwise, they would've been stuck at her parents' house.

He shook his head at her, switched into another conversation. Switched languages, one she wasn't familiar with. It wasn't hard to read his hardening expression, to feel him withdrawing from her into work despite the gentle hand he'd laid on her thigh.

The bubble of happiness created by his victory over Kodh, by his choosing her, by his casual use of the word home, slowly deflated. Something was wrong.

In the next pause, she said, "Your dal?"

"They're fine," he murmured.

In the one after that: "Sweepers?"

He nodded, and she knew then that he was preparing to leave her.

Her temper flared white hot, and she only just refrained from pounding a fist into the dashboard. Gods above and below, she'd just found him! Just learned to love, to trust. He couldn't go now, not when she'd just realized how much he loved her!

She sucked in a breath and drew on years of experience to control the anger and grief and sorrow roiling within her, to push it down so her reaction wouldn't upset Jos. The last thing he needed was for her to throw a temper tantrum over a situation he had no say in. Kraden Sweepers. That's where the true blame lay.

Tears pricked her eyes for the second time in two days, and she pushed them down, too. A crying woman did strange things to a man, and she would not impose them on her mate.

See? she thought. I'm not always the spoiled princess, and I refuse to play the martyr

.

She pulled the hovercar into the garage attached to her home. Funny, that. She couldn't recall any of the actual drive after realizing he had to go.

He followed her out of the hovercar, dragging his bags with him despite the cracked rib. She unlocked the garage entrance and took one bag from him, then led him into the mudroom past the pantry and kitchen, through the living area and the cooling fire she'd banked that morning before leaving. Two bedrooms were downstairs. She bypassed those and walked upstairs to the massive bedroom she'd designed for her own use.

Like most homes in Hrelum, hers was constructed of wood and stone inside and out. Her bedroom featured exposed beams on the ceiling and a separate fireplace. She'd decorated it with comfortable furniture and accessories she'd woven or knit herself.

Jos had grown quiet as they walked and stood now in the chamber's doorway, watching her as she dropped his bag on the floor and dug an empty one out of her upstairs storage closet.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"Maybe next time you can stay long enough to make yourself at home."

"I wish I could now." He hesitated a moment, leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. "I'm sorry I have to leave so soon. I'd hoped for a few more days."

"I always knew you'd go back, sooner or later." She dropped the bag on her bed, their bed now, and went to a dresser, yanking out necessities by habit more than thought.

"When do you have to leave?"

"A few ticks ago. My grandmother's holding her shuttle at the spaceport, waiting for me. What are you doing?"

She eyed his bemused smile and shrugged. “Whither thou goest.”

“You want to go with me?”

“What does it look like?”

“Even though you’ll have to twiddle your thumbs on Q while I’m deployed stars knows where?”

She slammed a drawer closed, irritation sparking from her eyes. “I’d rather be close to your base of operations than stuck here not knowing what’s going on.”

“I see.” He studied her for a long moment, long enough for the weight of his stare to become uncomfortable.

She shrugged it off and continued packing. Clothes, toiletries, an extra pair of boots. Where was that knitting bag she’d thrown together with enough yarn to knit her new husband a sweater?

“I thought you’d be furious,” he said.

“I am, Jos. Of course, I am.” She rounded on him, all the fury and pain and deflated hope pressing against her skin, urging her to move, to scream, to throw something if that’s what it took for him to understand how much just the thought of being parted from him right now hurt. “We haven’t even finalized the union yet. Haven’t settled the dowry or the assets, haven’t even consummated our marriage. What else should I feel?”

He crossed the room to her and pulled her into a tight hug. “It’s ok, love. Everything’s going to be ok.”

She curled trembling fingers into fists against his back, holding him with a desperate fierceness, her breath hitching on silent sobs. If she held him tight enough, would he still leave her? Would he survive the Sweeper onslaught and make it back home to her? He couldn't leave her here to endure that worry. Surely he could see the logic in taking her with him.

He held her head to his shoulder and rubbed the other up and down her spine, murmuring nonsense to her. Kissed her tears away, tears she swore would never fall. And when her breath calmed and her tears dried, he reached around him and gently took one of her hands in his, easing it to his side.

"I'm sorry, love," he said.

She rubbed her face against his shoulder, breathing in his scent, letting it soothe her frayed nerves. "It's not your fault."

"It is." His hand encircled her wrist, and she felt an electric hum and a soft click against her skin. "You see, princess, I had no intention of leaving you behind."

Confused, she stepped back and glanced down as Jos caught her other hand and melded her wrists together. She yanked on them, found them firmly restrained, and nearly stamped her foot. "What's this? What are you doing?"

One corner of his mouth quirked upward, and he stared down at her, his eyes hard and dangerous, laced with a silky, heated promise. "Turnabout's fair play, lover."

He smacked a transportation chip onto her shoulder and triggered it, and she popped out of existence, taking her outrage with her.

Jos didn't bother donning his armor. He found Tyelu's communications terminal, bypassed the security—sometimes having the top R&D in the sector came in

handy—and contacted Alna, voice only, while programming a set of transportation chips.

“What’s wrong, darling?” she said.

“It’s Jos. Who does Tyelu usually get to look after her property when she’s out of town?”

There was a long silence from the other end. “I’ll have someone drop by. How long will the two of you be gone?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“Sweepers?”

What else? A wave of fatigue washed over him. He scrubbed a hand over his hair, winced at the pinch in his ribs. “Yes. She’ll be safe enough.”

“As long as you keep her out of the fight,” Alna said wryly. “Tell her to stay in touch. Be safe, Jos.”

He cut the connection without responding. Safe was not a word people usually associated with Q-mercs. Neither was home, but here, in this home Tyelu had created for herself, he suspected he’d find one, too.

He jogged quickly upstairs as he messaged Zhina with a change of plans, then affixed the chips to his and Tyelu’s bags, and ‘ported himself and the lot directly to Kartikeya, his grandmother’s ship.

He popped onto the transport deck, snagged a passing hand to help with the bags. Tyelu was not there. When he asked where she’d been taken, the ensign manning the

deck directed him to the same room he and Tyelu had occupied on the way to Abyw.

He went straight there, his long strides carrying him swiftly through the ship. At a gesture from him, the cargo lad who'd helped carry their bags dropped them beside the room's entrance.

Jos waited until the other man was well away before testing the door. It was unlocked, the room it protected ominously silent. He cracked it a hand's breadth and called, "Tyelu?"

A low, furious laugh drifted to him. "Did you think I'd welcome you eagerly, husband?"

He stepped behind the hinge and pushed the hatch open with one palm. She sat on the edge of the bed, arms crossed over her chest, her legs stretched out in front of her. The restraints he'd used on her wrists lay on the bed beside her, broken beyond repair, and her eyes held the same icy fury as her voice.

"Would you rather I'd left you behind?" he said.

She scoffed and glanced away. "You could've asked."

"I could have. This was more fun."

"Fun!" she squawked and flicked her hand at the broken restraints. "Do you know how long it took me to get those kraden things off? Do you know how many people saw me wearing them?"

He ruthlessly suppressed a grin. That would dig him into so much trouble, he'd never get out. "Can I bring the bags in, or are you going to attack while my back's turned?"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “ I will carry in the bags. You, husband, will find a bathing chamber, and when you’re done, you will visit the nearest medic.”

“Do I get a kiss first?”

She gave him a disdainful sniff. “You reek of blood and sweat.”

“My lips are just fine, princess.” He advanced on her slowly.

She held up a hand and scrambled off the bed. “You would not dare!”

“I dare quite a bit, love.” He lunged for her before the last word left his mouth and caught her as she was turning away. Twisted her around so that her back met his front, wound his arms around her, and nuzzled the crook of her shoulder. “Don’t fight me, Tyelu. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

“I know.”

The fury had drained out of her voice, leaving a sad hollow. She placed her arms over his and turned her face into his kiss. He savored her for as long as he dared with the doorway open to any passersby.

When he pulled away, she sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. “Clean yourself up and find a medic. I refuse to send you into battle with a cracked rib and who knows what other damage.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She tried to pull away, and he held her close for a moment more. “We need to talk.”

“Oh?”

“Not now. Soon. Before I leave. Let me get cleaned up first.” He stole one more kiss, savoring the brief reprieve from the ever pressing demands of duty, then let her go. “Maybe when we’re done and I get cleared for duty, we can try out my spare restraints.”

She huffed out a laugh and waved him away, and he went, wondering if she still had some mischief planned to pay him back for kidnapping her.

Later, after he’d cleaned up, donned a fresh uniform, and seen the ship’s medic—around constant alerts and discussions with Magda and Q Command—Jos came back to her. While he was away, she’d gone through their bags and reorganized them, and now sat on the bed cross legged, knitting out of a cloth bag she’d packed with her clothing.

He sat down on the bed facing her and flicked a finger against the wound yarn. “What’s this?”

“A sweater for my husband.” Her eyebrows arched and she stared down her nose at him. “The one who would never dare send me into an unfamiliar situation with my hands restrained.”

“I knew it was safe.”

“But I didn’t, and that is the salient point.” She sighed and set her knitting aside. “You wanted to talk.”

“We have some things to settle between us.”

“Ha! I told you so.”

He caught her hand in his and threaded their fingers together. “Where you’ll stay on

Q. How to access my accounts. We can divvy up management another time, but while I'm away, I need to know you're taken care of."

She leaned forward and cupped his face with her free hand. "I've been on my own for a long time, Jos. I can take care of myself."

"I know. But you're not alone now, and I want—" He turned his face into her palm, nuzzling it while he searched for the exact words to help her understand. "We have traditions here, too. You've seen the tattoos people wear on their throats?"

"I have. Magda mentioned them as well." She scooted closer and gently turned his face toward hers. "Jos? What is it?"

"The tattoos are a bonding mark," he began. "The ink is manufactured especially for the Q on Domor. There's an empathic factor. When two people form a pair bond, if the bond is strong enough, they may choose to receive these mating marks. They transmit emotion between the pair. What one feels strongly, the other feels, too."

"But," she said flatly.

"If one dies, the other feels that death as if it were their own."

Her fingers jerked against his. Otherwise, she remained still, absorbing his words.

It was too much to ask, too much of a burden to place on her—

"Emler," she murmured.

Jos bowed his head. Was it selfish of him to ask this of her, knowing he might die in the line of duty? Knowing she'd have to live with the pain of his death?

But pain was only part of it. How could he deny her the benefits of that bond, the pleasure and certainty of knowing how much he loved her because she could feel it herself?

“Yes,” he said.

“What else? It can’t be just an empathic bond.”

“There are some legal consequences. Pair bonds can’t legally divorce under Q law. It’s easier to prove a union in the case of one partner’s death. Harder to disentangle assets.”

Her gaze searched his. “What does it mean for you?”

How could he explain? It was like a Pruxn? finding a mate on another planet and allowing them to skip the Choosing.

Again, he searched for the right words, words to explain how he’d dreamed of being in such a relationship during the loneliest days of his youth. When the rigorous training all Q-mercs endured ground him down to bone, leaving only the faint hope that one day he’d have something beyond it. A mate, a lover. Someone to come home to, someone to share the rest of his life with. By the time he’d made Q’Mhel, he’d buried that dream under the rigid chime of duty.

And then he’d ‘ported into a random cargo bay and seen her .

Had some part of him known then where a relationship with her would lead? Had that hope been rekindled when he recognized the fierce spark burning inside her as the same one that drove him? Had he known then, deep down, how much he would come to love her?

Before he could find the words to explain, she tightened her fingers around his. “I understand,” she said, and he wondered how much of his thoughts she’d read in his unguarded expression.

He kissed her fingertips, tucked a stray strand of her silky hair behind a delicate ear. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to. It’s a lot to ask, given how often my life is at risk.”

“I’ve lived with risk, Jos. Every day, for years.” A sigh filtered out of her. “Some things are worth taking the risk for. Some are worth risking everything. I will wear your mark with honor.”

“Tyelu,” he murmured. “Think about what you’re saying.”

“I have. Can we start now?”

“There should be someone onboard who can help us. With the first part at least. They’re taken in at least two stages, so we’ll have time to acclimate.” His mouth twitched into a grim smile. “The bond packs a punch. Are you sure? We can wait.”

“No,” she said sharply, then sucked in another ragged breath. “No, I don’t want to wait. Who knows what fate the gods may care to bestow?”

He felt her words to the depth of his soul. “Stars, I love you.”

“Jos,” she murmured, softening against him.

He pulled her into a fierce, demanding kiss, grateful for the nanos the medic had injected into his cracked rib. Healing already, he thought, and wished he had time both to make love to her and to start the process of legally and otherwise marrying her in the Q fashion. They’d arrive on Q all too soon and had too much to do in the

meantime for them to dally, much as he wanted to carry her down and love her until she cried out his name in release.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

They entered Q space only moments after Zhina's personal chef finished tattooing small crests over Tyelu and Jos's pulses, beneath their left jaws, using the specially crafted Domorian empathic ink embedded with healing nanos to speed the process.

"The bare minimum," Jos had told the woman.

The needle's sting had been minimal as well. Afterward, Tyelu felt no differently than she had before. Perhaps the fabled bond the mark supposedly fostered took time to settle in.

They had no time to test it. The moment Kartikeya docked, Jos hustled her off the ship, his mind occupied by the coming deployment.

Tyelu stood now in Q's spaceport, waiting while Jos spoke with his grandmother. The port itself was sleek and modern, designed for efficiency and speed. This one was specifically for civilian use. From the conversations around her, she inferred that there were others designated solely for military use and still others for cargo. Strategically, separating those functions made sense. Multiple ports, widely spaced, made it difficult for an enemy to wipe out all spacefaring capabilities in one or two blows.

Building all of them must've taken a good chunk out of Q's budget for decades.

She shifted her stance and studied a nearby map of the city, whose name she didn't know. Q was so secretive, so well-hidden by their technology and military might, that the only city outsiders knew by name was its capital, Vidarr. Tyelu would not make the mistake of assuming they'd landed in the capital, or that Q's government and

military centers were located there. Where Q-mercs were concerned, it never paid to assume.

At least everyone here seemed to speak Galactic Basic. That would make navigating this strangely advanced world so much easier.

Jos said goodbye to the taq and touched Tyelu's elbow. "I have to report directly to Q Command. Will you be ok making your own way to my apartment?"

She arched a single eyebrow. "I'm not a pup, husband. Give me directions and I'll be fine."

"I know, princess." He smoothed a hand over her hair, his fingers lingering on a stray strand. "I'm sorry I can't go with you."

"Jos," she said firmly, taking his hand in hers. "Go. Do your duty and return to me with the skulls of our enemies in hand, or not at all."

He barked out a laugh, his eyes dancing with heat and amusement. "I'll check in as often as I can."

He dipped his head and touched his lips to her right pulse. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she found herself unaccountably mired in a ripe sorrow underlain with a thread of fear. He has to leave, she reminded herself. Has to go and protect us all. She'd known what he was when they met, and understood in a way others might not what duty drove him.

Then he tilted his head and gently kissed the tattoo inked over her left pulse, and a wave of emotion washed her own thoughts away, battering her so hard she would've staggered if not for Jos's restraining hand. His emotions were vivid, swirling colors. The sharp purple bite of regret, the soft, muddy brown of sorrow, the militant scarlet

of duty, and beneath them all, the tender eddy of love.

“Jos,” she whispered, shock robbing her voice of strength.

He pressed her mouth to his pulse, and her own emotions flooded outward, into the sea of his. He’s right, she thought dimly. This is overwhelming.

But now, she understood why he’d wanted to do this. He’d given her a window into his heart, a precious glimpse of his innermost self. A priceless treasure. Before, she’d intuited that he loved her, through actions and words and his participation in the Choosing. Now, his love wrapped around, as warm and steadfast as his embrace.

He broke away and touched his forehead to hers, his regret stinging her inside and out. “Try not to provoke the taq while I’m gone.”

She had time only to huff out a laugh before he walked away. The loss of his touch sent her reeling. She swayed under the blow, stayed upright only through ingrained discipline. Still, her hand went to her heart and she fought the urge to crawl into a corner and curl up for a good cry. Their emotions stretched between them, thinning with each step he took. When he disappeared from sight, she braced herself for that thread to snap, but it merely thinned and thinned until her emotions became her own and Jos’s emotions narrowed to a tiny tug against her heart.

A passing elderly couple gave her politely questioning looks.

“New bond?” the woman said.

Tyelu nodded. “How did you know?”

They pulled down the high collars of their tunics, displaying matching tattoos running down both sides of their throats.

Tyelu's eyes widened. She croaked out, "It gets worse?"

The couple slid sly looks at each other, then the man said, "It always hits soldiers the hardest. It's the emotional discipline. When those emotions cut loose—"

The woman laughed softly. "Darling, you're embarrassing the poor girl."

The subtle undercurrents running between the mated pair didn't embarrass Tyelu. They worried her. If that initial touch had nearly dropped her to her knees, what had it done to Jos? He was literally riding into battle. How could he function effectively while grappling with this maelstrom pressing against his skin?

The woman touched a gentle hand to Tyelu's forearm. "Don't worry. The Q'Mhel will be fine."

"You know him?"

"No." The man tapped his temple. "Implants. We're retired now, but at one time we were hell on the battlefield."

"I want one," Tyelu said fiercely, and the couple laughed.

"Here, darling," the woman said. "Where are you going? We'll ride along with you until you settle."

Their conversation had helped her weather the twin shocks of that initial wave of emotion and Jos's departure, and she was grateful for their kindness. A pulse of emotion hit her chest, milder now, though startling enough to draw an undisciplined gasp out of her. The hand she held to her heart was clenched into a fist around something small, thin, and hard. She opened her hand and gaped at the chip laying in her palm.

“Oh, he’s given you his pass,” the woman exclaimed. “How thoughtful. You’re new here, then?”

“Pruxn?,” Tyelu murmured, still staring at the chip. When had he given it to her? How had he done it without her knowing?

The sneaky, wonderful fiend.

Again, the couple exchanged knowing glances. “Did you steal him, or did he steal you?” the woman asked.

Tyelu managed a shaky smile. “Both.”

The couple chuckled, then the woman threaded her arm through Tyelu’s and guided her gently toward the exit. “I’m Inisru and this scalawag is my husband, Ezo.”

“Tyelu af Alna,” Tyelu replied. “My…husband is Jos.”

Inisru’s steps faltered a fraction. “I see.”

Tyelu stopped dead, her eyes narrowed. “What exactly do you see?”

“Who you are,” Ezo said.

“I’m—” Tyelu clamped down a retort before it left her mouth. No need to spread her own credentials around until it was necessary. She held up Jos’s chip-pass. “Exactly how does this work?”

Inisru plucked it from Tyelu’s fingers faster than a woman her age should’ve been able to and nodded toward the map Tyelu had noticed earlier. “Come along. We’ll get you situated. Ezo, be a dear and contact the taq’s secretary.”

“No!” Tyelu said, her eyes wide. “That’s really not necessary.”

“Of course, it is,” Inisru countered, not unkindly. “Now, about that pass.”

Tyelu suppressed a sigh and let herself be led along. Maybe she should’ve stayed on Abyw where no one cared that she’d married into what passed for royalty on this strange, secretive world.

A denial followed immediately. No, better to be here at Jos’s home base. Better to take her time learning about Q, while he was occupied elsewhere, than to stew in her worry back home.

Let him be safe , she prayed silently, and immersed herself in Inisru’s patient guidance.

As soon as Jos exited the lobby, he staggered to a wall and pressed a palm flat against it, holding himself upright. His heart pounded against his sternum, driven by the chaos of Tyelu’s emotions and the strength it had taken to walk away from her.

Even now, it took every ounce of his willpower not to turn around and run to her.

To help his focus, he opened his internal communications. Immediately, a call popped up from Seni, his dal’s medic.

When he connected, she said, without preamble, “What’s wrong? Your health stats are all over the place.”

Silently, he cursed the implants monitoring his every move. “I just got married, Seni. Give me a break.”

“Oh,” she replied. “That.”

“Yes, that,” he said, exasperated, and straightened away from the wall. At least her call had broken through the chaos, affording him a slender window to snag control.

“What’s your ETA? Magda’s throwing a fit.”

“As soon as I can get there. I’m at Vidarr Port C now.”

“The civilian side? Frek, Jos. Marriage brought you down a step, didn’t it?”

“Shut it, Seni,” he grumbled. “I’ll route a more exact ETA to the dal when I hit the connector.”

“Roger that.”

The connection snapped off. A pulse of emotion from Tyelu hit him and rebounded back. Had to get that under control, or she’d feel too much of the battles yet to come. The whole point of bringing her to Q was to keep her safe. Maybe they should’ve taken the marks before the Choosing, so they’d have time to adjust.

He resettled his duffel across his shoulders, tightened his grip on the case holding his armor. No, he hadn’t been ready to mark her then, hadn’t known enough about what was in his own heart. They’d moved so fast, two warriors running on instinct toward an embattled victory.

Unlike civilians, who mired themselves in endlessly indecisive courtships. A civilian could afford to take his time courting a woman. A soldier never knew when duty might drag him away. That’s one of the things he admired about the Pruxn?: they chose a mate and made done with it.

He’d made the right call on the timing of the mark, but damned if he didn’t wish they’d had more time to adjust to it.

He caught an underground tube to Vidarr Primus, the military-only spaceport, flashing his credentials via implant at every checkpoint. The brand-new tattoo on his throat drew a few raised eyebrows and more than one knowing grin. People who knew him offered congratulations as they hurried past. Even in times of war, it was good to have a reason to celebrate.

Of course, Q was always at war in some way, since they hired the bulk of their military out as mercenaries.

He tucked the wry thought away as the underground carried him under the capital city to the military port. Tyelu's emotions had dimmed to a faint counter beat, pulsing irregularly against his own. The sensation fell somewhere between pleasant and uncomfortable. Domorians were used to it, being empathic creatures, but it often took humans a while to acclimate. How the ancient tradition had passed from their culture to his escaped him in that moment. Pondering it kept him from worrying about Tyelu. Had she figured out how to use his pass? Was she navigating Vidarr ok?

Magda connected. "Whatever you're doing, stop it. It's bleeding into us through your implant."

He bit back an apology. "I swear, I'm siccing the first suitable Pruxn? I meet on you."

Kodh would do. A vicious lubber the man might be, but he could fight like the fiercest d'ga. Jos's not-quite-healed rib twinged an agreement, and he grimaced against the unexpected pain.

"Don't even joke about that," Magda said flatly.

"Who's joking?" he murmured. "Run me through the dal's readiness."

She rattled off healing injuries, repairs being made to Apedemak and its crew. They'd

taken serious damage in the last conflict with the Sweepers, one of several Jos had missed after Tyelu kidnapped him.

He regretted not being there for them, but couldn't regret having her in his life. One day Magda would understand.

He distracted her with a question about their next assignment as he exited the tube and let their conversation push out any lingering worry over Tyelu.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

They left Q within the hour, flying out with a wing of dals supported by a full battle group, one of two deploying from Q in a rare combined offensive. While Jos had been preoccupied with Tyelu and the Choosing, his dal and others had been harried by the Sweepers. They'd followed one group through a jump and reentered space in the middle of a system overrun with Sweeper ships. Two dals had sacrificed themselves and their ships so that the others could escape with a warning about the amassed forces.

The Sweepers had entrenched themselves in a homebase, and their numbers were far, far greater than anyone had suspected.

The battle group was headed back now to hammer at the Sweepers' apparent base. Even Jos had been shocked by the news. Sweepers were nomadic more often than not, drifting from system to system in search of materials, technology, and slaves. The uptick in Sweeper child-ship development had been bad enough. This was horrifying. If left unchecked, Sweepers would devour the sector.

He stifled an impulse to message Tyelu, flinched as her emotions and his rebounded through their growing bond. He focused instead on his d'gas, anchored into the transport deck's walls, and the steady updates coming through Apedemak's dedicated comms. First jump. Clear space. Coordinating with the battle group.

The faint pull of a second jump pressed him against the deck's webbing. As soon as they reentered norm space, the comms went wild.

“Contact, contact, contact!”

“Incoming fire! Brace for impact!”

Frek. This system was supposed to be clear .

A quieter message informed him that his dal would be ‘porting into one of the mother ships they’d encountered upon jumping into a system. Jos relayed the message to his dal as a spike of adrenaline flooded his system.

His armor automatically administered countermeds, and almost immediately his focus narrowed to the task at hand. His dal snapped out of their webbing and stepped onto the transport pad, Jos leading the way.

He triggered his helmet, closing it around his head, and exhaled. Time to go to work.

After showing her how to use Jos’s pass, Inisru and Ezo took Tyelu to their favorite restaurant, tucked away in the old quarter of Q’s capital city. Their firm kindness eased much of Tyelu’s worry, helping her orient herself to the massive, urbanized landscape.

There were no suburbs here, as there were on Abyw, no quaint villages or open roads. During the ride from the spaceport to the restaurant, she caught a glimpse of mist-shrouded mountains in the distance, beyond the imposing skyline. The entire city rose stories above the elevated rail system and seemed to go on forever.

Tyelu clamped her teeth together to keep from gaping. Even Domor, as developed as it was, had more greenspaces than Q.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Inisru said, a gentle smile in her eyes.

“Beautiful,” Tyelu agreed. But also overwhelming. Different from Abyw, perhaps too different. She felt like a lubber set adrift in the vast reaches of space, her only tether

the faint echo of Jos in her heart. Lost, alone. She forced her spine straight and vowed to love it as much as she loved him.

The weather was pleasant during their ride through the city, almost balmy as the sun set and Q's solitary moon rose. The time disoriented her somewhat; she was still on Abyw time, where it would be nearing the midday hour.

The restaurant was a tiny hole in the wall serving traditional Q cuisine family style. The aroma of frying meat and spices made Tyelu's stomach growl, and she realized she hadn't eaten in hours. Tyelu allowed Inisru to order for her and carefully filed her companions' conversation away for later thought. The older couple laid a foundation of Q's settlement and growth for her, beyond the barebones encyclopedia articles publicly available on the net. Q was a water world dominated by strings of islands. Vidarr, the capital, had been built atop the largest, located in the planet's northern temperate zone.

Tyelu broke in during that explanation. "But where does your food come from? Have you no farms or ranches?"

Ezo grinned. "Ah, spoken like a true Pruxn?!"

Inisru elbowed him gently. "Leave off, Ezo, or the poor girl's liable to abandon us."

"Not until the meal's done," Tyelu assured her wryly.

"Smart girl," Ezo murmured. "Always eat when you get a chance."

"Spoken like a soldier," she replied, grinning.

"She's got you there, lover." Inisru pushed a plate toward Tyelu, filled with steamed greens tossed with slivers of other vegetables and a chewy, salted meat. "We have sea

farms, naturally, because of the oceans. Some of the islands near the equator were left wild, allowing edible native fruits and vegetables to flourish.”

Ezo picked up the explanation there. “The rest is grown on floating islands or in skyrisers. And we import quite a bit. Meat, mostly, and exotics that can’t be grown here. I believe one of the prime reasons we’re trying to improve relations with the Pruxn? is because of your abundant bovi herds.”

Tyelu lowered her gaze and busied herself with sampling the greens. Taq Zhina might wish for closer ties with Abyw, but that evidently did not include having closer ties with her grandson’s new wife.

After their meal, the couple offered to escort her to Jos’s apartment. They’d made it back to the rail station when an odd sensation pressed against her heart. She placed a hand there, puzzled, then the connection with Jos snapped and went silent.

“Jos!” she gasped.

Inisru’s expression shifted to concern. “What is it?”

Ezo shot an unreadable look at his wife. “I know this one. Don’t worry, Tyelu. He’s not gone.”

“Adrenaline suppressant,” Inisru said, nodding. “It has the added advantage of shutting down emotions.”

“Or disadvantage,” Ezo murmured. “Come along, Tyelu. We must get you settled in so you can rest.”

“But Jos!” Tyelu cried.

Inisru wrapped an arm around Tyelu's shoulders. "He's still there. You'll see."

How could he still be there? The loss of connection had left her hollowed her out. She'd only begun to get used to the idea of him being there when the connection had been ripped away. Or felt like it had.

"Tell me about the suppressant," Tyelu demanded.

"It's in his armor," Ezo explained. "Automatically administered ahead of battle along with a cocktail of other drugs. Perfectly safe, I assure you."

Of course, Tyelu thought. She'd known the armor administered some meds, just not what effect those would have on her bond with Jos. Fatigue washed over her, a harsh reminder that she'd just arrived on a new planet using a different time configuration and her new husband was very likely in the middle of fighting the sector's deadliest enemy.

Her stomach churned, threatening to upend her recent meal. She placed a quelling hand over it, refusing to embarrass herself by vomiting in front of fellow warriors. "Which way is Jos's apartment?"

The couple kindly refused to leave her side until they escorted her safely home.

As soon as Tyelu entered Jos's apartment, she secured the door behind her and set off to explore. It was unsurprisingly located near what Ezo called Vidarr Prime, the military-only spaceport located across the city from the civilian one.

Wise, she thought, pleased. Very wise indeed. Q's planners must have been quite the strategists in their day.

The apartment was roughly as spacious as her diplomatic quarters in Forro. A short

hallway ended in a well-appointed kitchen separated from a spacious sitting area by an uncluttered bar. The far wall was one enormous window overlooking the city and a small, attached balcony. Jos's bedroom was accessed through a door set roughly dead center between the two areas. An en suite bathroom branched off of it as well as a walk-in closet holding spare uniforms, casual clothes, and a wall of weapons.

Tyelu grinned as she ran her hands along blasters, knives, and the collection's lone short sword. This was why they were a perfect match, a small part of why she loved him. He was a warrior through and through, one of the many ties binding them together.

She backpedaled to the hallway and the inset door she'd passed, discovered a tidy clothes-freshening unit, a temperature modulating unit, and cleaning gear. Then backpedaled again to the kitchen and quickly inventoried his food supplies. She frowned at the empty cooler, was a little happier with the icebox, and somewhat satisfied by the selection of dried goods.

Well. Nothing for it. She'd have to figure out how to order fresh foods during her stay, or risk going out.

Her musings were interrupted by a chime. Quickly, she strode toward the door and checked the security feed. A crisply uniformed young man holding a covered basket stood outside the door. The feed identified him only as Minion 4. Tyelu snickered. Jos had to have done that.

Minion 4 turned out to be one of Taq Zhina's many underlings, the basket held a marital gift from the taq's staff, and the man himself apparently served as Tyelu's welcome committee. Tyelu took the basket and the man's card and shooed him off as quickly as she could, promising to contact him if she ever, stars forbid, needed to speak with Jos's formidable grandmother. She shut the door on the poor man asking her if she required a personal bodyguard, then sniffed at the question. As if!

That done, she found the apartment's net access and called her parents.

Alna greeted her with a bright smile. "How's the reconnaissance going?"

Tyelu laughed and settled onto the comfortable sofa in the living area, facing a large viewscreen. "So far, I've seen the spaceport, a restaurant, and Jos's apartment. The city is amazing. I've never seen anything like it."

"You sound relaxed."

"Not quite," Tyelu admitted. "Jos deployed as soon as we landed."

Alna's expression melted into sympathy. "You can always come home."

"This is home, too, or will be if I can ever figure my way around. There's a rail system running through the entire city. I'm thinking of taking a day and getting lost on it."

"You should!"

They settled in for a good chat, talking of matters back home and Tyelu's plans while Jos was away. Gared interrupted a while later, to remind Tyelu of the upcoming Council of Kafhs.

"Will you make it back in time?" he said.

"If I can get things settled here." She hesitated, then added, "Do you need me there?"

"I'd like for you to attend. It might save some trouble down the road."

Tyelu didn't ask what kind of trouble. She already had a good idea what form that

might take.

The conversation shifted to trade, and finally, when a yawn caught Tyelu by surprise, Alna pried her husband away from the net-point's miniviewer and signed off.

Tyelu replaced the viewer and turned on the wall-mounted viewscreen to a channel showing planetary news. Immediately, she was bombarded by a livecast compiled from direct feeds embedded into armor, accompanied by a news anchor's voiceover identifying the battle as an incursion against the Sweepers. The sight horrified her. Not because of the gory battle taking place. That didn't bother her at all. She'd seen her share of battles, both during and after her time with the Queen's Guard, and had no qualms whatsoever about watching Sweepers being gutted.

No, what horrified her was that the video would be shared roughly as it was created. What if a soldier was killed in front of such a camera? What if that soldier's family was watching the livecast and saw their loved one being torn apart?

After a moment, though, she noticed the nearly seamless gaps where feeds were stitched together. Bits were being omitted. That was easy to tell, once she got the hang of it. The feeds' identifiers were anonymized, to protect the soldiers' identities. No one was seriously harmed or killed. There must, she mused, be enough of a gap between the action and it being aired for an editor to snip out the truly nasty parts.

She retrieved her knitting and relaxed into the sofa without bothering to unpack. Plenty of time for that later. Just then, knowing how the battle was going seemed far more important than trivial things like making space for her clothes among Jos's.

She fell asleep at some point, there on the couch, and woke to the feeling of Jos wrapping himself around her.

"Jos?" she murmured sleepily.

The apartment's lights brightened automatically at the sound of her voice, and she sat up, searching the space around her for her lover. But he wasn't there, only the warmth of the connection strumming between them.

He's safe, she thought, and collapsed back into the cushions on a teary laugh.

The feelings of loss and return occurred several times over the next few days as Tyelu explored the city and began integrating her and Jos's finances. She made copious notes for him, each one sent to his official net address. From him, she heard little, but so long as she could feel him coming and going, she was satisfied.

During those few days, she was officially introduced into Q society, first to the support group for the spouses of the deployed Q-mercs, then at one of Taq Zhina's many formal functions. Tyelu endured each with as much grace as she could muster, smiling and nodding until she felt like a doll playing a role.

Once Minion 4 alerted her to it, Tyelu took a great deal of satisfaction from spending part of Jos's entertainment allotment on formalwear. Apparently, the entire ruling family had such monies budgeted to them for diplomatic and other occasions, out of the family's trust. Knowing that made it much easier to spend the credits. She cut a wide swath through local dress shops accompanied by Inisru, who was amused by the fervor and shrewdness of Tyelu's shopping frenzy.

When the conflict showed no signs of ending, Tyelu booked transportation to Abyw on an armed passenger ship, packed only what she needed for the voyage, and set off for the civilian spaceport.

Minion 4 met her there wearing yet another crisply pressed uniform, a travel duffel slung over his shoulder.

When he approached, Tyelu stopped dead and stared down her nose at him. "Why are

you here?”

“Security,” he said mildly, appearing not the least bit intimidated. “At the taq’s request.”

“How did you know I was leaving?”

“Your accounts are flagged.” At her icy look, he added, “Even your personal accounts. The safety of the ruling family—”

She held up a hand, interrupting that nonsense before he got going. “Spare me. The ship is leaving soon. I don’t have time to book another berth.”

“I took the liberty of upgrading your ticket when I bought my own.”

His mouth tilted at one corner into one of Jos’s smiles, and suddenly, she missed her mate so much, she had to glance away briefly lest the taq’s idiot minion catch sight of it.

“You’re related to him, aren’t you?” she growled.

“We’re cousins,” he admitted.

She saw the resemblance now, not just in the way they smiled, but in the set of their eyes, the breadth of their shoulders, the arrogant tilt of their chins. As they approached the gate, she sighed. “What’s your name?”

His eyebrows flattened. “It’s on my card.”

“Which you know very well I haven’t looked at,” she said crossly. “Jos has you input into his security system as Minion 4.”

The man stared blankly at her for a moment, then threw back his head and roared with laughter, drawing bland stares from the surrounding crowd. When his amusement dimmed to a grin, he said, "Sorry. Inside joke. Call me Oron."

Tyelu glared at him, only mildly annoyed now. "What's the relationship?"

"Cousins. My father is the current High Commander of Q Command."

"You're one of Zhina's grandsons and you let her turn you into an errand boy?"

In a huff, Tyelu scanned her credentials and boarding pass, then slid beyond the automated gate into the docking tube.

Oron followed closely behind her. "Hardly an errand boy, Tyelu. Your security is of the utmost importance."

"I can handle myself." She paused long enough to rake a gaze over his slender frame. "Certainly better than a reed like you can."

"I've had the same training as Jos," he said, so mildly she did a double take and, yes, caught a glint of anger lighting his eyes. People pushed around them in the narrow docking tube, murmuring polite nothings. Oron lowered his voice and hissed, "The only reason I'm not out there fighting right now is because my body rejected the implants. No implant, no active duty. Now can we board, please, before my grandmother and father take it upon themselves to come down here and check on us?"

Tyelu huffed again and resumed her journey, her long strides eating up the carpeted runway.

Their flight passed remarkably smoothly. Oron had booked them in an elite suite

comprised of two small bedrooms joined by a tiny common area. The passenger ship was slower than the taq's courier, though not so slow as to annoy.

They arrived at the connecting port within a standard day, then switched to a mid-sized hauler, a mixed passenger-cargo ship headed straight for Abyw.

She and Oron passed the time chatting with the other passengers, remaining as anonymous as possible. On their initial leg, anonymity dissipated once the ship's cabin invited them to take the evening meal with him. But on the hauler, where every cabin came in one, efficient size and the passengers were a mixed lot, they were treated the same as everyone else.

Tyelu, for one, reveled in the distinction, secure enough in her own worth to become irritated by those fawning over her purely because of her tenuous connection to Q's taq. Oron seemed more sanguine even as he shared quietly amused glances with her. Perhaps he was simply used to the attention, Tyelu mused, or perhaps he found humor in her reactions.

Still, she was happy when the ship docked at Abyw's orbiting port and they boarded the shuttle home.

When Tyelu had originally booked her trip, she'd planned to spend one night with her family and select appropriate clothing for the Council of Kafhs from her home wardrobe. Oron, however, had shifted the arrangements slightly when he'd upgraded her ticket, having them land directly in Pr?thum, the Pruxn? capital. Convenient for Oron. Not so much for Tyelu, who had not brought appropriate clothing with her.

When she said as much, Oron replied, "I'm also here as a diplomat. I've been tasked with pleading funds from Sigun to support our efforts against the Sweepers."

"He'll likely concede on some level." She narrowed her eyes at Oron. "That doesn't

excuse altering my itinerary.”

“You’re expected to liaise as well,” he countered smoothly, “and you should take advantage. While she was here, Zhina purchased a suite near Capital Hall for diplomats and high-level visitors. We’ll stay there. I’ve got credit chits for food, clothing, and essentials.”

“You could’ve told me this beforehand.”

Oron laughed. “And spoil my fun?”

She nearly stamped her foot at him in childish temper and made do instead with a mini shopping spree, happily ordering appropriate clothing for them both, much to Oron’s bemusement.

Her parents met them at a local restaurant the next morning for a hearty breakfast. Kodh, unfortunately, joined them, glowering down at both Tyelu and Oron, who was roughly Jos’s height. Tyelu smirked at her cousin, remembering the way Jos had taken him down. Kodh sneered back, and poor Oron cast a bewildered glance between the two of them.

“Children,” Alna said, mildly reprimanding them all. “You’ll be on our best behavior today as representatives of Myunad Province. And you two,” she added, spearing Tyelu and Oron with a pointed gaze, “will remember that you’re also representing Taq Zhina and Q today. We’ll have no quarrels between us. Now Oron, try these sausages. You’re naught more than a reed, child. We’ll need to put some meat on those bones before we can find you a proper wife.”

Oron couldn’t quite mask his alarm. He turned a pleading look on Tyelu, who grinned and, relenting, whispered, “She said nearly the same thing to Jos. You Q are a lean bunch.”

“We have to fit into armor,” he muttered. “They only make it so big, you know.”

Gared came to his rescue, launching into a brief history of Pruxn? culture as background for Oron, in preparation for the council meeting. Tyelu listened with only half her attention, being well-versed in it, as all good Pruxn? were.

After humans fled Origin Space, during the Great Migration, a small band of Ancients sought a new home. They came upon the Fluma system, rich in planetary bodies, and discovered two planets within the central star’s habitable zone: lush Narus, in the zone’s inner orbit, and icy Abyw occupying the zone’s outer edges. Naturally, the Ancients settled on Narus, thinking it would be the easier biosphere to adapt.

Soon, however, the Ancients fell ill, victims of a previously undetected pathogen that altered certain segments of their DNA, rendering a small number of their population sterile. In fear, they retreated from Narus to Abyw, hoping to quell the sickness in the frozen climes of Fluma’s fourth planet. The alterations to their genetic code remained. As fewer and fewer daughters were born among them, their scientists worked feverishly to correct the flaw.

Over time, their population decreased to the point that it neared collapse, causing unrest and instability. Desperate, the Ancients sent their strongest sons to nearby systems to procure suitable wives from among their closest neighbors, by any means possible. Their motto became keep what you can hold , and hold they did, for no other culture dared raid the Abywians in return. Eventually, such habits became a necessary tradition, settled into law, and their neighbors learned to defend against habitual raids. The Pruxn? had never stopped trying to fix the genetic flaw, but had had little success even with help from alien scientists.

Oron seemed fascinated by the brief history lesson, his breakfast forgotten until Alna herself shoveled more food onto his plate. He studied her now, his sharp gaze astute.

“You’re a stolen bride?”

Alna’s mouth twitched into a half smile. “Indeed. Gared claimed me on the eve of my induction into the Queen’s Guard.”

“And Tyelu served as your replacement.”

Tyelu shrugged. “The duty suited me well.”

“It did,” her father agreed, gazing fondly at her. “She became a fine warrior. Only a warrior of equal skill could’ve claimed her, eh, daughter?”

Oron talked right over her amused snort. “And you, Kodh. What of your own raids? Have you stolen a wife from some unsuspecting planet?”

Kodh froze, his expression stony. He stared at Jos’s cousin so long, Oron’s own expression hardened, startling Tyelu. She’d allowed her opinions of him to be colored by Jos’s nickname and his relative youth, though he couldn’t be more than two or three Standard years Jos’s junior. Here, though, was the warrior Oron had claimed to be, the battle-worn Q-merc whose own body had betrayed him.

An idle thought pricked her mind: so it was true, then, that all Q studied the warrior arts, as all Pruxn? learned to raid and protect their own.

She shook the thought away as Kodh rose and leveled a glare on her.

“Trust you to spread malicious gossip,” he growled.

She popped out of her seat, her temper twisting into hot flame. “Me? I said nothing! Why would I?”

“For your own juvenile pleasure,” he popped back. “’Twas no one else’s business, cousin. I’ve a mind to challenge you for repeating old history as gossip.”

Oron shoved back from the table, his gaze livid. “She said nothing to me, Kodh. It was an innocent inquiry, nothing more, but if you challenge her, know that you challenge me as well.”

Alna slapped one hand against the table, her tone sharp as the restaurant’s other patrons scooted casually away. “Children, must I remind you of your positions so soon? Can we not have one meal in peace, free of this bickering nonsense?”

Kodh sketched a bow toward her. “As you say, Aunt.”

He stalked away as Tyelu sat and tugged Oron down into his own chair. Gared blithely turned the conversation to the day’s business, and the meal was finished in the peace Alna had demanded of them.

Later, Oron pulled Tyelu aside and asked what he’d done wrong.

“Nothing,” Tyelu murmured. “Kodh went out on the raids during his twenty-second year, not long after becoming eligible. The candidate he brought back for the Choosing found favor with another.”

Oron winced. “No wonder he’s so bitter.”

“Aye,” Tyelu said, and for the first time found sympathy for her blustery cousin. What would she have done if Jos had claimed another woman on the Choosing fields? Would she be any less embittered than Kodh? Would she have found a purpose outside of helpmeet and children, as he had?

Yet he hadn’t tried again to find a bride. Had his pride been so wounded by that early

rejection that he couldn't risk another blow?

She frowned as they made their way to Capital Hall. Had she not despaired, in her own way, of finding a suitable mate?

The question made her squirm, for she'd descended into pride too often in her search for a good husband. She sank into reflection as Sigun called order among those attending the Council of Kafhs and the meeting began.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

As time wore on and the hunt for the core Sweeper base continued, Jos lost track of the number of battles his dal ground through, the number of meals and rest periods, few and far between, and the scars they accumulated along the way. The bonds connecting him to Tyelu became, like his implant, an inseparable component of his being, an unseen limb as necessary to his existence as breathing.

During encounters with the Sweepers, those bonds were suppressed by battle meds, though never to the point of disappearing. When the meds faded and he had a spare moment for a meal or sleep, he came to rely on his connection with her to reassure him of her wellbeing.

He'd tried a dozen times to compose a message to her, something more than "I'm fine" so she'd know his heart, and could never find the words beyond a simple reassurance. So, in those rare moments when his attention fell free from attack and counterattack, he allowed the thin, steady stream of her emotions to soothe him. They, as much as anything, succored him during the never-ending stream of battles thrown at his dal.

They had, by now, chased the Sweepers across the sector to the edges of a largely unpopulated nebula. The region was too unstable for settlement and had been eschewed by humans and their alien allies alike. Intel from Q Command, gathered by scout ships and elsewhere, suggested that the Sweepers had a possible regrouping point somewhere inside the nebula, where they fled jump by jump from the accumulated might of Q forces.

As they approached the nebula, Emler, his chest plate and repair kit in hand, sat down on a bench near where Jos was cleaning his armor's seals, in the room devoted to

their armor. Jos greeted him with a nod, then turned back to his own repairs. He hadn't had a chance yet to approach Emler about anything other than work since claiming Tyelu and didn't know what to say now. Emler's loss had hit them all hard. They'd watched him implode when his mate died, crumpling into himself from a pain so deep, none of them could fathom it.

Jos was beginning to understand now. And still, he couldn't find a good starting point to talk about his mating with Tyelu or Emler's loss.

Emler muttered a foul curse. "Harak borrowed my hand laser again."

"Borrowed or stole?" Jos said as he retrieved his repair kit and passed it over to Emler.

The d'ga snarled, making Jos laugh.

They worked in silence, each absorbed in the task before them. Emler repaired the faulty circuitry that had glitched in their last encounter, itself a replacement for a comms relay that had been crushed when a Sweeper threw Emler into a wall. The armor was tough, the dented chest plate easy to reform in the melder, though nowhere near as strong as when it was first crafted. Emler's bruised sternum was healing under the steady attention of Medical and nanos.

That circuitry kept glitching.

Jos frowned as he finished working over the seals around his helmet. They'd lost a supply ship early on, to a child ship that had misjumped away from the battlefield. Q Command had adjusted, but as the conflict ranged farther and farther from Q, supply lines stretched to the breaking point. Emler needed new armor. They all did. But there was no time for a refit, no time for the armorers to assemble and custom-fit pre-forged armor.

Disgusted and more than a little tired, Jos switched out the pieces of his own armor and began a careful inspection of the seals.

“How’s Tyelu?” Emler asked.

Jos glanced up and found his dal mate staring impassively at him. “Fine. She went back to Abyw for a meeting.” Her message had caught up with Apedemak only that day. And again, a substantive reply eluded him.

“The bond?”

“Holding steady.” Jos slid a finger over the next seal, found a burr, and pulled his repair kit back across the bench. “Oddest thing when the meds kicked in that first time.”

“Disconcerting,” Emler agreed. The hard lines of his mouth flickered into a faint smile. “Sarai panicked that first time. I got half a dozen messages from her when we uplinked again.”

“Civilians.”

Emler huffed out a laugh, his focus on the chest plate. “She was the best of me.”

Jos said nothing, could find nothing to say that would ease his friend’s pain.

“Tyelu,” Emler continued. “She’ll not panic. You’ll see.”

He returned the hand laser, took the chest plate and refitted it into his armor, his back to Jos.

“Sarai was a good woman,” Jos said.

Emler's hands paused and his back stiffened. "The best."

"I'm sorry—"

"Leave it." Emler's hands fell from his armor and he half-turned toward Jos, his expression shadowed in the half-power lighting. "She's gone now, Jos, and I have to live with that. Every day, I have to live with this hole in my heart, where she used to live. Every day, I wake up wondering where she is, but you know what? I'd do it again in a heartbeat." He ran a hand down his throat over the mating tattoos inked into his skin. "No regrets there, but hear me when I say that we're bringing you back to Tyelu in one piece, even if I have to drag you out of hell to do it. She won't have to feel you die the way—" He shuddered, his hands hard fists at his side. "Don't walk into the next battle without telling her how much she means to you. You won't want to live with yourself if you do."

A warning siren sounded, then a ship-wide alert went out. "Battle stations. Sweepers detected. Contact imminent."

Jos stowed his repair kit and briskly donned his armor as the rest of the dal filed in and slipped into theirs. Then they were assigned orders and he had no more time to dwell on Emler and regrets and words left unspoken.

They filed into the transport deck one by one and stood on the pad awaiting orders and the quickly approaching battle. Jos received a steady stream of intel through his implant. The size of the nest, the estimated number of enemy combatants, distance to the target, his dal's role in the coming fight.

His gaze settled on his dal mates, studying each one in turn: bright haired Magda, his right hand and oldest friend; Emler, who'd nearly died when Sarai had been taken from him; burly Harak, their demolitions expert; graceful, savage Seni, whose medical expertise had saved more than one of them; flirtatious Gav, a genius comms

man; and quiet Zhu, the dal's best marksman. Jos noted the dinged armor, the scars worn openly without complaint or comment, the resolve shining brightly in each d'ga's eyes, undimmed by the fatigue plaguing them through weeks of continual combat.

And he wondered, as he always did, if this would be the day...

He shunted that thought aside as viciously as he would a Sweeper's tentacle and hardened his own expression.

"Listen up," he said. "We're pairing up dal by dal and 'porting into a child ship. Once cleared, we'll 'port to the mother ship and mop up. Any questions?"

Gav jiggled his blaster. "Got me a giant frekking mop right here, Q'Mhel."

Harak groaned. "Frekking smartass."

"That's Handsome Mr. Smartass to you," Gav said, winking.

"All right, kiddos, that's enough," Magda barked. "Helmets up. Time for our daily ration of pew pew."

"Eyes up, guns out," Jos added. "We go in as one, we come back as one."

His helmet expanded over his head as his d'gas uttered resounding battle cries. Needles pierced his skin, administering battle meds, and his focus sharpened. A countdown outlined in red popped up in his helmet display, in a lower corner where a steady stream of data flowed.

Three. Two. One.

The world around him dimmed in a dizzying rush and popped back into focus as he materialized into chaos. Sweepers screamed around him, already enraged, their metal-tipped tentacles flaying each other and the Q-mercs indiscriminately. One slapped into Emler's chest, flipping him into Seni. They both went down in a tumble of limbs as their health and armor stats flashed urgently across Jos's display, fed through their implants and armor inputs.

Jos was already firing, steadily maneuvering through the tight press of bodies to take up a defensive position over the downed d'gas. Idly, he noted that the number of enemy combatants had been grossly underestimated. The thought slid by, joining a hundred other assessments in a quiet corner of his mind.

These Sweepers were ill-equipped to defend themselves. Few wore the metal-spiked leather jackets that seemed to absorb blaster fire. Many were young and undersized, their delicate tentacles unprotected by armor of any kind. His dal automatically targeted the tougher Sweepers first. Emler and Seni rejoined the battle almost as quickly as they'd been downed, and together, the d'gas made quick, efficient work of the Sweepers without any major damage beyond Emler's glitching comms and another dent in his chest plate.

The moment the last Sweeper fell, Jos initiated a check-in. One by one, his d'gas gave him the a-ok. They swept through the ship, clearing it of any strays, making sure downed Sweepers stayed down. Then they gathered in a clear space and Jos requested a group transport via Apedemak into the mother ship.

The 'port seemed to take longer this time. They materialized inside an empty room. Bare metal, roughly square, and ominously quiet. Unease twisted through Jos's guts, despite the emotion suppressants coursing through his blood.

"Normal gravity. No fluctuations," Seni said. "Atmosphere's intact and ok for humans."

“Magda,” Jos subvocalized.

She slung her blaster over one shoulder, dug out a handful of thumbnail-sized mapping drones, and flipped them into the air. Two slid into a vent. The others hovered above Magda, awaiting directions.

Harak checked the room’s sole hatch and found it sealed shut.

“Do it,” Jos said.

The demolitions expert knelt in front of the hatch and applied a thin line of liquid explosives. He stepped back, signaled everyone to move out of the way, and ignited the fuse. Sparks rolled in a wave around the hatch’s seam, the hatch groaned and popped. Harak shoved at it, and it slipped out of its frame and crashed to the floor on the other side.

Using hand signals, Jos directed them out one by one, Magda first with her complement of drones, then the others. He took the rear and stepped into a corridor as his d’gas fanned out to either side.

Magda checked the map unfolding on her arm screen. “We’re three levels below the bridge,” she murmured. “Looks like a new class. No Sweepers so far. No life signs period.”

“Frek,” Gav muttered. “Where is everybody?”

Jos shook his head, sent a query to Battle Command. A terse reply came back almost immediately. “On the mother ship. This is another child ship.” And no one had told him about the change, a serious breach of protocol.

Another message came in on the heels of the first, outlining the change of orders. Jos

noted the timestamp. It should've reached him before they transported out of the first child ship. The frek?

“Change of plans,” he said. “We’re going to scout this ship. Command noticed some anomalies here and wants answers.”

“Roger,” Magda affirmed. She waved her hand in a go signal, and they spread out, following the map as it unfolded on her arm screen.

The map populated through their implants, all except Emler, whose suit comms were still glitching. Jos relegated his copy of the map to one corner of his helmet display as they carefully explored the ship. They found an access point for the upper decks, ascending as stealthily as their armor allowed. The next deck above them had a smoother look. Again, they fanned out and found nothing. No people, no Sweepers, no equipment, just empty rooms.

Magda whistled low. “Never seen a Sweeper ship like this.”

Jos glanced around. His First was toggling back and forth between her arm screen and her helmet, fiddling with the map until it made sense.

He caught her eye. “Like what?”

“Engines,” she said. “State of the art, if I’m reading this right. No leaky tech here. Correction. Beyond state of the art.”

Gav paused with his back against a bare metal wall. “She’s right. Never seen that configuration before. Let me send this back to...frek. Comm’s down. Command’s not responding.”

The unease in Jos’s gut tightened. “Let’s find the bridge.”

“Up and away,” Magda said, then retrieved her blaster and led the way.

The route appeared on the map growing in the corner of his helmet display via their internal comms. He covered their six as they passed a hollow elevator tube and located an easier access point, continuing upward until they hit the right level. A few moments later, they fanned out again on the uppermost deck, walking through gleaming corridors along slightly bouncy flooring. Here, the doors were graceful curves along the soft white walls marred by blaster residue and occasional but unmistakable flecks of blood. Jos placed his hand against a wall and found a similar material to whatever covered the floor.

A hatch slid back as Magda walked past one room. Harak glanced into it and whistled.

“Looks like a lab,” he said. “Or what’s left of one.”

Jos peeked in as he walked past, his lips thinning into a grim frown. The room was a jumbled mess of broken glass and equipment. A quiet suspicion began to form in Jos’s mind. Whatever had happened here, it happened fast. Ten to one it involved Sweepers.

Clearly, this ship had not been built by Sweepers. Why, then, was it part of their nest?

“This does not feel right,” Gav breathed.

Zhu grunted, the first sound he’d made since the battle started.

Magda stopped at a closed hatch and pressed her fist into what appeared to be a controller. Nothing happened.

“Gav,” Jos said.

The d'ga stepped forward and examined the controller, then snapped the butt end of his blaster into it. The door rolled into the wall, revealing a spacious bridge. As his dal cleared the room, Jos took in the bloodstains on the floor, the overturned terminal, the curved viewscreen displaying the surrounding nebula and the battle slowly raging around them.

A woman was propped up in the captain's chair, dried blood flaking away from her forehead. She wore a stark white, skintight jumpsuit and her eyes were closed. Her delicate features lent an ethereal look to her. When Jos neared, he noticed thin wrinkles radiating from the corners of her eyes and around her mouth, and revised his estimate of her age upwards.

Seni checked the woman's pulse and ran a scanner over her. "She's alive, barely. Wound on her head looks serious. There's some bruising, too. Nothing's broken."

"Do what you can," Jos said.

Harak was kneeling next to a center column topped by a clear, rounded dome.

Jos fell in beside him. "What's this?"

"Dunno," Harak said. "Looks kinda like a net node, the kind installed on a planet."

"What's it doing here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Gonna just..." Harak popped off an access hatch, then scrambled back. "Get out, get out! It's rigged to—"

Sound and light ripped through the air and a giant hand picked Jos up and flung him against the wall as the world flashed white, then abruptly shuddered into darkness.

In the weeks after the Council of Kafhs, Tyelu buried herself in the demands placed on her time by her father and Taq Zhina. She and Oron were often sent to negotiate support for the forces fighting the Sweepers. Their message was simple: the Q would fight the war so long as the rest of the sector helped finance it.

No one had expected it to last so long, and everyone seemed shocked by the nearly daily reports of Sweepers nests being found and cleared. When would it end? The question was asked of her so often, it began to wear into her, like a parasite wiggling deeper beneath protective flesh. By the end of her and Oron's first week soliciting help, the question had become, at least in her mind, not when would it end, but when would Jos come home. She had no answers, only a shaky hope as the days marched unceasingly on.

Tyelu felt no guilt whatsoever about subtly blackmailing other planetary governments to chip in. She had only to point to the ravaged cities and outposts left in the Sweepers' wake. Oron's efforts were more subtle, though no less effective. Quashing the Sweeper threat once and for all would take the combined support of the entire sector. Given that Q had the largest standing military force, it only made sense that their soldiers were at the forefront, but everyone else must help.

Some planets banded together temporarily and mustered regular patrols to supplement the Q-mercs. Others, like Tersi, which had no space force at all, pledged whatever help they could spare. The Pruxn? were among the former, coordinating with nearby systems to guard cargo routes, though the bulk of the ships they used were like Ryn and Ziri's ship: poorly armed and ill-suited for anything other than hauling cargo or passengers.

Tyelu saw to upgrading Yarinska's arms herself, staunching Ziri's protests with a firm, "I will not put my family at risk when I have the means to protect them."

Ziri thanked her quietly, then she and Ryn were off again, the Yarinska pulling

double duty as both salvager and sentinel.

During that time, Tyelu regretted not having a ship at her disposal, one she could direct at will. She and Oron traveled so frequently, a dedicated ship would've been much more convenient than the never-ending chore of managing passage and accommodations. Fortunately, Oron handled that end of things, but still. Tyelu was aware of the lack.

From Jos, she heard little, though after a while what little she did hear became more substantive. Everything's fine became I'm sorry I had to leave when I did.

Do whatever you want with the apartment. I trust you.

Stars, I miss your temper.

That one made her laugh. The man must be gone for her if he missed her querulousness.

She kept her missives as unemotional as possible, refusing to mention her worry for him. Instead, she filled each one with news of her family and his, of the friends she'd made on Q—Inisru and Ezo were regular companions—and of the daily household management. Investments, divestments, opportunities. Whatever ephemera seemed interesting, she included in her messages.

She rearranged his apartment and set up a small loom in front of his wall-mounted viewer, for use on the rare occasions when she was there. More often, she picked up her knitting while watching the carefully edited livecasts only available on Q. In the time since Jos left, she knitted him three sweaters, herself one, and cast on a thin summer weight sweater for Oron.

Her knitting, she took everywhere.

Despite the hectic schedule she'd thrown herself headlong into, she often thought of what the future might look like; and during those long, maddening nights when she ached for Jos, she wondered if he wanted the same things she did. They'd had so little time together, so few thoughts of anything beyond their chance encounters. A hundred times, she wished she'd asked him what kind of life he wanted with her, before she'd precipitously dragged him away from the life he'd already made for himself.

Foolish, headstrong girl. Yet he'd proved himself so quickly to be the man she'd always wanted. How could she not have done exactly as she had?

A few months in, as the conflict dragged on and the Sweepers were inexorably pushed away from the more heavily settled parts of the sector, Tyelu was called once again to Abyw for another important meeting among the kafhs. She and Oron arrived the night before and settled into the suite they so frequently used. Her parents and Koth the Odious had already arrived in rooms they'd booked at an adjacent hotel.

As Oron secured the suite's outer door for the night, he said, "Do you want to let your parents know we've arrived?"

Tyelu checked the time and winced. "They're probably already asleep. I'll contact them in the morning."

Unease tugged at her, though she couldn't understand why or where it came from. Oron said goodnight, then drifted into his room, and Tyelu closed herself in hers and slipped quickly into sleep despite the oddness of that unease.

She woke screaming, one hand clutching her face, the other her chest.

Oron burst into the room a moment later and cut the light on. "Tyelu! What's wrong?"

“Jos,” she sobbed quietly, an echo of his pain throbbing through her. “It’s Jos. He’s been hurt!”

“Frek,” he muttered. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

She barely heard him over the roar in her ears. Pain washed over her again, stronger now, and she gritted her teeth against it, even as she trembled and broke out in a cold sweat. Whatever she felt must be a shadow of Jos’s agony. But the pain was good. Where there was pain, there was life. So long as she could feel his pain, she knew he was alive.

Oron rushed back into her room carrying his tablet and dropped down on the edge of the mattress beside her, dressed only in mid-thigh length briefs. “There’s been an explosion. Jos’s dal hasn’t been located yet.”

“They’re in a black space. Enclosed.”

Oron’s head shot up, his eyes narrowed. “You can see it?”

She clutched her chest, hunching into the fist pressed against her heart. “Feel it. Claustrophobic.”

His finger skimmed over the tablet. “I relayed that through the proper channels.”

“Your father?”

“Naturally. Can I get you anything?”

“A ship,” she whispered. “Have to go.”

“Tyelu,” Oron said gently. “We can’t dive into battle. We don’t even know where

they are.”

“You can find out where they were supposed to be.”

“And then what? We rush headlong into trouble?”

She shook her head, unable to explain the feelings pressing into her, the urgency and dread, the need to do something, anything, to ease Jos’s pain. Thick tears slid down her cheeks, and she let them fall.

“Supplies,” she said at last. “They’ll need bandages and plasma. Needles. Burn ointment. We have to go. Can’t you see? We have to try.”

Oron drew her into a hug, rocking her gently. “Ok, cousin. Be easy. I’ll book us on a flight back to Q.”

She shook her head against his shoulder. “No, now. We have to leave within the hour, if we can. Two at most. Someone has to have a ship we can use.”

She stilled against him and slowly pushed him away, her eyes wide, the echo of Jos’s pain still ricocheting through her nerves, burning them raw. “Kodh.”

Oron skimmed a hand down his face, cutting off a low string of curses. “He’s as likely to shoot us as help.”

“He’s the only...we could ask Sigun, but no. Kodh is the easiest.”

“Kodh hasn’t been easy a day in his life.” Oron rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes, then dropped them on a heaving sigh. “Alright. Let’s get dressed and see if we can bargain with the devil.”

He made to rise, and Tyelu dropped a hand over his, holding him in place.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t thank me yet, cousin. He may toss me out a window or something.”

“I’ll toss him out behind you.”

Oron rolled his eyes starward. “My hero. Get dressed. It might be better if we present a united front.”

A polite knock at the entrance drew him away.

Tyelu slid out of bed on wobbly legs and forced her limbs to steady. Jos needed her. She just knew it.

The knock came from management. Someone had heard her scream and lodged a complaint. Oron firmly sent them on their way. Tyelu contacted her parents, waking them, and while every moment seemed to last a thousand years, in reality, they were packed and out the door within a few minutes of deciding to go.

Kodh was waiting for them by the time they arrived flushed and out of breath. The shuttle services had shut down for the night and they’d had to walk.

He met them at the door of his hotel room, scowling, his wide shoulders nearly filling the doorway. “Alna said you wanted to talk.”

“It’s Jos.” When he refused to move, Tyelu snapped, “By Tyornin and Tyel, can we go inside so everyone doesn’t hear our business?”

Kodh’s scowl deepened, but he moved aside and let them in. Alna and Gared were

waiting in the miniscule sitting area, both fully clothed and alert, though Gared hid a half-yawn behind a massive fist.

Tyelu nodded to her parents, then rounded on Kodh. “Jos has been hurt. We need to return to Q immediately. I know your ship’s still in orbit.”

“So?”

“So! Let us use it.”

Kodh huffed out a fierce bah . “Same old, spoiled little girl. I’m not jumping every time you snap your fingers the way everyone else does.”

“Kodh,” Gared said, his tone remarkably mild. “Have some care how you speak to your cousin.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Kodh spat out sourly. “Everyone protects her, coddles her, let’s her temper run free solely because she’s a beloved daughter. It’s past time someone put her in her place.”

Oron stepped forward, heat blazing from his eyes. “That’s enough. Whatever you may think of Tyelu, she’s earned her place among you. Earned her place among the Q.”

Tyelu put her hand on his arm, gentling him. “No, Oron. Kodh’s right. For too long, I was an angry, spoiled little girl, especially after leaving the Queen’s Guard. My life held little purpose then and no real direction. I’m afraid I took it out on my family and friends. For that, I deserve censure.”

“But Kodh.” Here she turned to her cousin, seeing in him the bitterness to which she could’ve descended if not for Jos. “I’m sorry for being a brat to you. Truly, I am.

Especially in the past few years. Sometimes, cousin, you rub me the wrong way.”

He glowered at her. “You can’t talk your way around this.”

“Maybe not, maybe so.” She inhaled a steady breath and placed a hand over her heart, where Jos tugged at her. Jos’s love, his pain. He was slipping away from her, and she had to find him, had to do something. “Please, Kodh. Set that aside for now. All I’m asking is for you to lend us your spaceship so I can find my husband. That’s no less than what you would do if our situations were reversed.”

His skin paled, and sorrow sank into his eyes, hollowing them. “It’s not right for you to bring that up again. Old history.”

“I know,” she replied softly. “But what would you have me do? She walked away, it’s true. But if she hadn’t, if she’d stayed, wouldn’t you have done anything for her? Would you have stood by while something threatened to steal her from you?”

“Something did steal her from me, and I’ll never forgive you for reminding me.” He heaved out a great sigh and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Someone has to stay here and attend the council meeting. Tyrl Sigun won’t be happy if we miss it entirely.”

“That’s for me to take care of,” Gared rumbled.

Alna touched her husband’s hand. “I’ll go with Tyelu. I’ve a fair hand with a blaster and I’m not too shabby with tending wounds, though I doubt it will come to that.”

“I’ll pilot,” Kodh said, and rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this foolishness. The man’s got the best military in the sector behind him.”

“They don’t know where he is,” Tyelu said softly.

“And you expect to find him?”

“No. But I want to be there when they do.”

They were underway within the hour, lifting off with special permission from Pr?thum’s spaceport.

If Tyelu thought persuading Kodh to help her was difficult, it was nothing compared to Zhina. Jos’s grandmother stared down her nose at Tyelu through the video message she’d sent in response to Tyelu’s request to travel to the last known location for Jos’s dal. Her reply was short and firm, completely encapsulated in one word: “No.”

The message ended there.

Frustrated, Tyelu appealed to Oron, and Oron spent the rest of the journey to Q trying to persuade his grandmother and father to please, for the love of the stars and heavens, allow them to go after Jos.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

A rocking motion woke Jos to a bright, blinding pain. Voices surrounded him, muffled by a ringing in his ears. Unaccountably, the image of a woman pressed against his mind, a woman familiar to him whose identity remained elusively beyond his recall. Her lips moved first, then her words pierced his mind accompanied by an agony so fierce, blackness threatened to drag him under.

Thank you .

The image disappeared under a fresh wave of pain, and he sank again into a blissfully painless void.

Awareness flickered in and out, imparting blurry, dreamlike snippets. The ravaged interior of a spaceship. Helmeted medics rushing him through piercingly white corridors. The steady, ominous beep of machinery. A familiar hand holding his.

The latter roused him. “Tyelu,” he murmured.

“I’m here,” she whispered. “Sleep.”

Comforted beyond belief, he did as she asked.

When he came to again, an odd pressure had wrapped itself around his head. He tried opening his eyes and grunted when they remained shut, then panicked when he found his hands restrained. Had he been captured? Where was his dal? He could’ve sworn he’d heard Tyelu—

“Stop moving,” his grandmother barked. “Or I’ll have the nurse administer another

sedative.”

He stilled immediately and turned his head toward her voice. “Happened?” His voice came out as a whispered croak, shocking him. Exactly how badly had that last mission gone?

“An explosion,” she replied. “Your dal was sent to investigate what we thought was a newly built child ship. It turned out to be a captured NetPath mobile research lab.”

The woman in his head. “She...there?”

“The telepath? Yes. She managed to blunt the explosion. Otherwise, you and your d’gas would be dead now. The Sweepers have found an ingenious spot in their animalistic brains. They rigged the net node to explode, possibly deliberately. You seem to have walked into a trap.”

“How?”

He couldn’t get the rest of his question out. She seemed to understand what he was asking anyway.

“We’ve got our brightest minds working toward an answer. Never fear. We’ll figure out how the Sweepers got their hands on that technology and who showed them how to use it.”

What if the Sweepers had discovered that on their own? The thought shot raw horror through him. The only thing preventing the Sweepers from overrunning the galaxy was their own stupidity. Bad enough that they bred so quickly. That could be kept in check, or so Jos had thought just a few months ago. So everyone had thought. Obviously, Sweepers had found a way to hide a population explosion from the rest of the sector; and somehow, they’d managed to get their hands on the tech needed to

mount an effective assault, to defend themselves against the might of Q's highly trained mercenary-soldiers.

Their leather coats flashed through his mind on a fresh wave of pain, and he let go of deeper thought, drifting away from himself and further explanations.

When he woke again, a soothing hand caressed his jaw.

"Tyelu?" he murmured.

"I'm here," she said. "Water?"

He gargled out an incomprehensible plea.

She lifted his head and pressed something to his lips. "Small sips."

He drank gratefully, aware of the raw ache in his throat, of the bandages covering his eyes, of barely muted pain in his torso and legs. When he'd had his fill, she lowered him gently and held one of his hands between hers.

"Happened?" he said.

In the pause that followed, he became aware of the hum of an engine thrumming in his bones, the sharp scent of disinfectant, and that persistent mechanical beep.

"Do you remember Zhina coming by?" Tyelu said.

He searched his memory, landed on his grandmother's recent presence. "An explosion."

"And?"

“Net ‘path.” He swallowed and wished desperately for more water to soothe the grit coating his mouth and throat. “Dal’s ok?”

“Everyone made it out alive.”

“Good. Eyes?”

Another hesitation. “You’re healing. That’s the important thing, my love. Rest now.”

“Talk to—”

“Hush. You’re wearing yourself out.”

She said it so firmly, he grinned. Tried to, anyway. Even smiling hurt.

Frek it. Tyelu was here. He needed to feel her. “Kiss.”

Her lips brushed softly across his. “Rest now.”

“Love you,” he gritted out.

“I know. Don’t worry, my love. You’ll be back in the thick of things again before you—”

He faded out, content to have her nearby.

“Jos?”

The question woke him. A vague memory of Tyelu’s visit drifted to him, and he wondered irritably exactly how many more times he was going to lapse into unconsciousness in the middle of a conversation before he fully healed.

“Ah, good,” a hearty male voice said. “You’re awake. Try to open your eyes. Gently now.”

The pressure around his head was gone. He tried to blink his eyes open. His eyelids felt unbearably heavy. Somehow, he managed to open them a bare slit. Shadowed light stabbed through his eyes directly into his brain, and he winced.

“That’s to be expected. Don’t fight the pain.” The voice drifted slightly away. “The bruising’s a little worse than we thought, but still within acceptable parameters.”

“Acceptable parameters?” Tyelu said, her voice ice over steel.

“Ah, now,” the man said, a thread of humor in his own voice. “I’ve dealt with too many of you soldier types to be intimidated by a glare and a threatening tone.”

“Tyelu, leave the man be,” Jos murmured, his words slow and slurred from the drugs they’d given him.

She huffed out an exasperated grunt. “How do your eyes feel?”

“Like you skewered them with your sword. Miss me?”

The man coughed delicately. “Eyes open, Q’Mhel. Let’s see where you are on the road to recovery.”

Jos obediently opened his eyes again, this time wide enough to take in his shadowy surroundings. They were in a windowless room, him on a hospital bed dressed in a patient gown. Tyelu stood beside his bed, her hands clasped behind her back, staring down at him dispassionately. A brave face. He could feel the thin tug of her worry pressing against him amid the love.

He twitched his hand toward her, shocked by how much effort it took to move.
“There you are.”

Her expression cracked once and hardened, and she arched an eyebrow at him.
“Where else would I be?”

“Oh, to be young again,” the man said. “The explosion did quite a number on your implant as well. It had to be removed. No worries, Q’Mhel. We replaced it with the latest version. You’ll need to have it properly calibrated before achieving full functionality, but I think you’ll be pleased with the upgrade.”

Jos focused on the man long enough to discern the medical tabs on his uniform, then closed his eyes again. “Do I still have my own eyes?”

“Indeed you do, Q’Mhel. It was a close thing, though. The bots are still in there mucking about. Best to rest while they’re healing you.”

“My hand?”

“Just a little muscle relaxant,” the doctor said. “You took some serious damage to your torso and thighs. It’ll heal, with time. You’ll need physical therapy.”

“Great,” Jos growled.

“He’ll do it without complaint,” Tyelu said firmly.

Jos managed a half grin and turned his face toward her voice. “Stars. Love you. Give me a kiss.”

She scoffed, but pressed a gentle kiss to his mouth. After, she whispered against his ear, “One more day and you can come home.”

“Promise?”

“Yes,” the doctor said firmly. “Now rest. Plenty enough time tomorrow for romance.”

The next day, Tyelu guided a protesting Jos out of the hospital in a motorized chair. His skin seemed too pale around the bruises mottling his face, and he tired more easily than he liked. To save him the embarrassment of being out in public while he was still healing, she hired a private car and driver to ferry them back to his apartment.

Their apartment, she amended quietly. She’d made it hers as much as his while he was away.

As soon as they were inside, he pushed himself out of it and stood shakily, braced against the entry wall, his face haggard and pale. “Get rid of that thing.”

“I’ll have someone pick it up tomorrow.”

He shot her a disgruntled frown. “I don’t need it.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and matched him frown for frown. “Prove it.”

“Fine. I will.”

He lifted one foot, inched it forward, shifted his weight onto it. Sweat beaded his forehead, and his hand trembled against the wall.

She pressed her lips together and stayed right where she was, knowing he needed to try, feeling that need deep within her. She’d been injured before and understood all too well the drive pushing him. Jos wasn’t built to convalesce quietly any more than she was.

He reached the end of the entryway and stared bleakly at the space remaining between him and the living area. “Frek, that’s a long way.”

She hardened herself against her own need to care for him. Coddling would do him no good, even if he’d accept it from her. She could spoil him in other ways, fully planned to. But later, when he’d healed a little more.

“Two more steps,” she coaxed.

His eyebrows shot up and he turned a speculative look on her. “Do I hear a bribe in there?”

“Do you need one?” she countered coolly.

“Hard ass.”

“You like my ass.”

“Stars, yes. Best one ever. Can’t wait to see it again.” He gazed balefully at the sofa again. “Give me a distraction.”

“I’m not stripping down for you, Jos.”

“That’s a shame.”

He inched a shaky step forward, and she relented, if only to distract herself from an incessant urge to help him.

“I finished knitting your sweater,” she said, and corrected herself. “Three sweaters.”

“Three?” His knee buckled, and he muttered a curse as he steadied himself. “What do

I need with three sweaters, princess?”

“We’re headed back to Abyw soon.”

He did swear then, long and loud. “Has it stopped snowing yet?”

She grinned. “It’s always snowing somewhere on Abyw.”

“Figures.”

“But not at the equator, where we’ll be. My parents are meeting us there. Koth, too.”

He stopped midstride. “Koth?”

She rolled her shoulders under Jos’s sharp-eyed stare. “We were on Abyw when I felt—when you were injured. Koth agreed to transport us back here, then to the battle to retrieve you.”

“This sounds like a long story. Who’s we?”

“Me, Oron—”

“What the frek does Minion 4 have to do with anything?”

“Zhina paired him with me as security. He and I have been rallying support for the conflict from among other planetary governments.”

His eyes narrowed dangerously. “If that misbegotten cur laid a hand on you—”

“Jealous?”

“Yes,” he muttered as he forced himself onward. “He’s been making time with my woman.”

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “We’re friends. He calls me cousin .”

Jos uttered a sharp invective.

Tyelu stifled a grin. “Mama’s threatening to fatten him up and find him a wife.”

“I wish she would. Save me a lot of trouble.” He shook his head and tumbled onto the couch, panting. “Minion 4. Can’t believe Zhina sicced him on you.”

“Better him than an actual security detail. At least he has a sense of humor.”

“I have a sense of humor,” he said flatly. “Just not about you. Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

She leveled a cool stare at him. “Dear Jos, while you’re away ridding the sector of one of its deadliest threats, I’m spending most of my time sleeping one door away from your cousin, traveling on tiny ships with your cousin, eating every meal with—”

His mouth twitched into reluctant humor. “When you put it like that.”

“And you were jealous of Enel.”

“Not jealous exactly. Concerned.”

“After I went to all the trouble of stealing you?” Tyelu snorted. “Where did the nickname come from anyway? Minion 4. He wouldn’t say.”

“Did he tell you his nickname for me?”

She shook her head.

Jos grimaced. “Minion 3.”

The meaning clicked, and her eyes rounded. “He’s fourth in line for the taq?”

“Yeah. Our fathers are number one and two.”

“Your father.” She sighed and sat down next to him, careful not to bounce and cause him additional pain. “He and your mother have been recalled from their diplomatic posting. It’s going to take them some time to return to Q.”

He took her hand in his and smoothed his thumb over her skin. “Nervous?”

“About meeting them?” She turned away and shook her head. “No.”

“Liar. They’ll love you.” At her snort, he said, “What else has been going on? Any news on the net ‘path we found?’”

“That’s been classified, and I’m not in the loop. You really saw one? They’re so reclusive as to be myth. I’ve only ever seen their avatars.”

“We really saw one,” he confirmed. “She’s as human-looking as you and me.”

“She saved you.”

“Apparently. What’s going on with the Sweepers?”

“Lie down and I’ll turn on the livecast so you can see for yourself.”

He grumbled a bit even as he eased himself into a horizontal position. “Slave driver.”

“Be good and I’ll kiss you again when I change your bandages.”

His look held more than a little interest. “Where?”

She laughed softly and went to cut on the viewscreen.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Jos endured the next two days with gritted teeth. His muscles ached, trembling every time he moved. The net 'path might have contained enough of the explosion to keep any of them from dying, but the blast had still done a lot of damage. His thighs had been shredded, his gut bruised and bleeding. Surgery and nanos only went so far. His body needed time to heal.

Which was a frekking shame. After months away from Tyelu, all he wanted to do was bury himself in her for a couple of weeks, until they were both sated and too tired to think.

Naturally, she abided by his doctor's decrees to the letter. Sex was out of the question. Physical therapy was followed religiously. At night, she rested beside him, carefully separated from him by a pillow. During the day, she pushed him to just shy of the breaking point, only allowing him to rest when she was satisfied he'd done exactly what he needed to do to heal.

He knew she acted out of love. Even her icy resolve wasn't sturdy enough to hide her concern. If her eyes weren't underscored by deep shadows, he would've asked for a little slack. But those shadows were there, her hands trembled every time the news came on, and even her handicrafts weren't enough to distract her. She'd taken his injuries much harder than he had, so if she asked him to crawl across hot coals, he'd frekking well drag himself there barehanded if that's what it took to set her mind at ease.

His dal mates fared better, at least, except for Harak. He'd taken the brunt of the blast and was still hospital bound, but the rest recovered enough to go home and begin training again. Since all of them were unmated and had no one to push them the way

Tyelu pushed him, Jos threatened to sic her on them. Not that they needed it. Q-mercs were a disciplined bunch. But the threat of his princess overseeing their recovery lit a fire under them all. No one shirked. They were all eager to rejoin the conflict.

Of the net 'path they'd rescued, Jos heard nothing. The entire matter remained under an eyes-only investigation. Surprisingly, he'd been shut out of that loop, an oversight he vowed to remedy as soon as he returned to active duty. He also wanted to know exactly how the Sweepers had managed to capture a NetPath ship and a net node. The 'paths acted in such secrecy, their security was so intense, that the ship and node's capture had shocked everyone who knew about it.

Somehow, some way, he'd get to the bottom of that, but for the moment, he was content letting his mate coddle him in her own single-minded way.

A few days after Tyelu brought him home, they traveled to Abyw on a commercial liner. His new implant allowed him to hide his rank from the other passengers. For the duration of that trip, his implant broadcast his identity as Jos ab Kriya enig Tyelu. If any of their fellow travelers recognized him as anything other than a Pruxn?, they made no comment.

The anonymity was bliss. He and Tyelu hid in their quarters, quietly filling the time with some of the conversations other mated pairs handled during the courtship phase. Growing up, military training and service, family life. He told her about a few of his more difficult assignments. She shared her bemusement at earning the nickname the Right Hand of Death after one particularly brutal coup attempt. The back and forth, accompanied by the emotions echoing between them through the mating bond, deepened the intimacy of the trip, locking their love into place in such a way that Jos felt it became another limb.

They traveled straight to Hrelum and Tyelu's parents' home, giving them time with her family before their trip to Pr?thum. To Jos's surprise, Minion 4 was there, seated

in Alna's kitchen eating a bowl of stew. He exchanged handshakes with his cousin, then settled carefully on the bench beside him, with Tyelu on his other side.

Oron pointed his spoon at the bowl. "Have you tried Lady Alna's bovi stew?"

"Aye," Jos replied. "You look like you've gained some weight."

Tyelu snickered.

Alna, however, beamed. "We'll make a proper Pruxn? out of him yet."

"Only if I can marry you," Oron said.

Gared, seated across the table, shot a mock scowl at the younger man. "Boy, I'm not so old I can't take an undersized runt like you."

Jos laughed. Gared wasn't that much taller than him or Oron, but he packed a lot of muscle on his sturdy frame. He could probably take both of them on at the same time, one in each hand.

Tyelu leaned around Jos and eyed his cousin. "I thought you were on your way to Domor for another diplomatic conference."

"Layne Bilal took that one. She's tops in the diplomatic hierarchy, unlike lowly minion me." Oron dropped his spoon into the now empty bowl and leaned back, rubbing his palms down his thighs. "A Sweeper ship dropped into Domor's system right after she was supposed to get there and took out their net node. Looks like a targeted hit. I guess the news hasn't caught up with you yet."

Jos glanced at Tyelu. "Had you heard?"

“If I had, you’d know, too.” To Oron, she said, “Any word on her wellbeing? What about the Domorians? Did they weather the attack well?”

“No word yet. Q Command rerouted a dal when the node dropped out. That’s how we know what happened. Communications in that system collapsed. Everything’s having to go through the dal’s courier and even it has limits.”

Alna clucked her tongue. “What are the Sweepers up to?”

That question had been brewing in the back of Jos’s mind since before he met Tyelu. Unfortunately, his recovery might come too late for him to personally investigate. The dal could move forward with one d’ga missing, even two in a pinch. It couldn’t when less than half were fully whole. Unlike other military forces, Q-mercs rarely substituted d’gas because of injuries. They were too tightly linked together. Unless someone retired early, died, or was promoted, a dal that formed together usually served together until all their contracts were up.

Go in as one. Come out as one.

They could get a floating d’ga, if they needed one, but most had already been assigned. Dealing with the Sweepers was consuming more of Q’s resources than other peoples knew.

Alna plopped a bowl of stew down in front of Jos, interrupting his thoughts.

He glanced up at her. “We ate not long ago.”

“Eat again,” she said, her tone brooking no argument. “You’ve lost weight you couldn’t afford to part with.”

“I’ll never be able to fit into my armor again,” Oron muttered. “But this stew is worth

it.”

Before they left, Gared pulled Tyelu into the living area for a private word. She knew before he started talking that he’d made his decision, and dreaded hearing what it was. If he asked her to succeed him, she’d have to give up some of her time with Jos. And if he told her he’d chosen Kodh instead...

She wasn’t sure how she’d react, or if she should react at all. Despite the bitterness and anger Kodh had allowed to consume him, he wasn’t a bad man. Her father would phase out his own rule by increments, gradually handing leadership over to his successor, then staying on as a mentor for as long as he was needed.

Kodh would be fine.

What surprised her was her own apathy. The province needed strong leadership, and if it was asked of her, she would fulfill her duty well. But with Jos’s erratic schedule and the travel time between Q and Abyw, plus the possibility of children...

She shook her head. They hadn’t even talked about that yet. Besides, Gared might have chosen another option. No need to get ahead of herself.

Once they were out of earshot, Gared crossed his arms over his massive chest and stared down at her, an odd mixture of concern and duty in his expression. “I polled the Hrella over the past few days, to get a feel for their take on the matter.”

Her heart sank. She kept her chin high and her gaze steady. “And?”

“They came down in favor of you. Not by much, but enough.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think you’ve grown into a fine woman,” he replied gruffly. “And that young man of yours helped you get there.”

“If you’re thinking of choosing me because of him—”

“Don’t get your nose in a twist, daughter. He’s a good man, but he and his family will never rule here.”

Tyelu let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Taq Zhina is trying to incorporate me into their ruling structure.”

“She’ll have to get in line. We’ll have a trial period, eh? Six months for you to learn the role well enough to decide if it’s a mantle you want to wear. What say you?”

“If you ask it of me—”

He tweaked her chin. “Don’t do this because you think I want you to. Do it for yourself or not at all. The province needs a leader who’ll stick, not an ambivalent one who can’t render fair and consistent judgements. The kafh can’t afford to indulge in resentment over forced duty.”

“I know.”

Her gaze drifted beyond her father to the kitchen where she’d left Jos. He’d leaned a shoulder against the doorframe and watched her now, smiling faintly. They hadn’t discussed this either, not in enough detail, but she knew his mind, knew that he’d support her decision no matter what it was.

She swung her gaze back to her father and nodded. “A trial period then. We’ll have to work around Jos’s schedule somewhat, but I can arrange to spend more time here, among the people.”

“That’s settled.” He pulled her in for a hug, squeezing tightly. “I’m proud of you, daughter.”

Tears pricked her eyes, and she let them fall. A wise warrior knew when to cry as well as she knew how to pick her battles.

Later that night, Tyelu drove Jos to their home on the outskirts of Hrelum and hovered nearby as he walked upstairs to their bedroom. He was steadier now. His doctor had injected another round of nanos into his system before they left for Abyw, what he called a just in case batch : just in case the previous nano injections hadn’t corrected the damage. They seemed to be working. Between rest and physical therapy, Jos moved much more easily than he had the day she’d brought him home from the hospital.

She smiled at his back as she followed him up the stairs. Moving easily was good. She had plans for her Q’Mhel, plans she could only execute when he was well enough to handle them.

After they unpacked their bags and went through their nightly toiletry rituals, she slid into bed beside him and gingerly draped an arm across his chest. His armor had deflected much of the damage here, but not all. He sported a few new scars on his beautiful skin. She was thankful for every single one. Those scars served as a reminder that he’d survived and returned to her. How could she not accept them?

Jos hugged her close and kissed the top of her head. “No pillow tonight?”

“Only if you want one.”

“Frek, no. Does that mean we can have sex?”

She tilted her head back until their gazes met. “Do you want to?”

He snorted. “You have to ask?”

“We need to talk first.”

“Why? Is everything ok?”

She shrugged. “We should probably sort some things out.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “What kind of things?”

“Family things. Children things.”

“Are you asking me if I want to have children?”

“Do you?”

He shifted beneath her arm, shifting toward her until they faced one another. His hand stroked down her arm to her fingertips and back again. “Do you?”

“I asked first.”

“You’re the most stubborn, obstinate—”

She hid a smile against his chest. “That’s redundant. So. Do you?”

“Yes,” he said. “Of course. I’m sorry I didn’t mention it before.”

“We haven’t had a lot of time to sort these things out.”

“I’ve been home days now. Why didn’t you say something?”

“You weren’t in a position to do anything about it.”

“Do anything.” He tilted her face to his and met her gaze. His eyes had taken on a distinct glow, lightening their murky green. “Like making a family?”

“Like that, yes,” she said softly. “If you want to.”

“Babe, that’s the best idea you’ve had since you kidnapped me.”

She laughed. “So you’re not still mad about that?”

“No. I wish I’d let you kidnap me the day we met, or that I’d kidnapped you. Hold on.”

She pushed up on her elbow, alarmed. “Why? What’s wrong? Are you in pain?”

He pulled her back down and pressed a gentle kiss to her mouth. “Relax, princess. I’m fine. Just need to get permission to turn my birth control off.”

“You can do it yourself?”

“New implants. They’re fully integrated, but I can’t touch any of the bio controls without permission.”

“Oh. I have to see a doctor about mine.”

Jos heaved a playful sigh. “Oh, well. We can always practice.”

“Anytime,” she agreed solemnly.

He rolled her beneath him and touched his forehead to hers, his breath gentle against

her lips. “Are you sure?”

“About starting a family?”

“Yes.”

“I’m certain.” She traced a line down his jaw and over the tattoo that somehow, miraculously, linked their emotions together, wrapping their hearts around each other in a way she’d never thought possible. “I want it all, lover. Children, a home, a place by your side, everything. I’m afraid I’m quite selfish that way.”

He laughed softly. “If you are, then I must be, too.”

“Jos?”

“Yes, princess?”

“I love you.”

His love flooded through her, filling her more surely than words ever could, stealing her breath under the sheer force of his emotions. She let him sweep her away into a place where nothing could touch them, not duty or politics or difficult family members. No doubts, no fear, no bitter regrets or loneliness. Jos had become her reason, her grace, another layer of strength melded into her own, as finely tempered as any sword, and she could do nothing less than surrender herself to the love he’d given so freely, forever, until the end of time.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am

Ceg. A unit of measure used by the Pruxn?, roughly eighteen Terran inches.

Five by . Shipshape. Everything all right.

Frek . A stronger curse word.

Griyet . A mild curse word used primarily by the Q.

Hrik . A unit of measure used by the Pruxn?, roughly three Terran miles.

Kraden . A mild curse word used primarily by the Pruxn?.

Lubber . A planet dweller.

Myengen dun arig . The Pruxn? equivalent of good morning .

Ny . A negative response, similar to no .

Screxhound . A four-legged wild animal native to Abyw, known particularly for its screeching howl.

Skinsuit . Skin tight, lightweight armor worn under tougher armor. Also called “frag armor.”

Spacer . Someone who lives and/or works primarily in space.

Tick. One second or a moment.

Umlek. An inexact measurement. Approximately twelve.

Vud. An Abywian monetary unit. At current exchange rates, one vud is equivalent to 1.245 Galactic credits.

Yinga . A small, cat-like animal.