

Alien Embrace
Chapter One

“You’re being watched,” Ambassador Vrill whispered to Amelia.

Of course I am. I’m the guest of honor and the only Earther here, the redhead thought. Still, Vrill’s excited tone raised goosebumps on Amelia’s bare arms. She checked the fiery red and gold gown that had been custom sewn for her there on the planet Plasius. It managed to cover her where it should — barely.

How had Vrill convinced her to wear the almost nonexistent dress? The Plasian must have drugged Amelia’s drink before they’d gone shopping. There was no other explanation.

The neck of the sleeveless gown plunged to below her navel. The fabric was whisper-thin. She had to be careful her movements didn’t shift the barely-there bodice to expose her entire chest to the crowded room. Since she was amply endowed, the meager bit of material was constantly endangering Amelia’s modesty.

The halter of the dress would have left her entire back naked but for her hair. Her tresses were caught back in glittering combs. It flowed in a waved auburn river to her waist. Amelia found the feeling of her hair on bared flesh wickedly seductive. It was an unfamiliar, if titillating sensation. She usually wore her hair in a ponytail. With a shirt on her back.

Beneath the waterfall of hair, the shadowed cleft of her buttocks disappeared into the intricately laced train, which made up ninety-five percent of the gown’s fabric. It was constructed from heavier material that swept the floor. When Amelia walked, the drag of the train pulled at the dress, making the front stretch taut against her torso. No one had to guess how she looked naked. Every curve of her body was blatantly obvious.

The worst part of the dress was its scrap of a skirt. The hem in the front was barely a scandalous inch below her sex. Her long, golden-hued legs were framed by the cascading scarlet and gold.

Dress codes on Plasius were definitely different from morality-driven Earth. The seductive Plasians knew much about allure and cared little for modesty.

“Who is watching me?” Amelia whispered to Vrill. She regarded the crowd assembled in Saucin Israla’s home. High-ranking Plasians of the government and art guild swarmed the ballroom, flirting with each other. In darkened corners where overstuffed couches lined the walls, movement indicated coupling had already begun for some lovers. Their soft moans provided a background hum to the other partygoers’ easy conversations. An occasional cry informed anyone who cared that bliss had been realized. To say Plasians were not scandalized by public displays of affection was putting it lightly.

The room was for public functions but managed to create an aura of seduction. Amber-colored fabric swathed the walls. Golden lighting globes drifted across the ceiling, giving the room a dreamlike quality. The gentle illumination provided shadowed areas for amorous activity.

The globes also highlighted the fantastic but pornographic mural on the ceiling. Amelia had snuck many a glance at the painted figures cavorting overhead, each passionate scene more explicit than the last.

Despite the subject matter, there was no doubting the talent of the unknown artist. If Michelangelo had painted orgy scenes, Israla’s ballroom ceiling might have been his work.

Amelia’s scan of the room met many gazes, and all nodded in respect. The party was for her, Plasius’ first Earth artist-in-residence.

Vrill's black marble eyes smoldered. Amelia recognized her friend's arousal with amused embarrassment. The willowy Plasian's bronze skin glistened. The thick olive mane on her head, more akin to fur than hair, moved as if in a breeze. Her body heat released the perfume globules woven in her scant ice-blue gown. The air grew heavy with the sharp scent of spice, Vrill's preferred aroma. Her voice rose to its usual husky tone.

"You've caught the attention of a Kalquorian clan. If stares could burn, you'd be on fire."

Kalquorians! Amelia froze. For a moment, she forgot to breathe. "Are you sure there's a Kalquorian clan here? Israla didn't mention any attending."

"I'd know and want a Kalquorian if I were blind." Vrill's dark gaze probed. "That puts you in a spot. Earth refuses to treaty with Kalquor. Your people speak against them at every Galactic Council meeting."

Amelia swallowed. Her reply sounded defensive to her own ears. "Our leaders consider them a threat, especially to Earther women."

Vrill smirked. "That's because your leaders are male, and they don't want their women running off to join clans. You would, if you had a taste of what Kalquorians offer." Her expression grew concerned. "Would your government make you leave Plasius if they knew a clan was here?"

"Not if it's just one clan and I stay away from them." Amelia heard the uncertainty in her own voice.

"Good! I don't want you to go. Don't worry, my friend. If you decide to get to know the Kalquorians, *I'll* never tell." She tittered.

"Where are they, Vrill?" Only a forest of tall bronze Plasians greeted her gaze.

Vrill pulled Amelia a few steps to the side. "They're in the middle of the room, a little behind you and to your right." She pointed.

Amelia twisted her head toward that direction. Her neck muscles creaked. She saw the men staring at her. Even from the distance of half the immense ballroom, it was impossible to miss the monumental differences between the Kalquorians and Plasians.

The three aliens towered over the tall Plasians. Where the Plasians were soft, thin beings, the Kalquorians appeared sculpted from granite. Where the Plasians were slightly curved, the Kalquorians bulged muscle. The Plasians broadcasted their readiness to receive pleasure. The Kalquorians looked capable of taking it by brute force.

Vrill whispered in her ear, "Someone's thinking naughty thoughts. Your skin is as red as your hair."

Amelia flushed with heat. Her gown's scent wafted over her; the aroma of a summer night's breeze after a thunderstorm. Fresh, new, and somehow electric.

The Kalquorians looked like Earthers who'd eaten steroids from birth. Reports claimed that they had fangs that folded to the roofs of their mouths when not in use. Supposedly, a Kalquorian's bite sent an intoxicating venom into its victim, leaving him or her drunk and incapable of defense.

Otherwise, they were similar to Amelia's species. In fact, the resemblance was shocking. It was whispered, although not around those in authority, that Kalquorians and Earthers might have a common ancestry.

According to historians, an alien race had fled a doomed planet millennia ago and settled on Kalquor. Theories abounded that some of the Kalquorian ancestors had also settled Earth. For believers, too many similarities between the two races existed for mere coincidence.

Such ideas were taboo on Earth. Anything that contradicted the Church's edicts was illegal to consider, much less discuss. Earthers were God's chosen people. Kalquorians were viewed as poor copies, perhaps even emissaries of Satan.

Amelia privately prided herself on her more open views. Once off Earth, she'd discussed the possibilities of Earther/Kalquorian species ties with her alien friends. Her small circle of Plasian associates had been shocked and delighted to meet an Earther willing to entertain the idea in depth.

Amelia reveled in the freedom from Earth's religion-based regime. She'd seen corruption and damage done in the name of God on her home planet. While she still believed in a higher power that would punish evildoers, she felt it was more kind than vengeful, more forgiving than damning. It was this view that allowed her to happily reside on Plasius. Despite the sexual decadence of her Plasian hosts, she tried not to judge them.

With a brief glance, Amelia noted the Kalquorians had black hair, wide foreheads, and strong jaws. Their skin was dark, resembling Earthers of Middle Eastern origin. She appreciated the strength of their features, too masculine to be attractive in Earth movie star fashion. Hollywood's current crop of leading men were sometimes prettier than their female co-stars and androgynous enough to pretend sexlessness.

She turned from the clan's penetrating stares. Her clinging scrap of a dress provided no obstacle to their evaluating gazes. The erect buttons of her nipples pressed against the tissue-thin fabric. She blushed anew at the sight of her body's brazen spectacle and crossed her arms over her breasts. She shivered.

"I didn't realize Kalquorians were so...big," she said. "Are clans always made up of three men?"

"Usually. The Dramok is the clan's leader. That one's wearing a government insignia, so he's an official of rank. A member of the Royal Council, I believe. He's wearing the black formsuit with blue trim. Those formsuits are nice, aren't they? You can tell exactly what you're getting. That Dramok has a lot to offer a lucky female." Vrill licked her lips.

"He has a commanding presence." In the brief glance she'd had, his piercing gaze seemed to search her very soul. She shivered again and wished she could control her physical reactions. "What about the others? What are they?"

"That monstrously huge Kalquorian wearing the green tunic is an Imdiko, the clan's nurturer. Their breed is rather rare. If his face weren't so sweet, he'd be scary, wouldn't he?"

Amelia agreed he had a kind expression, but he was still a frightening specimen.

"I don't know that I've ever seen anyone so big outside the Tragoom race. Imagine wallowing all over him." Vrill leered. "He has an Interstellar Medical Council badge on his shirt. Only the top doctor from each planet can sit on that council."

"What about the third man? The shortest one?" Amelia almost laughed at calling someone who easily topped six feet tall 'short'.

"He's a Nobek, the member charged with the protection of the clan. He's wearing a Kalquor Global Security formsuit. Very impressive credentials on the entire clan," Vrill purred. "The situation must be dire on Kalquor if such an important group is searching off-world for a Matara."

Matara? Amelia wondered. Her excellent grasp of the liquid Plasian language omitted that term. It sounded too guttural for Vrill's tongue. The ambassador had almost barked the word.

Vrill fluttered alabaster eyelashes in the Kalquorians' direction. She flicked her tongue over her lips again. "It's nice to see them here scouting for a female."

Amelia started. "I heard Kalquorians and Plasians aren't physically compatible."

"Our species can enjoy certain pleasures together, but Kalquorian men are too big to penetrate Plasian females in regular intercourse. Of course, there are always lovely things to do that don't require that. I once used my mouth on a Kalquorian to—"

"No, Vrill," Amelia interrupted. Her face flushed.

The Plasian blew an exasperated breath. "You're so repressed. Anyway, I'm betting that clan isn't here for a Plasian fling. I think they're more interested in finding out what the Earther race can do for them."

Amelia's temperature dropped from hot to cold. "They're here because of me?"

Her friend smiled a long, slow smile. "Why don't you ask them, my prudish friend? Here they come."

"What?" Amelia's head whipped around. Her neck cracked, sending dull pain through her arms and hands. The clan was indeed walking in her direction, their attention riveted on her. She turned back in time to see Vrill disappearing into the crowd.

"Vrill!"

"Excuse me, Amelia Ryan?"

She started, and not just because he spoke to her in her own language. The voice rumbled through her very bones. Her whole body vibrated.

She resisted responding to him. She wanted to run away, *tried* to walk off, but the Kalquorian's commanding tone swiveled her towards the trio. She had always obeyed authority, even when it put her life in danger. Now was no different, though the man was not of her species.

As she turned, the clan slid into her line of sight: the bare, muscled arm of the Nobek, his wide formsuited chest, and his other arm. Then the sleeved, bulging arms and chests of the other two filled her vision. Her gaze lingered over corded necks, strong jawlines, and three pairs of eyes.

She was reminded of the concord grapes that grew on the fence surrounding her childhood backyard. The Kalquorians' sharp eyes were that same cool blue-violet color. Their catlike pupils were slits.

Earth would hate for me to speak to them. They say the aliens are degenerate, wanting Earth women for unspeakable sexual games. What kind of games, I wonder?

Pinned by their stares, she couldn't move. Despite her yammering thoughts, her muscles remained locked statue-still.

The Kalquorian standing in the middle, who treacherous Vrill had identified as the leader, spoke again. "Amelia Ryan?"

Her answer floated from her, a distant dream. "I'm Amelia Ryan."

He bowed. His sleek, shoulder-length hair swung forward. His eyes never left hers, and she was riveted by his stare. *He's handsome. They all are.* Amelia was surprised. With the trimmed mustache and goatee, the Kalquorian reminded her of an old movie version of a musketeer. None of the trio looked like the demonic creatures Earth had warned about.

His voice, despite its strength, was soft. It enveloped her in warmth. "I am Dramok Rajhir. This is my clan. Imdiko Flencik," he motioned, and the largest Kalquorian bowed as well, a hopeful smile gentling his strong features.

Flencik's ebony hair fell well below his shoulders in spiral curls. He was clean-shaven, his visage not as narrow as his leader's. Amelia had never seen anyone so tall. He was also the

bulkiest of the trio, but as Vrill had pointed out, his expression was the gentlest. His smile offered real warmth.

“And Nobek Breft.”

The Nobek echoed the others’ bows. Though he was the smallest of the group, he still stood about half a foot taller than Amelia’s five-foot ten-inch frame. His hair swept from his face in waves. Amelia caught herself wondering how it would feel if she stroked it. His mustache and goatee were fuller than Rajhir’s, softening the hard planes of his stern but attractive features. His predatory demeanor suggested he was more dangerous than his larger companions. He looked her up and down, as if wondering how tasty a snack she might be. Amelia could barely restrain a shiver at that evaluating stare. Her heart galloped as if it would jump out of her chest.

They watched her. They were waiting for her to respond. She struggled for something to say.

“Um...hello,” she said.

Still they waited. Their expressions seemed polite, even patient. Amelia took courage from that.

“I’m sorry if I seem rude.” She smiled. “I’ve never met Kalquorians before. You’re rather imposing.”

Rajhir’s brow creased. He looked at Breft and spoke in staccato bursts. Breft, looking concerned, answered in the same language, his gaze darting from the clan’s leader to Amelia.

Rajhir and Flencik exchanged dark looks, and Amelia’s stomach turned with sudden fear. What had she said to upset the Kalquorians?

Flencik spoke in a halting voice as deep as Rajhir’s, but gentler. “Your language to us gives confusion. Says Breft our appearance you are threatened?”

Breft interjected, his tenor diplomatic but lined with steel. “Flencik’s grasp of your language is not very good yet. He meant to say, does our appearance threaten you?”

“Oh...well...” Amelia struggled for a tactful tone. “Threaten isn’t quite what I meant. By calling you imposing, I meant you’re taller than most Earth men. More muscular.” Her face heated at the words. She prayed they didn’t think she was flirting with them.

The clan relaxed, and Amelia mentally sighed with relief. If the Kalquorians found her language confusing, landmines waited within any conversation.

Rajhir smiled at her, the expression warming his stern countenance. “Our people have misunderstandings, yes? Earth does not like Kalquor, but we have not harmed any Earthers.”

Speaking of landmines. Amelia’s stomach knotted again. Why was she speaking to them? Earth would have her tongue cut out if they saw her right now.

She couldn’t seem to keep her mouth shut though. “Your culture is very different from ours. Unfortunately, Earthers have a long history of not accepting what they don’t understand.”

Her statement prompted another exchange between Rajhir and Breft. After this, Rajhir smiled down at her again, as if about to confer a great favor.

“We will discuss Kalquorian culture with you. We show you Kalquorian ways. When you learn the pleasure we offer, you will understand and accept us. Mataras do no—” he paused and looked at Breft. “*Grolic?*”

“Fear,” the Nobek said.

Rajhir nodded. “Mataras do no fear clans.”

Mataras again. Now Amelia realized why it had sounded strange coming from Vrill. The word was Kalquorian. “What are—”

Saucin Israla's aide slipped beside her, interrupting the question. The lithe Plasian female inclined her black-maned head toward Amelia before raking greedy eyes over the clan. Once again, Amelia felt herself flush in the presence of overt sexuality. Would she ever relax in this atmosphere of gratification-seeking decadence?

"Saucin Israla requires Amelia Ryan," the aide purred. Message given, she glided away, casting glances over her shoulder at the clan. Her fur waved as if to beckon them to her.

They ignored the Plasian, their attention riveted on Amelia. She smiled a nervous apology. "I must go for the presentation. Please excuse me."

Amelia turned from the clan, both relieved and disappointed to be escaping. She feared the aliens. Earth's government despised Kalquorians with near violent abhorrence. Yet, she didn't lie to herself about enjoying their attention. Her trepidation, oddly enough, fed her interest in them.

She was fascinated by how much they resembled her own race. They were so unabashedly masculine. Even repressed Amelia had to admit a stab of desire. No wonder Vrill had become aroused at the mere sight of the Kalquorians.

She'd taken a step from the men when a hand slipped around her waist. Before she realized what was happening, Rajhir pulled her backwards and held her against himself. She gasped as the hard muscles of his thighs, abdomen, and chest pressed against her from behind.

Flencik and Breft moved to surround Amelia, blocking her from the view of the other guests. She stood frozen in shock. Rajhir's palm flattened against her slender belly, hot against the exposed skin. The heat went straight to her sex, making her gasp.

She couldn't pull free. The Dramok stroked her throat with featherlight pressure. His fingers drifted down, sliding over a round breast and cupping it. His forefinger and thumb massaged the tip of her nipple. The sensitive flesh hardened into a hungry nub and strained against the thin material of her gown. The heat of his touch shot from her breast in a lightning bolt to her sex.

The surge of undeniable passion snapped Amelia's paralysis. She gasped and reached to slap him away. Breft caught her hands and pressed them to his lips as a smiling Flencik stroked her cheek. Rajhir switched his attention to her other breast, slipping inside the dress to pinch the naked nipple. Breft gripped her hands effortlessly, his lips curling under his mustache in a grin as she tried to pull free. She thought of screaming, but the idea of the Plasians seeing her being ravished by the trio made her cheeks burn with humiliation. The amorous Plasians wouldn't understand what the fuss was about. Sexual play in public was as natural to them as breathing. Many at the party locked in such embraces already, some indulging in outright public sex. She doubted any would come to her aid. They'd probably cheer the Kalquorians on.

Flencik whispered, "You beautiful be. We show you we like."

"I don't — I don't —" Amelia couldn't think of what she was supposed to say.

"It is all right," Rajhir breathed in her ear. "We hide you. No others to witness pleasuring. Your government no discover this. None here will know of our little game."

Amelia certainly didn't want to be seen in this manner. If Earth found out...she shied from that notion. The consequences were too horrible to contemplate.

She stopped struggling, reluctantly surrendering to Rajhir's demanding caresses and praying that no one indeed would see her humiliation. Her unlawful behavior, punishable by torture and death.

"Good, Amelia Ryan. We wish to pleasure you. Show you we make good friends."

Her heart thundered in her chest as the clan's leader rubbed each breast in turn, testing their weight and fullness in his heated palms. Flencik's thumb brushed over her parted lips, drinking in the sight of his Dramok pulling aside fabric to expose her taut nipples, which flushed rose pink. An appreciative growl emanated from Breft, who brought her fingers to his lips. He sucked each slender digit into his wet, warm mouth.

Even as she trembled with fear and closed her eyes in shame, Amelia's insides sent honeyed lava to creep a molten path down her thighs. Want pulsed through her at the brazen ravishing. As always, her body became a traitor to her better sense, finding sensuality where it had no right to. She tightened her legs together, willing the flow of moisture to stop. Panties had been impossible to wear tonight. The back of the dress dipped too low and the fabric of the gown molded to her skin so smoothly that underwear would have shown with blatant lines. The Plasians already regarded her as ridiculously uptight. When she'd dressed for tonight, she'd gone nude under the gown so she wouldn't have to endure the snickers and pitying looks. Now she regretted it. What if the men decided to explore her there, discovering the nakedness, the wetness of her sex? Would her uncontrollable desire encourage them to do more than simply explore? Would they take her right here in front of the Plasians?

Flencik caressed a breast when Rajhir offered it up to him. The Imdiko licked his finger and whirled his saliva over her areola. Amelia responded against her will. She arched, filling his hand with her breast. Had anyone ever touched her with such gentle knowledge? She moaned. "Please..."

Rajhir's breath warmed her ear. "You are in so great of need. This is wrong you suffer. Your society keeps your people from pleasure nature intends."

"I — I have to go," Amelia whimpered, wishing she sounded stronger. She tried to pull away. The Kalquorians held her still, as if to show her their physical power. Another bolt of desire shot through her, along with the instant surrender that had plagued her throughout her life. She trembled and quieted again, not fighting, waiting to see if they would set her free. Only when she surrendered did Flencik tug her dress into place, hiding her breasts with a rueful smile.

"We soon speak again, Amelia Ryan," Rajhir promised.

They released her and stepped aside to let her pass between them. She hurried towards the waiting aide, who smiled at her as if they shared a secret. Amelia's face flamed anew. The aide hadn't seen what she'd allowed the Kalquorians do, but no doubt the Plasian knew something had happened. Amelia prayed the moisture between her thighs wasn't obvious because of the shortness of her skirt. It took all the pride she could muster to not run from the Kalquorians.

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Rajhir watched Amelia rush through the crowd of Plasian elite. He drank in her lush figure, a pleasing collection of soft, pliant curves. Her auburn curtain of hair swayed, offering tantalizing glimpses of smooth skin bared by the backless gown. The tops of her buttocks were round, the shadow between them a teasing invitation. He longed to explore her there, in all the sweet, dark places her body offered. To discover her with fingers, mouth, and sex organs. To uncover all her treasures, to decode her secrets.

The Dramok had enjoyed his fair share of women. More than his fair share, in fact. Few females of his kind were left, but as a councilman, he had never lacked for female

companionship. His distant blood ties to Kalquor's royal family had also kept him satisfied when only the softness of a woman would do.

The few Kalquorian women in existence were strong, proud beauties. Every bit as commanding as their male counterparts in most cases, they inspired awe and reverence. Rajhir had entertained many females of different species, but none had ever come close to the delights of his own.

It had taken every bit of his longtime friend Ambassador Ospar's charm to get Rajhir to come to Plasius to meet Amelia Ryan. He and his clan had made the six-week journey on the thin chance that the Earther female would offer hope to his race when none was left. If she were breeding compatible, Ospar had told Rajhir his clan could keep her as their mate.

"If you don't want her for yourself, bring her to Kalquor. Remember the duty you have to the empire, my friend," Dramok Ospar had said.

"We're reduced to kidnapping." Rajhir made plain the disgust he felt.

"Distasteful as outright abduction may be, we're out of time. Your own clanmate Flencik has told the emperors and the council's medical funding committee that there is no hope of restoring our females' fertility. If the Earther is compatible, Kalquor must have her and others like her. I'm already sending out other clans to collect the ones we can get as soon as Flencik confirms compatibility."

Honor and empire. It had been the dominant phrase in Rajhir's upbringing. He knew his duty better than most, but he also understood when to let it pass. Before arriving on Plasius, he had decided clanning Amelia Ryan would be among those few duties he would not accept, even if she were compatible and could carry his children. Why should he when he could have a woman of his own species? He was content to enjoy the Earther and to teach her to enjoy men of his race in kind. Then he could transport her to Kalquor and give her to another clan not so blessed with his opportunities.

Now Rajhir wasn't so sure. Amelia Ryan was smaller than Kalquorian women, fairer-skinned, with a flaming river of hair. He found her exotic. Instead of being muscular, as the Kalquorian females were, she was soft with large breasts, a slightly rounded stomach, and bountiful hips. He'd never encountered anyone so delightful before. Kalquorian women did have yielding breasts like Amelia's, but otherwise they were physically powerful creatures.

As delightful as Amelia Ryan's flesh felt, it wasn't her body that gave the Dramok pause. It was the beguiling vulnerability in the Earther's eyes, the instant submission that too few enjoyed. Kalquorians, both male and female, were mostly alpha creatures, dominant in some form or another. The way Amelia Ryan had melted against Rajhir, had surrendered as her heart thundered wildly in her chest...it had made him hard in an instant. It had also given rise to an almost instinctual urge to take control and care for her to the best of his ability.

The little enchantress was still weaving her spell over him, halfway across the room. Rajhir drank in the sight of her flesh glowing in the amber light. He thought of how his brown hand had looked in contrast to the golden mounds of her breasts and the pink of her nipples. He couldn't wait to touch her burning skin again. *Soon*, he promised himself. Tonight, if possible. To bury his dark flesh in her pale sweetness, enclosing himself in her softness...

"The poor woman is terrified," Flencik said in Kalquorian, interrupting Rajhir's fantasy. The Imdiko's tone betrayed his disgust. "Her government has damaged her natural instinct for sexual pleasure. She cannot enjoy what she craves. It's abhorrent."

Rajhir suppressed a smile. Trust a member of the Imdiko breed to want to rush in and make all the hurts disappear, especially someone as caring as his Flencik.

Breft answered. "Totalitarian regimes, especially fanatically religious ones, have a nasty habit of taking the life out of living."

Rajhir was unable to tear his attention from Amelia Ryan. It was as if he'd not seen a woman before, hadn't bedded a single female in his life. The brief encounter with the Earther had been more than enough to charm his often too-cynical heart.

First things first. We have to determine once and for all if her species is compatible with ours.

The luscious Earther stood with a group of Plasians, next to a draped square suspended on a stand. She spoke to Art Guildmaster Osill, a male with languid, drooping eyelids, and the Plasian Saucin herself, Israla. Amelia glanced at the Kalquorians then looked away, blushing furiously.

She might be afraid of word getting back to Earth, but she was as fascinated by the Kalquorians as Rajhir was with her. "They haven't destroyed her carnal instincts. They may have even done us a favor with their repression."

Flencik blinked. "What makes you think that?"

"Did you notice how she submits to authority? Asserting complete dominance over her may be what's called for. As an Earther female, it's all she's ever known. She's lived her life in submission to the males who hold the powerful positions of her society."

Breft licked his lips. "I have no problem dominating such a lovely creature. I scented her desire. She wants to be taken."

Rajhir raised an eyebrow at his youngest clanmate. Under the careful guidance of the other two men, Breft had gained a great deal of control over his more primal instincts. He was no longer the uncivilized youth Rajhir had clanned. However, a Nobek never truly lost his feral leanings, and Breft had been more animal than most when they'd met. Violence was the Nobek breed's second nature.

Rajhir reassured himself. *It's been years since Breft lost control to his wilder urges. He learned his lesson with Flencik. He's not a youngling anymore, and I can trust his maturity. He'll be careful with the girl.*

Flencik's tone grew concerned over Breft's words. "There are limits to forcing someone to submit to anything, even on Plasius. Saucin Israla might draw the line at coerced medical tests."

Rajhir ran his gaze up the long, lovely line of Amelia's legs. Was it his imagination, or was there moisture glistening on her inner thighs just below her high hemline? He sucked on his lower lip for a moment, imagining her flavor.

He told his Imdiko, "It would depend on the manner of coercion. If we can get the Earther to let her guard down, we may be able to gain a sample of her eggs."

"How are we to gain Amelia Ryan's cooperation if she's too scared to speak to us?"

"Who says either she or the Saucin have to cooperate?" The grin on Breft's lean face was hungry. "We can take Amelia Ryan to Kalquor easily. No one would be the wiser until too late. It's what we came to do anyway."

Flencik narrowed his gaze at his clanmate. His heavy brow creased. "Not unless she proves viable. Nonetheless, such action might traumatize her. Earthers are more fragile than we are. Stress could damage their reproductive abilities. We need to entice her and win her confidence. We dare not kidnap this Matara."

"We don't know if she can be a Matara, at least for our kind. That's what we're here to find out. Whether she agrees to it or not, she must be tested."

Rajhir held up his hand to quiet the argument. They fell silent and waited for him to speak.

He glanced at Amelia again. Though not as aggressive as Nobeks, the Dramok breed was the most dominating. The fantasy of the lovely creature struggling against him before surrendering to his seduction threatened to arouse Rajhir beyond conscience. He knew the sweetness of such a scenario. Given Amelia's eager reaction to their touches, it was a real possibility. He was sure she could be coerced into giving herself, as well as much more.

He kept these thoughts to himself, determined to maintain Flencik's peace of mind. His gentle Imdiko had to be handled more carefully in this matter than Breft. Unless Flencik was sure testing the Earther was to both her and the empire's greater good, he would balk no matter what was at stake.

Rajhir said, "Amelia Ryan's art has endeared her to the Plasians. To kidnap her from here would strain relations between our peoples. Plasius has been too long a trading partner to risk Israla's censure."

Rajhir considered for a moment before continuing. "If we force Flencik's tests on Amelia Ryan against her will and her government discovers we did so, Earth might no longer allow their females off-planet. We'll lose any hope of access to those women. We must gain her trust and compliance."

Breft scowled. "What if she refuses to cooperate anyway? Then what?"

"Then we'll have no choice but to gain samples through trickery or force." Flencik opened his mouth, protest written all over his face, and Rajhir added, "Only as a last resort and with the hope it does not damage her."

"I'd rather it not be an option at all," Flencik said.

"I feel the same way." Rajhir squeezed his shoulder. "Remember though, we're facing the extinction of our species if we don't find compatible females soon. Keep that in mind, my Imdiko."

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Osill clasped his long-fingered hands together. "The anticipation is driving me mad." He stared at the covered painting like a starving man at a feast. Then again, the reed-thin guild master always looked hungry. His marbled black eyes bulged from his sharp-edged face.

Amelia managed to smile despite feeling the Kalquorians' heated stares. She didn't have to look at them to know they were watching her. It was as if their gazes had weight. She did her best to ignore them.

She kept her gaze on those she stood with. "I hope I've met the Saucin's and guild's expectations," she told Osill, inclining her head toward Israla.

The Plasian leader's smooth features remained emotionless as she spoke with her aide, as if she hadn't heard the Earther's comment. Amelia's nervousness turned up a notch.

It wasn't only Israla's rank that intimidated Amelia. Despite being three times her age, the Saucin was a beautiful example of her species. She'd make any Parisian model stalking the catwalk envious with her long slender build and ideal proportions. Her clothing was scantier than Amelia's, consisting of only a scarf draped around the nape of her neck and hanging over her small but perfect breasts. Another scarf tied about her hips. The fabric was deep red and see-through. Nothing was left to the imagination; Israla's hairless sex was easily discerned behind the transparent scarf.

Israla's legendary appetite for young men was a testament to her disregard for her age. Tonight, two young Plasian men flanked her, wearing small loin cloths made of the same fabric Israla wore. Vrill had confided that these boys were young enough to be Israla's great-grandsons. Their slender penises stood at attention as they unselfconsciously rubbed Israla's back. She occasionally smiled at them and stroked their eager flesh with pointed fingertips. Amelia couldn't bear to watch them.

Amelia still preferred Israla's aloofness to Osill's enthusiasm, as the guild master did little to quiet her fears. He practically panted with anticipation. "If this painting is like the rest of your works, all of Plasius will fall at your feet in adulation."

She regretted that the Plasians expected so much of her. Such interest could only doom her latest painting to failure. It would never live up to their hopes.

The opposite would have happened on her home planet. Earth noticed little of her current work because her style confounded the critics. Not only that, Amelia's choice of voluptuous, sensual shapes and colors, while not explicit enough to be unlawful, pushed the envelope of acceptable art in Earth's Puritanical society.

In contrast, Plasius embraced Amelia's art with a fierce passion, importing prints and displaying licensed vids of her paintings by the thousands. Her arrival three months ago had been met with sensation, although 'sensation' in Plasian terms was tame by most interstellar beings' standards.

Israla ended the conversation with her aide. She ran her fingers over chimes that tinkled over the murmur of conversation. The hall went silent as all eyes turned the quartet's way.

The aide said, "Attention, please. We'll begin the presentation now."

The crowd surged forward. The Kalquorians also approached. They were watching her as she'd sensed, their stares devouring her. The attention set her skin on fire. It was as if they had the ability to possess her body with their gazes. She looked away from the three riveting men, fighting to maintain an aura of nonchalance. Her burning face informed her of her failure.

Osill stepped forward to address the gathered. "Welcome, everyone. This is an exciting occasion, which we've been looking forward to for some time. We come here tonight to celebrate the work of our visiting Earther artist, Amelia Ryan."

Quiet applause. The guild master smiled at Amelia, and she returned his warm expression. She could feel her lips trembling and hoped it wasn't obvious.

Osill continued. "We have not long known of Earth. Indeed, the more we learn of our new neighbors, the less we understand them."

A ripple of laughter greeted his words. He bowed his head to Amelia to indicate he meant the comment as a joke. She smiled wider, no offense taken.

"It is only that our cultures are so exceedingly different. Art, however, speaks a single language. Not in many generations has an artist spoken as eloquently as Amelia Ryan. We're honored to host her on Plasius, where we hope she'll find much inspiration."

He stepped back to polite applause as all eyes settled on Amelia. The bronze-skinned Plasians looked at her with as much hunger as the Kalquorians. She took a deep breath and stepped forward.

"Thank you, Guild Master Osill." The steadiness of her voice surprised her. She avoided looking to her right where the Kalquorian clan stood.

"It is I who feel honored to have been granted the opportunity to paint the landscapes and people of your planet. In gratitude for your kindness and hospitality, I present to Saucin Israla and the people of Plasius this work." She nodded to Israla's aide.

The aide lifted the velvety drape from the canvas Amelia had labored three months over, sometimes going for days without sleep. The mere memory of her hand cramped around the paintbrush, the agony of effort slicing up her arm to her shoulder and neck, was excruciating to recall. Only pure will had kept her going some of those torturous days. Now she'd know if the weeks of pain she'd endured to complete it on time had been worthwhile.

With a flourish, the aide swept the cloth aside, revealing the painting: the landscape of Plasius' Lisidia mountain range. As it came into view, the tension leading up to this moment released its grip on Amelia's gut. There was no doubt it was the best work she'd ever done.

When she'd first viewed the seemingly endless line of mountains, the spirit of the rock and earth had revealed itself to her with unguarded abandon. She saw in them the undulating curves of a reclining Plasian woman, lush with invitation. Amelia had painted the Lisidias in the hues of bronze and olive, the predominant colors of Plasian flesh and fur. At first glance, the mountains appeared to be a woman lounging in a languorous pose, her black marble eyes half-closed, and her parted lips curved in a provocative smile. It was not only a landscape of Plasius, it was the planet's very spirit of relaxed, graceful sexuality.

The assembled Plasians gasped as one. For a moment, they gaped at the artwork. Amelia's heart stopped.

Applause crashed over her as the usually indolent race roared their approval. Osill shook her as he cried, "Beautiful, Amelia Ryan! Absolute perfection! Better than my greatest hopes!"

Most astounding of all, the aloof Israla embraced her, sobbing like a lost child found. "It is beyond expectation! An incomparable gift! I was born in a village in sight of these mountains, but I never saw them in truth until now. You have honored Plasius with your art. Thank you." She kissed Amelia with an open mouth. Her mane, dyed red to match her outfit, danced with delight.

Plasians jostled to get close to the painting and its creator. They crushed against Amelia until she gasped for air. They congratulated her with exuberant shouts and open weeping. Eager fingers brushed against her cheeks, throat, breasts, belly, and arms. The bodies pressed against hers until she couldn't draw breath. The room tilted like a funhouse, and Amelia realized she was near fainting. Black spots appeared in her vision. Someone grasped her hand in an iron grip. She found enough air to cry out as pain shot from her fingers to her shoulder.

The pressure eased as dark muscled arms pressed the Plasians back. Rajhir's rumbling voice said in passable Plasian, "Please, good friends, give Amelia Ryan room! She needs air!"

Breft eased himself through the crowd to her side. He lifted her, cradling her in arms of steel. The Nobek hugged her close to his chest as he carried her from the knot of Plasians. He whispered in her ear, "Relax, little one. I'll take you to safety."

Amelia lay limp in Breft's arms as her grateful lungs heaved oxygen.

Rajhir and Flencik flanked them, as if to hold the eager Plasians back. Israla, her aide, and Osill darted ahead to peer at her.

"Is she all right?" Osill asked. "I'm so sorry! We didn't mean to hurt her."

Flencik answered. "She well, but overwhelmed."

"We must keep her from the crowd until they have calmed," Rajhir added. "You'll also want to guard the art. They may destroy it in their excitement."

"The painting!" the aide exclaimed and rushed away, presumably to save it.

Israla waved them to a closed door. "Use this private room," she said, ushering them in. "You'll care for her, won't you? She is precious to us." At Flencik's nod, Israla patted Amelia's arm. "Rest now. No one will bother you here. I'll have refreshment brought."

The Saucin swept out, and Osill took Amelia's hand. His long fingers trembled. "Forgive our enthusiasm. You have captured the very soul of Plasius with your painting, and we cannot contain our joy. No harm was intended."

Despite her dazed response to the excitement of the last few minutes, Amelia managed to console him. "It's all right. I'm glad it was so well received."

Flencik spoke up. "She rest now must."

"Of course. I leave her in your capable hands." Osill bowed and left, closing the door.

Israla and Osill had left Amelia alone with the clan. Fear spiked through her chest, and her heart skipped a beat. Amelia suddenly realized the Plasians' jostling had shifted her gown to expose her breasts. She jerked the bodice over her nakedness, fresh embarrassment turning her skin almost as crimson as the garment.

"Lounger," Flencik said, and Breft carried her to the seating area. The Plasian lounge looked like an oversized sectional sofa, perfect for sprawling, relaxing, and sleeping.

And lovemaking, Amelia felt sure as the Nobek lowered her onto the deep red billowy surface. She clutched her arms to her chest. The Kalquorian men had been quick to ravish her in a roomful of people. What would they do to her in private quarters?

To her relief, Breft released her and stepped back. He remained standing like a wary sentry, angled towards the closed door they'd entered through. Rajhir and Flencik sat beside her prone body.

Amelia looked about the room, seeking an avenue of escape. Lighting globes drifted across the ceiling, illuminating the room in a soft golden glow. A smokeless firepit crackled in the middle of the room as chunks of scentwood burned. Aromatic fumes scented like roses swirled about the room.

In a corner, the Plasian version of a shower sluiced a waterfall into a bubbling basin. Amelia knew from her own apartment that the roiling warm water eased tense muscles.

The room was a sensual retreat, with only one door offering escape.

The trio of men regarded her in silence. She should have sprung off the lounge, or at least sat up, but she was afraid to move. What if they pushed her back and pinned her down?

It would be Amelia's fault if the Kalquorians forced themselves on her, the way it had been her fault with the others. Especially after the way she'd surrendered to their touches earlier. They no doubt believed her to be a slut, a whore, a wanton creature eager to couple at the slightest provocation.

Still, such behavior was the norm on Plasius. Amelia had dined in restaurants with Vrill while fellow diners pleased each other right at their tables. Early on, she'd learned to keep her eyes on her meals.

Had the Kalquorians acted inappropriately when they'd fondled Amelia in the great room? Not by Plasian standards, though Plasians usually had the courtesy to ask before they grabbed.

Another misunderstanding, Amelia thought with relief. That's all. These men simply don't know how to act with an Earther. Maybe I can still talk my way out of this.

She tried to smile. She pretended her heart wasn't pounding. She ignored the voice in the back of her mind whispering, *it has nothing to do with misunderstandings. These brutes want something from you, and it's not lessons in Earther etiquette.*

Shutting out that voice, Amelia said, "Thank you for the rescue. I thought I would be crushed out there."

Rajhir stroked her shoulder, and she held back a shiver. His hands were warm and made her think of things no upright Earther woman should.

“The Plasians are passionate for beauty,” the Kalquorian said. “Your painting excited their senses to overwhelm. Tell us —”

A knock at the door interrupted him. Breft whirled. The next instant, he was at the door. Amelia blinked. The Nobek was incredibly fast, too fast to follow with the eyes. It brought her fear of the Kalquorians up another notch.

He opened the door. A Plasian servant stood outside with a tray of goblets and a pitcher filled with azure liquid.

Amelia tensed as she heard the loud voices of excited Plasians. “They’re still reacting to the painting.”

“Relax,” Flencik said, squeezing her hand ever so gently. “We will no enter give to them.”

Amelia nodded her understanding of his halting English as Breft took the tray and shut the door, closing the servant and noise out. He carried the tray to the lounge.

Flencik nodded approval as he filled a goblet from the pitcher. “This leshellia good drink is. You try it to drink,” he said, handing Amelia the goblet as Rajhir helped her sit up. “It will you calmer.”

“What is it?” she asked, sniffing the sapphire liquid. She’d seen quite a few drinking it. She wasn’t much of an imbibor herself, preferring to keep her wits about her.

Rajhir and Flencik turned to Breft. He poured a goblet for himself. “Like the Earth drink called wine, I think.” He drank his serving in one swallow.

“Try it, Amelia Ryan,” Rajhir prodded.

“Just Amelia, please. Earth people have two names, sometimes more, but we’re usually called by just the first.” She wondered why she was talking to the men like they were at a nice dinner party. She had to get out of this room.

“Amelia,” Rajhir said. He smiled. “Easier.”

She smiled back, liking how the expression softened his stern features. She mentally kicked herself for being so damned polite again. She sipped her drink for something to do before she said anything else to encourage the trio.

The drink tasted smooth and buttery, and yes, similar to an expensive white wine. The knots in Amelia’s muscles loosened. The leshellia went down easily. Too easily. She took the glass from her lips and noted with shock she’d drunk half of it.

“You started to ask me about my painting?” she asked Rajhir, hiding her embarrassment. Now they would see her as a slut and a drunkard. What a wonderful impression she must be making.

The Dramok nodded. “I have seen the Lisidias. I know that is what you painted. The woman resting in mountains...the colors you put to paint. They are no true, but they look — correct?” He struggled. “I do no have Earther words. The painting was wrong reality but perfect. How did you know the mountains wanted to be those colors, that woman?”

Amelia swallowed more wine without realizing it until the warmth made her tingle all over. She felt very relaxed now. The lounge beneath her was like a cloud.

“I paint subjects not how I see them on the surface, but how I feel their soul appears.”

“Soul?” Rajhir’s brow furrowed. He looked to Breft, who shrugged his own confusion.

“A soul is a person’s life force. Or in my painting’s case, the mountain’s true inner self.”

Her explanation left them more perplexed. Breft's lips pursed as he mused. "It sounds similar to the Temple of Life's teachings."

Amelia didn't know anything about the Temple of Life. She gave up trying to provide a definition. "It's hard to explain. As you say, I don't have the words."

She raised the goblet and saw it was full again. She hadn't noticed it being refilled.

"Is it good?" Breft said.

"Wonderful." Languor spread through Amelia like a balm. She was relaxed but not fatigued. Indeed, her senses were incredibly alive, as if she were on the verge of some great excitement, only waiting for something wondrous to happen. The lounge caressed her skin, as soft as cashmere. She longed to kick her heels off and dig her toes into its luxuriousness, if she could summon the effort. Her limbs lay heavy, melting into the cushions. She wanted to purr. The top of her gown had shifted again until a breast was in danger of exposure.

Amelia wondered lazily if it mattered. The men surrounding her had seen the show already. It no longer seemed to be a big deal.

Whoa, girl. You're drunk. You'd better get your head together, because you're alone in a room with three men who already molested you.

However, Amelia couldn't summon the morality to care. In fact, as she looked over the big, muscled bodies that were works of art themselves, she wondered if she dared to touch them.

Rajhir leaned close, and she looked into his blue-purple cat eyes. His scent wafted over her, a pleasant cinnamon-y smell. His breath wafted over her lips as he spoke. "Are all Earther women so desirable?"

Fingertips — Flencik's? — brushed over her throat. Amelia caught her breath. She was sensitive there, more so than she'd noted before. They drifted down to her breastbone, leaving a trail of heat.

"You think I'm desirable?" Her words slurred a little.

The stroking moved to Amelia's breasts. The Imdiko's hand flattened to cover them. She moaned, excitement spreading to her sex. Warmth trickled between her thighs.

Rajhir's hypnotic gaze held her captive as his face drifted closer. She closed her eyes as his lips brushed hers. "You are very desirable, lovely Amelia."