

Alien Embrace – Chapter 1

“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.

She still couldn't believe Vrill had convinced her to wear the almost non-existent dress. The Plasian must have snuck something in Amelia's drink before they'd gone shopping. There was no other explanation.

The neck of the sleeveless gown plunged to below her navel. It was bad enough 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 fabric 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 from her face in glittering combs. The weight of all that hair flowed in a wavy 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. She felt sure no one was guessing how she looked naked. Every curve of her body must be 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 fabric.

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 back to Vrill. Her eyes darted over the crowd assembled in Saucin Israla's home. High-ranking Plasians of the government and art guild swarmed the ballroom, flirting with one another. In darkened corners where overstuffed couches lined the walls, movement Amelia dared not watch too long 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 still managed to create an aura of seduction. Amber colored fabric swathed the walls, and golden lighting globes drifted across the ceiling, giving the room a soft, 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 eyes, and all nodded in respect. The party was for her, Plasius' first Earth artist-in-residence.

Vrill's eyes, streaked like black marble, 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 like fur than hair, moved as if in a breeze. Her body heat released the perfume globules woven in her scant gown's ice blue fabric. 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 now."

Kalquorians! Amelia froze. For a moment she forgot to breathe. "Are you sure there's a Kalquorian clan here? Israla said nothing of them attending."

"I'd know and want a Kalquorian if I was blind." Vrill's dark gaze ran over the Earther's face. "That puts you in a spot, doesn't it? I mean, since Earth refuses to treaty with Kalquor. Your people speak against them at every Galactic Council meeting."

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

Vrill smirked. "That's because every one of your leaders are male, and they don't want their women running off to join clans. All of you would, if you had just a taste of what the men of Kalquor offer." Her expression changed to one of concern. "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 not to stay away from the Kalquorians, I'd never tell." She tittered.

"Where are they, Vrill?? Amelia continued to look around but only a forest of tall bronze Plasians greeted her eyes.

Vrill pulled Amelia a few steps to one side. "Now you should be able to see them. They're in the middle of the room, a little behind you and to your right." She pointed.

Amelia twisted her head to look in that direction. Her tensed neck muscles creaked. She saw the men staring at her immediately. 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 Kalquorian men looked 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's whole body 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. There were numerous differences to be sure. Outside of the size disparity, Amelia knew from reports 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 very much like Amelia's species. In fact the resemblance was shocking. It was whispered, though not around those in Earth 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.

For her part, Amelia reveled in the freedom of being away from Earth's religion-based regime. She'd seen too much corruption and too much 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.

If only she could get her emotions to agree with her reason, she often lamented. She was still too conditioned by her restrictive upbringing to be comfortable around the amorous race.

In the brief glance Amelia allowed herself, she noted all three Kalquorians had black hair, wide foreheads, and strong jaws. Their skin was dark, like Earthers of Middle Eastern origin. Despite herself, 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 jerked her eyes away from the clan's penetrating stares. Her clinging scrap of a dress provided no obstacle to their evaluating gazes. She looked down to see the erect buttons of her nipples press against the tissue-thin fabric. She blushed anew at the sight of her body's brazen spectacle and crossed her arms over her breasts. How naked she felt! She shivered.

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

"Of course. There's the Dramok, 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." Amelia thought about the lean, stern features and piercing gaze of the man Vrill identified as the leader. In that brief glance, his eyes seemed to search her very soul. She shivered again and wished she could control her body's reactions. "What about the others? What are they?"

"That monstrously huge Kalquorian wearing the green tunic is an Imdiko, the clan's nurturer. If his face wasn't so sweet, he'd be scary, wouldn't he? I don't know that I've ever seen anyone so big outside the Tragoom race. That's an Interstellar Medical Council badge on his shirt. Only the top doctor from each planet can sit on that council."

"And the third man? The short one?" Amelia almost laughed at calling someone who easily topped six feet tall 'short'. However, he was the smallest of the three aliens.

“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 all three,” Vrill purred. “The situation must be dire on Kalquor if such an important clan 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 actually 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 thought Kalquorians and Plasians aren’t compatible.”

“Our species can enjoy certain pleasures together, but Kalquorian men are too big to penetrate Plasian females in regular intercourse. Of course, there’s always lovely things to do that don’t require the typical; 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 body temperature dropped from hot to cold. “You think they’re here because of me?”

Her friend smiled a long, slow smile. “Why don’t you ask them, my lovely, 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 intent eyes 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 the man spoke to her in her own language. The voice rumbled through her very bones. Her whole body seemed to vibrate to the resonance.

She resisted responding to him. She wanted to run away, *tried* to run away, but the Kalquorian’s commanding tone swiveled her body towards the trio of men. She had always obeyed authority, even when it put her life in danger. Now was no different even though the man was not of her species. Any time she sensed someone dominant to herself, Amelia instantly complied with that person’s expectations.

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 eyes lingered over corded necks, strong jawlines and three pairs of eyes.

She thought of the concord grapes that grew on the fence surrounding her childhood backyard. She remembered the tart sweetness that slid down her throat like liquid silk. The Kalquorians’ sharp eyes were that same cool blue-violet color. Their pupils slitted like those of a cat.

I should walk away without answering him, Amelia thought. Earth would not want me to speak to them. They say the aliens are degenerate, wanting Earth women for unspeakable sexual games. What kind of games, I wonder?

Her body, pinned by their stares, refused to move. Despite her yammering thoughts, her muscles remained locked statue-still.

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

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

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

His voice, despite its strength, was soft. It seemed to envelope 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 softening his strong features.

Flencik's ebony hair fell well below his shoulders in soft spiral curls. His face was clean-shaven and not as narrow as his leader's. Amelia had never seen a man so tall. He was also the bulkiest of the three, but as Vrill had pointed out, his expression was the gentlest. His smile was one of real warmth.

"And Nobek Breft."

The Nobek echoed the others' bows. The smallest of the three, 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 what it would feel like to stroke it. His mustache and goatee were fuller than Rajhir's, softening the hard planes of his stern but attractive features. The predatory look in his feline eyes 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 right out of her chest.

They watched her. She realized they were waiting for her to respond. She struggled for anything 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. "It's just that 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 eyes 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 to her in a halting voice. It was deep like Rajhir's but even 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. When I said you were imposing I meant I'm not accustomed to your great size. You're much taller than most Earth men. More muscular." Her face heated at the words. She hoped they didn't think she was flirting with them.

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

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

Speaking of landmines, Amelia thought, feeling her stomach knot again. *Why am I even speaking to them? Earth would have my tongue cut out if they saw me 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 will show you Kalquorian ways. When you know 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."

Matara again. Now Amelia realized why it 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 pleasure-seeking decadence?

"Saucin Israla requires Amelia Ryan," the aide purred, still looking at the Kalquorians. She glided away, casting glances over her shoulder. Her fur waved as if to beckon them to her.

The three men ignored the Plasian. Their eyes remained 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. Despite the fear of being so close to the aliens Earth's government despised with near violent abhorrence, she didn't lie to herself about enjoying their attention. In fact, she knew her trepidation only fed her interest in them. She was fascinated by how much they resembled her own race.

Plus, 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 took one step away 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 hand flattened against her slender belly, his touch hot against the exposed skin. The heat went straight to her sex, making her gasp.

The Dramok pinned her against his body so she couldn't pull away. His other hand stroked her throat with a feather touch. It drifted down, sliding over one 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 desire snapped Amelia's paralysis. She gasped and reached to slap his hand away. Breft caught her hands and pressed them to his lips as a smiling Flencik stroked her cheek as if to soothe her. Rajhir switched his attention to her other breast, slipping his fingers inside the dress to pinch the naked nipple. Breft held her hands effortlessly, his lips curling under his mustache in a grin as she tried to pull free. She thought of screaming, but the thought of the Plasians seeing her being ravished by the three men 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. She'd seen 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.

"Do no be afraid," 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. "Be a good girl. We know Earthers do no like others to witness sex pleasuring. You government no discover this. Do no resist and none here will know of our little game."

He'd done his homework on Earthers. More than anything, Amelia didn't want to be seen like this. If Earth found out ... her mind shied away from that thought. The consequences were too horrible to contemplate.

She stopped her struggles, reluctantly surrendering to Rajhir's demanding touch 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. No fear."

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, his eyes drinking in the sight of his Dramok pulling aside fabric to expose her taut nipples, which flushed rose pink from the attention. 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, even as she closed her eyes in shame, Amelia's insides sent honeyed lava to creep a molten path down her thighs. Desire pulsed through her at the brazen ravishing. As always, her body became a traitor to her better sense, finding pleasure 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 thought her ridiculously uptight. When she'd dressed for tonight, she'd been willing to go 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 with fingers? Would they take her right here in front of the Plasians?

Flencik caressed a breast when Rajhir held it up to him like an offering. The Imdiko licked his finger and whirled his saliva over her areola. Amelia's traitorous body 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. We know how your society keeps your people from pleasure nature intends."

"I – I have to go," Amelia whimpered, wishing her voice sounded stronger. She tried to pull away again. 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 back into place, hiding her breasts with a rueful smile.

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

They released her and stepped back to let her pass between them. She hurried towards the still waiting aide who smiled at her as if they shared a secret. Amelia's face flamed anew.

She knew the aide hadn't seen what she'd let 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.

* * * *

Rajhir watched Amelia rush away through the willowy crowd of Plasian elite. His eyes drank in her lush body, 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 a woman's body offered. To discover her with fingers, mouth, and sex organs. To uncover all her body's treasures, to decode its secrets.

The Dramok had enjoyed his fair share of women. More than his fair share, in fact. So few females of his own kind were left, but first as the son of a councilman and now a councilman himself, he had never lacked for female companionship. His now-ignored distant blood ties to the royal family back on Kalquor had also ensured enough attention to keep him occupied when only the softness of a woman would do.

The few Kalquorian women still 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 women of different species, but none had ever come close to one 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 was breeding compatible, Ospar had told Rajhir his clan could keep her as their mate.

"Even if you don't want her for yourself, you must bring her back to Kalquor. I don't have to remind you of the duty you have to the Empire, my friend," Dramok Ospar had said.

"So we're reduced to kidnapping," Rajhir said. He made sure Ospar heard the disgust in his tone.

"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 woman 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 knew when to let it pass. He had thought clanning Amelia Ryan would be one of those duties he would not take up, even if she was compatible to carry his children. Why should he when he could have one 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 take her back to Kalquor and let another clan not so blessed with opportunity have her.

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

As delightful as Amelia Ryan's flesh felt, it wasn't so much her body that gave the Dramok pause. It was that sweet vulnerability in the Earther's eyes, that instant submission that too few women enjoyed. Kalquorians, male and female alike, were mostly alpha creatures, dominant in some form or another. The way Amelia Ryan had melted against Rajhir, had surrendered so beautifully 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, even 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, to let her tender, soft flesh enclose him, consume him...

"The poor woman is terrified," Flencik said in Kalquorian, interrupting Rajhir's fantasy. The Imdiko's voice betrayed his disgust. "Her government has done severe damage to her natural instinct for sexual pleasure. She cannot enjoy what her body 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 go away, 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 found himself unable to tear his eyes from Amelia Ryan. It was as if he'd never seen a woman before, had never bedded a single female in his life. She was exquisite. His status that would eventually attract a Kalquorian lifebringer to join his clan was very much the least thing on his mind right now. 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 eyes, and the Plasian Saucin herself, Israla. Amelia glanced at the Kalquorians then looked away, blushing furiously.

She might be afraid of them, but she was every bit as fascinated by them as he was with her. Rajhir said, "They haven't destroyed all 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 immediately 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 has lived her life in submission to the males that hold all 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 little like the uncivilized youth Rajhir had clanned, his more brutal nature at last tamed. However, a Nobek never truly lost his more 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 let his wilder leanings take hold. He learned his lesson with Flencik. He's not a youngling anymore and I can trust in his maturity. He will 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 enough, 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 even speak to us?"

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

Flencik narrowed his eyes at his clanmate. His heavy brow creased. "We are not to take her unless she proves viable. Even then, such action might traumatize her. Earthers are much more fragile than we are. We don't know if stress damages 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 immediately fell silent and waited for him to speak.

He eyed Amelia again. Though not as aggressive as Nobeks, the Dramok breed was the most dominating. The thought of the lovely creature struggling against him and then surrendering to his seduction threatened to arouse Rajhir beyond conscience. He knew the sweetness of such a forceful seduction and felt the possibility given Amelia's reluctant but eager reaction to their touches. He was sure she could be coerced.

He kept these thoughts to himself, determined to maintain Flencik's peace of mind. His gentle Imdiko had to be handled even more carefully in this matter than Breft. Unless Flencik was absolutely 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 thought for a moment before continuing. "We must also remember that if we force Amelia Ryan to take Flencik's tests against her will and her government discovers it, we risk Earth not letting any more of their females off-planet where we have easier access. We must find a way to 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 know and 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.”

* * * *

Osill clasped his long-fingered hands together. “The anticipation has nearly driven me mad.” He eyed the covered painting like a starving man at a feast. Then again, the reed-thin Guildmaster 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, a pressure that ran all over her body. She did her best to ignore them.

How naked she felt in her scanty gown! “I only hope I've met the Saucin's and Guild's expectations,” she told Osill, inclining her head toward Israla.

The Plasian leader's smooth face 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 just 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 even Amelia's, consisting of only a scarf-like fabric draped around the back of her neck and hanging over her small but perfect breasts. Another scarf tied about her hips. The fabric was deep red and completely 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 of all races and body types was also 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 these boys were young enough to be Israla's great-grandsons. Their slender penises stood at attention as they unselfconsciously rubbed Israla's back. Occasionally Israla smiled at them and stroked their eager flesh with pointed fingertips. Amelia couldn't bear to look at them.

Amelia still preferred Israla's aloofness to Osill's enthusiasm, as the Guildmaster 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 the Plasians expected so much of her. Such attention could only doom her latest painting to failure. It would never live up to their hopes.

The opposite would have happened back home. 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, still 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 much sensation, although 'sensation' in Plasian terms was tame by most interstellar beings' standards. There had been an endless round of quiet dinner parties hosted by Plasian elite. They started off quiet, at any rate. Amelia learned fast to leave the dinners as soon as eating was done because Plasian parties always degenerated into sex orgies that lasted well into the next day. She was sure tonight would be no exception. As soon as she finished her presentation, she planned to head straight for the nearest exit.

Outside the upper crust of Plasian society, Amelia had received dozens of offers from both male and female fans eager to help her shed the well-known issue of Earther sexual

inhibitions. She'd been kissed on the street, pulled onto turgid laps at the outdoor cafes, and on one memorable occasion, nearly undressed in the middle of an art exhibit by four amorous women. For their part, the Plasians couldn't understand how someone who painted such sensual pictures became flustered when confronted with sensuality itself.

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

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

The crowd surged forward, and Amelia saw the Kalquorians also approach. They were staring at her just as she'd sensed, their eyes devouring her. Such attention seemed to set her skin on fire. It was almost as if they had the ability to possess her body with their stares. 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 everyone, giving Amelia someone else to pay attention to. "Welcome, everyone. This is an exciting occasion, one we've all been looking forward to for some time. We come here tonight to celebrate the work of our visiting Earther artist, Amelia Ryan."

Polite, quiet applause. The guildmaster smiled at Amelia, and she returned the warm expression. She could feel her lips trembling and hoped it wasn't obvious. Damn it, she was nervous what with the presentation she was about to make and the Kalquorians standing nearby.

Osill continued his speech, facing the audience once more. "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 one language. Not in many generations has an artist spoken as eloquently as our new friend Amelia Ryan. We are honored to host her on Plasius where we hope she will 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, put on a smile, and stepped forward.

"Thank you, Guildmaster 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 would 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, all the tension leading up to this moment released its grip on Amelia's gut. Indeed there could be no doubt that 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 revealed itself to her with unguarded abandon. She instantly saw in them the undulating curves of a reclining Plasian woman, lush with invitation. Amelia 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.

Then 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 every bit 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 all of Plasius with your art. Thank you." She kissed Amelia with an open mouth then bowed. 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 many tears. 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. Then 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 into the air, 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 will take you to safety."

Amelia whooped air into her chest. She lay limp in Breft's arms as her grateful lungs heaved.

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 will 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, opening the door and ushering them in. "You will 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 will have refreshment brought to you."

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 to them 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 lounger 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, a self-protective gesture. 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, his body angled towards the closed door they'd entered through as 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 the roses back on Earth 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 the roiling warm water eased tense muscles.

The room was a sensual retreat, but only one door offered Amelia escape.

She looked at the trio of men who regarded her in silence. She knew she should get off the lounger or at least sit up, but she was afraid to move. She was afraid they'd push her back down and pin her to the lounger. That they would take advantage of their greater strength.

It would be all Amelia's fault if the Kalquorians chose to force themselves on her, the way it had been her fault with the other men. What could she say to these aliens after the way she'd surrendered to them earlier? Surely they 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. Many times Amelia had dined in restaurants with Vrill while fellow diners pleased each other right at their tables. Early on, she learned to keep her eyes on her meals.

Had the Kalquorians really acted inappropriately when they'd fondled Amelia in the great room? Not in the least 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, *You know it has nothing to do with misunderstandings. These brutes want something from you, and it's not lessons in Earther etiquette!*

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 incredibly 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, and 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 not 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 leshella 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 exactly?" she asked, sniffing the sapphire liquid.

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 took a sip of her drink for something to do before she said anything else to encourage the trio.

The drink tasted smooth and buttery, and yes, similar but better than an expensive white wine. The knots in Amelia's muscles loosened. The leshella 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 said to Rajhir to hide 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 not true, but they look – correct?" He struggled. "I do not have Earth 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 only made them look more perplexed. Breft's lips pursed as he thought. "It sounds like something from the Temple of Life's teachings, I think."

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 without her noticing one of the Kalquorians refilling it.

"Is it good?" Breft said.

"Wonderful." Languor spread through Amelia's body like a balm. She was relaxed but not fatigued. Indeed, her senses felt incredibly alive, as if she was on the verge of some great

excitement, only waiting for something wondrous to happen. Her body flushed with warmth, and the lounge felt to her skin like the softest 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 one breast was in danger of exposure.

Amelia thought lazily, what does it matter? The men surrounding her had seen the show already. It no longer seemed like such 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 what it would be like to molest them.

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

Fingertips – Flencik's? – brushed over her throat. Amelia caught her breath. The flesh felt sensitive there, more sensitive than it had ever been before. Flencik's fingers drifted down to her breastbone, leaving a trail of heat.

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

The fingertips moved to Amelia's breasts, flattening so that the Imdiko's huge hands covered them. She moaned, the heat from his touch 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 moist lips brushed hers. "You are very desirable, lovely Amelia."