

Behind the Masks Part II

Author's Note:

As usual, I really do appreciate any and all feedback. This story is set as part of the aftermath of the Dragon War. It is a series of "slice of life" scenes in the every day lives of our heroes. I envision at least one other part, but probably three more "chapters" to it. You can always email me at Cobalt-Blue

Scene 7

The mall was crowded with people getting ready for the holiday season. D'an'a actually found the whole concept of Christmas to be rather interesting. She had only seen four Christmases so far, and had enjoyed them even she didn't understand them.

It was one thing that her Dad, Adam insisted upon. Late in every December, they would all pack up and go spend a week with D'an'a's grandparents in Maryland. She wasn't sure this year what she was going to do since she was living with Leighanne and family.

She sat with her friends at Burger Meister and enjoyed a loaded double bacon cheeseburger. She was finding that she could eat just about anything humans ate so far, but like most of her people, was fascinated by bread. The girls on the squad had all commandeered one of the larger tables in the back of the *gourmet* hamburger restaurant and were talking rather animatedly.

Finally, Marissa asked in a more sedate voice, "Were you serious about letting us ask questions?" Her voice was unusually low for the usually vibrant outgoing girl.

D'an'a smiled at her and said, "Sure. As long as I can ask questions back."

Marissa seemed surprised by the caveat but smiled broadly. "You're interested in us too?"

"Of course," D'an'a said. "Why do you think my parents sent me here? To learn about the human side of my heritage."

"Okay," Marissa said. "We've heard all kinds of things about what it's like on Illia, but so Bonnie and Chris are the only people we know besides you who've been there."

"Corey's been there," D'an'a corrected.

"Yeah, but Corey's kind of a special case. He might as well be a Shan too," Cassie said.

"That's not entirely accurate, but I don't think it's fair to discuss Corey while he's not here," D'an'a said.

"Fair enough," Marissa said shooting a warning took to Cassie.

"What do want to know?" D'an'a asked.

All the girls looked at each other and then Cassie asked, "Well, we know that the Shan don't wear clothing in general. How are you coping with it here?"

D'an'a chuckled and said, "As best I can. I honestly don't understand all the discomfort you show about being seen in the nude. We never developed the need for clothing because we are immune to the effects of cold, and to be honest they would get in the way underwater. If I were to wear a pair of jeans in the water, when I tried to swim quickly, they would hinder my jets and I couldn't make the necessary changes in thrust to be able to maneuver." She smiled and then added, "The first time Corey tried that, he shredded them."

The girls exchanged glances and then said, "Not all humans are as attractive as you are. We don't want to show all of our flaws."

"You just have to learn to accept who you are," Bonnie interjected.

"Did you go naked there?" Jennifer asked.

"A time or two," Bonnie said. "More than Chris did."

"That must have been a sight," little Leslie said.

"It was interesting," was all Bonnie would say.

"What about what they're saying on the news about kids being naked and having sex?" Leslie asked blushing deeply.

"They're saying a lot of things," D'an'a said. "Not all of it is accurate. What do you want to know?"

"Are the kids naked too?" Jennifer asked.

"Very few people wear clothes in Illia," D'an'a said. "And the ones who do are either visitors from other countries, or they are dealing with visitors who find casual nudity to be distressing."

"Do they have sex all the time, out in the public too?" Leslie asked.

"Some do," Bonnie said. "Shan choose when they get pregnant, so it's not a big deal for them. It's just a way to have fun, like playing football or just to cheer someone up, to make them feel good."

"So you just make love to a complete stranger?" Cassie asked somewhat shocked.

D'an'a shook her head and said, "If you wanted to I guess you could, if they wanted to too. But mostly it's between friends."

"Boys and boys, too?" Leslie asked.

"Boys and boys too, and boys and girls, and girls and girls, and sometimes in a group. Pin to the bottom is one of our favorite games."

"Pin to the bottom?" Cassie asked.

"It's sort of a mass wrestling game that becomes very intimate," D'an'a said.

"Have you played it?" Cassie asked.

D'an'a smiled thinking of B'near, her favorite playmate back home. He was a young baseline just coming into puberty. He had been so sincere when he'd come up to her at the Rec Center party. She'd seen directly into his mind that his interest in her was genuine, and her heart had almost burst at the affection she felt off the boy. D'an'a felt her male genitalia begin to harden in her jeans at the memory. "I've played it with a friend, not en masse, like I was just describing. Defenders have to be careful when we play."

"Because of your strength?" Marissa asked.

"Yes, because of our strength. B'near is a baseline. He's no stronger than a human of his age. If I'm not careful I could hurt him."

"B'near?" Marissa asked. "Is that your boyfriend's name?"

"He's a friend, and he's a boy," D'an'a said. "But I don't think that the term boyfriend would apply the way you use it. Yes, we've had sex, but at the same time we are not exclusive. I know for a fact that he's had several other playmates as well."

"I think the term she's looking for is, friends with benefits," Bonnie said.

"But you haven't?" Cassie asked with an insight that surprised D'an'a. "Had other partners that is?"

D'an'a shook her head and said, "No, not really."

"Why?" Marissa asked. "I mean if your people don't have a problem with it, why just one boy?"

D'an'a exchanged looks with Bonnie and then sighed and said. "Because just like humans, Shan are not all cut from one cloth. We have a social strata as well, and I recognize that because of who one of my fathers is, I am near the top of that strata. I'm a telepath and I can read people's minds. Most of the offers I've had have been from people who only wanted to play with me so they could say they'd played with K'horal's child. There are other reasons too, they are more personal, but that is the main one. B'near genuinely liked me, not because of who my parents are, but because of me. That was rather special. He could care less who my parents are."

"Who are his parents?" Marissa asked.

"One of his father's is a xeno-biologist, another is a mathematician, and the third is a defender. His mothers are all doctors."

"Have you "played" with any humans since you've been here?" Cassie asked making little quotation marks in the air at the word: played.

D'an'a smiled and said, "When I came to live with Mrs. Leight and her family, I understood that I would have to live within human cultural norms. That doesn't mean that I can't take a lover if I choose do so, but your cultural norms tell me that I shouldn't answer that question without first knowing you very well- or at least you be willing to answer the question as well."

"Huh?" the other girl said.

"You tell first," Bonnie said with a smile.

Cassie blushed deeply and said, "Oh."

"Well is there anyone you'd like to go out with?" Marissa asked.

D'an'a shrugged, "There have been a few boys and girls that I've seen that I would like to get to know better."

"Ewwww," Leslie said.

D'an'a raised an eyebrow, sensing in her mind the source of the girl's discomfort. "I am Shan, not human, Leslie. At least not completely. I am by biological need, bisexual. That is pretty open knowledge on the various media sources. I can never conceive a child without the presence of the hormones of another female." She didn't add, that she couldn't father a child without first taking the seed of another male either.

"Shan culture is an example of nature initially defining society. Shan can't become fertile without the presence of others of both genders. I won't get into the mechanics of it. That's an advanced college biology course on its own." Bonnie said.

"Well, who do you like?" Marissa asked.

"In what manner?" D'an'a queried.

"Someone to go out with?" Marissa said.

D'an'a sighed and said, "Someone to be friends with, everyone here on the squad. Someone to "play" with...." She copied Cassie's gesture with her own webbed fingers, smiled and said, "There are quite a few, I'd like to play with. But, I'm afraid there would be too many misunderstandings."

"What do you mean?" Marissa asked.

"Besides personal matters that I don't want to discuss, there's the fact that I'm going out with them to find a potential husband or wife. I would simply be going out with them to enjoy their company, make a new friend and maybe have a good time," D'an'a said.

"You mean you wouldn't love them?" Leslie said.

"No, I did not say that. I mean I wouldn't be looking for a podmate. I haven't reached my sexual maturity yet," D'an'a said. "Human society places an emphasis on sex that the Shan don't. It's probably because humans can get pregnant by accident. There are no accidental pregnancies among the Shan. As mothers explained it to me, there is no, "oops guess what?"

"What do you mean you haven't reached sexual maturity yet? You haven't gotten your period?" Leslie asked.

"Shan females don't menstruate," D'an'a said. "Blood in the water, sharks in the water, female in the water, don't make for a good combination." She sipped her soda and said, "I mean that my body isn't capable of releasing an egg yet. They are there, they are functioning, but there is a valve in my ovaries that lets me release it when it's formed yet."

"Okay, who do you want to take you to the winter formal?" Marissa asked changing the subject. She seemed to be concerned with the idea of D'an'a not having a boyfriend. D'an'a on the other hand needed to find a boy who wouldn't have a problem with her extra set of genitalia and could be discreet. "I thought about asking Stefan Vovaraky, the new kid in the neighborhood."

"You mean the Russian?" Leslie asked.

D'an'a smiled and said, "Da." Then she noticed a look of concern on Bonnie's face. She let her mind drift over to her young friend and realized exactly who it was, that Chris was going to introduce to Corey.

"He's a geek!" Leslie said.

"So?" Bonnie said rather defensively. "Haven't you heard, geeks will one day rule the world."

"Sorry, D'an'a," Marissa said. "I don't think, you quite have the plumbing to interest Vovarsky."

"Plumbing has nothing to do with a social occasion among friends. Besides, if he's not interested in me sexually then I don't have to worry about a date that wants play pin the bottom," she said.

"I thought you said you didn't mind playing pin to the bottom with a friend," Leslie commented.

"I don't, but then again there is the difference between Shan and human social norms," D'an'a said. Leaning in over the table she said conspiratorially, "Besides, I'm afraid I might break him."

"Can I ask question that doesn't deal with sex?" Cassie said.

"Sure," D'an'a replied.

"Why did you and Corey decide on cheerleading?"

"They wouldn't let us play furball, and Corey wanted something physical," D'an'a replied. "In cheerleading we can still participate on the field without participating in competition."

"Why won't they let you play furball?" Marissa asked.

"Pheromones," Bonnie said.

"And my water wings," D'an'a added. "It seems that nocturnal claws can shred them. Mine will stop a bullet but not a werewolf's claws. Corey's will stop even the werewolf claws though, but he has a transhuman gene for durability and strength too."

"So you aren't exactly alike?" Leslie asked.

"No," D'an'a said. "He's much stronger than I am and can take whole lot more damage. But the again, he can't do some things I can do."

"Such as?" Cassie asked.

"Magic," D'an'a told her. "I got the mage gift from my mother."

Bonnie's phone rang, and D'an'a watched her check the message. Bonnie smiled hugely, and then said, "I think you'd better find another date for the Winter Formal."

"Why?"

"I think Stefan has one already," he said.

"Perhaps, I'll ask Simon then," D'an'a said.

"Ask Simon what?" the object of their discussion interjected as he sat down at a nearby table with a very pregnant red-head in her early twenties.

Scene 8

Jord'n felt the shuttle settle into its docking bay in the embassy in Miami. Well, technically, the embassy was located about five kilometers off the coast of Cocoplum in South Biscayne Bay. It was far enough out to keep the casual boater and swimmer from "buzzing" the facility out of curiosity, but close enough to be able to be able to carry out the business of the embassy. Mainly it allowed them maintain both a dry and an aquatic environment for the Shan who ran the embassy.

K'hori's meeting with the UN ambassador had turned into another exercise in frustration. The UN was accusing Illia of economic warfare, which Jord'n was honest enough with herself to realize that in a way, it was probably a truth. Illia and Atlantis had decided that one of the best ways to not only build the capital of their own currencies but to break the power of the petrol-dollars fueling international terrorism was to take the world off the oil standard.

Using their advanced fabricating technologies both countries began exporting petroleum on the world market in a bulk rate that forced the price of oil to plummet. Then they began introducing clean hydrogen fuel cell energy technology to member nations of the International Alliance. This further suppressed the price of oil and the screams that were coming out of OPEC could be heard around the world.

Add into the mixture the fact that when Ship entered into braking orbit around the Earth, the Chinese tried to shoot him down with a nuclear missile over Tibet. That forced him off course and over North Africa. The pressure wave of an object three

kilometers wide moving at fifty times the speed of sound had plowed city of Mecca into the Red Sea. That had not been an auspicious start as far as the Muslims of the world were concerned. Actually, it had earned the Shan the eternal enmity of many of those people.

The fact that the Shan and eventually the Atlanteans had allied themselves with the International Alliance during the Transhuman War, had further created a rift between the UN and the people of Illia. Jord'n did not question her husband's wisdom in making the alliances that he did. Mother, the colony's electronic intelligence, had backed him, and so far Jord'n could not complain about the results. Yes, Illia was technically on a wartime footing, but with the demonstration of force they'd given during the last attack, the UN had decided to withdraw its threats. Jord'n suspected that it had to do with a certain knowledge that Illia's space based lasers were now trained on the capital cities of several UN member states. Were Illia to be attacked again, those cities would be burned to the ground in a matter of seconds.

"You seem pensive, Love," Randi said next to her. "Not something I would expect of you after the other night."

Jord'n smiled at her wife, realizing she was speaking of the decision they'd made to have more children. "Just thinking about the world situation and how we ended up here."

"We are meeting here at the request of the Atlanteans," K'hori said.

"Why did they want to meet at our Embassy?" Adam asked.

"Sloan Atlan said that it was because he suspected that certain members of the Imperial Family would be less likely to break our stuff than their own for this meeting."

"Who are we meeting?" Randi asked.

"A representative from the UN..."

"Again?" Randi asked in exasperation.

"Again, but we are also meeting with the Atlanteans and the Meirrians," K'hori said.

"The who?" Adam asked.

"The Meirrians," K'horal said. "They are the extraterrestrial race that was supplying the UN with the psionic enhancing crystals that Leighanne took from the gestalt that attacked us."

"What's that supposed to be about?" Adam asked.

K'hori smiled as the airlock cycled on the shuttle and they water inside it mixed with the warmer water of the bay. "I am unsure," he said. "If I understand correctly, the crystals did not come from a Meirrian approved source. I'm told that Leighanne, Corey, and D'an'a are going to be here too."

Jord'n noted the hint of humor in their husband's voice with that last news. The chance to see their child again was most welcome to all of them- especially with the news they had to share. "Is that why you told us to clear our schedules for the whole day?" she asked.

"Of course. I miss D'an'a too. I thought we could spend the day as a family," K'horal said.

"But why Leighanne?" Randi asked. "Don't get me wrong, since her son now carries part of your genetics, I tend to think of her and George as family anyway, but I get the feeling there's more to it than that."

"There is, and I don't understand it," K'horal said. "Evidently the Meirrians requested her by name."

"Oh shit!" Randi said. "I know what this is about."

"What?" Adam asked.

"Her brother," Randi said.

"Leighanne doesn't have a brother," Adam said.

"Not any more. He was killed in two-thousand three when the UNIPACT Prime attacked Cape Canaveral."

"Leighanne's brother was Sun Dancer?" Adam asked. "I didn't know that," he added as the four of them exited the craft and swam upwards toward the surface of the moon pool that led to dry areas of the embassy.

Before they reached the surface, Randi reached out and touched K'hori's and Jord'n's arm. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course," K'horal said with a smile.

"Leighanne's going to be on edge as it is. She and the Meirrian's didn't part on the best of terms the last time they talked. Out of deference to her, I would suggest bowing to human custom and wearing suits and ties."

K'horal gave her a long look and then smiled, "Out of deference to Leighanne, I think that would be a good idea."

Jord'n smiled and asked, "What happened?"

Randi frowned and said, "When Leighanne was about Corey's age, Sun Dancer got caught up in some kind of political battle in the Meirrian Senate. They targeted Leighanne and Sun Dancer for execution because for some reason it was illegal for him to be a Gem Corpsman. I don't understand it all, but it had something to do with genetic engineering. In the end, Sun Dancer agreed to have his powers burnt out in exchange for his, Leighanne's and his son's lives."

"What?!" Adam asked. "Is that the reason he left Paraforce 1?"

Randi nodded her head. "Yeah. He left to create the equipment he used later to continue to be a hero. He just did it without his powers."

"And we're going to be meeting with these people?" Jord'n asked.

"Evidently," Randi said as they entered the area where the Shan consul was awaiting them. She was a tall baseline woman with lemon yellow hair. Jord'n noted that she was wearing what would be considered female business attire for humans.

"Consul Sien'a," K'horal said nodding to the woman.

"Commander," she said. Then turning to Jord'n and the others she added, "First Pod."

"First Pod?" Randi asked with a smile.

Sien'a smiled and said, "We had to come up with something to refer to you as when dealing with the humans. It is fairly analogous to the US First Family, the British Royal Family, and the Atlantean Imperial Family. We have discovered that it sometimes easier to deal with humans on their own terms."

"I knew there was a reason we sent her here," Randi said with a broad grin.

"I have taken the liberty to fabricate appropriate attire if you should choose to go that route, Commander," Sien'a said.

K'horai turned to Randi and said, "I think your idea may be for the best."

Twenty minutes later, they were all dressed in what was expected for a head of state. There were even two harpoons for her and K'horai. She left hers sitting in its

cradle. Sein'a gave her a questioning look and asked, "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"I think it best if we inform D'an'a before I confirm that," she told the ambassador whose face suddenly lit up with a smile.

"I understand. He is waiting with Defender Corey in the outer chambers. They both have their harpoons," Sien'a said.

Jord'n smiled and said, "I would expect nothing else. They earned them." She followed her family out of the dressing area down the stone hall to the conference room. A single male defender stood on guard outside the door. Jord'n noticed that besides his harpoon, he had a portable blue green laser strapped to his hip. She wondered if that was Sien'a's way of reminding the UN exactly what Illia was holding over their heads- literally.

Entering the conference room, Jord'n saw D'an'a standing next to Leighanne and Corey. D'an'a was dressed in a black skirt and with an ice-blue blouse that off set her hair rather nicely. Corey was wearing black slacks and a white pirate shirt. Both tops had slits in them for their wings to move freely. They held their harpoons at their side.

Both children were also watching with wary eyes a man and a woman standing with the Atlantean contingent.

Jord'n looked over to the men and women. She of course recognized Cobalt-Blue, Dancer, and Phantasia standing there dressed in their Atlantean mantel. They represented three of the five members of the Imperial House that made up the Emperor. Standing with them were the UN Ambassador that K'hori had met with the other day, and a woman wearing a rather strange grey suit. She had a blood red crystal at her throat, that Jord'n recognized as the same kind that Leighanne had taken from the submarines that had attacked Illia several months ago. Pinging the room, she made a remarkable discovery. Every female capable of being so in the room was pregnant, even the Meirrian. This was going to be interesting indeed.

Scene 9

"What do you want, Merrick?" Kym asked the man standing across Murphy's office from him. It had been almost a week since he'd left Spellbreaker and the dragon armor with Tommy and Elizabeth. When he'd been asked to come to this office, he'd suspected it would be to see either Tommy or Nicole. Merrick had been something of a surprise. But he'd also asked to have Aerin present for this meeting too.

"I want to know what's going on," the big black-haired man crossed his arms and stared down his nose at Kym. "Why did you abandon your armor and sword with Tommy and Elizabeth. What do you mean you don't want anything to do with any from us that you haven't taken by right of combat?"

"It sounds pretty clear to me, Merrick," Kym said. "All of them are very simple words, granted two of them are two syllables, but they're both fairly common."

"Don't get snarky with me boy, I'll turn you over my knee," he said.

"I don't think so," Aerin said coldly. "We all are going to keep our hands to ourselves."

Merrick looked over at the tall Nordic girl and scowled. Kym knew that she made him nervous, very nervous. That was why Kym wanted her here. She would keep both of them honest. "Don't threaten me, Merrick. You're not my father, you're not dragonborn, and as far as I'm concerned you're just another dragon, a little bigger maybe, a little tougher, but you're still simply a wyrm."

The effect his words had on Merrick were immediately apparent. "I oughta knock you through a wall," Merrick said balling his fists up. Kym saw the subtle shift in weight that suggested that it was more than just a thought.

"You can try," Kym said. "I don't have Spellbreaker or the armor. You may even succeed, but if you do try, I'll do my damnedest to make Nicole a widow again. It'll be just you and me, Merrick, black dragon verses the avatar of Tyr."

"That's enough!" Aerin said, "Both of you!" She turned to Kym and asked, "What's going on here, Kym?"

"I cut my strings," Aerin, he told her. "I'm not going to play their game anymore. I took the sword and armor and left them with Tommy. They can do what ever they want with them. I'm not going to be the good little warrior anymore; follow orders, don't do this, do that. I did my last piece of dirty work for them at that mountain."

"What's this about, Kym?" Merrick asked.

"What's it always been about Merrick," Kym said. "It's about us killing each other and taking the souls. It's about being bred to be the perfect warrior, to serve the orders, to sever the peace. It's about being a weapon to be taken out, used, and then put away without evening a thank you. I'm serving you all notice, I pick the battles I fight for now on."

"You want to be thanked for doing our job?" Merrick asked.

"No, I want out," Kym said. "There's peace between the dragons and the 'born. You've got Nicole. Tommy's got Elizabeth, and she's got Matthew and my fathers' power." He looked at Merrick and said, "And that makes her and me about evenly matched, and you over-matched. I want my father's back, I want my life back. But no, I'm not going to get those. My fathers are dead, and their power has been cleansed of their personalities by now. My world, my grandfather, my home, my whole damn universe have dissolved into nothingness- you yourself saw to that."

"Grow up Kymbrall," Merrick said. "You're acting like a selfish brat. The universe isn't all about you."

"You're right Merrick," Kym said. "It's not about me. It's never been about me. It's been about the Hidden War. I was created for one thing and one thing only, Merrick- to bring about peace between the dragons and the 'born. A lot of people died for that to happen, Merrick. Now every dragon on this world has a dragonborn counterpart.

The six children you brought with you have six dragon mates. You have Nicole, and Elizabeth has Tommy. My job is done. You have your peace, you have your wife, you have your family. What more do you want from me, Merrick?" Kym said angrily.

"You're turning your back on the dragons, and 'born, Kym. That's not right. They gave you a home, they trained you, and made you who you are," Merrick said. "You're breaking your Aunt's heart, you're breaking Tommy's heart."

"Why?" Kym asked. "Because I don't want to play good little dragonslayer anymore? Or is it something else? With everyone else gone, do you just not have anyone you can push around? Do you still need me to go fetch and tote for you?"

"Kym, I don't think that's quite fair?" Aerin said.

Kym turned to her and said, "Neither was forcing me into a meaningless fight, a distraction to keep the dragons off Nicole's and Elizabeth's back while they went after Cain."

"You were here two months before we arrived. You could have taken him out in that time. Why didn't you?" Merrick asked. "If it was all that important to you, then you should have done it before we got here. I guess the famed dragonslayer isn't all he's cracked up to be." Kym balled up his fists and felt his nails bite into the skin of his palms. "Somebody had to distract him, while our best operatives took him out," Merrick quoted one of Kym's grandfather's favorite canards. "You forget, Tommy and I were there in that fight with you. We stayed and did our duty."

"Are you suggesting I didn't?" Kym asked.

"No, but I'm suggesting that you're bitching about having to do it," Merrick said.

"Okay, I'm bitching about having to do my job. Now my job's over. You've got your peace, what else do you want?" Kymbrall asked.

"I don't know, my family," Merrick said.

"You've got that. You've got Nicole, you've a step son, and you've got a daughter in law."

"Yes, but I'm missing my snarky nephew," Kym said.

"And I'm missing my Dad's and my grandfathers," Kym said.

"And your aunt is missing her brother and her father, and though she won't admit it, even her mother," Merrick said. "Look, her and Elizabeth going after Cain wasn't a slight against you, it wasn't an attempt to keep you from gaining your father's phyre.

You and I both know that by that time Cain would have been cleansed it of their personalities. Harsh truth is, we both know how the phyre works."

"That may be the case, Merrick, but I wasn't even given a chance. It was just like the Orders telling me not to investigate their deaths in the first place, because they were afraid of offending the dragons," Kym said.

"Damn it boy, it had nothing to do with offending the dragons!" Merrick said.

"Then what did it have to do with?"

"It had to do with the fact that your aunt was protecting you. It had to do with the fact that she didn't want to lose another member of her family. It had to do with the fact that nobody knew if Cain was still a black. He was expecting you. He set everything up to get you to come to him. She didn't do it to cheat you out of getting him. She did to keep you alive and keep him from gaining your phyre," Merrick said.

"Okay, she protected me. Cain's dead. I'm still alive. What now?" Kym asked.

"Now, you and your aunt and your cousin and all the rest of us get a chance to rebuild; to live our lives without the Hidden War hanging over our heads," Merrick said.

"Okay," Kym said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Talk to your aunt and your cousin; give them a call," Merrick said.

"That doesn't sound unreasonable, Kym," Aerin said.

"What's there to talk about? Kym asked. "How they're going to rebuild the orders, or maybe a new society of dragons or something?"

"No," Merrick said. "No. You don't get it. They're not rebuilding the orders. You're the only one talking about rebuilding the orders."

"Fine, you're not rebuilding the orders. Good, I'm glad to hear it," Kym said flippantly. "What do you want me to do? Oh, I know. How about military school? That way I can be out of your hair until you need me to kill something."

"You just want to pick a fight don't you?" Merrick said.

"Not particularly, Merrick. You're the one who came here. I'm just getting my blows in while I can," Kym said.

"I'm came here to check on you because you won't take your aunt's calls. Then you show up at Tommy's and drop off your gear and tell us all to go to hell," Merrick said.

"Okay, I'm fine," Kym said. "I'm eating three meals a day, and I haven't missed any school."

"It's not a matter of missing school or whatever the hell," Merrick said. "It's more of a matter the fact that you've decided that you don't have a family."

Kym shrugged and said, "I have some family left. I have an aunt, and I have a cousin."

"Whom you're not speaking to," Merrick said.

"I spoke to Tommy just the other day," Kym replied flippantly.

"So are all your conversations going to go, here's the crap I don't want any more. Fuck off?" Merrick asked. "Don't call me, I'll call you and don't hold your breath cause I ain't gonna be calling?"

"No," Kym said. He hated the fact that the way Merrick put it made him sound so self centered. He hated himself for feeling exactly the way Merrick was describing. "What do you want me to say, Merrick? Everything is okay? Everything isn't okay. I'll live. I'll get over it. But right now, dealing with you and dealing with Elizabeth is more than I want to deal with."

"Okay then don't deal with me or Elizabeth, but don't shut out the rest of your family because you don't like either one of us at the moment," Merrick said.

"Okay." Kym said simply. "You win. I'll talk to Nicole and Tommy." Kym wondered how this conversation suddenly got so twisted around.

"Oh could you do me just one small favor?" Merrick asked.

Kym looked at him incredulously. "What?"

"Could you not possibly tell your aunt that I butted my snout in?" he asked. "She sort of told me to leave it alone until you were ready to come talk to them. Well, I figured if you are as stubborn as either one of them are, then Hell was going to freeze over before you did. I figured if I made you mad enough at me, then you might call your aunt to tell her to tell me to fuck off."

"I'll think about it Merrick," Kym said.

"That's all I ask," he said. "Now, I'll get out of your hair and leave you alone." He turned to Aerin and said, "Ms. Draupnir, Kym." He then left the office.

"Well, that didn't go the way I thought it might, Kym said turning back to the window."

"Oh?" Aerin asked. "How did you think it might go?"

"I should have remembered my grandfather's advice," Kym said.

"Which is?"

"Kill a dragon before he can talk you to death," Kym said.

"Well, you're still standing," Aerin said. "Besides, there has to be something somewhere redeeming about that particular dragon. Your aunt doesn't particularly strike me as someone to leave fools or threats standing."

"I'm not so sure," Kym said. "My aunt always liked to play with dangerous toys. In the meantime, I think I'm going to go home and take a long shower. Somehow I feel sort of dirty."

Scene 10

Murphy wasn't stupid. She knew exactly where Jake had been sleeping these past few weeks. But what Jake didn't seem to realize was that she really had no problem with him sharing Kevin's bed. After Kevin's funeral, he'd come to her and confessed that he and Kevin had been lovers, something Murphy had already known. She'd come home from that fight with Russian Winter in New York City to find the two exhausted and curled up together in Kevin's bed. It was the way that Jake's arm had been draped protectively over Kevin's chest, and the fact that by judging from the pile of clothes on the floor, they were both nude.

She knew that he'd been tiptoeing around her for over a week, simply giving her plenty of space. Now it was time for some frank and open discussion between them.

She caught him coming out of the Command Center that they'd moved into the basement of the main headquarters and said, "Jake, you got a few minutes?"

He smiled up at her and said, "Sure." She noticed that his body kinesthetics, his reactions to her were not that of the seventeen year old he looked like but more like the thirty year old man he'd been before Avalon pulled whatever stunt she'd pulled to run his age back.

She looked down at her watch and asked, "How about I buy us both a cup of coffee at the DF?"

"Sounds good," he replied.

Five minutes later they'd grabbed a couple of seats where they could watch the bay through the window. As they settled in watching the sun begin to sink into the Western horizon, she asked, "How are things working out with you and Kev?"

He swallowed a sip of coffee and said, "They're coming along. There's some adjustments, I've changed and he hasn't."

"Serious?" she asked wondering how Kev was dealing with a much more mature Jake than that to which he was accustomed.

Jake shook his head and said, "No, not really. It's just I'm not used to being the one to slow things down, to point out patience. He used to do that for me." He looked up at her and said, "I heard we had a few visitors earlier this afternoon."

"You mean Merrick and Kymbrall?" she said. "Just a family squabble that Kym asked Aerin to mediate."

"What kind of squabble?" Jake asked.

"Kym's cut himself off from his family; even went as far as to turn his armor and sword over to his cousin. I think he's got just a little bit of the drama queen in him," she said. "Merrick came by to tell him to grow up and stop acting like a prick."

"What do they expect him to do?" Jake said. "I understand where he's coming from. What his aunt and Drake did was tantamount to what the President did to me. Stand by and watch but don't do anything. He had a lot of emotion, and a lot of personal blood invested into taking down Cain. They cut his feet out from under him and demanded that he follow orders. I think I'd be a little miffed too."

"Well, Merrick set him strait. Pointed out just how petty and childish he was being and told him to call his aunt and cousin," Murphy told him.

"How did he take that?" he asked.

"According to Aerin, he took it rather well. He agreed to it," she told him.

"That is not good," Jake said.

Murphy looked at him confused, "Why? They're talking now."

Jake shook his head and said, "I don't think so. Merrick didn't address the problem, he just dressed him down and told him to shape up. He covered it over. I know Kym's personality type. He'll do just what they told him to do. I know this is the case for Merrick and Drake, and I suspect that it might be the same for the others as well; they don't see Kym as a person, or at least he doesn't think they see him as a person."

"What do you mean?" Murph asked worriedly.

"All his life, he's been this Avatar of Tyr, this wunderkid who was neither born of woman nor hatched of dragon. He was trained from birth to be a warrior, a tool, not a person. Kym told me himself that his aunt trained him as an assassin, and as a spy. He got special instruction from every preceptor of their orders, all toward bringing about peace with the dragons. They lost sight of the fact that there was boy in there too. The only people who ever treated him as a boy, were his grandfathers, and his fathers and we know what happened to them. Now, Merrick comes in here and orders him to act like a grown up. That's going to blow up in all of their faces."

"You think it might turn violent?" Murphy asked worried.

Jake shook his head and said, "I honestly don't know. I don't think it's the way to handle Kym though. Merrick just did the one thing that drove all of that home to him. He'll relent at first, but the hurt is going to fester if it's not dealt with."

"What do you suggest?" Murphy asked.

"I don't know. He won't let anyone get close to him," Jake said. "I think about the only people he trusts, I mean really trusts right now are Aerin, and maybe Adam and Steve. I think the boys remind him of his dads, what I think he sees Aerin as scares the shit out of me."

"What?" Murphy asked.

"Galadriel," Jake said. "The perfect woman, untouched by age, and of unmatched beauty, a woman who could look into the minds of men and judge them fairly by what

she saw there." Jake sighed, "I think that in his own unique way, Kym loves Aerin. Not a sexual or even a romantic love, but I think to him, she represents the perfect virtues of womanhood. After all, she is a demigoddess. She's the perfect woman he can love, because in his own head he can never be worthy of her."

"That could be a problem if Corbin and Leif found out," Murphy said.

"I don't think so. Corbin I think understands that ideal perfectly because of his own interests in all things fantasy. Leif on the other hand, I think most people sell way too short. That Norse party-boi image of his hides a very deep soul," Jake said. "And I don't think that Kym is jealous of them either because of what they share with her. I think he sees it fitting that she should be attended by the Gods themselves."

"That's a lot of speculation, Jake," Murphy said.

Jake shrugged and said, "Have you watched him around them and her? He treats them with an almost religious reverence, which in a way is appropriate I guess."

"I'm not going to start worshiping my employees, Jake; no matter who their parents are," Murphy told him.

"Didn't say that you should, and we both know that they would be highly upset if you tried. I'm saying that Kym is caught up in his first girl-crush and he chose a real demi-goddess for it."

"Do gay boys get girl-crushes?" Murphy asked?

"Oh yeah," Jake said with a slight blush. "It's not a sexual thing, it's an admiration thing."

"Did you ever have one?" she asked.

Jake blushed deeper, "Oh yeah."

"Who?" she asked.

"You," he said sipping his coffee and looking over the rim.

"Me?" she asked surprised. "Isn't that a little Oedipal?"

Jake shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe. But it wasn't the milf thing. It was you were someone I admired. You were..., are Kev's mom. You were the person who understood what had happened between us and loved me for it. In a way, for a long time, you were the perfect woman for me- the woman by which all other women were

judged and found wanting. You were safe, because I couldn't have you and therefore could reject all other women."

"Okay, you're saying that I was at one time an object of a teenage boy's affection placed in an unattainable category," Murphy told him. Then with a smile, she added, "I can live with that." She took a deep breath and said, "But Kym is wrong about his aunt. She and I had a long, long talk about what she did that day, and why she did it."

"I'm not saying that she doesn't love him, and I'm not saying that she doesn't see him as a person. I'm saying that Kym sees it that way. Let's face it, his entire life was focused on one thing, and now it's over. But the problem is, he doesn't have a lot of experience with the others in a family setting. He was sent to live with his grandfather for the few weeks after his dads were killed. The one time he got really close to one member of his family, they sent away. It's going to take more than just talking about being a family. They're going to have to prove it to him. Right now, the only people doing that are Adam and Steve."

"You can't prove something to someone who won't acknowledge your existence beyond a "here's your shit, fuck you". His aunt is trying to contact him, to speak with him, and he refuses all communications with her," she said.

"I'm not saying she isn't. I'm saying that they've got to find a way for him to realize that they see him as a person," Jake said. "Whether they realize it or not, that little stunt you just told me about was a cry for help. I would say Merrick was the second worst person to send to answer it."

"That's just it. They didn't send Merrick. He showed up on his own to find out what was going on," Gates said putting his coffee down.

"And he basically told him to grow up. That his aunt did what she had to do to protect him and that he should appreciate it," Jake said. "I can understand where he's coming from. He wants to protect his wife from more hurt and put his family back together. But from what I understand, Kym doesn't see Merrick as part of the family." Jake sighed. "But that's them. You wanted to talk to me about something else."

"Yeah..., uh..., the apartments in ten north," she said.

"What about them?" he asked. She could hear a wariness in his voice.

"I was wondering when you and Kevin wanted to move into them?" she asked.

He set his coffee cup down and looked at her for a moment. Finally, he said, "Are you out of your mind?"

"What do you mean am I out of my mind?" she asked.

"Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do. But, I don't think it would be what's best for Kevin," he said. "Yeah, he should be thirty something years old. But he's not, he's fifteen, and whether he realizes it or not, he still needs some adult guidance."

"No, no, no, you've got it wrong. I had ten north remodeled. It's now more along the lines of being a overly large second floor of a house. I had one of the walls removed connecting it to my apartment. It's now looks more like a family room with three or four bedrooms off of it. I'm not sticking you and Kevin up there by yourselves. I'm just trying to avoid any more uncomfortable situations like the other day when Kevin busted Ethan coming out of our bedroom."

"Our bedroom?" Jake asked. She could tell he was fighting back an unspoken: *Mom!*

"Yes, we have reached the point where Ethan has moved in," she said.

"Maybe Kev and Ethan need to deal with each other then. Kev's a big boy," he grinned and said, "Trust me, Kev's a big boy. But he's known you've had lovers in the past. It's kind of hard to hide something like that from him."

"No Jake, there's a difference," Murphy said. "This is not here for a weekend, or on leave for a few days. This is a permanent thing."

"Then Kevin needs to deal with it," Jake said. "Or is this more of Ethan feeling uncomfortable?"

"No, this more of a fact that A: I would like my boys ie; you and Kevin, instead of being stuck in operative quarters on three and four to actually move in with me on nine and ten. And B: as for Kevin and Ethan, they're going to find their own balance. The scary part is that those two are more alike than they think. Finally, C: That and Ethan is Kevin's biological uncle."

"What!?" Jake asked.

"Ethan is Kevin's dad's half-brother," she said. "It was something we discovered after we started seeing each other."

Jake shook his head, "Okaaaay..., Does Kevin know?"

"Yes," she said.

"And how does he feel about it?"

"That Ethan is not the sperm donor; that it's neat that he happens to be Ether, and that he seems to be a pretty good guy. Evidently Kevin fixed him breakfast the other day and they talked."

Jake sighed and said, "Okay. I guess that's no weirder than the fact you don't have a problem with your fifteen year old son sleeping with a thirty eight year old man."

"Jake honey," she said. "Sweetie, darling, baby-face. Mentally, you may be a thirty eight year old man. But I got news for ya. Physically, you can't buy beer any more."

"Tell me about it," Jake said. "But it still doesn't change the fact that I'm much older than Kevin now, and you seem to be cool with that."

"Honestly, if were anyone else, I'd be feeding them to the sharks by now. But I saw you after Kevin's funeral. I watched you grow up and I know what kind of man you are.

It also wasn't lost on me, that you could have moved on, but never did. One doesn't just do what you did to help Kevin out of a sense of duty. What you did was very poignant expression of love. There's an old and overused concept of soul mates. If there were ever a truer example of soul mates than you and my son, I haven't heard of it."

"So, as long as we don't present you with a grand child in the next few years, you're okay with us together?"

"Ichy is enough for now. Maybe in twenty or thirty years, you figure something out, or call the Shan," she said.

"Ichy is enough for a lifetime," Jake said referring to the cheeseburger loving energy draining protoplasmic life form that Kevin had created in the lab over one weekend when he was eleven. "Hey, why didn't we use him against the dragons?" he suddenly asked.

"We thought about it. But we figured there would be two problems," Murphy said with a smile. "The first is I don't have enough lingerie to distract him and Burger Meister doesn't make enough cheeseburgers to fill him up after he was finished."

"And the second reason?" Jake asked.

"We were afraid that he'd think they were cute and cuddly and want to keep them as pets. You may not realize it just yet, and Kevin will learn that Ichy has developed to point of having a personality and an intelligence, beyond that of what Kevin's notes said would be a family pet. Ichy's now on par with probably a four year old, may five."

"Great a five year old that can eat a city's power grid," Jake said with smile.

"Yep. So see technically, you and Kevin are already daddies."

"Just don't tell Dad," he said.

"What? Your father's met Ichy. He thinks he's cute, especially after he ate the neighbor's chihuahua that barked and well, we won't say what it did to your father's newspaper every morning."

"Okay." Jake said.

"Okay what?"

"We'll move into to ten north."

Scene 11

Corey watched as D'an'a's parents entered the meeting room. He was surprised to see them all wearing basically business suits. Somehow it seemed to wrong to him, almost immoral to see the Warders in clothing. He wasn't sure why his mother had been asked to come by name, and he was completely befuddled by a request for him to be there. D'an'a made sense, she was after all their daughter.

Cobalt-Blue, smiled as the Warders entered, offered his his hand to K'horal and said "Thank you for agreeing to have us here, Commander."

The big man smiled and returned the gesture. Corey sensed that these two men genuinely liked each other. He thought that was a good thing since they now represented the leadership of two out of three of the world's hyper-powers. "It is our pleasure Your Highness." He looked over the Meirrian and UN ambassadors and added, "We had plans to spend the day in Miami with our child anyway."

Corey saw the UN consul look over at D'an'a and smirk. He caught himself scowling silently at the man. Something about his demeanor set Corey's teeth on edge.

Cobalt-Blue smiled again and said, "You know my wife and husband, the Lady Katherine and Lord Dannon?" He indicated Phantasia and Dancer. "This is Ambassador Daenalle of the Meirrian Empire, and I believe you know Consul Balyuzi from the UN?"

"The consul and I are acquainted," K'horal replied. He nodded to the Meirrian and said, "Ambassador."

"I have of course met your daughter, Dana- I'm sorry I can't approximate the sonar signals in her name, so I won't embarrass all of us by trying, and her companion, Corey Leight. I've yet to be introduced to this other young lady." *Young lady?* Corey asked

himself. He never thought of his mother as a young lady. But then again, he also wasn't supposedly five hundred years old either.

"This is Leighanne Carstairs, a friend of our family, and I'm told an acquaintance of the Meirrians," K'horal said. *Mother, knows aliens?* Corey found himself yet again surprised.

"I'm sorry my government did not treat Mrs. Carstairs, or at the time she was Miss Anderson, very well the last time we met. I was her defense counsel," the woman with the gem at her throat said.

"Uh, defense counsel?" Corey finally found his voice.

"Children should be seen not heard," Consul Balyuzi said.

"Defender Corey is a duly recognized hero among the Shan. He has defended both Illia and this world from threats, posed by your government and the recent dragon incursion," Jord'n of all people interjected. "If he has a question, then it should be addressed.

The woman with the gem said, "It's a fair question." Her eyes seemed to penetrate Corey's soul, but he felt her mental probe slip off his mind shields. "I was Miss Anderson and her brother's defense counsel, when a great injustice was carried out against Sun Dancer twenty years ago. It has always been to my regret that I was unable to do more for either of them."

"Uncle Jeff was Sun Dancer?" Corey asked.

His mom turned and nodded, "We'll talk about it later." She turned and looked at Consul Balyuzi and said, "If you ever attempt to pull that attitude with any of my children again, I will return you to your masters in several unmarked envelopes."

"I don't think threats are going to get us anywhere right now, Leighanne," Miranda said. "But I understand the sentiment, and uh..., will pitch in on the postage."

His mother turned to the Meirrian ambassador and said, "Corpsman Daenalle, it's nice to see you again, under what I hope are more pleasant circumstances."

The woman smiled at his mother and said, "The Empire will not admit it, but the Corps recognizes that you've done us a good turn. The gems you recently retrieved from the unfortunate telepaths who attacked Illia were flawed. They were cast-offs that were meant to be destroyed but somehow found their way onto the black market. You exposed a bit of corruption in the Senate. I'm afraid Senator Tiell's quarters are not going to be as pleasant as they have been in the past."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer individual," his mother said sarcastically.

Cobalt-Blue clapped his hands and said, "And that brings us to the purpose of this meeting. As Ambassador Daenalle said, those gems were sold to the UN by an interstellar criminal organization. They will not be selling any more to the UN. Furthermore, there will be no further purchases of UN grown replicants. That too has been outlawed in the Meirrian Empire."

"What?!" Balyuzi asked. "How dare you interfere with UN negotiations with an extraterrestrial species!"

Lady Katherine suddenly began chuckling. "The Meirrians are not an extraterrestrial species. They were an Atlantean colony that fled Earth during our last civil war. And furthermore you were not dealing with a government, you were dealing with Meirrian's version of *La Costa Nostra*."

Ambassador Daenalle nodded her head. "Lady Katherine is correct."

"You recognize this child's claim to a title?" Balyuzi asked.

"Consul Balyuzi," Daenalle said, "This child as you call her, stopped with her husbands one civil war and kept the Empire at peace for five hundred years. If the last Emperor had listened to her there would have never been a second civil war and we'd have never left Earth. This child's claim to the Atlantean throne is stronger than even our Empress's. The fact that she and her people are true Atlanteans is not lost on us.

Technically speaking the Empire is still a satellite colony of their throne." She looked over at the Cobalt-Blue and said, "But neither of us wish to push that issue at this time.

The Corps would probably find itself coming down on the side of Thule, and that would do our Empire even more damage than recent events."

"But we had an agreement with your representative!" Balyuzi said.

"No, you had an agreement with a criminal cartel. If you wish to open relations with Meirria, you'll have to do it through proper channels. Right now Imperial law forbids contact with Earth, for monetary purposes," Daenalle said. "In other words, nobody gets contact except the corps and certain university studies, which I believe have been halted. We will be establishing an embassy on Thule." She looked over at Cobalt-Blue and grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I really don't want to move to the South Pole."

The big blond man chuckled and said, "I don't blame you, it's cold there."

"So we're stuck with half a million replicants and are getting no more psionic crystals?" Balyuzi said.

"You have half a million replicants?" Leighanne asked incredulously. "You created humans to sell into slavery? And you wanted access to Shan technology?" She was nearly shouting.

"What kind of replicants?" Lady Katherine asked. "What was their genotype?"

Balyuzi turned on her and asked, "Why? Are you interested in buying them?"

Corey slammed the butt of his harpoon onto the floor. "You are selling people!?" He started to take step forward but felt D'an'a's hand on his arm.

"Shhh, just watch," she said to him.

K'horal smiled broadly, "Ah the outrage of a leader. Just think what's going to happen when the fact that UN has been practicing an illegal slave trade with an alien criminal organization makes it to the press and the news nets."

Balyuzi smiled back and said, "What news nets? We control most of the media."

"Oh no, no, you misunderstand me," K'horal said. "I'm not talking about the media. I'm talking about the alternative media. Most people in the West look very unfavorably on the practice of slavery."

"And they look unfavorably on the practice of taking trophies too," Balyuzi said.

"What are you talking about?" Randi asked.

"That gem around Mrs. Carstair's neck. It was one of the ones we bought."

"You mean my brother's gem?" his mother said. "The one that I've had since I was twelve?" She reached up and touched the reddish black crystal at her breast. "The one that I broke Senator Tiell's hand when he tried to take?"

"Sorry, Consul Balyuzi," Corpsman Daenalle said. "She's right. It's well documented that she's had that gem for well over twenty-years. It's not quite dead, but it's useless to anyone but her, or possibly her children." She gave his mother a meaningful look.

Corey noticed that Lady Katherine suddenly smiled and then looked over at her husband Lord Dannon. "Now back to the replicants, Consul Balyuzi," Lady Katherine said. "Exactly what are you going to do with them?"

The man smiled and said, "Perhaps it's time that UN had its own standing army. Half a million or more highly trained genetically enhanced combat troops should be quite a deterrent to any more economic warfare on the part of rogue nations."

"Half a million slaves," Corey said.

"But then again, that's all the UN has ever been truly interested in, being slave masters," Miranda said.

"I think this meeting is degenerating into threats," K'horal said. "If I understand what has been said here correctly the following agreements have been reached. The Meirrian Empire will not allow any more trade between the black market and any Earth government. They will be establishing an embassy on Thule, as they recognize it as the only government that has any legal right to trade with the Meirrian Empire."

"Not quite true, Commander," Daenalle said. "We also recognize the Shan, and if they still existed the Sslelkians."

"Oh don't forget the Mideanites," Lady Katherine said with a smile.

"Lady Katherine, officially the Midianites are an extinct species. The Gem Corps is an attempt to keep their traditions alive. Officially," Daenalle said.

"Who are the Mideanites?" Balyuzi demanded.

"The first children of Lilith," Cobalt-Blue said. "They sought refuge in Atlantis during the Great Hunt, and they served the Empire until its destruction. They were the finest and most powerful psionics the world has ever seen."

K'horal interjected, "Be that as it may, I think we need to stay on topic. The topic is this. No more Meirrian technology for the UN. Also there will be no more replicant slaves sold off planet by the UN. Am I correct Ambassador Daenalle?"

"You are correct," she said.

"Okay, then why was I asked to be here?" Bayuzi said.

"To inform you," Daenalle said. "Just as you informed the Shan that you were going to put sanctions on them. We will deal with the UN as an official government of Earth when it is able to reach a consensus from all peoples of the planet. Until then, we will deal with the Atlanteans and the Shan, and we will keep other races from interfering in the affairs of our homeworld."

"This will not end well," Balyuzi said. "Mark my words, there will be price paid for your arrogance."

"We know what that price is Ambassador, even if you don't," Corey's mother said with a smirk further confusing him. "We have already made the down payment."

"That made no sense whatsoever," Balyuzi said.

"Not to you, Consul. But it does to us, some of us at least," Leighanne said.

Scene 12

After the mess at the Embassy had been cleared up, D'an'a had enjoyed spending the day with her family. It was fun showing them around the little suburb of Miami where they lived. She showed them where they went to school, the field where they cheered, and the little burger place at the mall where they all liked to hang out.

Her father and mother, Adam and Miranda that is, were very patient while she explained a lot of the things that her mom and dad, K'horal and Jord'n didn't necessarily understand because of cultural differences. But all four of their eyes lit up when she mentioned that she had a date for the Winter Formal.

"Who is he or she?" Miranda asked while they were having lunch at the Burger Meister.

"Simon Rosen," she said. "He's the captain of the furball team, and is a werelion. His brother is the guy who could stop the dragons from using their elemental based powers."

"Hmmm, and when is this dance and do they need parental chaperones?" Adam asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Chaperons?" D'an'a asked. "What are chaperons?"

"Adults," Leighanne said. "They're job is to keep the more amorous students in line or keep others from spiking the punch or dropping balloons filled with shaving cream from the rafters."

"Amorous?" D'an'a asked beginning to understand that she was being teased. "You mean it is there job to stop them from playing pin to the bottom. Why would you do that?"

"Oh, it's our job as parents," Adam said. "To make your dates as nervous as possible, so that he will be reminded to stay on his best behavior."

"Ah, an implied threat of violence," she said.

"Violence," George said. "It's such an ugly word. Humans father think of it as their prerogative to protect the virtues of their angelic daughters." Corey in the meantime was leaning back in his chair smiling. George looked over at him and said, "Or sons."

Corey shrugged, "It's okay. Stefan's dad has already had a long talk with me."

Miranda raised and eyebrow at the comment. "You've already got boyfriend? Wow! Most kids that age aren't quite that brave."

"Chris introduced us," Corey said.

"I wasn't commenting on your bravery, Corey. We know about it. I was complimenting him," Miranda said with a wink.

"Well, I think he agreed because he was afraid D'an'a was going to ask him out," Corey teased.

"And why is he afraid of D'an'a," K'horal asked.

"Because she's learning to be human girl, and that's sort of scary all things considered," Corey said.

"I am not scary!" D'an'a said. "I'm just confidently opinionated."

"And does Simon think you're only a girl?" Jord'n asked.

"Of course not. He can smell the difference," Corey told them.

"Good. It's not a good idea to have any misunderstandings in these situations," Miranda said.

"Besides, I think he would be infinitely fun to play pin to the bottom with," she said.

"Oh, why?" K'horal asked.

"Because we match each other in strength, stamina, and durability. Neither one of us have to be afraid of hurting each other. Also he's less affected by our pheromones, so I know he's reacting to me. And since his brother's a member of the First Pride, my being Commander K'horal's kid doesn't mean a hill of beans.," D'an'a said.

"Well, we're glad your adjusting. But we've got some news for you," Randi said.

"You and mom are pregnant," D'an'a said.

All four of her parents turned and looked at each other in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I'm not sure, but I could tell all the females at the meeting today, except for me were pregnant," she said.

She watched as Corey turned to his mother and said, "Mom?"

"I don't know. Give me a minute," Leighanne said sitting back and closing her eyes. For a moment she appeared as if her mind were elsewhere. After a few moments she opened them again and said, "I told you I wanted a daughter."

"That's great!" Randi said reaching across the table and hugging her childhood friend.

After that, the day drifted into all kinds of just fun activities and by the end of it, D'an'a was nearly exhausted. She did consent however to showing her parents the dress she and Leighanne had picked out for the formal on the following night. It was a stunning black number that connected by tying around the back of her neck and then gathered in the back just above her butt giving her water wings freedom of movement. The skirt was long and flowing ending just above her ankles, and had a star pattern of sequins across the front. Leighanne had gone out of her way to help her learn to walk in high heels and had showed her how to fix her hair and makeup. D'an'a really was beginning to think of her as a third mother.

Her family had had to return to Illia around midnight and she found the parting to be harder than she thought it would be. She hadn't realized how much she missed home, and made a conscious decision to visit in a few weeks when their school schedule allowed.

Meeting Simon's family turned out to be an interesting experience. His father kept giving her the strangest looks. She let her mind drift out to touch his. His thoughts were vacillating between: *Why can't my children be normal? Why can't they date normal girls?* to *My son the doctor. Grandbabies!* He was evidently using the latter thoughts to quash the former.

Later that evening while dancing- D'an'a was still impressed with the variances in human music compared to Shan- she'd asked Simon, "What did your father mean by why can't my children date normal girls?"

"Did he say that to you?" Simon asked suddenly worried.

She shook her head and said, "No. But he was projecting it. When he caught himself thinking about it, he'd suddenly think about your brother being a doctor, and having grand children."

Simon chuckled, "When my brother David came out of the closet, my parents took it pretty well. But then he brought Noah home and all hell broke loose. Then Noah and

the rest came out as nocturnals and Dad and David took the verbal knives to each other. Eventually they worked it out- about the time David entered medical school. Now that Delia and Sharon are pregnant, all he can think about is the fact that he's going to be a grandfather."

"What does being a doctor have to do with it?" she asked.

"You have to understand. The words *my son the doctor* strikes a chord of pride inside Dad that is so deep that it overrides just about everything else in his brain. The fact that David and his family are now worth several hundred million dollars doesn't hurt either," Simon told her.

"And you and I going out together reminds him that David is a nocturnal?" she asked.

Simon smiled and laughed. "That and every new moon when I shift. I think it's going to get worse next month though. Sprite's started showing signs of shifting too, and she's only ten," Simon said.

"Sprite?"

"My sister, Amanda," Simon said. "I'm 'Bit or Little Bit, and Amanda is Sprite," Simon said.

"Your father is afraid that you see me as marriage material?" D'an'a asked.

Simon got a worried look on his face. "My dad can get weird. A lot of it is a holdover from his fights with David."

She stopped and looked at Simon and said, "I've grown up most of my life knowing that some people didn't think that I was pure Shan and wasn't a good match for their children. Others thought that I since I'm 'avad'a, I'm not a good match. It is different to be rejected because I'm not human enough. I guess Shan don't as you would say, have the market cornered on being stupid."

"I'm not rejecting you, D'an'a," Simon said.

She smiled at him and said, "I know." She leaned up and kissed him. I've known three boys in my life who've accepted me exactly as I am. You're one of them," she said.

"Corey is one of them, and I'd hazard Chris is the third?" he said.

She shook her head and said, "Actually no. Chris was embarrassed because as in his own words, he's hung better than I am. But I don't hold that against him. He wasn't seeing me as a potential playmate, but as competition for Bonnie."

"Some times Chris isn't very smart is he?" Simon said.

D'an'a chuckled and said, "It's not that. He's just very focused on Bonnie."

"They do seem to be close, don't they," Simon said looking out over the other students dancing. D'an'a followed his gaze to where Corey was leading Stefan Vovarasky out onto the dance floor. The shaggy blond Russian looked like he was about to die of embarrassment until her brother pulled him into his arms and they began to dance. Every eye in the room was on them. D'an'a could feel the thoughts of the other dancers bombard her. There was a mixture of disgust, admiration, lust, and satisfaction mixed in. Humans really did have a lot to work out when it came to their sexuality. "Glad to see Stefan get what he's wanted for a while," Simon said.

"I'm glad to see Corey start to see someone else as a potential playmate," D'an'a said.

"What do you mean?" Simon asked.

"There's a couple of kids on Illia that Corey plays with exclusively. He was starting to get too attached to them. I was worried that he was going to get his heart broken," she said.

"What about your heart?" Simon asked tilting her face up to his. Looking around quickly to make sure nobody was looking, he kissed her quickly.

D'an'a found the brief brush of lips to be gentle and full of promise. She put her hand against his broad chest, pulled back until on foreheads were touching as they danced close together. "My heart is my own. I'm not giving it to anyone for a long time. I'm Shan so that means that I will likely never give it to only one person."

"Good," he said. "I'd like to explore things with you further, to just have some fun. But I've been told that I have other responsibilities later when comes to who I can let myself fall in love with, and like you odds are it won't be to only one person. I want a pride like my brother's."

She smiled and took his hand and said, "Want to find an empty classroom?"

He shook his head and said, "No. Too much of a chance of someone walking in, or coming to look for us. But I only live a couple of blocks from here, and I've got David's old room which is the pool house. We won't be bothered by anyone."

"Okay," she said.

Ten minutes later, she found herself in a large pool house converted into a boy's bedroom. A large wrought iron circular staircase wound its way to a hatch in the center of the room. There were posters all over the walls; most of them were of big cats.

Two stood out though, one was of Murphy's Law Pacifica- Witchcat, Magelight, Life Force, Coldfire, and Defender. The other was Runeclaw and Avalon.

A huge custom made solid oak bed stood against the back wall. It looked big enough to sleep half a dozen people or more. A matching desk and entertainment center was on the opposite wall. D'an'a noticed that the place was conspicuously neat as Simon hung his jacket on a silent valet. He turned and smiled at her saying, "We don't have to do anything you don't want."

She laughed and said, "Good. I don't want to play war games." She reached up and pulled him to her kissing him seriously.

With a smile he responded to the kiss and began to run his hands down her shoulders along the smooth skin. "You're very warm," he said pulling away from her slightly.

"My body temperature is naturally forty degrees Celsius, she said, as she began to pull the tie from around his neck.

He laughed and said, "That's why standing next to you feels like lying in the sun."

"What a nice thing to say," she told him as she pushed the shirt off his shoulders revealing his broad, well-defined chest. Most boys her age were not this big, nor were they this well developed. D'an'a suspected that Simon's werewolf heritage had a lot to do with that. She ran her webbed fingers through the peppering of curly blonde hair around his nipples and across his pecs. And no Shan boys had hair on their chest or anywhere else on their bodies except for their heads and pubic areas.

As he removed his shirt, she reached behind her neck and undid the clasp to her dress and let it cascade like sheet of the night sky to floor. Picking it up, she lay it across the silent valet with his jacket and stood in front of him in only her heels, a bra, and a pair of boy's briefs. She noted with a smile that there were two large wetspots spreading across the front and bottoms of her underwear.

Simon unzipped his dress slacks and stepped out of them to reveal a tent in his boxers. With a grin she said, "There is something to be said for watching your lover undress. I'll have to mention it to Corey."

"You wouldn't!" Simon said suddenly self conscious.

She gave him a confused look and said, "Not if you would prefer I didn't."

"Do you two talk about this stuff often?" he asked.

She nodded. " We tend to talk about most things. It started when he came out of the healing chamber. He asked me about what happened to his body when he became a defender. He didn't understand some things. We had some pretty frank conversations about our bodies and about sex. We both had our first sexual experiences in the same room."

"Not with each other?" Simon suddenly asked.

She shook her head and said, "No. He was with S'vann and Ant'l and I was with B'near, the third boy who accepts me as I am."

Simon seemed to calm at that. "I'm sorry. It's just I'm a little self-conscious about people knowing what we do."

That thought bothered her a great deal. She let her mind reach out and touch his and was relieved that it wasn't through any sense of shame toward her, just the same kind of reticent that made Chris insist on him and Bonnie locking the door to his room when they made love. She smiled and stepped closer to him and kissed him again letting her hand roam down to the hard length of flesh tenting out his underwear. As her webbed hand closed around his turgid dick, she felt both of her sexes begin to respond. Her own dick began to lengthen in her panties, and her pussy began to moisten in anticipation of their coupling. D'an'a had studied the more colorful side of the English language and had been working on understanding when to use certain words. She felt that this was an appropriate to at least think in terms of those words.

"I won't discuss it with him if you don't want me to," she said as she gently squeezed the shaft of his dick behind its flaring head. She could sense the effect her ministrations was having on him in his thoughts. She realized that the feelings she was generating by touching him, kissing him, and stroking his dick had pretty much shut off a large section of his brain, and his ability to think coherently. And she hadn't even generated any pheromones.

He simply groaned as she began to nibble on the hard little nub of his nipple and a shudder ran through his body. She felt his dick in her hand throb and then become wet and sticky. Looking down, she noted that he'd already orgasmed in his boxers. That was one advantage that Shan boys had over humans. They tended to be more experienced so they didn't orgasm quite as quickly. "Uh..., sorry," he said sheepishly.

She reached down and pushed his boxers down and away to reveal his muscular legs already covered in golden curls that blended up into a rather impressive mass of curls around his balls and covering the base of his dick. To her surprise, she realized that he

was on the small size when it came to male endowment being only about ten or eleven centimeters long. He was rather thick though, probably six or seven centimeters across. She also noted that he was completely missing his foreskin, leaving a broad flesh-toned head flaring out from around the scar tissue.

A long stream of semen was stretched between the slit at the end of his dick up across to the curls around his navel. She smiled, bent down and licked around the head of his dick tasting his semen. It was different from her own, and even from B'near. It wasn't quite as sweet as she had become accustomed.

Again he groaned in pleasure. She took the length into her mouth and began to gently suck up and down enjoying the taste and feel of it on her tongue. After a few moments, she could feel him harden again in her mouth.

"This isn't fair," Simon said as he pulled her off his dick with a surprising strength.

"What's not fair?" she asked.

"I'm standing here pretty much naked, and you're still wearing your bra and underwear. I want to see you too."

She smiled at him and remembered her mother telling her that human males were very much visually stimulated. She reached behind her back and released the clasps of her bra, and drew the straps through the rings of hard flesh where they separated from the back of her tricep and crossed to her lats. Those rings were very sensitive to sexual stimulation, and her first few weeks of wearing a bra had left her walking around with a perpetual spike in her shorts and a soaked pussy. As she dropped the bra revealing her pert A cup breasts, he whistled and said, "Nice."

Reaching out, she gently touched her hardening nipples. She felt a rush of pleasure run through her body as she bent forward and pulled the briefs she was wearing away and dropped them to the floor, letting her own dick spring free. It was longer but thinner than Simon's and was leaking huge amounts of lubricant. "You're uncut," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"You're uncut, uncircumcised," he said reaching out and pushing D'an's foreskin back to reveal the large purple head.

"That is not a Shan practice," she said.

"My brother is uncut," Simon said.

"Yet you are?" She asked. "How is that?"

"Mom won the argument with David, but not with me," he said. "Dad said he wanted at least one son who'd gone through a Brit milah. There's a whole mess of a fight that caused, especially since Noah is uncircumcised too. But I'd rather not talk about it right now," he said reaching down and running his hand along D'an'a's own dick.

D'an'a nodded her head realizing that there were some major religious points that she did not understand. Shan had neither Gods nor religion. Both of her human parents had been raised in a Christian family, but neither practiced it openly, and she suspected that her Mom, Miranda was likely to be close to at least acknowledging if not outright converting to the Atlantean Gods. What little religious training she had came through Mrs. Cashatte and that was because she taught her the Runes and they came from the Norse Gods. She smiled as Simon gently pushed her foreskin back and bent his head and licked the end of her dick. She felt the precum come bubbling to the surface. "We can not talk about anything you want," she said with a smile pulling him back toward the bed.

"D'an'a?" he asked as he licked up the length of her dick. His hand began to play with her balls, and then slip behind them to find the opening to her female sex.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Can I ask a personal question?" he said.

"Yes," she told him.

"You have a lot of precum. How do you keep from getting yourself pregnant?" he asked.

She laughed. She couldn't help it. She guessed that might be a problem for a human with her condition. "First off, I can't get pregnant right now."

"What it's not that time of the month is it?" he asked. "I don't smell any blood."

"No, Shan females don't menstruate," she told him. "First off, I can't get pregnant because I haven't reached my sexual maturity yet. Secondly, even if I had, I would have to purposefully release an egg. Thirdly, my sperm is incomplete. I have to take the sperm of another male to complete my own." She felt his tongue dip below her balls to the entrance to her pussy. He buried his face into her female sex while stroking her male organ.

"Oh," he said. Then, she felt her own pleasure begin to build in a slow burn as he'd lick from her opening, up across the very sensitive area where the back side of her scrotum emerged from the folds of both the inner and outer lips of her labia. Then he

licked up across her balls to the base of her dick. In a long lingering stroke, he lapped all the way up to the head of her dick. In a single motion, he plunged his mouth about half-way down over her cock. She felt his fingers begin to probe the opening of her pussy. She shuddered at the feelings that were beginning to run through her body.

After several strokes up and down the length of her dick, Simon took his mouth away and stretched out atop her body. Kissing her, she could taste her own lubricants on his lips. "How do you want to proceed, beautiful?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Do you want me to suck you off? Do you want me to eat you out? Do you want me to fuck you in your pussy, or in your ass?" He said. "Or do you want to fuck me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Yes to which one?" he asked.

"All five of them," she said. Seeing the look and worry on his face she reached up and gently pushed a stray strand of blond hair from his eyes. "But we don't have to do them all tonight. I don't think we'd have time."

"Then what do you want first? he asked. "I'm hard again and I want to be inside you."

She reached down and grabbed the length of his dick and pulled her legs up and wrapped them around his waist. Placing the head of his dick under her balls, she scooted her butt up until he was pressed against the entrance to her pussy. "How about you put this here," she said. Then taking his hand, she placed it along the length of her dick, she added, "And use this here."

He smiled at her suggestion and and slowly entered her. He needn't have gone slow. She was already soaking wet, and he slid in easily. She reached back and grabbed a double handful of his muscular ass and the two began rocking back and forth. It didn't take long to develop a rhythm. Before long she could feel the effects of his dick drawing along the inside of her pussy starting to set off a series of contractions in her body. His thrusts became stronger, and faster and she began to push her hips back to meet him.

At the same time, her dick began to throb in his hand as he stroked its length. He gripped it much tighter than B'near had ever been able to, and that was in itself highly erotic. She felt the contractions that were beginning in her pussy move up to the base of her cock. Suddenly he thrust deep into her and and shuddered, not moving any more. He'd taken her to the edge but not over.

Locking her legs around his waist, she twisted her body and flung him onto the bed next to her. Then while he was still surprised and without releasing his dick from her pussy, she raised her body up until she was riding him. He'd let go of her dick when she'd rotated, so she reached down and began to stroke herself as she pressed back against his slowly softening organ. A dozen hard strokes and she was at the edge again. As if sensing his job wasn't done, Simon reached up and began to rub her breasts. She felt his dick begin to harden again right as her orgasm took her.

Her pussy began to contract, her balls pulled up inside her body, and she shot several long ropey strands of semen across his chest and lower face. For long seconds she sat there trembling as her orgasm subsided. As she came down, she stretched her legs out behind her and along his body. Kissing her cum from Simon's face she said, "We're going to have to do this again." What she didn't tell him that this had been a rather frustrating attempt and they needed to work on their timing.

Later that evening, when she got home, she found Bonnie, Chris, Corey and Stefan all sitting in the living room talking. Bonnie looked over at her and winked. D'an'a just shrugged waved at them and went back to her bedroom.

As she slowly undressed, she heard a knock at her door. "Come in," she said without thinking.

Bonnie entered the room and closed the door. "Why do I get the feeling that things didn't go as well tonight as you had hoped?"

D'an'a raised an eyebrow and said, "Let's just say, that his inexperience shined through."

"Simon? Inexperience? That's not what I've heard. I've talked to several girls that say he's a very good lover."

"Either they're lying, or they don't have a lot of experience either," D'an'a said. She sighed and gave Bonnie a pleading look. "Look, don't tell anyone this. I told him I wouldn't talk about what we did with Corey."

"Okay," Bonnie said. "I'm not Corey."

"The first round lasted about ten seconds," she said. The second started off pretty good. But he finished before I did, and didn't seem to realize that he wasn't finished. I sort of had to take control."

"Okay," Bonnie said. "He was nervous?"

"I don't know," D'an'a said. "His brain about half shut down."

"That's a human teenage boy," she said. "You're lucky if they're brains are working at a quarter capacity. Especially when coming to something like sex."

"Do you have this kind of problem out of Chris?" she asked.

"I used to," Bonnie said. "That the advantage of having a single lover. You get to understand how they respond and how to please them. Maybe in that way, the human approach to sex is different from Shan."

"Maybe I could get Corey to give him some lessons?" D'an'a said.

"No!" Bonnie said strongly. "When it comes to the human teenage male the last person you want even suggesting sexual tips is the person that is perceived as your brother. If Simon were to see Corey coming up to him like that tomorrow, he'd probably think that Corey was going to pound him into the ground, and not in the fun way."

"But Corey told B'near to make sure that I enjoyed our first time as much as he did," she said.

"Yeah, but stop and think. Corey has all of these Shan reactions programmed into him now. His outlook is going to be different from a baseline human or even from a nocturnal like 'Bit."

D'an'a sighed, "Well, maybe practice will help him."

"Practice, and I wouldn't be surprised if 'Bit has a talk with his brother-in-law."

"His brother-in-law?"

"Brother-in-law. Remember the tiny blond guy that was with his brother?" Bonnie asked.

"Yeah."

"That's his brother-in-law."

"But why him? Why not his brother?" she asked as she hung the dress up in the closet and took out a pair of sweats.

"Noah is more experienced than David," Bonnie said.

"You're implying something there," D'an'a said.

"Early was an early bloomer into his sexual awakening, and David was a little bit of a late bloomer."

"Okay, what do you suggest I do, if anything?" she asked.

"Well first off, if someone asks you about this Monday if you had a good time, just say yes. Give Simon a couple of days and ask him out again. Look at this as possibly being a one time performance issue. After all D'an'a, whether we realize it or not, you can be slightly intimidating. Look at it this way. Simon probably didn't have any issue with the fact that you're probably better hung than he is." She paused a moment and then asked, "Wait! Are you better hung than he is?"

D'an'a just blushed and didn't say anything.

"Aw c'mon. This is girl talk, gossip. What you say stays between you and me," Bonnie said.

"About ten centimeters," she said.

"Okay, so there you go. He's already feeling intimidated. Give him another chance."

"Okay," D'an'a said. "What happened with Corey and Stefan?"

"Some hand holding and I think there was a couple of kisses," she said. "Chris'll drag it out of him tonight."

"I feel bad about promising Simon not to discuss us with Corey. Why was he concerned about Corey though?" D'an'a asked.

"Big brother," Bonnie said. "Remember, despite the fact that Simon is a werelion, he's been raised as a human. And we both know that Simon is strong, but Corey's a whole lot stronger. And no human brother wants to hear that his little sister is having sex with one of his friends."

"Humans are weird," D'an'a said.

"Yes, yes we are," Bonnie replied.