

CROSSING ORBITS

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He was tossed into the cell without any fanfare. B'lair got to his feet awkwardly, noting that blood was darkening one painful knee. On this primitive world he would be lucky not to gain an infection that would render him helpless with fever and pain.

Then he smiled at his pessimistic thoughts. Yes, he'd been cast deep into waste product, but he was essentially unharmed, despite the threats of the local lawkeepers to separate his chattering head from his body. His charges had fled off planet, and were safely on their way back to their families' welcoming arms. It had cost him to bribe the temple guards, but his dignity was a small enough sacrifice to make.

Mara would ensure that the students he'd guided through the markets and sites of ancient splendor on this mostly forgotten world would return from their trip with tales of adventure, not fear, and soothe any concerns spoken for him.

"B'lair is a Traveler," she would remind his students. "Travelers make their own way. He will be fine."

Useful propaganda, but not exactly the truth. It would take all of his skills to extricate himself from this most regrettable situation.

Still, his people had made an art form out of shaping truth – and what was the truth when any event could be perceived in so many ways – into a beautiful illusion.

An illusion that in time might be dispersed.

There was a reason Travelers never stayed long on any planet or hired out for more than a short duration.

In this, B'lair was considered a heretic for he had stayed and learned and taught at the Bastion, that most prestigious center of learning in two quadrants, for years now.

His eyes had been slowly adjusting all this time and he began to make out shapes in the cell. His thoughts had been flung light years away from the gravity well he found himself trapped in, but like a comet they now returned, blazing across his mind.

If only the lawmen had been delayed in coming to the temple, he would have persuaded the temple guards into letting him go, too. Escape was his only chance of freedom now, for the testimony of the temple guards would condemn him to death. And to escape, he would need to persuade his jailers to turn their eyes elsewhere. He did have some small talent at picking locks. A useful skill for a Traveler, his people had found, in case sweet words did not smooth over misunderstandings.

He could see well enough now. This was a fairly large cell, with mats hanging from three sides and benches on three walls. A dozen aliens from several different species sat or stood. He couldn't be sure, but he thought they were all humanoid males not native to this world. A pair of Bexans faced each other on the bench to his right, grooming each other by running short claw-like hands through the thick hair on each others' bare chest. B'lair had heard of that, with Bexans. They did it to relieve

anxiety, the act stimulating the release of calming hormones. They were prone to attacking any who disturbed their ritual, he remembered. He would not be speaking to them or sitting nearby.

He swallowed as seven tall forms rose to their feet as if by command. Silently they approached, encircling him, then emitted a low hum that steadily rose in pitch as the sound bladders hanging from their jowls vibrated more frequently. They took slow steps towards him, tightening the circle, until B'lair could have taken three steps in any direction and touched them.

He responded by whistling a complicated tune and offered a silent plea to the universe that these Dirnarie would respect his message.

The sounds stopped abruptly and one of the group whistled an inquiry. B'lair answered with a three note arpeggio and the seven turned away from him and returned to their bench.

He sighed deeply in relief and glanced at the remaining occupants. Two were maybe sleeping on the wide bench... Ah, no. They were having sex, and half of their clothing was scattered on the floor. Judging by the brilliantly colored hair and very long limbs the pair must be from Callonia. The exhibitionists of the galaxy, some said. Not B'lair, of course. He didn't judge another culture's mores or behaviors. Well, he tried not to, but really, cultural bias was inherent in any observation of a different people from your own. Fear of the outlander, the outsider, was deeply grained in each species. Evolution had ensured that caution within DNA; after all, those who lacked such caution failed to reproduce when the outlander slaughtered you and yours.

Still, trust between species could be forged, and many things advantageous to both groups shared. B'lair firmly believed in this. He also believed in keeping your wits about you and always having an escape route in mind when meeting with strangers.

Turning his attention to the last remaining bench, he noticed a figure sitting ramrod straight upon it, eyes staring ahead. He wasn't sure what planet this man came from; at first glance he seemed very similar to the people of this world, who had inherited their genetics from the Old Ones, kept pure due to their isolation from other worlds. Plus, their primitive level of science meant that adapting their genetics through deliberate manipulation was out of their grasp.

He moved closer in order to see the man and judge whether it would be better to remain standing or find a place on the floor, or if it was safe to sit on the bench with him.

He very much hoped he could sit down and rest on the bench. He was tired, and in his experience jail floors usually were coated in undesirable body fluids.

Summoning up his most friendly smile, his most disarming demeanor, B'lair sidled cautiously until he was just out of arm's reach of the man who seemed almost frozen, he was so still.

Too still. The man's eyes should have flicked to take in B'lair, to assess him as currently being dangerous or harmless.

B'lair asked him if he was all right. He ended up asking him that in every language common to this part of the quadrant.

The man did not respond. B'lair took a chance and moved closer to the still figure, hoping he wasn't one of the Ranori, who were famous for tricking unwary travelers with their seemingly catatonic states – right until you got within grabbing range, and then they'd attack you, long tubular organs shooting out from their necks to stab your body, paralyzing you while they sucked on your liquefying flesh.

B'lair shuddered. Ranori could mold their features to mimic other races. But probably he wasn't a Ranori. The lawmen wouldn't have tossed one of them into a cell inhabited by other people.

Would they? Maybe they didn't know how to test if a person was a Ranori or not.

He could end up a puddle of stinking, oozing, body fluids and bones. He moved back away from the man.

Better to stand for now. Observe the situation. He was good at that, being an observer, and he'd just ignore the voice of his conscience that was telling him he should try to help the man.

Funny how his conscience sounded exactly like his mother's sweet voice.

B'lair shifted his tired feet again and wrapped his arms around himself. The man – or Ranori – hadn't moved an inch in all this time.

Perhaps the man needed a mind healer. He wondered if he could ask a guard to help him. He'd been in here for hours and no guard had looked into the cell. Unlike most of the jail cells he'd been a guest in, this one had no cameras focused on the prisoners.

He stood on one foot and pulled a boot off. Taking careful aim, he threw it straight at the man's face. It bounced off the man's handsome features and landed with a thud on the floor, but the man or Ranori didn't so much as twitch. Frowning, he repeated the test with his other boot, and the man did not flinch.

Valor, valor, valor, he chanted to himself as he again approached the man. Before he took the last step that would take him within striking distance, he muttered, "Hello, man. Please be some species of human and don't suck the flesh from my bones," took a deep breath, and leaped in front of the man.

Nothing happened. He gave an enormous sigh, feeling the tension in his body relaxing. Taking hold of the man's shoulders, he shook him, at first gently, and then harder, but while the man's head bobbed back and forth, his eyes remained staring blankly ahead, as if B'lair wasn't even there.

The man wasn't in a coma, and while B'lair had seen how music or lights could put someone into a trance state, there was nothing here that could be keeping this man in such a state. Simple touch wasn't bringing the man around. He looked around the cell, but the other inhabitants were keeping to their own groups. That was just as well. The Callonians might be comfortable with being exhibitionists but B'lair preferred if the others kept on paying no attention to what he was about to do.

He whispered into the man's ear, "Forgive me, man, if I overstep the bounds of decency with you, but my mother's mother's mother once brought a man such as yourself to consciousness this way. We Travelers pass such lore on to our children, and I'd like to try to free you from whatever has you so spellbound. A drug would have sent you to the ground, and you're not in a trance or a coma. My ancestor guided that lost soul to regain control by doing what I'm going to try."

If the man remained as he was after B'lair attempted to free him from this state, then B'lair would try to get a guard to have a mind-healer see him.

He undid the clip that held his hair and ran his fingers through the mass of curls that fell almost to his waist. Taking another quick glance at his fellow inmates he noted that the Bexans were now sleeping head to toe with each other, and the Callonians were still engaged in sexual congress – their stamina was legendary – but the Dirnarie had turned as one as they sat in a row on their bench, their eyes on him.

Well, it couldn't be helped. The message he had whistled at them earlier had only granted him a reprieve from their ritual, not their observation.

He undid his shirt, slowly sliding each bright metal fastener through its opening, until the brilliant fabric of greens and blues was hanging from his shoulders, his chest exposed.

The man hadn't moved. So, there was nothing for it now except to just do what needed to be done.

He moved determinedly till he was almost touching the man, and then he swung a leg over the man's thighs and sat down on his lap, facing him.

Picking up the man's hands he drew them close and plunged them into the mass of his hair and breathed on the man's face.

Was it his imagination or did he see the man's eyebrows shift minutely toward each other?

Taking a deep breath, and exhaling slowly, B'lair began the K'tana, and his hair began to move on its own, seeking out the man's skin, curling round his wrists, his fingers, and wrapping around his lower arms, both binding the man to B'lair and holding his hands in place.

B'lair slid his own hands free and waited, watching, listening, to see if this would be enough, if the stimulation from the K'tana and the intoxicant he was breathing on the man would break this spell of paralyzed silence.

He waited, but the only change he saw was a slight fluttering of the man's eyelids, maybe every thirty heartbeats.

What he was doing was not enough.

Sweet spirits of my ancestors, he prayed, guide me. Closing his eyes, he briefly meditated on what he should do. Travelers did not force themselves on others, they merely invited. But if he went beyond the briefest touch of his lips to this stranger's, then it wouldn't be the sweet brush of seduction, it would be him breaking down this man's defenses and taking, not asking.

He didn't know if he could do that to another being. But if he didn't demolish whatever held the man in thrall, then the man might die. Either his body would expire from lack of nourishment and true rest, or someone in this cell might take advantage of his helplessness and harm him. Kill him.

It was surprising that the Dirnarie had not already done so.

This might be the man's only chance of salvation. B'lair would protect this helpless person while they were together in this cell, but justice was swiftly dealt with on this planet and one or both of them might face their accusers very soon. Not knowing what this man had done to be incarcerated, it would be hard to know if he would be condemned or released.

B'lair knew he would be condemned. He had to escape, there was no other chance for him.

And if he didn't try to break whatever bonds held this man soon, the lawmen would come for him, and maybe both of them would be condemned to death.

His mind made up, B'lair closed the man's eyes and gently kissed the soft skin of his eyelids, then his forehead, in the old way of asking for forgiveness.

Then he slowly unbuttoned the man's black shirt, and pushed it off the broad shoulders. The man's chest was smooth, unlike his own, and his nipples were a dark brown in contrast to the paler tone of his skin. B'lair placed his hands over them and said, "I'm sorry, man. Can't see a way of helping you except by doing this."

There was a saying B'lair had heard, that a Traveler could make a priest forget her vow of celibacy, and a prostitute feel like a virgin. He'd always strived to be respected for his intellectual skills, not for how his body could make another's sing; but it was a Traveler's talents that were needed now, not B'lair's academic credentials.

B'lair cleared his mind and felt the let-down of hormones beginning. The man's hands were still held fast by B'lair's hair; allowing the K'tana to swell, to gain power; he sent impulses out through the nerves connecting to the man's hands and arms, bombarding him with pleasure.

Most people screamed in delight at the sensation. Some orgasmed from that alone. All this man did was breathe a little faster.

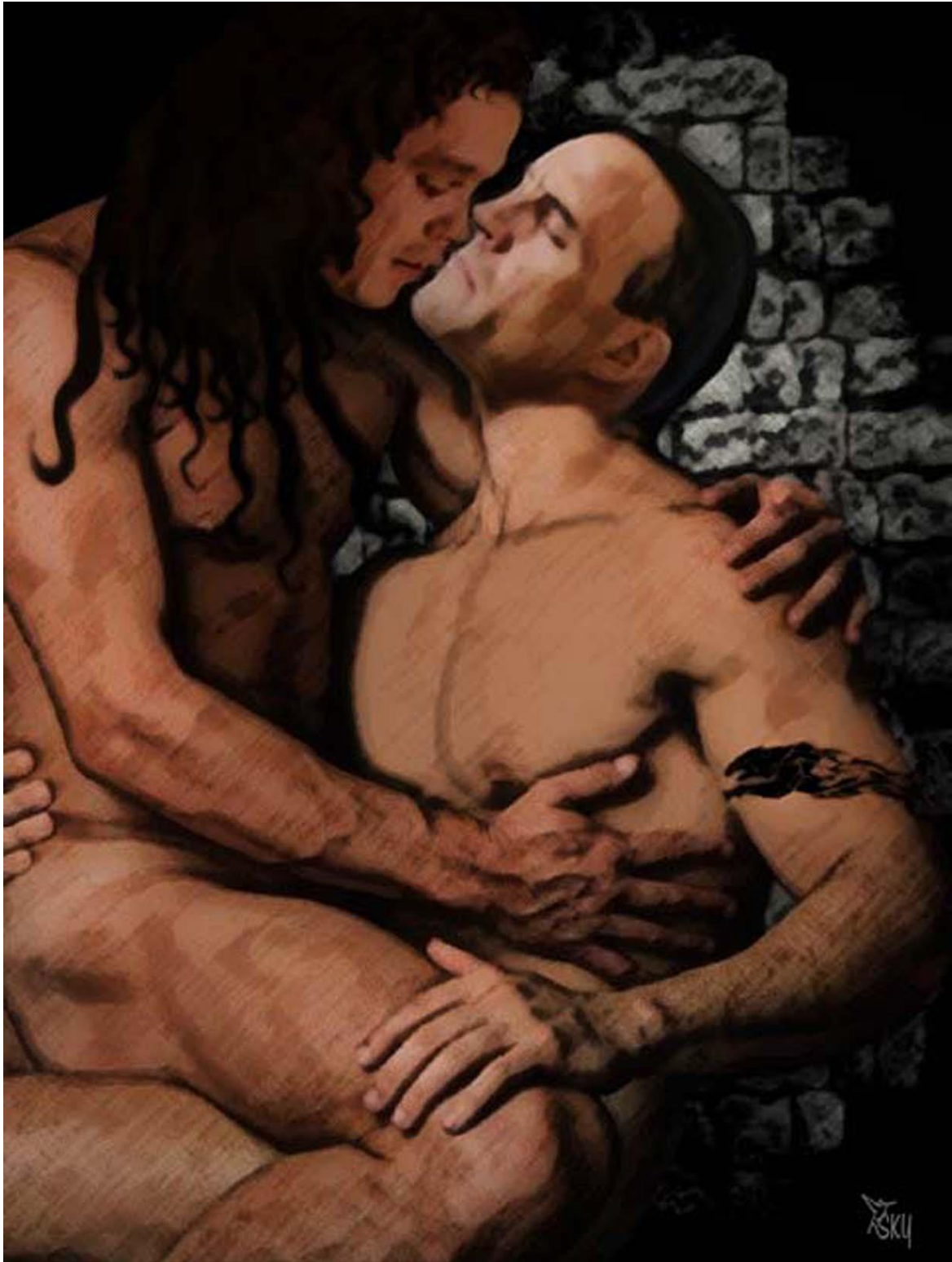
B'lair took that as a challenge. He would make this man react to him and wake him up. He leveraged himself closer to the man, by putting his hands around the back of the man's neck and shifting until the hair on his chest was touching the man's chest. The effect wouldn't be as strong as from the hair from his head, but it would stimulate the man pleasantly. He pressed his lips to the man's mouth, licking at the still lips, his tongue slipping inside and forcing the sweet mouth he was plundering to open wider, to let him in, to let him taste and touch and now B'lair was starting to feel desire himself.

That wasn't right. This was medical help he was giving, he wasn't supposed to be feeling such intoxicating sweetness of the body, but he was. Oh, blazing comets, he was. He wanted to make this man his.

His. He was a Traveler; a Traveler wasn't supposed to become possessive, but he was shaking with the need to claim this man.

He kissed, he slid his hands under his man's shirt and felt the strong muscles of his back; he began rocking on his man's lap, against the genitals that had been soft and lax when he first had settled himself against them, and his own penis was hardening against his man's belly.

Licking the outer edges of the delicate shell of his man's ear, he felt a small shudder from the man under him, could feel his man's erection stiffening under him. He ground himself against it like a shell dancer earning his fee from a customer, and returned to kissing the man, deep, open mouthed kisses, tasting again the sweetness of his man. He paused, and began to card his fingers through the man's short hair, and began what he knew must sound like whispered babble.



"Come back, come back, I'm here, I'm waiting, come back, come back, who are you, and oh, I know I shouldn't be doing this, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but come back, come back, man, sweet tasting man, and oh, you have a fine, fine body, and I want you, I want you, come back, man," and so on till his voice was strained and his throat tired, so he resumed kissing again, kissing the collar bone, nipples, and the side of the man's neck.

All of a sudden, the man's eyes snapped open and B'lair cried out in surprise. He started to slide off the man's lap, his hair releasing the man's hands and arms, when the man's hands gripped his hips and stopped him.

"No," the man said, in trade language.

"Hello," B'lair said, in the same language, his voice breathless and so very aware of the erection under him and his own that was pushing the loose fabric of his trousers outward, against his man's belly. He told himself to let go of the possessive feelings that had inundated him.

A Traveler did not claim a partner, did not tether them; they held them gently, so they could fly away without restraints.

B'lair said soothingly, "Don't be angry, man. Starting sex with you? It was to help you come back to yourself. What was wrong with you? I tried everything else I could think of to wake you."

"No," the man said, his eyes narrowing at him. B'lair tried again to free himself, pushing against the man's chest, but the man was holding on too tightly. He could try for the man's eyes, or nose, but he didn't want to hurt him. Besides, a Traveler's tongue had more than one use, his people used to say, and B'lair's tongue was talented even for a Traveler. He would convince the man to let him go.

"Good sir, let me up and we'll talk, I mean, you deserve to know who's been molesting you and why. I-- hey?!"

The man stood up abruptly and B'lair would have fallen but the man kept hold tightly, one arm sliding around his waist and the other – the other yanking his trousers and littlewear down, pulling them off him entirely, lifting him up easily.

"Hold on, wait, I can explain what we were doing, I was *helping* you. You were lost-- uh." B'lair's famed tongue faltered as the man opened his own trousers with one hand and pulled out his penis and it was just as large as B'lair had visualized it would be.

B'lair swallowed, the cold air of the cell chilling his bare legs. "Let's talk about this, my name is B'lair of the Travelers--"

B'lair was spun around and he lost his reasonable, logical, *rational* attempt at communication when the man dropped down on the bench and pulled B'lair back on his lap, making his legs splay out wide on either side of the man's thighs. The man kept one arm tight against B'lair's chest in a rigid band, his erection against B'lair's bare ass.

The man buried his face in B'lairst hair and with his free hand he captured B'lair's penis, roughly stroking him, the slide of his palm and fingers robbing B'lair of the words he meant to speak, to explain, to beg forgiveness for his actions. Instead, broken sounds were pulled out of him, and the K'tana swelled, his hair once again sliding and encircling the man's neck, his chest, caressing his face. The man licked the side of his neck, finding the V'dira gland as unerringly as if B'lair had drawn a map to it. Stimulated like that, B'lair's pores began releasing the scent of joy and he heard the man take in a deep breath, moving his penis in a smooth glide between B'lair's ass cheeks, rocking them both.

B'lair shuddered as pleasure began taking him over, muting him, and he felt helpless to stop the waves of intense feeling that were making his legs tremble; this man was taking charge, setting the pace of what was happening, and B'lair was letting him, he was letting him and the K'tana was

feeding pleasure to his lover, this stranger who touched him like he knew every place on B'lair's body that would make him melt as he gently bit the lobe of B'lair's ear.

Everything spun away from B'lair, and he lost track of time passing, of the walls around him, of the eyes that must be on them. His thoughts, too, flew away, and it seemed as if there was a voice whispering to him within his mind, the words not clear, but there was intent wrapping around his mind, coaxing, opening him up so much more intimately than what was occurring to his body.

With mild surprise, B'lair realized that he was completing his joy; the orgasm that tore through him was as strong as any forceful sea and wind storm he'd ever been caught in, and he shook as if a gale was battering at him.

The man took the handful of B'lair's semen that had pooled in his palm and grunted. Then B'lair found himself pushed forward on the man's lap, head hanging down, the man's fingers toying with his anus. He could only hang there limply, spent, utterly spent as the man prepared him by using B'lair's own semen.

And still, there was that whisper in his head, inviting him to join, to twine into something new, something strong, much stronger than each strand by themselves. To twine himself with something, *someone* who wanted him, who would cherish him, who needed him...

The sensation of being entered, of being pulled back upright against the man's chest, of being stretched and filled, made a counter-melody to the enticing whispers within his mind as the man started to rock into him, his strong hands supporting B'lair, moving him just how he wanted; he felt another wave of joy building and he wanted, wanted, wanted – *everything!*

Jimajamesell, son of Willembillell, born to Marimargrace, First Heir to House Ellison, felt his body and mind snap back entirely into alignment, the dark haze his thoughts had been trapped in lifted. He felt alive, every sinew and tendon and nerve ending singing as magnificently as the old Mother Earth legends of angels praising their maker.

To feel this way meant only one thing, the thing he had refused to accept for so long.

He tightened his hold on the limp and unconscious being still impaled on his cock and sprawled against him. This one, this tempter of the flesh, this long-haired imp of seduction, had saved him and condemned him by taking what Jimajamesell's desperate mind had thrust upon the alien. He, Jimajamesell, had offered the sacred bond to this criminal and the greedy little sweetlicker had grabbed hold with considerable strength.

It would be a good bond, strong, resilient, unlocking in Jimajamesell those talents he had denied to himself once he reached the age of self-decision. Already his senses were unfurling from being so tightly restrained, stretching outward, taking in everything at once, the sights and sounds of this primitive incarceration pen, the scent of his new guide, the pungent aroma of sex.

He confirmed what his guide's scent suggested, by dropping a hand down and mapping the lax genitals, feeling for any other opening into the body he held and yes, the guide's physical form was male. What gender he was would have to wait until the guide awakened. His new guide's sex and gender wasn't important to Jimajamesell, as the evidence of his own body had proved that he was attracted to and compatible with the guide.

Taking a deep breath, he savored the scent of his guide's body, and, acting on impulse, licked the soft skin of his neck. The taste on his tongue was enticing, and his fading erection took on new life. He hardened again, as he lapped at his guide's skin, and began again to thrust within him, at first gently and then as the guide started to stir, more vigorously.

The guide's mind was awakening again to conscious thought, and Jimajamesell sent a wordless inquiry. It was a complex flurry of questions, but dominating them were two demands. *Why did you do this?* and *what do you want?*

The guide's response was a tangle of impressions; of becoming aware that once again, he was riding a cock, that he was *not* controlling what was happening, that he was helpless to stave off the thrusts that were making lights bloom behind his closed eyelids. And that he loved the feeling of being dominated. The guide felt surprised that it was so, but he was a quick one, and he acknowledged this new understanding about himself and accepted it.

The guide's name was B'lair, and all he wanted was for Jimajamesell to keep on *doing what he was doing!* He let Jimajamesell know that quite emphatically.

There were no more coherent thoughts between them as Jimajamesell hurled them both to completion again.

When the scream that had been torn from B'lair ended, he slumped back against Jimajamesell's chest and sighed deeply.

"Man? Yes, you. What happened?" the words were slurred, as if B'lair could barely form them.

"You asked, I accepted; I asked, you accepted," Jimajamesell said, now that his mind was no longer clouded from the sex he and this... alien man had blazed between them.

"You're Jimajamesell... How do I know that? Are you? Were you? In my head?" He sounded bemused and appalled.

"You're not one to consider consequences, are you, B'lair?" Jimajamesell said, grimacing as he slid his cock free. Was the discomfort he felt his own, or B'lair's? Newly bonded pairs found it difficult to tell such things, he'd heard.

"What?" B'lair sounded even more dazed, and Jimajamesell turned him until he was sitting sideways on Jimajamesell's lap. B'lair dropped his head down onto Jimajamesell's broad chest, and closed his eyes.

"You initiated the bond, what did you think would happen?"

"Wha?" B'lair was falling asleep. He'd heard that the bond being initialized took guides that way, exhausting them. And this alien man wasn't even of his race. It could very well hit him harder.

"Go to sleep, little seducer. I'll watch out for you." Jimajamesell closed his own eyes in disbelief that he'd said that, in that protective tone. He'd meant to tell B'lair to get up and get himself dressed again, and then to explain his actions.

"Jimajames... too long. Jim. I'm calling you... Jim." B'lair mumbled and then the soft sound of his breathing filled Jimajamesell's ears. He shook his head. It was very bold of B'lair to shorten his name like that, but as a guide to the heir of House Ellison, he would be allowed some indulgences.

Jim. He rolled the name around on his tongue, said it out loud softly. It was short and pragmatic and friendly. He decided he approved.

B'lair had slipped into sleep and might stay that way for hours. Jim shifted him until he was curled on his side on the wide bench. Sliding off his own shirt, he covered his guide with it, although the other inhabitants of this forsaken cell had almost certainly seen his guide practically naked. The open colorful thin shirt had been no sort of shield against curious eyes. He picked up the equally colorful trousers of gold and brown and the shorter version that B'lair had worn to conceal his genitals, and folded them neatly, placing them also on the bench. The black boots that must belong to B'lair were scattered apart from each other on the floor and he scooped them up.

He frowned as he examined the reddish dust that covered them. B'lair had been on sacred grounds recently, then. He sent a mental impulse to his guide, but all he got back was impressions of dreaming.

He sighed. This was not how he'd envisioned his trip to Lowana would end. For now, he would bide his time. He sat down next to B'lair and after a debate with himself, positioned B'lair's head on his lap.

He played with B'lair's curls. There was something different about the long, reddish brown hair; and it was more than the static electricity he could feel building as he twisted and petted the strands. It was generating a low level electro-magnetic field. That was interesting. He decided that when it was safe, he would re-examine his memories of being held hostage to the thrall. Now that his body and mind were grounded by B'lair, he could accomplish that without losing himself again.

B'lair. He had a guide now, after all those years of refusing to consider joining. All those years of suppressants. Yes, he had a guide.

And he didn't want him.

B'lair scrunched his face and batted at whatever was trying to land on his nose. His eyes were shut and he had no desire to open them. He shooved it away and sighing happily, he dozed back off feeling warm and relaxed.

The annoying insect returned. He covered his face with his hands, but then it slipped under his sheet and started walking up and down his belly. It was trying to bite him, pinching up skin, so he uncovered his face and pushed the sheet off himself, slapping at the bothersome bug.

He didn't try to open his eyes, though. He wanted nothing more than to slide back into sleep.

The pest returned again, this time tapping at his nose. He grumbled at it and tried to roll over, to curl back under the sheet. He buried his face into the pillow against him.

The pillow moved. Then it moved again. He felt a sharp pinch on his butt, and he sputtered awake.

The pillow was someone's belly.

He sat up fast and lost his balance, starting to fall off the bench, but strong hands grabbed him, holding him still.

Turning him to face...

"Awake now, little seducer?" The man who he'd been using for a pillow spoke once again in trade language, and every Traveler child learned it along with their own, more private language as they were weaned from their mothers' breasts.

He stared into blue eyes and felt once again that touch upon his mind, whispering to him; suddenly everything kaleidoscoped into a montage of images. He remembered shepherding his students into the temple, warning them again of the taboo against outsiders laying profane hands on the artifacts arranged on the alters, interviewing several priests for his research, then the commotion as he and Mara and his students – the idiots – were shoved into a back room by the temple guards.

He'd felt so desperate to keep his students and Mara safe. The penalty for breaking the taboo was death. Being told the priests had taken their precious relics and artifacts to be purified in a ceremony by the River Natanna to cleanse the touch of outsiders upon them. The guilty and terrified looks on his young student's faces; persuading a temple guard to talk to him, letting him know of a Traveler's skills and playing upon the guard's – then all the guards' – curiosity. Letting them experience the K'tana in exchange for each student and Mara's release. One guard's joy for each life in his care.

He was drowning in those blue eyes and instinctively he reached out, latching onto this other mind that was engulfing his own, and a whirlwind of images overwhelmed him.

A clandestine meeting, and Jimajamesell didn't trust the other people at this secluded wooded outpost. Most, like himself, were off-worlders and it was dangerous for him to be there. A pair of Bexans sharpened their claws against their teeth, posturing at him.

Sliding a projectile weapon out from behind his back, and aiming it at a double-crossing Massana, who started speaking rapidly in a mixture of trade language and his own.

A seedy looking transport locked down at a decrepit spaceport.

Shaking out the last two capsules of his suppressants and dry swallowing them.

The raid where he was arrested while making arrangements to pick up his cargo. Being shoved into a cell. Feeling the suppressants wearing off, but his replacements were back on his ship.

Waiting for his partners to come through for him.

Feeling his senses go unstable and knowing the thrall might engulf him. Threatening the Bexans who got scooped up in the raid that if they harmed him while he went into a trance and talked with demons, then he would send the denizens of their culture's version of hell after the pair of them and they would be dragged into everlasting torment in the afterworld.

Losing himself and being helpless to stop it.

Feeling disconnected with his body, but knowing that he was moving, was fucking the one who had called him back, who'd awakened him. Who'd seduced him into having sex.

Offering the bond and the relief he felt when it was accepted.

Realizing he'd bonded to a guide.

Deciding that he'd break the bond as soon as it was safe.

B'lair came out the entanglement with Jim like he'd been dragged into a riptide and held under the waves and suddenly was able to breach the water, gasping for air and aware that he'd almost been lost, drowned by a power far greater than his own strength.

He wasn't free of the riptide yet, and he had no idea where it was taking him.

He abruptly became aware that he was practically naked, his own shirt unbuttoned, Jim's shirt wrapped around him. He looked at Jim, and felt his breathing speed up. He was connected to this man, he didn't know how that had happened, but it *had* and there was mental communication between them and somehow he'd pulled Jim out of that trance. Jimajamesell, First Heir to House Ellison, who apparently was some sort of drug runner or smuggler, definitely somebody on the shady side of the law, and yeah, he wasn't judging, he didn't do that, but he also tried to keep himself away from the attention of the law enforcers, or what passed for any sort of justice system, and, yes, there had been some mishaps in the past, which was why he was more than familiar with the concept of holding cells, but really, none of those times was his fault.

This time wasn't his fault.

This time was totally his fault.

He should not have trusted his students to behave themselves, to ignore the superstition about the power of the artifacts on one's libido and luck. They'd touched the relics for bragging rights, because they'd dared each other and because they were sheltered and had no experience with how wrathful a culture could be if a taboo was broken.

Even as his breathing was changing from fast to truly panicked, he made a mental note to include more stories in his lectures of exoanthro students who had been eaten or hung or drowned or set on fire or married to some ugly chief's son or daughter for not respecting the cultures' they were doing field studies on *taboos*.

Jim's eyebrows drew together and the stoic expression he'd been wearing since waking B'lair up changed to one of concern.

"Hey. Calm down."

B'lair shot him an incredulous look as his heart beat soared and he couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't *breathe* and what was this bond and could he leave Jim behind in this cell, to fall victim to that trance again, and how long had he slept, he needed to entice a guard, or all of them, into letting him go and he *couldn't* breathe.

Jim let out an exasperated sound and grabbed him, pulling him back onto his lap and cupping his hands in front of B'lair's mouth, "Okay, time to calm down and breath slowly, little seducer. You're a smart boy. Nod your head if I name an irrational number. Square root of seven?

B'lair realized what Jim was doing and he was grateful. He nodded his head. To work mathematics would require logical reasoning, and it would override the emotional storm that was causing him to gasp like a zinx thrust into an oxygen atmosphere.

"The square root of thirty-seven?"

He nodded again. Thirty-seven was a prime number, thus its square root would be irrational.

"The square root of four thousand and ninety-six?"

He did the calculations and then shook his head. Sixty four was a perfect square, so it was a rational number.

"The square root of twenty thousand, four hundred and forty nine."

He could feel his breathing slowing down as he solved the problem. One hundred and forty-three. Another perfect square, another rational number.

They continued on this way for a few more moments, until B'lair was breathing easily. He pushed Jim's hands down and slid off his lap, holding the large shirt around his waist. He turned and faced Jim, who was looking at him with mild interest.

"Thanks, Jim. Well, thanks for helping me to slow down my breathing, because anxiety explosions? Are not fun. But I'd like to know just what you did to me, other than fucking me senseless, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. I mean, yeah, it was great, but is this the time and place, I ask you?" He glanced meaningfully at the Bexans, and the others in the cell. "And I like to know the names of my partners before we're intimate; what's wrong with having a little conversation first? Maybe I'll cook them a nice dinner or we'll go listen to music or take a walk, at least."

He was getting louder, but he couldn't seem to help it. "Was it too much to ask for a walk, Jim? A nice walk around this cell, a mutual exchange of our *names* before you shoved your dick up into me? And now, we're what? You said bonded. In my head, you said that. What does that mean?"

Jim shrugged like B'lair's question was not relevant. "It means that I'm stuck with you. For now. But calm down, one way or another we're gonna separate ourselves from each other."

B'lair felt like throwing up his hands, except that would mean dropping Jim's shirt and he really didn't want to stand there exposed. He didn't mind if Jim saw him; after all, that space ship had lifted off when they'd had sex together. Just how many times had he come, anyway? Suddenly he wanted his own clothes on. He saw them on the bench, grabbed them and sat down again next to Jim. After wiggling on his pants, he handed the shirt Jim had covered him with while he'd been sleeping back to the big lug.

He was fastening his boots when he glanced over at Jim, looking searchingly at him. "How's your head?"

"What do you mean?" Jim started running a hand over his face. He winced when he came to a sore spot.

"I tried to get you out of that trance by throwing my boots at your head. It didn't work."

Frowning, Jim said, "Why didn't you just shake me?"

B'lair nodded vigorously. "I did that, too, but first I threw my boots at you in case you were a Ranori."

Jim made a face. "Ugh."

"Yeah, so sorry about hitting you. I was trying to help." B'lair pulled his legs up and sat cross-legged on the bench. Sweet Ancestors, what a mess this day had turned into.

"You did," Jim said, and B'lair felt a tinge of commiseration from him. Had he noticed what B'lair had been feeling just then? But then that beautiful mouth of Jim's tightened and he said, "I wasn't expecting the bond, though."

"You think it's my fault we've got this connection?" B'lair said indignantly.

"Yeah." Jim's expression turned grumpy. "It's your fault because you used sex to get me out of the thrall."

B'lair opened his mouth to tell Jimajamesell that he was an ungrateful son of a spacer, that B'lair was just trying to do the right thing, and had Jim *wanted* to sit in the cell as a catatonic lump that anyone could have done anything to without his being able to stop them, but Jim slung an arm around him, startling him into silence.

"I know you meant well. And I'm going to fix things." There was an apology in Jim's voice and B'lair felt his annoyed feelings toward the big jerk wisp away. "But I think I need to hear the whole story, chi-ef. I know why you're in this forsaken hole, but I'm not sure what exactly you did to trade your students and the other?"

"Graduate student. Mara. She and I are graduate students at the Bastion. What's chi-ef mean?"

"One who takes charge. Also, there's this small, scrappy woods animal that goes by that name, very cute, with lots of hair the color of yours." Jim grinned at him, and B'lair rolled his eyes, then got out his hair clip from his pocket and twisted his messy hair into some semblance of order and pinned it in place.

"Focus, Jim." B'lair dug an elbow into Jim's side. "You have the attention span of a buzzer bug. Did you want to know about how I got the rest of the group out of the temple?"

"Yes."

"I'm a Traveler." Jim's arm tightened around him, and he gave B'lair a curious look. "We have certain... talents. They're genetic, and they allow us to, uh, sway people somewhat. Our pores release a scent that acts--"

"It's a drug. I've heard some of the stories. People say, well, Henrileebro of House Brown, when he's in his cups, goes on and on about a beautiful Traveler he spent one blissful night with, and how somehow he gifted her with a necklace that cost him as many credits as two weeks of job-pay." Jim eyed B'lair suspiciously, and B'lair lost his temper.

"I haven't asked you for a damn thing, have I?! And I won't. Yes, sometimes people who become intimate with a Traveler are very generous afterwards. Don't worry, though. Once someone's been exposed to the scent our glands release they develop a tolerance to it. You won't be tempted to give me the code to that broken down wreck of a space ship you've got hidden away or hand over the smuggled goods or drugs you're running. I won't be able to seduce you a second time."

He flung Jim's arm off his shoulders and stood up, hands on his hips, facing him. "And I didn't want to have sex with you the first time! All I wanted was to wake you up, and when everything else I tried failed, I did what an ancestor of mine had done when she had come across someone in a trance like you seemed to be in. I let you feel my hair, my body, experience my scent, and I talked to you and it worked. You came out of the trance. But when I tried to explain what I was doing you, uh..."

Jim's face had frozen. "I raped you."

B'lair stared at him, his anger evaporating away. "No. No, you didn't."

"You just said that you didn't want to have sex with me. And I entered you. I'm twice your size, you couldn't have stopped me." Jim got up and strode away fast, stopping at the end of the bench. He turned his back to B'lair.

B'lair ran after him, and grabbed his arm. "Jim, no. I could have stopped you. And thinking back, I don't think you were actually totally out of the trance. Compared to how you are now, you were a lot more primal. You must have been going on instinct, your higher reasoning abilities still locked down. But when I realized where this thing with us was going, I didn't want to stop you. I mean, I was just as aroused as you were."

"You said you didn't want to have sex with me," Jim snarled. "Don't sweetcoat the truth now, B'lair."

"I'm not, you stubborn son of a spacer!" B'lair shouted, moving so close to Jim that their chests were touching, grabbing Jim by the biceps. "I changed my mind!"

Jim broke his hold easily and grabbed B'lair under the arms, swinging him into the wall past the end of the bench.

"Travelers spin pretty stories, that's what I've heard," Jim growled at him, and holy comets, he lifted B'lair off the floor, slamming him hard against the wall, his thigh invading the space between B'lair's legs. Instinctively, B'lair grabbed hold of Jim's shoulders. He stared into Jim's eyes. Jim was angry, sure, but more than that, he was afraid, and disgusted with what he thought he had done.

They really needed to work on their communication skills, B'lair thought, but all he did was swallow, still staring into Jim's beautiful blue eyes.

Jim pressed against B'lair's penis and balls, and B'lair felt a sharp rush of arousal. He hardened, and lifted his face up, and Jim nuzzled his neck, and, oh, Jim probably didn't realize what he was doing, but he was milking the gland that released the scent of joy. B'lair could smell his own scent, sweet and powerful.

It wouldn't affect Jim this time, though.

B'lair whimpered. There was no other word for it, and Jim was kissing him, forcing his mouth open, and it felt so good.

Jim gentled the kiss and then, pulled back, his eyes shining with tears. "You couldn't have stopped me, B'lair. Not then and not now. I raped you and I'm sorry."

"You just had to prove it to me, didn't you?" B'lair said, aroused and exasperated and hurting for Jim.

"I need to take responsibility for what I did, not let you convince me that I didn't rape you."

"Jim. I could have stopped you. I didn't want to, not after things got so intense. I let you fuck me."

"You're lying."

B'lair wanted to thump Jim on his stubborn head. He wanted him to keep on doing what he was doing, because, wow, but he guessed he'd have to do some proving of his own.

"I'm sorry, too, Jim."

Jim laughed a bitter laugh, and pressed his body hard into B'lair's, but this time, B'lair thought it was for comfort.

"What have you got to be sorry about," Jim said, sounding ashamed. "All you did was try to help me."

"For having to do this." B'lair breathed into his face, and Jim's eyes rolled up, all of his muscles abruptly relaxed and B'lair and Jim slid together to the floor.

B'lair had finally managed to push Jim's unconscious body off him and, with a lot of effort, get him back on the bench. Jim was all muscles. Heavy muscles. Really nice muscles, but B'lair was quite a bit smaller than Jim, and this had been a workout. Jim would be asleep for a while.

B'lair lifted Jim's head and scooted under him. He needed to visit the toilet in the back of the cell, but he wouldn't leave Jim unconscious and unprotected. He was hungry, too. If he was rating the jail cells he'd been an unwilling guest in this one would have the honor of being dead last.

And if he didn't move things along, it might be the last jail cell he ever visited. He ran his hand over Jim's short brown hair, traced his eyebrows, his lips.

He was bonded to this man, and he still didn't know what exactly that meant, except that at times, he could look into Jim's mind and see his memories, hear his thoughts, and Jim could do the same with him. But not all the time. B'lair's scientific curiosity was racing, wondering how this had happened. Jim had been on suppressants, but what exactly, besides this mental connection, had been suppressed? Or maybe nothing else had, but he thought there was more going on. Why had Jim been in a trance?

How did Jim intend to break their bond? Maybe it worked on simple proximity. When he and Jim went their separate ways, maybe it would just fade into nothing. Or maybe it would shatter instead, and what effect would that have on their minds? Would breaking the bond involve some sort of withdrawal?

Was it painful?

B'lair bit his lip. He had always been casual with his sex partners, just a mutual good time with no commitments. He never lost his temper with his bed partners; nobody had ever gotten under his skin like Jim had done. He never had felt so enthralled, either, and he hadn't realized how much being dominated was a turn on for him. Being with Jim was interesting; he didn't want to end things between them.

He could try to convince Jim to let him stay with him and study what was happening. Of course, Jim was a smuggler. Or drug runner, and that wasn't good. But Jim himself was a good man, B'lair felt that so strongly. Maybe he could talk Jim into dropping this line of work. He was intelligent, there must be other options for him.

B'lair could always ask N'aomi to put in a good word for Jim. His mother knew so many influential people, and they all loved to do her favors.

The door to the cell opened then and a guard barked out an order. The pair of Callonians scampered out, gleeful expressions on their faces. The Dirnarie rose as one and glided out of the cell. B'lair sighed in relief. The truce he had negotiated with the Dirnarie would hold for a day and a night and a day; he hoped he'd seen the last of them since confronting them was not something he wanted to try again.

A cart was wheeled into the room by a guard, two others covering the room with weapons held ready to take down any prisoner who rushed them. B'lair gently slid free, careful not to disturb Jim, and walked towards the guards, hands held up as show of compliance.

One guard leveled his weapon at him before he could get within eight feet of the man. "Stay put, Traveler. The temple guards told us of how you ensnared them."

B'lair put on his best innocent face. "Ensnared? All I did was talk to them and give them pleasure."

The guard was not taken in, judging by his expression. "You bribed them into letting your companions go. The priests had cleared you, since you were with them with the sacrilege occurred. You would have been free to go, but not now. The court has heard the testimony of the temple guards and you will pay for the sins of those you let escape and for corrupting the temple guards. Say whatever prayers to whatever powers you believe in, Traveler. You die at sunset."

B'lair heard the clatter of the kettle as it was placed on the floor, the dull sound of the wooden bowls and spoons as they were dropped by the guards, but he was still reeling from being read his death sentence. He'd known, of course, what the penalty would be but actually hearing it pronounced chilled him.

He had to make an attempt to win over the guards or his soul would be released in a few short hours. What would happen to Jim if he died?

He took a few careful steps closer to the guard who had brought the food. The other two guards cocked their weapons.

"Step closer, and die now, instead of tonight, Traveler."

B'lair backed up until he was several more feet away. "Did the temple guards tell you of the pleasure I gave them? Aren't you curious to experience what a Traveler can do?"

One guard's expression turned avaricious, and B'lair smiled at him. "Stop it, Kalahan," ordered the taller of the two other guards. "Remember your instructions. Don't get close to him, don't talk to him. C'mon, let's go."

B'lair watched them leave, and the Bexans rushed forward and grabbed bowls and spoons, helping themselves to the watery looking concoction of vegetables and grains.

He wasn't hungry any longer.

He heard a soft "B'lair," and then Jim's arms were around him. "I heard."

"Guess I'll have to try an old fashioned jail break instead." B'lair stepped away from Jim and took the clip out of his hair. He dismantled it and shoved the bits he didn't need in a pocket. What was left was a thin strip of metal. Jim had watched him do it silently, but now he took it from B'lair and flexed it.

"I can help you with this. I think."

B'lair stared at him assessingly and said, "Let's grab some stew and go back to our bench. You've got questions for me, I've got questions for you. Like, who the hell are you? Where do you come from, that you can bind people to you mentally? Those pills you took, what where you suppressing?"

Jim said, "I'll tell you. And you're right, I still have questions, too. But let's eat. We're gonna need some energy for running when we break out of here."

Detouring to the locked door, B'lair examined it before coming back to their side of the cell. He was frowning, not a look that Jim liked seeing on B'lair's normally cheerful face. B'lair pointed to the toilet and walked away to relieve himself. Jim placed their food on the bench and waited until B'lair had finished before doing the same, letting the rust colored water drip over his hands to clean them.

B'lair was loosely braiding his hair in a long plait, when Jim returned. He took the bowl from Jim and sat down close to him. Jim wanted to touch that braid; giving in to the impulse, he picked it up, coiling it in his hand. "I'm remembering more of what happened when I was in thrall. Did you put my hands in your hair? It seemed alive, moving, wrapping around me."

B'lair nodded. "It's another genetic trait Travelers carry. The K'tana. Partly because of the electromagnetic field it generates, partly because of connecting to nerves, it can soothe, or stimulate the recipient into feeling great pleasure. Typically, people orgasm."

"That how you bribed the temple guards, chi-ef?"

"Yes" B'lair's mouth set into a stubborn line. Jim felt a wave of possessiveness welling up in him. B'lair had prostituted himself to save his students, and Jim wasn't going to think any less of him for that; he'd been desperate and bargained with the only credits he had. But just the thought of B'lair being forced to do it again to break out of this cell was making him angry. He wanted to make sure B'lair was going to be okay. Of course, when they went their separate ways, he wouldn't know when B'lair was in trouble. He had a feeling that his guide found trouble a lot, or perhaps it found him.

He tugged on the thick braid. "I'm sorry that happened, B'lair. And I'm grateful you shared the K'tana with me." He stifled the impulse he had to just tell B'lair that he wanted to be the only person B'lair allowed to touch his hair that way. Jimajamesell, he reminded himself, you don't want this bond, remember? You don't want to be tied to a guide for the rest of your life. To distract himself, he said, more forcefully than he had intended, "You won't have to do it again to get out of here."

"Doesn't look like I'll get the chance, Jim," B'lair said, looking at Jim as if he knew what Jim had been thinking. Maybe he did have some idea. Theirs was a strong bond, he was sure of it.

He wanted to distract those dark blue eyes from seeing into his soul. "How did you make me pass out? Can you do something like that to the guards?"

"I have to be a lot closer than the guards will allow. I suppose we Travelers developed that little talent to stop unwanted attentions. Usually, the V'inna happens when a Traveler is afraid, practically terrified, but I've studied meditation and learned to release it on command. If you hadn't

been so stubborn, I wouldn't have needed to prove to you that the sex we had was consensual." He thought B'lair sounded sad.

"And your skin releases another drug, right? One that's sort of an intoxicant and euphoric?" Another memory surfaced of how irresistible B'lair scent was, the taste of his skin.

"We call it the scent of joy. But don't worry, you're immune to it now." Definitely sad, Jim thought. Well, maybe getting out of here would cheer him back up. He got up and stretched, did some exercises to limber up his muscles. When he finished he dropped down by B'lair on the bench. It shouldn't be too much longer before he would be released. He'd see then about what he could do to gain B'lair's release, too.

B'lair dug an elbow in his side. "Your turn, Jimajamesell. Don't think I haven't noticed how close-mouthed you've been about yourself, and this bond. If you'd had the chance to get to know me, you'd have learned that curiosity drives me. So tell me," B'lair waved his hand between himself and Jim, "how this happened between us?"

Holding up a finger, asking for time, Jim then closed his hand around B'lair's wrist and let himself be grounded by the feel of his guide's pulse. He listened to the far off conversations of the guards. His mouth tightened and suddenly B'lair was in his mind.

What's wrong? B'lair looked at him and then looked closer. *Jim? Your eyes?*

Jim sent swift reassurance through their bond that he was fine. He extended his search further out and a woman's voice caught his attention.

There was something about her voice, and he followed that sound and the tread of her feet as she walked a maze, finally stopping at the center. She gave orders and then the sound of water being released and splashing against stone captured his attention.

Suddenly the woman began chanting words to purify the water, asking the ancestors to accept the sacrifice this day of the transgressor who had allowed the defilement of the temple.

When she was finished and the only sound once again was the music of the water as it filled some sort of stone basin, he heard her sharp intake of breath.

She murmured, "I sense you, listener. Show yourself to me, and I will find you. For one such as you, there is much that I can offer."

Freedom for me and my guide, priestess?

"Perhaps," she said, shading her voice into seductive tones. "You possess a rare talent, outlander. I would learn more of you."

She began humming, retracing her steps in the maze and Jim felt himself being spun into her web by that song, his thinking slowed as she started to invade his mind, learning of him, learning of his guide and he felt her greed, her desire to have him by her side, an obedient, faithful servant.

Not just by my side, Jimajamesell, First Heir to House Ellison. I would have you in my bed.

An avalanche of images buried him then, as the priestess sent him her intentions to bind him to her, by sex, by dominating his senses, by drugs that would free his mind to soar with hers into the unknown.

He was drowning now in that song, and he could feel himself becoming thrall again. He was losing himself and he felt the priestess' satisfaction that he would be waiting for her there in his cell, compliant and obedient when she awoke him from the thrall. His guide she discounted. He was ignorant, weak, and unable to shield the sentinel from her intentions.

With the last of his strength, he sent out a plea to B'lair to free him from the priestess's hold.

"Jim?" he heard his guide say, uncertainly. "What's wrong with you?"

Suddenly, like a warm breeze, B'lair was there in his mind and loosening the hold the priestess had on him, cutting through the thoughts that were strangling him and sending them back to her, much like a stiff wind chases away dead leaves.

He gasped as the last shreds of the web he'd been caught in fell away from his mind. B'lair was sitting on his lap again, kissing him, and he inhaled his guide's sweet scent, once more fully in control of his mind and body.

Pulling back, B'lair framed Jim's face with his strong, callused hands. "Are you all right now? What the hell was going on, you, you were trapped by something dark, something that craved power. Something evil."

Jim stood up, sliding B'lair to the floor. "We've got to leave now, chi-ef. That dark power you felt belongs to the priestess who intends to drown you in some kind of sacred pool."

"Holy comets! But she's a danger to you, too. I *felt* that, Jim."

Jim grabbed B'lair's elbow and started moving them quickly towards the door. "Give me that piece of metal from your hair clip. We don't have much time. She's coming."

B'lair fished the metal strip from his pocket. "It's not gonna work, Jim. I looked at the door and it's not the kind of lock you can jiggle free. I can't pick this lock."

"Can you whistle?" Jim dropped to his knees in front of the lock and pulled B'lair down beside him.

"Yes? Jim, what--?"

"No time, chi-ef. Whistle one note into the lock's opening when I tell you to."

Jim positioned himself and let his sense of hearing focus on the lock. He slid a hand under B'lair's shirt, resting it against his chest, feeling the beat of his heart. "Now, B'lair."

He chased the clear sharp sound into the lock's inner mechanism, building a picture in his mind of how he would need to bend the metal to force the tumblers to open. He freed his hand from under B'lair's shirt and held it out. B'lair dropped the metal piece into his hand and he quickly fashioned it to match his mental picture.

"If this works, we're gonna head for a side door. Stay behind me." Jim delicately inserted the makeshift key and twisted it gently.

The lock released and Jim stood up, pulling B'lair with him. The Bexans had moved closer, looking eagerly at the door. "Stay back," Jim growled out at them, and bent a hand. He released sharp, strong spurs that shot out from their sheaths near his knuckles, pointing them at his former trading partners. The Bexans dropped back to the bench and watched him with unfriendly eyes. If he was returned to this cell, they would be his enemy for this betrayal.

B'lair had sucked in his breath at the display of the natural weapons of his species. He looked at Jim with wide eyes, but there was no time for explanations now. Jim allowed his defense spurs to return to his hand.

He opened the door quietly, listening for guards, and then stepped out in the hall, B'lair right behind him. He re-locked the door, pocketing the newly fashioned key, and led his guide towards freedom.

B'lair couldn't wait until they were out of the incarceration compound and he could ask Jim a few questions – okay, a lot of questions – about himself and his people. Surely they'd have time to talk on the way to Jim's ship. They'd have to steal a land vehicle of some sort, but after watching Jim open that door he had no doubt Jim could manage it.

If he wasn't afraid of distracting Jim, he would ask him those questions via their mental link, but curiosity had to take a back seat to practicality.

They moved swiftly, and B'lair knew it was because Jim was listening for any guards with hearing that was much more powerful than his own. He'd figured it out when Jim had made the door unlock. He wondered if he could get Jim to let him test his sense of hearing, once they were away from this planet.

He wasn't insensible to the fact that he had broken this culture's law. He was at least responsible for the defilement of their relics and artifacts even if he himself had not touched them. But he didn't think the crime warranted his death. He grimaced, thinking of Panjandrum Edwards' audience with him when he returned to the Bastion. The woman would gladly use this as an excuse to oust him from his studies.

Jim shot him a concerned glance and he realized some of his emotions must have been conveyed to Jim. It was so fascinating, this link between them. He would love to explore more of what it all meant, for him, for Jim, but Jim had said he wished for them to separate.

B'lair bit his lip. Maybe he could convince Jim to change his mind. And what people did Jimajamesell belong to? He had never heard of any people who could do what Jim had done. His eyes and the way deadly sharp protrusions had emerged from Jim's hand -- he didn't think they were surgically grafted – they'd looked like some sort of sharp, thick bone.

They'd reached a side entrance, and Jim cautiously opened it, then motioned for B'lair to follow him. They were in a courtyard and on the high wall surrounding the hard packed dirt area there was another door. Jim strode for it, confident, and then he grabbed at his ears and fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

B'lair ran to him, and Jim grabbed his arm. "Run, B'lair. I can't hold on much longer."

"No, no, no! Jim, get up, c'mon." He crouched behind Jim and locked his arms around him and hauled him up as best as he could. Jim staggered, and B'lair slipped to his side, pulling Jim's arm around his shoulders. "Talk to me! Jim, will earplugs help?"



Jim's hearing was so acute, B'lair figured that a high pitched or low pitched sound must be broadcasting, targeting Jim. The priestess probably was responsible. She'd been in Jim's mind, must have learned of Jim's talents, figured out his weaknesses.

The priestess must know more than B'lair did, and if they got out of this alive then B'lair was going to kick Jim's ass for not explaining all of this when he had the chance.

He propped Jim up against the wall, breathing hard, because Jim was *heavy*. He tore at the hem of his shirt, shredding the cloth into two small plugs and then reached up and fit them into Jim's ears. Jim looked at him, his face ashen with pain, and shook his head.

It wasn't working.

He linked with Jim, then, and the shared pain made his own knees buckle. Wordlessly he demanded that Jim show him what the problem was and Jim weakly sent him images that showed that he had enhanced senses. Sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, plus this mental link and an ability to detect electro-magnetic fields and perhaps telekinesis. Jim had been on suppressants since he was a boy and old enough to choose to keep or deny his talents, and not every watch-warden had that particular gift.

B'lair wished that Jim could just turn off his hearing for now. Be deaf, or at least stay in the normal range for his species. That was what the drugs had done for him, but that wasn't an option right now. B'lair had learned to control his body's V'inna response by meditation and feedback loops. Jim could do the same, but it took time to learn, to practice.

They didn't have time. The guards were bound to find them soon. They needed to leave, but maybe if he could get Jim away from here, away from the sound B'lair couldn't hear, he'd start to recover. He pulled Jim forward and almost was knocked to the ground as Jim's feet refused to work. Grunting, he pushed Jim back against the wall once more. Jim's eyes were glassy and unfocused, his muscles lax; he was only moments away from passing out, B'lair realized.

He cursed his short stature; it wouldn't be easy to carry Jim. He planted a shoulder against Jim's belly and wrapped his arms around Jim's thighs. He heaved Jim up and only the adrenaline pounding through his veins allowed him to even take any staggering steps towards the outer gate.

He was thinking furiously as he took one difficult step after another. Maybe if Jim had an image to focus on, he could try to control his hearing. A dial of some sort, that could stand in for reducing his hearing to normal or even to totally deaf.

Jim's mind was almost unreachable, when B'lair tried, but finally Jim responded to the insistent screaming B'lair was mentally doing. When Jim faintly acknowledged him, B'lair sent him the visual of the dial and explained his idea. Jim immediately began trying to make it work.

He was unsuccessful.

B'lair reached the gate. It was locked. Of course it was. This was a different sort of lock, though, than the one in the cell door. This was meant to be opened remotely from inside the jail. This gate was locked electronically.

Cursing, he lowered Jim and shoved him against the wall. He'd kept the connection to Jim open and his watch-warden was still trying to shut his hearing off, but he was in such pain.

Taking his braid, he shoved the ends against the latch where it clung to the metal and called up an EMP, shutting his eyes to concentrate. Sparks flew when he released the pulse and, tossing his braid back over his shoulder, he opened the gate.

He pulled Jim away from the wall, intent on getting as far away as he could, thinking that he'd have to steal a land vehicle, wondering what direction Jim's ship was in, hoping that putting a little distance between Jim and the source of the pain he was feeling would ease him so that Jim could direct them to his ship. He once again heaved Jim up and took three steps through the open gate.

He never noticed the darts that were fired at him, not until he felt pain in his back, and saw a dart in Jim's shoulder.

His last regrets as his eyesight went dark and he felt himself and Jim falling to the ground was that he had failed Jim.

The sound of a gong being struck near his aching head echoed and B'lair forced his eyes open, trying to gather his scattered wits. The drug from that cursed dart had left him still dazed and it was hard to think. His wrists were bound behind him; he was gagged and lying on a cold, damp stone bench. Lifting his head a little, he realized he was in a stone chamber with no roof and at the center was a large stone fountain. The fountain where he was to be drowned. It sprayed water up into the air, misting as droplets fell back into the pool.

He rolled awkwardly over on his back. The last light of the setting sun was filling the chamber and if this was his time to die, he would take with him the sight of brilliant colors of red, purple, and green as the sky above him began to darken with the night.

"It is sunset."

The words were in the native tongue of this culture but B'lair understood her perfectly. He'd prepared for this trip, after all.

"Let all know that the defiler of our ancestors' ways shall now pay the price for his sins and for the sins of his companions." The woman who spoke walked over to the fountain's edge and motioned with one hand. Two men in flowing robes, priests, walked with ponderous steps until they stood on in front of the bench. B'lair could see they wore filters in their noses and their ears were plugged, they wore long gloves so they wouldn't touch his skin.

He was lifted up between them, and he tried to kick out, but his muscles were as soft as new tallow. He was brought to the priestess, and forced to kneel at her feet.

Jim! B'lair frantically searched within his mind's connection but the link to Jim was dormant, quiet. Jim was still drugged.

He slumbers yet, defiler. He was given more of the drug that subdued you both.

B'lair looked up at her, astonished that he could hear her thoughts. She was beautiful, dressed in golden robes, her eyes large and as blue as the janna flower, her body tall and supple and strong. Her hair was the color of the precious sunstone and arranged in an elaborate style. He looked harder into her mind, since she had opened it to him, and it was twisted and darkness twined around the light within her. Her soul was damaged; some of it had been done to her but most she had done to herself. She became a priestess not out of true faith, but because of the power and prestige it bestowed upon her.

You bound him to you, B'lair of the Travelers, but no matter. You are not worthy to be his, and once the link dies with your death, Jimajamesell will become mine. He is powerful, but naïve. I will teach him of his gifts and together we will face mysteries that you could never show him."

Maybe not. But I'd be his friend and help him with whatever path he decides his feet should travel. I wouldn't try to control him, priestess, B'lair thought at her stubbornly.

He will soon grow to love the harness I will weave for him, and you will be nothing but an insignificant memory and ashes. Out loud, she announced, "Drown now, and your body shall be burned and the ashes scattered on the wind, forgotten by all."

The exoanthro student within him noted how this treatment of his body showed this culture's utter disdain for one who had transgressed, and he couldn't believe he was making academic notes at *his own execution*. He yelled for Jim, but the gag muffled his words into an incomprehensible garble; through their link he frantically tried to rouse Jim, but failed.

The two priests picked him up and dragged him into the fountain, their red robes floating around them. Struggling against the tight hold on his arms, B'lair was turned to face the priestess; she held both of her hands up in supplication and then let them fall, nodding to the priests.

The water was not deep, it only came up to priests' waists, but as they forced B'lair's head down under the cold water, he thought wildly that it would do just fine.

Jimajamesell!! He sent the plea for Jim through their link once more as he held his breath, but though he called again and again for Jim, there was no answer. He kicked out and thrashed against the relentless grip of the priests, his heart fluttering like birds caught in a net, but he remained trapped by those strong hands drowning him.

Finally, he couldn't hold onto his breath any longer.

He inhaled.

He was lost.

Struggling, he tried to find himself again, know where he was.

Who he was.

He felt untethered. No, that wasn't quite true. He could feel it now, something, *someone* was holding him steady, in a distant way.

He heard a frantic call and vaguely realized that he'd heard it only in his head. He concentrated on that sense of connection to...

Jimajamesell!!

With that cry his memories returned: the arrest, waiting for Simonofbanks and Megahann to get him out of the incarceration cell, falling into the thrall after his suppressants wore off, being enticed back to consciousness with his senses set free by the small, beautiful male named B'lair. His body singing with contentment after the sex they'd had resulted in being bonded to each other. Realizing that now he had an unwanted guide. B'lair. Sweet Traveler, intelligent, kind and clever, he'd stopped that priestess from snaring Jimajamesell.

The priestess who would send B'lair to his death.

He remembered their escape. Being trapped by overwhelming pain as he was bombarded with sounds that only affected him. B'lair's valiant attempt to help him. The darts that drugged both of them.

The sound that had felled him was silent now. He sat up abruptly, and rolled out of the soft bed he'd been placed into. B'lair needed him. He sent a howling, whirling, desperate storm of inquiry to him and found the link fraying, almost completely gone.

B'lair was deeply unconscious and he could feel that death was gathering his guide into its cold arms, to take him to where Jimajamesell could not follow.

Pulling out twisted metal from his pocket, in three strides he was at the door. Locked, locking him away from B'lair. Locked from the outside. The make shift key he'd fashioned for the cell door was useless.

B'lair was going to die. Their link was almost gone and he regretted, he regretted intensely that he'd told B'lair that he wanted to be free of him. He didn't want that. He wanted B'lair by his side, talking, touching, smiling up at him.

There had to be a way to save him. He put his hands to his temples, and pressed hard, flipping mentally through everything he'd ever known about his gifts, how to open up himself so that his full potential was finally realized. His father would be appalled, his brother mystified that he was now choosing this path, but it was B'lair's only hope.

Scant moments later, he'd reeled from the intense pain shooting throughout his head from blasting open any remaining shut down pathways to his power, but he had the skills now of a full watch-warden, he was sure of it.

He wanted to scream out his defiance but would not alert his enemies. He knew that his eyes had shifted again. Good. It was time to gamble that the most difficult of a watch-warden's skills was under his control. Gambling for B'lair's life.

Searching for a guard to trap, he realized that two were standing on the other side of the door. He sent them the strong suggestion that something was wrong with their prisoner, that he had fallen ill, and that the priestess would have their plump sacks for the evening meal if they let the man within this room die.

He stood behind the door, and waited, hands clubbed together, as the two guards threw open the door and rushed in.

Taking down the first guard was a simple task, as he knocked him unconscious before the man even realized that Jim had sprung out behind him. The second guard whirled around and reached for his weapon, one that would send a charge that would incapacitate but not kill.

Jim kicked it out of his hand, his weapon-spurs sliding out of their sheaths. He charged the guard, leaping over the prone body sprawled by his feet and taking the startled guard down to the stone floor. He held his spurs to the guard's neck.

"Where is B'lair of the Travelers? And I'll know if you lie to me."

"The, the defiler --" Jim pressed into flesh damp with fear-sweat, and four blood filled lines appeared, droplets of red crimson slowly making their way downwards, "he was taken to the stone room." The guard's eyes were wide with fear, but there was no scent of deception escaping from his body.

"Where?! Tell me quickly and you'll live another day." Jim felt for his connection to B'lair and it was no thicker than a spider's silk. Cold fear settled in his gut, and the guard stumbled out B'lair's location.

"Ancestors intercede for me!" the man prayed, terror and wonder on his face, "Your eyes, they're golden!" He cowered on the floor and Jim ran out of the room, the door locking behind him.

The stone room with its pool was deserted. Jim had listened as he swiftly traveled the halls, ducking out of the way of the two priests who left the room where B'lair had been left to drown. He'd heard enough to know that the execution was over, and that the custom was to abandon the body for three hours, while a ceremony was held by the priestess that required the priests and temple guard's attendance.

He couldn't hear B'lair at all. No heartbeat, no breathing, no movements of any sort. As soon as the way was clear, he silently entered the execution room.

The link between them was almost gone now, but a scrap of hope still remained in Jimajamesell's heart because of the faint, slender thread of their bond's existence. He saw B'lair floating face down in the pool, his beautiful hair spread around him like a shroud, water falling down in a fine mist from where it jetted up from the fountain in the middle.

Numbly he jumped in and hauled B'lair out of the freezing water, laid him on his side on the wide stone edge of the pool. His spurs shot out and he cut the rope around B'lair's hands and laid him on his back. Pressing down with both hands locked on that still chest, he began the rhythmic up and down dance that he dared to hope would bring B'lair back from death.

He poured energy into their link, and felt tears start to fall as the link grew stronger, as B'lair gave a weak cough. Jim turned him on his side, B'lair coughing out the water that had invaded his lungs.

He was alive. His own bio-chemistry, the coldness of the pool's water, their link, the stubbornness that seemed to be such a part of B'lair, Jim didn't know what had kept B'lair alive those last few moments when he'd been declared executed by the priestess.

He'd never been so grateful in his life. He framed B'lair's face with his hands and dared to give him a light kiss. B'lair's eyelids fluttered and he wrinkled his nose.

Stay with me, B'lair, he pleaded, the bond growing stronger and stronger as each second ticked by.

B'lair needed medical attention. He was cold, and his heartbeat was still erratic. Jim had to get him out of here, and since Simonofbanks and Megahann had not come to claim him, he would meet them at the secondary meeting place, his ship.

He would have to carry B'lair.

Slinging his guide over his shoulder, he looked up at the sky overhead, the last light of the sun leaving, purple dusk arriving. He bent his knees and jumped up on top of the wide wall, which was easily three times his own height. He then jumped down onto the roof and made his way quietly to the side of the building. He had to leave now, before the priestess discovered he was gone and B'lair's body taken. Jumping to the next few buildings was his best chance, he decided.

B'lair was still unconscious, but that was probably a good thing for now. B'lair couldn't make these leaps, and he had the distinct impression that his guide was not fond of heights. Better that he not be awake for what Jim had to do.

Just as he had moved back a distance to give himself a running start, he heard it again.

The sound that had crippled him so much that he'd been unable to save himself or B'lair. If not for that cursed noise, he could have easily jumped the outer wall of the compound, taking B'lair along.

Falling to his knees, he clutching B'lair's wet body against him. The priestess, she must have ordered the sound to be broadcast again when their escape had come to light. It must be high decibel, and higher in the ultrasonic range than at least B'lair could hear or probably even the guards. It would still do damage to ears, even if the others couldn't hear it. The priestess must not care about her people, must be protecting her own hearing. She knew his weaknesses; in a lot of ways they were similar, he'd learned from the brief exploration of her mind.

He tried to get to his feet again, but collapsed, shaken. A search would soon find them and B'lair would be drowned again. He had to escape!

Seizing upon B'lair's idea of symbolizing his hearing as a dial, he pictured one of the dials on his ship's console and concentrated on shifting the dial's pointer up a few degrees.

It was hard, and he was concerned that if he focused too much, he would slip back into thrall. He should, he should do what B'lair had done to bring him out of the thrall before. Taking one of B'laire's fingers and placing it in his mouth, he sucked on it. The explosion of his taste sensors was strong, B'laire's skin, even after being immersed in water, was still sweet and enticing to him.

Using that to ground himself, he concentrated on decreasing his hearing, the dial in his head giving him a focus point. The sound that was crippling him was slowly fading and when he could no longer hear it, his heart stopped beating too fast and he gave a sigh of relief.

They still needed to get away from here before both his and B'laire's ears were damaged, though.

He stood up, testing himself by shifting B'laire back over his shoulder. He turned and jogged back to the middle of the roof, evaluating his co-ordination and strength. He took a deep breath and tightened his hold around B'laire's thighs.

Running hard, running fast towards the edge of the building, knowing that the drop if he missed might kill him and B'laire, he jumped, his powerful legs springing him through the air, feeling the cool night air whipping against his face.

He landed lightly and, with a strong sense of satisfaction, he ran across this rooftop, and again soared through the air. Another building, and another and another and another.

Finally, when he felt confident that he'd put some distance between the priestess and themselves, he laid B'laire down on a rooftop and checked his breathing, his pulse.

His pulse was steadier than it had been, but his breathing seemed labored, though. He needed medical attention. He needed the ship's med program to run tests and advise him on what to do for his guide.

B'laire was still unconscious and that worried Jim.

He allowed his hearing to creep back up, to see if the ultrasonic frequency was still being leveled as a weapon against him. That was silent, but then he heard something that made him grin in relief.

Megahann's clear voice and Simonofbanks' low grumble. They'd come finally to free him. He listened to their conversation as they left the justice building and learned that a manhunt was underway for him and B'laire, but that even if Jim was captured, the papers his friends had brought would no longer secure his release.

The priestess had claimed him.

How he wished he could contact Megahann and Simonofbanks, but he couldn't. Neither of them was a watch-warden. He could however, climb down this building and try to intercept them as their land vehicle navigated the city streets. They would head for his ship, he thought. He got his bearings and was glad of the cover of night as he slowly and carefully went over the side of the building, hugging a ledge and then balconies until he reached an emergency staircase.

B'lair remained a limp weight until Jim lowered him in an alleyway close to where he hoped to intersect the vehicle. He stirred a little then, and coughed weakly. He opened his eyes and blinked at Jim. His mental connection to B'lair flared and he sent a burst of hope and relief to his guide.

Hey, man. Jimajamesell, no, Jim. I call you... Jim. What?" but then B'lair's eyes drifted shut and he fell back into a darkness that had no dreams.

Jim left him in the shadows of the alley and waited, tracking the vehicle's progress, and when he realized that he was one block too far away, he sprinted to intercept it, torn about leaving B'lair alone in that alley. He wasn't sure how much range he had with his telepathy, but in case his friends could hear him, he projected to them that he was coming.

He frantically waved when the vehicle approached. It looked old fashioned to him, as this planet was several hundred years behind his own planet's technology.

Old fashioned and slow and inefficient as it was, Jim still thought it was a beautiful sight when the vehicle slowed to a stop and Megahann threw open the door, motioning for him to climb in.

Cold, really really cold. B'lair felt himself being lifted up, arms under his knees.

He struggled with opening his eyes and managed it for a scant few seconds. Jim was carrying him up a ramp. He closed his eyes again, more tired than he could ever remember being. Jim. Jim was safe? He tried to ask a question but instead began coughing. When the coughing fit was over, bright colored spots were dancing in front of his closed eyelids, and he felt himself slide back into unconsciousness.

B'lair? The voice in his head was gentle, but insistent. *Chi-ef? You with me yet?*

He drowned. He had drowned. He had *drowned!* Remembering that made him shake and he felt a surge of misplaced fear and adrenaline because that was Jim talking to him in his head and Jim had carried him somewhere away from the incarceration center, and so he must be safe.

Probably he was safe.

Holy comets, he hoped he was safe, that Jim was safe. They had to get off this planet!

B'lair, you're safe, and I'm all right. We're in my ship and the hyper-drive's engaged; we're far away from that rock.

Jim? Are you okay? Last time I saw you things were in a bad way, with what? Was it something in the ultrasonic range that was affecting you that way?

This time Jim spoke out loud. "Yeah, good guess. And your idea worked about the dial. Look, I'll tell you everything about our jail break but I need you to open your eyes and talk to me. I scanned you with the EMT program, and gave you some shots to help get over being drowned, but I need to get you scanned again. You've been asleep for six hours, chi-ef."

Oh. His brains must be scrambled, of course he needed to open his eyes. And before anything else happened, he and Jim needed to have a serious talk.

He opened his eyes and saw that Jim had company. He struggled to sit up more, although the head of his bed was already tilted up. Probably to help him to breathe more easily. Jim slid an arm behind him and then just scooted him over so he could sit on the bed beside B'lair, still keeping his arm around him.

B'lair blinked at the handsome, tall, dark-complected man, and the beautiful woman with long reddish-brown hair. "Hello," he said. "You must be Jim's..." He trailed off, not sure if they were friends, or just part of Jim's drug running, smuggling gang.

"Jimbo here's not the best at manners," the woman said, a grin curving her lips. "Eventually he'll remember to introduce us, though."

"Listen, Third Daughter of House Conner, I told you to stop calling me that," Jim grumbled, but B'lair could hear the affection in his tone. So, a friend then.

The woman winked at B'lair. "I'm Megahann of House Conner, and this," she pivoted to indicate the powerfully-built man who was a couple of inches taller than Jim, "is Simonofbanks, of House Banks."

Simonofbanks gave B'lair a stern look. "I don't care what sort of nonsense you Travelers get up to on your own time, but you will comport yourself according to protocol when tagging along with Jimajamesell."

B'lair gaped at him and blurted out, "I had no idea that smugglers and drug runners were such sticklers for the rules, but I'm just gonna lay this out for you. I want to help Jim, sure, but I got over wanting to be a space pirate by the time I was six, and I'm not going to join your gang. No offense?"

Banks stared at him, his mouth dropping open a little. "Jimajamesell, I thought you said you'd bonded with this boy?"

Jim squeezed B'lair's shoulder. "I did. There's a few things that weren't shared between us, though, so if you don't mind, sir?" and he looked towards the door.

Megahann laughed. "He was worried sick about you, B'lair of the Travelers. Grumpy as an old merakit, and wouldn't leave your side. Anybody that has that effect on the First Heir of House Ellison is somebody I want to get to know. We'll talk later. We won't arrive at Cascadia for a couple of days." She smiled at him and gave him a flutter of her fingers as she stepped out the door.

Simonofbanks' two fingers were massaging a line between his eyes on his forehead. "Get this straightened out, House Ellison."

"Sir," Jim acknowledged, nodding his head. "B'lair and I will see you on early shift."

The big man left then, nodding to B'lair, a look of tired bemusement in his eyes.

"So," B'lair said. "Cascadia. That's a restricted planet. Jim?..."

"Yeah," Jim replied. "I know I've got a lot to explain about." He pressed a kiss to B'lair's temple. "I think it might be easier to do this with the bond. And B'lair, this time I'll let you see everything. Everything, chi-ef."

Start at the beginning, B'lair ordered, reclining and pulling Jim with him. Who you are, where you come from. Cascadia? Jimajamesell, I don't want to break this bond between us. I know that you do, but can't you give me a chance?"

"Shhh," Jim crooned. I'm not the smuggler you think I am, B'lair. I'm a guardian and I was doing covert work on Lowana. The images I shared with you, they happened but I guess I subconsciously kept my true identity a secret. Hid those memories from you, although how, well, I just don't know. And then with trying to get away, well, I never got the chance to set you straight. Simonofbanks is my captain, Megahann is a guardian, too. To keep from breaking my cover, I had to be arrested. But I never wanted to bond with a guide, that's true.

B'lair's heart dropped. Jim was going to cut him loose. Bleakly, he wondered how he would make his way back to the Bastion, with no credits to his name.

Jim touched B'lair's hair. No, B'lair, no. See, you've changed my mind. If you want to take a chance on partnering up with me, then there's nothing I'd like better. You could work with me on Cascadia. And I know you're serious about your research. No offworlder has ever been allowed to stay on Cascadia or study my people. You could be the first."

B'lair climbed on top of Jim, knees to either side of Jim's hips. "Jimajamesell, First Heir to House Ellison, are you asking me to stay with you? To be what you said, your guide? And what about this?" He rocked his ass against Jim's groin. "Are you asking a Traveler to be your lover, to commit to each other?"

"Yes to everything, B'lair." He pulled B'lair down for a kiss. A gentle one, because B'lair needed to recover from drowning. He shuddered, seeing again B'lair's body floating in the fountain, his long hair spread out like sea kelp around him.

B'lair knew what he thought, saw the disturbing image of himself and it was as much for himself as for Jim that he kissed him, opening his mouth to him. *I'm alive, Jim. Feel me, feel my heart beat. I'll be your guide and lover, Jimajamesell.*

Jim smiled at him, reaching up to plunge his hands into B'lair's hair. "I still have so much to tell you, but we've got time. Let's get those scans done, and get some rest. It's been a hell of a day, chi-ef."

B'lair reluctantly climbed off Jim and slid to the floor. He held out his hand and Jim levered himself up and out of bed. He wrapped his arm around B'lair, and walked him over to a med station.

Sudden doubt hit B'lair. It had been a hell of a day. What if Jim was just reacting to B'lair's death? What if this wasn't what he really wanted?

Jim rolled his eyes. *Look for yourself, if you don't believe I'm serious.* and opened himself to B'lair.

B'lair dared to examine Jim, his mind and soul as bare to him as if he stood naked in front of him.

Smiling, relieved, he reached up and kissed Jim again. "You know, I'm really glad you didn't turn out to be a Ranori."

Jim's laughter was infectious and laughing along with him, B'lair decided he really liked the sound of their happiness entwined.

He wouldn't mind hearing it every day for the rest of their lives.

THE END

Note: Yep, I totally stole Jim's bone blades from Wolverine (Marvel comics.)