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**Athakarin**

Avala hated what she saw. It sickened her to the core. What they were doing was wrong. However, it was the only way to appease the spirits, or so the priests would have everyone believe.

Avala watched in horror as the man on the altar was burned alive. Her round amber eyes took in the gruesome spectacle as tears trickled down her pale cheeks. A lock of her golden hair fell in front of her face, blocking her vision for a moment before she swept it aside. She had to see this. If she did not, it could anger the spirits, and that would negate the sacrifice.

She watched in somber anger until all that was left was a charred husk. Finally, the elder priest raised the symbol of Yasal and recited the words of old. “May the spirits forgive our trespasses. May Yvan and Ijar turn away from our transgressions. May the death of this soul not be in vain. May we have peace from the wrath of punishment. May Yasal grant us mercy. May our sacrifice be accepted.” With that, the ceremony came to a close. Avala left the temple as quickly as possible, wanting to forget the horrors that she witnessed there.

Outside the sky was dark, as always, the stars twinkling in the void. The eternal fires to the west illuminated the horizon. She hurried through the cold to her home on the east edge of town, hugging her cloak close to her body. When she arrived at her hut, she kicked open the door, shattering the ice that had formed on it, and stormed inside.

She lit the hearth and then lay down on the pillows next to it. Only then did she finally release the wellspring of tears hidden within her. Her brother was the man who had been burned in the temple, burned to appease the wrath of imaginary spirits, because the people of her village were too enslaved to tradition to realize the spirits did not exist.

The door, which was still open, slammed shut. She didn’t even bother to see why, for she knew who had closed it: her husband, who she had been forced to marry when she was eight. She hated him, just like she hated the priests, but she was too afraid to lash out. She knew there was nowhere to flee if she did. To the east was frozen wastelands and to the west eternal fire. To the north and south were more villages, all following the same laws and worshipping the same made-up spirits. She was trapped in a hell worse than anything the priests could dream up.

“I was worried about you, Avala,” her husband said softly.

“As if you actually care what happens to me!” she replied through her sobs.

“Of course I do. You know as well as I do that these sacrifices are wrong!”

“No you don’t! If you did you wouldn’t have taken me from my parents!” This was the first time she had ever shown any sign of disliking of her forced marriage. It was a punishable offense for a woman to refuse the man she was given to, but she didn’t care anymore.

“When your parents deemed you were ready for a husband, I ensured that you came to me to protect you from what some of the other men might do to you. You know I have never laid a hand on you against your will. I have tried to treat you with kindness, which most women are not afforded.”

“You’re not going to beat me, like what father did to mother?” she asked, utterly confused.

He looked at her incredulously. “I would never treat a woman that way.” He shook his head and sighed. “Why have I been forced to live on this barbaric world for so long?”

Avala tilted her head in confusion, “What was that?”

“Avala, I . . . I come from another world. I am not Athakarin like you. I was sent here to watch and observe.”

“Then what are you?” she asked, the tears receding from her eyes. She had always wondered why Alvaj had never treated her like her father treated her mother. She assumed it was just some sort of torture he was putting her through, to see how long until she broke. That’s how men treated women. It was the way things were.

“We call ourselves human. We’re here to end the cruel reign of another off-worlder who calls herself Yasal. Her kind is the bitter enemy of my people,” he said, his hands behind his back.

She leaped to her feet. “All these years, and you never told me? You could have saved Vran! Couldn’t you? And . . . and Yasal isn’t real! The spirits aren’t real!” She didn’t know what was worse, the fact that she wanted to believe him or the possibility that he was just trying to torment her.

“Avala, I tried to save your brother, but the priests got to him first. I am forbidden from attacking the natives unless ordered. To do so would reveal ourselves to Yasal.”

She stared at him. He couldn’t be from another world. He looked so much like any other man, except . . . she had never seen anyone with blue eyes before. She studied his eyes. The more she looked at them, the more she realized they did not seem Athakarin. The pupils were the wrong shape; instead of slits, they were circles. Why didn’t she notice this before? She could have sworn they weren’t like this in the past.

She gasped. The Devalra were said to have round pupils, at least when they took the form of mortals. The priests claimed they were evil spirits who delighted in destroying those loyal to Yasal. The Athakarin were said to be the offspring of the good spirits, the Yaji, and the evil spirits, the Devalra. It was because of this mixed heritage that mortals existed. Due to that evil side of their heritage, Yasal required constant sacrifices to appease her. Could it be that her people were actually the descendants of two different beings from other worlds, beings who were stuck in a war?

“Are you a Devalra?” she asked shyly.

“That is what the Yajirans call us,” he replied, “but I assure you that we do not seek to enslave your people, like they do. We seek freedom and equality for all.”

Avala eyed him suspiciously. “I should tell the priests.”

“The priests are just going to demand you give yourself as a sacrifice once I escape. You are better off coming with me.”

“Coming with you where?” she asked with sudden excitement. Was he offering her a chance to leave this hell behind? Perhaps she had misjudged him. When she looked at him, all she used to see was a man who was just as cruel and unforgiving to women as any other on her world. Now she didn’t know what she saw, but he was suddenly fascinating, a mystery to be solved.

“I’m leaving my post on this world and going back to headquarters,” he said. “I’ve been given permission to take you with me—for your protection.”

She knew what he meant. If a man left a woman, it was essentially a death sentence. Without the ability to get a job, she would starve within a month. She would also be up for grabs by any other man in town, and she hated the way most of them looked at her. This was her chance to leave it all behind—if he was telling the truth. However much she wanted to believe him, it seemed too unlikely. *What do I have to lose by trusting him? If he’s just trying to break me more, there’s nothing I can do. But if he’s telling the truth . . .*

“I would like to go with you,” she said finally.

“Good. We leave at the ninth bell. Make certain you have everything you want to bring with you. We won’t be able to come back for anything.”

She retrieved the few belongings that mattered to her and placed them in a pack. They included her Mohavji necklace, which she received from her mother right before her death. She also packed her red Knakta crystal, which she found when she was a child, and her seven birth rings, each of which each signified something about her birth. Alvaj said they would not need food for the trip, but she

packed some anyway: two loaves of Milic bread, baked the previous cycle.

When the town bells tolled nine times, she was ready to go. Alvaj grabbed her hand unexpectedly. She tried to pull it away, but before she could, the world around her melted away. She was suddenly in a brightly lit room with metal walls and floors. Alvaj released her hand as she looked around at the alien room.

She checked below her and saw that she was standing on a large disk stuck to the floor. It was big enough to fit at least eight people standing close together. The walls of the round room were adorned with big rectangular panels made of the same glowing material as the plate. On one side of the room was a door, which slid open to both sides as Alvaj approached.

Avala followed Alvaj into a large chamber filled with strange furniture and people. As she entered, they all stared at her. A woman stepped forward. She looked like one of Avala's people except for her eyes and her strange outfit. Instead of a robes, tunic, or cloak, she wore a white form-fitting outfit with a gold stripe down the right side.

"Greetings, Agent Allan. I see she took you up on your offer," the woman said to Alvaj before turning to Avala. "You must be Avala. I am Commander Sylvia of the Earth Intelligence Service. Let me be the first to welcome you to the planet of Hydra Three."

"Is . . . this . . . real?" Avala asked softly. Everything around her was white. The other people wore the same white form-fitting outfits as Sylvia, although the stripes came in a variety of colors. Some were blue, some red, and others green or gold. Flashing lights of many different colors blinked around the room. It was like she was in a palace for spirits.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Sylvia said as she watched Avala take it in. "We call this the command center."

Suddenly, it occurred to Avala that Sylvia had claimed she was a commander, a position of authority. *That couldn't be what she meant, could it?* "Are you . . . in charge?" she asked shyly.

"Of everything that happens here, yes. There are others who I have to answer to, but . . . ." She paused, as if shocked at a sudden revelation. "Given your people's poor treatment of women, you must be surprised to see a woman in charge. Is that it?"

Avala nodded.

"No need to worry. Among our people, men and women are treated as equals. The only thing that puts me in charge of others is my rank, which I had to earn. I'm certain you'll like that about us." She paused to address Alvaj. "Agent Allan, you are dismissed. Make yourself presentable, and then report for debriefing." Sylvia turned back to Avala. "As for you, let me take you to your new home. Please, follow me."

Avala followed her through a doorway and along twisting white hallways until she stopped at a door. She touched the side of the door, and it opened. Sylvia motioned for Avala to step inside. As soon as she did, she noticed the interior looked similar to the home that she had just left behind. However, a strange device was set into the far wall. And though the windows looked real, when she tried to put her hand through one, she hit an invisible wall.

"It's an illusion, dear," Sylvia said. "We call them holograms." She pointed to the device in the wall. "If you need anything, such as food or heat, just talk to the Adjutant. That's what we call the device on the wall. Also, don't try lighting the fire the normal way. Just ask the Adjutant." She smiled. "I'll be back in the command center. Feel free to look around the complex. If you get lost, just ask any of the adjutants you see for help."

As Sylvia turned to leave, Avala grabbed her arm and put her forehead to Sylvia's wrist in a sign of gratitude. Tears streamed down her face. "Thank you for this great gift of freedom."

Sylvia put her hand on Avala's head. "You're welcome, child." Then she left, the door sliding closed behind her.