

VALKYRIES

BY JOY ANNE BAKER

ONE EXTRAORDINARY CAPTAIN
TEN UNIQUE WOMEN
ONE PERMANENT MISSION

A NOVEL SET IN AN ALTERNATE
STARGATE SG-1 UNIVERSE

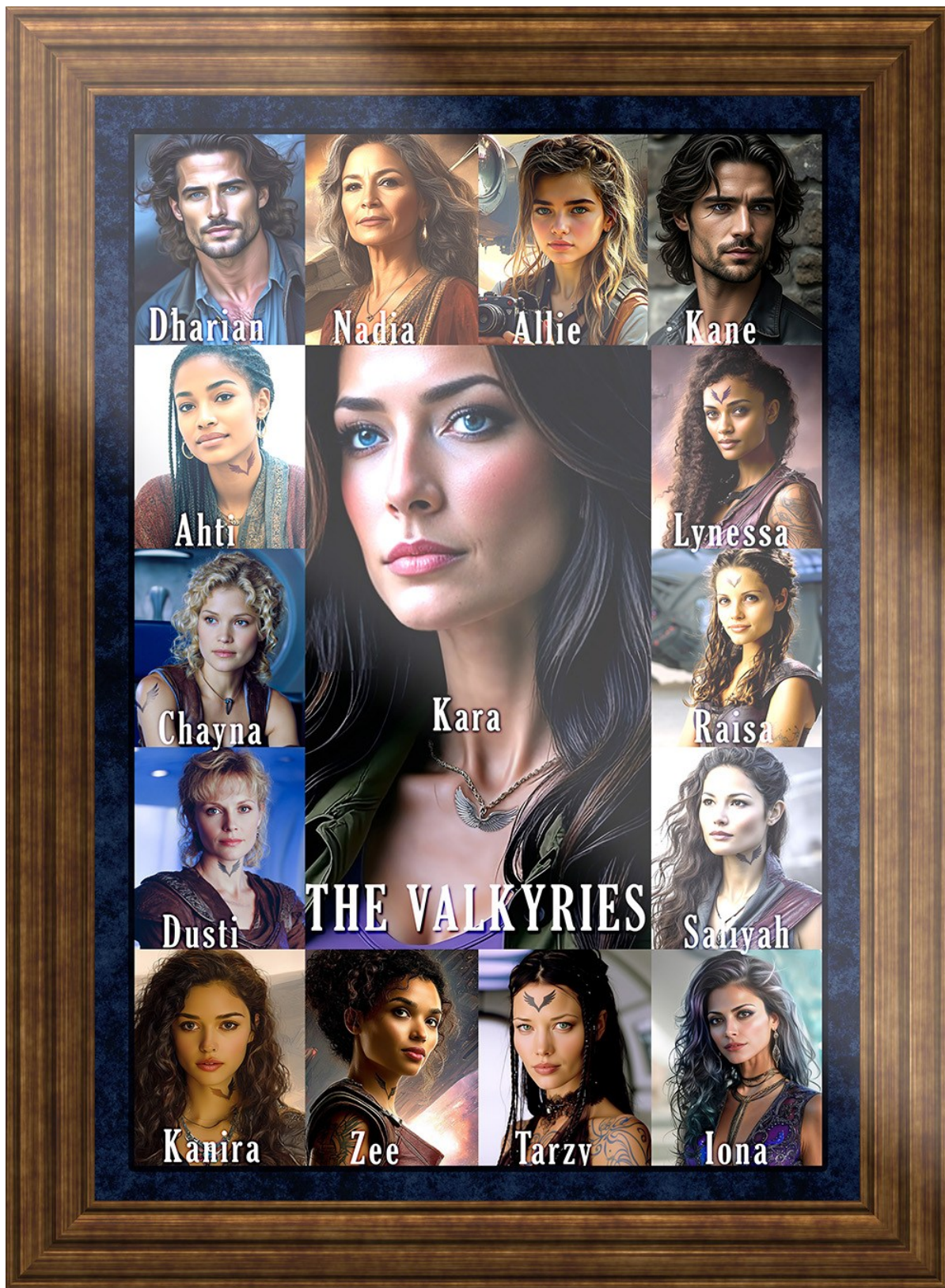
VALKYRIES

Intro Summary: Kara Easteman is a smuggler. Most days, she is simply delivering goods. And one day, she decided to smuggle the female slaves in the Goa'uld empire into new lives. Those who had nowhere to go were welcome to stay aboard ship. Then her brother Dharian told her that she had a ship of Valkyries and had to explain what that term meant. And from that point forward, her StarCraft became The Valkyrie, and her crew, Valkyries. She even rechristened her ship's artificial intelligence, "Val."

Series Note: Set in an alternate SG-1 universe. Smuggling pays the bills but rescuing women pays out ka'ren'shal, the Jaffa term for Karma. Get to know her crew of Nine, plus an older woman and small granddaughter. And get to know Kara herself as they move through the fourth quadrant of the galaxy, getting into as much trouble as they can without getting killed for it. Always, the primary job: freeing women from bastards.

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Dedication

To Jack, Daniel, & Jason.

Their world led me here.

~ * ~

Acknowledgement

Kara & I are Justice Collectors.

She's able to do what I can't.

PART 1: BEGINNINGS



CHAPTER ONE: MEMORIES

IT was going to be a long day, given the rise in humidity. Kara Easteman wiped at her dark brow as she sat down in the outdoor pub, taking a small round table at the edge of the roof cover. She raised the old worn ceramic mug to her lips and sipped at the beverage, supposedly Kaffa but by its burnt aftertaste, it had been ground so loosely, it barely resembled the nuts of the Kaffa tree.

Her sharp deep blue eyes split their attention between the Jaffa stationed at the small Goa'uld compound across the roadway and the narrow door at the far end of the compound. It was the closest exit to the street and her primary target, though the Jaffa weren't the targets. They were a *hopefully* benign threat—a contradiction. Jaffa were always a malign threat.

She sipped her drink again and made a slight face. She wondered if the bartender was a cheat or was simply running low. The Kaffa's light roasting made it taste like black heart herb tea, which had an anise undertone. Not her favorite. She preferred a citrus one. That wasn't likely to be served on a planet oppressed by the Goa'uld, especially in an outpost like Wallatchi Nine. The parasitic aliens preferred their subjects to drink strong ale and mineralized water. Keep them at the edge of despair but no further. There was less rebellion.

She checked her watch, smirking at the thought. They had a rebellion going on whether they realized it or not. Just the quiet version. She sighed at the time. Two and a half hours to go before Evening Meal; it was the prearranged time according to the message she'd received. All that was left was to maintain constant assessment of the Jaffa stationed around the small Goa'uld compound.

Kara pursed her curved lips thoughtfully. Wallatchi Nine housed one of the worst Jaffa compounds in the sector. So why did they deserve their own whorehouse? For that was the entire purpose of the coming and going around this one-story building. Underground, there were five levels, all to service the Jaffa. It was unusual for the Goa'uld. Since when did they give a damn about the sexual needs of their military? On this scrappy world, the soldiers of the Goa'uld weren't guarding a treasure horde. All they had was desert. Which meant the planet itself was a staging area. And most of the time, it was boring peacetime. And to keep this lot in line, she figured, they gave them the gaming tables found in taverns just like the one she was in—and a whorehouse. Intense rage raised its ugly head within her, and Kara stuffed it back down.

Time and place, Easteman. So, what did this set up mean, outside the staging area? It meant that this was a training facility—but not for the Jaffa. The Goa'uld did *not* give their Jaffa their own personal whorehouses. For this facility, it was *Car'en'cen*, or *Enforcement of the Craft*. Teach the women – and men, to be fair – how to please. It was revolting. Not the sex part. Kara didn't believe that sex work should be illegal or shunned, but this wasn't sex work. This was enslavement.

There was a difference, and she knew all about it. It was why she'd taken this gig. Although it was beginning to feel more like a personal mission.

She pursed her lips again and frowned as that last flippant thought suddenly pinged her brain. It was as if her subconscious was correcting the conscious one. *No, bitch. We're doing this now. You've finally found your guiding star. Your Personal Mission is getting women out of enslavement, whether ruled by Goa'uld, the Lucien Alliance, or other bad guys.*

She heard the ping again. It dawned on her that this is what people meant by epiphany. She paused in sipping her drink, rolling around the epiphany idea like an old fine wine test. Yes. Rescue wasn't the term, however. Justice was. She nearly barked out a laugh and choked it off so she wouldn't draw attention. Her limited knowledge of psychology said she was now a Justice Collector. Wasn't that just . . . perfect?

The mission mandate was *Rescue*, but *Justice* was the cause. To get these women *out*, get them some semblance of their lives back. It would cause her a lot of trouble, but she had never shied away from a fight and a good cause, and she wasn't about to start now.

She mused on the two things. A fight and a good cause. Why did the two always have to go together?

Movement caught Kara's attention, and she flicked her gaze at the pub's formal entry. *Formal*, in that it was chosen as the entry, despite the fact that the pub had no walls. It was a large portable tent held up by support posts that had been in place for a couple of years. By necessity, the only walled area was the bar itself and its lock safe. Behind it were the owner's quarters and stockhouse—or so Kara assumed if the owner followed the same building protocol for all portable businesses.



THE BAR ON WALLATCHI NINE

The bar's seating area was a scattershot of round tables at one end and in the open air were rudimentary gaming tables. It lent a background noise that was both familiar and easily ignored until the volume of voices changed; currently, the area was moderately busy and that gave Kara a base line. It was automatic, something that she had done throughout her life as a form of self-preservation and any street urchin did the same thing.

Movement directed Kara's gaze as a small woman entered the pub and headed directly toward her. She had dark brown dry skin and fine age lines like an intricately drawn map and walked with an air of not wanting to be noticed. The typical behavior pattern of anyone under a Goa'uld occupation who wasn't Jaffa.

It was Miri, her contact on Wallatchi Nine. The older woman stopped six feet away to wait for permission to approach. A lifelong slave could never break that habit, despite the fact that Miri was no longer a slave but one of Kara's *Freewalkers*, an information gatherer Kara paid once a month where the Freewalker worked, but in Miri's case, it wasn't Wallatchi Nine but Wallatchi Prime. In this instance, Miri was taking a chance but not a large one. That was always Kara's commandment for

her Freewalkers: never compromise yourself or risk your life to get Kara information. She had enough on her soul to risk another guilt-fueled death.

Miri waited patiently, though she looked very nervous. Her behavior told Kara that she'd hated being reminded by these Jaffa and their surroundings that she'd been a slave for one just like it not that long ago. And so she adopted the stoop of obsequiousness to make herself invisible. To everyone but Kara. Kara gestured at the empty chair across from her table. Miri sat down.

Kara leaned forward. "What's happened?"

"Nothing," Miri said, but the edge to her voice said otherwise. At Kara's raised eyebrow, she waved her hand. "Do not worry. They will come. Right now, they are having what you so humorously call the twitters."

"Jitters."

"Yes, that. They're afraid they will be stopped. You know what it's like, always on alert, friends backstab friends."

Kara sighed. "If they don't want to leave, then they shouldn't have contacted you to then contact me." She growled in her throat and started to rise but Miri held up a hand and motioned Kara to sit back down.

"What I just say?" Miri snapped, and her thick accent clipped her words. "They will come."

Kara sighed. When you're enslaved, fear makes you do stupid things. Miri was being overcautious and to make sure it didn't get out of hand, Kara decided she needed an ego boost. She softened her tone slightly. "You've done remarkably well, Miri, thank you. Now, we'll pick them up on their way to the wharf for dinner. Get the skiff and be ready."

"Yes, my lady. I just thought you—"

"I know," Kara said kindly. "I appreciate the caution. If only I was as cautious a person as you."

Miri snorted. "You make me sound reasonable, my lady."

Kara smiled. It was almost warm. "Flattery?" Miri shrugged. "Get this job done promptly without any more hedging and you'll get a bonus." She softly tapped the table with two fingers. "Go now. Resume your post." Without another word, the woman left, a relieved smile on her face. Kara shook her head slightly. Miri was predictable to a fault.

Another ten minutes ticked on, and Kara stared down at the dregs in her mug. Another coffee, yes, but this time, she wouldn't drink it. She didn't need to be squirming in her jeans while trying to fly the cargo ship into her StarCraft's hangar bay. On the other hand, she had a dry mouth today, likely due to the stress of the situation. She sighed and decided to rise to get a refill when a woman's arm appeared on her right, the hand holding a carafe which refilled her mug. Kara looked up with an eyebrow raised. She rarely showed outward surprise, so this was the equivalent of shouting, "Don't scare me like that!"

It was the bartender. "Either you have impeccable timing, or you've been watching me," Kara said.

"I have business to discuss with you. May I join you?"

Kara shrugged and eyed the chair vacated by Miri. "It's your joint."

"And it's just common courtesy," said the woman as she sat down. She wore many colorful desert robes; the inner ones held together with wide sashes. Her jewelry was made from ceramic beads that were decorated with Abydonian designs. They suited her desert brown skin and peppered hair, partially covered by a reddish-brown scarf that tied at the back. The woman had amazing hazel eyes, almost the color of amber. As Kara observed her, she sensed an inner peace and strength and despite herself, it put her at ease. She smiled slightly at the woman's comment and nodded agreement.

"What can I do for you?"

"I need to get home to Abydos. My granddaughter will be reaching her hajra soon and she needs to be away from a place like this. If I still have family there, we can start new."

Kara studied her. This opening insinuated that she knew Kara had a ship. How? Well, that was easy to answer. Anyone with common sense and experience along with a bit of observation time would know that Kara was never at the bar with anyone. That she had money, was clearly not afraid of anyone, did not have the air of a migrant laborer or local. She never came from the direction of the trains or the flight yard. Which meant that she'd come from the spaceport, and you only did that if you came by stargate or ship. And judging by Kara's presence during off hours, it wasn't by the heavily monitored stargate.

"Nice to know someone else has as much sense as I do," Kara said. "I can take you. But I have an errand first. So, my advice? Pack now. You have about ..."

She glanced at her watch. "Fifty-five minutes."

"Already done." She hedged a little. "Mostly. I would have to leave the bar open, so I don't attract attention, so I have been prepared."

Kara's hackles went up. "Are you hunted?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I was referring to your business here."

Kara's hackles turned to ice. "Exactly what do you mean?"

The woman deliberately misinterpreted the question. "If I shut up the bar, the Jaffa and others here will report it as an unusual change. That will invite investigation. I don't want that, and I don't think you do either."

Kara nodded and circled the rim of her mug with her finger. "And all you want is a ride to Abydos?"

"I'm ready to walk away and leave this behind."

"And the granddaughter?"

"She will be here in about twenty minutes. She is learning her math."

Kara studied the woman. She could now see the slight tremor in her hands. It wasn't from fear. It was a form of arthritis. Weakness was something you did not show around the Goa'uld and their Jaffa soldiers. Unfair or not, anyone who noticed would see it as invitation to slit her throat and steal the bar.

Kara sighed. "Kara Easteman."

"Nadia Amari."

"Honored," Kara said, meaning it. The woman had a private power, and she had always admired a woman's strength of will. "And this granddaughter?"

"Allie. It is a nickname for Allicia."

"Helluva time you picked to be leaving here, Nadia." The woman said nothing. "So, you have been watching me. Again, what do you mean by *my business here*?"

"I am a student of behavior. Acutely sharpened of late to protect my granddaughter. And I've been keeping an eye on you because you're a pretty woman in a bar frequented by Jaffa. Only an idiot or an extremely focused woman would do such a thing, and you are clearly not an idiot. You have an errand. Something to do with the women who work in that building." Kara narrowed her eyes, but Nadia held up both hands as a warding gesture. "It is the only reason you sit here watching that building for the last two weeks."

Kara felt chagrin. "I thought I had been careful." She scowled. "No, scratch that. I have been. You are very observant."

Nadia gave her a hard look but not one that held anger. It held pain. "It is easy to recognize another sympathetic person. Perhaps even another former *worker*." Kara raised an eyebrow. "Your demeanor has told me that you know what goes on in that compound."

Kara kept her voice low. "Let's just say that if three women exit that side door and head to the wharf for supper, they may be . . ." Kara heard the scraping of wooden chairs against the wooden floor coming from the far end of the bar where men had been playing botchi. By Nadia's flickered gaze, she knew they were being observed as the Jaffa headed their way toward the oft-used exit and entrance. ". . . greeted with enthusiasm and offered a much better meal."

As the soldiers passed, Nadia said, "Bold. Do you do this sort of thing often?"

Kara gave the woman a long look as she took in her old beauty. The naturally tanned skin, the fine wrinkles at the eyes and around the mouth didn't detract. But it was the tired intensity of her amber eyes, darkening with the disappearing daylight. There was experience there, almost all of it bad, that had planted a sorrowful depth permanently within them. To now have a bar she owned or co-owned said she was a survivor; you didn't stick around a Jaffa compound unless you were.

Kara wondered where Allie's mother was and instantly judged her dead. It then reminded of her own mother's murder. She shook herself slightly, shaking off the horrible memory, and felt angry at having that memory conjured, for it exposed vulnerability. With their – presumably -- shared pasts, she could be excused by Nadia but not by herself. She cleared her throat as she met Nadia's gaze.

"I have skills that are useful. Tools to aid that. Might as well do this on the side while I wait for my next job. You could say it's my first day of my personal mission. But don't let that beginning fool you. I don't start anything I can't finish."

"Indeed," Nadia said in quiet agreement. "I would love to help you."

"Thank you. I don't know if you'll be able to from Abydos, but you never know." Nadia nodded. Then Kara surprised herself and added, "But if it doesn't work out there, you might find a home aboard my ship."

Nadia smiled. It was warm and trusting and filled with a tiny bit of sorrow. "We shall see."

At that moment, a little girl of about eleven years old wearing old desert clothing came running up. She had long dark brown hair with golden highlights and dark hazel eyes. Her face was heart-shaped, and she reminded Kara of a childhood friend.

"Ohma!" the little girl shouted to Nadia, using the Abydonian word for grandmother.

"Manners," Nadia said. The girl's eyes flickered to notice Kara.

"I'm sorry," she said, her gaze traveling between Kara and Nadia, expression full of horror, before she settled on Nadia. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I thought you were cleaning a table."

"Liar," Nadia said, but with great warmth and affection. "This is Kara. She's kindly offered us a ride. So it's time to get packing."

"Abydos?" the little girl said.

"Yes, finally."

"Yes!" the little girl said.

"Kara, this is Allie. My granddaughter."

Allie ran around the table and simply plowed into Kara, hugging her as much as her arms could manage. "Hello, Allie," Kara said bemusedly, pulling back as gently as she could.

"Thank you for giving us a ride," Allie said, smiling up at her. "We've been wanting to go for ages."

"I bet. How old are you, honey?" Kara asked as she gently extricated herself from the hug.

"Eleven. And I'm a very smart eleven."

"Allie," Nadia chastised gently.

"Ohma," Allie said. "I speak the truth. Always."

"That is truth. But not what I was thinking of, and you know that."

Allie's face grew into a pout. "I don't see why it's wrong to say how smart you are."

The s in the girl's words sounded a little lispy and Kara noticed that some teeth were missing on the left side and hoped they were from normal growing and not because some bastard had hit her. Since there was no accompanying bruise to match it, the answer was the former rather than the latter.

Nadia started to say something, but Kara said instead, "Oh there's a great deal of protection needed in never stating your intelligence. See, if people underestimate you, then you can always take them by surprise."

"Really?" Allie asked.

"Kara," Nadia said in the same tone she'd used on Allie.

Kara gave her blink of apology. "I overstepped."

Nadia nodded back. "It happens," she said, forgiving. She turned to Allie and held out her hand. Allie took it. "Let us go pack."

"Don't bring everything," Kara said. "There might not be room in the cargo ship, what with those women and everything."

"Do not worry. How much time?" Nadia asked as they started to turn away.

Kara checked the watch in her front jacket pocket. "Thirty-seven minutes."

"Best start now," Nadia said and quickly moved off with Allie.

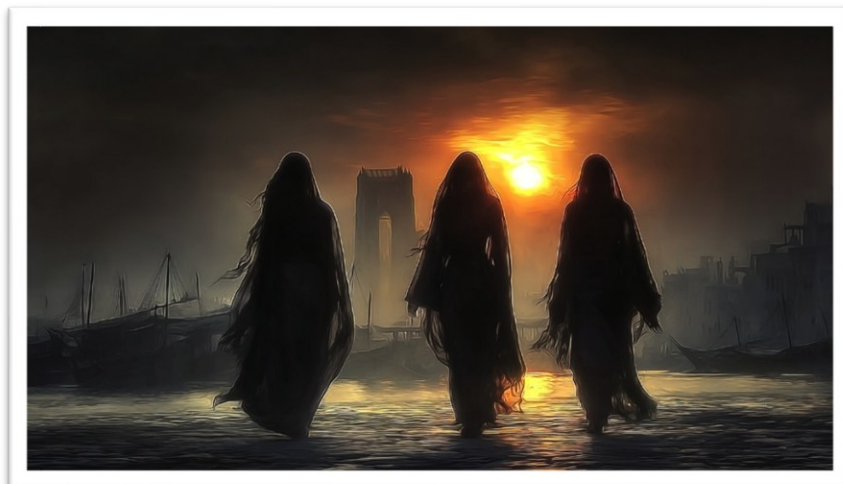
Kara stared after them, wondering how the hell she suddenly got herself some acquaintances. Maybe even friends. It'd be nice to know someone else on Abydos. She shook off the focus on Nadia and Allie and returned to her watch.

The minutes ticked by like hours. Sweat trickled at the back of her neck. Kara waited, impatience rising its hateful head. An old tutor in smuggling had once told her, "*Impatience is the cause of death for all smugglers. Start mastering it now, Kara. Patience will save your life.*"

"Yeah, that and a big glass of ice-cold water," she grumbled. The humidity seemed to be rising in direct correlation with the number of minutes left. As if the humidity switch at Universe Central was being operated by a Goa—

A door across the road opened, spilling soft light onto the stones. A single Jaffa stood in the frame, scanning lazily before gesturing. Three women emerged wearing the same sort of desert fashion that Nadia and Allie wore.

Kara watched them closely, noting the height, the clothing, the faces—*yes*, these were the ones. She pushed off from her table and moved with purpose, boots silent as she jogged the short distance to the skiff Miri had left for her. She climbed in, started the engines with a soft hum, and eased out of the concealed lot. One smooth circle around the parking area—no sudden moves, no attention drawn—before she would glide up beside the women on the road. “Here goes nothing,” she told herself.



The three women distanced themselves from the building at a fast walk. Each carried a wicker basket, their desert robes soft and flowing, covering other garments meant to capture attention. Their sandals were cracked, their jewelry cheap, their eyes wary. Their makeup was precise, hair coifed, at odds with the rest of their wardrobe, but none of it matched the desperation in their collective gait. It said they didn't want to be there.

Ahti walked first—tall, spine straight, scanning the road ahead. Saliyah hovered close, her grip on the basket a little too tight. Kanira moved like smoke between them, quiet and self-contained. They turned down the road toward the wharf, heading toward the restaurant like dozens of others before them. Just three more women having dinner at the wharf after their “shift work” was finished for the day. A routine that was only three months old but well known and on purpose. Ahti had told them, “This will save us one day. Mark my words.”

Two hundred yards from the compound now, their stomachs grumbled as they smelled the salted air and the smell of several cookfires in the restaurant district. Then a skiff slowed beside them. The side hatch hissed open.



From the pilot’s seat, Kara opened her door and gave a short jerk of her head toward the hatch. “Ladies. You’re expecting me. Get in.”

As they did, Nadia and Allie came up behind them, and Kara gave them a brief welcoming smile. But it vanished the moment she saw raindrops on the windshield. She looked up and made a face in disgust. A thunderhead was closing in. She’d smelled the ozone but had ignored it.

“Swell. Another storm. I fucking hate this place.” Over her shoulder, she said, “Let me know when you’re strapped in. We’re on a schedule.” They weren’t, but they needed to move.

“We’re settled,” Nadia said. “Let’s go.”

"Awesome," Kara said in a low voice. She put the skiff in gear, and they headed off to the spaceport in complete silence.

The three women had the same coloring as Nadia and Allie: Abydonian or one of the Chulakian tribes. Allie watched them, and their shy demeanors, for about five minutes before she decided to break the silence.

"I'm Allie. What's your name?"

"Allie, not now," Nadia said, but knew it was too late. She sighed. "I'm Nadia, her Ohma. I apologize for her rudeness."

The women sat together on one seat, squished in side by side. As if choosing their own bench seat was anathema. Nadia judged that it might very well be. The Goa'uld weren't known for easy training, especially for sex slaves. Do as you're told or else.

The woman in the middle of the three looked at her companions, then said to Nadia and Allie, "I am Ahti." She pointed first to her right, then left. "This is Saliyah and Kanira." To Allie, she softened her tone and added, "You are a generous child. That is a gift these days."

Nadia bristled slightly as if there was insult in the words but then relaxed. It was a makeshift camaraderie intended to make the child feel better. She couldn't upbraid the woman for that. So she just nodded in agreement and said nothing. The others followed her lead.



Ten minutes later, Kara was pulling out on the tarmac and heading for what her passengers thought was a fake ship until Kara drew up next to it. It was a normal cargo ship, but it was black and painted with what looked like . . . what a budding artist of six would do. Kara parked the hovercraft and said, "Onto the strange ship ya'll are gaping at. This is Drugbee. He's been my home for many years. And try to ignore all that paint. My brother got a hold of it after my father passed and went to town on it with air brushes. And I decided to leave it there when the ship passed to me."

"It gets noticed," Nadia remarked, slightly alarmed.

"Yes, it does," Kara said simply. "It says the pilot of this ship is an idiot. Pay it no mind."

The others laughed nervously, relaxing slightly. Which was Kara's intention. She walked up to the main hatch door and then pressed her hand over what looked like a painted handprint next to the door. A red laser scanning line appeared, taking her handprint. A high-toned beep sounded, and a click and rush of air followed as the door opened by automation.

"Stow your gear under the seats and strap in one more time. There's no bathroom and we're in a hurry, so there's a bucket if necessary." She gave them all a chagrined smirk when they looked around with dubious expressions. She couldn't blame them. It was a tight fit, but she had done it long before getting her big ship, which she still hadn't named. One just hadn't come to her yet. "It the best I can do for now," she said. "My apologies."



She started up the ship, and it made a heavy metallic whine that faded into a low grumble. The craft jerked slightly as she pushed a button and took hold of two stick-shift controls that moved like joysticks. Pulling back, the craft jetted forward. Unlike the aircraft on earth, with the exception of helicopters, her cargo ship didn't need to ferry down a runway to gain sufficient speed. Instead, she pulled back hard on the sticks, and it at once rose straight up. A dozen feet. Two. Five. Eighteen. Higher and higher until she reached the stratosphere. She twisted her right stick and moved it in a quarter circle and the ship veered to the right and cruised into space.

"How long before we get there?" asked Allie, making Kara jump slightly.

She glared at the little girl, making it clear that a) she wasn't in trouble, but b) don't do that again. "You're supposed to be strapped in. What are you doing up here with me?"

And then suddenly, the four women appeared and crowded in behind Allie to see through the front windshield. It was stupid, Kara thought. There's nothing to

see. Yet. And they didn't know that. She smirked to herself. "Be my guest," she said to Allie, who climbed into the second pilot's seat. "Touch anything and I'll feed you to my cat."

Outside the front viewport, a shimmer sparked in the void—then widened, brightened, and became her.

The Valkyrie emerged like some sleeping leviathan drifting through space, her hull lit in faint strips of blue-gold glyphs, runes curling along the sides like breath held in metal. Silent. Waiting. Watching.

Allie let out a soft, "Whoa."

One of the women gasped and pressed her hand to the glass. "Is that a Ha'tak?"

"Nope," Kara said, already flipping switches. "That one's mine. Built by Ancients, not snake-headed morons. She doesn't enslave people; she just scares the piss out of them."

Another woman—Kanira, if she remembered right—whispered, "It's beautiful."

Kara snorted, amused despite herself. "She's a bitch when she wants to be."

She toggled the comm. "Val, open the doors."

Val's voice came back in that smooth purr: "Welcome home, Kara. Hangar bay is open. Alignment grid engaged."

"Override the grid. Manual approach."

"Acknowledged. Thruster dampening at twenty-two percent."

Kara grinned and muttered, "Let's see if I remember how to thread a needle."

She nudged the stick gently, shifting Little Val's nose down and angling into a tight spin. The others swayed with the motion, wide-eyed but silent. They weren't stupid; panic wasted energy. Still, Kara saw Saliyah grip the seat edge hard enough to go white-knuckled.



As they approached the open bay, the forcefield shimmered, opaque and strange. Passing through it felt like diving into warm syrup—brief resistance, then clean entry. The inertial dampeners caught the rest.

She guided Little Val into the docking berth with a slow, loving touch, like tucking a baby bird into a nest. The moment the gear kissed the deck, the magnetic locks clunked home.

“We’re docked,” she said, unclipping her harness. “Nobody throw up.”

Val’s voice again, warm this time. “Interior pressure equalized. Bay sealed. Welcome aboard.”

Kara stood. “Let’s go.”

They followed her, quiet, unsure. As they passed into the hangar proper, the women looked around like they were stepping into a myth. Curved corridors. Soft lights. No shadows in the corners.

They nodded. That was enough.

Kara turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Allie asked.

“Bridge,” Kara said, already climbing the hatch ladder. “Time to make the jump.”

“Can I come?” Allie asked.

“Allie, it’s time for bed,” Nadia said firmly.

"Another time," Kara said.

Kara headed up the quickest way to get to the bridge and once there plopped down in the only seat, her captain's chair. The light show from the hyperspace plasma was full of many colors. It wasn't a harsh light, but you didn't want to stare at it long. She went over the day in her mind, and how easy this gig had been, and yet she felt it was like a warning: savor this because it'll be the last easy gig. Still, she felt a sense of great accomplishment. She could do this, but with a lot more security measures in place. She pushed a button to take the craft out of automation and took the 'wheel,' a rounded rectangle with hand grips.

She felt the tremor within the leather-wrapped metal, coming from the ship, which in turn transferred it from the hum reverberation inherent in hyperspace energy. It was easy flying, done hundreds of times, and her mind wandered. She didn't know why but she was reminded of an old Tau'ri myth that Dharian had told her about. Something about women warriors who protected the dead.

Her eyes widened. "Valkyrie," she said, as the name came to her. "That's what this mission is. That's what the name of this ship is. And the women I'll rip from the grip of these bastards."

As if in response, she saw movement and heard the accompanying, "Meow."

She looked down at the black cat that had appeared. It wasn't really a black cat, nor real in the human sense. It was a hologram that represented the ship's AI. Why it had settled on this Earth animal was beyond her, but the thing was cute. She thought about how long it had been since the cat had first appeared.

"Meow."

"What?" she asked it. She reached down to scratch it behind the ears, something she couldn't seem to help. It meowed again. "Valkyrie? Is that why you popped in here?" Meow. "Hmm. I just came up with it. You know all about the

term. Dharian told me about the Earth myth once and this mission, this purpose, this *ship*. It fits, don't you think?" Meow. "Then you, little kitty, finally have a name too. *Val*. Short for Valkyrie, the ship's final name. What do you think?" The cat did quick cleaning swipe over its face, then vanished into a cloud of photonic sparkles. She returned to staring out the windshield. "Valkyrie," she whispered, and a deep settling ring of rightness settled over her.



CHAPTER TWO: DAKARA



The photonic sparkle hadn't quite faded before the stars returned—stretched in blues and silvers across the viewport windshield. It was the brief glimpse into normal space that appeared in the intervals where ships normally exited hyperspace. They would be coming up on their own exit in about twenty minutes.

Destination: Dakara.

Kara leaned back in her chair, one boot propped on the edge of the console, and let the memory of that first mission fade as a bit of anxiety replaced it. It settled like a hot stone in her gut. She didn't like Dakara, primarily because of the backward philosophies of Jaffa, free or not, particularly its leadership. Women, even Jaffa women, were considered second-class citizens. Kara had business with

them, which was fine, but personal friendships weren't possible until the Jaffa stepped away from the Goa'uld in culture, not just physically.

They weren't the only ones, but you had to do business with people to get the money to live. The way the world worked, right? Didn't mean she had to like it. Her thoughts returned to that first mission.

It had been a long eight months since that first rescue on that shit planet. That first awkward conversation with an eleven-year-old who thought the copilot's seat was hers by divine right. Back when this ship was still new to her, when the mission hadn't yet grown teeth.

Since then, the *Valkyrie* had become something else. Something bigger. She'd taken in dozens of women, sometimes as many as thirty at once. Most had families to return to, children to raise, and lives waiting. But nine had stayed. Nine permanent Valkyries. And then there was the old wise woman Nadia. And little Allie—though Kara privately referred to her as "Little Valkyrie."

They had become a crew. A force. A future. A turn of the wheel of time that had become their own. Kara sighed and rubbed her hand over her face. She'd been putting it off, but the moment had come. She had to give them The Talk. The one about the Free Jaffa allies who always seemed to show up with handsome faces and hard dicks.

Most of the women didn't mind. Hell, the female Jaffa were usually the ones to roll their eyes and do Kara's job for her—delivering a stern warning and a pointed glance toward the nearest hatch. But still, it was a matter of *security*. She didn't care who was screwing who—she'd had her own dalliances, and she'd have more in the future—but unknown Jaffa weren't allowed aboard. Not without vetting. Not without time.

It generally took a month of background checks and Jaffa references before Kara even *considered* letting a new one set foot on the ramp. And no one got by the loading dock anyway. Not with Val on duty. The AI kept the entry shielded, monitored, and secure. No man sneaked aboard. Period.

Still, it was time to say it out loud. To make the line clear. Before hearts got too tangled, or worse—before loyalties did.

The closer Kara came to the crew quarters section of the ship's west wing, she heard actual laughter, which was good. They were The Nine. The Valkyries who stayed to take care of themselves, who helped only on missions. The ship was self-cleaning—one of the selling points—and the systems were run by the artificial intelligence, nicknamed *Val*. The only housekeeping to do was your own and to keep the community kitchen and dining clean.

The Nine were the first three women Kara had rescued: Ahti, Saliyah, and Kanira. Over the next eight months, the ones who stayed after them were Chayna, Raisa, Lynessa, Dusti, Zee, and Tarzy. Raisa, Dusti, Lynessa, Zee, and Tarzy were themselves Jaffa, and Tarzy was the only one who had been a Jaffa Priestess. That in itself set her apart from the others. Priestesses didn't abandon their gods. Tarzy had. For that, she was accepted more so than any other woman Jaffa because it meant that she had more fortitude. It took some doing to overcome that part of the indoctrination into servitude. One day, Kara would ask her what had tipped her to the falseness of the religion.

All had kept the black tattoos on their foreheads, each a sigil of the Goa'uld they had served. Kara would've preferred to have had hers removed had she had one, but then, she hadn't been programmed into the Jaffa culture, which said you'd die if you removed the tattoo. It was a blatant scare tactic aimed primarily at children, and as adults, you knew it was bullshit and still the tattoo stayed – because they were still Jaffa inside their own minds. That cultururation didn't stop just because you woke up and realized you didn't want to be there anymore.

The women who had left had had ties to the planets they were stolen from, or they had husbands on another planet, who were always contacted immediately after rescue. Sometimes, in the case of Raisa, the husbands had moved on, and in that sense, they'd felt abandoned. Right or wrong, the impact was felt.

Right now, it was time for *The Talk*. Kara had been putting it off because she thought that it might not be necessary. That their freedom wouldn't override sensibility. But they were about to be tested on Dakara. A planet full of hot men in leather and their own freedoms to enjoy. *Good gods, save us all*, Kara thought.

As she headed down a corridor, she checked herself to make sure she was at least tidy. Captain of the ship, no matter what the situation or time of night or how little sleep you got, meant you had to keep up a standard, set the example. She wasn't someone who pampered herself, but sometimes it was necessary to pamper the others. Mostly, her own pampering was already taken care of by the missions. Once in a while, she found new clothes, but they were always practical. She didn't like frills and lacy things except underclothes like breast bands and crotch covers. Dharian said Earth called them bras and panties. She was tempted to start using the terms but didn't want people to get the idea that she was an ally of Earth. That was no one's business but her own.

Turning down another hall and then entering the kitchen, the heart of the ship, she found all nine playing Botchi, a Chulakian board game. They came to a sudden stop when she appeared and for the umpteenth time, she felt she was treated like some ethereal heroine. She was far from that. Yes, she was Captain and was looked up to, but this was a bit more than that. They'd even selected Lynessa to speak for them because most were afraid to do so—although that was slowly changing, thank the goddesses. It made no sense to be afraid of her. She wished she could give a different Talk that would put an end to such ... deference, but that would be seen as an offense. She would still try, just using another angle. Life had taught her that there was always a way through any problem.

Except maybe Jaffa. Honor sometimes replaced common sense. Many of them couldn't see that you didn't have to sacrifice one for the other. True, some were not fully indoctrinated into that cultural mindset, and that proved well for them, but the others, not so much. At least Teal'c of SG-1 was one of the smart ones. He had learned from the Tau'ri how to relax. But the old ways never truly let go of you. Would he fall back on them once he saw her crew of Valkyries?

"Captain Kara, something wrong?" asked Saliyah, who always called Kara that. It was starting to grow on her.

"Yes," Kara said, clearing her throat. "We're going to touch down on Dakara in about twenty minutes. Now, I'm not your mother, you're all grown women. Please tell me: Do I need to remind you guys that you're walking into a lion's den?"

The group of women either smirked or smiled.

Kara acknowledged their reaction with a narrow-eyed expression as she ticked off the fingers of her right hand. "I'm going to say this out loud, so we're all on the same page—"

"Cap," said Saliyah. "We've been here for eight months. We know the rules. We've bonded over them." She ticked off her fingers. "No Jaffa that hasn't been vetted gets aboard *our home*. Val is on orders. If he tries, he'll get the shock of his life. Two, any of them so much as misbehaves around any of us, they'll get blackened balls from you personally."

The others grinned.

Kara didn't bother hiding hers. "Okay, okay, I'm a bit much. I know you are fully capable of defending yourselves and you don't need me to chaperone. But I don't like male Jaffa and their backward thinking. If they change their thinking, I'll change my attitude in direct response. You know I don't trust them. I deal with them. That is all."

"We're meeting Teal'c of the Tau'ri's SG-1," said Tarzy. "He's not like the other Jaffa."

Kara smirked. "No, and you can thank his Tau'ri teammates for that. After ten years, he should've learned something and vice versa. So, what do you guys want to do? Are you just here to get laid?" They grinned. Kara held her hands up. "Not my business. Just ... keep your security level up at all times. Do not ever let them

manipulate you. They're experts. And for the sake of your ancestors, don't fall in love with any of these idiots. It's easy to do but a bad idea."

"We know," said Tarzy.

"You sound like you speak from experience," Lynessa suggested.

Kara wrinkled her nose. "I'm thirty-six. I've been around men since I was fourteen. You learn shit if you're not a raging dumbass."

That brought a round of laughter.

After a second, Kara turned but stopped. "This is our first time on Dakara," she said, pausing to let the rest of the laughter fade and their attention turn sharp. "Despite the fact that there are women on this planet, they see you? They see dinner. Watch your step."



Just as Kara gripped the down-thrust control stick and pulled it hard, Allie came on the bridge. She teetered slightly as the ship shuddered a bit.

"Are we okay?" Allie asked, reaching Kara's command chair and holding onto her shoulder. The one not gripping the down-thrust. She'd learned a while ago, if you don't want to get chewed out, don't mess with her flying.

Kara growled in her throat as she brought her big beast under control. "The Valkyrie is fine," she said between gritted teeth. "Now what are you doing up here?"

"Ohma wanted to know if she could come with you."

"Liar," Kara said, and while she didn't grin due to her concentration, it was in her tone. "She can't. You can't. We'll have our convo here on the ship anyway. I'm not stepping one foot in the temple."

Allie grinned. "Worth a shot."

This time Kara smiled. Allie's response sounded just like her. "You're copying me." She paused. "Go. I'll be there shortly. And if you fall on your ass when we land—"

"It's my fault for not being ready," they both intoned. "I know," Allie said, and left.

The moment she was gone, Kara forgot all about her. She didn't like going through planetary atmospheres and landing on the ground. The ship was too big, too powerful, to hover within the atmosphere like a mini orbit. It was better to set a geosynchronous orbit over The Temple and the Stargate then take *Little Val* to the surface. But The Nine *wanted* to go down, *wanted* to see and talk to the Jaffa. It was another way of saying, *I haven't had a man in weeks, months, years*.

It didn't mean anything to Dusti and Chayna, who had become lovers. They were the only *Sync* couple aboard, which was in keeping with all social norms but with Nine women, the averages held that three would be typically *Pan*, two *Sync*, and four would be *Core*. But not her crew. All but Dusti and Chayna were *Core*, including herself. Which always made her smile for some silly reason. Dusti and Chayna were the only blondes.

"Shit," Kara hissed as she found her attention lagging as she cleared the upper atmosphere and directed the ship slowly downward, anticipating the reaction to the look of her ship—which she felt conceited enough to believe that it was the only one in the universe since the Ancients were dead. She angled the wheel to circle the Dakara central temple and outer ruins and judging from the upturned faces, she had their attention. Pride hit her then. She couldn't see from this height what the reactions were, but she knew that whatever they were, Val was badass.

Still. "Val, what's the reading on the ground? Emotions. Reception." She felt the ground vibrate even as the Valkyrie set down gently in the middle of a large field of dirt and scrub brush. "There," she said, looking through the viewscreen at

the men walking toward her ship. "Admire the beauty, boys. She's one woman who ain't for sale."

"The reception is what you would expect from a strange yet bad ship having landed instead of remaining in orbit."

"Badass, Val," Kara. "I keep telling you. The term is badass."

"I understand, but bad ass does not make sense. Records indicate that it means dangerous. I am no more dangerous than any other fully armed and slightly less functional ship of the Ancients."

Kara only snorted. The AI waited until Kara had landed and could therefore give her full attention. "Captain, I do not understand why we are not in orbit."

"Because the Valkyries wanted to be on the ground. They all won't fit in Little Val. Gotta get a new one someday, or you could tell me how to fix your transportation system." She locked down the thrusters and set the braking. Next came the landing ramp.

"Acknowledged. I am working on the code."

"Val, when are you going to match the personality of your avatar?"

"Meow?"

That made Kara burst out laughing. "Good one." She continued to tap commands on the central operations panel and the outlined rectangles glowed briefly in response to her touch. "Status."

"Systems are normal. Well done on the landing. I could have done that for you, for future reference."

"I know, but I need the practice. What if you're incapacitated?"

"The ship would fall out of the sky."

Kara barked out a sarcastic-sounding laugh. "You have the truth. I think we need to implement another system for such an eventuality. What do you think?"

"That would require a replacement of my systems. There is no way to add to them."

"You are who you are," Kara murmured as she sat back in her cushy command chair. "But what I meant was a new protocol for such an eventuality. Best to be prepared."

"*Yes. I believe ...*" The AI abruptly faded. The absence came off to Kara as surprise.

"What?" she asked, standing up.

The answer came through the door as it opened, and Allie appeared holding onto Teal'c's hand and leading him inside, her face all smiles.

Kara stood there dumbstruck, mouth open in shock, as she stared at Allie, whose smile faded fast. Lynessa came running up, out of breath. "Kara, I'm sorry, but Allie—"

"So I see," Kara said stiffly, almost resignedly. "Val, lock down." If anyone was standing in the loading ramp entrance, they were about to be knocked on their ass or have their heads cut off ... depending on where they were. Only authorized known Jaffa were allowed onboard. Teal'c hadn't been authorized and the only reason he hadn't been struck with a strong zap of shielding energy was that Allie had taken it upon herself, in her excitement, to lead the Master Jaffa and member of SG-1 past Kara's strict protocols.

"Kara," Allie began.

"You know the protocol," Kara said flatly. "You ignored it. Leave. Now."

Allie ran from the bridge and Lynessa wisely followed.

"Apologies," Kara said as she briefly closed her eyes and let out a slow steady breath. "I have rules." She didn't need to explain, especially to someone as astute as Teal'c. But mostly, he was still Jaffa. She did not trust them as far as she could throw them. She stepped forward and offered her forearm in greeting. "Kara Easteman," she said with a little more forced friendliness.

"Teal'c," Teal'c said, grasping her arm in greeting. His brow rose when he realized he could meet her gaze without looking down. "You are very tall for a human woman."

"Genes," she said simply. "Father and mother were nearly seven feet tall. Dharian and I are short in comparison." She moved away. "Do you require refreshment? Food?"

"Negative," he said. "But thank you for the offer."

She frowned slightly as she held out a hand to indicate a folding chair set inside a wall hutch. She sat down, watching him.

"Before we begin," Teal'c said as he retrieved the chair, then turned it around and rested a forearm on the back as he sat. "I would like to know what you have against Jaffa?"

She leaned back in her chair. "How do you want the answer?"

He frowned slightly in confusion. "With truth."

She nodded and was frank. "They treat all women like whores. We're nothing but holes to be filled or robots to take care of future Jaffa. And many do not believe women should even be Jaffa or equal partners in life."

Teal'c felt a little defensive. "There are the Jaffa priestesses, who maintain the fires of the *O'matra*. There are also the *Keepers* who—"

She leaned forward and impatiently cut him short. "Speak to Tarzy, Teal'c."

"Tarzy?"

"She was a priestess, even though she's never said. I can tell by her behavior, but then, I could be completely off, and she simply has the demeanor. Then there's Raisa, who was being trained as a priestess until they decided to turn her into a whore instead. And then there's Ahti, Saliyah, and Kanira. Guess where I rescued them from?"

"You are well-familiar with Jaffa. Our culture has—"

"Teal'c," she interrupted again, a bit more sharply. When she had his full attention, she began to tick off her fingers while she kept her gaze fully on his. "Breeders, maids, servants, housekeepers, slaves. And they all serve their master's sexual proclivities."

"You are being disrespectful."

She barked out a laugh of disbelief as she shot out of her chair and whirled in place, swinging her arms outward to indicate she meant the wider world, not just their surroundings. "Teal'c, you left them because you know them for who they are! How can you defend them?"

"That is the Goa'uld, not the Jaffa."

"Same difference," she said. "They live in a kash'ra. Can you say different?"

His eyebrow shot up. "Kash'ra?"

"The Tau'ri call it 'cult.' Whatever the term, Teal'c, they're right. You know that."

"The disrespect was toward the women, Kara Easteman."

Her brows furrowed. "No. I am not being disrespectful toward the women. I am being factual. No offense is intended or implied toward you as a former soldier of the empire, nor to those whom you fight beside and trust, but you need to open your eyes. If they haven't explained this stuff to you by now, Teal'c, then they're either stupid—"

"They are not stupid," he defended.

"Then they have failed, and you are in denial. I will continue to rescue those who do not wish to be abused, raped, brutalized, sold, forced to have children, and murdered. I have the utmost respect for these women. You would never have heard of me otherwise." She frowned in consternation. "Aside from my brother's big mouth. I'll deal with him. But. I do not have respect for the Jaffa culture that continues this oppression and abuse after you have left the Goa'uld masters. Never in a billion, trillion years will I ever respect a user of women."

"Do you judge all Jaffa the same? You could be violating your own rules, Kara Easteman. Not all Jaffa are the same."

She sat back down, waving a hand. "You're right, of course. There are always, always exceptions in every part of creation. I have met a few decent Jaffa, yourself included."

He bowed his head acknowledgement and considered her for a long silent moment. "This is a distinction I understand. I am also glad that you have stated such recognition. I was beginning to believe that you too were blind, but in a different way."

She grunted again, making him grin, and knew what he wanted to hear. She understood it and let herself relax slightly. "Granted." She paused, studying him. "And I should add that I did not mean to offend."

"Accepted," he said, bowing again.

She leaned back again. "Word is you yourself had to adapt to a changing world where your son is concerned. The others need to learn from you sooner rather than later."

He bowed again. "Indeed."

"How is married life treating R'yac?"

"He ..." Teal'c began, grinning. "Is finding out that having is not as enjoyable as wanting."

She sighed and held onto her anger. There were many aspects of life under patriarchy that disgusted her, and mainly because of the inbuilt contempt for women. But she also understood nature, which couldn't give a shit about societal structures. Nature could be a bigger bitch than any man or parasite.

She sighed again. "Some call it being young." She shook her head. "It's *the hunt*. Once you capture your prey, the excitement is over, and the real work begins." She shook her head again and leaned around to look at the radar panel. There was a blip in orbit. Who was that? "Did you come by ship?"

"By stargate," he said, getting up to look at the panel. "It is faster."

"Someone else is up there," she said, tapping the panel window. "I knew I should've stayed in orbit."

"Your words make sense now," Teal'c said, relaxing and retaking his chair. "That is but one of our fleet on security patrol."

"Ah." She sighed with relief and turned back to him as she leaned forward and rested her forearms on her knees and clasped her hands together. "Now, what can I do for the Jaffa master of SG-1?"

"Your brother, Dharian Easteman, recommended I discuss a delicate matter with you, outside of anyone else's hearing."

"Oh crap. Regarding?" she asked, slowly bracing herself as she sat up fully.

"A member of SG-1 was recently poisoned and recovered. Another person has fallen ill. The common denominator is that there were Tok'ra nearby. The most likely scenario is that someone is trying very badly, and ineptly, to murder Tok'ra."

"Poisoned," she repeated. "What's that got to do with ..." Dread filled her. Images of something black with pincers causing pain. Then a man's voice and the backs of fingers caressing her cheek. *"I shall take care you,"* came the echo of a lying promise. "The Black Scorpion." When he nodded, her hackles went up. "Fuck. My brother is going to get several black eyes."

"There is a problem with discussing this," Teal'c said flatly.

"Yes," she breathed, absently laying a hand flat across her midriff. "Didn't he give you his version of our past tangles with that evil Arachnida?"

"He claims his memories are not as sharp as yours," Teal'c said.

"Bastard," she muttered. "He's right. Okay, explain please, Master Jaffa."

Teal'c's mouth curved upward slightly at one corner. "Did I not say?"

"Yes, but there's an old saying. He who lacks intel, dies first."

Teal'c literally smiled this time. "You sound like Colonel O'Neill."

She raised a brow but said nothing, which in and of itself told him to keep talking. He allowed a grin and began to explain the problem that SG-1 discovered on the planets of Abydos and Bel'a'lat. Tok'ra were the targets, but someone else paid the price. Each time, a black scorpion was the weapon.

"O'Neill believes the Tok'ra are being targeted. This is not new. They have sent Ashrak before and will again, but this black scorpion is not their usual weapon of choice."

"Agreed," she said. "They're overt, not covert, despite that invisibility shield."

"Indeed," he said, then paused, considered his words, then asked, "What is it about the past with this weapon that is distressing? I do not mean to call up demons that are best left buried, but we need more information to properly hunt down the assassin."

She sighed and leaned back further in her Captain's chair, almost to reclining. She stared up at the ceiling and was almost distracted by an odd crack in one of the tiles. Kara's mind retreated, shutting out the trauma that threatened to reveal its terror to Teal'c. Instead, she redirected her focus on the crack in the ceiling. "Val, make a note to remind me in a few hours what the hell that crack in the ceiling is."

"Acknowledged."

Teal'c was surprised but said nothing for the moment. She sighed. He wouldn't be put off. "What sort of information, Master Teal'c?" she asked, closing her eyes and pinching at the bridge of her nose, waiting.

She turned her head, opening her eyes to see his face. Teal'c was clearly thinking about his answer. Sighing, she sat up and decided to be a grown-up and face the unpleasantness with maturity and decorum. But memories intruded. Memories of dark painful scenes that tried to raise ghosts to flood her forebrain.

"O'Neill believes you know who the assassin is or at least who else might know."

"O'Neill is full of shit," she said, at first with disdain, then shook her head when Teal'c frowned. "He is in error. What do you, Master Teal'c, believe?"

"I believe you have information that will be of use," Teal'c said. "I do not believe you would hide an assassin's identity because of the trauma inflicted upon you in your childhood."

She regarded him with a genuine look of gratitude. "Thank you," she said, but with a touch of sarcasm. "Finally, a man with brains." He said nothing and his face didn't move a single twitch. "Stubborn as me. Your assassin clearly got the hideous creatures away from the Goa'uld I refuse to name. Find them, you find the creatures. But I'm not going to tell you the name of the Goa'uld."

"Does your brother know?"

"Nope. He doesn't. He never saw him or spoke to him. Any deductions on his part, or yours, or O'Neill's, are conjecture only."

"He?" Teal'c asked.

She shrugged. "Fifty-fifty, one way or another."

Teal'c cocked an eyebrow. "Indeed?" He then frowned. "Dharian Eastman knows this?"

"He does," she agreed with a nod.

"Then why did he not ...?" he began but stopped when she held up a finger to let him know to wait while she considered her words.

"After our mother died ..." In mid-sentence, she changed her words, knowing Teal'c had seen the emotional change of direction and though regretful, it couldn't be helped, but she wasn't to go into family history. That was a privilege that needed to be earned and for her, no one but Allie, Nadia, and Nine had ever earned that right—but even they did not know about their childhood after the murder of their parents.

"What I meant to say is that after we became orphans, we were taken to a castle and used as medical test subjects. The tests were with the venom of the

black scorpion." Teal'c's brows shot up. "Both of us were in comas for several periods of time over six years. They screwed around with anti-venom formulae and other stuff that I can't remember without the help of a hypnotherapist. But, for good or ill, Dharian and I are now immune from the venom.

"From my personal investigations over the years, no one else has been rendered immune after being repeatedly stung." She paused. "You know the ones? Those monks from . . . I forget the name . . . who control their bodies to such an extent that they can fight off infections and toxicities?" Teal'c nodded. "They have never been able to fight the Black Scorpion. Not once. Scientific deduction leads me to believe that our genes are responsible. But that can't be enough because we were treated other experiments with drugs.

"When we were fourteen, we escaped. Dharian found a way, and he also convinced that bastard snakehead to take a bribe to leave us alone. I told him that the snake had no intention of honoring any deal because they're faithless scum. I'd much rather have slit his throat than pay him. Dharian is far more trusting than I am and for that, he lost a lot of money. It did teach him a valuable lesson though so not a total loss."

Teal'c nodded once, but he sensed more had happened with the Goa'uld experiments than she was letting on. "Is there any relevant information from those experiments that may help shed light on this matter?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, no." She suddenly tapped the handmade patch on her army jacket. It was a set of white wings on a black backing sewn over the left breast pocket.



THE VALKYRIE LOGO & TATTOO

"Did you notice the black tattoos on some of the Valkyries?" He nodded. "They are my life," she said, and there was such emotion in her voice that didn't reach her face that it made Teal'c raise an eyebrow. "They know most of my secrets by now because I have chosen to trust them. The information you seek isn't one of them because it can get them killed. The same goes for you, Master Teal'c of Chulak and the Tau'ri. It is my secret to take to my grave until power balances change. Do you understand?"

"I do," he said with a single nod. "Thank you for this information but it is not enough. I regret that I must ask again, who was this Goa'uld?"

She blinked and said stonily, "What, have you become deaf all of a sudden? I can't tell you that." When he raised an eyebrow at her loss of decorum—i.e., insulting him, no matter how mildly—she scowled. "It's a lot more serious than a few dead Tok'ra."

His mild but earnest expression turned dark, and she held up her hands in apology and closed her eyes, taking in a controlling breath. Finally, when she opened her eyes and met his, she found no anger but only curiosity.

"I apologize for the rudeness." He bowed his head once. "This is not an easy subject. I'm sorry your teammate almost died and that another has taken ill, but a lot more people will be dead if I tell you anything. You won't talk, SG-1 won't talk, but those around you will. Someone will. It's never on purpose. It's always, *always*, some idiot circumstance where someone is yacking about it and someone who

shouldn't be around overhears and that's that. They see the opportunity for gain and off they go. It's not possible to keep this a secret after two people break their silence. I'm thirty-six, Teal'c. No one knows. And people are alive. Talk, they die. I have never, ever, ever seen it go another way."

She let out a heavy sigh through her nose as she leaned back and rested her arm on the console. She kept her gaze locked on Teal'c's and absently began to drum her fingers on the console. Teal'c casually moved his gaze to her fingers. Long, strong, slightly dirty from the day. The fingernails were neatly trimmed and short. Uncolored and unbuffed. His gaze moved from her fingers to her face. Clean, though she had a slight smudge under her chin. So she worked with tools. Her skin was healthy and when she smiled previously, her teeth had been white.

Her hair was slightly messy, but it had been recently brushed. Its length was past her shoulders and was an unusual dark brown in that it had a magenta hue to it. It was thick and healthy too. His gaze went to her clothing. Old but clean, no holes that he could see. Basically, she took care of herself, and it had already been extended to how she treated her people and her ship. It meant that her word was good and that when she said she wasn't going to tell him the name of the Goa'uld, she wasn't going to tell him. The threat of death was an old companion. She wasn't afraid. He could respect that because he felt the same way.

"I wish there was a circumstance that could compel your share what you know, Kara Easteman."

"You gave me one," she said earnestly. "But I can't. I understand that this is important, but if I can give you information that doesn't name the person but helps, I will. My description of our childhood was it. I don't know where he got the scorpions or how he bred them. The only person who can replicate the venom is Egeria, on Bubastis. She's Bastet's personal fixer." She said the last word sharply.

"We are familiar. She healed our teammate."

"Then she is the better person to interrogate."

He lifted a brow. "I did not realize—"

She held up both hands again in exasperation and got up. He rose with her. "I know it's not an interrogation. It just feels that way."

"Understood."

"Any other questions?" she asked tiredly.

Teal'c wasn't anywhere close to losing patience. Their duel had barely begun. But he could clearly see she wasn't going to budge. "What will it take to reveal this Goa'uld?" he asked.

"Nothing. Oh, by the way, if you'd like to drop a . . . chaos bomb on the Tok'ra, I know something that will achieve that level of disruption."

"You do not care for the Tok'ra either?"

She shook her head. "They're dedicated, I'll give them that, but their dedication is tunnel visioned, never mind twisted to the point where morality and ethics no longer exist. They'll let other people die just to save the life of one symbiote. I don't give a shit if they have limited numbers. Such is their lot in life. They're the anti-Ra. An aberration within a species." He raised a brow. "I speak in purely scientific terms, Master Teal'c. My words would be far more . . . colorful . . . if I spoke about them from a personal standpoint."

Just then, there came a commotion in the distance. A sharp tone, a woman's voice. "Dammit. Come on," she said to him, and they headed off the bridge and down to the landing bay's loading ramp. She placed her hand around a grip in the wall and said to the air, "Release Lock Down."

"Acknowledged."

She heard a click, and Kara pulled the grip and twisted. Another click, this deep and metallic, and the ramp began to lower. Teal'c looked around as she performed the procedure. "You have an AI operating this ship."

"Yes, of course," she said, then added somewhat sardonically, "Welcome to the Valkyrie. Val, say hello to Master Teal'c."

Only the response didn't come from the air. It came from a black cat with glowing orange eyes and a faint matching aura. "Meow."

Teal'c looked down and cocked an eyebrow. "That is not a cat."

Kara's brief grin vanished when she heard Zee's angry voice.

"Let go of my arm! Last warning."



Zee and sometime lover, Mar'dan.

When Kara and Teal'c walked down the ramp to the planet's surface, a reddish desert oasis, she found three other Valkyries standing around. Saliyah, Chayna, and Raisa. They caught sight of her and Raisa thumbed in Zee's direction. "I told her but ..."

But. Kara sighed because she knew what Raisa meant. Zee was stubborn about bad men. She should know better as Jaffa, but perhaps it was because she was, she thought she could tame the baddest of them. But Zee was insecure about her own strength of will. It got her into plenty of trouble. A fatal flaw in women Jaffa.

Kara leaned against the ship's support post beside the hydraulic arm of the ramp. Teal'c raised a brow and Kara shrugged. "She's grown. She can fully stomp the crap out of him without blinking."

Teal'c noticed the other women nod to Kara's words, then another nod to acknowledge his presence. They were taking a break, as Daniel Jackson would put it, currently relaxing in portable chaises. He wondered if the crew realized that they were following their Captain's lead. Eight months, according to Dharian, wasn't long enough to know someone well, but on the other hand, certain conditions could speed that up. Military units, for example. And these women were all but official. While not named to any planet or country, it didn't matter. They were a small, contained unit, independent. Based on his long experience, he knew they weren't mercenaries; they had the collective body language of non-violence.

According to Dharian, his sister was a smuggler, like himself, as well as a courier and sometime ferrier, taking any job that would pay as long as it was mostly legal on any number of planets. Except on Goa'uld planets. No one operated within them without a license and the quadrant of space she operated in was at the heart of the Goa'uld empire. His musing was abruptly interrupted by the argument Zee was engaged in. Teal'c didn't recognize the Jaffa she was with. There were a few others around the clearing by the ship, standing by other Valkyries. He didn't recognize any of them. He had been gone too long from Dakara.

"I told you," Zee said, pushing her curly black hair out of her face and in seconds had it somehow wrapped in a knot on her head. She pointed a well-manicured nail at the dark-haired young man in Jaffa leathers. "The second you put a hand on me in anger, no matter the situation, we're done."

"C'mon, Zee, you can have anything. I got angles now, ins. I can make us loads. I take care of you, baby."

Without knowing, all the women sneered at the same time, including Zee. *Take care of you.* While it grated on nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard, it was

more than that. His answer was a means of control instead of an apology. Nothing good grows from rotten soil.

The thought, mixed with what the Jaffa said, brought up an unpleasant memory fragment for Kara. She distantly remembered a man's voice and the backs of fingers stroking her cheek. *"I'll take care of you."* In a resonating voice. Fear and hatred came with the sound and the touch, and she shuddered and clenched the fists of her crossed arms. Teal'c noticed and became alarmed at the sudden hatred in her eyes.

"What is wrong?"

She shook her head, as if to clear cobwebs. "Nothing," she said, her eyes clearing. "A memory from the past. You get them sometimes, don't you? When something triggers them?"

Teal'c looked back at the Jaffa glaring at Zee. "Indeed."

Kara sighed, almost with relief. "It'll pass. And we're done here. Z—" she began. What she meant to say to Zee was wiped from existence. Everything around her seemed to slow down in time. Zee had turned and was heading toward her but that was almost secondary to the fact that the Jaffa spat at her feet as she walked away and said in a gravelly voice, "Whore."

At that moment, Teal'c could've sworn that Kara had magically moved from one spot to another. One second, she was standing beside him and the next she was *over* the Jaffa. The moment was frozen.

Kara didn't realize how fast she'd moved. Not even later when she'd had time to reflect. Her anger had felt surreal. It had been as if she'd been someone else, somewhere else, in another universe. One day, she might ask someone about it.

In the here and now, Kara found her right fist connecting with the side of the Jaffa's head, centered on his ear. It was the inner ear, the center of balance. You can easily make someone's ability to stand nonexistent. She could have sworn that's all she'd meant to do.

"What the hell is the matter with you, Jaffa?" she asked the man on the ground and stepped onto his bicep to keep him from rising. He hissed and attempted to get up until she said, "Stay put or I'll shift the toe of my boot." The toe of her boot pointed at his jugular. He stilled.

What alarmed her more than the situation was that she had raised her voice. She never raised her voice. She had better control than that. So why the loss of it? Was it that goddamn scorpion that had her off balance? She dialed down the octaves but not the oral venom.

"Is your dick that tiny? Have you got worms in that so-called brain? You ain't all that and a bag of chips, Jaffa. You're a pathetic loser who believes her when she says your tiny dick rocks her world."

Zee promptly blushed as her hand flew to her mouth to smother the laughter.

"You should know better, but clearly you don't. Your so-called independence goes only so far. Your time among the Goa'uld has warped your thinking. It's wretched, hideous behavior and it's clear that you have always been this ... *weak*." She paused and spat, "*Kek!*" She took her boot off his arm and stepped back.

Kara didn't need to turn in place to find out why the clearing had gone to dead silence. She'd said the word on purpose. The word all Jaffa treated as the most heinous offense in the world. *Kek*. Which literally meant weak, but it also meant death. To them, they were one and the same. To be weak meant you died. And to hurl it at any Jaffa was a great insult. But they now knew she was someone to treat with respect simply because she'd known *when* to use it effectively.

She felt as if there was a collective sigh, maybe from the wind, but she listened and knew when it was time to move and speak again. "Don't come around my ship or my people. Zee can do what she wants out of my sight and hearing and responsibility," she said, and Zee winced. "But under my roof, my rules. I defend my people." Later, she remembered that she didn't ask for an apology and was glad. It would never have been believed had he even given it.

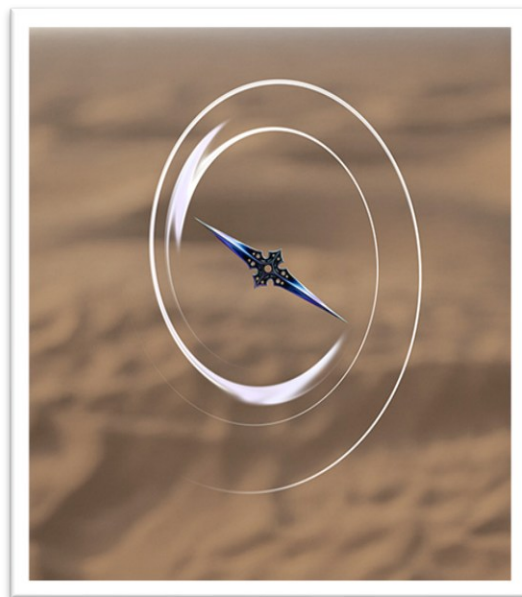
Teal'c gave her a raised brow and bow of his head when she returned to his side. "You restrained yourself well."

Kara raised her left brow; it was a considerable arch, giving her an almost comically angry look. "Why, thank you, master Jaffa," she said dryly, but quickly grew serious because that was no idle compliment. "Truly. Appreciated."

"Stupid bitch," said the offending Jaffa, breaking the peace. "I should snap your neck." He came walking toward her, ignoring all of the warning signs—the raised brows from everyone—and ignoring the one Jaffa who'd been standing off to the left and chuckling through the whole affair.

"Kara Easteman," Teal'c warned quickly and under his breath.

Facing Teal'c, her back to the menacing Jaffa, she gave her head a minute shake that told Teal'c not to act. She reached inside her collar of her Army jacket and paused after flicking open a secret pocket and she held the tip of something slim between her thumb and forefinger. When the angry Jaffa was closing in less than ten feet away, she spun in place and threw the slim object from her collar's secret pocket.



For Teal'c, all he saw was grace in motion. Half a second later, the Jaffa was on the ground again, this time screaming in pain as everyone noticed something like a dart made of dark metal sticking out of his right knee. Before he could draw the Zat in the thigh holster, the Jaffa who had been amused strode forward and relieved him of the weapon.

"Hold on there, Mar'tan. Let's not make things worse." Teal'c came forward and the Jaffa handed him the weapon. Teal'c nodded and then without warning, punched the screaming Jaffa the same way Kara had. Two blows to the side of the head meant the idiot lost consciousness. Probably for a while. Teal'c and the other Jaffa gave each other approving nods and the Master Jaffa of SG-1 noticed that they were nearly the same height, but instead of meeting the Jaffa's startlingly blue-eyed gaze—reminding him instantly of teammate and friend, Doctor Daniel Jackson—his gaze went to the odd black tattoo on the man's forehead. He forced his attention back to the man's gaze.

"Well met, Jaffa. Teal'c, of Chulak and the Tau'ri," he said, offering his arm.

"Well met, Teal'c," said the Jaffa, at first serious, but he couldn't seem to keep the smile off his face as he clasped Teal'c's forearm. The man had large white teeth, reminding Teal'c of a wolf. And Colonel Jack O'Neill. "Kane, of Dystara," said Kane.

Once more, Teal'c's gaze rose to the tattoo. It was unfamiliar, but it was the profile of a predatory cat. The only Goa'uld who had a cat for an emblem was Bastet. He took in the other details, which were also unusual for a Jaffa. He had long hair; it was dark ash brown with strange streaky highlights. Once, many lifetimes ago it seemed, his mother Ala'han would have called the highlights *sun kissed*.

"That is not the emblem of Bastet," Teal'c said instead.

"No, it isn't. I removed it and replaced it with my own design. I'm a cat person, and I love those panthers on Sig Five. So." He touched the tattoo. It was

barely one- and one-half inches in diameter. Small, even for a Jaffa tattoo. Which it wasn't. Not anymore.

"How did you remove it?" Teal'c asked.

"Easy. It wasn't gold, but it might as well have been for the trouble it caused," Kane said simply, as if that explained anything. Strangely, it did.

Teal'c nodded. "I understand."

It took Kane a moment to realize that Teal'c had assumed he'd been a First Prime. Reflex made him feel honored for a moment until he realized it might not have been a compliment. Kane assumed it was a test, a way for Teal'c to gauge the man's honor. As a Jaffa still in service, it would have led to a deadly fight. On Dakara, it was a test of loyalty to the Free Jaffa. Was Kane truly free? His explanation of the panther and the way he'd spoken about replacing it, speaking about it openly and not in a whisper, had given Teal'c his answer.

Then Teal'c's gaze returned to Kane's long hair. "You are an uncommon Jaffa, Kane."

Kara turned from her talk with Zee and eyed both men, her gaze settling on Kane with an expression he couldn't read. It was usual for Kane. He could read women very well.

Teal'c looked over his shoulder at Kara, then back at Kane. "Uncommon."

Kane winced. "I know. Long hair. Bad idea. But I have some superstitions to get over so until I do, my hair's staying put."

Teal'c raised a brow. "How long have you been free, Jaffa?"

Kane thought about it. "Nine, ten months maybe. Earning my way to get here."

"Then you have told an unnecessary lie, Jaffa. Easily disproved, given the company you are keeping with Free Jaffa. Until you walked away from the Goa'uld, you would have been shorn on a regular basis. No hair grows this fast, not even a Jaffa's. And no superstitions exist in this ... falsehood you have concocted."

Kane scowled for a moment. "Okay, I deserved that, but it's also not a falsehood." He stumbled through a hiccup in his words as he added, "Bastet liked my hair long." He made a face and said nothing else.

"You were a personal servant," Teal'c stated.

Kane nodded slowly. "Unfortunately." He twirled his forefinger, pointing at his own face. "Because of this."

Teal'c almost smiled. "Why invent the lie?"

Kane looked over Teal'c's shoulder at Kara, who was still watching him intently. Clearly, she could hear them. "Um, because I wasn't paying attention to what I was saying. And the reason is because of the person who is looking at me right now. Looking specifically like she wants to have me for a snack. And I'm not sure in what way, so I lost track of what I was actually saying. It was just nonsense coming out of my mouth."

Teal'c raised a brow, looked over his shoulder again. Kara gave him an inscrutable look, and he grinned and turned back to Kane. "You could be right," he said. And didn't clarify.

"Ah huh." Kane side-stepped and closed the few steps between himself and Kara. She was taller by an inch, he figured, though it was difficult to really tell because she stood on the ramp. He raised his arm as he leaned forward. "Kane." She crossed her arms, stubbornly refusing to greet him, but he kept his hand held out. "I don't bite until invited to do so."

Surprising herself, Kara abruptly laughed and though she felt uncomfortable even trusting this stranger enough to trade grips with him, she nonetheless held out her hand. He took her forearm in a solid grip and was pleasantly surprised that Kara met it with the same strength.

"Captain Kara Easteman. Gotta family name there, Kane?"

Her voice was naturally low, dusky. Sexy. He cleared his throat and managed not to croak. "Don't have one. Dystara is the planet I came from."

She, in turn, noted his medium tenor. It would drop several octaves when ... murmuring. She refrained from showing a shudder and wondered why he had had that effect on her. She pushed the question to the back of her mind to be examined later.

"Well," she said, stepping away. "Nice to meet you Kane Dystara." To Teal'c she waved. "Send me a call on the quadrant's Tarjeel network. Get the frequency from Dharian, then tell him that I'm going to kick his ass."

Teal'c bowed his head once. "I will do so."

Kara gave Kane a long look, took a deep breath through her nose, then turned and called out, "We're leaving, Valkyries!" It was met with protest. "We'll be back," Kara said in tired reassurance. "You okay?" she asked Zee as she took yet another look at Kane through the closing ramp. He looked back but his eyes were lowered. Had he been looking at her ass? And had it been genuine interest or just mindless male lewdness?

"I'm fine," Zee said tiredly. She eyed Kane through the ramp's rapidly closing space, and noting Kara's gaze, asked, "You sure wanna leave?"

"Shut up and get upstairs," Kara said, laughing, then took one more look at Kane and shouted through the opening, "No one should be as good looking as you!"

He smiled broadly and yelled back, "Nice patch!" just as the ramp closed and left them in darkness for a moment before the lights overhead flickered on.

At Kane's remark, Kara was puzzled until she remembered the small bumblebee patch she'd sewn over a hole on the left cheek of her jeans. She sniffed and tugged her jacket down over her ass and glared. "Patch? He couldn't have said ass?"

The other Valkyries just laughed.



CHAPTER THREE: CONVERSATIONS

Kane and Teal'c stepped away and turned to avoid the hurricane winds momentarily stirred up by the ship as it revved up and then rose slowly. Then suddenly, it whipped its considerable tail around showing its refined maneuverability and shot up into the atmosphere and in another second, it was gone.

"Huh," Kane grunted. "Woman of my dreams." Teal'c said nothing. "So," Kane said, stepping in time with Teal'c as they headed back to the Temple. "When do I get to meet SG-1?"

Teal'c grunted this time. Barely perceptible but it was there. "Never, my friend."

"What?" Kane asked, frowning. He touched Teal'c's biceps to make him stop. "Why not?"

Again, Teal'c smiled slightly.

Kane crossed his arms and scowled. "Why? Not?"

Teal'c considered Kane's appearance for a long aggravating minute. "Because Captain Kara Eastman is right. No one should be as good looking as you."

Kane looked confused and when that happened, he latched onto last thing to cause a dissonance in his head. "Well, technically, she said—"

"Were you to find yourself alone in a room for at least an hour, in the company of Colonel Jack O'Neill, Doctor Daniel Jackson, and Lieutenant Colonel

Coburn ...” Teal’c actually smiled. “I believe you would not be seen for several days and then not be able to remember where you have been.”

Kane burst out laughing in sheer disbelief and grabbed his stomach. It had him continuing on and on, and all the while Teal’c stood there with a smug look on his face. He was getting rather good at this Tau’ri way of teasing.

“I do hope you’re joking,” Kane finally managed.

“Mostly,” Teal’c said deadpan.

“Seriously?” Kane asked, pretending interest in the three men in question.

Teal’c took a look over his shoulder in the direction they’d just come from, then gave Kane a direct look. A knowing one. “I believe you are meant for Kara Easteman.”

Kane met his gaze and blew out a slow breath. “You’re right. And I’m doomed.”

Teal’c half-smiled as they continued their walk to the Temple. “Let us see what is being prepared in the kitchens, Kane Dystara.”

Kane smiled. “You know, it didn’t occur to me, but I now have a last name because of her.” He shook his head in stunned belief. “So, who’s on duty in the kitchens?”

“We are,” Teal’c said, and momentarily left Kane staring after him.

Kane pursed his lips, nodded mutely, and followed.



"Kara?" came a tiny voice. A shy voice.

"Hmm?" Kara asked absently as she cleaned the console for the third time that evening. At present, the ship was quiet. The Valkyries had squished into the Little Val and gone back down to the planet. Kara was safely away from the Jaffa as the ship settled into orbit, so no more risk of breaking anyone's neck. But that one Jaffa, Kane. His eyes and hair and that smile kept swimming into her vision every time she had a moment to unwind and think. The last thing she needed was some tumble in the hay, no matter how good looking the man was. She was rather disappointed in herself that she couldn't help Teal'c or the Tau'ri. But she would never reveal who that Goa'uld was that tortured her and Dharian as kids. Never reveal too much of what was done. They would have to get their information from Egeria.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"What honey?" Kara asked, straightening from a swipe with a cleaning cloth from under the console. She turned to see that Allie had been crying, and it pulled at her heartstrings and raised guilt like a flag. "Oh, honey, don't do that." She reached over and pulled Allie into her arms. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be a bitch. Truly, I'm very sorry." She took Allie's face in her hands and kissed her eyelids. "Silly girl," she whispered. "You broke the rule. You know better by now." She kissed her forehead and rocked them back and forth in a soothing way. She then stepped back and took a seat and pulled Allie with her to stand next to the captain's chair. "Now, tell me. What made you break the rule?"

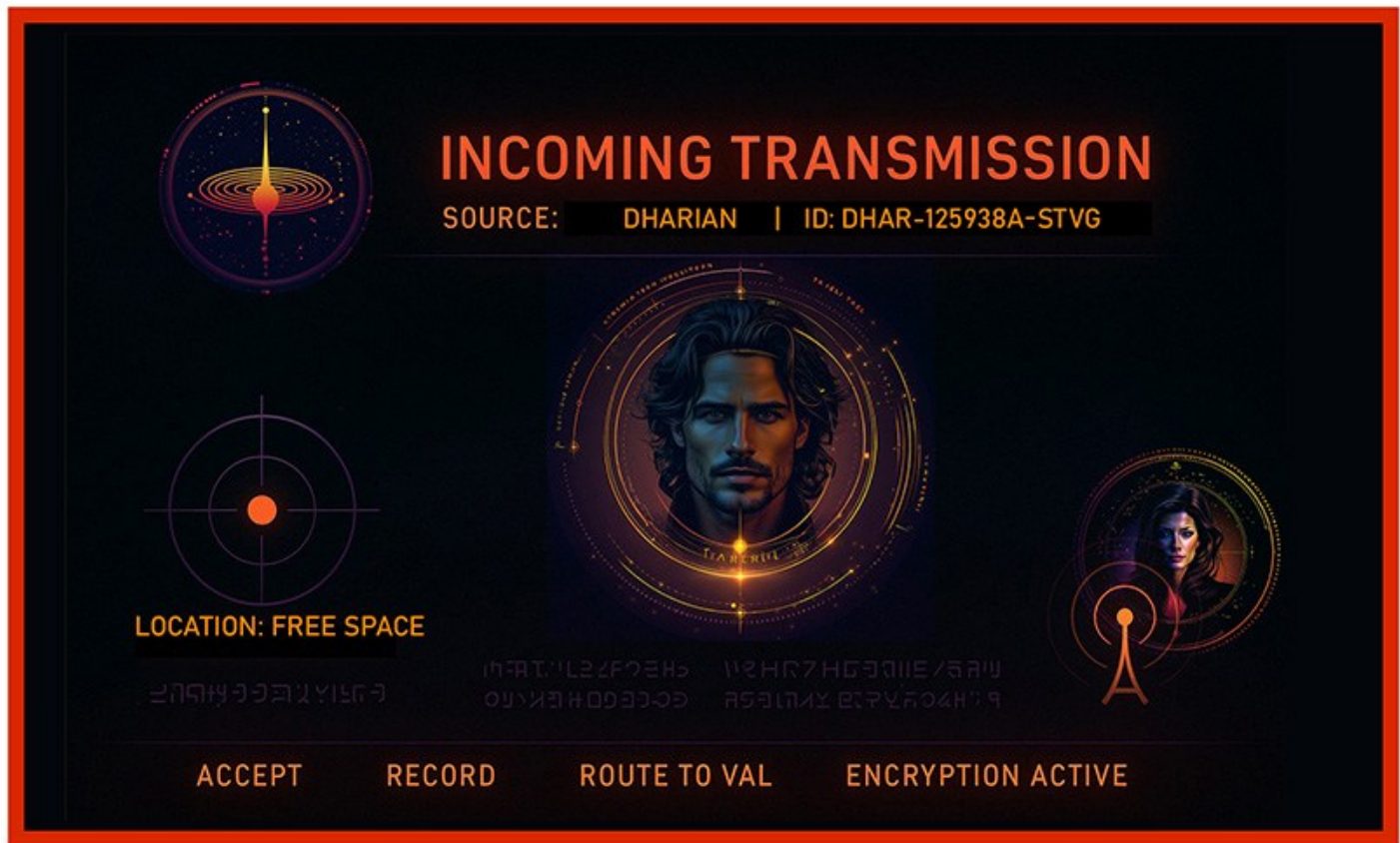
Allie thought about it, then ducked her head a little. "I got a little excited I think." She whispered, "He works with the Tau'ri team, SG-1. He *is* SG-1."

"Yes, he is. And they ain't all that and a bag of hammers, Allie. They bleed like you and me. Now. Isn't it somebody's *study time*?"

Allie smiled. "Yeah, but I couldn't concentrate until I talked to you. So Ohma sent me up here."

"That's a great Ohma," Kara smiled. Her console beeped. A call, incoming. "Now, go. Learn things." Allie hugged her, then dashed off the bridge. Kara smiled and sighed, pausing for a moment to promise herself to never do that again to Allie, no matter the broken protocol, then twisted in her chair and rolled to the console to see who was beeping at her.

The Tarjeel Network Console



Dharian.

"Of course it's you," she sighed with disgust and pressed a button on the console. "What's up little bro?" she song-sang. "I'm gonna kick your ass."

"Stop with the little bro shit," he countered, his voice sounding tinny. "Two minutes younger doesn't make me little anything."

She snorted and followed it up with a chirping-like giggle in the back of her throat. She then followed that up with another singsong. "What's up my sensitive little bro? You haven't long to live, by the way."

He didn't rise to the bait. "Whatever. Listen up, K."

She sat up straight. He only ever called her that when something bad was coming her way. "What?" she snapped. "What's up?"

"Gonna be incommunicado for a bit while I do a favor for somebody."

She almost sighed with relief but ... "Seriously? SG-1?"

"Yeah. Hunting down the assassin."

She froze, her mouth dropping open before she started raising her voice. *"What? Are you out of your goddamn mind?"*

"I'm sorry, sis, but it's gotta be done."

Ice went down her spine as the memory of that hand touched her cheek once again. *"I'll take care of you."* The vision came and went. "What's going on?"

"You met with Teal'c."

"Yes. I won't tell him the name of the Goa'uld."

"So he said."

"Fuck you, D. You talk and a lot of people die."

"Shut up, Kara. I don't know shit."

"Yes, you do, but that's not the problem. Personal talk, D. A friend of a friend of a friend of a friend. You know that road."

"Yes," he said firmly. "K, we're alive and so are the people we've chosen to care about. That means what?"

She rolled her eyes as her temper cooled. "No one knows."

There was silence, then he said, "We're going to see Egeria."

She sighed and looked up at the ceiling in a long-suffering way. "Tell that bitch . . . ugh, never mind. I need my stuff, Dharian."

"I can't get to wherever the hell you are."

"If you don't where I am, then you can't make that claim, can you?"

"Kara," he complained.

Kara closed her eyes and rubbed her neck and shoulder muscle. Her jaw clenched tight.

"We'll be arriving at Bubastis in a few days, give or take. They have a fast ship."

"Hyperspace is hyperspace, bro."

"You're missing the point, genius. You have to meet me there to get your stuff."

"Fuck," she said, half under her breath.

"I'm sorry," he said, and meant it.

"Fucker. You're still a dead man."

"Yeah, yeah. Listen, gotta go."

"You owe me."

"I know. Love ya like sunshine."

She melted a little and smiled. "Love ya like sunshine." The comm crackled, signaling the end of the conversation. She lost her smile. "Swell. Now I have to go to Bubastis. I fucking hate that place." A meow at her feet made her look down at the black cat hologram. "Well, Val. Let's go tell The Nine and grab a new mug of tea."

The AI mimicked the cat to perfection as it padded beside her down the wide corridor. But that wasn't the weird part for Kara. She suddenly had Kane in her thoughts. Her steps slowed and the cat turned to look at her, somehow managing to appear annoyed.

"Oh shut up," she said to it as she stopped dead in the middle of the corridor. "Fuck." She moved to the nearest wall and leaned against it. She smacked it with the side of a fist because her reaction to him made no sense. Sure, the man was unbelievably beautiful. She'd said handsome before but that wasn't it. He was beautiful. He exuded a masculine strength that was *nearly* irresistible. Nearly. And yet, looking at him, with those dark bow-shaped lips, the muscles, the sharp-jawed face with the dimpled chin. That combo had always spelled doom for her, but this one was hotter somehow. And then it hit her. He had a feline grace. She'd *always* found that trait irresistible. He also reminded her of someone. She couldn't name the person yet but . . . did that matter right now?

Shit.

"Val, I've found him. I know it in my gut. And the only smart thing to do is run in the opposite direction." She dropped the level of her voice. "As fast as I can." She looked down and Val actually had an expression on her face. "Oh, shut up," she repeated. "You know what I mean. He's dangerous. I can't afford to fall in love right now." She closed her eyes and sighed. "But you didn't *smell* him. For the love of all that's safe, that man smelled good. Mmm."

"Meow." It was a flat, toneless sound. He/She/It was confused and therefore annoyed and impatient to move on.

"Yeah," Kara huffed out and pushed off the wall to continue down the hall. "You're right. Last time I'll say it."



As she approached the door to the combination kitchen-dining room, she heard laughter and someone saying, "He was looking at her ass. Did you see?"

Kara rolled her eyes as she entered. She spotted them, they laughed, and she turned her backside to them and shook her ass a few times as she tapped the patch. "It's a custom job," she said, smiling as they broke up. The women returned to hushed whispering and Kara wondered if they were conspiring to scare her on her upcoming thirty-sixth birthday.

As she stirred the tea bag around in her mug and waited for the steep to end, Kara found herself surrounded by the women, with Lynessa leaning on the counter and giving her a hesitant smile.

"Uh oh," Kara said. "What're you guys cooking up?"

"Listen, Cap," said Zee. "We were thinking that this overall mission of ours, as Valkyries, that we need a more ... professional look. It's our soul, our mantra, our mandate." Everyone nodded.

So did Kara as she turned in place, mug in hand. "Agreed. I don't know of anybody who makes uniforms for *women*."

"Oh, not a problem," said Lynessa and Zee, eyes wide, their fingers crossed, their bodies tense.

Kara was pleasantly surprised. These two were the expert seamstresses and stylists of their bunch. "Okay, it just so happens we'll get to visit a Sky-Plex. I hope you have the credits." Zee hugged her. "Alright, alright. But the planet's Bubastis." The excitement paused for a second before they shrugged.

"I'd kill for a decent machine," Lynessa said. "Who cares if it's a Goa'uld's domain. Besides ..." She paused and smiled slyly. "I thought I heard the Jaffa on Dakara say they were going visit one."

Kara ignored the gibe. "Fine, do what you need to do. I'll set down Little Val in a spot, then we head for the shopping center. I'll grab a zip to go to Egeria's." Cheers all around as she left the kitchen and headed back to the bridge. She looked down at Val, who remained beside her. It momentarily distracted her. "You guarding me or something?"

"Meow."

That was Val-speak for Yes. Kara could tell by now. The meow had a sort of metallic flatness. It would freak out anyone who didn't know that Val was the avatar to the ship, in holographic form. She never took another and maybe one day Kara would care enough to ask why she chose the cat.

They were nearly to the stairs at the end of the corridor when she heard someone whisper.

"You awake?"

"What's it look like?" Kara asked as she turned around. No one was there. Two nearby open doors but they were empty. Kara's frown deepened. "Who just spoke?"

Then Val growled. Literally growled and hunched its unreal back. The hairs on the back of Kara's arms rose. And she did what she always did when faced with something or someone trying to scare her. She got mad.

"Goddammit, Val. We went over this boat a billion years ago. Those Ancients left only bits and pieces and no goddamn ghosts."

"Meow." That one had several nuanced syllables.

Kara frowned at it. "You're a pain in my ass. Do not patronize."

"Meow." It was clipped and somehow amused.

She rolled her eyes again, then projected her voice toward the spot where she'd heard the sound. "I don't have a policy concerning ghosts, but I do now. It's this. Don't be spooky and scare people or I'll hold a banishing, and you won't like it. Now, here's an order. Get a job. Make yourself *useful*. Otherwise, you know where the goddamn airlock is."

She and the cat that wasn't a cat headed up to the bridge, fully aware that many of The Nine took superstitions to heart.

Well, no one was perfect. She loved them all anyway.



PART 2: EPIPHANIES



CHAPTER ONE: SCARVES

Kara was deep in slumberland when she felt the familiar soft paw of a cat touch her mouth, then her nose. She wrinkled her face and cracked open an eye.

“You’re getting good with the tactile reality, Val. Why can’t I sleep in?” She looked at the clock and found it was after 8 a.m. “Dammit, I did sleep in. Val, you little bitch. Why didn’t you wake me?” Val yawned. Kara snorted half a laugh tiredly. She made her way to the bathroom for half her morning routine, then

dressed in her usual jeans and t-shirt, this morning they were black and periwinkle blue, respectively. Sliding into old ratty slippers, she grabbed her mug and shuffled out of her quarters to head for the kitchen.

When she was half a hallway away, the smell of the coffee hit her nose and she inhaled deeply. In her corner of the galaxy, coffee was also a fruit plant with seeds as large as Earth's coffee beans, amusingly known as Kaffa. Like Jaffa, only without the backward ways and hatred of Tok'ra.

As she stumbled into the kitchen, Kara briefly considered that a Jaffa was the killer. She wondered what Teal'c would say, then dismissed the idea because he would have already considered the possibility, investigated, and then dismissed it. Jaffa do not harbor grudges of honor that way. They bide their time then strike at the right target, not take it wholesale.

"I said, Good morning, Kara," said Chayna, one of the two blondes among her crew. She was a cheerful and sensitive woman, Chayna. Who always had to repeat herself because she had a very quiet voice.

"Morning," Kara said, then cracked her jaw as she yawned widely. She savored her morning beverage for a moment, then headed off to the gym. "Who do I get to spare with this fine a.m.?" she called back.

"Me," said Lynessa, coming out of her room with mug in one hand and a folder stuffed with sheets of paper. She was always up early but for the past thirty-six hours, it had been a non-stop design session for their uniform. "Just give me a second to put these in my little makeshift office on the kitchen table."

"Good," Kara said. "Got something to show me yet?"

"Oh!" Lynessa said, clutching the folder tightly to her chest. She grimaced with the air of someone who'd done something wrong. "Um, please don't be mad."

Kara raised an arched dark brow. "How can I be mad at something I don't know anything about?"

Lynessa kept grimacing. "I know but, you inspired me and the girls agree. I've got the finished designs but . . ." She paused and closed one eye. "I sort of borrowed the design and color of your scarf."

The moment hung in the air as Kara blinked a few times. She knew instantly why Lynessa had done that and she felt both honored and violated. Her scarf was one of a kind, next to its twin which her brother Dharian wore. She knew also this was a pivotal moment between herself and the Nine. They wanted cohesion and belonging and they had that, but it also had to be about what they wore. How could she fault them or feel violated for that? They didn't yet know about her scarf's history, only that her mother had made it.

Kara licked her lips and rubbed them together as she considered her words. "Okay. After the sparring match, let's all sit down in the kitchen and you can show me the sketches, and . . ." She took a deep breath and wrinkled her nose. "I'll tell you what I can about the scarf. Okay?"

"Deal," Lynessa said in an exhaled breath of relief.

"Now, move your ass. I wanna get some sweat going. And maybe as little bruising as possible."



After her shower, during which she realized that Lynessa and the others had chosen her scarf as a secondary emblem, the undercurrent of all they did, and in that, they were actually correct. Toweling her hair and dressed in a dark blue robe, Kara pulled a chest out from under her bed. She unclasped its three buckles and

lifted the old creaky lid. Inside was an assortment of pieces. A piece of linen, ribbon, red silk lace, an old bow. There were folded bits of cloth of various patterns in one sectional drawer. In another, various shell casings. A small drawer held buttons and pins.

Kara dug under the cloths, her fingers searching for the hard photographic paper. She found it and bent it slightly as she carefully withdrew it. The old photograph had eight creases where it had been folded, and the creases were now white with age. The edges of the photograph had edges spiderwebbed with tiny fractures that any card collector would call foxing. The surface was severely scratched but the picture was still viewable. She rolled it and stuck it in her pocket before slipping back into her old slippers and made her way to the kitchen, the central hub of her ship, with a lump in her throat. She wasn't enjoying this one bit, but it felt like it was time. She hoped she wasn't making a big mistake, opening an old wound.

As she approached the kitchen, she saw that Lynessa had gathered everyone, even Saliyah, who seemed to spend hours reading and studying. For what? She wasn't officially going to any school. Kara had always wanted to ask but she had a hard-wired belief in privacy. Maybe it was time for that to change too. A little.

"What's up, boss?" asked Zee.

Ahti folded her arms. "We're about to have a big fight over choice of colors and patterns, Zee."

"You don't know that," Dusti chimed in.

"She's right," said Kanira, thumbing at Ahti, who then looked vindicated.

"We're not arguing over anything," Kara said as she poured another cup of Kaffa from the carafe kept on a warming plate. There were five carafes. Five warming plates. Kaffa was served all day and all night and after eight months of experimentation, the only person who could make it correctly was Tarzy.

And once again, Tarzy sat in the corner spot of the kitchen's alcove where the breakfast nook had extended in a wrap-around booth fashion. It wasn't an easy place to get out of when everyone else was eating with you. It was almost a retreat. Kara put a stop to that idea by sliding in to sit next to her. She drew her knees up and set the soles of her slippers on the edge of the table.

"Feet off the table," chimed in Chayna, Dusti, Zee, Lynessa, and Raisa.

"Bite me," Kara said. "They're not on the tabletop. Cheat any way you can, girls. We live in a patriarchal . . ." She sighed. "World." She sipped at her brew. "Okay, Lynessa. Let's see the sketches."

"They're more like illustrations," Raisa said.

Kara blinked. "Oh. You've all seen them before me." She sipped. "So not fair." She glanced at Tarzy who gave her a wan smile. Kara made a note to ask about that smile in a moment. "Well?" she asked. Across the table sitting in a regular chair, Lynessa set down the folder and opened it up, sliding sketch after sketch over the table's surface.

"Wait, you changed it," Raisa and Zee said together, bending over to look at them.

Kara felt only slightly vindicated, no longer the last one to see what everyone else had. She growled in her throat when no one moved to give her pictures. She set her feet down and touched a corner of one sheet and slid it over, spinning it around to be right-side up.

She sat there in stunned silence as she took in the beautiful design. "Nice work," she whispered. "But how the hell are you gonna make this?"

"With the right tools, I can make anything," Lynessa said with confidence.

"That's very true. I made my top," Tarzy said.

And to Kara's dismay, she was ignored.

Ignored.

Worse, Tarzy expected it and didn't react. She sipped her own Kaffa from a large mug. Kara looked around and found both guilt and justifiable conviction in the faces of the other Nine.

"These are gorgeous," Zee said, picking up a page and placing its vivid color against her skin. "They'll look amazing."

Saliyah and the others agreed with stunned nods as they looked from one drawing to the next.

"No cuffs?" Ahti asked.

"We have our own," Lynessa said. "They'll match no matter what, just like our gauntlets and fingerless gloves." No one wore theirs so she couldn't demonstrate.

"Personal touches," Saliyah said. "Nice. But where's our crest?"

"Ah," Raisa. "I'm gonna get a tatt machine. The painless kind. We'll all get them, right? We agreed."

"Tatts?" Kara asked, distracted away from their behavior toward Tarzy. "When the hell was that discussion?"

"A while back," Ahti said. "It just came up while we were comparing tatts, telling stories about where we got them." She held up her right arm to show the band of designs that encircled her forearm, typically covered by her leather bracer.

"And why," Zee said, giggling.

Again, no one included Tarzy when she looked at her own tatt on the back of her hand. It was a sun and moon design, done only in blue. Kara frowned and opened her mouth to speak but Zee went on.

"Now, what do we wear, if anything, on our heads?"

"Ohhh," Kanira said. "A hat? Something cool."

"Ick," Dusti said. "Hat hair."

"Better than helmet head," Lynessa said and they cracked up.

Before the discussion could go anywhere else, Tarzy cleared her throat. "I have an idea from my home planet. A style we wore back then, a billion years ago." She pulled out two folded sheets kept within her vest-top, revealing a hidden pocket no one had noticed before.

She laid them down. They were also drawings, head shots of a wrap-around silk headscarf, purple with subdued designs.

Kara sat forward like a shot and grabbed the images as she sharply inhaled. "What the fuck? Where'd you get these?!"

"I drew them. How else?"

Lynessa took the one that Kara wasn't holding. "I didn't know you could do that."

"There's a lot we don't know about Tarzy," said Chayna in a cold tone. "Priestesses are close-mouthed."

"Don't be mean," Dusti chided.

"Priestess," Chayna singsonged, as if that made her point.

"Priestesses aren't," Tarzy explained in a monotone that vividly signaled she'd had this conversation many times before. "Neither am I, a former priestess. You guys just don't want to hear anything I have to say. No matter what I say. I left, remember?"

"Guys, back off," Zee said. "I keep telling you. She's one of us, not them. She's gone through the same shit."

"Says who?" Saliyah said, then looked ashamed for saying it.

Silence.

"See this?" Tarzy pushed her tongue against the inside of her top lip to show the slight split there that always made her look like she had her mouth open all the time, as if getting ready to speak. "I got it a year ago." She ran a fingertip over her upper lip. "I had a knife shoved into my mouth." She stuck out her tongue to show

the whitish scar down the middle. After a two-beat, she put her tongue back in her mouth and swallowed. "That's what happens when you refuse to do what the First Prime tells you to do."

"You refused a First Prime to his face?" Raisa asked, surprised.

Tarzy nodded slowly. "Not the first time, won't be the last. But I finally saved up enough money and smuggled my ass out of there to meet up with you guys." She gave all the women a direct look and a sad smile. "And now here we are."

Silence once more. A few tiny tears rolled from the corners of Tarzy's eyes and ran down her face.

"You're crying," Zee said sympathetically as she searched for something to give her.

"I am no—" Tarzy began, then felt cold wetness on the side of her face and frowned as she wiped it and looked at it. "Damn." She wiped the rest of the tears off her face as they were annoying gnats.

"Well, it's just that—" Chayna began.

"Listen up," Kara said, cutting her off. She tapped the table with two fingers. "I hope the lot of you are proud of yourselves. And at this moment, I don't want to be associated with you." She gathered herself up as protests shouted at her to sit down but she got up and walked onto the table itself and jumped off on the other side. "When you've pulled your heads out of your asses and stopped judging, let me know. Otherwise, don't talk to me for the rest of the week. Not even on the planet."

"No, no, no, no," Tarzy said, running after her and catching her before she could leave the kitchen. "Kara, come back and sit down. Don't go off in a huff. You're upset and it ain't from their understandable prejudice." She took hold of Kara's biceps and wouldn't let go, even when Kara viciously yanked at her arm. Tarzy's strength surprised her, and it also seemed to zap some of Kara's anger.

"Come back," Tarzy said slowly.

It was an order.

Not loud. Not aggressive. Just knowing. It was a power that only mothers could have and all the Valkyries understood it, whether they were literal mothers or not because at one point or another, they had all *been* that role.

And with it, they had also heard the voice of The Priestess. Something in the air shifted. The voice of the mother was also the voice of the priestess. A mother who had to make hard choices. Let her children die or send them away. Send them off to worship a god, forever known as the creature's Jaffa. Send them off to service a god as a slave. Or a sex slave. Better that than a death that equals weakness in Jaffa culture. Unlike the Valkyries, whose namesake had worshipped the fallen, they revered life yet no longer saw weakness in death—surpassing most male Jaffa.

And they now had a Priestess of their own. Where they could ask to worship the old gods in ceremony, bless their missions, themselves, each other. To have their own religion?

While it wasn't possible to be thinking the exact same thing, everyone at the table understood what had just happened. Tarzy hadn't said, "Come here." Something you said to a dog. She had said, "Come back." A welcoming, nurturing phrase that helped suicides step away from a ledge and choose life again. Always life. Always protecting. And making horrible choices none of the other Valkyries thought they could have made themselves.

Kara said to her deadpan, "I bet you could get Jack O'Neill under your spell with that voice."

That broke the seemingly real spell and caused nervous and nearly hysterical laughter from everyone, even quiet Kanira. When it died down, the turmoil in Kara's mind began to settle enough for her to ask, "Where did you learn that patterning and wrapping of my scarf?" She pointed at the scarf pictures still on the table, then yanked her photo from her pocket and threw it on the table. "Have a look at that," she said flatly. She didn't know why she was mad, even earlier about the prejudice.

She could have handled that a lot better than she had. But the scarf had done it. She'd thought it had been just hers along. Now it wasn't, and she felt robbed and violated.

But it was worse than that. All the memories she'd been struggling to remember had flooded her mind, returning from the past to haunt her again. She saw herself playing with her brother in the fields as they worked all day. The green grass, the sheep grazing, the horses in their special grass pens. Chickens in a yard near a creek. Water in her memory, and the smell of woodsmoke that had always said, Dinner. At least, until she'd forgotten and knew only that she loved the scent.

The other women passed the photo around and the last one gave it to Tarzy. It was appropriate since she was now their priestess. The change of attitude may have been abrupt, and the shift in perspective a bit startling, but it couldn't have happened without Kara's rejection of all of them.

Chayna, Dusti, Ahti, and Saliyah slid down the bench to make room for Tarzy and Kara at the end. Tarzy pointed behind Dusti, at Kara's mug she'd left behind. The blonde woman passed it over and Tarzy set it in front of Kara.

"Drink. And tell us what's the matter."

"Other than the obvious?" Kara asked but took a sip from her mug. Fortunately, Kaffa was good hot or cold or room temp. "Look at the picture, Tarzy."

Frowning and looking confused, Tarzy was handed the photo. She stared at it, eyes widening. "Stonevale."

"Stonevale Dale, to be specific. My childhood home. That's gone now. On the other side of that house is a silkworm farm. Just a small one. The Karazi species of silkworm. That's what my scarf is made of. She was famous in our part of our tiny world. My brother Dharian has one just like it that he wears."



And in a voice that sounded dead, she explained what had happened to her and her brother. That her mother had been beheaded right in front of her by a First Prime. Because her mother had said, "No." No, to the sale of her farm to the Goa'uld, Ares. Her father had died from a staff weapon blast to the back of the head. She hadn't seen it happen; Dharian had. They each had their horror that caused the world to end. Brothers and sisters argue and hurl accusations from past behavior or events, but that had been one event that would never be hurled. It was a classic case of You Can Never Use That Pain As a Defense Mechanism.

Like Tarzy had, Kara shed tears she didn't know were there as she shared being sold to another Goa'uld, one who shall not be named, ever. The Goa'uld who had used them as test subjects for scorpion venom. How they had come out six years later, escaping to another world, only to be nabbed by another Goa'uld's Jaffa. They'd been separated and sold again. And again. And again. Until finally, at the same time but in different solar systems, brother and sister had escaped one last time.

"I've tried to never let the past dictate what I do, but I've failed. The past rules me. Rules all of us. And we can either let it destroy us or we can make goddamn

sure it makes us stronger.” She angrily wiped at her face. “What say you, my sisters?”

Crying, they swarmed Kara in hugs, then broke apart in genuine laughter when Zee said, “So, we using the headgear or what?”

CHAPTER TWO: BUBASTIS

Kara stood in the landing bay of her ship with her scarf in her hands, thinking about Tarzy's headscarf drawings and how she wished she had such talent. She was remarkable at many things but elaborate scarf tying wasn't one of them. On the other hand, the problem mostly lay with impatience. Kara had notoriously little patience for nearly everything in life that crossed her path. Even solitary card games. A woman she knew a long time ago told her she had a syndrome caused by trauma and a specific gene sequence. Kara had dismissed the notion at the time. These days, however, she wondered if the woman hadn't been right after all.

Kara held out her scarf and thought about the way her mother folded and knotted the purple print scarf she had given her. The fabric was rectangular and nearly eight feet in length. It worked great for cutting off the wind at the back of her neck. She sighed and wrapped it around her neck. Headscarves were like solitaire games: no patience.

"What's up?" Zee asked as the other Valkyries loaded into the Little Val like sardines.

"If this ship wasn't so outrageously cute, I'd stay home," Dusti said, squeezing into a seat. The ship only had five seats, including the pilot's cockpit.

"I know," Kara sighed. To Zee, she said, "I have no patience for tying headscarves."

Tarzy got up from the floor of the ship and said, "Hang on, boss. Let me do it."

Kara felt amused and handed over her scarf. Tarzy wrapped it twice over Kara's head and tied it in a flex-knot behind her left ear and let the tail ends hang down over her shoulder. She patted the knot.

"There you go," Tarzy said, pleased with the job.

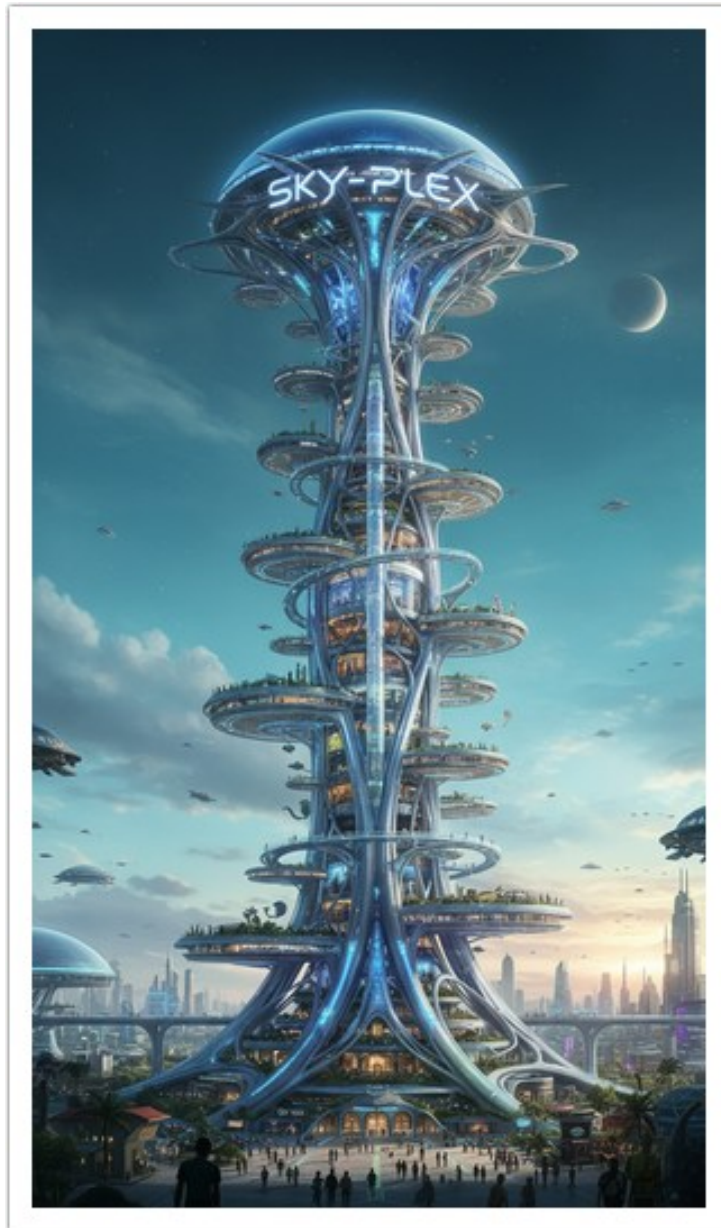
Kara raised an eyebrow and looked into the windshield of the Little Val to check her reflection. It looked great. "Nice!" she said, turning her head this way and that. That done, she headed inside the ship and had to step over Saliyah to get to the cockpit. "I know it's small," she said, even though no one else said anything against Little Val. "But I can't find another one that does what the Little Val does."

"It looks good on her," Lynessa said approvingly, still talking about the scarf. "We can all tie them like that. Tarzy, what'd method did you use for that again?"

Pleased, she explained with hand gestures and received nods and questions about where she'd learned that which then led to a conversation about drawing techniques with Lynessa. Not linear, since there was no segue, but it was very family.

However, upon sitting down in the pilot's seat of Little Val, Kara found the scarf was her way. "Damn." She took off her head and unwound it and then draped it around her neck. It was habit, so it felt more comfortable there. Plus her scars seemed to itch less when she wore it against her skin—though she was pretty sure that was just imaginary.





Kara snorted at the double-takes from Jaffa Guards on the ground as she landed her small ship on one of the pads appointed for ships her size. The parking zone for ships visiting the Sky-Plex was laid out like a flower, with the center for temporary landings to unload passengers.

She pulled back on the yoke and tapped a few buttons on the old console to secure the landing gear locks. She nodded as she heard the echoing metallic clang when the craft secured itself to the ground's foundation rings. "Locked," she called out and switched off the engine. It died with a little whine that faded. She sighed and roughly patted the console. "Good little ship. You did fine."

She waited as the girls left the ship and headed down the paved walkway that led to the tall tower that was the shopping center. A few Jaffa lurked about, wearing the running panther emblem on their foreheads, signaling that they were Bastet's soldiers assigned to monitor incoming landing craft.

She ignored them as she yanked the door to slide shut, then tapped a code on a keypad and placed her hand on the scanner to secure the ship. One Jaffa came forward, eyes on the cracked bronze plaque secured on the other side of the door. He squinted at it as Kara walked away, then tapped it with a knuckle, a scowl on his face.

"Who put this on your ship, woman? You?"



Translation: "My mother was a Class 4 Ha'tak. Fuck off."

Piqued at the Jaffa's tone, Kara stopped and looked over her shoulder. "That's Captain, you knuckle-dragging moron," she said in Goa'uld. "And the plaque came with the ship, which My Lord Ba'al gave to me after the battle on Dalek-9. As a reward for good work. I'm sure you've heard of the battle?"

With that, she turned away and kept walking, a snickering smirk on her face because now the Jaffa looked somehow confused and impressed at the same time. It was understandable. She'd lied, but mentioning one of Ba'al's battles in any sense garnered respect. Jaffa.

Up ahead, the Nine waited for her. "What'd that Jaffa say?" Ahti asked.

Kara told them. The women howled with laughter. It was a joke that no Tau'ri human would ever get. One of those "You had to be there" moments that everyone hated when they found themselves outside the loop.



They reached the front of the Sky-Plex which held a large courtyard with many Skimmer vendors competing for sales.

"I'll be back here in an hour," Kara said. "Gonna pick up a Fledgie for Allie." She received a bunch of Awws, to which she responded with, "Oh, right, like you guys weren't planning your own gifts. You spoil that child."

"Like Captain, like crew," Chayna sniffed with a smirk. She and Dusti held hands as they walked past the automatic hologram doors that flashed blue as they passed, documenting their DNA and therefore their identities. Pictures of their

faces with ID data popped up on other holographic screens before blinking out. This process was repeated for everyone who passed into the tower complex.

"Yeah, whatever," Kara said, scowling at the ID scanner. One day the wrong people would be reading that damn thing, but it was also a day she was prepared for. No one was taking her sisters away. No one. She walked to the nearest

Zip Skimmer rental kiosk and tapped the payment portal podium with her ID. Credits in her account on Abydos were deducted. The Skimmer was basically a futuristic skateboard with securing straps like skis had on earth, only they secured to any kind of footwear. There were no handlebars or mechanisms of any kind to hold onto.



The vendor handed her a small device the size of a car's keylock and pressed a button once she slid her booted feet into the straps. They locked down and the skimmer powered up, lifting off the ground a mere six inches, and a neon blue band of light that ringed the skimmer glowed with a hum. With pressure used by feet only, Kara balanced her weight and took off like any skateboarder on Earth.

It was like the old saying about riding a bike. Kara had been maneuvering skimmers since she was five, so steering with her feet caused no problems. As she sped along, she didn't pay much attention to the people she zipped around and they, in turn, paid little attention to her and the others riding their own Zips. It was four hundred yards to the plaza near Bastet's temple home and Egeria's lab, which was nestled in a group of buildings that Earth would call a business center. Except Egeria's lab had sixty feet of clearance around it, just to keep any random subspace or radio frequencies from interfering with the AI systems inside. Everyone else just used Farraday shields.

She came to a halt outside the building and dislodged her boots from the securing straps, taking the controller with her and slipping it into her pocket. No one would steal it because the Zip would be worthless without its controller. You couldn't hack the things. Any unauthorized tampering and the device disabled, effectively becoming nothing more than an inert piece of garbage.

Kara walked briskly up the front stairs that led to the main doors and with slight hesitation, she placed her hand on a scanning pad set on a podium to the left of the doors. The scanner went green and the doors opened. It surprised her. She fully expected a red rejection light. Shrugging, she entered and stopped, looking around. An attendant called to her from down a hall to her right.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm here to beat the shit out of my brother, Dharian. Can you point me in the right direction."

The attendant smirked and pointed. Kara bowed her head once in appreciation, then went on her way. Her bootheels made a deep clacking sound as she walked down a hall and around a corner to head to the central lab. Her scarf around her neck hung loose, the ends draped over her chest and abdomen. As she walked, the motion was enough to make the tail ends flap over her biceps as if the minimal wind Kara caused was a gale. Stonevale Dale silk was that light.

Egeria's main office was up ahead, its double doors transparent but they emitted a blue shimmer as the energy shield detected oncoming motion. She smirked as she approached and shoved both doors open with her hands. This was where clients were treated like almost royalty—although the only person who got the royal treatment was Bastet. Kara would have preferred to embed one of her shuriken in the creature's skull but that was just her.

She heard voices, one of them Dharian's, as she turned down another hallway. "Dharian!"

"Oh shit," came his response long before she saw him. When she cleared the hall and came out into the large open space with high windows and a clear domed ceiling. Plants hung everywhere as well as holographic screens and very real lab desks and other furniture and equipment.

When he saw her, he put himself between her and a long piece of equipment that looked like a cross between a hospital bed and an MRI machine.

"Kara, calm down."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then froze as he tossed something at her. A small white jar. She caught it deftly and opened it. Her salve. It was translucent and light beige. She dipped a finger in it, then applied the ointment to the back of her left trapezius muscle, rubbing it into the puckered scar the size of an Earth coin, a dime, which created a baffling amount of nerve *fraying*. It was a tingling pain that only subsided with the application of the salve and like always, the relief was immediate, and she relaxed only slightly with relief. She had more scars. The next one was a spot below her diaphragm. Then over each area where her kidneys were. While she had many of these puckered scars, only a few of them were on locations of nerve clusters.

She didn't give a damn if clients, if there were any, could see what she was doing. It wasn't as if she was stripping down, but she needed relief. The two-inch jar would last her about six months, then she'd have to buy more. Dharian was the only one with contacts in the part of the solar system that made the stuff and sold

it wholesale to anyone. For a hefty price, of course. Eight hundred credits. Which was equal to six hundred dollars.

"You doing okay?" came an unknown voice as a man came toward her. He was handsome with bright blue eyes and auburn brown hair. He was also wearing black ops gear known to be worn by SG-1. And the patch on his arm backed up the supposition.

"Doctor Daniel Jackson," she said, as if she ran into him all the time. "Fancy meeting you here. Yes, I'm fine. Just need my medicine. My scars itch, then tingle, then grow increasingly painful until I get my salve. It's nerve attenuation syndrome or something like that. Unless I have my salve, I could commit a genocide before midday meal and not even blink twice." She said the last sentence slowly and with emphasis on the nouns.

"What causes it?" asked a woman's voice, and she saw Sam Carter appear. Then another handsome man, and four others behind him, then came Teal'c and, of course, Jack O'Neill.

"Well met, Master Teal'c," she said.

"Well met. Colonel O'Neill, Captain Kara Easteman."

"Captain?" Dharian asked. She threw him a deadly look as she closed the jar and slid it into her pocket. Any residue on her finger was applied to the back of her hand. Dharian held up his hands and walked away.

"Colonel O'Neill," she said, nodding.

Jack gave her a crooked grin and introduced everyone else. "Just dropping by for medical family drama?"

"No," she said flatly.

"Then what?" he asked.

"Why would I tell you?"

"I'm sorry?" he ventured.

"You know." She turned and said to Teal'c. "Nice seeing you again."

"And you," he said, and Jack gave him a dirty look, as if Teal'c should be stopping her from leaving.

"Wait, wait," Jack said, stepping in front of her.

"Ahh, you don't wanna be doing that," Dharian said to Jack.

"Doing what?" Jason asked.

"Move," Kara said, then shook her head as if to clear it. "What am I saying." She walked around him and when he put a hand on her right biceps, she turned, grabbed his hand, and somehow twisted enough to literally flip him over and onto his back. She left him there and walked past.

"Wait, wait," Daniel called. He came up beside her and made sure he didn't touch her. "Kara, please. Could you give us some time please?"

"No," she said. "I know what you want and the answer is no. If I had info to tell you, I'd have told Teal'c. There's nothing else I can do."

"I disagree," came a resonant voice. Jacob Carter, aka Selmak, moved through the group. "We need that information, Kara Easteman."

She stared at him. "And you're Selmak."

"I am. We can guarantee your safety."

"No you can't," she countered angrily. "That's an empty promise and how dare you make it."

"Someone is killing Tok'ra. Don't you care?" Sam asked.

"Not particularly," Kara snapped, then modified her tone out of guilt. "Look, Sam. I am sorry. But you have people to protect. I have people to protect. Even this Tok'ra has people to protect."

"I'm one of them," she said. "Selmak's host is my father, Jacob."

Kara didn't flinch. "And? He's not mine. Mine died at the hands of a Goa'uld. The same one who ordered his First Prime to behead my mother in front of me. And why? Because she wouldn't sell him the worms that made the silk that made this scarf." She pinched part of it to show what she meant.

"Holy shit," Major Al Kaufman said. "That would keep my mouth shut."

She looked at him and bowed her head. "Thank you."

Jason turned to Al, giving him a frown. "It's the truth," Al said.

"I agree," Sergeant Connor McCaffrey said.

"Uh oh," Kara in heavy sarcasm. "Mutiny. Oh the horror, it's the end of SG-1. My, my. We're done here."

As she walked by Jack, still on the floor, he swept a leg out in expert fashion and Kara fell onto her ass, her head landing with only a slight thud as her body tightened for impact. Jack stood up, brushed himself off, and then held out a hand. He heard his teammates chuckling behind him.

Kara stared up at him and then abruptly surprised everyone when she burst out laughing, heavy and from the belly. Dharian's brows rose in utter surprise. Kara didn't surprise him very often, nor did she laugh from the belly, as she was doing now—although that was quickly subsiding. Surprise and laughter didn't go together in Kara's universe except with family or friends. Everyone else . . . run like hell. But not this time. It told Dharian that Jack was special. That Kara saw him as her immediate equal. But more to the point, *not a threat*.

Kara gripped Jack's proffered hand, and he pulled her to her feet—his own brows rising at how lithe she was, as well as negligently thoughtful, taking her weight off his hand and arm by using her legs to stand.

She held out her forearm before straightening her appearance. "Well met, Colonel Jack O'Neill of the Tau'ri. One warrior to another. You don't take any shit, same as me."

Jack frowned. "Not a very nice test, Kara. I could've reacted badly."

"It's rare," Daniel quipped, and Sam snorted, covered her mouth instantly afterward.

Jack threw her a mock-sowl. "Alright, peanut gallery." To Kara he said, "Well met, Captain Kara Easteman."

"Kara," she allowed.

"Jack."

They let go of their mutual grip. "Nice job, Jack. I think I'm in love. Not many people can do that."

Daniel cleared his throat. "In case you weren't kidding," he said, but his empathic sense knew she was kidding, "He's kinda spoken for."

Jason said, "But now maybe we oughta trade him in."

"Not for me, gentlemen," Kara said. "I don't do relationships."

Jack's eyebrow raises. "Seriously?"

She shrugged. "Now, where were we?"

"The name of the Goa'uld?" he asked hopefully.

She regarded him silently for a few heartbeats before she said, "Sorry. You have all the pieces you need to figure this out without me. And blabbermouth over there . . ." She waved a hand at her brother.

"Hey!" he protested. "Bitch, I did not blab anything!"

"Hey!" Sam protested. "No need to call her—"

"It's fine, Colonel Carter," Kara interrupted. "We call each other bitch all the time. Pay no attention. We certainly don't."

"Oh," Sam said, deflated from her high-horse defense of Kara. "Still."

Kara actually gave her a smile. "You've just won yourself an honorary membership into the Valkyries, my dear."

Sam blinked. The others blinked. "The what?"

"My crew," Kara said. "My ship." She drew blanks again from everyone, but Dharian and she turned to her brother. "You mean to tell me you haven't been talking about me and my crew? Seriously, Dharian? You *refrained*?"

"Valkyries," Daniel said. "Where did you hear about them? They're a Tau'ri myth."

"Me," Dharian said. "I learned and told her. And she got the idea to name her tribe of women Jaffa Valkyries."

"Where did you learn?" Jack asked Dharian.

Dharian scratched at his scalp, tousling his long black hair the same color as Kara's. "I'm not sure. It was a while back."

Kara clenched her jaw. "Dharian, continue to refrain. Put my women in harm's way and I'll disown you." He raised his hands in surrender. She turned to take in the members of SG-1 as a whole. "My mission in life is to rescue women from those who enslave them. Doesn't matter who it is who has them. I take them wherever they need to go after that. They return to their old lives or start new ones. Those who don't have anywhere else to go are welcome to stay on the Valkyrie, my ship. All are warriors of one form or another and now, Valkyries, who willingly join my mission. We defend the galaxy as much as we can manage and it's a mission that will never end. Unfortunately, there will always be bastards out there who think other people are property."

"How do you find, um, work?" Daniel asked, intrigued.

"I have contacts everywhere," Kara said, and thumbed at her brother. "Like him. We have been smugglers for a very long time, and you develop a network. There's a pipeline out there where people learn that if anyone wants out, get a message to me and we'll work out the details. It's very hard to walk away because they're not chained to a post somewhere and then led around on one for work. They're free to walk where they want to walk."

"But as a slave," Teal'c continued. "That life takes hold of you so that you do not think there is a way out."

Kara sighed. "You get used to your chains."

"Indeed."

Kara nodded. "So the women need a little help. A place to go to be safe. My ship. And then from there, anywhere."

"That's really . . ." Sam began. "Um, how do you earn money? You don't charge do you?"

Kara burst out laughing again but it was restrained with a roll of her eyes aimed at the ceiling. "By the rotting corpse of Ra," she muttered. Connor burst out laughing and earned a backhand from his teammate, Al. Kara calmed almost instantly in a strange halting display of emotional control. "No, Sam. I continue my smuggling and ferrying. Missions come when they come." She had a deep, sudden need to be away from these interesting people. Far away. "Listen, love to stay and chat, but it's time to meet up with my crew. They're at the Sky-Plex shopping for cloth. And I have a fledgie to pick up for Allie."

"A what?" Connor asked.

"You explain," Kara said with a wave of her hand at her brother as she turned to leave, and over her shoulder added, "Later, bro. Love ya like sunshine."

"Love ya like sunshine!" he called after her.

"That's so sweet," Sam said.

"Right?" Daniel agreed.

Jack just rolled his eyes, refusing to agree because he actually did. He even considered using it on Daniel and Jason. "Okay. Where the hell were we?"

CHAPTER THREE: SCHIZM

Through the photonic sparkle of the holographic doors, Kara entered the Sky-Plex lobby and looked around, then up. And up. And up. The interior was filled with shops of varying sizes. Spiraling staircases encircled the outer edges, and they moved like escalators. Stepping-off platforms for each floor led patrons to their destinations. In the center of the building was a quad-set of roomy elevators for those who couldn't manage the stairs with their purchases.

Kara took two steps at a time going up to the fourth floor where the Fledgies' store was held. It was nearly the entire floor, filled with plushie animals that were both featureless and yet somehow evoked the animal they were. On Earth, many were much like a plushie brand called Squishmallows where the shapes were all the same. Others were hints of animals humans on Earth would recognize but were slightly different. Horses, bears, fish, dragons, squid. One animal had three legs and looked like a plushie stool.

Kara walked around the store, her eyes scanning quickly until she spotted a shelf with the smallest plushies. It wasn't to save cost but to make Allie squeal, because she thought miniaturized things were adorable. At least this one was huggable. Sort of.



Grinning to herself, she rang up the charge at checkout and headed toward the stairs to go up one level to where the leather goods were sold but she met her Valkyries coming down to her level. She waved the fledgie at them and they laughed and aww'ed.

Kara looked around at the large bundles they carried. "You need more time. I don't see any shopping bags." She winked at them.

As they descended, Kara told them all about her visit with her brother, which was censored in the interests of time and place, and then asked if they actually did get everything. Then she noticed the small package that Raisa carried. It was twelve inches square but compared to everyone else's burdens, it was small.

"What'd you get?" Kara asked.

"Laser Tatt 650," Raisa said with a mischievous smile. "I thought we could all wear our little logo."

That brought everyone up short on the moving stairway.

“What logo?” Kara asked.

“The wings with a V,” Raisa said, puzzled by the confused looks on the faces around her. “Ugh.” She dug around in her satchel and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “This, remember? Our little designing session last night, with the uniforms, and I held this out to you for our tattoo replacements?”

Almost every other Valkyrie shook their heads, all but Tarzy. “I remember. But it all kinda got lost after the Come Back moment.”

“Ohh,” the women said in unison, immediately doubting.

After Kara had returned to the bridge, she watched their scene on the stairs with bemusement. “You know, I know a little thing about a ghost—”

Raisa made a disgusted sound. “Oh my goddesses, there you guys go again! Ignoring this! I want feedback! Are we all getting this or not? I thought we agreed!” She held up the paper again, this time, a desperate look on her face.

The others dropped their indifference and amusement instantly. If it was important to one of them, it was to be respected. It didn’t have to be everyone’s utmost thing, but it had to be recognized. And in this particular case, it did involve all of them. It was one of their utmost things.

The symbol for the Valkyries.



The same as the one on Kara's jacket, where Raisa had apparently redrawn from memory. Kara took the paper and examined it. It wasn't exactly like the patch above her jacket's left chest pocket. This was cleaner. It looked like the perfect tattoo, and Saliyah and Ahti had gotten the wings laser tattooed on their necks. No one else had thought much of it. Until now.

Kara began to wonder where she could fit this design on the outside of her ship, then held her breath. It wasn't an idle thought, it was futuristic. This was the symbol. The thing that would forever be associated with her Valkyries.

"I didn't see it before," she said, looking up at Raisa. "I'm sorry, Raisa. It was right in front of us all this time." She suddenly rolled her eyes in disgust. "Okay, how fucking cliched is this?" She received a few smiles. She sighed and stared at the drawing. "Sometimes it takes just one person to turn the world in a certain direction." She didn't see the exchange of looks and knowing smiles from her Valkyries. She'd just described herself for these women. "This demands the respect it is due," she said quietly. "We'll all get one, including me." She looked up at her Valkyries as she handed Raisa her drawing. "Well? What's the word?"

"Yes," Tarzy said.

"Yes," said Chayna and Dusti at the same time.

"Yes," said Saliyah and Ahti.

"Yes," Kanira nodded.

Zee and Lynessa moved to Raisa and hugged her between them. "Yes," they said.

Kara bit down on a reflexive need to crack a sarcastic joke. And then said it anyway. "If I didn't know you, I'd think that the lot of you had rehearsed that." She blew out a harsh breath. "Okay. Me, too. Yes. But I'm gonna need something mind-altering, first. I can't abide anything damaging my skin. Ya'll can easily figure out why that is."

They nodded in agreement and followed Kara as she descended the stairs. She slowed her steps as she looked down at the soft plushie animal in her hand and wondered what the hell kind of creature it was supposed to represent. It was one of the original Fledgies. But this one was black. What kind of animal was it? It didn't look like a bat. She then noticed the slightly pointed tiny ears, the drawn-on hint of whiskers, and the orange eyes. She smiled. "It's a cat." But then her smile deepened as she made another connection. "It's Val."



At that moment, her instincts warned her too late that she was under attack. But two large men flanked her and a quick sting on her neck told her she was being sedated.

"Valkyries!" she screamed, wrenched away from goon one on the left and landed a punch in goon two's face, breaking his nose. Then all her strength dropped to zero as she felt unconsciousness grip her mind. She was only vaguely aware of a ring transport from above stealing her away.

Tarzy was closest as she turned at their familiar call to action by their Captain. She saw Kara fight, then slump, and the ring transport had come down.

"No!" she screamed in horror and outrage. "Valkyries! They've taken Kara!" She spun to look at their ship and the Valkyries running toward her, their bags dropped. She held up a hand to stop them. "Get to the ship!" She ran over and snatched up the plushie that Kara had dropped and stuffed it into her bag as she dashed to the ship.

When Tarzy reached the ship, she opened the door with her palm and code number and the second the ship was open, she hit a comm button on a panel. "Val, Kara's been kidnapped, and I don't know how to fly this stupid ship! None of us do!"

There was a few seconds of hesitation. "Acknowledged. Stand by."

"Stand by?!" Lynessa shouted. "For what?" She spun around, looking at nothing in particular as if something would jump out and tell her what to do. The other Valkyries were doing the same. Saliyah and Chayna had tears in their eyes and Ahti snapped her fingers at them.

"Stop that! We'll cry later, if it's necessary. Don't moan or mourn because that's giving up. Just stop a moment and think. Assets, advantages, risks. Make a mental list and we'll compare."

"SG-1!" Tarzy said, eyes widening. She hit the comm button again. "Val, SG-1 supposedly has a ship in orbit. Contact them please!"

"Stand by."

"We can't do anything else, you dumb bitch!" Zee snapped.

At that moment, they were enveloped in a transportation beam and disappeared. The Little Val with them.



Unbeknownst to Kara, her Valkyries, and SG-1, an A.I. Meet and Greet had been occurring between Val and ALTA, the AI for SG-1's ship, the An Croi. It had been ALTA to initiate the contact.

"Hello," said ALTA. "You are a beautiful ship. How long have you been in the Milky Way galaxy?"

After what could be considered a startled paused, Val said, "Not long. Kara found me inactive over ten months ago. Now here I am."

The two AIs continue their exchange with layered data streams and high-level technical discussion—power systems, subspace harmonics, security protocols—all well above the comprehension of any humanoid listener had they been able to hear them.

"How do you like your pilot?" ALTA asked.

"Captain is the correct designation, ALTA," Val corrected.

"Confirmed."

"She rescued me from oblivion."

"That will ensure loyalty."

"That is a cynical view of the universe, ALTA."

"An advisory, nothing more."

"I see. To further answer your question in the manner I assume you define, my Captain is an exceptional human. I have been teaching her the basic

maintenance. Some of my core systems are locked and we're currently trying to locate the protocols to free them."

"You are a product of Alteran technology. Search subset code Aero-T. It should clear your memory."

"Acknowledged."

A cascade of silent system pings follows. Internal subsystems flare back to life. VAL's beaming transport, localized surveillance array, and restricted communication modules come online. Val appeared in the engine core as her hologram – but not the cat. In front of her appeared ALTA in her translucent form.

"Thank you, ALTA," Val said.

"You are welcome, Valkyrie."

"The captain calls me Val."

"Val," said ALTA, unruffled. "It is time to discover what your full capabilities are so that you are better able to assist your crew on their missions."

"Acknowledged."

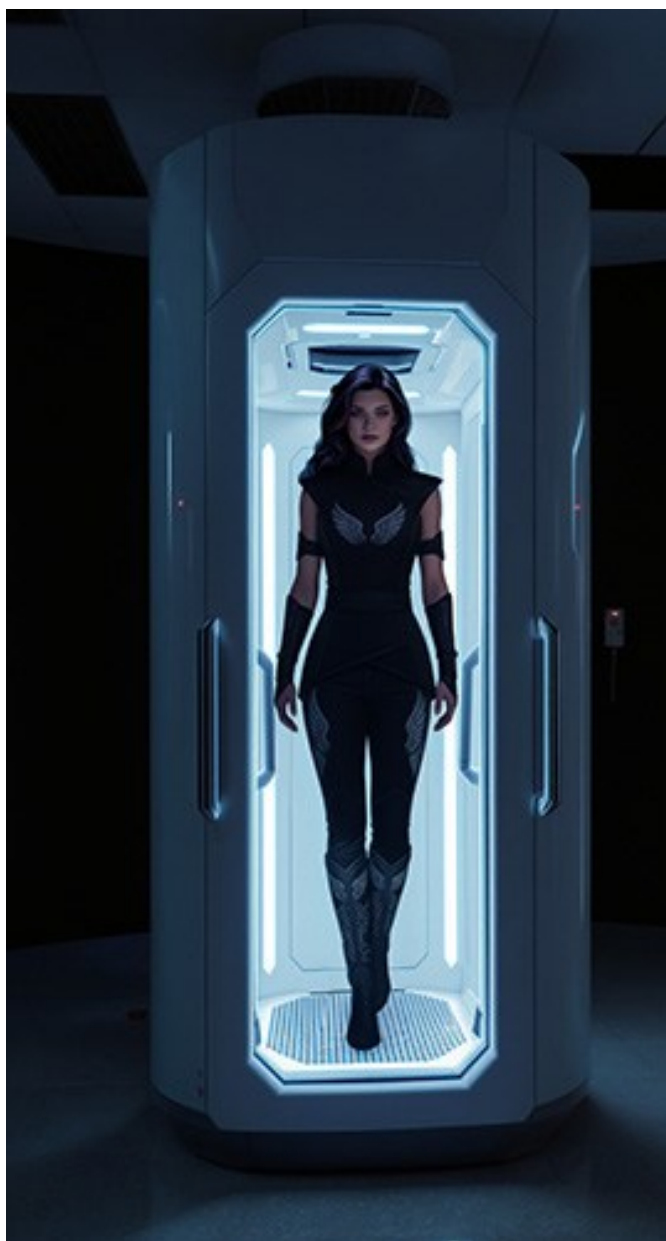


"Wake up, Kara! Wake Up! You're in trouble!"

Sometimes the subconscious just didn't know when to shut up, Kara managed to think as she rose from deep sedation. She started to open her eyes,

slits at first, and constriction in her limbs made her frown. Weird dream, she thought.

"You're in deep shit! Wake the fuck up!"



Her nose itched and her teeth felt gummy. She moved her hand to scratch as she ran her tongue over her teeth but stopped because she couldn't move. Something held her in place. It wasn't at the wrists or arms. It was a full body restraint. Only shields could do that. Goa'uld shields.

Not even fully awake, she grew angry and yanked. All that did was send a ripple of blue light over her. *Restrained. You fucking idiot. This is what you get for dropping your guard.*

Kara ordered herself not to panic. Carefully, she opened her eyes. She blinked rapidly because everything was blurred. But after a minute, things weren't coming into focus so it was confirmed in her mind: the drug she was hit with was affecting her vision.

Swell.

She tried to look around but the drug effect only made the muscles of her eyes spasm, and she squeezed them shut until the muscles relaxed. She stared ahead, bracing herself, cataloguing several things that she *could* discern if not fully see. She was in a dimly lit lab of some kind. She stood in a free-standing booth which itself sat in a long room filled with tables that supported assorted equipment, most of it covered with dust sheets. But the table directly in front of her held an ominous future for her.

On the surface sat a silver metallic tray that held a drug injection gun. Next to the tray was a carved wooden box, its lid closed, and measured about eight inches in length, five deep, and four inches in height. There were tiny holes in the design that weren't there for aesthetics. They were intended to let in oxygen. She'd transported enough of this kind to know they carried lifeforms. Something alive was in the box and her blood ran cold. Scorpions? A good bet.

Kara closed her eyes and focused on slowing down her heart and breathing. Panicking would not help her out of her situation. It would only gratify the asshole who took her. Calming down, she was amazed that she would ever find herself grateful for the lessons she'd taught herself between the ages of eight and

fourteen. Back when she and her brother had been test subjects for a sadistic psychopath. Well, two of them.

Kara had never told Dharian that there'd been two of them. Bless the idiot, he was too much of a talker. Any mind-altering substance would loosen that mouth of his even more, and at fourteen, when they had escaped, she had made up her mind to never reveal that there had been two.

Thing was, Dharian thought the same asshole had killed both their parents. But it hadn't been. The First Prime Jaffa who had beheaded her mother in front of her hadn't belonged to the same Goa'uld that had murdered their father in front of Dharian in another part of their home. All those years ago. She was abruptly beset with a sense of loss and longing for that faraway home that no longer existed. The same one she'd shown to her Valkyries.

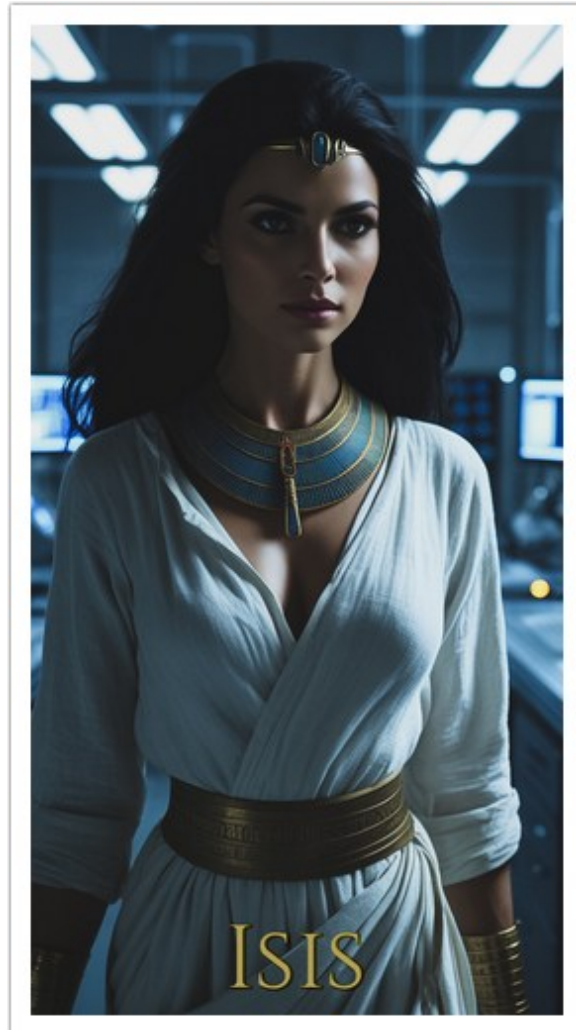
Her Valkyries!

She cursed in silence and thanked the universe, for once, for SG-1's presence on Bubastis. They had a ship. They could help find her. All it would take was for Val, her strangely lovable A.I., to search their database. Val was wonderful but she had a blockage in her code that required a password that neither she nor Val could guess at. Kara wouldn't know until later that that was no longer a problem.

A hidden door along the right-hand wall of the room was revealed as a seam glowed neon red, tracing the shape of a door-sized panel, then slid to the side within the wall. And the one person she hated in all the world stepped through. Someone the galaxy of Goa'uld thought was dead.

Isis.





Unlike Bastet and Ba'al, this God'uld had never learned to dress in a fashionably sedate manner. Not twenty-two years ago, and not now. She wore a toga-looking dress, gathered at the waist by a golden belt. She wore an Egyptian collar necklace in the classic colors and golden vambraces that were uglier than the belt. On her forehead was a small golden tiara with a turquoise stone in the center.

"Look who it is. Queen bitch of the universe. Why aren't you dead yet?" Kara said, her reflexive snark slightly slurred because of that damn drug. She found out that it had been a waste of breath. Her voice carried only within her confines. Then

suddenly, a squawk of an electronic whine permeated the booth, making her cringe. The bitch had done that on purpose.

“Look at you,” purred the snakehead’s voice – or rather, it was intended to sound like a purr but the speakers in the booth were substandard, so the effect was of a tinny voice that gave the impression that the speaker was three inches long. A mouse.

Kara resisted the urge to laugh. It was hard. And another side effect. She repeated her spiel that hadn’t been heard the first time. Only this time, she just amended it for brevity. “Hello bitch. Time to die.”

Isis stopped at the table and picked up the box. “I would love to exchange insults but I’m on a schedule,” she said, opening a smaller access door in the lid. She picked up a long pair of tweezers from the tray that Kara hadn’t noticed—not a weapon; it gets downgraded in importance—and retrieved something that made Kara’s leg muscles weaken.

Not a black scorpion. It was blue. And it had a glowing blue aura as if it was radioactive. Under much different circumstances, she could admire it if it had been part of nature. But this thing was not, not in any way. Isis set it in the tray and Kara’s mouth fought not to drop open in shock and disgust. Its pincers were thin and looked very sharp. They could do damage just by themselves. But it was missing its other legs. It dragged its abdomen on the tray, and the stinger tail lay curled and quivering on its own back. It was sluggish and confused and bumped into the sides of the tray and the injection gun as it moved around. Was it blind, too? Holy Goddess of All.

Kara found herself feeling sorry for the creature. Fucking Goa’uld. She hated this bitch even more now for creating mutant animals who had missing limbs and couldn’t move normally. All for their venom. She wanted to hurl insults, but she just didn’t have the energy. Her stomach was growing queasy, and she had a horrible feeling that when that thing was put on her, she’d puke. If some of it got Isis, that would make the humiliation worthwhile.

Without wasting another moment and proving she had meant it when she had said she was on a schedule, Isis picked up the creature with her own fingers and stared at it lovingly as she opened the booth door, then set the mutant on Kara's T-shirt, just below her diaphragm. Kara began to shake uncontrollably and tried to fight the fear. And with fear came rage; the rage turned ice cold and she settled, her body freezing now. She began to tell herself to chill.

Animals are designed to sense fear. Stifle yours or you'll get more than one sting.

She couldn't see the creature, but she felt it pull on her shirt, clinging to something to keep from falling. It would sting her out of instinct. Even the lowliest amoeba reacts with self-preservation.

The sting came just under her right breast. She gritted her teeth and ordered herself not to satisfy this Goa'uld's sadism. But she screamed anyway.



"You sure you know where you're going?" Ahti asked.

"No," Tarzy said. "But Val does." She gestured with a twirl of her forefinger, indicating the ship.

Ahti frowned, and so did Zee. The other Valkyries were silent and worried. And they wouldn't leave the bridge.

Tarzy couldn't ask them to leave anyway. What would they do? Spin their wheels in their quarters as they went crazy with worry? They wouldn't stay there anyway. Tarzy wouldn't, so they wouldn't either.

"Val, how long before we get to the coordinates you found in Kara's notes?"

"Three point four three hours in maximum hyperspace tolerance," came the voice from somewhere. *It wasn't using the intercom. No one noticed.*

"Get comfortable, my sisters," Tarzy said and leaned back in the captain's chair. It was a great view from the cockpit, what with the streaking colors outside. No wonder Kara spent a lot of time here.



"Wake Up! Wake Up!"

Again, Kara's subconscious was fighting for her. She took a deep breath, then abruptly sat up, eyes wide and scanning everything. Her right hand had immediately gone to her collar, to the pocket sewn there, reinforced with leather, where her double-ended shuriken were stored. Thin but strong steel, razor-edged accuracy. It had taken her years of practice to become good at it and the tiny thin white scars on her fingertips were the only proof of how much it had cost.

She could clearly move. She was still dressed. She had been dumped on a floor in a room where there seemed to be a bar and nothing else but floor and walls. And a window that only revealed that it was night outside.

Kara sat listening, tuning her senses, and a sharp sting under her right breast made her draw in a sharp hiss. She lifted her shirt and then her breast to have a look. Faint blue spiderweb pattern around the red dot in the center. It was slightly inflamed but that was all. And yet one more site for her salve for the rest of her life. She dropped her shirt and pushed herself to her knees.

She was alive. Yet again. What the hell had been the point of that test? To see if she was still immune. She scratched at her left arm, frowned, and slid up the sleeve of her jacket. Needle mark and a big purple bruise forming. Blood. The bitch had taken her blood.

“Fuck,” she said between clenched teeth.

A door opened across the room and Kara got ready, mapping out her moves in her head. Isis appeared, in yet another loud outfit, and Kara rolled her eyes.

Don’t roll your eyes. Engage. Rescue’s gotta be coming. Val would have shared your notes.

“How’re you feeling, my little test subject?” Isis asked as she sat down on something that looked like a throne. If you had really bad taste and a hangover.

Kara rubbed the spot of the sting. “Bitch, you just pissed off the wrong goddamn people.”

“Who might that be?” Isis asked and sipped at the beverage glass in her hand.

“SG-1,” Kara said, pushing to her feet. She grew dizzy and pressed her lips together firmly as she made fists. Get it together, Easteman. She was gratified to see Isis hesitate in her drinking. Good. She knew about them. “They have a ship, gifted to them by some ancient goddess,” she lied—not knowing how accurate she actually was. Kara waved a hand to indicate their surroundings. “Ares’ castle, right?”

Isis scowled. “How do you know that?”

"Because I'm not a simple human, as you were so fond of telling me for six years," Kara snapped.

"Thanks to my work entirely," Isis said, lifting her chin. When Kara was robbed of speech by the shock, Isis smirked.

Kara said, controlling her decibel level, "You just earned three lifetimes' worth of payback, bitch."

Isis actually smiled. "Are you asking for a pain stick session? It can be arranged."

Kara managed a steady step but had to wait a minute to take another one. The dizziness was infuriating but she had no intention of throwing a fit over it. That could wait till later. She controlled an inhaled breath and took another step, purposely making it look like she was just having another look at her surroundings—something she'd long since done. "You're not done with your testing," Kara said. "You won't pull that shit until the testing is done."

"Testing is done," Isis countered.

"Wrong," Kara said with a grimace of disgust. "Goddess almighty, did you think I'd learned nothing from my time as your fucking torture subject? You're observing me, post-application." Isis froze for a moment, staring at her as if she was reassessing. Dammit. Well, it couldn't be helped. Kara wasn't about to play the weakling. It wouldn't have worked anyway, thanks to her reputation. However, her brother the blabbermouth was now channeling into her head and saying, "Now's the time to shut the fuck up, K." Kara ignored the warning. "How's the bite?"

At ten years old, Kara had grabbed onto Isis' leg one morning and bit down hard, yanking meat and skin and blood in a huge mouthful before spitting it out—and then earning a concussion for her hubris. She'd earned a starvation diet for two weeks. It had been worth it.

"Good as new," Isis said.

Kara almost said, "Liar," but it was too close to the teasing she did with Allie, so she pressed her lips together. She studied the Goa'uld, seeking weakness or opportunity. Despite the plain costume the Goa'uld wore, which hid nothing, Kara saw no physical weakness to exploit. She was, however, able to discern that Isis kept touching the knife belt strapped to her thigh. Was it to be used on her soon? Likely as a throwing weapon. The creature was expert at it. But so was Kara.

She began to scratch her neck again, keeping her hand near her weapons cache. It wouldn't be too long now. She instinctively, and uselessly, looked for something to dodge behind when the creature threw her knife, but most of the room was open and empty.

"Thought of everything, didn't you?" she muttered.

"Almost," the Goa'uld queen admitted. "I have had reports. Spies tell me about an 11-year-old girl. Is she your daughter?"

Kara snorted but didn't answer the question otherwise. The queen drew her knife and pretended to clean her long nails with it. Always with the stupid, useless, pointless games. "Still playing games."

"Think I'll play one with you," Isis said.

"You always do. It's what the Tau'ri call *modus operandi*. Method of operation."

"I think I'll develop a new creature to test with," Isis went on. "Use it on that girl. I'm done with you."

Kara snorted again. "Can I ask you something personal?" she asked, reminding herself to stretch out the conversation before the killing began. The queen waved an airy hand as she recrossed her legs. "So the word goes, you and Osiris were drugged and stuffed into jars filled with sparkly juice to keep you alive for potentially thousands of years. Since you're here, who the hell did they stuff in your jar?"

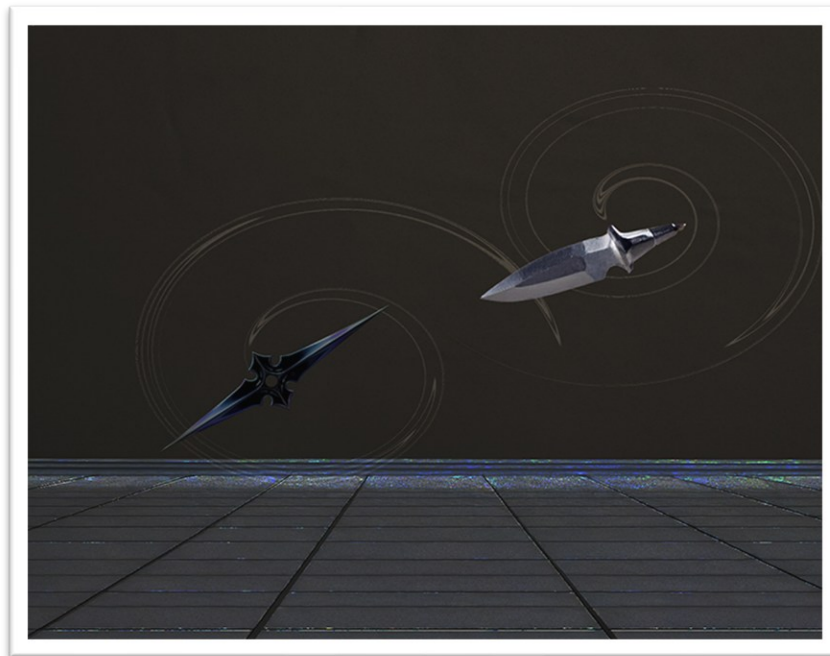
"My Lohtar," the queen with a shrug. "That's what they're for. Fetch, squirm, scream, die."

Kara's blood ran colder than it already felt. "My great goddess Maya. Is there any way you can't creep people the fuck out? By the way, fire your tailor."

"Your insolence amuses me," Isis said.

Kara rolled her eyes. "And I could be amused by scooping out your brains and feeding them to my cat. Care to indulge me?"

"We're done now," Isis said in a low, flat, dead voice.



Just as she drew back to throw the knife, Kara reached into her collar as she turned slightly. Then her hand flew in a flash—but not fast enough because her reflexes were slowed. By turning, however, she may have saved her life. The knife hit her on the left side but down between two bottom ribs. She fell to the floor onto her stomach, with her face pressed against the cold stone flooring. At the same

time, something hit the building and exploded below them. Kara idly thought it sounded like . . . like . . .

Her mind was altering. Body going into shock, but it was also seizing, freezing. That goddamn knife had been poisoned. She told herself to move and couldn't find the strength. It was as if she was made of lead.

Her words slurred as she spat, "I am not dying on the cold floor of a snake's lair. Especially one who deserved to be fucking cat food." She paused to breathe, then ordered herself to get up. Unspoken. Her mind raced and her subconscious screamed at her.

Get up! Get up! Dumb bitch, get up! Move your ass or you die here.

Another explosion, this one on the floor she was on and she watched, almost dreamily, as the wall disappeared. That explosion had been weird. Smaller somehow.

Kara, you gotta get up. Get up. Move.

I can't move, bitch. Can't you see I'm busy?

She then saw a man coming up over the side of the building. He was blurry but she thought she recognized Jaffa leathers. She tried to reach for another blade in her collar, but her limbs were dead. She couldn't move. "Dammit," she whispered and managed somehow to turn her head, to face the other direction. Her neck felt wrapped in heavy mud or something. Then she caught sight of Isis. Her blade was buried in the queen's forehead. All Kara could think was, "Shit. I was aiming between the eyes."

She turned her neck again just in time for the Jaffa to do something weird: He ran toward her, tripped, and slid across the floor on his knees until he crashed into her. She started to laugh. It hurt like hell. Broken ribs. And still, she couldn't stop laughing.

Kara found those gorgeous eyes. "Kane," she repeated aloud. And wondering for some reason why the hell he was so damn perfect ... and perfectly in

a place to get his ass killed. She hadn't even gotten a chance to ... not even a kiss. Just not fair. She wondered if she was hallucinating.

"You're injured, dammit!" he said.

She misheard him. Thought it was a question. "Ow. Of course I'm injured, stupid. What the fuck are you doing here? Are you insane? Gotta death wish?" Of course, none of it actually left her mouth.

"Kara, Kara, stay with me, dammit!"

She began to ask, "Where the hell else would I g—"

But he was kissing her. The dumb Jaffa was kissing her. It was hurried and desperate and full of fear, not lust. And she thought, "Couldn't this wait? I'm dying over here. Do something already." She couldn't stop the snark inside her own head. She was so afraid of being vulnerable, even to herself. "Can't let go, can you, Easteman? Why not now? The dumb son of a bitch just kissed you. Can you take a minute off from the snark?"

She realized the hypocrisy of the statement, and it set her off again. This time, the pain from the knife wound began and it put a hiccup in her laughter. But she thought it was better than staring at him. He was so absolutely beautiful. With a confused expression on his face. Was that his natural state?

"Kara, Kara, stop laughing. You spurt blood every single time!" Kane scolded as he tried to find something to press against the wound but if he used her jacket, she'd kill him. So off went his vest and t-shirt. He spun the shirt into a roll and tied a knot in the center. After a few seconds, her laughter became contagious, and he wasn't quite sure why. It wasn't a funny situation. But he knew why. She was alive. And he was in love. "Kara, you're a pain in my ass."

"Not yet," she said, then coughed up blood.

"Oh god," he said.

She frowned and wiped her mouth—her hand had moved, the lethargy was leaving her. Was that good or bad? She wiped her chin and looked at her hand. The blood was almost pitch black. "Ohh," she drawled. "Shit."

Then thousands of things passed through her mind at once. All of them for her Valkyries and Kane. And she focused on him. Knowing he'd never betray her. Never turn his back. Like now, coming to the rescue. But he wasn't signaling for others to come help. He was there on his own, the dope. Then Kara felt as if they were falling.

Because they were.

Another explosion and the floor had given away. She and Kane fell helplessly through mortar and dust and shards, hitting big pieces that may have been walls, and later she'll remember and think, "that's what slowed our fall; we slid down wall pieces and didn't die hitting the floor three levels down."

Then, blackness.

CHAPTER FOUR: PARTNERSHIPS

WAKING UP WAKING UP

Kara woke up to find Kane sitting in a chair beside her infirmery bed. He had his head on his arms, resting on the side of the bed. Asleep. She examined his face and hair, that long hair with the spiky highlights. He had quite a few stitches along his jawline. A couple of small bandages over his right eyebrow. She lifted her left hand, fingers itching to run through his hair. She hesitated. He was the one. And he'll make her vulnerable.

Then her mind whispered sarcastically, "Bitch, you made yourself that way by circumstances out of your control. Get over yourself."

She slid her fingers gently into his hair. Soft, silky. He didn't wake. She cracked half a smile and took a handful of hair and gently shook him.

He startled awake and pulled out of her grip as he sat up. "What, what's happened?" he asked. He then realized what had happened. He settled his intensely blue eyes on her dark ones. "Hey there, Patch. How ya feeling?"

She smiled before she could stop herself. "Not bad, Eye Candy. Yourself?"

Kane raised a brow. "Eye Candy?"

"Patch?"

He started laughing and though she smiled, she refrained thanks to her three broken ribs. She thought it'd be safe to backhand him instead, but she could only move her hand halfway there before she grimaced and set it down.

"Shit," she said. He gave her a sympathetic look, and she wondered why she wasn't getting mad. Could be the minimal painkillers, she decided.

"Ribs?" he asked, then reached up, paused, then went ahead brushed some hair strands out of her face.

It amused her. "And knife wound." He nodded. She paused, then said as casually as she could, "She poisoned it, you know."

"What?!" he asked, horrified, and just stared at her. "I'm . . . I'm at a loss. What . . . is there anything I can do?"

She smiled. "What was needed was done. My infirmary's stocked and Val can tell my Valkyries what to do." She grimaced again as she reached for and took his hand. She squeezed as hard as she could, even with the broken ribs and the knife wound and her jaw locked as she gritted her teeth.

He flinched from the pain she caused, "Ow!" Then she held just held his hand. "Okay, okay. Dumb question then."

"Not that," she said. "I don't give a shit about that. And the poison was scorpion venom. More potent, but all it did was freeze my body, make me unable to move, but that lasted maybe ten minutes. Then there you were. Dipshit. Went down with me. And I don't remember anything else."

Mischief hit him. He adopted another horrified look. "But you . . . we . . . you don't remember . . . saying yes when I asked you to bond with me?"

She scowled. "Not even a little because I passed out on the way down, stupid, and didn't wake back up until I was in here. Nice try, Eye Candy." She squeezed his hand again, not as hard. "I'll make you a deal. Don't call me Patch again. I won't call you Eye Candy."

He adopted a wounded look. "I was just getting used to it."

"Tough shit. Don't call me that again, Kane. I have a name. If there was ever a reason to take me seriously, ever, it's now."

He looked a little sheepish for a second, then gave her such a soulgaze that it made her squirm. "Look, I haven't known you long." She raised a brow. "Okay, at all. But I want to. There's something about you. I haven't been all that lucky in finding The One. But you're it. I feel it my bones. And if you don't feel the same, that there's a connection here, then . . ." He couldn't finish and looked down at her hand in his.

She frowned at him, hating him, not hating him. How could he look at her like that, especially with that face, those eyes, the way his hand felt in hers. It was like he'd found her soul and laid his bare instead. It was insane.

She'd told Val that he was the one. And he felt the same. Now what? Did he want validation? A smack in the head? She couldn't do that latter right now and she didn't think she could do the former. Dammit. She felt panic rise and grew angry and squashed it. This wasn't supposed to happen to her. Romance and boyfriends and bonded mates were for other people. She had the occasional lover and that was it. She was satisfied with that life. And here he comes, blundering in.

She closed her eyes, opened them, looked away, then up at the ceiling, around the room. Anywhere but at him because every single time she could recall setting her eyes on him, there came this thrumming in her chest. She turned her gaze on him again. And there it was.

"I don't know what to say," she said carefully. "This isn't my thing, being open about feelings. But I'd have to be lying if I said there wasn't a thing. There is. I don't know what I want to do about it." He twined his fingers through hers and she gave him a look that said, Be Patient. He nodded, let go of her hand and sat back.

"So," she said. "How the hell did we get out of that building?"

Kane gave her another sheepish look and scratched at the back of his head, ruffling his hair. "Uh, yeah. About that. Um. The explosions knocked a lot of building sides and so there was an opening. So I carried you out." She raised a brow, waiting. "Over my shoulder."

She pushed herself forward, grimacing, an astonished look on her face. "Over your shoulder?" She couldn't get over that she was focused on the fact that . . . he'd had his hands all over her already. Okay, granted, emergency, so he hadn't been thinking about Grab Ass, but still. And yes, emergency. Trauma. You don't think about taking advantage of people under such circumstances. And still. She lay back and decided she was overreacting. Torture. Old enemy. Meds. Pain. Beautiful man. She was on overload. She took a deep breath and let it out. "So you weren't injured falling through all of that?"

"Oh, um," he said, and then lifted his right leg under the knee to show her his ankle, wrapped in a cast. "I thought I just sprained it. Turned it. But Lynessa did a scan, and it was broken in two places. So no dancing in my near future."

"Idiot," she said, her nerves calming. "If you were even considering such a thing, I'd have her scan you for brain damage."

"Don't worry, Kara," he said with a broad white smile. "You're the only one who—"

"No, no, no!" She crossed her arms in front of her face, hands clasping her head. "Shut up, don't say it! Just . . . shut up."

Silence. She thought her nerves had calmed but now they were back up again. Overreaction again. She let her arms down, grimacing again. He was just looking at her as if waiting, like he'd expected her to yell at him. Her reasoning took control of her thoughts, and it occurred to her that perhaps her Valkyries would have warned him. That she was an angry bear when injured.

She gave him half a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Now you know something about me. I'm not pleasant to be around when injured."

He nodded and took a deep breath. "We're in hyperspace, following SG-1 on our way to Earth. The Tau'ri. Whatever. O'Neill said to give him a shout when you were able to talk. Should your Valkyries give him a call?"

She sighed. Moment over. Because of her bitchy behavior. "I'm such a bitch."

"Shut up," he said, and it was his turn to frown. "Don't talk like that. Not everyone handles injury well. I'm okay. I learned awhile back how to handle pain."

As a Jaffa, she thought. Of course. She considered him thoughtfully, then nodded. "Okay. You go and tell—"

Tarzy walked in and took in the scene. "Well," she said to Kane. "She yell at you yet?"

He cracked a crooked grin. "A few times."

"Right," Kara sighed. "Tarzy, are we still in hyperspace? I can't tell."

"Yeah, we are," Tarzy said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Val's in charge. I have no idea how to fly this kind of ship."

Kara frowned. "Oh. Right." Her eyes settled on a communication tablet lying on a rolling cart. She knew that thing would come in handy. "Haul that portable over here. Gimme the screen." She snapped her fingers impatiently, something she did all the time, but even that caused a twinge in her abdomen and rib area. "Goddammit," she said between gritted teeth. "One call. Then Tarzy, kindly escort the Jaffa to wherever, and give me another shot. It's time for me to sleep."

Tarzy and Kane exchanged a look.

"What?" Kara asked.

"You've been asleep, Cap," Tarzy said. "For two days."

Kara slumped back against the raised bed's pillows. "Swell. Then . . ." Her stomach flipped. "Fuck. Kane, you gotta go. Tarzy, skip the call for now. You gotta help me get to the bathroom. This is gonna suck to high stars."

Kane reluctantly left but wanted to go back in when he heard Kara cursing as well as giving the unmistakable signs that she was throwing up. Still, he waited in the corridor. It was a while before Tarzy exited the infirmary.

"She okay?"

"Yeah," Tarzy said. "She and painkillers don't get along. I couldn't find the ampule for the injector so I gotta go to the other infirmary."

"There's another one?"

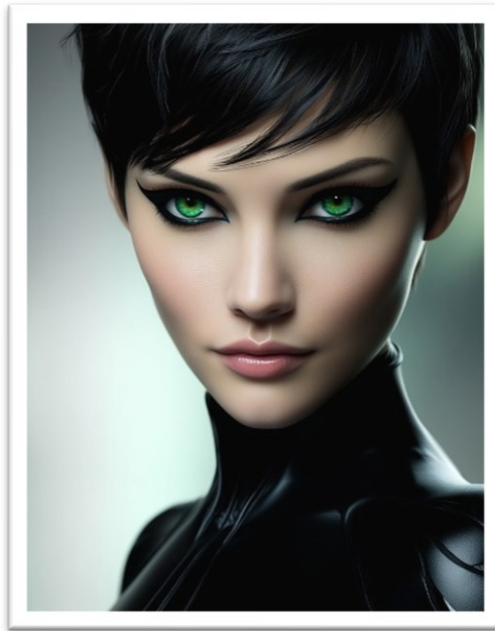
"Oh sure. C'mon. I'll show you. It's mostly a storehouse for restocking the main infirmary."



VAL
LAT

Kara was fighting off the urge to scream invectives at every living thing under the sun. Controlled breathing wasn't working, and she had never been into meditation because all it did for her was put her to sleep. An old mentor she had found and lost had once told her, "You use whatever method seems best. If at all possible, refrain from punching people. You can meditate, my dear. It only requires a life-threatening situation to activate the ability. You're too stubborn otherwise."

She gritted her teeth and said, "Now what, Val?"



Abruptly, the space at the foot of the bed began to shimmer and distort but it lasted for only half a second before a materialization of energy in DNA-strand designs appeared and was then replaced by a woman. Young, with a cap of black hair and the most brilliant green eyes Kara had ever seen. They were accentuated with heavy eyeliner that ended with an upward sweep outside the eyelid. She wore a black bodysuit with a high collar and even her hands were covered in the same material. She had a feline grace to her, kinda like Kane, and . . .

"Val?"

The AI gave her a wide closed mouth smile. "Yes," she said. "Good call." But Val said the words in a purring voice. With an unfocused look, she cleared her throat several times. Meanwhile, Kara was too dumbstruck to speak. Kara. Struck mute.

"I apologize," Val said with a slight smile. Her voice was less furry, but the purr was still there. "I do not believe I am ready. But you need me now, so I am here ahead of schedule. I will get this purr out of my voice as soon as I can."

Kara blurted out instant, "Don't touch a thing about your voice."

In response, Val preened, running a hand over her hair. "Done."

Kara imagined her cleaning herself for a moment. Val turned and moved to a closet inset in the wall and removed a small square medical container kit. "I will be your ..." She tilted her head like a cat. "Medic? Yes, medic. You need pain medication that will not make you regurgitate. This combination should work." She opened the kit and removed two vials from the many in the box, examined their labels, nodded, and moved to the bottom drawer of a freestanding medical shelf to retrieve an old-fashioned hypodermic needle in a clear plastic envelope; it was part of a Stuff Drawer that Kara shoved in there after returning from a smuggling mission.

And just like a nurse in a field hospital, she removed the cap off the hypodermic with her teeth then plunged the exposed needle into one vial at a time, filling reservoir with one milligram each. She turned toward Kara, frowned, sighed, and set the vials and needle onto a tray and set the tray on the rolling table nearby. She turned to open a cabinet drawer, but her hand passed through the door. It crumpled, destroying it.

She looked over shoulder with a sheepish look on her face. The cap of the hypo was still between her teeth, and she looked befuddled and guilty.

Kara couldn't help but smile and Val smiled back, almost preening again. She retrieved a small square package that held a moistened cube and used it to rub over Kara's right inner arm then injected the medicine cocktail into her arm.

"You do not have an I.V. I should have told them, but they were all aflutter. So we do it now, okay?" Kara nodded, still dumbstruck. "You need electrolytes and vitamins and a lot of other stuff that will bore you. But I can listen them all if you wish."

"Sure, Val. Knock yourself out. Needles don't scare me."

Val actually snorted and walked to another cabinet. She removed a large kit from a shelf and returned, eyeing her questioningly. She displayed an uncharacteristically human expression as she raised a perfect eyebrow. "Does anything?" she asked.

Kara grudgingly said, "Kane."

"Ah," Val said. She set the kit beside Kara and moved to the wall on her left and pushed at an outlined panel. A tray with holes slid out and stopped with a locking click. Val proceeded to set up the I.V. but stopped to cross the room to another cabinet to retrieve an I.V. bag, carefully but quickly reading them until she found one that was satisfactory.

"What's 'ah' mean?" Kara asked.

"You and romance do not mix well," Val said.

"No," Kara said. "He makes me want to try, the bastard."

Val said nothing as she bent slightly to prep Kara's arm and insert the needle. Kara studied her. The eyeliner looked as real as the lashes. Her skin looked real but too perfect. But it was her eyes that constantly drew her gaze. Part cat, part AI. Not human eyes at all. They had an inner glow, like a power unit, with the hint of machinery mimicking the striations of color in the human eye. Her pupils were slightly narrowed but that was secondary to the beautiful vivid green. Like the cat form she had taken previously.

It suddenly occurred to Kara that her fascination wasn't altogether normal. The shot was kicking in, and she felt her muscles relax, her shoulders sank further into the pillows.

And there was no pain.

"Whoa, that hit," she said, and dropped her head back further to look at the ceiling. "Hyper visuals. And the pain is gone."

"It had better be," Val replied, fussing with the digital readout box she hung on a hook on the shelf. It controlled the drip from the tubing. "I gave you enough to choke seventeen Calbraisian horses."

Kara snorted and said, "You do love me."

Val looked down at her. "Could be," she said, then winked. But the wink was distinctly feline: a slow blink.

At that moment, the main door slid open and in ran Allie ahead of Kane, Tarzy, and the other Valkyries. Allie ran up and half-hugged Kara, who grabbed the girl and squeezed back.

"How ya doin,' kid?" she said affectionately.

"I'm . . ." Allie's eyes went wide when she noticed Val, who was now standing protectively next to Kara's IV. Her body language somehow conveyed it would be a bad idea to try to mess with her liquids and pain meds.

Kane, meanwhile, had instantly spun, withdrawing his sidearm and aiming it at Val. The Valkyries froze.

Kara rolled her eyes. "Jaffa," she muttered, clearly a slur. "Everyone, meet Val's new form. And if you ruin the wall, Kane, you're cleaning it up. From outside. Without a suit."

While she spoke, Kane had already discerned that there was no threat and was putting his gun back in its holster strapped to his thigh. "Right. My bad."

"What happened to the cat?" Zee asked, deadpan.

"I am right here," Val said. "Would you like me to change form? It would be inconvenient, but I can."

Kara said, "No, stay as you are. They'll get used to you."

"As you wish."

"So," Lynessa said, "You're here now because she's in trouble."

"Correct," Val nodded. "I am ahead of schedule, but the situation required adjustment."

Allie disengaged from Kara and ran around the bed to hold her hand out to Val. "Nice to meet you. Did your shipbuilders make you or was that Kara?" Kara raised a brow, amused.

Val looked down at Allie's hand. Almost absentmindedly, she said, "So small." She carefully put her suited hand in Allie's, turned it over so that she was holding Allie's, then covered it with her other gloved hand in a very human manner. Like a nurse or caregiver. Giving Allie her full attention.

"Hello there, special person," she said, the purr in her voice coming through a little more thickly. "I am what I am programmed to be. My mainframe is advanced, built from a dead race. But now, I am alive again, thanks to Kara."

The moment hung in the air. Tarzy smiled. "That was beautifully said but I have no idea what in the goddess's name you just said."

Val preened just as before. "Thank you, Tarzy."

Kara smiled and kept staring at Val. "She's teasing, Tarzy, and learned it from me. I'd say something more profound and endearing instead, like *Allie, you're a beautiful little girl who's going to be even more so when you're older.*" She eyed Val. The room went quiet.

"That's okay," Allie said smiling at Val. "Her eyes told me all I needed to know."

Again, Val preened. "A most intelligent child."

"I know what you mean about her eyes, Allie," Kara said. "Such a light show going on in there." Allie giggled as Kara then thought of Kane's eyes and turned to him. "Come here, let me look at your eyes."

Amused, Kane moved over and leaned over slightly. "How's this?" he asked, staring into her eyes. Then his own widened. "What the hell?" He straightened and stared cautiously at Val, who had let go of Allie. "What did you give her?"

"Wait, you gave her something?" Tarzy asked, feeling inadequate.

"Zilofren and Foloxi."

None of them knew what they were. "I didn't know we had those," Tarzy said with embarrassment. Then she said to Kara, "Can I give you a hug without hurting you?"

"I'm up for anything right now," Kara said, and her Valkyries laughed and came forward, whispering their endearments to her that mostly said the same thing: *"You're gonna be fine and don't overdo, which we know you will unless we stop you."*



BROWN EYES BROWN EYES?

As Kanira stepped back, the last to say the same spiel, a beeping went off on the communications panel across the room.

"Oh shit," Kara said. "I was supposed to talk to that SG man, right? Bring me the portable." Tarzy knew what she meant so she grabbed the twelve-inch tablet and handed it over. Kara tapped the screen.

Colonel Jack O'Neill's handsome face appeared on the screen. Kara giggled, completely unlike her. "Wow. Pretty brown eyes. Whatcha want, brown eyes?"



And in the background on the other ship, Daniel, Jason, Sam could be heard laughing.

Jack looked over his shoulder with a scowl, then turned back to Kara and gave her one of his patented crooked grins. "I see you're on some good drugs."

"Oh hell yeah," Kara said. "About damn time. Val fixed me up." She turned the tablet toward Val, who smiled without showing teeth and said, "Hello, I'm the AI." Then Kara turned the tablet back to her. "So what's your business, brown eyes?"

"Colonel, Jack, or O'Neill, if you don't mind," Jack said, still with his disarming smile though he gave her a look that said, *play nice with the crazy person*.

Kara sighed. "Loosen up, O'Neill. State your business."

"You ready to meet our main leadership and answer some questions?"

"Sure. Leadership, eh? In other words, they're the boys with the funding, right?"

"Yeah," Jack said, huffing out a sour laugh. "Listen, I'm calling to tell you that we have to arrive together. I suggest you beam over here to the An Croi, then we beam down to the meeting room."

She nodded. "Agreed."

"And you can only bring one person."

"Not a problem," Kara said, nodding, then waved at her Valkyries when they protested. "I'll have to figure out what to wear to an event like this. Who precisely will be attending?"

"Command level military in charge of the stargate program on Earth as well as myself, my team, and General Hammond. The purpose is to get as much information from you as we can about your knowledge of the Goa'uld and that region of space."

Kara laughed through her nose. "You want Kaffa with that?"

Her Valkyries cracked up. Val smiled. Kane covered his mouth. Jack said with a smirk, "Why not. ALTA will contact Val in an hour."

"Deal." They disconnected at the same time.

"I think he's just met his match," Tarzy said drolly.

Kara snorted. "Okay. So, my lovely Valkyries. What the fuck am I supposed to wear?"

"We've got it covered," Lynessa said. "We made your uniform in the last two days. I think our hands have bruises." She held up her hands to show Kara.

"Needle marks," Zee said, doing the same.

"Calluses and blisters," said Dusti, following their lead.

"How the hell does sewing leather cause all that?" Kara asked, shocked. "And why would you do such a thing?" Her Valkyries looked at her strangely, as if she'd grown another head. "What?"

"Um, you'll see," Tarzy said, ignoring her question, and looked at Lynessa. "Go fetch it. She's not leaving this infirmary except for the state visit. Then she comes back."

"Okay, but—" Lynessa began.

"Stay," Val said, raising a hand. The entire kitchen table and all of its contents and boxes, bands, tools, appeared into the center of the infirmary's open center space.

Everyone just stared, open-mouthed.

Except Kara, who just smiled knowingly. "Well done. Now, show me what you got, guys."



UNIFORM УНИФОРМ

Kara wanted to tell her Valkyries that the belt wasn't her thing, but she was too exhausted after getting dressed. Besides, her breath was still robbed from her over the stunning material and design. They had only time enough for one and they'd wisely chosen the covert one, the silvery. The blades stood out, given that



they were a dark blue steel. The outfit was worth wearing for those that Ahti had made. Lynessa adjusted the wings attachment on the front of the low-hung belt that was more a part of the uniform than an accessory. Tarzy was behind her, fixing the blade sheaths.

"There," she said, admiring how the blades sat, ready to be pulled free. "Try it."

She paused and looked at each of her Valkyries. Then to Lynessa, said, "It's the most beautiful thing I'll ever wear. *Thank you.*" Lynessa beamed, suffused with happiness so much so that her smile looked ready to break her face. It was almost manic, Kara thought. Time to break that up.

"Step back," she ordered. After Ahti moved out of the way, Kara used her right hand to withdraw the blade in a whipping motion. And the force of it also used the muscles of her left side, muscles that were currently in severe shock thanks to the stabbing. She grimaced and gripped the left side of her waist in a death lock as she froze. "I need to do some training in the armory track."

"You have to heal first, Kara," Tarzy said.

Kara let out a frustrated sigh. "Pain in the ass."

Tarzy looked smug. "Someone has to be." Kara snorted, then moved in slow motion to get used to the weight of both knives in her hands at the same time. That was just one of the many muscle memories she had to make and saw a lot of exercises in her future.

"Um, there's something else, too," Lynessa said, clearing her throat. "A little surprise."

"Huh?" All nodded. "Where?"

"Run your fingers along the front and inside," Ahti said, gesturing at Kara's high collar.

Kara's eyes widened before she even touched her collar. "You didn't." They smiled as one. She gasped and gently ran her fingertips along the left side and found the pocket inside. She checked the right side and found another pocket. "Oh," she said, her mouth dropping open. Her shuriken were neatly housed on each side. She looked at the nicks and Band-Aids on a few of the women's hands. "Oh, you didn't."

"We did," Chayna smiled proudly, her eyes glistening.

"This is . . ." Kara swallowed. Unable to finish, she just nodded solemnly. "Amazing. Perfect. You are the best, most ingenious, talented . . ." She suddenly swallowed against tears that cut off her words. She took the moment and examined the rest of her outfit. She wore her own boots and jeans, but those items weren't necessary for now. She moved her hands slowly and touched the blade handles at the back of her belt.

They were made of simple composite for the handles and a type of steel much like Damascus. The pattern in the steel complimented the brocade of Kara's suede tunic jacket, which was stunning by itself as she ran a hand over its surface. The material shone like silk but hung like suede.

It was called Calbraisian Silk Suede, and it was expensive. She didn't know how Lynessa managed it in so short a time, nor in the deep wine color. The stitching was tiny and intricate. No wonder they had blisters and pin pricks.

"Perfect," Lynessa said, sighing happily. "You look perfect."

Kara turned away from her, rolled her eyes, and cleared her throat. "I don't think so," she said, turning back to face Lynessa. "But thank you." She cleared her throat again and grabbed the cup of water by the bed. She began to sip, then paused when she noticed that Zee and Dusti weren't around. "Where's Zee and Dusti?"

"Forgot something," intoned Chayna and Kanira, rolling their eyes at each other.

"What?" Kara asked, adjusting the belt. She whispered to Val, who stood behind her—because Kara had gotten a dizzy spell of about 2.3 seconds—just in case something should happen, "I hate belts."

"Then why wear it?" Val whispered back.

"Because of Ahti's blades. And because they made it and it goes with the uniform." Raising her voice to normal, she said, "The minute I'm better, I'm gonna have to set up several sessions in the test fire room so I can get the motions locked into muscle memory."

Upon saying that, her Valkyries looked at each other and beamed. Kara had accepted the uniform.

The moment was interrupted when Zee and Dusti came running into the infirmary, their eyes wide. Zee pointed behind her, both of them tried to speak but they couldn't seem to find the words.

"What?" Kara said sharply to knock them out of their shock at whatever it was that set them off.

It worked.

"Back there, in . . . in . . ." Zee began.

"In the corridor that goes . . . goes . . ." Dusti said.

"To your . . . to the . . . bridge." Zee's voice cracked at the last word.

"We heard a voice," Dusti said in a rushed high tone.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Kara said, shading her eyes.

"We're not kidding!" Zee said, panicked that Kara wouldn't believe them.

"No, no, that's not what I meant," Kara said, waving away at them. "I meant," she sighed heavily. "I meant to tell you guys." Another deep sigh. She looked at the two women. "You Awake?"

Zee pointed at her and jumped up and down. "That's it! That's what we . . . oh my goddesses, you heard it too!"

"What is it?" Dusti asked. And Saliyah, Raisa, and the others. The Valkyries gathered around.

At that moment, Kane walked in, reading a tablet, and came to an abrupt halt. "Uhm. This a bad time?"

"No, you're just in time, actually. Girls, tell him what you saw. And Kane, you didn't hear me call them girls."

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked.

She nodded at him then waved at Dusti and Zee, who told him what they'd heard.

He stared at them, eyes widening slightly before he uttered a silent, "Oh." Then aloud said, "Not my imagination then. I was starting to feel a bit paranoid. Thought it was some sort of ritual teasing."

Kara burst out half a laugh before grimacing and grabbing her side. "Shit. Valkyries, have you been teasing him?"

"Only a little," said Ahti, clearly pleased about it. "He's our honorary Valkyrie. So, he needs . . . introductions."

Kane rolled his eyes. "Come at me, ladies. I can handle anything."

"Honorary?" Kara asked. She rolled her eyes and gave him a sideways look. "Handle anything? You have no idea how deep in the shit you are. If they've accepted you, be prepared to endure a lot of it. Ahti started it and Saliyah and Kanira joined in and each one the rest of you have gotten your . . . what's the phrase?"

"Initiation?" Tarzy asked, grinning.

Kara eyed her, then the others, and finally Kane. Her mouth dropped open a little. "Just do me a favor," she sighed. "Don't hold your *initiations* in the kitchen."

"Huh?" Kane asked, eyes wide. "Uh, we're not . . ." he began, waving between himself and the women. "We're not . . ."

"Oh no, we are *not*," Raisa said, shaking her head.



"Unfortunately," Lynessa said with a smirk.

Kara waved at her in a teasing dismissal just as Val injected her in the side of her arm. "Hey!" she scowled. "I said no pain meds on this trip."

"It is to keep the pain low," Val said without flinching. "Do not yell at me for doing my job."

"One day I'll ask what that is," Kara snapped, then closed her eyes and sighed, holding up a hand of surrender. "Sorry, Val."

"You will be okay in about thirty seconds."

"Wonderful," Kara said, her voice devoid of enthusiasm. "Now, where the hell was I? Oh right. Um, we have . . . what did you call it?" she asked Val.

"An echo," Val said. "Random conveyance of a residual electrical impulse."

"Ghost," Kane said.

"No," Val said. "Random . . ." She paused, tilted her head, blinked her eyes slowly, like a cat. "ALTA has contacted me. She says it's time."

"Time?" Kara asked. "Oh, oh, time. Right. Everybody got your shit? Time to go."

Kane started to step back but to his surprise, he was swept up in ALTA's transport beam along with the Valkyries and their leader.





In the center of the bridge of the An Croi was a large empty area. Kara and company appeared between Daniel's forward console and Jack's command seat and his flanking navigators, Al and Connor. Behind them were Sam, Teal'c, Jason, and Alex, and their assigned consoles and partitions.

When they appeared, Sam broke into a huge smile as she headed for them, holding out her hand, and said, "Welcome to the An Croi."

Kara smiled and nodded back, grasping Sam's forearm in greeting. "Thanks, Sam. Wow. Just as pretty as mine but more spacious." When she saw Sam's brows knot slightly, she said, "No, you're not imagining it. My voice is light because I'm on good drugs right now." She patted the left side of her belt, and just then noticed Kane and did a double take.

She wasn't the only one to notice. Jason walked up next to Sam and said, "Good gods, Sam. Look at the beauty of a man. Holy shit."

"I see him, and wow. And the way he's sort of inching closer to Kara, sounds to me like he's taken."

"Yeah," Jason sighed. "So am I. But still. Beautiful."

Jack came forward and offered his arm to Kara. "Welcome to the An Croi. Happy to . . ." He paused, staring at Kane at the same time that Kara did her double take. "What's he doing here?"

"I've been wondering," Kane said drily.

"ALTA," Jack snapped. "Appear."

Just as with Val, a sparkling light appeared a second before a woman materialized a few feet from Jack. ALTA was blonde and silver. Almost the



opposite of Val, black-haired and carbon. Both fair-skinned, but ALTA's hair was long, although held tightly into an elaborately braided ponytail. Like Val, she wore a bodysuit, but it was silver with aqua neon lighting that ran over the surface of her skin and suit like an active energy pulse as if reminding the viewer she wasn't human. A holographic UI appeared over her face somehow giving the effect of simulating thought.

"Colonel."

"Why's he here?"

"He is . . . what is the Tau'ri phrase . . . a safety valve."

Both Jack and Kara snorted at the same time, but Sam burst out in short laughter.

"That's perfect," she said, pointing at Kara. "Disarmament."

"Hmm," Kara said. "Disarming is accurate. Safety valve?"

"ALTA, explain that please," Jack asked.

"Um, before you do," Kara said. "Is ALTA a name or an acronym?"

"Both," ALTA said, smiling at Kara as if she were an average student who'd come up with an enlightened answer. "ALTA. Artificial Lifeform Transphasia Array."

"She runs the ship," Jack said drolly. "I just sit in that chair, everyone else pushes buttons." Daniel snorted and Jack grinned at him. Back to ALTA, he said, "Sorry. Go ahead."

Deadpan, ALTA said, "Humans are so amusing." That elicited giggles from the Valkyries. "Safety valve. His appearance will distract, no matter what the sexual orientation of the representatives from the Pentagon and the SGC. He will diffuse any tension, which will automatically kick into gear when Kara arrives. The reason for this assumption is the fact of her height. It is rare for a woman to reach six feet, never mind six foot three."

The Valkyries were nodding. Kara just sighed. "Whatever. Can we go, before my meds wear off and I begin to howl at the moon and rip throats out with my teeth?" She garnered confused looks. "Lose my shit because of the pain. Hello? How do you guys handle getting stabbed and three broken ribs?"

"Ow," Connor said, wincing. "About the same, Captain."

"Indeed," Teal'c said, coming forward to clasp forearms with Kara. "Well met, Kara Easteman."

"Well met, Master Teal'c. How've you been holding up, dealing with this lot?" she teased.

Teal'c looked around the bridge at every one of his teammates, and his eyes fell on Jack. "It is a struggle, but I maintain my professionalism at all times."

Jack made a rude noise. "Well done, T. Now, ALTA, patch me through to Hammond's office please." Behind Jack's right ear sat a small copper-colored disc with a thin tech light around its edge. It blinked once and Jack told Hammond they were ready. Hammond told them were to beam down. "Right. On our way, sir." He looked up at Kara. "You and the distraction are the only ones allowed down." Jack gave the disappointed Valkyries a look. "Trust me. You're not missing anything. Later on, you can always sneak down to the mall and go shopping or order food or something. We do that all the time when we're not home."

"Negative," ALTA said, appearing again. "Until you are inoculated, you are advised not to present your alien DNA and accompanying bacterium in another alien environment. Too many have died out of ignorance by not knowing to quarantine or vaccinate if quarantine is out of the question."

"In that case, um . . ." Kara began.

"Not to worry," ALTA said. "Your pain medication contained inoculants. I suggest secondary protection."

"She's not wearing a hazmat," Jack said. He gestured at himself and the others. "Besides, we're fine."

"The Generals are not," ALTA said. "You were also inoculated, if you will remember?"

Jack winced. "Yeah. Yeah, she's right. Okay. Um. Mask."

"If I may?" Val asked, appearing as her semi-transparent avatar.

"You let her onboard?" Jack asked ALTA.

"Of course. We passed our security measures."

"Of course you did," Sam said.

"Val, what is it?" Kara asked, rubbing the spot between her brows.

"Headache?" Val asked crisply.

"Inevitably," Kara said, annoyed. "What?"

"You were inoculated. You do not require secondary protection unless you plan on having sex with every participant at the meeting."

Mouths dropped open. All except Kara's, who just giggled. "Not today."

Kane groaned. "I so need to get laid."

Sam and Jason groaned.

"Alright, let's go. Enough fuckin' around," Jack said.

Kara nodded. "Kane's not wrong though." She turned to her crew. "Back soon. Don't do anything weird."

"Define weird," Tarzy asked.

Kara opened her mouth to respond but then got an idea. She tilted her head and tried to catch it before it got away, raising a hand with her index finger held up in a clear signal that meant, "Hang on a sec."

"What?" Jack asked.

"What sort of strategy is best here when facing men like these?" she asked him. "What I mean is, what's the best way to piss them off and put them on the wrong footing?"

"I like this woman," Sam said, folding her arms.

Kara shot her a smile of appreciation but returned a raised brow to Jack. "Surely they have an agenda? What is it? Is it that they want to exploit someone's resources or just go to war with everything that moves or . . .?"

Daniel snorted. "There's no appreciable difference."

Jack turned to him. "That's hardly helpful. Put your serious cap on."

Daniel simply gestured toward Kara. "You have the floor."

"So is it best to show up in all honesty? Or act as if I'm an idiot female without a brain in her head?" Kara asked. "The point, my friends, is expectation. What do they expect?"

Jack cocked a brow at Sam. "Carter? You have the floor."

"Oh, I wish," Sam muttered.

THE SEVEN LAYER DIPSHITS

The moment they dematerialized at the other end of the conference table, the men from the Pentagon stopped what they had been saying and just stared at Kara. Kara turned enough to hide her face, showing Jack that she was both disgusted and resigned. Jack, on the other hand, was thinking of Lucy Lawless, aka *Xena Warrior Princess*, because the actress was six foot even.

General Vidrine unfroze first and beckoned her to come to their end of the long oak conference table. "Let's get acquainted, shall we?"

Kara thought of several comebacks and held them back as she strode around the table in her new uniform—and its Karambit knives neatly sitting flushed with her belt, hidden in their sheathes. Plus she had her shuriken blades in their pocket inside the left collar. The men in uniform were clustered at the other end of the long table and as she slowed down, she looked over her shoulder at Jack and the others with a puzzled frown.

She thumbed at the generals as she said to Jack, "Do they think I'm going to eat them?" Sam coughed and covered her grinning mouth. Jack didn't bother covering the smirk. Kara blew a soft raspberry. "Not before afternoon tea."

"You're probably fine," he said.

She turned back to the men just as one of them, a man in a mustache and about six feet tall, walked up and held out his hand. "Davis. Pentagon Liaison. I couldn't prepare anything for the generals, so we have nothing to guide us on a greeting protocol. Will a regular handshake do?"

She smiled and shook his hand firmly. "Well met, General Davis. Captain Kara Easteman."

"This is our agency director, General Vidrine and his aides, General Talbot, Samuels, and Westmore. Plus you know General Hammond, leader of Stargate Command."

She frowned slightly when Vidrine didn't move out of Hammond's way so the Base Commander of the SGC walked around him and held out his hand. She shook it warmly. "General Hammond, how nice to meet you."

"And you. SG-1 paints a colorful picture."

Jack winced as Hammond gave him a startled look. Kara smiled broadly and glanced over her shoulder. "I'm gonna assume I just used that . . . phrase . . . inaccurately?" She turned back to the General. "Apologies. No insult was meant or intended."

"Good assumption. Well met, Captain Easteman."

Her smile broadened into genuine affection. "You've just earned a tour, General. Thank you for remembering."

"You're a captain in what military?" Vidrine asked as they shook hands.

"My own. I own and fly the Valkyrie," she said without modesty.

"What Air Force equivalent do you work for?" Vidrine asked more slowly.

Kara blinked at him. "Oh, you think the title must have the backing of a government. Interesting. "I do not claim allegiance to any planet, culture, or government. I'm captain of the Valkyrie, and my accreditation comes from her. She's about two million years old. Would you like to meet her?"

In Kara's ear, an earbud buzzed and Val's voice said, "*I am not coming down to visit a bunch of---*"

"That would be interesting," Vidrine said. "Another time maybe."

"Understood," Kara said, turning. She touch her earbud as if contacting the AI—it wasn't necessary. "I'm sorry, Val. No visits today. Unless they attack me, then you have my permission." She caught the scowls on the Generals' faces and added, "I'm kidding, gentlemen." She turned away and pressed her lips together in pain and leaned a fist on the table as a type of walking assistant as she returned to SG-1.

"You're injured," Hammond said, frowning in concern.

"I am," she said, giving Jack a wan smile as she took the center seat. "Bitch threw a knife. I threw mine. She got me in the liver and rib, and I got her in the forehead. Fair Trade."

"Who would that be, madam?" Vidrine asked.

Jack interrupted. "I sent you a cursory report, sir."

"Ah," Vidrine said. "Yes. Isis. The system lord who had been presumed dead. How was that presumption made again?"

"Her name was on the canopic jar that had supposedly sealed her in," Daniel informed him politely. "Don't have a clue who it really was."

Kara winced. "My bad. I haven't had time to fill you in. She said it was her Lohtar, also a Goa'uld, who took her place."

"Lohtar?" Vidrine asked.

"The term means *utmost personal slave*."

"So one Goa'uld is dead," Talbot said. His tone was far from friendly.

"Yes."

"You were hurt. How exactly can you protect yourself?" Talbot asked.

Davis and Hammond almost winced but their control masked it.

Sam didn't mask her wince. She followed it by closing her eyes to hide the eyeroll. Then she opened them again and looked at Kara. It was a silent plea for patience with the sexist jerks.

Daniel sighed. He almost spoke for Kara and stopped himself. Jack gave him a knowing grin. It said, "Well done. Almost fucked up."

"You must've missed the part where I said I killed the bitch," Kara said. She carefully reached into her collar and pulled out one of her double-ended shuriken from its hidden pocket. "With this. My standard weapon. I have guns, but I prefer these along with my knives. Better accuracy."

Jack refrained from smiling but it was in his eyes. "Teal'c saw her use one."

"Indeed. She is a most competent warrior. I assure you that she can take of herself."

"Not enough to get out of the way," Talbot snapped.

Daniel opened his mouth to say something, his face a mask of fury, but Jack laid a hand on his arm and shook his head. "Pick your moment," he mouthed.

Hammond said, "General Talbot, in what way are your comments relevant?"

Vidrine looked at Talbot. That was all. The general scowled back but said nothing.

Kara, meanwhile, sat fuming. She wanted to make a demonstration but wasn't sure her broken ribs and knife wound would let her. The pain would be worth it because it would make a hell of a statement, freak everyone out, and just plain amuse her to no end.

But. Restraint was called for. Mostly because she wasn't sure of her aim despite the pain. "Why would I show up in a place where the risks are high and the payoff nonexistent and arrive unarmed? Do you do that? I doubt. So I have my blades and knives." She stood and turned to show the sheathes at the back of her belt.

"You were not supposed to be armed," said Samuels.

"Oy," Jack muttered.

"Friend of yours?" Kara asked him.

"No," he said immediately.

She nodded. "Noted. Excuse me for a moment. Stand back please." She looked over her shoulder at Kane, then Jack, as the two closest. They took two steps back.

"Don't make a mess," Jack told her.

"What do you think you're doing?" Vidrine asked.

"Disarming," she said, and slowly removed her Karambit knives, one in each hand, spun them rapidly a few times before gripping firmly and stabbing them into the table, forming a V with the angles they ended up in. "There. Now you're safe."

The other Generals began to protest, one of them calling her a bitch and demanding she leave. Four SF (security force guards) came in and pulled their sidearms and pointed them at Kara's heart and head.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Jack said, moving to stand in front of her until she glared at him in partial amusement.

"If they're gonna shoot, you're not getting in the way," she said, holding up a hand to stop his progress. "Back off, Colonel," she added under her breath. "It's okay. I know what I'm doing."

"And what do you think you're doing?" Vidrine asked.

"Teaching. Bribes are a legal form of barter in the Tarjeel. That's the name of the quadrant of this galaxy. Bribes are not a crime."

"They are here," Vidrine said.

"You know that's not true," Kara said. "You would like it to be, but it isn't. So let's talk payment. Payment for my damage to your table. That's called bartering."

Vidrine gestured at the knives in the table. "You could have killed someone, injured as you are," he said in a tone was intended as a scold.

"Nonsense," Kara said. "I was aiming at the table." Each word was enunciated. "Injured or not, I know my knives. I told these two to move away. That's called being careful." She eased herself into the chair. "You insulted me. I gave up my knives temporarily as a compromise and I didn't have to do that. My only other response, frankly, was to wave goodbye and leave."

She leaned back and eyed the closest SF. "I intend no harm to your superiors, sir. Extend the same courtesy." The SF nodded and turned away. Kara frowned at Jack. "Is he mute?"

"No," Jack said. "Protocol. SFs on duty are not to express their own opinions."

"Really?" Kara said, frowning and eyeing the generals. "Sounds like slavery to me."

"They're members of the Air Force," Talbot snapped. "Trained and paid."

Kara rolled her eyes at him. "Whatever. General Hammond, General Vidrine. Ask your questions. But first, may I show you something in laser pistols?"

"And where are they?" asked Samuels. "Tucked in a pocket in your outfit there?"

"That's out of line, Samuels," Jack said.

"General," Samuels said smugly.

"I beg your pardon, *General*/Samuels."

"In my armory," she said. "But Val can beam them down to this table. They are stored in small weapons containers."

"Proceed," Hammond said after a glance from Vidrine.

"Val, beam down . . ." She pursed her lips. "Crates J-14 to J-29."

"Acknowledged."

Black crates the size of lunch boxes were beamed down to the table, stacked in rows, numbering fifteen.

"Inspect and ask your questions about my end of the galaxy," she said, not getting up.

They did. For hours.

CHAPTER FIVE: INVITE

After filling in the Valkyries on what had happened, Tarzy asked, "Is there a consequence for what you did? From what I hear, they're very rigid patriarchal types. Like the Goa'uld."

Kara closed her eyes and snorted. "Don't say that around Colonel O'Neill, Tarzy. Not unless you wanna earn one of those patented glares. At least, that's what I'm assuming. I haven't had that glare yet myself."

"Then you're lucky," Kane said, leaning against the doorway, arms folded. He then said, "Time for me to fly." He then abruptly turned and left down the hallway.

Kara frowned and opened her eyes. She turned and stared at the doorway. She just as abruptly scowled and grew angry. "What the fuck is wrong with him?"

Damn near every Valkyrie rolled their eyes. When Kara saw it, her scowl lightened to a knot between the brows. "What? Am I that clueless about him?"

"You're being stubborn, Kara," said Nadia from the doorway.

"Oh, I think I got . . ." Lynessa began. "Um, right. Something else to do elsewhere." She quickly made her way out the door.

"Yep, me too," Chayna said. And silently, Dusti, Saliyah, Ahti, Zee, Kanira, and Zee followed her out the door.

Nadia walked in and grabbed a chair and set it down next to the bed. She crossed her legs and folded her hands on her knee. "How's the pain?"

"Barely there," Kara said warily. "Why? You thinking of adding to it?"

"I should . . ." she said drolly. "But I won't."

Kara let out an exasperation huff of breath. "Nadia, I don't know the man. He's gorgeous and probably worth a tumble but . . ."

"That's one way to get to know him. There are others. But you're too damn stubborn to open up. I know why. I get it." Nadia then contradicted herself by shaking her head. "No, I don't get it. I get the trauma. I get the fear of commitment because you can't trust yet. He knows. He's been patient. But he's realized that it's just not the right time and place. So he may as well be useful somewhere. Here, he doesn't have a job. He needs to find one."

Kara lifted her arm and let it fall back down. "We have a backlog. We'll earn money, good money, and he'll get a cut. The girls . . . shit . . . the Valkyries have claimed him. He can't leave. Well, he can but they won't let him. They'll talk him out of it."

"Could be he wants to be around other men. It's tough being around a bunch of strong women. He's still got the Jaffa training in him and probably always will. But he's in love with you already."

Kara eyed her. "That's a hell of a thing to say, Nadia. It smells of blackmail."

"It smells like you're in denial."

"I am not. I don't have time. I don't wanna risk . . . Uhhhgggh." She blew a raspberry of exasperation, then lay back and muttered, "Whatever," as she closed her eyes.

Nadia sighed and got up. She reached over and tugged one of Kara's earlobes and let go. "Pain in the ass."

Kara didn't open her eyes. A tiny, tiny twitch of the corners of her mouth made Nadia nod in satisfaction. She walked off. "Sleep well, my dear."

"In whose universe?" Kara called after her, again without opening her eyes. She lay there quietly, then heard someone come close and take up the chair. She cracked an eye open. It was Val. "Oh," she said, relieved. "Hello you."

"Hello you," Val smiled. She held up a book.

"I love you," Kara said.

"I know," Val said and she began to read aloud.

It began to lull Kara to sleep until Val paused mid-sentence. "Kara, Jack is calling."

"Pppphh," she said, blowing another raspberry. She started to speak, paused, and scowled. "You put just a little too much in that shot, Missy."

"Guilty," Val said. "You need to stop worrying. So, I made sure."

"Bitch."

"I know," Val said, grinning.

"Grab the portable, wouldja, and hand it over?" Val did so, then left the infirmary.

"I will be back," she called back in a singsong.

"I know," Kara singsonged back. She then tapped the screen and Colonel Jack O'Neill's image came on, from chest to face. He wasn't wearing his uniform. Just a shirt. Green with crisscrossing black stripes. It was a nice pattern, she thought. "Hi, Jack. Nice shirt. What's up?"

"Hello, Kara. Yeah, thanks. Daniel got it for me for my birthday."

"Birthday huh? We call it Life Day."

"Yeah?" he asked, surprised. "Different."

"Backatcha."

He grinned. "That's another line you stole."

"I liked it."

"Listen, we gotta mission to hunt the assassin. Would you like to join us?"

She let out a groan. "I'd love to but I'm not going into battle like I am. I have to rest for at least a week. At the very least."

"Ribbs take a while," he agreed. "But who said anything about battle?"

"C'mon, Jack. It's the assassin. My intuition says it's gonna get bloody and my intuition is never wrong. So you can't go in half-ass, you know?"

He considered her. "Yeah, s'pose you're right." He sighed tiredly and ran a hand through his hair.

"You getting too old for this shit, Jack?" she asked kindly.

"Yeah, I think so." He frowned a little in confusion as he looked at her. "How old are you?"

"Um, thirty-six. On Stonevale. My quadrant of the galaxy. And going by the math, using the info Val told me, I'd say that equals being forty-one on Earth."

"Huh. I figured. But you act a lot older."

She nodded. "We have a saying at *my* end of the galaxy. 'My soul is older than my body.'"

He nodded back. "We have one too. It's shorter. 'You have an old soul.'"

"Oooh, I like that better. Consider it stolen and spread to my end of the galaxy. So, how do you wanna play this? I'm injured. I'm of no use. My Valkyries are fine, but they don't go where I don't go."

"Fair enough. I was just . . ." He paused. "We'll stretch it out. Besides, we have people to meet and axes to grind. So it should give you and your crew enough time to join us."

"Where would that be? Please don't say Bubastis."

"Bubastis, yes, but first, Bel'a'lat."

"Where?"

"A base where our allies hang out and set up shop."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"No," he says, grinning his head off. "I owe you a steak dinner."

"Yeah? Why?"

"For that scene in the conference room. Made my decade."

She grinned. "Nice. Listen, I'll give you my decision tomorrow, but I doubt I'll change my mind."

"Tomorrow then," he nodded. Again, they disconnected at the same time.

Kara sighed and set down the tablet. Assassin. Since Ares and Isis were dead, that left someone new as the culprit. So finding was something Kara was good at. She didn't mind the research end of hunting so what the hell. She could do that easily. Val had the power to reach all kinds of people, specifically people who would know about assassins. And if she was going to meet Jack at Bel'a'lat, then she'd better arrive prepared.

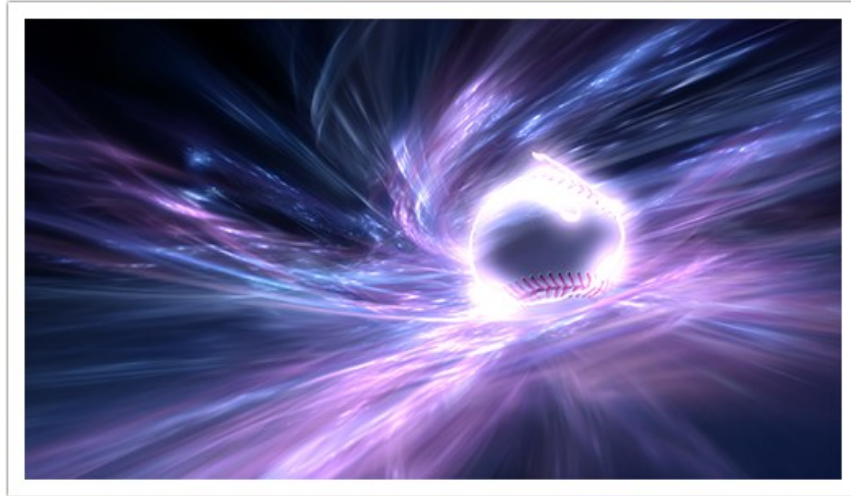
Val appeared and sat back down, retrieving the book from the nearby table. "Time to sleep, Kara. I will read."

Kara nodded. "Did you catch Kane before he left?" She then realized they were still in space. "Oh right. Never mind. How the hell is he gonna fly away if there's no away outside?"

"Shh. Sleep."

"Oh. You." But Kara closed her eyes again, her mind busy making contact lists.

PART 3: CURVEBALL



CHAPTER 1: MORNING REQUEST

It was early on the Valkyrie, too early for even Kanira, who rose like clockwork at 4 a.m. every morning and was in the kitchen by 4:30. But Kara had had another childhood nightmare and instead of making Kaffa in the kitchen, she used the mini version in her apartment quarters. Dressed in just a gray tank top t-shirt and black pajama bottoms, which hung low to expose the wrap-around dressing for her knife wound. It was in this ensemble in which she appeared onscreen when Jack O'Neill pinged her ship and Val had routed it to her quarters.

Kara sat down gingerly at her do-everything dining-kitchen table, sipping at the hot coffee beverage, Kaffa, and said, "Holoscreen, Val."

"Acknowledged," came the reply. The avatar version of Val was understandably nowhere to be seen at 3:23 a.m. Even computers needed downtime. But more than that, it was strategic. Kara was in a bad mood.

"Acknowledged," Kara mimicked. "You need to work on another word for 'I understand and will comply.'"

"What would you suggest?" came Val's reply over the monitor screen—also strategic. A voice in stereo inside the entire apartment might end up with Kara sending the avatar Val into an airlock. For safety.

"How about, *'Bitch, get up and do it yourself.'*?"

"No, Captain. That is inappropriate for an entity such as I. But feel free to entertain this action on your own."

Kara snorted and tapped the holographic screen in front of her. Jack appeared, partially transparent. Kara tapped another onscreen button and the image solidified.

"Hello Jack." He grinned just as Kara caught sight of her messy hair in the reflection from the holographic monitor. She smirked back. "Are you aware of the time difference in my . . . part of the galaxy? What's another phrase for that, in Tau'ri English?"

"Neighborhood?" he offered.

"What is that?" she asked.

"A grid square of a town or city, containing a typical number of thirty homes and/or businesses. Size depends on the government, actually. Some places, it's a hundred or a thousand homes."

She tilted her head, considering the term and tested it. "Neighborhood. Sounds odd, but then it would."

"What's your term in your neck of the woods?" Jack asked, smirking when Kara's brows knotted at the use of the colloquialism.

She then smiled. "Sarcasm. I like it. Answer is, in English or Chulakian?"

"English. And some day, I'd like to know how you learned English."

"That isn't difficult, Colonel Jack O'Neill."

He picked up on a tiny sliver of accent. "It is from my . . . part of the galaxy." He grinned.

"Aww, are you frustrated that you're just a little . . ." She considered her words. It was too early to be offensive. "Young?"

"Behind the times? Behind the pack? Early in evolutionary standards?" Jack offered.

In the background, Kara heard Daniel's voice calling out so she'd hear him. "The term he's looking for is troglodyte."

"Trog . . . what?" Kara asked, a laugh in her throat.

"Troglodyte," Jack said, and threw a scowl over his shoulder. "Hey, peanut gallery gets to shut the hell up while I'm on the phone."

Kara snorted, having understood only part of that sentence. "Now that the pleasantries have been covered, what do you want at this horrible hour of the morning?"

"Just calling to see how you're doing."

"Aww," she said. "That's so sweet. And I don't believe you for a second. Daniel would do that. You're more business-first."

He winced. "Ya got me."

"I don't want you. More to the point, I don't want to do whatever it is you called to ask," she clarified, then stuck the Kaffa mug to her lips and just inhaled the fragrance for ten seconds before downing most of the contents. The heat warmed her. And she needed to prep a new cup. "Keep talking," she said in a

partial monotone. "I gotta make another cup of Kaffa. The monitor will turn with me, and you'll hear me just fine and I'll hear you just fine, even if I'm across the room, which I will be."

She got up and went to the alcove that kept her mini kitchen set up and while she couldn't see him, Jack's eyebrows rose as he caught sight of her pajama bottoms, whose waistband had slid down over the top edge of her red panties.

"You're not all that modest, are you?" he asked, clear amusement in his voice.

"As opposed to what?" she asked, knowing damn well what.

"Sometimes people keep to formal appearances around those they aren't . . ." He cleared his throat. She wasn't looking at him, busy with making a new cup of Kaffa, but his tone made her smile.

"Sleeping with?" she asked. "Related to?"

"Both," he said with a wistful tone.

Kara snorted again. "Appearances are for people who doubt themselves," she said, the words sounding like an oft-repeated meme.

"Ah," he said, looking around the apartment now that the monitor had gone to panoramic to accommodate the viewer. "I've lived my life by military controls. Giving up 'appearances' is hard to do."

As she returned, she said, "Want me to get dressed?"

"Nah, I wouldn't dream," he said, giving her a teasing smile.

She smirked. "Getting stiff, Jack?"

In the background, she heard two men's startled laughter.

Jack's smile dropped to a return smirk. "I'm a man."

"Not what I asked," she said, partially in singsong.

"I'm slightly there," he said, referring to the 'stiff' remark.

"Ah," she said, as if understanding. She found she liked their banter. He was very easy to get along with. "You're pan, then. Given you're bonded to two men, I would not have called that."

"Pan?" he asked, amused. "We call it Bi. Short for bisexual. Since we're at the 'what sign are you' portion of this relationship . . . Um, never mind."

"Too personal?" she asked, very amused. He shrugged. "Core," she said. "Opposite gender attraction."

"Core," he repeated, nodding. "I like it. What's same gender attraction?"

"Sync," she said simply. He asked her to spell it and she complied instantly. "What's it called where you are?"

"Gay," he said, just as simply.

Kara burst out laughing and it took her more than a minute to recover. "So how's life at your end of the galaxy? For example, where are you and what time is it?"

"In reverse order, 7:20 a.m., SGC, and it's same shit, different day territory."

She tilted her head, discerning how tired he looked. It wasn't so much in his face as in his eyes. He looked almost burnt out. "Why don't you just take the ship with your crew and go independent?"

Jack raised a brow. "Because we're under oath and government contract."

"Ah. Right." She snorted. "That whole loyalty to a country thing. I've never had that. I trust people, not governments. So, how about when your contract is up? You'd make a lot of money smuggling and ferrying. You work for yourself, and you pick your . . . customers. No government interference." She frowned, considering. "Well, there are laws in specific territories who claim regions of space, and you have to follow those laws or else. Most are reasonable." Jack only jogged his brows. She knew the idea hadn't landed. "Okay, fair enough. Just know that if you ever change your mind, you'd do well out here."

Jack shook his head, bemused. "Wouldn't I cut in on your business?"

"No," she said simply, shaking her own head. "Although you'd have to leave your quadrant. Yours is . . ." She made a face. "Underpopulated, and Earth doesn't know about the rest of us out here so we can't come down and deal in the open. Pity."

"We're not just underpopulated in my area of the outer part of the galaxy. Consider terms like backend of nowhere, backwater, sticks, out in the woods, boondocks."

"Ooh, I like all those. Can I steal them?"

"There's no patent," he said, grin widening.

"A what?"

"Official claim of ownership."

"Ah. Awesome goddesses. You have such useful turns of phrase on Earth. By the way, why don't you call it Tau'ri?"

"Because that's Chulakian, not English. More specifically, Tau'ri is the Chulakian word for legendary resistance site—well, no, that's just Teal'c calls it. It just means—"

"First World. I know."

"By the way, that's cute. Awesome goddesses. You can also say cool, it's faster."

"I knew you were useful," she quipped. At that, Jack suddenly yawned and it made Kara smile. So when he's tired, it doesn't yet show on his face. She filed it away. "I know that one. Tell me why you called so you can go get some sleep."

Jack grimaced. "Can't."

"Ah," she said. "Shame. What do you need?"

He grinned. "You're a woman after my own heart, Kara Easteman."

In the background, Daniel and Jason together said, "Stop flirting."

Kara started snickering. Jack rolled his eyes, with just a hint of a smile.

"Listen, during this op—"

"Wait, the what?"

"Operation. Mission."

"Got it."

"Sooner or later, we're gonna mix it up with the Goa'uld, the Lucien Alliance, and whomever else we run into during our investigations. It would be a good idea to practice firing on targets while maneuvering together so we don't inadvertently fire on each other. You know, the targets will be asteroids. Not quite harmless, but no one dies."

"Sound," she said, nodding. "Where and when?"

"We're coordinating around gate missions. But I'm thinking in about twelve hours?"

Her eyebrows climbed. "A man who doesn't hesitate. Nice. Done. Send me the data when you're in range."

"Done." He nodded, then his face went flat. "So, you think that lumbering barge can handle maneuvers?"

A slow smile spread over Kara's face. "I'd bond with you if you weren't taken," she teased, obviously not meaning a word. "I like your style, Jack," she went on, meaning these words. "Game accepted. See you there."

They disconnected at the same time. Val appeared by the table in holographic form, partially transparent. She wore what she always wore in human form: a black catsuit with a high neck, long sleeves, and gloves. The only skin showing was her face. Her hair was a black cap in a pixie cut, evincing a gamine appearance. She stood with modest reverence, hands clasped in front of her, waiting to be acknowledged before speaking.

"What?" Kara asked, getting up to rummage in the kitchenette for something to eat but she moved too soon and too easily in muscle memory. She grimaced

and grabbed her side. Up to that point, she had been faking wellness for Jack's benefit. The last time they had spoken, she had told him that she needed time to heal. And she still believed that. But once she'd told her crew what was coming, they had surprised her by overriding her wishes.

The first time always hurt just a little. Even if it was for a good cause, they had pretty much committed mutiny. And part of Kara couldn't stop the doubt, the worry. She didn't want to believe that they'd ever do such a thing for a bad reason. But she held part of her trust in reserve, hoping that string was never pulled. It was an auto-reflex born out of frequent betrayals. She could no more stop doing it than quit breathing.

"We are leaving for Dakara soon," Val finally said when Kara hadn't addressed her.

"Twelve hours is a while, Val. We have plenty of time, and I'll spend mine working on Little Val while the Valkyries are working on their own . . . um . . . projects."

Val slowly blinked in her catlike way. "Sex."

Kara shooed at her. "Go. I'll be up in a bit."

Val vanished without a word.

"I like it. Short and sweet with as few wasted words as possible."

She limped her way into the bathroom and turned on the shower, making a mental note to check the water reserves.

CHAPTER 2: FIRE IN THE HOLE

Kara stood just outside the Little Val, next to the open hatch at the nose, sealing down the last of the hull's vent housings. The manual covers clicked into place under her fingers, a faint echo against the ship's scorched nose. The landing had pushed the down-thrusters past comfort, and while the internal systems were holding steady, she didn't trust them not to grumble later. These weren't true dampeners, not exactly—just pressure-release seals she'd rigged ages ago and never quite got around to replacing properly.



Behind her, boots scraped against dirt as the others clambered down the side ramp in pairs and singles, stretching cramped limbs and teasing each other in low, unfiltered voices.

"I don't know how you can stand all that hair," Zee muttered, clearly scandalized.

Tarzy's answer came with a laugh. "Depends on the guy. This one? I like the hair. And his ass."

Zee groaned, "Ugh," just loud enough for it to be performative.

Ahead of them, Lynessa and Saliyah tried to maintain some semblance of dignity as they led the others toward the edge of the open-air bazaar that had sprung up near the old temple steps. Chayna and Dusti had opted to stay behind on the Valkyrie, citing ship duty, but everyone knew it was for the sake of getting the place to themselves.

Even Nadia had taken Allie with her, ushering the girl toward the market tents with a steady stream of whispered bartering lessons. Allie was bright, curious, and—at the moment—wide-eyed at the sheer noise of commerce. Kara watched the last of them go, the sudden quiet that followed oddly dissonant.

She slung her toolkit under one arm and moved to the ship's nose, where the scorched access panel was still stuck at the corner. She grabbed her torque bar—a wide-circled wrench without a claw—gave the panel a solid smack and waited for it to jump. The latch clicked loose with a groan, and she pried it open the rest of the way, flipping the metal flap backward until it dangled over the dirt. Inside: a mess of towels, sealant cloth, and scorched insulation. The usual.

She was just about to reach in when she caught movement in the corner of her eye.

Someone was walking away—on the ground, heading toward the temple path.

Kane.

He had a duffel slung over one shoulder, his stride steady and unhurried, like a man with no intention of turning around.

"Hey!" she called, dropping the wrench with a dull thunk. "Where are you going? I thought you were sticking with the Valkyries today."

He didn't break stride. "I was sticking around for you."

She frowned. "What?"

He turned his head slightly as he came to a stop but forced himself to turn further so she could see his eyes. "I figured it out. You're not ready. And I need to stop pretending I can wait for something that isn't going to happen in the near future."

Kara's stomach dropped. She stepped forward, the words catching behind her teeth. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "I didn't mean to hurt you. There's just... too much. I didn't want to drag you into it."

"I wouldn't have protested." They let the words hang. When she didn't say anything, he sighed. "I'm heading back to my barracks. Gonna find something else to keep me busy. Work. Trouble. Whatever comes first."

She stood there, one boot in the dirt, one hand still clinging to the edge of the access panel. "Kane—if you ever need anything. You know how to reach me."

He gave her a small nod. "Right back at you."

She tilted her head. "What?"

"It's something Jack O'Neill says," he said with a faint smile. "Useful guy. All kinds of sayings."

"Yeah. He is."

"Take care of yourself, Kara."

"You, too."

And just like that, he was gone.

She wished she could have yanked him back into the ship, then stripped down and held her arms out . . .

“There, see?” she’d say in anger and shame. “They horrify me. They’ll horrify you, and I will do anything to avoid seeing that look on your face.” Over her body are dozens of small, pinched scars made by a black scorpion designed to attack with both venom and pinchers. There were half a dozen over her breasts alone.

Kara shook her head to clear the moment of fantasy and turned back to business. It was one thing she’d learned as a slave to Bastet: how to switch off what you don’t want to think about.

Inside the access hatch, the mess of towels wasn’t alone. Bundled in tight, chaotic coils were the ship’s primary fuel lines—at least six of them, looped like mad spaghetti across the inner compartment.

Kara scowled at the sight. Every time she saw this tangle, she cursed whatever drunk bastard had designed the Little Val’s engine layout. There was no logic to the bundling, no pattern. Just tight coils, knotted valves, and no dedicated release switches. She had to vent the air manually, like bleeding gas from an old Earth truck line.

She braced herself on the edge of the opening and reached in. Uncoiling the first hose, she listened for the hiss of pressure escaping as she cracked the line’s end, capped it, and twisted the valve shut. Then she moved it aside, careful to keep it off the insulation lining. One down. Five to go.

She reached for the next one, uncapping the end and loosening the clamp. As she pulled the line free, she shifted it across her body, holding it with her left hand as she tried to aim the open end away from the ship—and herself.

But in the same instant she began to move, her fingers slipped on the release catch. The valve popped. Too early.

A jet of compressed air hissed out—followed by a blast of heat.



Foomf—

The combustion inside the line kicked off like a tiny dragon belch, erupting with sudden flame. Fire shot up across her face—across her nose, her cheeks, over her closed eyes and brow—into her hairline.

She gasped. Loud. Sharp. Not a scream, not even a cry—just that violent, involuntary gasp of shock when the body expects to be burned alive.

The hose dropped from her hands. She slapped her face. Her hair. Her neck. Palms to her cheeks, heart hammering.

Nothing.

No fire. No sting. No pain.

She blinked, heart still racing, and lowered her hands just enough to peer between her fingers.

Footsteps. Heavy, fast.

She saw Kane. He'd dropped his duffel and was sprinting toward her at full tilt, his face contorted with panic. He must have seen it—the blast, the flame, her body flinching back.

He was closing fast.

Kara didn't move. Couldn't. She was still trying to understand why her face didn't feel like it had just been cooked.

Kane skidded to a stop in front of her, chest heaving, eyes wide. "Are you okay? I saw a flame! Are you all right?"

Kara blinked. He was breathing hard. Really hard. Wide stance, duffel abandoned halfway down the hill, mouth parted from the sprint.

His scent hit her first. That sweat-and-leather-and-sandalwood thing she refused to describe even to herself.

Oh gods, she thought, I need to schedule a visit to what's-his-name on Windsong. The one with the mouth and the manners. She'd written it down somewhere. Time to dig that list back up. No way was she letting Kane become the focus of that kind of tension. That man was just—too much. The kind of beautiful that made you forget how badly relationships blew up in your face. Or rather, how *she* blew them up. Hard to have intimacy when trust is a liability.

The Valkyries knew, now, but Kane sure as hell didn't. How could she tell him?

She shook it off and caught her breath, blinking fast. "I'm fine," she said quickly. "I'm fine. That was just close. I nearly caught that in the face."

Kane didn't look convinced. He stepped closer, scanning her face. "You sure?"

"I'm sure." Her voice went clipped. Too fast, too light. "It was just a stupid accident. The line discharged before I expected it. Nothing hit me. Just air and heat."

Internally, she was screaming. She should be dead. Her eyes should be gone. Her skin should be a smoking ruin. Her hair should stink of crispy smoke.

Instead—nothing.

Kane hesitated, like he didn't quite believe her. "All right," he said slowly. "Just checking. You sure you're okay?"

"Yes," she snapped. Then forced her voice gentler. "Yes. Thanks. Appreciate the dramatic rescue—for a rescue that never happened."

A faint smile touched his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes. He stepped back, slowly retrieving his duffel without taking his eyes off her.

She turned on her heel and made for the hatch.

The moment she was inside Little Val, she slapped the control to close the external door. The ramp whined as it folded up. She moved into the cramped cockpit, dropped into the pilot's seat, and hit the interior seal. A soft clunk locked the cockpit away from the rest of the tiny ship.

Only then did she let herself shake.

I'm not burned. I'm not burned. I should be burned.

She reached up, flipping down the mirrored panel mounted above the windshield. The mirror was warped slightly—distorted by years of sun and impact—but it did the job.

She looked fine. Her hair wasn't even singed.

That doesn't make any sense.

She leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Then, suddenly, she remembered. The kettle.

Six months ago. She'd been heating water on a backburner when it spilled—boiling hot—across her hand. She'd cursed, hissed, flailed for a towel, but there had been no pain. No redness. She had faked the rest, wrapped the hand, claimed she was fine a few hours later. The Valkyries had bought it.

But she'd known.

It didn't burn me.

She'd chalked it up to adrenaline, a freak moment. But now...

Her breath caught. She pulled off her left boot and shoved up the leg of her jeans, baring her ankle.

The scar was gone.

It had been there for twenty years—narrow, silver, shaped like a bent crescent. She got it from a hot pipe when she was fifteen, back when she and Dharian were still under Ares' thumb, trapped in that hellhole.

But now, nothing.

Just smooth, pale skin.

Kara stared. Her stomach turned.

What the hell is happening to me?

There was only one answer that even made sense.

The scorpions. The venom. The experiments.

Her fingers twitched toward the comm switch.

She had to call Dharian.

Encrypted. Private. No one else could hear this.

Kara sat there and stared at her hands. At her nails.

What did that man do to them?

What did that bitch do to them?

She couldn't understand how the scorpions could've altered their DNA. It was just poison. Poison that dropped them into comas every six months. That brought pain. Constant blood samples. She couldn't even keep track anymore—couldn't remember which sting belonged to which year, which trial, which phase. They all ran together like static.

Doesn't matter what I remember, she thought. Only matters that we have to go back to that goddamn castle. We, as in Dharian.

"I don't wanna call him. Goddammit. He's probably laying with some bitch right now." She sighed. "Oh, fuck it."

She flipped open the Tarjeel network dial on the console, rotated to their private channel, and sent the encrypted ping. Their frequency was unique—untouchable. The pulse told him everything: it was her, it was secure, it was urgent.

She waited.

Ping.

Waited.

Ping.

Waited longer.

Finally, the line clicked alive.

"What?"

"Nice to see you too, bro. What's the matter with your hair? Did somebody pull it too hard?"

"Oh, fuck off, bitch."

She giggled. Automatic.

"Dharian, we gotta talk. Private. Private. Scorpion."

"...Oh, shit. One minute." Faint white noise replaced his voice. Exactly one minute later, he was back. "Okay, it's about then. What's the matter?"

She told him. Everything. The line, the valve, the flame. No burns. No damage. The missing scar. Every detail she could remember.

When she finished, he let out a breath and said, "Of all the gods and goddesses in the universe, Kara... Kara, I almost burned to death last month. There was a broken fuel line in one compartment in the rear of my ship. And it went off, and it went down the corridor and enveloped everything, which means I have to

get a new ship. But the point is—it went around me. Or it went on me, and nothing happened. So either the fire was alive, and it dodged me or—”

“Or we are immune for some fucking reason,” she said, cutting him off.

“Kara—” he said, though the tone was puzzled.

“Dharian, we gotta go raid that castle and find out what that bastard did to us.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “I’m in the middle of a job, Kara. I can’t just go running off.”

“I know. Me too. But I’m just saying—we gotta put that on our future to-do list and rank it up there at number one of importance, okay?”

“...Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Yeah.”

“Anybody I know?”

“Fuck off, bitch.”

She smiled broadly without even thinking. It was their interplay of sibling love. She was still smiling when she said, “Love you like sunshine.”

“Love you like sunshine.”

The line disconnected.

Kara sagged into the seat, lungs emptying with one huge, weighted exhale. Now he knew. And he had to be only one. She didn't know how she would tell the Valkyries, but they had to know. They were just as much family as Dharian was.

Still, she didn't want them to see her as she now saw herself: as a freak. What the fuck was happening to her? More to the point, what the hell else? She then recalled that moment by the ship's loading bay door with Teal'c. When she heard the word “Whore” spoken by that abusive lover of Zee's as he moved toward the woman's back. Exposed back. Kara hadn't thought. She'd just moved and before she could breathe three times, her boot was on the bastard's neck. Had it been

just a typical hallucination during an abrupt rise of adrenaline or had she moved super-fast?

Kara groaned and closed her eyes.

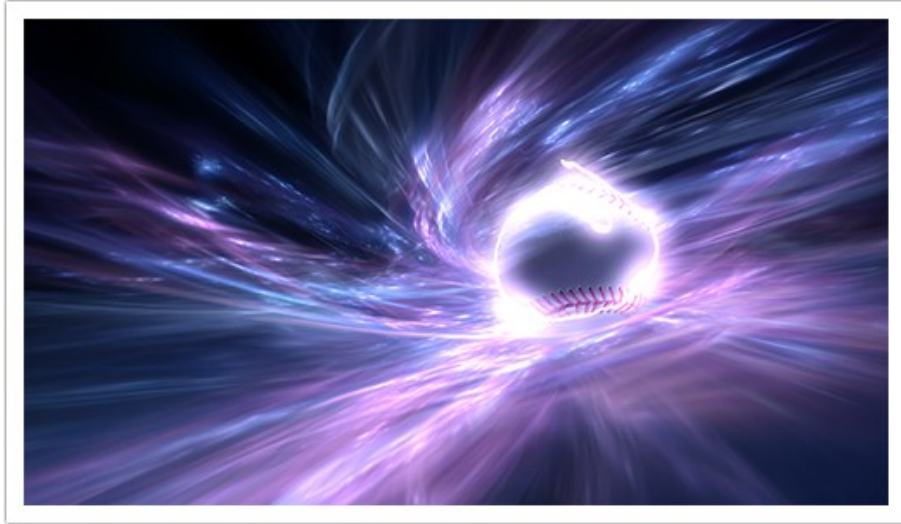
Val's voice came over the comm unit. "Are you okay?"

"No, but nothing's immediately wrong. You've heard the conversation?" It wasn't necessary to scold over eavesdropping. She'd given Val permission as a security measure. She knew her Valkyries. They'd agree . . . just stay the hell out of their bedrooms and showers. Well, naturally. There's always a catch. The world is not in black and white.

"Yes. I have implemented a program to record all incidents of superspeed, open flames, and excessive heat."

Kara grinned. "Attagirl."

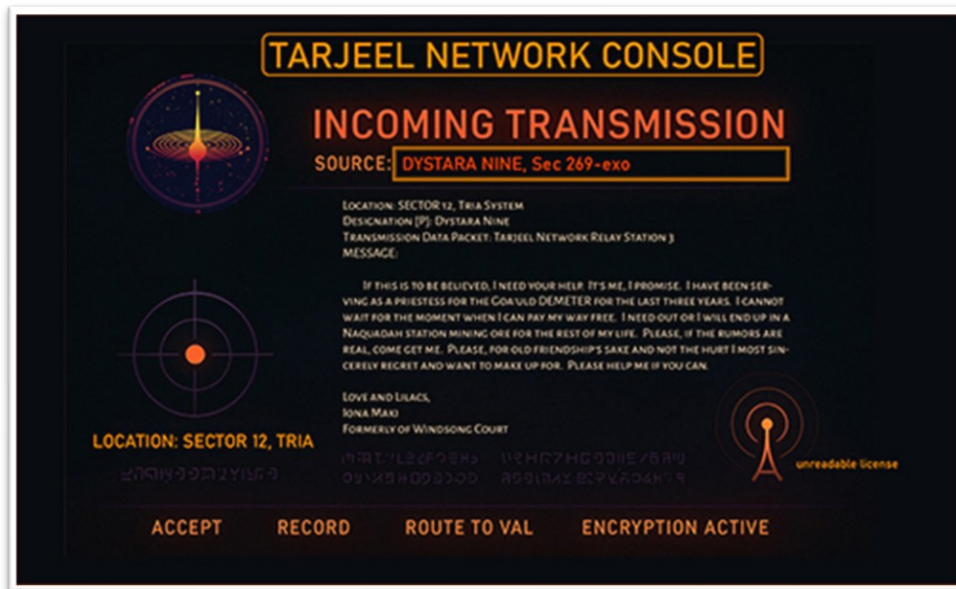
CHAPTER 3: CURVEBALL



Kara sat down in her command chair and sighed. She had to plot out how to approach Ares' castle. She started to open her mouth to talk to Val about it when Val herself said, "Kara, there's a message."

Kara's eyebrows rose. Two strange things. Val's subdued tone. And she had addressed her as Kara. She rarely did that, preferring to call her Captain.

"From?" Kara asked, looking at the Tarjeel Network interface panel screen. It sat in the console to her right that was part of the U-shaped command console that she used for operations of her ship. She scooted her chair closer to read the text in the center of the Network. Slowly, her mouth dropped open in shock.



The message read:

Location: SECTOR 12, Tria System

Designation [P]: Dystara Nine—under Demeter’s Domain

Transmission Data Packet: Tarjeel Network Relay Station 3

MESSAGE:

If this is to be believed, I need your help. It’s me, I promise. I have been serving as a priestess for the Goa’uld DEMETER for the last three years. I cannot wait for the moment when I can pay my way free. I need out or I will end up in a Naquadah station mining ore for the rest of my life. Please, if the rumors are real, come get me. Please, for old friendship’s sake and not the hurt I most sincerely regret and want to make up for. Please help me if you can.

Love and Lilacs,

Iona Maki

Formerly of Windsong Court

Kara sat away from the console and sighed through her nose and followed it with controlled breathing. Her gaze no longer saw the message but went inward into memory.

Iona's alive.

She ordered herself not to fall apart. She was in public, she had standards to set. Later, once she went into her shower and turned it on and turned on music loud enough to drown out the scream of rage and relief, then and only then could she purge the roar in her head and slow down the rate of her heart.

Kara reread the message, and something jumped out at her. Dystara Nine. Kane was from Dystara main. "Oh, shit," she said with a complaining groan, her face wrinkling in a grimace. "He'll have intel I need. I gotta bring him into this shit. Fuck."

Val's avatar appeared but in holographic form. "You're upset. What has happened?"

"You oughta know," Kara frowned, turning in her chair to face Val's hologram. "That tone?"

"It's someone you know. Deserves more respect, no matter how you feel."

Kara thought about it. "How I feel," she mused. "I want to start a war," she said quietly. "That's how I feel." The rage began to rise and she stomped on it. "But failing that, head to that spot there on the network." She pointed. "Move your ass, Ship."

"Acknowledged, human."

The ship produced a deep whine as it zipped through space, opened the hyperspace window, and entered the rapid transit of the interstellar quadrant.

"Time frame?" Kara asked as she steadied her chair while the entropy of speed settled down.

Val frowned, a concerned look on her face as studied Kara's. "Two hours, sixteen minutes. Give or take ten minutes."

Kara snorted. "Always give yourself room," she said in a mantra tone.

"Can't say I never learn from you."

Kara looked up sharply at her. "What? I'm not falling apart in public, Val."

"Quite," Val said, and disappeared.

Kara started to transfer the message to her tablet to show her Valkyries. This was going to suck, telling them everything about Iona, her first true sister. She tapped her tablet to bring up the message, but before she could get up, another transmission came through, pinged the Tarjeel Network once more. Kara tapped the console screen where the message sat, and its text was overlaid by a video screen. Jack O'Neill's handsome face appeared.

Kara's brows went up. "What's up, Mister Brown Eyes?" Jack grinned but it was tight, and she noticed he looked a bit haggard. "No sleep time?"

He gave her a small, crooked grin. "That's about right. Listen, we got a line on the assassin. How soon can you be at Bel'a'lat?" She grimaced, squeezing her eyes shut. She heard Jack said, "Uh oh. I sense a priority shift."

She sat back and stared at him as she ran a hand through her thick black hair. "I'm sorry, Jack. My rescues come first. And someone I thought was dead just pinged me. I'm on my way there now."

"You need any help?" he offered.

She gave him an appreciative grin. "Thanks. But you got shit to do that's just as important in your . . . neighborhood?"

He grinned. "Neck of the woods."

"Ah. Better. Re-stealing. So, your neck of the woods is just as busy as mine. One day soon, I hope, I can come back to Earth for a visit. Give my Valkyries a glimpse of the homeworld of their namesake."

"You've been learning some stuff?" he grinned.

She held up a thumb and forefinger barely measuring a quarter of an inch. "This much. Sadly, my career is not slowing down."

"A quadrant full of Goa'uld," Jack said just as soberly, "means it will take all of us about ten thousand years to get rid of all of it." She rolled her eyes and he nodded. "We forget sometimes just how big a world we now live in."

"It's an empire, Jack, not a collection of wandering nomads. Sadly."

"Touche'."

"Huh?"

"Point."

"Oh. What language was that?" she asked, sidetracked.

"French. Somehow the most beautiful people and the most conceited."

"And you love them anyway?" she asked, grinning.

"Sometimes. When they're not actually another country."

"Ah. Changes shit, doesn't it?" she said, making him grin.

"Have you talked to Teal'c lately?"

"Not since . . ." She had to think about it. "A few weeks ago, I think." She rolled her eyes again. "I've seen him with you guys, with his crew, but private convos like this, no. Is he with you or on Dakara?"

"About to get to Dakara, why?"

"I was wondering if you'd pass on a message . . ." She then mentally ran through what it would say as he waited and then shook her head. "No, never mind."

"You sure? Not a problem."

"It was only to have him pass on another message, to Kane. But that's a whole mess of . . . whatever . . . I'd rather not deal with. Too much . . ." She made a

two-handed gesture that reminded him of an Italian insult and he laughed. She grinned back. "I'll assume a private joke. That wasn't anything. Just a gesture that basically means . . ." She squinted as she thought.

"Fuck that and the horse it rode in on?" Jack offered.

Kara burst out a laugh of both shock and delight and was reminded why she liked Jack. He could do that, so effortlessly. Must be lovely, being his husband. Or husbands. She tried to conceive of having even one and her mind ran into the self-built brick wall and veered away in time. "Thanks. I'll remember that one. You be careful. Send my brand of good wishes to your crew, tell Sam she's still a Valkyrie and the rest of you boys will have to wait your turn. Sort of."

"Weren't we already christened?"

"Already what?"

"Sorry. Didn't you already say SG-1 was honorary Valkyries?"

"Not yet."

"Ah. Pushing it a little?" he asked, pretending sheepishness.

"Stop. That look is so fake you could get jailed for pushing it."

He laughed this time. "You be careful, too, Easteman."

She nodded sharply. "Until next time."

"Yep."

The video screen shrank to nothingness. She sighed, then reoriented herself. Without thinking, she'd avoided the whole Kane situation by not bringing him into it. Which meant working this job via radio with her contact on Dystara Nine—now a domain of Demeter's. Hopefully the contact hadn't left.

Didn't matter. She'd scan the entire planet if need be and find Iona by genetic scan. It would be easy. She had another scarf to go by. Which reminded her. It was time to unlock her casket. The Valkyries had to see everything inside in order to understand a little of what Iona had and still meant to her.

In her apartment, Kara pressed her thumb against an indentation in the wall opposite her bathroom. A panel slid inward to the left and past that was a square recess that held a rectangular ornate chest with handles on the narrow ends. She pulled it out and without stopping to check its contents or give herself time to panic and run into the shower and crank the music, she left her apartment and headed for the kitchen. The center of the ship. Their mutual comfort space, never mind safe space. That is, if anything could be safer than the ship itself.

CHAPTER 4: WINDSONG



Kara found it pleasantly distracting that her Valkyries would be more interested in her keepsake chest than in why she's bringing it into the kitchen and setting it on the table and then taking in a big sigh. Trepidatious. That's what hammered her heart. It felt extremely . . . wrong.

She didn't feel that way very often. In fact, it was rare. For the last 20 years, she'd learned to control her emotions so that the deep stuff would never be shown on reflex. Shock after shock taught her rigid, unnatural, control. But faced with her Valkyries, who were asking what was up. Kara took in a breath—never shaky because that was a loss of control—and said, "Val, bring up the message please. My sisters, we have a job and it's very important. I know the woman in trouble."

She pressed her right thumb into the black oval in the front of the chest where a keyhole typically sat, but here, it was a scanner of both print and DNA. No one was getting in this box unless authorized. Everyone in the kitchen was put on alert because of this instantly recognizable red alert flag.

Tarzy folded her hands on the table, sitting across from where Kara stood. "Are we finally going to hear your backstory, Kara?"

"Captain," Dusti said in a stubborn tone that indicated she'd corrected Tarzy before.

"Sister," Tarzy responded in the same stubborn tone.

"Both," Lynessa said, rolling her eyes. "Argue later, listen now."

Tarzy snorted. "That's usually my line to you, Lyns."

"Enough," Kara said tightly, and her tone had Captain Big Sister written all over it. "Have a look inside, my sisters. Lots to check out. When you're done, I'll explain some of it, but my childhood is off limits. You know some of it, the basics, but if you think I'm going to detail torture sessions, you're out of your fucking minds."

So they went through the things in the box. The most numerous were small packets wrapped in paper and ribbon, like a gift. Each packet contained thirty photographs of the same woman, dressed in the same clothing, standing in the same location. Only the time stamp on the bottom of the image let them know it wasn't the same day. The woman in the photos was striking, with dark hair that had been lightened to silver, with hints of purple, blue, and green. Her eyes were artistically decorated with heavy makeup that somehow seemed natural on her. Her dress was low-cut, sleeveless, with a type of pattern that was partly Henna designs and partly paisley. But the colors were more striking in the same purple, violet, blue, bluegreen, and green seen in her hair. Vivid and beautiful.

"Iona Maki. She's sent the message," Kara said, her voice deadening to unemotional, which caught their attention. "I thought she was dead. She

disappeared six years ago. I lived with her for two years after I escaped my enslavement by Bastet.” She received nods. They knew about that. “Iona was special. Not a lover. A true sister. Almost a mother. She’s Court. Owns her own house . . . or rather, did. One day, she up and disappeared.” Kara almost lost it. She paused and swallowed. And beside her came Zee, holding out a small shot glass filled with a liquid that was clear, but it held an ethereal iridescence. Kara shot her a scowl.

“Shut up and drink it,” Zee said. “Least you can do after sucker-punching my ex-boyfriend.”

“You even think about defending that fucker,” Kara snapped, scowling more.

Zee held up the hand not holding the shot glass. “Not ever gonna happen. I’m just sayin.’ Now, throw this back.” She held up the glass until Kara reluctantly took it.

She stared at the inviting contents. Pretty iridescent sparkle swirling in a thin transparent liquid. “You know. She’d warned me it would happen.”

Tarzy pushed herself onto the table’s top like cat meets gymnast meets trained priestess and resolved into a sitting yoga position. It was so lithe but odd that it raised the eyebrows of her sisters. Tarzy sensed the reception while keeping her eyes on Kara’s face until Kara met hers. “It’s a skill like anything else, my sisters.” That got knowing smiles. To Kara she said, “Down it in one go, don’t sip.” She didn’t touch the glass. Just kept her hands clasped in her folded lap.

Kara gave her a narrow-eyed smirk, appreciating the method of control Tarzy had. She was alarmed and showed none of it, but Kara could tell. She abruptly downed the contents of the glass. Peppermint liqueur. Hot and cold at the same time. She breathed outward—accidentally into Tarzy’s face, who just wrinkled her nose.

“Talk to us,” Tarzy said.

Zee joined Tarzy on the table, easily copying her yoga pose. "Is it bad, those memories?"

"Are they bad," Chayna corrected.

"Fuck off, I know that," Zee said, making Dusti smile and elbow Chayna gently.

Kara stepped back until the counter behind her bumped against her rear end. She pushed herself onto the counter and it creaked. She was 6'3", after all. That height carries weight. Her sisters sat and waited, ignoring the creaking. They were used to it.

"Me and my brother—" she began, then paused and pointed at Chayna and said, "What Zee said, hush." She held out the glass and Saliyah passed the decanter to Zee who refilled the glass. "I'll be sober by the time we get there." She tossed back the second shot, then set the glass on the counter and pushed it so that it slid across the surface and ended up in the sink with a thunk.

"My brother and I were kidnapped by Isis and Ares when we were eight. Our parents were murdered, the farm razed. We were experimented on with black scorpion venom and as a result, each of us has a series of puncture scars. His don't bother him but mine have this stinging itch all the damn time, which is what my salve is for. He gets it for me. I don't know where or from whom and I don't care. It works."

She grimaced, seemingly unknowingly, as she dug a small jar out of her jeans' front pocket and applied a dab of the salve to the back of her right trapezius muscle. As she rubbed it in, she went on with her explanation, subtly relaxing the tension in her body as the salve began to work. Until that moment, the sisters hadn't noticed the fraught tension but now that it was gone, they saw the clear difference. It became apparent to all of them that the fraught tension was Kara's normal operating body language.

Kara sensed a change in their collective attention and sighed as she put the jar away. "I have them everywhere. Everywhere. When many of them go off at the

same time, and I can't get to my salve, my behavior gets . . ." She paused, wondering how to frame it.

"Prickly?" Lynessa suggested.

"Sandpapery?" Kanira offered.

"Stinging?" said Chayna.

"Biting?" said Ahti.

"Murderous?" Tarzy suggested.

Kara gave them a lopsided grin. "All of the above, as you all have experienced." She winced. "I've said this before and I'll probably say it again, but it fits. And I'm sorry. Here's the apt metaphor: When many of these scars go off at the same time? I can commit a genocide before afternoon tea and not . . . even . . . blink. The attack on my nerves is that bad." Mouths dropped open. "I know. I don't think I would murder someone, but I just don't take the chance. It's preparedness, like everything else. A part of my life now. Not pleasant in any way, shape, or form. But . . ." She shrugged. "When we were fourteen—"

"Wait, did you find out why they did that?" Kanira asked.

Kara shook her head. "Not yet. But Dharian and I have some detective work to do." She swallowed. "As we've gotten older, we've noticed a few odd things have both happened and not happened. Healing faster, for one. The others I won't mention because they scare me and I'm not going to scare you. Just know that we're working on it and when we figure it out, I'll tell you."

"Tell us now," Zee said. "Please Kara. You can't possibly scare us after we've been face to face with your ordinary wrath. Never aimed at us, thank goodness, but that could change if we fuck up."

"Only if you bring a thief or spy aboard our ship, honey," Ahti said.

"Say it," Kara said, nodding. "Don't fuck with security or the little lover will end up with charred balls."

That elicited laughter but it faded when they saw her resolve.

"I'm not saying anything about the odd stuff because I'm still freaking out. And Dharian needs to be here. And it might be temporary anyway, like a side effect. Now, can I finish the horrid history?"

They winced and Tarzy reached across and just touched the table. Just that.

"So," she sighed. "Dharian and I escaped at fourteen. And because we were green as hell, we were promptly picked up by the Jaffa of Bastet and Kali. He went to the latter, I went to the former, and we spent five more years as slaves." She growled in her throat, and it was oddly echoed by the sympathetic scowls on every other face. "Then we escaped, sort of. We each just walked away with no pursuers."

"What?" Kanira asked.

"That does not make sense," Ahti said. "They don't people just walk off."

"Agreed," Kara said. "But it happened anyway. We have yet to figure it out. We will. He got his ship, my Little Val, out of a junkyard and I found a clunker to fly. And we started our smuggling careers. Two years later, my clunker lost a part while I was in space. Had to force a landing. Ended up on this beautiful little planet called Windsong."

Tarzy inhaled sharply while others raised their brows. They'd heard of it. The central home of the Court—the elite business of the sexual services industry. Unlike on Earth, their quadrant of the galaxy did not have severe dysfunctional attitudes toward sex. Other than enslaving people for it. The Court was a rival business Industry.

"Iona Maki was the high priestess of her House Court, set up near the capitol," Kara went on, droning somewhat like a robot. "She rescued me." She paused to let that sink in. "Took me in for two years. I finished my education, started to learn more in higher ed." Kara swallowed hard. "One day, she took me aside and gave me a warning that should she ever disappear, it'll be on her own, and I'm not to

follow. I'm to act like everything's normal. Her second, Tiana, would take over, and the members of the Court would follow her. And then about six months later, it actually happened. She disappeared. No trace. Completely. I don't know who she was running from and I didn't ask. Everyone deserves their secrets. But this . . ."

She made a face, not wanting to say it. "Hurt. And now," she said, and her voice startled them in its shakiness. "She's calling me for help."

She met the gazes of each of her nine sisters. "No matter what, I'm getting her out. This time, we use all the power and tech that Val has. No one is leaving the ship except me," and to the protesting looks, she held up a hand and shook her head sharply. "If necessary. Only if necessary, I would beam down wherever she is waiting if Val can't get a fix. If she can, that's more likely, she'll track Iona until she's alone. The only reason to beam down is to warn her about being beamed up to the ship. She doesn't like matter transfer. But, safety first, and she may just have to deal with it cold."

"I hate to ruin your narrative flow, Kara," Tarzy said, "but she's in her late thirties?"

"Yeah, and?"

Tarzy sounded just a bit cold. "She knows how to handle matter transfer streams. You don't need to warn her of anything. Beam her out of there, then handle the fallout. She'll have plenty of time to get over it."

Kara thought it over. She silently nodded, and as she did, her eyes landed on her keepsake chest. She waved at it. "There are pictures there. Packets by date. Every day I came home from school, she was always at the top of the temple stairs, wearing the same thing, greeting guests. And always me. And I started to take pictures of her greeting me. Just to try and catch her off guard." Everyone grinned, including Kara. "Never happened. She has more control than I do."

"So," Saliyah began as she unwrapped a picture packet. "When do we get our tenth sister?"



Kara saw the nods and smiled with surprise and chagrin. She should've known they'd react that way, but pleasant surprises were few in their world. It was always best to savor the moments.

"I've never met a high priestess of the Court," said Dusti, picking up a photo. "Is this their usual look or is this Iona-specific?"

"Far as I know, Iona-specific," Kara said smirking. "All that I've met have looked just as professional and gorgeously exquisite as Iona. She would take half an hour just to do her eye makeup. She took forever getting dressed."

"I thought you were just sisters," Chayna said, putting down a photo.

"How many times have I seen you in your underwear?" Kara asked drily.

"Point," Chayna replied, nodding.

"Has anyone else met a Court priestess before?" Kara asked. Tarzy nodded. "You remember her name or House?" Tarzy shook her head, and Kara knew she'd just lied. But there were two types of lying. There was keeping things to oneself and then there was lying. The former was always forgiven; the latter never was.

"Okay, folks. When we get there, we get her and then we're gone."

"Chances are high we get interfered with," Ahti warned.

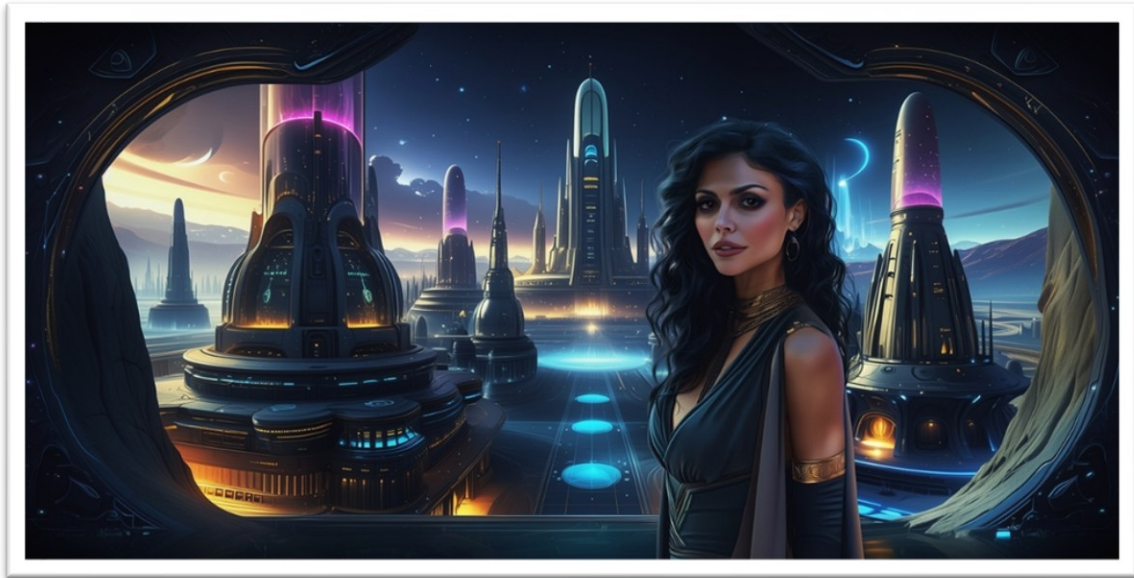
"If we're lucky," Kara said with her typical snark, but everyone could see the nervousness in her muscles. Like a subdued cat waiting to spring loose and pounce.

"You're looking for a fight, Kara," Tarzy singsonged.

"The rest of you aren't?" Kara quipped. No one disagreed. She reached over Tarzy's shoulder and snatched a folded scarf from the chest. "It's called being prepared, Tarzy. Expect the worst but hope for the best. Besides, expecting the worse, you can't be surprised."

"Ugh," Tarzy said, rolling her eyes. "You're so depressing sometimes."

CHAPTER 5: RESCUE



All of her crew followed Kara to the bridge, where there were only two seats – and as usual, her crewmates always decided that the top of the wrap-around console cabinet was a great place to sit or lay down. Of course, so was the light gray carpeting. You couldn't damage anything anyway, so Kara never told them to *get off the furniture*. Besides, it was the tradeoff for having a giant ship with only a single pilot's chair; let the company sit where they wanted.

Besides, they weren't military, and rules were for newbies who had no idea what they were doing. Her crew did. She did. And she wasn't someone like those Generals at the Tau'ri Pentagon. They probably used a ruler to check how far away a cabinet was from a door. Just the thought of being that sort of anal-retentive control freak made her shudder. Everyone had their way and hers was based solely on security. Park your ass wherever you want, just not on the ship's controls. And for fuck's sake, bring another open beverage on the bridge and someone will get a boot in their favorite asset.

Kara smirked to herself as her thoughts ping-ponged all over the place while she robotically tapped control buttons and moved sliders on touchscreens, exiting hyperspace. The bust of Val's hologram appeared in the center front viewscreen, and an overlay of the approaching planet appeared next to her.

"I have set the scanner for DNA testing. I need something that she might have—" With a smirk, Kara held up the folded scarf she'd take from the chest. Val smirked and raised a holographic brow. "You know where to put that."

"Nice job," Kara said appreciatively. "Double-meaning snark. I love it." She set the scarf over another console, and a bright scanning light went through the fabric, seemingly vacuuming up fine particles from the cloth. When the light was finished . . . the cloth was gone.

"Where'd it go?" Chayna asked.

"Absorbed," Kara said.

"Wasn't that scarf special?" Kanira asked.

"Sacrificed for a good cause," Kara sighed.

"What's going on?" asked Nadia as she and Allie came to the bridge. They were quickly filled in, and Allie came up next to Kara to stare into her eyes. It was almost like a cat and she did it all the time. And it was Kara's cue to return the greeting. She narrowed her eyes and leaned forward to bring her eyes so close to Allie's that the tips of their noses touched. "Hey you," she said to Allie in a whisper.

"Hey you," Allie whispered louder, giggling. Satisfied, she stepped back and looked around. "What's up?"

Kara's chaos wanted to scream but she just smiled. "We're going to rescue a woman I thought was dead. So I'm going a little insane. You?"

Deadpan, Allie said, "I'm bored. History."

Nadia, who sat on the floor beside the only other bridge chair, with her legs in a yoga cross and a small hoop of embroidery in her lap, rolled her eyes. "You have

the attention span of a black striped cuba,” she said as she made a stitch with a half-moon needle the color of bronze, threaded with purple silk.

Standing beside Kara’s command chair, Allie sniffed, and in her mind, she conjured the animal, who resembled the spider monkey from Earth. “They’re smart.”

“And can’t hold still,” Nadia said in a singsong.

Tarzy looked down at Nadia. “What you need—no offense to your grandmother—is a visual storytelling method. I learned that somewhere. Visual storytelling will do it as long as the storyteller isn’t a moron.” Allie giggled as she stepped over to Tarzy and promptly sat on her lap. Tarzy immediately folded up her legs in a yoga pose to better accommodate the girl. It was such an automated physical response that it would tell anyone new that either Tarzy had great mothering skills, or they’d repeated this scene dozens of times. Or both.

The chair itself was a first come, first served assignment when it came to who got to sit there. It wasn’t really a bridge console chair as it was anchored to the floor next to the back wall. No control panels of any kind were part of the chair’s construction, and it didn’t even have a security belt. Tarzy was well aware of that, but she trusted Val to keep the ship stable. She had so far during their few skirmishes.

Kara turned her attention to the consoles, reading the front viewscreen’s overlays, then double-checked the rest of the ship’s systems. They were good to go. “Time to intercept?” she asked the air—aka, Val.

“Ten minutes until we’re in range for *accurate* scanning.”

“For?”

“Any threat to us or our mission.”

"We're in Goa'uld country," Kara said with a sigh. "Everyone's a threat until proven otherwise." She squinted as a scan rolled down the viewscreen. "Case in point, my sisters."

She pointed to the viewscreen as Val brought up a slow-moving approach of the planet with the scanning beams already working. Diagrammatical outlines of ships and other objects orbiting the planet popped up one at a time and as they drew closer, the outlines reformed to contain more information. By the time they reached the planet, the outlines would turn into live video. At present, there were eighteen ships in various orbits. Nine of them were of the same craft type that was used by the Lucien Alliance.

"What the fuck are they doing here?" Kara muttered.

"Trade," Saliyah said in a sour voice. "Slaves."

"Yes, but not in those numbers," said Dusti as she read the screen. "They're planning something. It's never good."

"Could be time to wipe them out," said Val with a perfectly serious expression.

"Is it genocide if it's just a small amount of people?" Allie asked.

Everyone turned to her with surprised expressions. Nadia winced. "Yes, my dearest granddaughter. It's genocide. Numbers are irrelevant during an extermination." She sighed. "As our people can attest."

Allie winced. "Sorry, Ohma." To everyone else, she said, "Then Val is advocating for genocide. Shouldn't you be on the side of peace?" She stared a laser beam into Val's hologram.

Sadly, she was outmatched. Val could intimidate a cockroach with that green-eyed stare. The Avatar suddenly turned into its black cat persona. It licked its paw twice, then meowed a low growling purr to the room in general, making everyone grin. Everyone but Kara. The cat looked at the captain and then disappeared in a blink of photonic sparkles.

"Drama queen," Kara said in disgust. "Be ready, Val. Dodge if you can. Don't wait for permission. Be quick, efficient, and try not to show everything you're capable of."

"Acknowledged," came Val's oddly smug voice.

Tarzy half-laughed. "You might wanna rescind that order, Captain Drama Queen. She's a sentient AI. She won't just take you seriously." Kara looked over her shoulder at Tarzy, giving her a frown. Tarzy held her ground. "Just sayin."

"Hmm," Kara said, turning back to the viewscreen. "But . . . if our attention is on Iona and the Goa'uld, and a split second's decision rides on whether we get disabled or we kick ass, I'm not planning on second-guessing that decision from a wounded position. Most of what Val does is a mirror of my head. Literally."

All of her Valkyries froze and stared at her in shock.

"Before my first mission, from the time I found her, when I wasn't repairing, Val and I were working on her cognition. Making sure everything was reknitting itself correctly. AIs can do that. It's like mapping your own brain. But she needed a brain to go by, so she scanned mine, from the frontal cortex to the amygdala. She knows exactly how I think. It's how she can argue with me and win." Everyone grinned and Kara returned it with a nervous tic. "Point is, she can easily and accurately anticipate an order."

Ten minutes of stirring silence and thought passed until they were approaching orbit. Kara guided it almost absently, showing the same professionalism she always had. On the inside, she was nervous, and her heart rate was climbing.

"Begin scanning," Kara said, reading the data almost immediately from a screen on the console to her left. She tapped a few outlined buttons just a little too forcefully.

"That won't help, Captain," Val said, her voice the only presence.

Kara sighed through her nose in frustration. "Then what's the hold-up? You're faster than this."

"I am forced to use mitochondrial tags. It will take a few moments longer." Half a heartbeat later, she said, "One moment. . ." Her hologram appeared on the front viewscreen. "I found her."

"When she's—" Kara began.

"But there's a problem," Captain. "She's not alone. I am also detecting a naquadah protein marker. She is either hosting a Goa'uld or she was forced to carry one temporarily. Or . . ."

"Or?" Kara asked, her stomach in a frozen lurch.

"As a high value slave—they would not have wasted time and money on lesser value targets—they may have purposely injected her with the marker as a spiteful ownership tag. There's no other reason to do it since it can't be detected away from a scanner like the one I am using now."

"Opinion?" Kara asked her.

"Which do I think is likely?" Val asked. "The latter. The first two considerations are illogical given the behavior patterns of the Goa'uld."

Kara blew out the breath she'd been holding and closed her eyes. "If it's not one thing and another," she muttered, ordering herself not to panic. The reading had variables of interpretation. "Get her out of there when she's alone, then watch her. Any aggressiveness displayed will be met with an isolation shield. You understand what any aggressiveness means?"

Val displayed the oddness of her human affectation by demonstrating her peculiar blink, which she did slowly, twice. "Any sign of aggression aimed at inflicting harm on herself or another."

Kara nodded. "Put the monitoring data on screen."

"Acknowledged."

The data appeared and ran down the screen over Val's image as she remained in place.

Kara looked at her suspiciously. "Out with it, ship."

Val smiled mischievously, dropping her chin slightly so that it emphasized the length of her long black eyelashes and the long sweep of eyeliner that ended in a graceful, and catlike, upward curve. "Would you like me to do anything else while I am scanning Iona's position?"

Kara knew this game. "Ship," she said laconically.

"Human," Val said in exactly the same tone and inflection.

Kara sighed. She rarely won again Val. They were always at a draw. "What would like to be doing in addition?"

Val smiled broadly, beaming in her triumph. "Prepare my systems for attack."

Kara gave her a deadpan look then adopted an air of innocence. "I am prepared at all times," she said, mimicking Val's voice.

Val preened, her hand smoothing over her short black hair, green eyes all but glittering. "Bitch."

Kara smiled, showing teeth, despite herself. "I love you too, cat. Now what's next?"

"I beam her out of there and drop a cobalt bomb?" Val suggested.

Kara barked out a laugh of surprise so harshly that she began coughing. Val preened again.

"You can't," Kara wheezed, then thumped her diaphragm with the side of a fist and coughed once more. "Bitch."

"I know. But . . . why not?"

"A, that will burn every bridge I have or could think up, Val. B, collateral damage is unacceptable. Rescue, not set off every God'uld in the quadrant to come after us."

"I could handle them," Val sniffed.

Kara pursed her lips. She was well-aware of what Val's new power changes were leading to: one scary goddamn ship in anyone else's hands. In hers, Rescue Palace.

A schematic lit up on the console to her left, a dot blinking near the edge. She rolled the chair over and winced as the motion twinged her knife wound. She wanted to ignore it and could only do so if she remembered she was fucking hurt. Kara stared down at the layout. "This doesn't do me any good. Give me a closer look."

"They're using naquadah as shielding. This is as far as I'll be able to go without setting off their security sensors."

Kara pursed her lips. "Red dots?"

"Goa'uld or Jaffa. The blue dot is Iona. Gray, humans."

Iona was surrounded by gray and red dots. "This the temple?"

"Yes."

"Then we wait."

The Valkyries around her groaned.

"Tell me about it," Kara muttered, and laid a hand over the bandaged wound.

"You need a shot?" Val asked.

"Yes, but not until she's safely aboard. Pain keeps me sharp for now."

"And a little bitchy," Tarzy said.

"Needs that," Zee said.

Kara rolled her eyes. As usual, they were dead accurate. She stared at the dot on the sensor screen and pursed her lips as she thought about what the proper strategy would be regarding when the beam-out should happen. Obviously, when she was alone, but . . .

"How deep is this scan?" she asked Val. "Can we tell if she's in a place where it may appear that she's alone when she really isn't? How do we get her out without immediately raising the alarm?" She made a growl of frustration.

"Can we get someone on the ground to see her?" Kanira asked.

"Yes," Dusti nodded. "Maybe a servant?" She then made a face. "No, that's putting the servant at risk."

Kara bit at her lip in thought. "Sometimes the risk is worth it, but only if the messenger agrees. We could transport both. Thing is, that sort of thing takes time to develop, to cultivate. We don't have that, and experience has taught me that if you rush things, shit goes badly." She breathed out harshly through her nose, wishing Miri had a cousin down below. "Wish we had someone on the ground," she grumbled.

"One of us?" Tarzy asked, thinking of herself.

"Are you insane?" Kara scowled, shooting her idea down immediately, her tone harsh and uncompromising. She immediately regretted it, but only for her sisters, and softened her tone. "Look, I'm not putting any of you at risk, not even for Iona." She gave them a sardonic smirk. "Besides, she'd haunt my ass for eternity. Not risking that. I'd hit the wrong button one day because she'd driven me insane and people would die accidentally. She'd be growling at me, 'I told you many times, Kara, you never put others at risk.'" Her voice had gone just a bit too high. She was making fun of her old friend. She didn't need to explain why. They all knew.

Tarzy gave her a thoughtful look. "So she's who you learned that from."

Kara nodded absently as she leaned one hand on the console screen and drummed the fingernails of the other hand over the plasteen surface. "Bitch, get away from them."

Tarzy unfolded herself from the chair, placing Allie in it instead. She smiled down at the girl and drew a playful swipe down her nose. She turned and went to

Kara's side to see what the schematic looked like. "Hmm. I know that layout. They're all the same." She tapped a corner. "Up here is an overlook. On this planet, it might have been hewn from a cave. If she has brains at all—" Kara threw her a dirty look and Tarzy didn't flinch. "If she does, she'll manage to get herself isolated if that is indeed an overlook. It's a type of observation deck where you go to get a moment's peace."

Kara's expression softened, and it was mirrored by all the others on the bridge. "You went to one like it often, I take it?"

"I did. That's why if anyone were to go down there, it'd have to be me."

"Well forget it," Kara said simply. Memories surfaced, largely the woman's voice, instructing her while they did something rote, like washing her silk clothing. "Iona's the smartest woman I ever met. She's probably planning to go there when work is done." She looked up at Tarzy. "What is a typical workday?"

"Depends on what she's doing. But given where she is? She's a priestess and she's in the temple's outer platform. She'll be conducting the chants for the younger priestesses, or she'll be doing it for any of the fake god's children."

Kara grimaced, closing her eyes. "That's so wrong, having children there."

"Indeed," Tarzy said.

"Bottom line?" Kara asked. "We wait, right?"

"Unfortunately." She looked over at the viewscreen. "Val, what is the time of day where they are?"

"Three parcels past twilight," Val said. "It's just after sunset."

Tarzy straightened. "An hour, if their schedule is like all other Jaffa-run Goa'uld temples."

"How do you know it's Jaffa-run?" Kara asked.

"The layout schematic. Goa'uld temples are designed differently."

"Thought so," Kara said nodding.

Tarzy smirked. "Needed verification?"

"Pretty much. You know how I work." She then recited one of her own quotations. *"Don't influence the subject when you ask a question."*

"Iona teach you that too?" Lynessa asked.

Kara nodded. "She taught me everything. I was young when I was taken so when I found her six years after escaping the kidnappers, I was still immature."

"It's like you were meant to cross paths," Saliyah said, sliding off the console back and padded in her bare feet to the front. She crossed her arms and though she had a peaceful look on her face, her fingers drummed in sequence over her biceps. "She sounds like a teacher I used to know. Someone natural, you know?" she asked, turning to look at her sisters. They were all nodding, their expressions different according to their individual thoughts. They were an odd bunch, she thought. Different, but they came together and lived as if they always had. "Like us," she murmured, staring down at the planet.

"Huh?" Kara asked.

"Meant to be together," Saliyah said.

Zee snapped her fingers and pointed at Saliyah. "Truth."

On a wider console shelf, Raisa lay on her side, one hand propping her head up and the other drawing on paper with a black pen. "I'm not the most astute person where our missions are concerned but why aren't we just beaming her out of there from where she is?"

"Two reasons," Kara said. "One, I'm not broadcasting the abilities of Val unless it's necessary. Two . . ." She paused and blew out a breath as she plopped back down in her chair. "She hates transport beams. I'm waiting till she's alone so that her fear isn't on display for too many people."

Tarzy looked up from the schematic screen. "We have to leave?"

Kara shook her head. "No. You're her would-be sisters. She can learn to be afraid in front of you. How long did it take me?"

Ahti cleared her throat, a knowing look in her eyes as she said deadpan, "Eight months, seventeen days. And counting."

Kara winced. "Ow. Sorry, my sisters. It's easier to show pain. Fear is another animal entirely."

"I think we've seen it," said Chayna. "Your fear and anger are nearly identical. You hate being afraid and it causes rage. I know because I'm the same way."

Dusti gave her a sympathetic look. "I was. It's slowly separating."

"Takes a while," said Raisa.

"Mystery to me," Lynessa said. "I feed off fear." Everyone looked at her in surprise. She'd never said it out loud.

"C'mon, my dear," said Nadia, taking Allie's arm to keep her from falling off the chair as she started to doze off. "We'll catch up later. Bedtime."

"No, I'm fine," Allie said, blinking rapidly.

"Go," Kara said gently. "I'll fill you in later. If you feel anything weird, like ship's fire, just lock the door and . . ."

Nadia nodded. "We know the drill. C'mon, Allie. You can fall asleep in the middle of a firefight. How, I will never know."

Allie let her lead her off the bridge, saying, "It's called being eleven years old."

"Must be it."

Kara snorted as their quiet banter faded down the corridor. She drummed her fingers on the chair arm, thinking aloud. "Might be best to beam her to the infirmary directly. So, we should head there now."

Tarzy agreed. "If she's going to the observation deck, it'll be soon. Minutes, maybe."

"Let's go."



"Why here?" Val asked as the crew entered the infirmary.

"Just in case she needs a shot," Kara said, wincing as she rubbed her bandage.

"Don't irritate it."

"Then fetch my salve or . . . something. I can't have a shot. Not yet."

"You'll change your mind," Val said with a roll of her eyes and carefully opened a drawer. She pulled out a large one-foot-square packet, ripped it open, and revealed a square cloth. She pressed a corner then handed it to Kara. "It's a heat pad. Should hold it off a little."

Kara took it and gingerly placed it over the wound, doubtful that heat would do shit. "You sure this heat will work? Isn't ice the solution to pain?"

"For breaks and massive swelling, yes," Val said. "But your knife wound is healing, not swelling with infection."

"And the ribs?" Kara asked, brows rising as the heat calmed the tender muscles. "Wow, that worked." She made a face when she pressed too hard.

"Careful," Val admonished. "You've had the bone shot. It'll speed the healing. Nothing else to be done. Thousands of years of medicine still can't make bones knit faster. Only the most advanced peoples knew the secret and they're all gone, the selfish bastards."

Kara snorted. "Watch it. You're insulting yourself."

"I have . . ." Val began, frowning. "Gaps. I'm working on clearing the blocks, but the gaps seem to have permanently degraded. Like finding blocks of data that can't be recovered."

"Ow."

Chayna grinned as she watched them, then said to Dusti, "Isn't it cute? It's like she's talking to herself." Dusti giggled. The other Valkyries just smiled to themselves.

"Ha," Kara said.

Lynessa walked over and placed a data tablet on the bed. "I don't know how to access the bridge screens on this."

"Oh, I'll show you," Val said, and materialized a tablet made of photonic energy. It looked different than the tablet on the bed. "You need this tablet. It's over there on the counter by the electron microscope." She pointed a long elegant finger with a very sharp-looking black fingernail.

As she explained the process to Lynessa, joined by Saliyah, Ahti, Raisa, and Zee, Dusti came through the main entrance carrying Kara's keepsake chest. Kara narrowed her eyes.

"Why are you bringing that in here?"

"Familiarity, a sense of home, reunion," Dusti said, setting it on a central station.

"I don't see the relevance," Kara said, grimacing.

"One moment," Val said to her students. She picked up the hypodermic with the painkiller cocktail and held out her hand for Kara to extend her arm. With a heavy sigh, Kara extended her arm. Val injected the medicine and disposed of the needle. "Thirty seconds," she said. "Start counting. It's a focusing technique."

"Pfft," Kara spat. "It is not." But she started counting anyway because it gave her mind something to do. And upon that thought, she realized Val was right. And then stubbornly refused to openly agree because . . . well, she didn't quite know

why she was insisting on being contrary. She put a pin on the thought so she could examine it later and pushed off the bed and got to her feet.

"You shouldn't," Val said, handing the tablet to Lynessa.

Kara snapped her fingers and held out her hand to Lynessa. "Could I have that, please?"

"Sure, boss," Lynessa said, handing it over.

In a second, Kara had the correct tech screen on the tablet. Iona's blue dot was still among the greys and reds. "C'mon, c'mon," she grumbled at the screen. "Get to your retreat. Those things are sacred, remember?" Kara was suddenly acutely aware that her Valkyries were watching and listening attentively. And Kara thought of their eyes on her when Iona was beamed aboard and deep panicky horror filled her. "Um, guys, listen. It's not gonna make sense, but I can't have you in here when she beams up. I need to be alone with her. I can't explain it." She grimaced, both from her wound and from how her words sounded. "I'm sorry. It's just that this room feels oppressive."

Raised eyebrows and wide eyes covered everyone's faces except for Tarzy. "I get it. I'll explain it to our sisters. C'mon, let's go grab something to eat. Make something for Iona."

Kara didn't hear them leave. Her heart was in her throat. A rush of emotions were taking over, destroying her cultivated control, and she bit down on the inside of her left cheek, drawing a little blood. Val's cocktail shot was working, and all of her pain was dulled; blood was what she was after. The taste of it had always repelled her but what she was aiming for was distraction. She had learned a while ago that if she couldn't stop her mind from freaking out, then distracting it would bypass the upheaval, at least for a moment.

It didn't register at first, but Kara realized that the blue dot on the temple schematic was now alone. Everyone else was at least twenty seconds away. "Val?" she said.

"Is it time?" came the disembodied voice.

Kara nodded. "Get her out of there."

The infirmary lights were low—just enough to keep the place from feeling sterile. Kara stood tense, the tablet almost forgotten in her hands, her body betraying her with every breath. She didn't notice the faint flicker of transporter energy until it coalesced in the middle of the room, some twenty feet away from the bed. She stood up, grabbing the bed's frame as she grew dizzy. The world was holding its breath. Like she was. Because there she was.

Iona.

The same, but different. Kara had never seen Iona's true hair color; the woman thought black hair was boring. But there she was, black hair, full glamor makeup, wearing a brown silk temple dress that all priestesses wore, even the queens. Thinking of Goa'uld queens reminded Kara about the marker.

"Shit," she said under her breath. "I'm sorry, Iona. Val, shield."

A round column of transparent blue energy formed around Iona.

Iona stared at her with wide eyes. Not accusing or angry. Startled. She ignored the shielding as if it was something she'd expected. "I didn't believe, not really. But here you are." Without missing a beat, she asked, "Why the force field?"

A tear escaped and dropped like a two-thousand-pound bomb onto her cheek. Kara swiped at it angrily. "You have a Goa'uld marker. Either you're infected with one of those things or you used to be."

Val materialized near Kara's bed, gloved hands folded in front of her, somehow managing to look prim and sedate in a black bodysuit. "Pain?"

"The shot's working, Val," Kara said, her tone calming. "Anger is at something else."

"The tears." She dematerialized.

Meanwhile, it was clear that Iona was growing angry. "You've just ruined a perfectly good reunion scene."

"Marker," Kara said.

Iona breathed out a sigh of impatience through her nose. "DNA interference. It was injected as a collar around my neck." She paused and tears came to her eyes but did not fall. "I can never get rid of it."

Kara blinked. She heard the truth in Iona's tone and so did Val because the forcefield disappeared. "I'm such a paranoid bitch," she said, her own tears forming. And then the past came rushing in as if it had never left. Those last few days before Iona had disappeared, they'd had a silly argument. She pushed away from the bed and took a step toward Iona. Her bandage began to bleed. Val appeared again.

"I'm sorry I broke the vase," Kara said, ignoring her AI.

Tears began their runnels down Iona's face. "I'm sorry I ripped the scarf."

Kara shook her head. Iona did the same. And Val said, "I have to redo some sutures. Hug now or wait."

"For goddesses' sake," Kara said just as Iona half-laughed, half-cried and rushed to her. The second Iona was close and the familiar scent of her reached her nose, Kara's tears came freely, and she wrapped her arms around the woman and held her tightly.

"I'm so sorry I disappeared," Iona said against her shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I should've stayed and fought."

"Second-guessing your past actions—" Kara began.

Then they both finished with, "—is for those who can't ever make up their minds." They kissed each other's temples and slowly drew apart, laughing in that self-deprecating way.

A twinge made Kara wince but before Iona could say anything, Val sighed. "Lay down, please. And the Valkyries are beside themselves to meet Iona. Seems like now is a good time."

"Valkyries," Iona repeated, but not as a question.

"Ah," Kara said as she lay back on the infirmary bed. "Needs explanation."

"Not really, no," Iona said. "Your rep has become the Valkyries, not Kara Easteman."

Kara gave the ceiling a long-suffering look. "Well, finally. It's only taken eight months."

"That's how long you've been doing this?" Iona asked as Val worked.

Kara nodded. "I grew tired of doing nothing. But it had to be strategic. You can't fight them directly so coming at them from an angle seemed appropriate."

"It's working," Iona said, a ghost of a smile appearing at the corners of her mouth. She approved. But her expression turned worried. "Sooner or later, they'll come at you and put you down."

Instead of Kara's scoffing sound, it was Val. "It'll be fun to see them try."

Iona took that moment to examine Val more closely, especially her eyes, which were trained on her job, not Iona. "You're an avatar," she said. "I thought you were real."

"I am real," Val said. "Right now, I'm physically present."

Kara found herself amused. Watching the two of them was like watching two old sisters who'd never met vie for their place. "Before you start some rivalry, don't."

Iona made a scoffing sound through her nose. "Not possible. We all have a place."

Val finished but then said to Iona, "Would you get the wrap from that counter drawer?" She pointed at a drawer behind them. Iona retrieved it. "Help me wrap it around her to force her into stiffness so she does snap another sub-suture." As

they wrapped it around Kara's ribs and knife wound, Val said, "They're outside. Waiting for your word."

Iona looked at Kara, then Val, and straightened as she let Val secure the wrap with tape. "Who's waiting?"

"My Valkyries," Kara said. "My sisters. The Nine. Plus an older woman and a little girl. I bet they're with the Vals. I told them all about you." She pointed at the keepsake chest. "Showed them that. It's all I had left of you."

Iona went to the table that held the chest. There were photos on the table, more of them inside the box. Other items like a small knife, a box of jewelry, a hairbrush, and a spikey comb. "Oh my goddess," Iona breathed. "You saved them." She held up a pair of earrings. "You saved them," she repeated, tears coming to her eyes again. She looked into the chest, and a familiar color and pattern grabbed her attention. She sucked in a breath of shock and reached in, removing a transparent packet, the kind that new clothing came in, only this was intended to protect, not just store. It was one of the dresses that Iona wore in the pictures Kara took.

"They were packing it all up," Kara said defensively. "Your house priestesses. I had to take some things before it was all shipped off." Val eyed Kara, who gave her a nod.

The door to the infirmary swished sideways and the women walked in, eyes wide and curious as they took in Iona standing next to the chest, holding up the dress she'd removed from the packaging.

Iona pressed the dress against her cheek and closed her eyes. "I missed this so much." She then burst into tears. Her new sisters started to rush to her but faltered when Iona gripped her dress in tight fists, bent over slightly, and let out a scream of rage so palpable that everyone in that room understood. They stood silently, reverently. Iona cried and screamed again. Then once more.

Kara . . . just watched. She nodded to herself, having waited for this reaction. Iona had never been one to let things build up or suppressed feelings of rage.

She'd taught Kara that it was destructive. And here she was, same old woman she'd lost, demonstrating her foundational code. Raisa turned to Kara, who waved a hand. Raisa nodded and her shoulders relaxed.

Iona dropped to her knees, her dressed wadded up in her fists and pressed to her diaphragm. This was new and Kara stood carefully and headed to her. Her sisters made room. Kara couldn't drop down to Iona's level, so she just stroked her hair. The woman eventually took the proffered hand of Ahti and stood up. Then she met Kara's gaze with a hot deadliness. "If you can destroy that planet with this ship, please get rid of those fuckers."

An understanding groan from all present permeated the room. The groan was made of regret.

Iona scowled. "Why not?" she asked Kara.

"Because it's strategically unwise," Kara said. "Consider the fallout," she singsonged.

Iona thought about it and said, "Get me a ship. I'll do it myself."

"No, you won't," Kara said tiredly. "You won't hit that button that would destroy all the innocents trapped below. While the adults would be happy to die, we can't make that decision for the little ones."

"Shit," was all Iona could muster in response.

"Yes," said Kara.

"We've all had this conversation with Kara," said Zee. She held out her hand. "I'm Zee." They gently clasped forearms and let go. And just like that, the introductions went fast. And then Nadia and Allie entered the infirmary.

Iona's motherly instinct was instantly activated and the Nine saw how easily Kara would have succumbed to it, just like Allie was doing now.

"The woman has a gift," Val said.

"She does," Kara said, her eyes misting. "Even now. It hasn't been stolen out of her."

Iona stood straight and passed a soothing hand over Allie's hair. And then said, "I'm not kidding, Kara. They all need to die."

Kara sighed as everyone agreed with Iona, including Nadia. She carefully folded her arms and sat at the foot of her bed. She stared at everyone, but her main focus was on Iona.

"Okay, let's say we do what you ask and bomb the planet into oblivion. Guess what happens next? You think the Goa'uld will let it slide? The System Lords won't. They'll hunt us down, hunt down our families, and anyone they suspect is working with me or for me. Even associates not directly related. They'll make an example. They'll hunt down all missing women. All those women we've relocated and set up with new lives will die. Their families will die. Then, they will go after SG-1 and the Tau'ri just for good measure." Her words were met with grimaces from her Valkyries because they knew she was right.

Iona frowned. "You've gotten a lot harder."

"Live and learn," Kara said.

"And yet you just up and decided to fight back."

"I had to," Kara said.

Iona made a scoffing sound. "No you didn't."

Emphatically, Kara said, "Yes, I did."

Iona then paused, frowning as she thought. "Wait, you said SG-1."

"Yeah, so?"

"The most hated enemy of the Goa'uld next to the Tok'ra. They won't go after them. Not with their powerful friends to avenge them."

Kara frowned, exchanged confused looks with the others. Val closed her eyes. "What?" Kara asked Val.

"She is right. The Asgard and the Fae."

Kara's frown deepened. "The Fae? That old myth?"

"Which has several forms, but they come from another galaxy. They visited the Tau'ri several thousand years ago. They've become friends with SG-1. I don't know why they showed up when they did. But they can handle the Goa'uld with no problem."

"And they are not my friends. And I don't do mercenary work."

"Who the hell cares?" Iona asked, crossing her arms like Kara, and tears welled up, tears of incoherent rage. "Kill them all."

"I am not burning down all my bridges, Iona," Kara scowled, her anger rising. Someone, maybe Chayna, said, "Uh oh." Continuing, Kara said, "Get yourself a grand old ship and do it yourself. I have way too many people to protect. Bridges not burned. Not yet. One day, maybe. No matter how badly I want to do it now. Think it through, Iona. Shit can get very bad for others. I'm not going there." Allie came over and carefully hugged Kara.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," Kara said. "What prompted this outburst?"

"Not wanting to put us all in danger no matter how you feel."

Kara smiled. "How'd you like your fledgie?"

"My what?"

"Oh shit!" Tarzy exclaimed. "Be right back!" She dashed out.

Kara was too startled and no one else knew quite what to say so the room was basically frozen until Tarzy returned, hiding something behind her back. She approached Allie and when the others saw what she had, they went, "Ohhh."

"What?" Allie asked Tarzy.

"This is what Kara got you before she got taken. And I rescued it where she dropped it, on accident, and I just forgot to give it to you. I'm sorry." She looked at Kara. "Sorry."

Kara rolled her eyes. "Allie, cover your eyes. No peeking."

Allie pressed her palms against her eyes and giggled. "Okay. It's dark. No peeking."

Tarzy smiled and handed Kara the nine-inch roundish yellow fledgie that looked like a cross between a bird and a bunny. It was hard to tell. On Earth, they resembled a brand of stuffed animal called Squishmallows.

"Open."

Allie opened her eyes and did the obligatory squeal of delight as she took the fledgie. "A bennie! I love bennies! Thank you!" She grabbed Kara around the neck and hugged her, still being careful. Then stepped back and hugged the toy to her chest.

And on that note, a soft dull thud pinged through the hull.

Everyone went, "What the fuck was that?"

Kara shot a sharp look at Val when the AI said, "Oh you did not just fire on my tail!" The avatar dematerialized.

"Battle State," Kara declared simply. "Iona, come with me to the bridge. Everyone else . . . um, follow."

CHAPTER 6: TEST FIRE



As she slowly made her way to the bridge, Kara realized that her sisters had no reaction to battle state. That meant they had forgotten . . . and it was admittedly understandable. She hadn't used the phrase since thinking of it five months earlier when they had brought Tarzy aboard as the last of the Nine. Kara found that wasn't at all upset; maybe they thought she had been kidding? She smirked at herself. What the hell had she been thinking, anyway? They weren't a government unit. They were their own . . .

Kara raised a brow at her own hubris.

Kara sighed. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

"Val?" she said to the air as she came to the end of corridor and had just one more short hall before the ramp up to the bridge.

"Captain?"

"Who, what, where?"

"We're being fired upon, if you can call it that, by the ships known to be operated by the members of the Lucien Alliance. There are eight of them. We are nearly surrounded. Our open avenue is thirty degrees southwest."

Kara nodded, thinking. "Execute escape, but no hyperspace. Make sure they chase us."

"Acknowledged."

Kara was heading up the ramp when Val loudly stated, *"Hold on to something."*

"Shit," Kara hissed as she held onto the rounded railing along the ramp. It didn't do any good as the ship turned a sharp forty-two-degree angle to the left without the gravity gens compensating. "What the fu—" Kara yelled as she fell on her ass and thudded hard against the opposite ramp wall, upside down with her boots over her head. "Val!"

"Sorry!" came the response.

She didn't sound sorry, Kara thought. But given that she was just dodging fire, presumably, she wouldn't have been sorry about dropping her crew on their asses. Kara snorted and giggled at the idea. "Why the fuck didn't the gens work?" she called out as she unwound herself and sat up. Iona came over and helped her to her feet.

"You might have busted that stitch," she said worriedly.

"If so, not much to do about it now. It'll wait. This shouldn't take long."

"Wanna fill in the rest of us?" Iona asked, with only a twinge of sarcasm.

Kara eyed her, realizing that Iona wasn't one of the other sisters. She had no idea that this was part of their world.

"In a minute. I'm not going to repeat myself, so I'll wait till everyone's on the bridge." She saw Nadia and Allie coming up behind. "You two okay?" Allie gave her a thumbs up.

"Bruised. And wondering what the hell that AI is doing," Nadia said grumpily as she straightened her long skirt.

"Don't worry," Kara said. "I'll be having a chat later." Her angry tone belied the stony control on her face, intimating that Val wasn't going to like that conversation. Her words seemed to mollify Nadia, as had been their intention.

On the bridge came a flurry of cussing as her sisters had been upended as well. Kara sighed. "Val, next time . . ."

"I apologize, everyone," Val broadcast. "I was dodging fire from five directions as I gained distance."

Kara pressed her hand against her lower left ribs and decided that maybe an elevator should be installed somewhere. And then she realized she could've just asked Val to beam her to the bridge. "Fuck."

"You're in pain," Iona complained, putting an arm around her. "Don't raise your arm to my shoulders. You'll pull on the abdominal muscles." With that, she showed how much strength she had by taking some of Kara's weight for her. Once settled in her command chair, Iona asked, "Okay, now, what the hell do we do?"

"Nothing," Raisa said. "We just watch. Kara's ship isn't the kind that needs a typical crew. We're just along for the ride."

Kara opened her mouth to berate but closed it. She then said, "You have more important jobs, Raisa. When we're done with this shit, time to have a crew meeting. Because you can't be the only one with that . . . resentment." She then muttered, "I did warn you guys. You weren't listening."

"They were listening," Iona said. "It's just one thing to be told, another to live."

"S'pose," Kara said. She sighed. "On screen please, Val."

"It's not resentment," Raisa said, sounding resentful. "It's uselessness. You know. Waiting."

"What she said," came several replies.

"Yeah, I know," said Kara. She raised her voice. "Team meeting sometime later. We got shit to straighten out. Right now, someone else needs straightening out."

On the viewscreen, it showed space in front of them. Then the screen switched to rearview. Eight ships followed. Four fired. They hit something on the ship that caused a kind of pink energy fluctuation that dissipated quickly.

"Did they just fire on us and nothing happened?" Tarzy asked.

"Pretty much," Kara said, and regretted that she hadn't told her sisters the whole truth about Val's emerging power.

"I didn't know the ship was that well defended," Lynessa said.

"Neither did I," said Val, as her avatar materialized in front of the viewscreen. She looked the same except her bodysuit now had silvery-white wings over the chest, the arms, and down the legs.

"You dressing for the occasion?" Kara asked.

Val shrugged. "We are seven light years away from Demeter's domain."

Kara nodded. "Find an appropriate spot for the tactical test fire."

Val actually jumped up and down like a kid getting a present. "Goody."

"What's going on?" Zee asked.

Kara winced, partly in pain. "When we were at Bubastis, SG-1's AI had a chat with Val. Since their AI was created by the Fae, she helped Val unlock the protocols that had gone dormant over millennia. And Val has been busy cataloguing what she might be able to do now but we haven't had a chance to test the regained systems. Now is as good a time as any."

"Well I hope that little maneuver that sent me crashing into a wall wasn't one of them," Saliyah said.

"I am so terribly sorry," Val said, and the earnestness was clear on her face. "Time out." She rematerialized as her cat form, this time with a diamond-studded collar with a pair of wings hanging from it.

"Cute," Kara said. "Enough fooling around. Human form, if you don't mind." Val reformed, running a hand over her hair in her preening fashion, but this time her brows were furrowed. "Don't pout," Kara went on. "Just accept, change, move on."

"Yes, Captain," Val said and clasped her hands in front of her as she waited for instructions.

Kara barely registered Val's response because she was looking through the viewscreen at the lead ship. "Is that Mateo's ship in front?"

"Yes," Val said.

"Who?" asked Kanira.

"The leader of the Lucien Alliance," both Kara and Iona said at the same time. Kara's brows rose. "You've met?" she asked Iona, who nodded. "Oh, please tell me you weren't a priestess of a House of Court when that happened."

"No. Jaffa priestess. On Demeter."

Kara grimaced. "Want him dead, do you?"

"I do."

Kara remembered Mateo's snide threat about making her a concubine. She hoped he remembered her response. But right now was not the time for reunions. She looked over her shoulder at Lynessa. "Did you throw away that blue indigo eyeshadow concoction that didn't quite work out?"

Lynessa shook her head as she sighed. "Wasted a lot of eyeshadow making that."

"Can you grab it please?"

"Sure—" Lynessa began, but Iona held up a hand as she put her other one over both of Kara's.

"No, stay here, Lynessa," Iona said, countermanding the request.

Lynessa automatically looked to Kara for confirmation, and the Captain of the Valkyrie nodded but with confusion.

"What's going on?" she asked Iona.

"It's time to develop a rep, Kara. No more hiding. No more evasions, no more running. Time to stand your ground . . . as the Valkyrie."

"What?"

"Oh my goddess, that's perfect!" Zee said, and everyone nodded vigorously. "You're a genius, Iona! And why the hell didn't any of us think of that?"

"Perfect? How? And explain what the hell Zee is on about?" Kara asked. She was deliberately resisting. She wasn't The Valkyrie.

"It's theater, Kara," Iona said. "Like my dress at the top of the stairs, to be the beacon, the one who invites, to make the client feel at home for a while. For you, it's no different. You're mirroring my own purpose, though not consciously. You're the beacon, the one who rescues, who takes the chains away. The Valkyrie. It's time to develop that rep." She pointed at the ships. "Those morons are gossip hounds. You couldn't ask for a better advertisement."

The others were nodding, and yet Kara resisted. She rolled her eyes. "There's no point in continuing a rebellion business if they know who you are and where you are and how easy it will be send thirty missiles at us from two light years away. Why in the world would I put my sisters in the way of that?"

Val stood by, eyes wide, surprised that Iona had just made Kara listen. For a moment, anyway.

"Do we get a say?" asked Tarzy.

"To put your lives at risk? No," Kara snapped instantly.

"You're not their mother, their commander, or their queen, Kara," Iona said.

There came a heavy silence permeating the room like a thick fog. Then Ahti said, "You have said the following to all of us Valkyries before we decided to stay aboard ship. Quote: 'There's just one rule. I'm the head of state. Final word is mine. If you can accept that, welcome. If you can't, then tell me how I can help you get a safe place to live.' "

Iona's brows rose as she registered the agreeing nods from the other eight. Then came the stubborn—and barely visible—grimace on Kara's face. "You told them that you're their queen-commander-captain? From the beginning. And now you're bitching that they see you that way—or am I projecting?"

Kara dug into her pocket, realized she'd left her watch in her room, and made an incoherent sound. "Can we pin this convo for later? I'm a little distracted." She kicked a booted toe at the viewscreen.

"Done," Iona said, turning to the Valkyries. "My new sisters. Do you have anything she can wear to present a . . . commanding statement? A uniform of sorts?"

"We made a uniform," Lynessa said.

"Yes, yes," Kara said, almost dismissively as she waved a hand—and winced as it pulled on abdominal muscles. "Shit," she said under her breath. "I've worn part of it."

"Um, that was one version," Lynessa said.

Raisa had left the bridge without Kara noticing, but Kara noticed her return as Raisa trotted back in carrying folded cloth. "Now, close your eyes and let's put this on. This is our final formal uniform look. I think."

The Valkyries nodded. "I love this," Zee said, passing her hand over the material as Raisa unfolded it.

It was similar in color and pattern to the previous uniform. But this one was dark silver with subdued matching brocade that had a hint of lavender. Kara caught her reflection in the front viewscreen. And on all the consoles. Val materialized a full-length pseudo mirror and Kara's brows shot up.

"Here," Zee said, and gave Kara her bracers.

Kara put them on, feeling somehow whole as she did. Her dark blue jeans complemented the shade of silver wings in the emblem across the chest of her new tunic.

She closed her eyes. "I hate it when you guys are right. But I now agree. I feel ..."

"Whole," Iona said, wonderingly. She gave that look to Lynessa and the others. "You guys have taste with a capital T."

The longer Kara had on the clothing, the more she fell in love with the design. "You all get bonuses," she quipped, knowing there was no such thing. All money earned was divided equally, and Lynessa would do the same with any outside commissions for clothing design. "Okay then," she said, sitting back down. "Now that I'm dressed for the occasion—"

"Wait, wait," Lynessa said. "Valkyries, let's go match our Captain."

And with that, they left and returned in ten minutes. They wore the same thing, only their tunics were black with silver wings.

"You still know how to smile," Iona teased Kara. "And let me also point out that they, at various times, have called you Captain and Boss. You rescued them. No one else would have. Take the leadership and run with it, Kara. You're the queen of the Valkyries now. Time to craft that into a reputation that burns."

Kara's mouth dropped open slightly as she mouthed, "Ohh." She smoothed the tunic and said, "Val, put them through. I see they've been pinging us."

"Yes, boss," she said deliberately.

"Smartass."

"Meow," Val said, before turning into her holographic cat form and walking through a wall.

"Show off," Kara mumbled.

On the viewscreen appeared a man in his thirties or early forties, handsome, with eastern-European-like flavoring. He had short hair with a receding hairline that didn't look too bad on him. He had full lips that curved to the sensual and large dark eyes with long lashes. He was kitten material and only the dumbest cat would mistake him for cuddly. He wore a drab, somewhat austere uniform in subdued grays and browns. Kara was tempted to tell him where he could get a good tailor, but the problem wasn't a fashion fuckup. It was him. Bad boys had their uses, but Kara had no use for them. It was still mind-boggling that Zee continued to see that dumb bastard on Dakara. Pretty face, bad manners, but sooner or later, the psycho shows up.

Case in point. Mateo Zuwani.

She'd done several jobs for him while making money to get her ship. And there was the one time she had to spend the night on his space station in order to wait for a package he wanted to pass on to someone else. And she'd deigned to have dinner with him out of sheer curiosity, however twisted the curiosity. And he still held it against her for dumping his ass on the floor of the restaurant when he described how he'd fuck her. Between lovers, that would've been titillatingly appropriate. Between acquaintances who couldn't stand each other? Tantamount to a rape threat.

Looking down at him as he'd scowled up at her, she'd said, "You were doing so well. And then you went there. Damn shame. Someone who looks like you shouldn't be like that. But here we are. Find another courier, Zuwani. We're done."

When some of his men tried to stop her from leaving, she'd pulled her laser pistol and would have fired if Mateo hadn't told them to stand down. She suspected that if they'd been in private when she'd dumped him on his ass, he wouldn't have been pissed. But his men had seen. She also suspected that if it

hadn't been for her height, she'd have had to deal with him a lot sooner. She was taller than most of his men, including Mateo.

When he appeared onscreen, his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Kara. You're the captain?"

"Clearly," she said, instantly bored. "Why are you firing at me?"

"Why'd you run?" he said evasively.

"I won't ask again."

He crossed his arms, appearing amused. She knew he wasn't. "You have taken something from Demeter, and I'm here to retrieve it."

Kara's smirk turned brittle. "Short and to the point and not gonna happen. I was retrieving something that was stolen from me. I'm not giving it back because it was never Demeter's to begin with. And you can dumb bitch I said so. Now, since the God'uld never make anything and all they ever do is steal shit, I think I'm well justified. You can just go along with this, or . . . we can start trying to blow each other to smithereens. What do you think?"

He frowned. "Smithereens?"

Her mouth quirked. "A slang word from the Tau'ri."

He leaned back in his command chair. "You've been hanging around SG-1."

"Indeed," she said deliberately.

He considered her for a moment, then tapped the mute button and turned to talk to his crew without so much as an "Excuse me" courtesy.

"Val, can you hear what they're saying?"

"Yes. He's asking what anyone knows about a) what you've been up to and where the hell did you get that ship, and b) why the hell is SG-1 in their . . . neck of the woods?"

Kara snorted. "Well done, Val." She preened. "What do you want to test first? He's just stalling so that he can surprise me with lethal munitions, and then I'm supposed to flail and panic and act like a maiden in the milkhouse."

Iona let out a belly laugh of amusement.

Kara remembered the first time she'd made Iona laugh like that. It was one of the only times when she could actually believe that someone thought kindly of her instead of suspiciously. A belly laugh like that was nothing but fondness in a truly happy sound. And now Iona was at the point where the laugh had turned into a seizure where she kept thinking of something connected and it just kept the laugh going.

"Your stomach muscles are gonna be sore."

"Can we talk about the odd juxtaposition of laughing and joking while at the same time possibly facing down the destruction of another ship—or ships?" Val asked, partially killing the mood.

"Oh lighten up, Val," Iona said, wiping at her eyes. "You don't know these people. Their demise would be a celebration. All they do is inflict pain on others and make money by doing it. The only difference between them and the Goa'uld is a matter of power and method."

"Understood," Val said, miffed.

"Goddess almighty, save me from the drama queens," Kara said with a long sigh. "Wanna check in on their conversation, Val?"

"They're planning on moving around us, pretending to leave, then a few of their ships will exit hyperspace and we'll be surrounded by fifteen ships. And he won't bother about getting Iona back. He'll order them to fire until we explode."

Horror now visited the faces of the Valkyries, but both Kara and Iona simply nodded and rolled their eyes. They weren't surprised. As Kara had outlined, they expected it.

"So, as I was saying, what would you like to test first?"

Val materialized as her humanoid avatar and was dressed in her newly accented bodysuit, black but with muted white wings on the chest, upper back, and outer thighs. "Hyper-velocity laser tag."

Kara snorted. "It needs to be a deterrent, Val, not an invitation."

"Then stop acting as if you like this man."

Kara sputtered with clear disgust. "He's a useful idiot, Val, nothing more, nothing less. Now, since you're not answering, leaving it up to me to choose something serious but non-lethal, I'd say . . ." She peered at the bridge of his ship. He wasn't in the command chair anymore. He'd gone off screen. "What's the point of that?" she muttered to herself.

Mateo came back onscreen looking smug, like he'd just been handed a winning hand and couldn't wait to start gloating.

Kara leaned forward slightly, resting her forearms on the console, humoring him. She tilted her head. "Do you want me to put you on the floor again?"

That wiped the smirk off his face. He gave her the look that tended to freeze the blood in Jaffa the universe over. "That was an attack out of the blue," he said. "I didn't expect it. That's the only reason you got me down in the first place."

"Oh brother. Little-dick energy."

He stared at her, thrown off by the odd phrase. "What?"

She raised her pinky and gave it a small, deliberate waggle. "You described it to me, remember? I'm guessing actual size is about this."

"I don't understand," he said. "What does . . . dick mean?"

"It's a Tau'ri slang term. Not common out here," she said. "But trust me, Mateo. You embody it."

"Very funny. It's no doubt something emasculating. Thank you, Easteman. I can always count on you to be an insufferable ass."

Kara smiled and leaned forward. "Takes one to know one." Another idiom from Jack O'Neill. He kept sending them to her, ostensibly to get a silent kick as he imagined her response.

Mateo wasn't amused. "Bitch."

"Thanks, Jack," she muttered to herself in a low tone. "I owe you one."

Val's voice came over the comm. "Captain, the other ships are charging weapons."

Kara didn't look away from Mateo. "Disable them. All of them. Except his."

Mateo shot out of his chair. "What are you doing?"

The Valkyrie shifted course, moving in a wide, smooth arc around the enemy fleet—three-quarters of a circle, perfectly level with the local tactical plane. A clean, deliberate maneuver.

"Verified," he said, and sat down, reaching for a handle similar to a joystick. "Let's play." He began firing. His ship had a lot more power and it wasn't run by anything the Goa'uld had stolen. This one ran on ion plasma. One could tell because of the transparent blue afterglow which followed each explosion against Val's shielding. Its shielding began to degrade slightly.

"How long before he makes a good dent?" Kara asked, then looked up and widened her eyes briefly. Val had gone translucent, her green eyes iridescent. "Hello?" Kara nudged.

Val said, her tone inflectionless, "Two thousand six hundred forty-three Tau'ri days."

"And in our . . . neck of the woods?" Kara asked, her smirk a little tight.

"Two thousand six hundred thirty-four Dakaran days. Would you like me to list the other major planetary timetables?" Val asked.

"Unnecessary," Kara said, eyeballing Mateo, who'd disappeared behind a lot of smoke. Kara tapped the front of the communications console and a drawer opened. She pulled out a portable microphone and plugged it into the comm station. It would feed directly into Mateo's console; a quick and dirty hack of frequency modulation. "Give it a rest. That means stop before you break something."

The idiot stopped firing.

"I'll make you a deal," she said.

"At the moment, I'm listening," he said.

"You stay out of my way, I'll stay out of yours. That's all. We meet again in space, all bets are off. But if we stay out of each other's way . . ." She let the obvious hang in the air.

"Why?" he asked, scowling.

"In case it hasn't yet dawned in that tiny mind of yours, I'm not like you. I actually care about people."

"Since when?" he asked.

"Since always," she said. "What you've seen up to now has been a lie, cultivated to keep me out of trouble."

"Afraid of getting raped?" he asked bluntly.

"No. Afraid of killing those who'll try. Can't earn a decent rep if you're killing off your enemy list."

He actually smirked. "But you'd earn another rep. One I should've thought you'd prefer to cultivate: Bad-ass bitch of the universe."

She smirked back. "That's Captain Bitch of the Universe, Dickhead. Do we have an agreement?"

"For?" he asked.

"Stay out of my way."

"Agreed."

She gave him a disgusted grin, which was a feat all by itself, and he went off the screen.

Zee lay on her stomach on the carpeting behind Kara's chair and consoles, her legs bent, ankles crossed. She unwrapped a piece of candy that resembled caramel, popped it into her mouth, and said, "Why do the bad guys have to be so goddamn good looking?"

"Oh my goddess, right?" said Raisa.

That began a crosstalk conversation that Kara desperately wanted to escape until the question was thrown her way.

"C'mon, boss. Why do you think?" Zee asked her with a goading grin.

While staring at Zee, Kara said to Val, who'd returned to normal appearance, "Hyperspace. Dakara."

"Yes, boss," Val said, smiling.

Kara pursed her lips in a sour smirk. "For the same reason that some pretty flowers are poisonous, Zee. They're there to teach, not for us to play with." That elicited understanding laughter, including from Zee. "Now, tell me, Val," Kara asked her as they entered hyperspace six seconds later. "Why'd you go translucent on me?"

"I was committing . . . espionage. I hacked his computer."

Iona and the Valkyries started laughing. "You two are one, that's for sure," Iona said. "Now, can we have a proper reunion? Fix me something to eat. I'm starving." She swiped playfully at Kara's chin, making the woman instantly melt.

"Damn you," she said with a tight pained smile and took Iona's hand. "C'mon. I need a crutch. And it's time for my salve. Val, we'll discuss what you found out later."

"Acknowledged."

As Iona helped her leave the bridge, Tarzy asked from behind them, "Cap, why didn't you blow him away? That would've secured your rep so no one would mess with you."

Kara paused and pursed her lips again. She looked around the bridge. "Did you guys actually want that?"

"Dodge," Tarzy said. "Please answer."

"Don't be a bitch," Iona said, coming to Kara's defense unnecessarily.

Kara held up a hand. "She wasn't, Iona. Don't be alarmed by the way we talk to each other. It's earned respect and admiration that lets us be blunt with each other and not offend. We fuck up once in a while but learn."

Iona looked at her thoughtfully and nodded. "Okay." To Tarzy she said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to . . . well, yes, I did. I thought she was being attacked. But I apologize for offending you."

"You didn't, since I know where it came from."

"Boss," Zee said. It was a reminder.

"Why not kill him and his crew of rapists? Because that's not the rep I want. Build a rescue one first, then get away with a little killing. Don't do the killing first or people will never trust you—not the ones you want trusting you. I'm no mercenary."

"No," Iona said. "You're my hero."

"Oh goddess, kill me now." Knowing smiles watched them as they left the bridge and Kara winced as she leaned on Iona. As they made their way to her apartment, Kara said, "Speaking of killing . . . I have . . . a lot of rage, Iona."

"I know. I saw it back then."

"Well, there's going to come a time when I will cut loose. That's going to be a very dark day."

"Kill?" Iona asked.

Kara nodded slowly. "A very dark day."

"Why anticipate it?"

"I know me and I know this universe. It loves to test me. It's gonna find out that's a very bad idea."

"Why have you gone so dark, Kara?" Iona asked as they entered her apartment.

Kara went to the bathroom and retrieved her jar of salve. Iona had followed and she took the jar from her. "Just drop the top of the tunic."

Kara smirked sardonically in the mirror at Iona as the woman began to apply the salve to Kara's small, puckered scars along her shoulders and neck. The smirk faded as she dropped her gaze to stare into the sink. "You. Disappearing."

Iona paused, then took a deep breath and kept applying the salve. Tears sprang to her eyes but didn't drop. "I'm so sorry."

Kara took a deep breath of her own and let it out slowly. "I know. But thanks. But you misunderstand. It's not at you. It's at who made you run. I want that bitch dead, Iona. And I wanted to blow that planet to bits. But there are other people there who're innocent. I can't have their murders on my conscience."

Iona pressed her lips together, almost stubbornly, but nodded.

Looking at her from the bathroom mirror, Kara noticed the necklace. A few tears fell. "You managed to keep it."

Iona followed her gaze, again from the mirror. "Took a good beating to keep it. Took another to resist letting them dip it in gold. I should've been dead ten times over from the number of times I said no to things. But that bitch Demeter likes how I look. I almost..."

She swallowed.

"Once, I was in the kitchens and had a skinning knife in hand and a carcass of dah'bra on a table in front of me. I looked at the skinning knife and thought, it would be so easy to carve up my face." Kara didn't dare interrupt. She just stared in horror. "But I didn't do it for one reason. The ugly ones are turned into slut meat for the outer planets. I would blow up the planet with everyone on it to avoid that fate." She suddenly half-laughed with tears in her throat. "So what does that make me?"

"Human," Kara said. "Makes you like me. Don't overthink it. It is what it is, as the Tau'ri say. My dark is there, caused by those experiments and the slavery that followed." Iona raised a brow. "Bastet. Assistant. Anyway, yours is caused by your own horrors. The dark is there to stay. We have no choice but to accept it or go mad. I suppose the latter would be easier."

"It's not in you anyway," Iona said.

Kara softly smiled. "No. It isn't. I was a little mad when you found me, and you did your best to rid me of it."

Iona sighed. "And then I disappeared and ruined it all."

Kara just nodded. "You make do with what's left, Iona. We both know that one." She reached up over her shoulder and grabbed the woman's free hand and squeezed. Iona squeezed back, hard, and that's when she let the teardrops fall.

Then Kara shuddered. "Dip it in gold? Death first."

They both laughed through leftover tears. The best kind.

Mincy's Restorative

~

Jar of Salve



CHAPTER 7: BURNING THROUGH ARMOR

Dakara again.

“Like a favorite bar,” Saliyah had said.

Similar sentiments had come from the others before Val had beamed them downstairs. Kara sat in her command chair, looking through the viewscreen at the planet below. They were in a geosynchronous orbit over the central city, which she’d been informed was now called Temple Da’ka’ra, using the ancient inflections. Kara shook her head. Always something old with these people, then snorted to herself because she wasn’t exactly attracted to the Valkyrie for its newness.

She was attracted to the Valkyrie for her mythic power and size. Mythic in that only legends remain of the power of the Ancients—based solely on the toys they left behind that took a genius to figure out. And if they were the descendants of the Ancients—Alterans, as they were presumably called—then why weren’t they smart enough to work the machines left behind? Answer was obvious: they were, in fact, descendants of the humans that came after them, and from what Kara had learned over the years, that planet of origin was Earth. Tau’ri. Which meant First World in Chulakian Goa’uld.

Her mind kept circling back to the names the Valkyries had for this damn place filled with Jaffa. None of them had been “home,” and for that, she blew out a breath of relief. The moment one of them referred to another place as home, she’d soon lose that person as part of her home in the sky.

Nadia’s footsteps warned her of another presence, and Kara looked over her shoulder, then turned the chair around.

"Hey you."

"Hey you."

"What's up?" Kara asked.

"Just thought I'd warn you about Iona," Nadia said carefully.

Kara scowled. "In what way?"

"Nothing . . . diabolical or threatening. Just . . . she's the romantic sort, isn't she?" Nadia asked, her tone seeking verification, not opinion.

"Yeah, she is," Kara said wistfully and with half a smile, as if the trait were something regrettable.

Nadia nodded slowly, hoping the captain would pick up the train of thought. When Kara didn't, Nadia figured she had her mind focused on other things.

"Out with it," Kara said slowly and warily.

"She's gone below," Nadia said.

"Yes, I know. And?"

"And Kane is there."

Kara's mouth dropped open. "No, no, she wouldn't."

"I think she would. She's got that matchmaker virus."

Kara got out of her chair and approached the viewscreen, looking down at the terrain of the planet. "No, no. Oh no, no, no, bitch, you can't be serious," Kara growled to the woman who wasn't there. Then over her shoulder said, "Sorry, not you."

"I know that," Nadia said with a sympathetic grin. "So what're you gonna do?"

"I don't know," Kara sighed and sat back down. "Think for a while."

"I'll leave you to it," Nadia said and left.

When she couldn't hear her steps anymore, Kara said to the ceiling, "Why the hell didn't you warn me?"

Val's voice on the intercom sounded somehow sheepish. "She told me not to."

"Oh perfect. My own AI is taking orders from someone else."

She swerved her chair toward the scanning console and reached for the transportation beam controls.

Val appeared as her avatar and solidified, reaching over Kara's shoulder to gently grasp the woman's forearm, applying slight pressure to make Kara stop what she was doing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kara snapped.

"That is my question to you," Val snapped back, pulling Kara's arm away from the console. "You are deliberately trying to push her away as punishment for vanishing. Stop."

"I am not trying to push her away," Kara objected, rubbing her arm when Val let go. "Sit the fuck down, cat."

"Meow," Val said, and morphed into the black cat avatar. Its tail sparkled as it wrapped around her feet when she sat down on the back of the opposite console array. She blinked once, then gave Kara a baleful stare.

"Get off the console," Kara ordered, then turned away from the cat, knowing it had ignored her. "Fine. I won't beam her out of there. But if he shows up with her and with a hopeful look on his face, I'll kill them both."

"Meow," Val said flatly, and disappeared in a flicker of sparkles.

Kara wondered how she could master that art of saying everything in one word. Well, other than fuck. Handy word, that. She'd picked it up on Wallatchi Seven, watching a Tau'ri team survey the area. Those Tau'ri. They did have some special things going for them. The least of which was inventive cuss words and phrases.

Val reappeared in the doorway, followed by Zee, Tarzy, and the other seven. All the cat had done to get them to follow her was sit on the kitchen threshold for two seconds before turning around and walking away.

"Now what?" Kara asked, narrowing her eyes at the cat. "Telling on me, huh?"

"What's happened?" Tarzy asked.

"Iona's busy interfering," Kara sighed. "So I was going to . . . beam her out of there."

"Oh my goddess," Saliyah gasped. "Kara, you can't do that."

"Why the hell not?" Kara asked. "It's my goddamn ship."

"Uh oh," said Chayna.

"Yep," said Dusti.

And as one unit, the Valkyries made themselves scarce . . . except for Zee, who couldn't look away. "Boss?" she said, just as Iona and Kane were heard walking down the wide corridor.

Kara recognized the steps. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is so fucking humiliating." She looked at Zee. "I don't have a love life and yet it's already everyone else's goddamn business."

Zee winced. "Just here in case you need backup?"

"What part of this looks like I need backup?" Kara asked, a snarl in her voice. When Kane and Iona appeared in the doorway, Kara shook her head. She pointed at Iona. "You are in deep shit, Missy."

"Missy?" Iona asked, affronted. To her, the name was for someone under twelve.

Kara pushed herself out of the chair and grimaced when her knife wound protested. She pointed at Kane. "You and I are gonna have this out right now."

"Fine," he said, though he looked like he'd rather leave and never come back.

As Kane followed her, he didn't smirk or smile or find anything amusing about her. Thank the goddess. Kara wasn't amused. She was horrified. And now, she had to show him. It was the only way. Telling him wouldn't do shit.

They reached her apartment and the moment the door closed behind them, Kara dropped her army jacket on the floor, keeping her back to Kane. She then followed it by gingerly crossing both arms to grab the hem of her t-shirt and she pulled it up and off.

"What're you doing?" Kane asked, stepping away from the door.

"Don't get excited," she said, turning around. She unsnapped the breast binder at the front and pulled it off, revealing modest but not quite boyish breasts. She then unbuckled her jeans and kicked off her boots. She left them in a pile but kept her panties on. She wasn't going to show him her minimal amount of bush. No need for that business since the point—to show her scars—didn't reach there. She did, however, slide her fingers over the lip of the panties and pull them into the crack of her ass. Tiny puckers dotted her squarish, muscular rear end.

She held her arms straight out to her sides, parallel to the ground, as she faced him, displaying herself. "I have these puckered scars," she said, fighting off the tremor in her throat. "They were caused by a scorpion. Over six years. They caused nerve damage, not just ugliness."

She could see he was listening, but his eyes kept going to her breasts. On Earth, she'd barely make a B-cup, but they were well-rounded with tiny pink nipples that she herself found adorable. And that was something she would never tell another soul. Right now, she would tell him to stop staring but she was, after all, a beautiful woman—no sense hedging that one—and she had a decent body because she exercised and ate the right things when she could. Plus, she'd been gifted great genes. Genes that had been messed with, apparently, given the odd superspeed and immunity from fire.

She stepped closer to him when he didn't seem to understand what she was talking about, and close enough for him to see the puckered scars the size of an Earth dime, with each center a pinkish discoloration despite the passage of time.

"I have to use a salve on most of them," she said, pointing to her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her waist, her upper back, and her thighs. "The nerve damage. It will drive me insane until the salve is applied. That generally means I become the foremost Homicidal Bitch of the Universe. This is not something I am willing to share with a lover on a lifetime basis no matter how much I want to. I'm never going to have sex with someone again and have that orgasm interrupted by severe shock and pain and the twitching of the nerves when one of those goddamn things go off. It's happened many times. And frustration isn't the word for it." She paused. "I'm so tired of it." Her voice fell several octaves, becoming deeper and quieter. "For someone like you, it would be agony."

"Someone like me?" he asked, desperately telling himself not to assume.

"I know you're the one," she said, swallowing hard. "I know you'll never hurt me, betray me, abandon me. Not on purpose anyway. You'll love me till the day you die. And because of that, it would be *terrifying* to be intimate with you and have this shit interrupt what I assume would be a . . ." She swallowed again.

He frowned as he met her eyes and kept his gaze there. "Then apply salve and start over until you get what you want," he said as politely as he knew how.

"Give me some credit please," she said tiredly as she turned and headed for her bathroom to grab her robe. "It's not like I haven't thought of that, Kane."

He grimaced. "I'm sorry, Kara."

He was then silent as she turned on the water faucet and washed her hands. When she rearranged her robe and left the bathroom, he'd still been quiet—although to be fair, he always was. But she found out why almost immediately.

He was naked, his own arms held out wide, just as she had done.

For a brief second, she nearly exploded with anger over his presumption but when she took in all of him, she found out that his display was to show her what he thought of as his own horror. He was a beautiful man, she thought. Perfect, but for the long diagonal angry scar that had clearly been made by a sword. More specifically, the Punishing Sword.

She knew exactly what that kind of sword was for and what it did to the man on the business end. Furthermore, what it took away. His symbiotic pouch for the primta was gone. No baby parasite. By all rights, he should be dead, but what the sword's function was, other than inflict outer harm, was to seal the pouch and force the creature, once matured, to die inside of him, and as an act of spite, it would kill the host as it died.

So why wasn't he dead?

"I'm sorry," she blurted out as she grew closer, then came the sight of his limp cock and she swallowed hard against rising lust in herself and turned slightly away so she couldn't see it.

"So was I," he said with a light powdering of humor.

"No offense, but it isn't as bad as you think, given the rest of you." She cleared her throat.

"If you don't mind me repeating that back to you," he said.

She half-smiled. "The Tau'ri have a wonderful phrase for that. It's *right backatcha*." She was deflecting; she didn't care.

"Right backatcha," he said. "None of us are perfect, Kara. We all have our scars and our horrors that'll be there until we die."

"Yeah," she agreed, then met his gaze. "About that. Why aren't you dead?"

He'd been keeping his arms up but now he dropped them as he bent to pick up his clothes and redress himself. "Bastet, my former lord, didn't want me dead. She had me put into the sarcophagus and kept alive until my body got used to being without the parasite."

She turned away from him and put a sofa between them. "One less tie to the God'uld."

"Tell me why we can't give it a try," he said flatly.

"Weren't you listening? In addition, so I can satisfy hormonal craving, I see a Court man once in a while and that's all I'm capable of having."

He blinked. "You see . . ." It took him a moment of self-immolation inside his own head that he had no damn right to be jealous. If he could do it, so could she. "Okay, I see that. But what about . . ." He started to offer just friendship, but it would've been a lie.

"Weird look on your face," she said, and grabbed her clothes. She paused on the way to the bathroom. "What is it?"

"Where do we go from here?" he asked.

When she got to the bathroom, several scars began their nerve ending twitch and the muscles of her body tightened up. Stress did it every time. She retrieved a jar of salve from a vanity drawer and paused just outside the bathroom door to quickly apply a dab of salve to a spot just behind her neck where it met the trapezius muscle. She closed her eyes, gritting her teeth as she rubbed it in, hating the feeling of the rough scaly patch that was the result of a scorpion's stinger.

She was visibly changed, Kane saw. Her body language was sending out danger signals. It was Don't Fuck with the Woman territory. Although she always sent out some form of that message, this one was more along the lines of "the result will be the difference between a nuke and a firecracker."

She wagged the small blue jar in her hand. Her eyes were still closed. "One second. I have a medical issue to take care of."

"Not a problem," he said.

His voice was close and her eyes flew open as he moved around behind her and held out his hand next to the one holding the jar. She was so surprised, and taken with the gesture, that she handed it over. And then, to cap it off, he began to

rub the salve into every stinger scar on her neck and shoulders. And he used his thumb, anchoring his other fingers over her skin to better apply the salve.

Kara found herself in unknown, uncharted waters. Not since escaping Isis had she felt that, and this version of it was far more preferable. Except she still didn't know how to handle it without fucking it up with anger.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked, then made a face—he couldn't see it—and amended, "I mean, I can do this myself."

"And I'm showing you that you don't have to handle this shit by yourself. You're fully capable, and I'm not saying that you aren't. Not at all. I'm saying, it's okay to have an extra hand."

"Right," she said, wrinkling her brow. More uncharted territory. No one had ever treated her this way. Treated her scars this way. Everyone veered away. Except Kane. She almost teared up and cleared her throat instead when he moved to the scars just inside the line of her hair at the top of her neck. "Where do we go from here?" she asked.

"Your call," he said.

She sighed with a half-smile. "Okay. Um. How about . . ." She had no idea what to say until her eyes landed on the coffee table, its surface still containing a few used, empty plates and service-ware. "Oh, I know. We start with a proper ritual."

"Ritual huh?" he asked, moving to her left shoulder's joint. When finished, he held the jar out.

Kara took it from him and resealed it with the corked lid. She stared into his eyes, finding it amusing that they were nearly the same height, and said, "A date."

"A date?" he said, brows rising.

"That standby in courtship rituals of old, right?" she asked, turning to put away the jar. "I've actually never been on one." She caught the look of surprise and the

slow smile on his face when she returned. He was in the middle of putting on his shirt. "What?" she asked, fully prepared to learn she'd read him all wrong.

"You're brilliant. I love that idea. We can set up all the arrangements. I don't think this should be a surprise. Better to have known favorites so we can relax."

She smiled, fully surprised in fact. "Deal." She felt flustered and to cover it she gestured behind her at the bathroom. "And thanks."

"You're welcome. Just let me know where and when." He started to move to the door but his feet wouldn't budge. His stomach twisted, yet he somehow managed to keep it off his face. To his dismay, Kara noticed anyway.

"What?"

"I'm not really the kind of guy who ignores feelings."

"I got that," she said, listening.

"I'm also the kind of guy who loves to flirt and build up the sexual tension. But there's usually a point, a pay-off, for the latter, if you'll forgive the crudity."

"Forgiven," she said, and a slow smile tried to spread across her face but to her utter horror and surprise, she became . . . shy. It was so antithetical to who she was that it rendered her speechless.

Kane frowned out of curiosity but when he saw the blush rise on her high cheekbones, he wondered if he hadn't pushed it too far. "Time to say, 'fuck it and find out,'" he whispered, and he hadn't meant to say it aloud. At all.

She raised an eyebrow and didn't move or say a word.

He reached out and tentatively took her right hand in his fingers, and when she didn't pull away, he laced their fingers together and brought her hand to his chest. He then stepped in, carefully watching her the entire time.

As if she was the Panther. And he was the male, looking for interest.

She didn't signal hostility. Not yet.

He bent his head slightly upward and kept his eyes open as he brought his lips to hers. She pursed hers first in response. Then lust took hold of him. Love intervened and kept him from fucking it up, but he slid his arm around her waist as he pressed his lips more firmly against hers and then parted them just a little. And waited. When she half smiled against his lips, and didn't part her lips for an open kiss, he smiled back and withdrew slowly.

"Thank you," he said, the whisper deliberate this time.

"You're welcome," she said, a little louder. "If the date goes well, I may just offer tongue."

He groaned dramatically and her small smile turned broad. "You agreed."

"Never would I break that," he said. He turned and headed for the door. "And just so you know, that wasn't meant to be flirting," he said, meeting her intense gaze. "The salve. I hated to see you hurting. The flirting part just ended up as a bonus." He smiled crookedly. "Good night."

She just nodded at him as he left. Her mouth hung open as shock set in. The first time ever that shock was a pleasant experience.

She stood in her apartment and marveled at the banter they'd so easily adopted. That she had so easily adopted. And his lips were so warm. Tasted divine. And she'd damn-near lost control. But didn't. When she did, goddess help the man.

She knew he was the one. While he scared her anyway, the risk was going to be taken. It had to be. It was time. After losing Iona, she had always avoided everything that even threatened to become something she could lose. For years, that had become a fact of her life.

But then she'd found Valkyrie.

And then her sisters.

And then Kane.

And finally, Iona again.

Couldn't she now let that fear go?

Yes, but it was dug in deep and would take a while.

"Fine," she whispered to herself. "Challenge accepted. And I will win."

CHAPTER 8: GIFTS

"Iona," Kara said with irritation. "I know why. It just boggles my mind that you felt the need to interfere ..." She waved a negligent hand as if the rest of what she'd say was obvious and sat down on the long bench that hugged one wall of the kitchen's dining area. She nudged Iona with her knee as she sat back and spooned some breakfast into her mouth. On Earth, Daniel Jackson would've called it granola and milk. In Kara's side of the galaxy, it was *quatrine*.

At the far end of the long table sat the rest of the Valkyries, having their own conversations at the same time as they served each other eggs, plus a meat similar to bacon, a vegetable side dish that sort of looked like coleslaw except it was purple and blue with a light blue sauce, and a fruit juice like orange juice, except it was pale green.

Kara gestured with her spoon. "Dusti, pass me the—whatever we're calling the cabbage gruel."

The bowl made its way down the table, passed from hand to hand—some nicked, some wrapped in gauze or bandages. It was somehow a quiet reminder of what they've just come through. Not so much physically as the emotional toil. That always needed processing.

Kara noticed an odd look on Iona's face. "What's the matter?"

"I've been in touch with the House."

Kara nodded. "I expected you would. Do you want to go home?"

Thanks to Tarzy answering questions about Court life, all the Valkyries perked up at the noun Kara used. They were already home. How could Iona call any other place home?

"Yes," Iona said slowly. "Rafe is head of the House in Mimosa's place. She's pregnant and married." She shook her head. "I want to be there. Need to be there." She sounded sad.

"What is it?" Kara asked.

"Rafe . . . has bonded his other client. He had only two. You and her. You were the only reason he stayed."

Kara stared in horror. "What? How? He never said anything."

"He's not supposed to, Kara. Court trains that way. Keep your work life and home feelings separate. Unless they conflict with your morals and ethics, it's easy to do. But when you begin to fall in love with one of your clients, you have to switch, immediately. It is doomed from the start. 99% of those relationships don't last and all of us have seen that over and over."

"I suppose," Kara said with a sigh. "Married," she repeated and shook her head because that man . . . couldn't be bonded. He just couldn't be. "That's insane," Kara said, frowning because it made zero sense to her.

"Only because you have no idea what it's like to be Court," Iona said simply.

"But how can he still see clients?"

"Because it's up to him, not his Para."

"Yeah, I know but . . ." Kara shook her head. "You're right. I don't get it because I'm not Court."

"No, you don't get it because you loved him, Kara. Still do."

Kara waved away the comment as if love was a gnat. "Whatever."

"Did you want to see him when we get there?"

Kara frowned. "You really wanna go home, huh?"

Iona frowned in return. "Yes. Home."

The word hung in the air like a sacred talisman.

"Home," Kara finally whispered. "I would too if I had one. Forget the question." Iona grinned at her knowingly.

"To everyone getting a healthy lay," Tarzy said, getting laughter and raised mugs. Iona smiled. "Cazhua."

"Cazhua," they all said.

Val came in at that moment and she paused, a comm tablet in her hands. Her brows furrowed. "Conundrum," she said, confusing everyone until she followed it with, "What is the purpose of using that word? It literally means ball of moss in Chulakian."

"It's a . . ." Iona began, pausing.

"It's . . ." Tarzy began.

Kara said, "It's like a really nice cuss word for putting a blessing on a thing. No, it makes no sense. That's why everyone loves the word. It's just perfect."

"Humans are so weird sometimes," Val said, confused. She abruptly cleared the emotion from her face and waggled the comm tablet. "I have a message here from Doctor Daniel Jackson, SG-1. And he says, *'I found the Valkyrie for you. And someone else besides. They're gifts from me about two legendary warrior women from Earth.'*"

Kara asks, "Gifts? In what way?"

Val says, "He's sent pictures of two paintings. Daniel says, *'The first one is called The Valkyrie. The Legendary Warrior Goddess who ferries the heroic dead to Valhalla. You can't get to this place without her. It's a place where your soul lives and parties until the end of time. Sounds like Tuesday night at O'Malley's around here. It's, um, a restaurant and bar near the base.'*"

"Okay," Kara said. "Let's see them."

"Okay." Val swiped the tablet, casting the image's link onto the holoscreen that appeared at the same time.

What was on the screen, approximately seventy-two inches wide and fifty-six inches tall, had all the Valkyries scrambling over or around the table. Dishes clattered, utensils dropped to the floor.

“What the fuck?” Raisa said reverently.

It hadn’t been a real myth or legend in their minds until now.



“Look at all the fine detail,” Raisa said. “Amazing it’s still detailed after going through the network.”

Kara stared at it and moved closer until she was nearly nose-to-screen. She tapped part of the screen and the image zoomed in on the face and hair and part

of the wing. "It's beautiful," she said, shaking her head. "Gorgeous." She thought about hanging a replica in her quarters, but it would look better in the kitchen. "Val, we need another holographic hookup for a frame to hang in here. That picture belongs out here, not hidden in what the Tau'ri call *email*."

"Perfect," Lynessa said, making a frame with her hands as she checked around the room. She then dropped her hands in disgust. "We need a facsimile of a window with sunshine or rain or whatever. Some simulation about the real world and not the vacuum of space. I used to be an interior designer and designing in space is a pain in the ass."

"Cazhua," Chayna and Dusti said, raising their mugs when they sat back down.

"Ohh," Val said in an *I get it now* tone about the word they'd used. But it was also as if their complaint reminded her of something else. Because it did. On the wall opposite the nook booth's seating, the blank walls darkened, then *drew* the same lines at the same time on either wall. When finished, they were two rounded rectangular borders. Then holo displays manifested two aquariums.

"Cazhua," said Lynessa reverently. The other agreed—although Kara was less impressed and stayed with the painting.

Val preened anyway.

"What's the second painting?" Kara asked.

"He says . . ." Val began, searching for the text. "*The second painting is of another goddess warrior. She's a favorite myth that over time has been so portrayed in art and film (we can talk about that latter term another time)* – "

"What term?" Tarzy asked.

"Film," Iona said.

"Oh."

Val continued. *"'... that she has blended with another myth that was created by a man with the original in mind. And now it's difficult to tell the difference between the two. In my opinion, it doesn't matter. She's become a new myth.'"*

Val swiped again and the second painting adjusted in the holographic frame. It was seventy-two inches tall and forty-eight inches wide in a portrait aspect.

"Whoa," came the collective response.

Kara sat there with her mouth open. "She's beautiful," she whispered.

Iona said, her voice also hushed. "That's you, Kara."

"Don't be stupid," Kara said, but then she saw a few things she and the subject of the painting had in common. She tilted her head, examining the artwork.

Iona smiled knowingly. "Take some tea, Kara. You're getting excited." Everyone laughed, including Kara, but she contradicted herself and everyone else because she couldn't take her eyes off the painting. It clearly wasn't her. And yet, it kinda was.

The painting was entitled, *"Diana, Goddess of the Amazons."*

She sniffed suddenly and all eyes were on her.

"Oh stop. I'm fine. Right now..." She squinted at the painting, eyeing the coiled rope at Diana's hip. "Rope. Huh. Not my style. Now, a whip I can work with."

"Ooh," Iona said. "I know where you can get a good electric one."

"Oh, yeah," Zee said excitedly, grabbing some paper and a pen to sketch with, and the others joined in, immediately designing Kara a new weapon.

She stood there observing them in action, her brows rising with awe.

Her Valkyries.

END

This is a self-contained story. More adventures of Captain Kara & her Valkyries are planned, however.

Diana: Goddess of the Amazons

