



SWEET SCIFI ROMANCE
WITH A KICK

HE'S A THIEF.
SHE'S A SOLDIER.
DO OPPOSITES
ATTRACT?
OH, MERCY!

ANTONELLO BROTHERS 1

AT THE MERCY
OF HER PLEASURE

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

KAYELLE ALLEN

Chapter One

*Tarthian Empire, Kelthia
Miraj City, Crooktown District
Wintresq 12, 4662 Tradestandard date*

Deep in the shadows outside a ruined warehouse, Senth Antonello shoved back the hood of his sensor-blocking cloak and fanned himself. The Thieves' Guild tech let him hide from copbot scans, but it didn't cool him. Sweat beaded on his skin. Using his fangs, he unfastened first one glove, then the other, and peeled them off. He tucked them into one of dozens of hidden pockets in the cloak, and wiped his face.

The faint sound of gang chant carried in the chilled night air. Gangs in the Crooktown District hunted mixed breeds like him. At first glance, Senth appeared human, but with his catlike eyes and fangs, no one could miss his Kin nature. In moonlight, his eyes would glow.

The chant grew louder, along with the sound of breaking glass. The deeper darkness that followed meant two things: another streetlight had met its end, and that gang was closer than Senth had thought.

"You come down here, I skin you." Senth flattened himself against the brick wall. "I skin you, the Grand Master skins me. Let's do each other a favor, huh, boys?"

Worse, the Grand Master would inform Senth's *Sen'dai*. His guild master. The crime lord all the other crime lords feared. The Man. The Harbinger. Luc Saint-Cyr.

The Guild didn't accept non-humans, unless they were *enslaved* to a human member. No one could rise past level ten, unless *related* to a human member. Guild-arranged marriages and adoptions happened regularly. To keep the Guild happy, Saint-Cyr was Senth's lord and master *and* his adoptive father.

No way Senth wanted the Man angry with him. The last time, he'd almost...

Senth shook off the thought, drew his hood forward again, and edged around the corner into a darker alley. "*Fffftt!*" The Kin cuss word hissed past his fangs. Where was Khyff? He had to be close. Senth had looked for hours. His HalfKin sense of smell caught a faint whiff of male, mixed with... He took another sniff. Someone--or something--else.

Pressed against the wall, Senth slipped around a corner, and hunkered down. He melted into the concealing darkness behind a barrel, and narrowed night-sensitive eyes.

His human half-brother leaned against the opposite wall of the trash-strewn alley. Khyffen Antonello's blond hair shone in the muted light. A female pinned him, arms around his neck. She tore open Khyff's shirt and ran her hands over his chest.

Senth folded himself into the tight space behind the barrel and settled in to wait. Protection of his brother went before any assignment. Family came first. At least tonight.

Senth's mother had died after birthing him. Khyff, who'd been three, had been told Senth was dead, and Khyff had been sold into slavery. Neither of them knew the other lived until a month ago. Neither had a clue about their biological fathers. Until Khyff found him, Senth's "family" consisted of the Man.

Pulling out a square of paper, Senth angled it to catch the dim light and read the words he'd copied from Saint-Cyr's note once more. YOU AND KHYFFEN MEET ME AT THE GHOST. I HAVE A JOB FOR YOU. DO IT AND I'LL BUY AND FREE YOUR BROTHER, BUT IT'S GOING TO COST YOU.

Of course it would. The Man didn't do anything for free. But if it got Khyff out of that hellhole, Senth would do it. He tucked away the note, and slipped on his gloves.

Senth's master had raised him to believe that no one should have to sell his body to survive. Saint-Cyr owned one slave, Senth, and only so he could rise within the Guild.

Senth and Saint-Cyr might not agree on much, but they both believed Khyff needed his freedom. But with Khyff's record, freeing him wouldn't be cheap, and it wouldn't be easy.

Leaning out from behind the barrel, he checked on his brother.

Khyff had clenched his fists, shut his eyes, and lifted his face to the night sky. His mouth opened in a silent scream.

Senth rubbed the back of his gloved hand across his brow. *Man, if I had to worry about being perpetually turned on, I'd never get anything done. We've gotta get you off that drug.* The one Saint-Cyr dosed Senth with had the opposite effect. A Kin's feral nature clashed with that of humans, unless dosed with Shackle. Since puberty, he'd never known life without its effects.

A *scratch* signaled rats. When one ran across the toes of his boots, Senth bared his fangs. He clamped down on a hiss before Khyff could hear it.

The gang chant grew louder, bringing the rustle, clink, and crunch of feet shuffling through trash and broken glass.

Senth braced himself for a fight.

A gust of wind kicked up dust and mold. Senth fought a sneeze. The spike of wind brought the whine of a hovercar's engine. The hum of a window lowering added rock music and female voices. Male voices mixed with laughter, then the sound of doors opening and closing. The car's hum faded, leaving quiet.

That was close. Senth blew out the breath he'd been holding. *Khyff! Hurry up!*

Khyff and the woman walked over and stopped in front of the barrel where Senth hid. Pulling his hood farther forward, Senth leaned back and rested his gloved hands atop his drawn-up knees.

The woman, blonde and beautiful, looked at least forty. Wealthy, judging by the material of her jacket and pants, yet something about her scent was off. Rich women didn't come to Crooktown. Not to mention hire a slake. She didn't look like the type who paid for men.

Despite what they'd been doing, Senth had to wonder if she knew how Khyff made his living. Her clean hair, new clothes, and unscuffed shoes said big city, not Crooktown. What was she doing here?

"Let's meet again in three days." She had a husky voice. "Someplace safer."

"No." Khyff tilted his head. "You like it up against the wall in an alley. You like danger. That's why you come to me."

The woman threw both arms around Khyff's neck and kissed him. "You're so right, you beautiful creature."

"You've had enough for one night." Khyff shook off her embrace and tossed blond hair out of his eyes.

She reached for him again.

"I said no, Liu. Go home. You shouldn't linger in Crooktown after dark."

"Take this." The woman dangled a silver debit bracelet on the tip of an outstretched finger, as if offering food to a dangerous animal. "It's a thousand *draks*. You can spend it anywhere."

A thousand? The floor-length leather coat Senth's brother wore cost a fraction of

that, and Khyff didn't wear cheap stuff.

Khyff tucked a strand of his hair behind one ear. "You already paid me."

Senth bit back a startled laugh. Khyff sounded as if he were turning it down.

"You made me happy. Come on, Khyff. Please? Think of it as a tip."

"I can't take that. You think I want people knowing about us? You think I want your banker knowing you've got a slake?"

That made more sense. Khyff didn't want his DNA in her bank's possession. Or his master knowing he was moonlighting.

"It's debit, not registered. Untraceable. Come on." She jiggled the bracelet. "Let me do something for you. I want to. Put it in your freedom account."

Khyff hesitated, reached out, and then took the bracelet. "You carried this kind of money here? Are you crazy? You could have been buzzed. There are thieves everywhere. One could be watching us right now."

Ain't that the truth. Senth suppressed a snicker.

She ran her hands over Khyff's chest. "You care about me?"

He moved her hands away. "You know I do."

"Oh, Khyff."

"Oh, Liu."

Oh, please. Senth mimed gagging himself.

When the woman exited the alley, Khyff's smile flicked off like a switch. He dropped the bracelet into a pocket and patted it like an old friend.

Senth rose to his full height, level with his brother's shoulders.

Khyff lunged into him, grabbed Senth by the front of his cloak, picked him up, and

slammed him against the brick wall. Khyff's raw, physical power rendered Senth immobile.

"Easy! Khyff, it's me."

"Sen?" Khyff set him back on the ground. He shoved back the cloak's hood. "You deadlurking me, Bro?"

Senth dusted himself off. "I cozied your back. Peak freaks out there, sniffin' out drugs and buzzin' clinkers. Didn't want them shoppin' you."

"I'm sorry. What? Yes." Khyff held up both hands. "I know my street slang sucks, but what does that mean?"

"I was watching your back. Didn't want junkies messing with you while you were working."

"Why couldn't you say that?"

Senth spread his arms. "I did."

Khyff rubbed a hand across his brow, shaking his head. He jerked a thumb in the general direction of the street, and started walking.

Senth fell in step beside him. No shops stood open at this hour, so all the windows and doors were barred. Clouds covered Kelthia's single moon. Those streetlights unsmashed by gangs cast too dim a glow to banish shadows.

"Say, Khyff? I'm goin' sly a few days. Wanted to tap you."

Khyff raked a hand through his hair. "Try that again, in Etymis."

"Leaving town. I got a pull. A job. Facing a buyer."

"Facing a-- Could you please just--"

"I'm meeting a client, okay?"

"Where?"

"The Ghost."

His brother snorted. "You're meeting a client at The Ghost. That place is *the* worst club in Crooktown. It butts right up against the slakehouse where I work. No way you're going there. I won't have it."

"Got to." Senth handed him a piece of paper. "Scope this."

Khyff halted in the middle of the sidewalk and tore the paper in pieces.

"Hey!" Senth grabbed him, but the body under all that butter-soft leather felt like iron.

With both hands on Senth's chest, Khyff shoved him. Paper remnants fluttered to the ground as Senth danced backward to keep from falling.

"I told you!" Khyff raised balled fists. "No one touches me." He shook his fists at Senth. "Not you. Not anybody."

"She touched you."

"She paid for it, Sen. Back off!"

"I didn't mean to annoy you, Khyff. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"It better not. And stay out of The Ghost."

"Can't do that. The Man said to meet him there. He said to bring you."

"Why would the Man want me?"

"You think I'm gonna ask *him* why he does anything?"

Neither brother had said the name of Senth's *Sen'dai*. No one did.

"The Ghost is no place for kids."

"I'm old enough to join the armada and vote. Stop calling me a kid."

"If you were free." Khyff turned on his heel and started walking.

Senth growled low in his throat but followed. "Why'd you...you know? Back there. I thought you hated doing that."

"I do."

"Then why?"

Khyff halted and swung toward him.

Senth backed up a step.

"Look, Sen, it's different when you're not forced. Besides, the money's easy, the tips are great, and on the street, I decide how much of my clothes I take off." He pulled the bracelet out of his jacket. "Here. Do you know how much this is?"

"I heard."

"You know where to put it." Straight into the freedom savings account entitled to slaves. Like all children born into slavery, Senth would be freed at age twenty, in two years. Khyff's time in prison and parole delayed his freedom for at least eight more years, or until he had enough money to buy himself.

Senth stuffed the bracelet in a pocket. "You keep getting tips like this, you can buy me too. She must like you."

Khyff snapped him a look, then chuckled. "Guess Liu does look female."

Senth's cheeks flamed. "That was a guy? I thought he smelled different."

"Not male. Chiasmii. An Androg. Fully male and fully female. You never see one that close before?"

"I thought he seemed different. Or is it she?"

"Liu uses the female pronoun, but most of her friends use phe. She's beautiful,

huh? Androgs always are, no matter which gender phase they're in. There've been a lot of them at the clubs lately. Liu's fascinated with humans. They can't imagine what it's like being one gender all the time. They switch every quarter. I make good money catering to them."

"Does it matter which phase they're in?"

Khyff made a noise halfway between a grunt and a sigh. "Like slakes ever get to pick the menu."

Senth contemplated that for a moment. "Is it true Androgs can make you feel what they're feeling?"

"Sure, when they want to. I'm guessing that's not happening in a dark alley." He punched Senth in the arm. "Come on, Bro. Let's get you over to The Ghost. It's time to put *you* to work for a while."

* * * *

As Senth approached The Ghost, the club's beefy Kin bouncer put out a hand. "Hold up, kid. You--" She motioned toward Khyff -- "Wait over there. Now..." She motioned Senth aside. "You got ID?"

Senth opened his cloak, revealing the lining with its unmistakable Thieves' Guild insignia, a skeleton key inside a slashed circle. He gave his *Sen'da's* hand sign.

"*Fffftt!*" The bouncer made an apologetic shrug. "Sorry. Why didn't you say you were the Man's right up front?"

"*His* shouldn't have to." Senth brushed a hand down the front of the cloak. "And I'm no kid."

"Sorry, sir." She opened the door for both of them and bowed.

Once inside, Khyff held out one palm, and Senth slid his down it, hooked his

fingers as Khyff did, and with hands clasped, gave one downward shake.

"C'mon, Bro." Khyff led the way past the darkened foyer.

Inside, music pulsed like a living entity. Throbbing bass tickled Senth's chest, and he coughed. Drums pounded. Colored lights swept the cavernous room. Strobes flashed across the congested dance floor, highlighting bobbing heads and upflung arms. Light glinted off human bodies slick with sweat, while bared and damp Kin furskin stuck out in points, laden with glitter.

"Stay close," Khyff shouted over the pounding music, standing next to Senth. He headed for the rear and left no chance to argue. They skirted around the crammed dance area. Senth liberated a few loose credit stubs clipped to belts and stuffed them into the pockets of his cloak.

Senth tried not to stare at the slakes along the wall, but their clothing and attitude declared their availability. A pair of male and female slakes bent over a low railing, their pants around their ankles. Androgs handled their bodies like merchandise.

Khyff nudged him. "Comparison shoppers."

Senth frowned. "Not funny."

"Try being the one hanging over the railing." Khyff jerked his head to the side.

Females ruled on the Kin planet Felidae, and the majority who visited The Ghost had more than one male in their company. A single Kin female at the bar turned and looked Senth over from head to foot. Tall and slender, she wore brown leather the same color as her hair. She slid her tongue across her upper teeth, back and forth between her fangs, and wiggled her cute feline nose. Then she twitched her pointed ears toward Senth. A jerk on his arm drew Senth's attention.

"Stay away from her, Sen." Khyff glared at the Kin. "She'll take you to bed and then eat you for breakfast. That's not a figure of speech. HalfKin who leave with her aren't seen again. She's working this floor for someone. Watch this." Khyff slid a hand down his body, giving the Kin a slow smile.

The female crooked a finger at Khyff and smiled back.

When Khyff rubbed his fingers and thumb together in a sign for money, and she turned away. "Yeah, I thought so."

"You wanted her?"

His brother snorted. "You couldn't pay me enough to screw a Kin. Come on."

Senth followed him deeper into the club. At another bar, two female Betters conversed with each other, ignoring the human males chained to their wrists like pets. The men wore pants, boots, and chain harnesses across their chests.

Enhanced humans with every sense fine-tuned, Betters were bred for intelligence, leadership, beauty, and lust. Khyff had told him they went into heat like animals, and that once you'd had a Better in heat, you couldn't be satisfied with a normal human ever again. To curb potential problems, Betters were not permitted to hire slakes or enter slakehouses. Ever.

Senth walked into a solid wall of muscle, and backed up. He flinched, ready to duck.

Khyff glared, arms folded. "You better be glad it was me." He grabbed Senth by the arm and shouldered through the throng with him in tow. "Quit hawkin'." Khyff glanced back. "You want talons in your eyes?"

When they rounded a corner, the noise level lowered. To the left, wide marble

stairs wound upward. Bouncers stood guard on the first landing, weapons cradled in their arms. Beside them, arrowed signs pointed in different directions. HOTEL. CASHIER CAGE. EXIT TO SLAKEHOUSE.

Senth started up, but stopped at a tug on his cloak. He turned and looked straight into Khyff's eyes.

"Here." Khyff dug into his pocket. "My master's in the club. I saw him. Take this." He offered a wad of soft money. "He'll pat me down before he puts me to work."

Senth hid the cash in a pocket.

Khyff set one foot on the bottom stair. "They won't let me go up there."

"The Man's note said to bring you. You're coming with."

"You prolly misread it."

"I'd show you but you ripped that sucker up, remember?"

Khyff clamped his jaw shut. Lighting in this section cast a warm glow over his features.

For the hundredth time, Senth wondered at their relationship. They couldn't be more opposite in looks. But Saint-Cyr had tested their DNA, and they shared the same mother.

"Come on." Senth turned and headed up the steps, and after a brief delay, he heard footsteps pounding after him. Senth let himself smile.

On the hotel level, six of his *Sen'dai's* private, no-nonsense goons in dark suits and dark glasses blocked the hallway.

Senth flashed the Harbinger's hand signal.

One man scanned him with a handheld, glanced at the display, and with a

grudging nod of respect, opened a door. "He said you should wait inside."

Senth and Khyff entered a darkened room. The door shut behind them with a *click*. Background noise ceased.

"You gonna turn on a light?" Khyff's voice sounded hollow in the dark.

"Don't need one." Besides being HalfKin, Senth had been trained to work in darkness.

An interior door opened, and though Senth could not see the Harbinger, he felt the Man's presence. A native-born Kelthian, Luc Saint-Cyr's dark chocolate skin and habitual black attire made it possible for him to disappear into the shadows.

If the Harbinger himself was on Kelthia, this was an important job.

A small light clicked on, but that made the shadows darker. You still couldn't see Saint-Cyr. "Senthys. Khyffen. Thank you for coming." The Man took one step, and the light revealed part of his face.

"*Sen'dai*." Senth bowed.

Khyff bowed also.

"Khyffen. Good to see you." Saint-Cyr offered his hand, and Khyff wiped his hand on his pants before he shook it. "Your brother has the opportunity to take a sizable job, and if he accomplishes it, I'll help him buy your contract and free you."

A full Kin could smell emotion, and while Senth could not match their prowess, he couldn't miss the scent his brother gave off. Like the air after a rain, fresh and clear: hope. A tinge of tart fear followed.

"Thank you, sir, but why would you do that?"

"You're blood to my blood." Saint-Cyr squeezed Senth's shoulder. "I made your

brother my slave to foster him into the Guild. I have no others. A man should be free.

Now, how much did you get tonight?"

"For what, sir?"

Senth understood his brother's hesitance. If anyone reported Khyff working the streets without a license, he could be sent back to prison.

"It's all right." Saint-Cyr stepped all the way into the light. Like most people, Senth avoided looking directly into Saint-Cyr's eyes. The man wore contact lenses that turned his eyes solid black. Raven's eyes, peering, intent. Vulturous. "Your secrets are safe with me. Liu Alderon is one of my people. Did she treat you right?"

Khyff glanced at Senth, as if seeking approval.

Senth gave a slight nod.

"Yes, sir. She paid me, and then tipped me."

Senth made a handsign, and Khyff continued.

"She gave me a thousand *draks*, sir. Best tip I ever got."

"Good, good." Saint-Cyr steepled his fingers. "Since Senthys told me about your situation, I've been matching what you earn on the street and putting it into your freedom savings account."

"That's generous of you, sir, but why would you do that?"

"I know you're in a bad spot. I'm doing everything I can to help you."

"What do you expect in return?"

"The better question is, what does your brother expect?"

Khyff narrowed his eyes, sending a questioning look Senth's way.

Resisting the urge to shrug, Senth waited for Saint-Cyr to jump in. It didn't take

him long.

"I want Senthys for a job. If he's successful, he could buy his freedom. Since I won't part with your brother, I hit on this solution. What do you say?"

"So you're using me to get my brother to do something dangerous."

A slow smile eased across Saint-Cyr's face. "Well put. If you want assurances that he'll be safe, I can't give them. Nevertheless, there are certain guarantees. It *is* a union job after all, and they require a 'safety net' in the contract terms. The job will bring in a tidy sum, and I'll owe him more than what the union dictates. Yes, it holds risk, but I know my son. He can handle it."

That might not sound like much in the way of praise, but coming from Saint-Cyr? Senth rocked on the balls of his feet.

His *Sen'dai* motioned to Khyff. "Senth will be paid, as usual, but the job is important enough to warrant sweetening the deal. I think helping your brother help you should make us even."

Khyff looked from Saint-Cyr to Senth and back again. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your offer, but I'd prefer you freed my brother. I'll be able to--"

"Son." Saint-Cyr tapped his steepled fingertips together. "You were not listening. I'm going to repeat this once. I'm not ready to free him yet. I need him for this job. You're being offered your freedom. That offer is contingent upon your brother succeeding. I suggest you accept."

Senth winked. "Do it, Bro. Get out of there."

After a glance between Saint-Cyr and Senth, Khyff nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"All right, Khyffen. If you'll excuse us, your brother and I have work to do. He'll be

off-planet for a few days, so say your good-byes. Walk him to the club, Senthys, and then meet me back here."

"Yes, *Sen'dai*." Senth accompanied Khyff back downstairs to the entry point for the club.

"Look, Sen. I'd still rather he freed you."

"Take the offer, Bro." Senth set a hand on the railing. "I've got two years and I'm free. The Man and I-- we have our issues, but he is my father. He's taken care of me since I was three. It's okay. I trust him."

Khyff's narrowed his blue eyes at Senth like a weapon. "You're sure."

"Positive. Look, since you and I found each other, I've bargained everything short of my soul to buy your contract and free you. They treat animals better than your master treats you. Let me help you."

Khyff rubbed the back of his neck. "If I do this, promise me you'll be careful. The job is dangerous or he wouldn't be bargaining for it. You gotta know that, right?"

"You think you can shirk my cozy without a drip? Man, Bro, yo' cover is for gloom." Senth stuck up a thumb. "I got you happy."

Khyff frowned. "Uh..."

Senth sighed. "You gotta learn how to talk if you're gonna make it on Kelthia, Bro. I said you can't get rid of me that easy. No one watches your back better than I do."

Khyff grinned, shaking his head. "Go to work." He turned and shouldered his way into the crowded club.

Back upstairs, one of his *Sen'dai*'s goons bowed and opened the door for Senth.

No one was in the semi-darkened room when Senth entered. Without moving, he

sized it up. High ceilings, subdued lighting, heavy furniture, marble-topped tables. No paintings. Two statues, obvious fakes. Dense drapes, deep carpet, wood-paneled walls. The positions of the door and windows, plus the spacing of the panels meant a hidden safe. No visible security cambots, but nowhere the Guild set up a meet lacked them.

That inner door opened again, letting in a shaft of light. In the middle of it, a silhouette revealed the Harbinger. "With me, Senthys."

Senth grimaced at his master's use of his full name, but he followed. *Nicknames lack dignity*, he mouthed, mimicking Saint-Cyr's oft-used phrase.

After leading Senth through another room and to a flight of stairs, Saint-Cyr paused. "How much was it?"

Senth lifted his head. "Sir?"

"Khyffen's tip tonight. How much?"

Senth held his *Sen'da's* gaze, focusing on the centers of the solid black orbs. "A thousand, sir. Like he told you."

"Good. I meant what I said about matching what he earns, so it won't help him to hold back or lie."

"I told him that on the way over here."

"Did you now? Good." They continued up the stairs. "You know your brother's master and I are old...*friends*." Saint-Cyr's emphasis on the last word sent a chill up Senth's spine. "I want to free Khyffen from that man. Your brother would be an exceptional asset to my face business."

"Which one?"

"For Women Only." Saint-Cyr's private security company offered premium

protection services to celebrity female clientele.

"I agree, sir. I'll do whatever it takes to help him."

Saint-Cyr shook a finger at him. "What have I told you about being too eager?"

"Sorry, *Sen'dai*. You surprised me."

"Bargains are always a surprise. Keep that in mind."

"Yes, sir." Senth lowered his head in respect.

"If this job succeeds, I guarantee your brother will be freed in a week."

Senth tried not to show his glee, but a smile pasted itself across his face anyway.

The Harbinger shook his head in a way that said, *What am I to do with you?*

"What do I have to do for Khyff's freedom?"

"Khyffen was right. The job we're meeting about tonight is risky. I don't usually give you a choice, but this time I'm going to because of the job's importance. In return for your brother's freedom, I want a few promises."

"I'll do whatever it takes."

The Harbinger's mouth lifted at one side. "Never admit *that* to anyone again."

"Sorry, sir."

"Senthys, you understand why I've kept you on Shackle?"

While Khyff's master had addicted Khyff to Thrust, which put his sex drive into overload, Shackle did the opposite to Senth. Since puberty, he'd never known life without it.

"Yes, *Sen'dai*."

"Good." The Harbinger tapped a knuckle against his mouth, frowning at him.

"You know what they'd do to you if you lost control again, don't you? Where they'd take

you this time?"

"Yes, sir." He stiffened. "I don't want *that*."

"Keep that in mind over the next week. After five days without Shackle, you'll start withdrawal. Your heart will pound. Your head will feel like it's splitting apart. You'd be as high and strung out as Khyff is on weekends. There's a possibility of stroke if you quit cold. It's dangerous. You must taper off the drug. Do you understand?"

He nodded. "I do, sir."

"This job should take four days, so it's important to return as soon as it's over."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll dose you before you leave to ensure you have the full five-day effect."

"Thank you, sir."

"The reason I've told you all this is because you'll be working side by side with a Better."

Senth opened his mouth, shut it again, and then mouthed, *Better?*

"Listen to me, my young *Deshai*. Despite the romantic nonsense you've heard about Betters being extraordinary lovers, their kisses can poison you. If her saliva mixes with yours, she can control your mind. The touch of her hands will drive you insane. There are ancient myths about sirens, women who used their voices to lure men and then slay them. Betters aren't mythical. They're real. If she subjects you to her passion, you'll be at the mercy of her pleasure forever."

Senth swallowed against the tight feeling in his throat and nodded to show he understood.

"This woman is dangerous. Under other circumstances, I wouldn't let any of my

people work with her kind, but in this case... I have my reasons. I trust you to obey me. As long as you return in fewer than five days, losing control won't even be an option. Shackle will protect you from her. Besides, if you come back to me no longer a virgin, I will know. The deal for Khyffen's freedom will be off."

"How would *you* know I wasn't a virgin?" Senth bit his lips the moment the words escaped, shocked at himself for even asking the question.

His *Sen'dai* lowered his eyelids and angled his head toward Senth like a bird of prey sighting its next meal. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Senth reached a foot back, feeling for the next lower step. "No, sir."

"You know what happens when you displease me."

"I wouldn't want to do that."

"No, you wouldn't." The Man leaned in until the dark, predatory eyes filled Senth's vision.

When Senth stumbled on the stairs, Saint-Cyr grabbed his arm, steadying him. Senth raised a hand to his brow.

"Senthys? Are you all right?"

"Fine, *Sen'dai*. Sorry."

"Good. And you're right. They do."

"Uh... Pardon?"

"Nicknames." Saint-Cyr gave him a closed-mouth smile. "They lack dignity." He made a hand sign--a fist with thumb down and then up--which put Senth on guard. "It's time to meet your Better partner."

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Kayelle Allen writes Sci Fi with misbehaving robots, mythic heroes, role playing immortal gamers, and warriors who purr. She's a US Navy veteran who's been married so long she's tenured.

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