



Chapter One

*Tarthian Empire, Tarth
Tarth City, Kelthian District, Khyff's apartment
Birit 45, 4664 Tradestandard date*

"Welcome home, Mr. Antonello."

Khyffen Antonello flinched at the disembodied android voice. He let out a frustrated sigh. "I am *never* going to get used to that. IdBot?"

The home security system pinged in response.

"Didn't I ask you to call me Khyff?"

"Yes, Mr. Antonello. Would you like to know the dates of your requests at this time?"

"No, I would not. Just change the greeting. Call me Khyff."

"Yes, Mr. Antonello. Greetings and welcome protocols are found in the home security system settings in the main system. Would you like to adjust them at this time?"

"No." His shoulders sagged. "Remind me later. I've been away for a month, okay? I'm a little tired."

"Yes, Mr. Antonello. A reminder has been scheduled." Locks activated with an audible click, and a slight increase in pressure on his ears told Khyff the flat had been sealed. "Premises secure."

Khyff dropped his travel bag. The long commute had left him stiff, and he rolled his shoulders. In the living area, he swiped two fingers across a table and frowned at the dust. The cleaning droids had been skimping again. Not every machine was as efficient as idBot.

"Might be a good thing." Khyff stretched, working out kinks. "IdBot, play music."

The blare of hard rock made Khyff jump. He clamped both hands over his ears. Drums thundered and boomed behind a wailing voice he'd heard on tour every day for the past month as security liaison for Wind and Thunder. "End music."

The silence made him groan with pleasure. "That's better." He lowered his hands. "IdBot, how did that music get on my setup?"

"Music added by roommate Senth Antonello."

"My brother is back."

"Affirmative."

That meant trouble.

"You could've warned me my brother was home when I got in the door."

"Yes, Mr. Antonello. Greetings and welcome protocols are found in the home security system set--"

"Never mind." Khyff rubbed his temples. A tantalizing whiff of cookies baking made his stomach growl. He entered the kitchen. The foodsynther hadn't worked since he moved in, and nothing sat on the counters.

The magnets on the fridge lit up when Khyff approached, flashing all the local specials from restaurants within their delivery area. He sniffed. None of them smelled like cookies. He'd tossed out the one from Zhkarr's. The Kin fish market restaurant might appeal to some, but Khyff gagged thinking about it. That place was for Kin, and he steered as far clear of the feline humanoids as possible.

He sniffed the air and followed the scent to his brother's bedroom door.

"Senth?" He knocked and opened the door. "Man, those cookies smell so--"

Senth grabbed at bed sheets. Beneath him, his fiancée, NarrAy Jorlan, yelped

and covered herself with both arms.

"Sorry!" Khyff snapped the door shut. "Sorry!" He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Oh, man. That was more of Senth than I *ever* wanted to see."

In the kitchen, Khyff opened and shut cupboards, clattering cups and spoons for tea. The image of NarrAy naked burned into his thoughts and refused to go away.

His half-brother emerged from the bedroom and padded toward him, Senth's movements smooth as a cat's. He wore denim jeans but no shirt, and his tight abs gave mute evidence of his strength. Since Khyff had seen him last, his little brother had put on height. Khyff was now the shorter one. Though a free man, Senth wore his curly hair even longer than he had as a slave. It fell down his back.

Senth narrowed his feline eyes. Except for his eyes and fangs, he looked human, until you got him mad.

"Sorry, Sen." Khyff stepped behind the counter, putting space between himself and the HalfKin. Khyff's stomach fluttered. "I know NarrAy's pheromones smell like butter and vanilla. I should have known it was her and not cookies, but I didn't think. I haven't seen you in nine solar months."

Senth seated himself on a stool at the island counter and played with a spoon, watching Khyff with an expectant, angry look. A low growl rumbled. The corner of Senth's mouth twitched, revealing fangs.

Sweat prickled all over Khyff's skin. His stomach lurched. "It was an accident, okay?" He fought to keep his voice calm. Senth had once ripped out a man's throat with those fangs. "Didn't you hear the Wind and Thunder music come on? You left it keyed, and when I came in, it--"

A twinkle lit his brother's eyes.

Khyff slammed the flat of his hand on the counter. "You were gonna sit there and let me ramble on about how sorry I am, weren't you?"

Senth grinned. "Nah, I always knew you were sorry."

"You royal scam-butt."

Senth laughed. "Scammed you good, Bro."

Khyff ran a hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "I thought you were angry."

Senth snarled like a wildcat, fingers hooked and clawing the air playfully. He laughed again.

Khyff swore under his breath. "Real funny."

"Junk me, Bro." He stood and came toward him.

Khyff flinched, and backed away from him.

Senth stopped, tilted his head, and frowned. An expression close to pity crossed his face. "Notta boasted you clean. Leave me sly for it."

"You know I don't speak street. Use Etymis and talk like an adult."

His brother gave him a long look. Straightening his shoulders, Senth shook back the long curls falling into his face. "'Sorry. I shouldn't have teased you.' There. That suit you better?"

"Nothing to forgive." Khyff picked up the teapot and held it out. "Fill that, will you?"

Senth looked down at it a moment before taking it from Khyff's hands. "Sure, Bro." He put it under the autofill faucet.

Khyff wiped his brow with the back of a hand and stayed on the opposite side of

the island counter from Senth. "How about you and NarrAy lock the door next time?"

His brother made a brief, placating gesture. "Sorry. Thought you were still out of town." The wet teapot hissed on the burner. "Bro, when you gonna get that foodsynther fixed? A person could starve to death in here. Only Kin restaurant nearby is Zhkarr's, and who can afford them?" Senth was smiling, but Khyff stayed out of reach until his brother sat back down.

"What have you and NarrAy been doing? Other than what I interrupted."

"No new coins, Bro." *Same stuff, different day.* Senth's work for the All People's Liberation Army entailed theft, and NarrAy's involved interrogation. She was second-in-command to the leader of the rebellion. Neither talked about it, except to say they were a team. Likely all they could say.

Khyff leaned against the island counter while stuffing loose tea leaves into a ceramic ball. "Will you be home long?" He eased the tea into the heating water.

"We're on leave until after the wedding and our honeymoon. Six weeks." He tapped the tip of the spoon, flipped it, and caught it midair. "What's up with you?"

"Saint-Cyr keeps me busy." Khyff retrieved the bag he'd dropped near the door. "Had me supervising security for a rock group."

"You? Hanging out with a rock group? Can't picture that."

He opened the bag. "Kin rock group."

"You boastin' me."

"Nope. Not exaggerating." Khyff rummaged in the bag until he found the button he'd obtained. "You can wear this button, attach it to clothing or a backpack, or download it into your music player. Touch the top. See for yourself." He set it down.

Emblazoned with a lightning bolt, the chip had its own glow. "Got it straight from the group. New stuff. Not out yet." He chewed his lower lip, awaiting Senth's reaction.

His brother pressed the chip's center. A mini-replica of Wind and Thunder appeared on the counter. All wore traditional Kin leather, the females with gem-encrusted hook knives at their belts. Tovar, the male, wore his drumsticks the same way.

Senth's pupils flashed green like a cat's in the light, still dilated from exposure to NarrAy's pheromones. "These guys are the best. I love this group, Bro."

"I know." Khyff sat on the stool opposite him. "Press it again."

When he did, it changed to dynamic view. One of the singers purred like a cat, and then added, "Hello, Senth." Her low, sultry voice continued in a brief greeting. Her brother Tovar spoke from behind the others. "Hey, Senth, *dok cho, sah.*" Each of the five greeted Senth by name, their lead singer last. "*Sahkeet tahkro, rokk nahee. Deel. Nah rone dah.*" Gelina Fasra tossed long, beaded braids over a shoulder. "*Nife dak rohk, Keef.*" The vid faded.

"What was that?" NarrAy leaned against the doorjamb. "I couldn't make out what they said." Even with her sun-streaked hair mussed and tousled, beauty radiated from NarrAy. A Better, she'd been designed in the womb and created with features so symmetrical and faultless she might have been a doll. Her simple white cotton sundress showed off her golden skin and perfect build.

Khyff did his best not to stare at her like some love-struck puppy. She was his brother's woman. But Khyff couldn't look away. He propped his chin on one hand.

Senth held out a hand to her, and she went into his arms. He kissed her on the

nose. "Khyff supervised security for a Wind and Thunder concert. He got me a personagraph."

"Cool." His future sister-in-law regarded him from the circle of Senth's arms. "Hi, Khyff."

Sorry, he mouthed.

She mouthed back, *No problem*. The petite woman's head reached Senth's shoulder while he was sitting down. "Did you understand any of what they said, Khyff?"

"All the Felis I know are the cuss words Senth taught me."

"Ow!" Senth pulled away from NarrAy. "What did you pinch me for?"

She gave him a playful smile. "Teaching your brother dirty words."

"You use them." When she pinched him again, he laughed and clasped both her hands in his, then swept them behind her and tugged her up against him. "Stop that, you terror." He kissed her. "It's not like he didn't know any in Etymis. He taught me some choice ones. I don't see you poking Khyff."

Khyff threw up both hands. "For all I know, Gelina was cussing me out for being so strict about rules."

NarrAy smiled up at Senth. "What did the boy say? He's kind of cute. I like his tufted little ears."

Senth nuzzled her cheek. "You don't need to be lusting after some Kin hottie when you've got me."

Khyff made a rude snort, which earned him a glare from his brother.

"What did he say, sweetie?" NarrAy smiled up at Senth.

"Dok cho, sah."

"Oh..." NarrAy nodded. "*Hello, Bro. Sahkeet* is brother, right?"

"Right." Senth rubbed noses with her, and they shared a smacking kiss.

NarrAy pulled her hands free and reached for the chip. "This is glowing."

"Poke the top." Senth wrapped his arms around her. "Let's watch it again."

The personagraph ran through its cycle and shut off.

"That was nice, Khyff." NarrAy smiled at him. "Did she say something about humans? I thought I heard the word *nahee*."

"*Nahee* means 'not us'," Senth answered. "Kin use it for Tyrans and Chiasmii too." He kissed NarrAy on the cheek. "*'Sahkeet tahkro, rokk nahee'* means 'Your brother is cool, for not being one of us.'"

Khyff groaned at that. "She made a point of calling me *nahee* the first few days, like that was my name. When I refused to answer, she started calling me Keef, because she said Khyff sounded 'too human' for her mouth. That bugged me, 'cause I constantly get asked if Khyff is a Kin name. I was born before Felidae was even discovered." He nudged his chin toward the music chips. "What else?"

"*Deel* is a simple word, but its meaning is complicated. 'To the death for honor,' maybe."

"Go on." NarrAy leaned against Senth.

"*'Nah rone dah'* means... Well, I'm not sure if that means no one sneaked into the show or no one stalked them, but the last part, '*Nife dak rohk*,' is an idiom. Kind of the way we'd say, 'Back at you, man,' or 'Be cool.' She was talking to Khyff. I think she had a thing for you, Bro."

Khyff snorted. "Like I'd ever want a mangy Kin."

"Mangy?" Senth's brows lowered. "Did you forget who you're talking to?"

NarrAy looked from one man to the other, then moved out from between them and around to the other end of the island.

"We've been over this, Sen." Khyff heard the impatient ring in his own voice and tried to curb it, without success. Fatigue clawed at his reserves of energy. "You look almost human. Why do you want to be accepted by those animals, anyway?"

"Kin aren't animals, Khyff. We've been over that, too."

"Yes, they are." He fought the rage threatening to strangle his thoughts. "They tried to kill you the minute you were born. They didn't want you. They hated you on sight."

"You mean *you* hated me, Khyff. *You* didn't want me." Senth stood, shoving the stool out of the way. "If it weren't for me being a half-breed, your mother might still be alive."

"*Our* mother." He leaped to his feet. "She cried over you for days when the Kin stole you from her. Nothing I said or did made any difference." Khyff braced both hands on the counter. "I was a child, Sen. I couldn't help her, but I didn't know that then. I thought it was my fault. All I knew was because of you, they threw us out, and Mama wouldn't stop crying. She abandoned me because of you."

NarrAy gasped and covered her mouth, eyes welling with tears. "Oh, Khyff. I'm so sorry you were hurt like that."

All the strength drained out of him, taking the anger with it. He sat.

Senth slid a hand across the table and touched the tips of his fingers to Khyff's. With a male economy of words, that expressed enough. Both forgave.

NarrAy sidestepped around the counter and lifted her arms to Khyff.

He enfolded her in a warm, safe embrace, arms wrapped all the way around her tiny frame. He drew her between his knees and pressed his face against her neck.

Two years before, she'd rescued him after a savage attack had landed him in the hospital. Since then, he'd allowed no one but her to touch him. Senth got a rare handshake.

He relished the pressure of her gentle arms around him, the rapture of her skin against his. Khyff risked chemical dependence, holding her. Even with short exposure, the touch of a Better addicted. She'd accidentally addicted him once, and he'd suffered while weaning himself. His brother could never leave this woman. Never love another. Senth was hers.

By new laws passed recently, NarrAy must cover her entire body in public. Khyff shouldn't risk addiction again. Shouldn't let her touch him. Shouldn't... He hugged her closer.

Her touch soothed, tranquilized. How anyone could expect a woman as loving as NarrAy to hide from the world? She wasn't dangerous. Already, the darkness of Khyff's soul was lifting, evaporating. Fading. How could he have forgotten how wonderful she smelled? How sweet she was? How comforting it was to be held?

The teapot whistled.

"I'll get it, Khyff." NarrAy stepped back.

The absence of her touch left Khyff bereft. Dropped him back into his darkness. He turned away. Careful not to let Senth see it, he clutched one hand over his heart.

NarrAy moved the pot off the heat. "Is it ready to pour?"

Khyff grunted. He turned back and wrapped both hands around a cup as if it were his lifeline to sanity.

NarrAy climbed onto a stool between him and his brother. While she spoke to Senth, Khyff concentrated on breathing evenly. What would it be like to make love to that woman? Press his body against hers? What was he thinking? What kind of man lusted after his brother's woman? A miserable, lying cheat, that's what.

His brother said something. Khyff had no clue what. He blinked, focusing with effort.

"Bro? You okay?"

"Fine." He cleared his throat, willing his breathing to calm. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"What's your next job? Do you know yet?"

"Guarding ambassadors at a strip club."

"*Fffftt!* You get paid to hang out at strip clubs?" Senth grabbed NarrAy's hand before she could pinch him. "Not that I'd ever want to do that, of course--" he glanced at NarrAy "--but, man, Bro, what a life."

"Senth." NarrAy shook her head. "Honestly."

At least *she* hasn't forgotten the type of slavery Khyff had endured before Saint-Cyr helped free him.

Senth looked from one to the other and lifted his shoulders, hands out. "What?"

"For Women Only doesn't guard men." NarrAy glanced at Khyff. "They're female ambassadors, and it's a male strip club and bordello."

"Oh, *fffftt.*" His brother cringed. "Sorry, Bro."

NarrAy touched Khyff's hand. "You're sure the job will be over before the wedding?"

"Saint-Cyr promised to be at the wedding too. Don't worry, NarrAy. I'll stand up for Sen and make sure he says 'I do' on time."

"Good thing. Because there's no way I'm letting your brother back out of marrying me."

"No way I would, sweetie." Senth placed his hand over hers. "You've got me good and hooked. And don't you love it?"

NarrAy giggled. "Yes, I do."

While they kissed, Khyff turned his head and shut his eyes.

Want to read more?

Check out this page <https://kayelleallen.com/for-women-only>

The prequel to this book is At the Mercy of Her Pleasure

<https://kayelleallen.com/at-the-mercy/>

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