

Shadow Walker

By

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Chapter One

The Anatta left her to watch Caddawyc die. Tesla Naadhira, caretaker of the young Lourvain prince, stood by his bedside and brushed a gentle hand across his hot cheek. Cad couldn't last much longer. His wails, soft now, came further and further apart. Each ragged breath seemed to take him away from her. When he died, she'd have no one.

She'd be alone.

Loss bowed her shoulders. The strength she'd relied upon these last months drained from her with every whimper Cad made. He made a slight choking sound and for a brief moment, silence hung heavily in the room.

Except. . . A tiny noise, a whisper of silk against stone, grabbed her attention. She straightened from the prince's side and spun to face the intruder.

At first she didn't see anything. The small chamber, dimly lit by two luminas, contained numerous shadows. Plenty of places to hide.

As she stared, one of the shadows moved. Tesla started and took a step back, putting herself between the blackness and the prince. The shadow drifted into the light, materializing into a tall figure dressed in stark black. Humanoid. Male.

An impression of the sleek, ebony liicat of her home world flashed through her mind. Resembling the dangerous mountain predator's walk, the intruder stalked toward her, each movement filled with barely controlled energy.

Was he here to kill her or the Prince? Terror for Cad released the lock on her voice. Tesla drew in a breath to scream for help. Even the Anatta were preferable to an assassin.

In the space of a blink, the stranger stood in front of her. He pressed his gloved hand against her mouth. His other arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her hard against his body.

She choked on the scream. His masked face filled her vision. Her heart hammered in her ears. The man stood so close, the heat of his body soaking through his clothing into her skin.

“Do not.”

His voice was a velvet murmur, soft and seductive, tinged with an accent she recognized even though she had never met someone of the race. An Outlander. A member of an organization of warriors known for nefarious business dealings and often hired out as assassins.

Common sense warred with apprehension. Such were the skills of the Outlanders, if he'd wanted to murder her or Cad, they'd be dead before she even knew of his presence.

That knowledge, and that fact that even while captured in his arms he gave her no sense of threat, soothed away her anxiety. Tesla nodded a brief bob of her head.

After searching her eyes as if he sought to find the truth in her expression, he slid his hand away from her mouth. The arm around her waist followed. He took a couple of steps back away from her, but remained close enough that if she decided to scream again, he'd be able to stop her. Not that she planned to.

Tesla examined the Outlander, fascinated despite her fright. From her youth, she remembered the thrill of danger tickling her spine as she watched from the palace's secret room when Cad's father spoke to a small group of Outlanders. The first, and last, time, she'd seen an Outlander, yet the memory of the delicious fear stayed with her.

A jetta completely enveloped him from head to ankles in midnight folds. Only his unusual eyes were visible. She'd never seen such eyes - jet-black glowing with a golden light. His gaze returned her scrutiny with one of his own.

Searching.

Penetrating.

Reaching into her thoughts as if he sought her secrets.

Nervous tremors rippled through her body. No matter how hard she tried, her feet wouldn't obey her command to move from his unsettling perusal. Around the fear locking her knees, Tesla swallowed hard, lifted her chin and boldly met his eyes.

The soft gleam of gold flared bright. A velvety touch brushed her consciousness as if someone physically caressed her mind.

An intrusive, physical caress.

Tesla shuddered at the invasion. Willing her legs to move, she took a half step, the back of her knees bumping into the chamber's single bed. Just when she thought she might faint from the pressure in her head, the stranger spoke.

"You are not of them." A confident statement. "Who are you?"

"Tesla Naadhira. I'm the caretaker of Prince Caddawyc of Lourvain."

Tesla winced and forced herself to turn away as she felt pulled into the dark depths. What was wrong with her? It was enough she didn't call out for help. Why would she share something as private as their names?

The Outlander glanced at the shivering young boy lying on the small bed. “How long has he been like this?” The authoritative tone made the words sound like a command instead of question.

Tesla started to reply, then pressed her lips tightly together casting off the strange compulsion to tell him whatever he wanted to know. Why did she feel this way? She didn’t know anything about him. For all she knew, he could be in league with the Anatta. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d tried to trick her. As the thought lingered in her mind, the Outlander faced her.

Tesla took a deep breath. “No,” she whispered on an exhale without knowing what she denied. Shaking her head, she met his probing gaze, determined not to let him intimidate her.

As she held his stare, Tesla detected a softening of his stern demeanor. The pressure growing in the room lifted. She exhaled a long sigh of contentment. How strange that she’d feel contented. An emotion she hadn’t felt in a long time. Not since the time before the Anatta had come to her world.

And destroyed it.

“My apologies, liria.” The Outlander bent his head. “Please tell me how long the young prince has been like this. I will not harm him. You have my word.”

At his gentle words, Tesla’s fears eased. Maybe she was being unfair. Maybe he wasn’t like the others. Would he have sneaked in like a thief if he were in league with the Anatta? What would have been the purpose? A ruse, possibly, yet not even an Anatta could fake the sincerity in the Outlander’s tone.

“For three weeks. He is getting worse.”

“Yes. He will continue to get worse. Until...” The Outlander’s voice trailed off. A flicker of something frightening and unfathomable glinted in his eyes.

Tesla held her breath, waiting for him to finish. “Until what?”

“Until he dies.”

She gasped. “I don’t understand. What is wrong?”

How ridiculous. As soon as the words left her mouth, she wanted to cringe at the stupid, senseless question. She knew what was wrong with Prince Caddawyc, but didn’t want to put it to words. If she never said the words, then the horrible thing would stop.

In the beginning, denial had been the only way to deal with what happened to her world and her people. Not that it mattered how much she denied. Nothing changed.

Tesla hurried to the bed as the young prince moaned and started thrashing, his thin body whipping from side to side. The ebony-clad Outlander followed and stood by her as she placed cool cloths over the prince’s fevered forehead.

“The assimilation has begun. It won’t be long now.”

“The assimilation?” She’d never heard it referred to in such a term.

Tesla’s gaze left the prince and flashed to the Outlander. She inhaled sharply at the bleakness in his eyes. Stars and shadows, he did know what was wrong. But how could he after seeing Cad for only a few minutes?

Yet, he did know. His dark eyes held pity. A gloved hand came up to her face, brushing aside a lock of hair she hadn’t known existed, from her cheek. Tesla flinched and skittered back a few steps.

“You do not know?” He dropped his hand and tilted his head. “Ah, but you do. Why do you deny it?”

Tesla turned away, still feeling the caress of his gloved fingers against her cheek. She wouldn’t share her reasons-or pain-with an Outlander. He was not of her world and wouldn’t understand.

The compassion that welled upward shocked Jaxon Lucanus. It had been a long time since he felt compassion or any other emotion that weakened him. Not since the Anatta came to Sylvonna, his home world, asking for help but instead, ruthlessly took what they wanted.

Human body slaves.

Sylvonna had become little more than a barren planet populated with a race that used to be friends and family; now only human shells to house the parasites.

Jaxon stared at the young caretaker. A beautiful girl, fresh from a teaching center and ill-prepared to deal with the harsh realities thrust upon her. Her chestnut hair hung in a single braid down her back and gleamed in the lights like the crystal raybon found on his planet. Sapphire eyes, tinged with sadness, met his. She was frightened, but still faced him with courage.

That courage wouldn't have saved her from the Anatta; assuming it had been tried. If not, why hadn't she been taken? It was unheard of for the parasites to leave a human host unoccupied. Only the diseased and infirm were safe. If death could be called safe.

Jaxon sensed a difference about her, something that teased his mind but never became solid. When he got close to her, his shakakra reached out, seeming to recognize the caretaker on the most basic level. But that was impossible.

The Shakkaian care for their own. No gifted child is left alone. He was proof of that. Born of normal parents, his gift manifested at puberty. And when it did, he found himself shuffled off world, away from his parents, his siblings and his friends. When the Anatta invaded the Shakkaian planet, he became the last one. There was no one else.

With a mental shrug, Jaxon forced the intrusive and unwanted feelings to the dark recesses of his mind. The softer emotions, including love, were there, where they would stay. Those emotions could never be allowed to surface - too much was at stake. He turned to the writhing boy.

“There is still time. I can help your prince.” Jaxon reached out a hand to the shivering boy intending to feel his forehead. The contact of Tesla’s fingers on his arm startled him. He almost jumped at the sensations her touch evoked. Great Father, what was it about this girl? Even through his clothing, he felt her touch.

“Wait,” she said. In her wide eyes, he saw her concern. And determination. “I don’t understand,” she continued. “Who are you?”

“Someone who can help the boy.” Jaxon watched her closely for a reaction to his next words. “And someone who can help you both escape. That is all you need to know.”

The little caretaker blinked; the only outward sign of her agitation. Admiration rose. Much like the delicate, lovely orosah of his home, this female had a strong center surrounding the delicate outside. Most women of his acquaintance would have been a quivering mass of emotions by now.

“No.”

Her response surprised him. He hadn’t expected her to deny assistance. “No?”

Her chin lifted. “I can’t let you take him.”

“I don’t know anything about you.” Tesla frowned. He couldn’t be serious. “How do I know you will not harm him?”

For a moment the Outlander studied her, amused interest gleaming. Much to her chagrin, the gold light flared again. Not as bright as before, but still obvious.

“I have given you my word.”

Tesla waved a hand dismissively. “What do I know of your word or your honor? You are an Outlander.”

Did he honestly think she would simply let him take Prince Caddawyc without a protest? Tesla pulled back her shoulders. She might be a female but her responsibility to her prince was clear. If that meant she had to fight, or die, to protect him, it was her duty. The prince must be saved and returned home at all costs. He was necessary. She was not.

The Outlander leaned close, his dark eyes glittering. It took all the willpower she possessed to remain still and not back away. She would not cower before this man. Outlander or not.

A hair's breadth from her face, he stopped. He stood so close she could feel the heat from his body. Rich, earthy scents tickled her nose.

"I will heal the young prince and help you both escape. That is all you need to know," he continued, his accent thickened, revealing his irritation. "If you fight me, I will take the prince and go--without you."

Tesla felt her eyes widen. She opened and closed her mouth a few times as she tried to find the words to set the Outlander in his place.

"You..." she began. Her tirade stopped before it started at a choking cough from Cad. Whirling around, Tesla knelt down beside Cad. Her breath hitched in her throat as she watched the young boy struggle to breathe.

The – assimilation – as the Outlander named it, was taking a great toll on Cad. She'd never heard of an Anatta taking a human so young. And survive.

She had no choice. Not actually. Either the assimilation continues and she'd lose Cad to death or the Anatta or fight the Outlander in which case, he'd take Cad and leave her behind. She'd still lose him.

Neither option appealed.

Jaxon watched the range of emotions crossing Tesla's face. Anger, frustration, fear, concern. She likely thought him harsh. Of necessity, he was.

Although he had no intentions of leaving her behind, he did not have time to soothe her mind with a detailed explanation. As soon as he began to work on the boy, the Anatta would know the threat to one of their own. He'd be able to disguise their location for only a brief time.

Tesla lifted her head. She met his gaze straight on. Resolve lit the sapphire depths and she nodded. Standing, she moved away from the prince. But not far, Jaxon noted.

Crossing to the sleep platform, he scanned the young royal's form, using his senses to determine the extent of the assimilation. The boy's slight figure arched, his fingers digging into the bed covers. Jaxon stretched a hand over the thin, trembling body.

A wave of white-hot pain, the boy's distress, hit Jaxon within seconds. In an ordinary human, the pain would be crippling. Even for him, the agony had the sharpness of a knife blade slicing skin.

He stiffened, his jaw tightening. Despite the boy's size, the level of his suffering was almost enough to send Jaxon to his knees. That meant the assimilation was near completion.

When he told her the prince would die, Jaxon was only half right. What died when an Anatta occupied a human form was the part that was human. The heart. The soul. Everything that meant anything.

The process took time to complete. If caught early enough and the host was strong, the parasite could be purged. For this boy... Jaxon did not know. Still, he would try.

He gritted his teeth against the waves of agony surging through his body from a dying soul struggling to exist. Jaxon felt every struggle, every gasp, of the soul's death. Only his willpower and resolve gave him the strength to push the pain aside to do what needed to be done. He suppressed the sensations and looked over his shoulder.

“Tesla, no matter what you see, do not interrupt. The prince will die if you do not follow my instructions. Do you understand?”

She clamped her lips together for a second then nodded. Jaxon fought to keep the smile from his face. Obviously, she wanted to quarrel, but her dedication to her ward prevented her from doing anything that might harm him. This suited Jaxon.

It took all of his concentration to perform the shandon, and he didn't want to worry about what Tesla did behind his back. Any distraction, no matter how small, could prove potentially fatal for him and the boy.

Jaxon knelt on the floor and leaned against the edge of the bed, placing his left hand over the boy's forehead. He steepled the fingers of his right hand on his own forehead then closed his eyes.

As he called the shandon, the life energy possessed by the Shakka filled his soul in a rush of warmth and light. This was the only time he felt any peace. The gift had not always provided succor. There'd been a time when having the power was a curse, not a prize.

Pushing aside painful memories, Jaxon bent his thoughts to what he needed to do. He sent a thin thread of energy into the body, carefully directing the stream to the heart. The resting place of the Anatta as it took over the soul. The Shakka believed the heart was the soul, which explained why the Anatta occupied a human in that precise location.

With surgical precision, the energy filament honed in on the intruding organism. He took a deep breath and began the work of exorcising the parasite.

Tesla's fingers plucked at the dagger tucked in her waistband, hidden from sight under the folds of her tunic. The Anatta were unaware she had a weapon. She'd managed to steal the

blade from one of the last Anatta to attempt her take over. Easy enough to do while the others frantically tried to keep their own alive.

Her jaw clenched, and she scowled at the black-clad figure kneeling over her charge. Despite the whisper in her mind the Outland could be trusted, if it seemed he intended to harm the prince, she wouldn't hesitate to plunge the sharp blade into the Outlander's back.

When he knelt by the prince's side, her glare faded into a frown. Where were his healer tools? His hands were empty. He didn't look like he was about to perform any kind of healing.

She lifted a hand to question him but hesitated, her fingers outstretched. His command that she not disturb him rang in her ears even as the Outlander moved. He placed one hand on Prince Cad's forehead and the fingers of his other on his own.

Intrigued despite her concerns, Tesla dropped her arm and moved around to the Outlander's side to better see what he was doing. The Outlander's eyes were closed. Dark lashes rested in a dark arc against his skin.

What did he look like? His form suggested powerful. Before he knelt, he had pushed the jetta behind his shoulders, revealing a lean and muscular body. Muscles strained at the form-fitting fabric of his under clothing, and from the open neck of his shirt, a tanned throat beckoned. Her fingers itched to uncover what lay beneath the material.

Tesla felt heat rush to her cheeks. What was she doing? Gawking at him as if she were one of the courtiers who surrounded Cad's father in the hope of becoming one of his mistresses. She tore her gaze away from the Outlander's shape and focused on what he was doing to her ward.

Her eyes widened. Gold light flickered and grew between the fingers of both the Outlander's hands. Suddenly, his lids snapped open. Tesla recoiled, her stomach lurching. His

eyes were completely gold, no trace of black or white marring their shiny surfaces. He stared at Prince Cad, and the gold brightened around the hand touching the prince.

Cad moaned and writhed upon the bed. Clenched teeth and a pale face reflected a mighty struggle taking place in the mind and body of her prince.

A gasping shriek startled Tesla. She took a quick, sharp breath and moved closer. Cad's face had paled to a shiny, white sheen, as if made of marble. Deep lines cut into his forehead and around his mouth. In little more than a couple of minutes, Cad looked as if he'd aged by twenty years.

Tesla glanced at the Outlander. A similar expression of agony pulled at his golden eyes. The hand over the prince trembled.

When Cad shrieked again, his tone guttural, she pulled out her dagger. Stars, this couldn't be right. Her fingers squeezed the knife handle, indecision twisting her stomach.

Cad appeared to be in more agony than before. Despite his assurances, was the Outlander killing the prince? When Cad arched again, his back bowing so much she thought it would break, Tesla lifted the delicate blade. Her hand shook. Could she do this? She pressed her lips together. She had to. There was no one else.

Gold reflected off the glittering surface of the metal as Tesla sent it arcing down toward the Outlander's broad shoulders. With no warning and no acknowledgement of her attack, his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. With a quick tug, she fell to her knees.

Prince Cad whimpered; the dreadful screams silenced. Tesla lifted her gaze to the Outlander's. Golden eyes pierced her to her soul.

Stars and shadows, she had made a grave mistake.

Chapter Two

Tesla swallowed past the fear clogging her throat. It took her a couple of times, but finally she could breathe again. Her gaze tracked the Outlander's expression. A muscle jumped near his right eye.

He whispered, "Foolish girl, a mistake to try and kill me. If you had succeeded, we would all be dead."

Despite the anger in his eyes, she did not fear he would strike her. What she feared is he'd would take Cad and leave her behind.

"Tesla, do not be afraid," he continued, his tone softer. "I will not harm him. Or you. The harm will come if you do not allow me to finish what I have started. If I do not, death will surely take your prince."

Accepting his warning, Tesla dropped her gaze and nodded. The ornate dagger slipped from her hand and fell to the floor with a clatter on the stone.

"Wise decision, liria."

He released her wrist and turned to the quietly moaning boy.

“Stars,” Tesla cried out as a smoky mist came from Cad and hovered above his quiet form. A shrill sound whistled through the air. She clapped her hands over her ears to keep out the horrible keening sound.

The Outlander’s eyes opened and his hand shot out, directing a golden glow to the evil mist. When it was completely enclosed, he closed his fingers to make a fist. After a final shrill cry, the Anatta disappeared in a bright flash.

The Outlander’s head lowered. Both hands dropped to rest on the stone floor on either side of him. His broad chest heaved as he fought for breath. Tesla moved her awestruck gaze from the Outlander to her ward. A cry of relief broke from her lips.

Prince Cad’s brown eyes were open. He smiled a wide stretch of lips. She’d not seen such a happy look for almost a year. Her heart swelled, and she leaned forward. Touching his smooth forehead, she let out a relieved sigh. His skin was cool and dry.

“Tesla,” Prince Cad spoke softly, his voice thick and scratchy from his cries. “I’m hungry.”

She managed a choking laugh. This was more like the young boy she loved. Tears pooled in her eyes as she glanced at the Outlander. A warm glow flowed through her.

On his feet, he stood near the window. To her searching glance, weariness dragged at his body and an air of isolation surrounded him. Definitely not the same confident and powerful man who climbed through her window and wielded a wonderful gift. More . . . normal.

Tesla walked over to the bell and stretched out a hand, intending to call for food. For the second time, the Outlander grabbed her wrist. She hadn’t seen or felt him move.

“No.” The word came out abrupt. Stern.

“Why not?”

“It’s time to go.”

“Time to go? That’s impossible,” Tesla protested. “The prince isn’t well enough to travel.”

“He is well enough,” the Outlander replied. “They will already know about the death of one of their own. It won’t be long before they come to find out what happened.”

Tesla studied him thoughtfully. “How do you know this?” How could he know so much? It was as if he had insights into the Anatta’s race.

“It would take too long to explain, and we don’t have the time,” he answered in a tense, clipped voice that forbade further questioning. “Gather only the things you need. Quickly.”

Did it really matter how he knew what he knew? He’d healed Cad. That’s what was important. And that he could get Cad away from the Anatta.

Tesla nodded and hurried over to the prince. She had some bread left over from her last meal. It would have to do. She whispered the barest instructions to him. Despite the lingering shadows in his eyes, Cad’s face shone with good health and spirits. Bounding from the bed that had been his home for the past couple of months, Cad ran into the washroom.

Her mind whirling with excitement, Tesla began to change into one of the few outfits she had left. She had most of the buttons undone on her tunic when she glanced around. Her gaze tracked and locked on to the Outlander. Stars and shadows.

She froze in the act of undoing a button as her senses leaped to life. The Outlander made no attempt to hide the fact he watched. Dark eyes alight with a savage inner fire appraised her with more than mild interest. Her cheeks felt warm under the heat of his gaze.

Tesla swallowed nervously and took a hesitant step backward. She tore her gaze away from his, whirled around and darted behind the shelter of the screen in the corner of the room.

Once behind its comfortable solidity, she released the breath she had been holding. What was she doing? She’d been about to disrobe before the Outlander. Worse, when he’d looked at

her, her insides melted as if they'd turned to a puddle of gelatin. All she could see of him were his eyes. So why did she feel an undeniable attraction to him?

She knew nothing about him, except that he had a wondrous power at his command. The Elders had never mentioned the Outlanders possessed magic.

Tesla puffed out an exasperated breath. This was nonsense. Their very lives were at stake and she had turned into a weak-kneed female at a glance from him. After nearly ripping the gown off, she changed into traveling clothes and moved out from behind the screen. She sighed with relief. The Outlander stood at the window, looking out at the courtyard.

“Tesla, where are we going?”

Prince Cad moved between her and the Outlander, his eyes glowing with excitement. A tender smile touched her lips. She loved him as if he were her own. And he might very well be the only son she'd ever have.

The final attempt of the Anatta to take over her mind and body had failed and with it, likely her ability to have children. Her lips firmed. Just another thing the Anatta owed her.

The prince tugged on her sleeve. “Tesla?”

She smiled down at him again and smoothed his hair. Thin strands fell softly between her fingers. He'd lost a lot of hair fighting his . . . illness.

“It's all right, Your Highness,” Tesla assured him. “I don't know where we are going, but it will be somewhere safe.”

She looked up and caught the Outlander's eyes. An unreadable expression filled his cool gaze. Was it going to be all right? She didn't know anything about this man, but she was meekly going with him. Maybe she was losing what little sanity remained after her world had been destroyed. Was she leaving a bad fate for a worse one?

After quickly gathering the necessary items, Tesla threw them onto a sheet. A shirt slipped from the pile and fluttered to the edge. She picked it up, and an object fell to the floor landing with a sharp metallic ring against the flagstones. Before she could bend down and retrieve it, a black-clad hand came down over it first.

The Outlander picked up the medallion and studied it, his expression thoughtful. Tesla held her breath, not sure why she did, but feeling as if it was important he not recognize the artifact. She had forgotten she put the precious heirloom with that shirt. The medallion was the only thing she had left of her parents. The parents she never knew, who had given her up when she was an infant.

After turning it over several times, the Outlander handed it to her. “A very interesting design. Where did you get it?” he asked, his dark eyes giving away nothing.

She affected a disinterested attitude. “Prince Cad and I found it one day when the Anatta let us out for fresh air. It’s a pretty little piece isn’t it? I keep it for decoration.”

Not meeting his gaze, she all but snatched the medallion from his hand and carefully put it in her jakclok. He didn’t need to know the truth. It mattered not to him.

Jaxon studied the bent head of the lovely girl before him. Even without using his extraordinary senses, he knew she lied about the medallion. Without knowing why she did, he kept his recognition of it hidden as well. At least until he could find out if she knew what it was and what meaning it had for her. He would keep her close until the answers came to him.

The girl intrigued him. Not only was she able to withstand the Anatta, her obvious dedication to her ward and her possession of the medallion left him interested.

And dismayed.

When she'd starting undressing, he'd felt his groin tighten with only the merest hint of flesh she'd uncovered. The Shakka train for years to forgo bodily pleasures. Anything that interferes with control of the shandon is forbidden. For his body to react in such a way was a complete violation of Shakka edicts. Until Tesla, he'd been able to resist.

Shoving aside his body's reaction, Jaxon beckoned to the boy to follow behind him, Tesla bringing up the rear. Jaxon went to the door and placed his hand over the scarred wooden surface. He touched his power. No one was near.

"It's locked," Tesla hissed the words from his side as he reached for the handle. "Can you open it?"

She leaned close, the heat from her body doing wicked things to his senses. When he inhaled, a sweet spicy floral scent tickled his nose. At the base of her throat, her pulse beat, the pale skin teasing him with rosy health.

Fighting for control, and barely winning, Jaxon ignored her closeness and placed his hand on the knob. With a quiet click, the lock gave way, and he pulled the door open. A soft sound came from Tesla, but she said nothing.

He turned and saw two pairs of eyes, one brilliantly blue and the other light brown, watching him. Equal amounts of anticipation and fear shaded both gazes. He placed a finger over his lips and waited until both heads bobbed in acknowledgement.

Jaxon stepped out the door and traced his fingers along the wall, trying to flush out any lingering sensations of recently passing Anatta. After making sure Tesla and the prince followed, he continued down the hall, every sense alert.

Behind the Outlander, Tesla held tightly to Cad's hand. Her heart thudded so loudly in her chest she thought it would give them away. More and more she wondered if she had truly

lost touch with reality. She had always planned on escaping but never had she figured it would be with an Outlander. And after the prince had taken ill, she feared they would never be free.

The Outlander stopped, and she almost ran into him. Tesla could feel her cheeks flush. He turned his hooded face to her. The same telepathic presence she'd felt earlier came again. This time, she was prepared. She quickly threw up a mental shield, preventing the presence from gaining a hold.

She was mildly surprised when the Outlander's eyes widened, gold flaring bright. The deep block was something she'd recently perfected. By chance, she'd found out it protected her from the Anatta's constant subliminal assaults.

The Outlander started to move then halted and put up a hand to stop her. She pressed against the wall and made sure Cad did the same. Tesla held her breath and waited as the Outlander moved forward alone. She found herself entranced by his stealthy movements as he stalked the corridor. A curious swooping pull grabbed her stomach, threatening to leave her knees trembling. Who was he, this Outlander?

She had never heard of beings that could banish the Anatta as he did with Cad. Did the Anatta know of this man? If they did, she and her charge were in more danger being with him. Yet, what choice did she have? They could no longer stay behind; she would lose Cad.

The Outlander stopped again and pressed his back to the wall. Stars and shadows! Tesla could no longer separate his shape from the shadows flickering along the corridor wall. She grabbed her lower lip with her teeth when footsteps echoed in the dark, smoke-seared hallway. The prince whimpered softly.

Cad stared fearfully down the corridor. She reached over and pulled him into her arms. Quietly shushing him, she hugged his face against her chest, muffling his quiet cries.

For all his earlier good spirits, he obviously wasn't over his episode. When she was sure he would not cry out in his terror and warn the Anatta, Tesla turned and looked for the Outlander. Where was he? Had something happened? Or worse, had he abandoned them?

The footsteps got closer and two men garbed in blood red uniforms rounded the corner. Tesla knew them. They were once farmers on her home world. Now they were Anatta and nothing like the men she knew.

If discovered, Cad would suffer the takeover again. Once the Anatta controlled Cad and Tesla was no longer necessary for the Prince, she would likely be killed. Or worse.

Like be forced to watch her beloved Cad turn into a monster.

Either way, she knew something would happen. After all, she was proof the Anatta weren't invincible. She didn't know what made her different; she just was.

Suddenly, a shadow launched itself at the two men. The Anatta had no time to defend against the attack. The Outlander kicked one of the men in the chest and spun around, arms thrust out, as a golden glow enveloped the second man.

Tesla felt, rather than heard, the scream that shook the second man when the light surrounded him. Seconds later, he crumpled to the ground.

The man, who had received the Outlander's punishing kick, stumbled to his feet and stared at the downed man in stunned surprise, then blinked his shock at the Outlander. Before he could attack, the Outlander slammed him against the wall.

With Cad in tow, Tesla moved down the hallway until they stood near the Outlander. She heard the end of a whispered threat.

"I'm giving you and your loathsome masters' fair warning. No longer will humans be your slaves. There is a new power and it is mine. "

After he delivered his warning, the Outlander lifted his other hand and flattened it against the forehead of the pinned soldier. The man, who struggled to free himself, suddenly slumped. The Outlander released him, and the man slid to the ground, completely unconscious. Tesla couldn't stop the squeak of surprise.