

# Visiting Kirnae

Drax Guard Short Story

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# ATHINA

I SHIFT MY WEIGHT impatiently from foot to foot. The early spring sun sparks against the pavement that lines the circular Lusitanian gate port. Most everyone is waiting inside the climate-controlled buildings for arrivals or for gates to be ready for them to depart. But I'm outside to be as close to the arrivals as possible.

Cieran's almost here. We finally have permission to keep our heart-bond dampeners off unless on missions. He's a more muted impression right now thanks to the physical distance between us. But...I smile. I can sense the same impatience from him.

It's been almost two months since we've seen each other in person. And those whirlwind forty-eight hours of me showing up in Dunhare and helping with a mission was not even close to enough time.

This is his first time to the Islands. And another burst of nervousness spears through me. I want him to love Kirnae as much as I do. Want him to feel comfortable with my parents. But mostly I just want him here.

The gate at the end of the port, built of reinforced metal to spin the gating spell though it and transmit over long distances, lights up. The two fae standing next to it cue up vibrant grey magic and feed it into the metal, bolstering the magic that's coming from the other end. A connection is made but I'm too far to see through the other side. No

matter my military clearance, I still have to stay on the safe side of the barrier.

A line of travelers starts coming through, checked by customs officers before being allowed to progress into the buildings. I head that way along the barrier, almost halting at the sudden feeling of *him* that washes over me.

A smile breaks over my face and I jog to the entrance. Cieran focuses on the customs officer as he hands over his passport. Jeans and boots and plain short sleeved shirt, backward ballcap that I've learned is a losing battle. But I'm not admitting defeat yet. Sunglasses obscure his eyes and he carries a duffel bag over his shoulder.

He's chatting with the officer, getting everything filed correctly. Then he looks up, and even with the sunglasses I know when he sees me. A broad smile stretches across his tanned face, and he strides to me. I meet him halfway, wrapping arms tight around him, breathing him in.

"Hey, hot stuff," he murmurs. I tuck closer, pressing my forehead into the crook of his neck. It's such a stupid nickname but I love it. We stand there for a moment, letting the heartbond settle from maelstrom to quiet waves between us. Then he moves and I loosen my hold enough to tip my face up for his kiss.

My heartfire crackles brightly, leaping alongside the bond as our lips press together in the almost desperate missing that phone calls and video talks can't cut. Finally, his fingers tuck some loose strands of hair away from my cheek, and he withdraws slightly.

"Hi," I say softly, brushing another kiss against his crooked smile. Cieran doesn't move as I gently pull his sunglasses off. He still looks tired, but not the exhaustion that compressed around him two months ago, and even last week when we'd talked via video for hours late into his night

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and my morning because he couldn't sleep. I loop arms around his neck, content to stay here another moment and tentatively push at the bond.

We're both trained to resist mind probes and the like, and sometimes that's too helpful when it comes to this bond. I can feel him balk for a moment before he eases up on his side. It's easier here in front of him to give the feeling of support compared to when he's in America and I'm in Kirnae.

*"How have you been?"* I ask in the mindspeak.

*"Okay,"* he admits. "Okay" for him means less hazy and a stronger sense of purpose.

*"Good."* I move to grab his hand and squeeze. *"Ready to go?"*

He steals another kiss and loops his arm around my shoulders. *"Yeah."*

I keep close to his side and slide his sunglasses on my own face. He just chuckles and lets me keep them. There's a flash of appreciation for the way I look, and some heat tinges my face. It's something I'm still getting used to. I've been looked at before with various intent behind it, but with him it's always been a genuine admiration of *me*.

"Is that all you brought?" I ask as we head inside the building. He's carrying just the one bag and will be here for just over a week.

*"Yeah, figured one change of clothes would be enough."*

I glare up at him as he laughs and pulls me closer. I loop my arm around his waist.

"How are *you*?" He turns it back to me. We dodge around parents trying to corral their young children.

"Better now." I push open the door and we part for long enough to exit the port. Then his arm is back around my shoulders, and mine circles him again. "We'll have to walk down to the ferry. Is that all right?"

“Yeah, you know I don’t mind walking,” Cieran replies easily. I do know. He often walks to try and make himself tired enough to sleep on his bad days. And I also know that sometimes it bothers his prosthetic leg. “I’m fine.” He nudges me in response to the worry that must have slipped through.

“You’ll tell me if it bothers you?” I pause a half-step to get his promise. There are many places I want to show him on the Islands, and a good amount involves walking or hiking.

He kisses my forehead. “Promise.”

It’s a ten-minute walk through winding bricked streets from the gate port down to the ship that will take us to the islands. I could fly us, but we have some rules to follow and I want him to experience it from the deck of a ship first. The time is spent on easy catch up. He’s settling in as sergeant with Crew Six and I’m studying for another scouting test coming up.

It’s things we’ve already talked about on phone calls, but there’s some part of us that’s still newly dating even if we did form a heartbond on a joint mission and came out alive because of it. Newly dating *and* living across the world from each other.

The ferry is a small charter boat. Visitors to the archipelago are carefully vetted and approved. We had to start the process for him to visit a month ago, even if we’re heartbonded and our militaries are talking to each other to figure out how to handle the bond connecting two special forces soldiers.

We settle on the ship’s benches, and he squints a little in the glinting sunlight.

“You know if you wore the hat correctly...” I say.

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Cir shakes his head but doesn't take his sunglasses back. He eventually does turn the hat forward to cut some of the direct sunlight. The islands start as just a dark line on the horizon, and the city behind us falls away. It's us and a few other passengers who had their documents checked by a soldier before we departed.

Cieran's not bothered by any of it. I'd warned him ahead of time, but he's also a soldier and has been to many different places with many different types of security.

Wind catches at the loose overshirt that I wear unbuttoned over a modest v-neck. Like Cieran, I usually wear some style of boots even when out of uniform. Today they're brown leather with some extra padding and laced up over loose olive-green military-style pants. I also like having extra pockets around.

It's an hour boat ride, but it's worth it to see the way he studies the approaching islands. The way the main island's ridge line looks like a slumbering dragon. The smaller islands to the north and south are vibrantly green with blotches of color that's houses and city centers. The on-duty fleets patrol the skies high above in dragon form, and I can hear the hum of their mental communication in the back of my head.

The furthest island to the south is oddly purple, some side effect of warlock magic long ago.

"It's amazing," Cieran says. I sit a little taller, pleased with the assessment. We'll hike at least one of the dormant volcanoes on the north island, and there's plenty of rocky beaches to scramble across on my home island.

We circle around the arm of the main bay and as we enter through the narrow mouth, it feels like the island bursts into more color and sound. We dock and I claim his hand, threading us through the constant hum

of the fishing boats, ferries, and bayside restaurants to the upper parking lots.

My reliable jeep waits for us. We'd only laughed when we learned we both drive similar cars and prefer older versions that have yet to fail us. Cieran tosses his bag in the back seat, and I roll down the windows before pulling out. The main islands hosts the military base and is therefore where I live. But for the next week, we'll be staying on Chern, one of the smaller islands with my parents.

We'll be back and forth, since my fleet is planning a cookout for him, and there are plenty of places to eat pie.

I claim his hand with my right, driving comfortably through the streets with just my left hand on the wheel. He doesn't argue, since we've done this before in Dunhare. I point out different sights and he asks about others. Statues and art are everywhere, tiled rooftops cover brightly painted houses. Downtown does not have high-rises like his city—we keep our buildings shorter to protect from Atlantica storms.

I merge onto the main highway to take us to the edge of the island and we fall back to silence, only the rushing of wind between us. He takes in the view as we crest a rise—waving shoreline where sparkling sand meets the Atlantica Ocean. Beyond is trackless waves. Sometimes it wakes a longing to fly and fly forever, but not today. Not with his hand tucked in mine and...I pause.

There's a tenseness that's built in his grip since we left the city. I reach through the bond.

“Cieran, are you *nervous*?” I don't know whether to laugh or worry.

He looks a little embarrassed, but answers. “Yeah. I've never done this before. Meeting parents.” Then he gives me a flat look. “You don't have to be *that* happy about it.”



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I flash a smile. I'll just blame the dragon side for being protective of him and grateful I don't have to share him with any other woman's memories.

"And?" I prompt, sensing some more unease.

He sighs in a little annoyance, but it's hard to hide in a heartbond. "It feels stupid that I'm so nervous about coming here. But it's been a while since I've traveled somewhere just to visit." Been a visitor instead of a soldier. "And usually I have a pretty good grip on language and customs. I know you gave me a crash course, but..."

Kirnae tends to keep to itself. Our people are essentially the last dragons since the true born dragons went deep into hibernation under the earth or oceans a few centuries ago. I gently squeeze his hand. Like any good soldier and officer, he doesn't like walking into the unknown.

"Everyone is excited to meet you. And they don't expect you to know everything about the Islands," I remind him. "And besides, you have me, and we have the mindspeak, so it will be easy if there's something that knocks you off balance."

"Yeah, but what if your parents don't like me?"

I release him and reach over to swat at his head. "Impossible. My mother has called me at least three times a day for the last week to make sure I think you'll like everything she cooks. And my father has been practically interrogating me on American customs."

Cieran chuckles and holds his hand out for me to lace my fingers back through his. "Yeah, but what if they don't like me?"

I turn my attention from the road to frown at him. He flashes a smile I'm not quite sure I can resist and focuses forward. Some of his tension is lightened, but it's still there. I cannot judge. I'm sure I'd be in a similar mess if his parents and siblings were alive for me to meet. I only have his

memories of them, and some of my heartache joins his that I'll never be able to meet them.

The road hum changes as we transition from island road to serpentine bridge that connects the main island to the next. It's easier to tell stories of growing up now that he can see it with his own eyes instead of through memories. The sheltered bay where we'd dare each other to jump off the cliffs in human form and hold it as long as we could before shifting to dragon. My old school. Beaches where bonfires and cookouts filled summer nights.

Then the road shifts upward, winding into the hills to the smaller neighborhoods. And then down a longer driveway that cuts through a strand of trees to a house set back from the road on the leeward side of the hill. I park in the wide circle in front of the main gate.

The stone is a light tan, matching the low fence line that runs around the property and protects from the cliff edge. The house rises in two tiers, the back half stacked higher than the front. We get out and Cieran retrieves his bag. He takes his hat off and scrubs his hand through his hair, getting it into some order after being crushed under the hat. He doesn't put it back on.

I get hit with more nervousness, from him and from my parents inside. I smile until I realize that it's infected me and my muscles jitter like scales are about to come forward in a shift.

I take Cieran's hand and pull him toward the wrought iron gate and push through into a sheltered tiled courtyard filled with potted plants and a weathered tree I climbed countless times as a child.

My parents step out and another quick burst of feeling comes from Cieran before it abruptly cuts off. I pause long enough to give him a small smile to let him know I'm not mad he's suddenly retreating through the

bond. I'll prod him out later if I have to. The slight squeeze he returns tells me he knows I will, and he'll let me.

I got my height from both my parents. Though Cieran and I stand even at six feet, my father is the tallest here by an inch or two. There's a brief moment where I can tell the former soldier is sizing up my mate, and the current soldier is assessing my father. Then Father sticks his hand out and introductions start.

*"Hugs?"* Mother asks through our mindspeak. I nod and Cieran readily takes her embrace. There's a slight ache that sneaks through our bond. It's been over sixteen years since he lost his parents, but this is making him miss his mother again. He fiddles with his hat until I reach out and steal it. Cieran purses his lips slightly at me and I just grin. I'll give it back. Maybe.

"Come inside!" Mother waves us forward into the house. Colorful rugs dampen some of the echo from tiled floors. More hanging plants and herb boxes line the windows. "Show him his room, 'Thina." She shoos me off.

They know, and approve, of our decision to wait for the deep physical intimacy of a bond. If he'd been a dragonwalker, the bond activating would essentially be marriage. And if he was a dragonwalker, he wouldn't live an ocean away.

There's too much to figure out—the heartbond, the long distance, the rules from our respective countries and militaries, each other. He'd asked to wait first. He'd been so caught off guard by the bond, grieving the recent death of his sister, knowing that we didn't have long in the same place before I had to return to Kirnae, and wanted to get himself into a better place mentally.

I'd readily agreed, with a bit of relief. Years of pushing myself to excellence and independence has me getting used to this bond as well. And we are a more traditional people as well, usually waiting for the official bonds of marriage before sex.

So he has the guest room, and I'm in my old room. I'd brought my bag over yesterday, stretching my wings in dragon form between islands. His room has a wide window that looks out over the fence line to the wide ocean. The incoming sunlight beams off the white-washed walls and raftered ceiling. Cieran glances around as he puts his bag on the low bed, then sticks his hand out.

I tap my palm against his. He arches his eyebrow and I step closer, keeping the hat tucked behind my back. Cieran just shakes his head and pulls me in for another kiss. I toss the ballcap down on his pack and loop my arms around his neck.

For a moment, there's a more desperate edge to the press of our lips than at the gate-port. Fiery love, missing, desire roars so hot from both of us that we have to break apart. I press my forehead against his shoulder with a breathless laugh. He doesn't let go, his answering chuckle still tinged with a tremor.

"Sorry," he says.

I slip arms around his waist instead, letting the emotions slowly recede. A contented hum rises in my chest as we stand there for a long moment. Then I step away. "I'll show you the rest of the house."

After a brief tour and spending longer than we needed to at the pictures of me as a lanky teen my parents insist on still keeping out, we turn to a late lunch.

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For a moment it's awkward silence, then my father starts asking about Cieran's time in the service. At first I brace, but then realize that we're all a little relieved we have this common point to at least get started.

We stay close to the house for the rest of the day before dinner on the wide back patio that overlooks the ocean. Light breezes sweep through, mingling with laughter and conversation. My parents like him, and he's comfortable around them. These impressions come through the mind-speak I share with my parents and through the heartbond.

As I lean into his shoulder to pour us a little more wine, and he tips his head toward mine for a brief moment, my mother's voice comes through the mindspeak.

*"He's good for you."*

I meet her look across the table. She leans elbows on the table, long dark hair mixed with strands of copper straying around her shoulders in the wind. Her bright eyes watch him as he talks with Father before focusing on me again. I keep my shoulder pressed against Cieran's.

*"You are relaxed with him."*

"I know," I reply. They don't know all the details about the Waste-land's mission, certainly not the details from when he and I were captured. When we tried to protect each other. All that's important is that they know he matches my strength as I match his. And that he won't ever try to make me feel small.

Cieran glances toward me, head tipping close again, question in his eyes at the quick burst of tangled emotion at my center at the thought. I smile and send reassurance back. He takes another second to return his focus to my parents and whatever conversation they're having, and only after I increase the pressure between our shoulders.

A deep rumble of approval comes through the mindspeak from Father, and he gives a slight nod when I look to him.

My father is a decorated officer among our fleets, still highly regarded even though he retired years ago. I still don't think he quite understands the legacy he left behind and the broad airstream that I sometimes struggled to avoid getting tangled in when it comes to the name.

He was never demanding or exacting with me growing up, making space for mistakes and turning each into learning, or giving space for tears if needed. But I've always known that wouldn't extend to whatever man I brought home. Mother and I always laughed, trying to tell him that the standard of excellence he'd expect for the mate of his only child might be too high. But he'd just stubbornly shake his head and declare that perhaps I should never marry.

Cieran is many things I didn't ever think I'd choose—human, American, a soldier, but he is many things I'd always wanted. And he's many of the things on Father's impossible list.

Dusk creeps around us, and we help my parents clear the table. Cieran and I settle back on the bench outside as the stars peek out one-by-one. He loops an arm around my shoulders and I lean into his side.

"You didn't tell me your dad had an impossible list," he says, teasingly aggrieved.

I smile. The bond is so new and we're both figuring it out, so sometimes I'm not sure what sneaks through or not. "Yes, almost seven feet tall, able to fly straight into a hurricane, perfect intelligence scores."

I tilt my head against him to watch the way the laugh lines on his face deepen as his chuckle comes free and easy.

"Should I pack my bags right now?" he asks.

“Might have to,” I reply, and then after a moment say, “They like you.”

He presses a light kiss to my forehead. “I like them too.”

I smile, letting him feel the sparks of relief. His arm snugs tighter around me and I tuck closer.

Cieran hums and adjusts so I can get more comfortable. “So aggressive.” He only laughs softly at my sound of pretend annoyance. We stay there, softly talking, until he lets slip some of his fatigue through a small yawn.

“Go to bed.”

He rests his forehead atop mine. “Don’t wanna.”

I’m just as reluctant to extricate myself, but I do and poke his chest and side until he slowly gets up. It will be an early morning tomorrow and I’m hopeful that he sleeps well enough here.

*“I’ll be fine,”* he reassures.

*“Tell me if it’s not.”*

The corners of his hazel eyes crinkle and he taps his forehead gently against mine. *“Maybe.”*

I thump his chest and he just kisses me once more before we go inside.

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The next two days are filled with hiking and scrambling over and across rocks, summitting the dormant volcano and looking out into the open ocean at the still smoking volcano miles away that holds the first dragon’s tomb. From there I shift and carry us both on the winds down to the base. I pretend it’s because I wanted to fly, but I’d felt the quick ache in his right knee before he shuttered it away. And I try not to glare in frustration back at the car when he digs out pain pills from his backpack.

“Athina,” he says without regret. “Sometimes it hurts from me getting out of bed. It’s just life at this point.”

*This point.* Nearly two years of having a prosthetic limb. An aspect of his life I will have to get used to. He’s usually in long pants or military uniform, so it’s easy to forget about it until it bothers him.

“But did this make it worse?” I ask.

Cieran shrugs. “Maybe? But I wouldn’t have missed this though.” He gestures to the volcano.

I prop my hands on my hips, and he mirrors the position. “Athina, I would have said something if it was really bad, okay?”

He doesn’t want me to look at him like he might be weak, and I understand that, but...

*“Athina, I’m all right.”*

My shoulders drop and I push apology through the bond.

“You can’t predict everything,” he says softly. “I can’t even always predict this.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “Now, come on. You promised me pie.” He wraps an arm around my shoulders and steers me around to the driver’s seat.

Thirty minutes later we step out of a small café with brightly colored paper plates holding a slice of fried pie dusted with powdered sugar. I pick one of the small tables set against the bricked exterior and shaded from the late afternoon sun by an awning. Before we sit, Cieran digs out his phone, a slight grin on his face as he opens the camera. And then stops, abruptly closing off the bond.

“Cieran?” I ask softly. He lets our connection open just enough to let me feel an emotion that stings my eyes.



“I was gonna take a picture to send Shay. Make her jealous.” He offers a pained smile. “Fates, you’d think...you’d think I’d remember that she’s gone.” His voice cracks and he looks away to some point up the street.

I put my free hand on his forearm. It’s only been four months since his sister died.

“Take a picture anyway,” I say quietly. I’m not sure if that will help at all, but at least I can be here to help him try and navigate the fresh twists and turns grief throws at him. He sniffs in a condemning way and does.

There’s a new emotion twisting in my chest as we sit, neither reaching for forks just yet. Cieran clears his throat abruptly and raises an eyebrow at me, silently asking me what’s wrong. I mess with the fork before sliding hands into my lap.

“It feels almost...wrong...that somehow I’m grieving her too,” I say softly. “I missed meeting her by *days*.” And his memories and emotions are so sharp and vivid and tinged with loss when it comes to his sister.

“I know,” the simple words hold complete understanding. He musters a smile, a shadow of his true one. “She would have loved you. Hell, she’d have crashed this trip.” His expression eases into something freer.

The corner of my mouth tucks up. “We can visit every pie shop here in her honor.”

A soft chuckle breaks from him. “Don’t tempt me, hot stuff.” He pauses for another moment, then, “She believed in Heaven and the afterlife. She was like Bes. Always pulling out a rosary for things. Fates, and she was so...so worried about leaving me behind.” He sniffs again. “I don’t know...maybe she knows we found each other.”

There’s some softer contemplation around him. We haven’t really talked about religion or faith yet. I know he’s not either. And I’m...undecided. My parents have found faith more in the last few years, but I didn’t

grow up with anything much. But I do know that I will support anything that feels like it might give him a better anchor to keep weathering life.

"I hope she does," I say truthfully. And I hope that she would like me as Cieran insists.

"She'd also insist that you're too good for me." Cieran picks up his fork.

"Well." I shrug in casual agreement. He smiles and digs in. I wait, just to watch his reaction.

"*Fir*, that's good." His eyes go wide with the first bite. "I'm absolutely leaving you for this pie."

I laugh, lightly tapping my boot against his. We finish our pieces and split another. For Shay.

---

Two nights later, we park outside Iosef's house. He and his wife claimed the honor of hosting us for dinner with the fleet. Both Cieran and I are completely relaxed this time. Music already comes from behind the house where lights are strung across the wide patio.

Takis opens the door for us, immediately greeting Cieran with a handshake and hug. He loops an arm around my shoulders next and I connect through the mindspeak to the rest of my fleet. They appear as comforting hums in the back of my mind, finding a place beside mine and Cieran's connection.

Iosef is cooking outside. Dimos is with him, kicking a ball around with Iosef's two young children. Iosef's wife meets us in the kitchen, giving Cieran a warm embrace. She's been eager to meet him, wanting to judge for herself if he's a good mate for me and not just take her husband's word. Even though they have a heartbond and know that the bond is never wrong.

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She refuses to let us help her, directing us outside in the lowering evening instead. They live furthest from the military base, in a quiet neighborhood with other families and only a few minutes' drive from the ocean.

"Cieran!" Iosef and Dimos leave off to come greet him. He's just as at ease around them as they are with him. I'm thanking the Fates that we met on mission and they've already seen him in action, otherwise this would be painful as they tried to either intimidate or scare him off.

Instead Iosef is hosting us for dinner, refusing to let us bring anything as honored guests. Takis scoured the islands for the finest selection of beer for tonight. Dimos helped expedite paperwork for this visit and designed the folding knives we had commissioned for Cieran and his crew. He'll get his tonight and take the other three home along with Iosef's personal spice blend for Remy and a few other small gifts.

It's late when Dimos and I sit at the fire pit watching Takis and Cieran play football with the children. Takis is between girlfriends right now. He's rarely still and that often extends to relationships. The few times I've seen him truly quiet and calm has been around us. This is usually how nights at Iosef's go—Takis playing with Nikos and Avris, keeping tabs on any other conversation through mindspeak. Dimos sometimes is with him, but he willingly surrendered that role to Cieran tonight.

Iosef appears at the sliding door to call his children to bed. They immediately resist and try and hide behind the adults. Takis picks Avris up and flips her upside down. Cieran crouches and slings Nikos over his shoulder. There's a bit of familiarity through our bond, a glimpse of memory doing this for other small children as either Javi or Masood laughs like Iosef.

The children laugh and squirm as they're carted inside. Dimos smiles and it's always good to see our captain relaxed. It took him time after we were made a fleet to become less serious around us. Unlike my father, his parents are stern and exacting. They trace their lineage directly back to the first dragon and try to place the weight of centuries upon him. He can be very rigid, which sometimes makes us laugh with how chaotic he'll sometimes let his art get. I'm glad too that tonight he is not quiet and more closed off around someone he doesn't know very well. But Cieran has a way of putting people at ease.

Dimos's calm expression fades and he rotates the beer in his hand.

"New orders came today, 'Thina," he says in a low voice. Readiness slides over me, and my dragonfire rises to join it. Dimos lifts his chin toward the house. "Two days after he leaves, we will fly out."

"Where?" I ask.

"Lusitania. The cartels are on the rise again."

Our islands have high security, but that has never stopped criminals. Sometimes it seems they only like the challenge. Takis appears in a rush of motion and drops to the chair opposite me. Cieran leans in the doorway, hands in jeans pockets. He watches me with understanding. He felt it through the bond.

And I think I love him more as I understand his returning emotion. He's not upset that I'll be going on a mission. He wants to be there to fight alongside me, the same way I felt when he deployed three weeks ago, and the way I rushed to his side in Dunhare two months ago.

"We'll guard her wings, Sergeant," Dimos says.

Cieran smiles. "Just don't slow her down."

Takis chuckles, and Dimos allows another smile as Cieran comes to sit next to me. I slide my fingers through his. It's not the first time

since meeting him that conflict has tangled inside me. Wanting to keep *this* with my fleet, my sometimes wing-brained brothers, and wanting Cieran. Even with the heartbond, I feel pulled equally in two directions. And I don't know if that makes me something less that I don't know yet where I want to be.

"Hey," Cieran's voice breaks through. "*Don't give everything up for me.*" His thumb traces against the back of my hand. "*We've got time to figure it out.*"

I know. There is no expiration on a heartbond, but with both of us serving in special forces, it seems like time is all the more precious. He gently squeezes my hand, reminding me to come back to the present and not try and scout out the future. More often than not, I can be impatient, ready to fight against the unknown. He's becoming an anchor for me, tempering the quickness of my heartfire with some patient steadiness. And both of us know that if either of us made a choice to discharge right now, it would only lead to regret.

So I soak up the next few days with him, both of us trying to bolster ourselves for another parting. It will be almost another two months at least until I can visit him again in Dunhare. Weeks with at least one mission for us to get through with bond dampeners on. He doesn't have any upcoming orders yet, but that could change as soon as he's back on duty.

We hold each other tight one more time at the gate-port, our only regret that we have to let each other go. He steps through the gate, and the heartbond loses some of its vibrancy with distance, the mindspeak now feeling like we are calling to each other from separate rooms. But it's still there. And I only smile as we both keep the bond open as wide

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as we can, keeping each other quiet company as, half a world apart, we  
make our way home.