

Surrogate
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For my sister—playwright, historian, and author, Anne G'Fellers-Mason, who seems unaware of the immensity of her own talent.

Entry from *The Combined Takla-Human Empire Dictionary: Forty-Third Unabridged Edition*

Alyward [al-uh-wawrd] (n)

- 1) a humanoid species originating from the Milky Way galaxy whose genome has been widely altered by millennia of genetic engineering
- 2) A person of the Alyward species

Alyward subclasses: boss, worker, random

Associated terms: ajeja, autalaci, eja, imma, ottonol, shae-bast

See also: she-beast: Terran Common variant of shae-bast (n) the Alyward female breeding instinct

Chapter One Drowning

“An agent’s coffin?” A male spoke in muffled Terran Common. “It’s crushed! How’d it survive entry?”

“Pure luck.” Another male voice as muffled as the first. “Watch yourselves. It’s still hot.”

Are they wearing masks too?

“Didn’t the Alyward send word of a four month delay?”

“Wormhole time distortion,” said someone. “It always makes sending and receiving between worlds a little off.”

“Then how long was this coffin in there?”

“Long enough for the gravity to play havoc.”

Trade Agent Etain Ixtii tried to call out, but any sound she made remained trapped behind her breather. *I made it! I survived!* But she knew she was injured.

“Glad it’s in the shallows,” said another voice. *Female?* Maybe, but Alyward gender-based inflections weren’t the same as this world’s. “Brr. I thought it was spring.”

“Late cold snap. Say, why’s the Royal Physician here?”

“Witness for the death log.”

“Foreign particles check negative.”

“Rad counts are down.”

Get me out of this fly box! She struggled in her straps.

“Careful, Fiam,” said a soothing, male voice. “Splash water on those handles. Everyone use gloves. Easy now. I don’t want to treat my own staff. And use your masks. We don’t know if any micro-contaminants survived entry.” Pressure, light, and stifling humidity flooded over Etain. “Body intact?”

I’m here! Etain gagged when she inhaled.

“Yes. No, wait! The agent’s still alive!”

Splashing sound increased around the coffin.

“Hold on. It doesn’t look good.” This accent was different than the others.

“Decontaminate the case interior before you touch anything,” someone said and a cool mist coated her exposed skin.

Am I alive or hearing dead? She had to be alive—too much pain. And now they were touching her, taking off her breather, loosening the straps and—a hand ran down her front.

“Female.”

“Isn’t the trade agent female?”

“Affirmative, but what’s that projecting from under her left hip?”

Everything stopped. *What’re they doing?*

A hand slid beneath her. *No! Don’t! They bite!*

“It looks like—what *is* that?”

“A leg! Another lifeform crossed with her!”

“Where is it?”

They removed her straps and rolled her side-to-side, searching for—*Panpobal!* She could move if she wanted but her head—her neck—she managed to reach one hand to her face. *I’ve got to warn them, have to—*

“Found it!” A woman yelled, but her voice suddenly rose out of Etain’s range.

Etain thrashed in her case when they pinned her. *Kill them! Kill them!* She lost track of the sounds, but when she next woke the straps were tight again. *Why?* She arched against their hold.

“Don't.” Someone pushed her down. “Where's the last float?”

“On its way.”

Several someones talked in Takla, but their voices pitched out of her range. The Takla vocal range was massive, and the wider the tonal shift the more emotion was involved. She understood little without an aural modifier. *What's wrong?*

She opened her mouth—nothing.

“Don't,” said the Soother. “You're swollen.”

She tried to pain growl but only gurgled. *Medi's tears! What's wrong with me?*

“Where's the float?”

“The watch leader called. Captain Dresh ordered her taken to the guard tower.” Another woman talked in Terran Common but barely within Etain's range. “She's on her way.”

Captain? Etain struggled to remember the word's meaning. *Captain. Rank. Tasker? Why? Medi's tears, I can't think straight.*

“Tell her to take her time,” said the Soother. “This one's my patient before she's an inmate.”

Inmate? Her breath stopped in her throat.

“Her throat's closing.” The Soother's voice skipped octaves. “Get my kit.”

“The float will be here momentarily,” said someone. “Shouldn't we get her onboard and inside first?”

“No time.”

Why can't I breathe? Was she under water? Were they trying to drown her? Too much water. Too little air. *Am I drowning?* They tilted her head and shoved something into her mouth, trying to force it down her throat. She gagged and tried to growl at them, but they kept trying, scraping the back of her mouth and throat until—*No! I can't breathe!*

They jerked the device from her throat. “It's gone,” said the Soother. “Let's try the trachea.” Something cold swiped across Etain's throat and a hand pushed back her collar to expose her right shoulder.

“Are you sure you can do that on her species?”

“I'll not lose her too. Torrents! How many times has she been bitten?” The Soother. “Other side.” Her shoulders and upper arms were exposed to heavy, wet air. “Someone get that metal band off her right arm before it cuts her circulation.”

No! Only my usurer can remove it! She fought them harder than ever.

“There's a spot.” Something cold stung her shoulder, and someone pushed her back into the case.

No! I can't go back! Her body was sinking, regressing...*I can't move.*

“Hand me the small blade and the short tube.”

Medi's tears! They're going to kill me!

END PREVIEW