

Stained Glass Heart

by Catherine Asaro



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The Golden Suns

Vyrl slipped outside the castle, making sure no one saw him escape. Beyond the village, the Dalvador Plains spread out like a silver-green sea of reeds rippling with the breezes. He took off in a loping run, the grasses rustling around his legs.

Reveling in his freedom, he soon left the village behind. He ran for the joy of being healthy, strong, and full of life. Out here he could be himself, rather than Prince Havyrl Torcellei Valdoria.

In his more introspective moods, Vyrl realized he lived in an idyll, his life marked by golden days. His parents had set it up that way, to shield their children from the harsh life of the Imperial Court in an interstellar empire. The colonists who had settled the world Lyshriol lived a simpler life, one close to the land. They cared more about a good harvest festival than long titles or dynastic lineages. So Vyrl and his many siblings tended crops, pulled weeds, and looked after livestock just like anyone else.

Reed-grasses rippled around him, the translucent tubes sparkling like glass but bending easily, supple and soft. Iridescent spheres no larger than his thumb topped many of the stalks and floated off their moorings when he brushed by. The drifting bubbles marked his path through the plains.

Running hard, throwing his arms wide, he relished the strength of his muscles and broadening shoulders. After a year of gawkiness, when he had seemed to grow visible amounts every day, he had finally stopped feeling gangly and awkward. He was more comfortable now with his new height and strength.

He tilted his head up, letting sunlight bathe his face. Two gold suns hung in a lavender sky, side by side right now, shaped more like eggs than spheres, and speckled with dark spots. The double star destabilized the terraformed planet, but Vyrl earnestly believed that by the time that difficulty threatened this world, well into the future, his people would have figured out how to fix the problem.

Then Vyrl ignominiously tripped over a rock. Laughing, he staggered through the grass, flailing his arms until he recovered his balance.

Eventually his pent-up energy spent itself and he slowed to a walk. He glanced back at the village. The distant cluster of white buildings and colorful turreted roofs barely showed above the waving grasses. He could just see the topmost level of his home. His family lived in a castle, a small but lovely one, with towers at the corners, each capped by a blue turreted roof. Spires topped the roofs and pennants snapped on them, violet with gold ribbing.

Vyrl let out a contented sigh. Then he flopped on his back in the grass, breathing deeply, his heart beating hard. Swaying stalks bent over him, releasing bubbles that glistened against the sky. Ah, what a day! He grinned, relieved to have escaped his math homework.

A girl giggled.

Vyrl's sense of peace fled. He sat up fast. "Who is that?"

Silence.

Scrambling to his feet, he glared over the plains. The breezes blew his red-gold curls in his face, and he pushed them out of his eyes.

He saw no one. Although a person could easily hide in the grass, she should have left a trail of bubbles floating over whatever path she took here.

Vyrl peered back the way he had come. He had left more than a trail; his wild race had stirred clouds of glimmering spheres. If someone was following him, she could have disguised her approach by keeping to his path. He should have noticed someone skulking after him, but then, he hadn't been paying much attention. None, in fact.

"Who is here?" he called, trying to sound forceful. The words came out more startled than commanding, but at least his voice wasn't breaking anymore. It had finally finished changing and settled into a deep baritone, which pleased him just fine.

No answer came to his question, however. The girl was playing a trick on him. Hah! He wouldn't let her rattle him. He saw no trampled grass nearby, but the reed-grass always sprang back fast. He had flattened a great deal of it when he lay down and already it was rising back into place.

Vyrl continued his search but found no trace of the intruder. He began to feel a bit foolish. Perhaps he had imagined that giggle. Finally he lay down again, stretching out on his back with his hands behind his head.

Another giggle floated on the air like a bubble.

"Who is that?" He *had* heard her. Glowering, he jumped to his feet and stalked around the area, stomping at the grass. "Who's there?"

Two bubbles detached from a nearby stalk and bobbed off over the plain. There! He strode forward, grasses whipping around his legs.

A trill of laughter rippled in the wind. Then a girl jumped up out of the grasses, red-gold curls and blue skirts. With a laughing glance in his direction, she took off and raced away.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Lily, you come back here!"

Instead of running after her, though, he hesitated. Lily was the daughter of a local farmer. She and Vyrl had been friends practically since they had been born, but lately he had avoided her, unable to do more than stutter banalities in her presence. Lily didn't look like Lily anymore. She had changed, become all curves and mystery.

She ran through the grasses, sending sprays of bubbles into the air. Her blue skirt swirled around her legs and parted the high grass, showing glimpses of her thighs, then hiding them again. The top of her dress fit snug around her torso, adorned by a maze of confusing laces. Vyrl had never figured out why girls needed so many ties on their clothes. She made a beautiful sight, though, her waist-length curls flying in the wind, streaming around her, shiny and red-bronze, touched with gold sun-streaks.

Hah! He wouldn't let her get away with spying on him. He took off in a sprint. In the village, he would have held back, not wanting people to see them playing like children, but out here he felt less constrained. Chasing Lily, making her shriek and laugh, had always entertained him. Now the thought of catching her made his pulse quicken in a way that had never happened when they were younger.

Lily glanced over her shoulder, her gaze flashing with mischief, her large eyes taunting him with an audacious gleam. Her teasing laugh sparkled across the plains. That laugh had been the bane of his existence for as long as he could remember.

With his long legs, Vyrl easily gained on her. Coming alongside her, he grabbed her around the waist with a gleeful shout. They went into a spin, their momentum whirling them around. He almost regained his balance by swinging her in a dance step he didn't usually let anyone know he had learned, given that men weren't supposed to dance. Then they toppled into the grasses in a tangle of limbs and clothes.

"Got you!" Vyrl flipped her onto her back. Still panting from his run, he pinned her upper arms to the ground. "Say 'Give,' " he demanded. "Come on, Lily! I win."

In years past, she would have yanked up a clod of tube-reeds and thrown it at him, then escaped while he yelled and wiped his eyes clear of the sparkling dirt that clung to bulbs on the grass.

Today, though, she wasn't laughing. She stared up at him, breathing hard, her chest rising and falling, her violet eyes huge. Most everyone in the Dalvador province had violet eyes, including Vyrl himself, but until this moment he had never realized the beauty of the color. Her lashes glimmered gold, a thick fringe against her milky skin. The rosy blush of her cheeks made his pulse race. He felt hot, then nervous, lying here, half on top of her, gazing at her face, which was so familiar and so new at the same time.

Her emotions washed over his empath's mind: confusion, surprise, and an uncertain anticipation, sweet and intense. It all mixed with another emotion harder to define, a warmth that spread through her and made him even

more aware of her curves. Vyrl flushed, unsettled by his heightened awareness of her. Usually he shared emotions only with members of his family, who were the only empathes in Dalvador. Even then, they had to be near one another to pick up moods, and they had learned to guard their minds, to give one another privacy. Yet with Lily, his mental defenses were drifting away as if they were no more than ephemeral bubbles that floated on the wind.

They lay staring at each other, Vyrl with no idea what to say. Lily's mouth parted slightly, her lips full and soft. So soft. Plump. How would they feel if he touched them?

Then she dimpled like an imp and grabbed a handful of reeds. "You must let me up, O clumsy sir, or I will be forced to shower your head with sod." Although she spoke as always, full of play, she sounded different today—breathless, a little scared.

In the past, Vyrl would have wrestled her for the grass. Today he murmured, "You must first pay a fine for spying on me."

She gave a mock gasp of dismay, her heart-shaped face as expressive as ever. "And what terrible fine would you wrest, you heartless beast, from a poor girl such as myself?"

"Not so terrible," he said softly. Then he bent his head and kissed her.

As often as Vyrl had imagined this moment, his daydreams were nothing compared to the real thing. A jolt went through him as their lips touched. She tasted so sweet and felt so soft, her breasts against his chest, her body round beneath his. His heart thudded hard, as if he were still running.

Lifting his head, he whispered, "Lily." Then he kissed her again, moving his hands up her sides, caressing, feeling where her hips curved in to her waist.

Her emotions had become a confusing tumult. Ah, no, she wasn't responding. Mortification swept over him. Had he made a fool of himself? If she pushed him away or laughed at him, he was going to die, utterly die.

Instead she slid her arms around his waist, her embrace tentative, as if she wasn't sure where to put her hands. Her mouth parted under his and she nibbled shyly at his lower lip.

Vyrl sighed, almost giddy with relief. He wanted to untie her laces and pull up her skirts, touch her everywhere, but he held back, afraid he would scare her.

Her emotions flooded past the natural barriers in her mind, the protections all people raised without realizing it. Then he knew; this was her first kiss, as it was his. Despite his good intentions, his hands roamed. Still kissing her, he stroked her sides, down and up, his touch urgent. He folded his palms around her breasts, filling his grip with them—if only this cloth would disappear! He fumbled with the laces on her bodice, baffled by their complexity. Frustrated, he pulled harder, straining to undo them. Pushing up her skirt with his other hand, he reached for her thigh—

"Vyrl, no. Slow down." Lily pushed his hand away from her leg. She was breathing hard now, but she had tensed, no longer pliant under him.

He groaned softly, one hand on her breast, the other intertwined with hers at his side. With her mental barriers fading, he could feel her shy desire, but also her fear.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're just so soft and pretty." He brushed his lips across her nose. "I could kiss you all day."

Her blush deepened, as pink as a sunrise. He had always thought Lily was lovely, even in their early childhood when cruder children had called her a "fat little sprout." Now the plump little girl had vanished, replaced by this curvaceous beauty. Warmth washed out from her mind and he closed his eyes, letting it flow over him. She felt so very, very right, as if he had always known he would someday hold her like this.

"You've been working on your father's farm a lot," she said. "I've seen you doing your chores."

Vyrl opened his eyes. "They don't seem like chores." He longed to kiss her more, but he held back, not wanting to ruin this moment by pushing too hard. He shifted onto his side next to her, their bodies fitting together like pieces of a puzzle. The grass waved above and bubbles shimmered in the air. One popped, scattering glitter over them. Vyrl laughed, then flicked the powder off Lily's nose.

"I like to work in the fields," he said. He would far rather plow a field than study the physics his tutors persisted in trying to teach him.

Her mouth curved upward, half shy, half teasing. "You look very fine out in those fields with your shirt off."

He flushed. "You watched me like *that*?"

"You know, Vyrl, you used to be skinny, like a stalk of too-tall-weed."

Hai! He never had liked it when people called him that, even if it had been true these past years, when he shot up like the too-tall-weeds that grew over houses, seeking light from the suns.

"So what weed do I look like now?" He tried to make light of it, though he would really rather not be called a plant.

Her face gentled. "You don't." Touching his cheek, she spoke in her lilting voice. "You look like a man now, so strong and tall."

An emotion swelled in him, one he wasn't sure how to define. He knew only that he was where he belonged. With a tenderness he hadn't known he possessed, he brushed back a curl that had blown in her face. Then he kissed her again, barely able to believe he had her in his arms. He wanted to feel her skin against his, to make love to her out here under the golden suns, just as he had so often loved her in his dreams. But he held back and did no more than kiss her, taking it as slowly as she needed.

When the larger sun touched the horizon and shadows stretched across the plains, Vyrl and Lily headed back to the village of Dalvador, walking hand in hand, smiling and shy with each other. Vyrl was in no hurry. Now that he and Lily had made clear what had always been unspoken between them, they had plenty of time—their entire lives—to explore what they had begun today.

The Hearth Room was empty. The fireplace at the far end of the long hall slumbered, its coals dark, no flames licking its blue stones. No one sat in the armchairs there, and the standing lamps with their rose-glass shades remained unlit.

Lost in daydreams, Vyrl walked across the other end of the long hall, far from the hearth, in the shadows. As he passed the great stone staircase that curved up to the second floor, he glanced around to make sure he was alone. Then he turned in a circle, pretending to dance with Lily. With a flourish, he snapped his foot to his knee and spun fast, three times. He came out of the turn in a leap, jumping high off the ground. Then he landed on bent knees and stopped, checking to make sure no one had seen him. Laughing softly at himself, he resumed his staid walk.

"You're late," a voice said.

Vyrl froze. In response to the speaker, the lamps at the far end of the hall came on, shedding warm light over the hearth. This far from the lamps, shadows filled the hall, but enough light filtered back to show a man standing a few paces away, in the doorway Vyrl had been approaching. He hadn't heard anyone enter, probably because he had been dancing.

Vyrl managed to find his voice. "Father."

Eldrinson Althor Valdoria, who carried the title of Dalvador Bard, looked to Vyrl like the hero of an epic poem. At five feet ten, his father stood half a hand-span taller than the average man of Dalvador. He had a well-built physique, his muscles firm from years of farming. Wine-red hair brushed his shoulders, its healthy sheen visible despite the dim light. Even Vyrl, who understood almost nothing about how women saw such matters, could tell his father had a handsome face, with its straight nose, high cheekbones, large eyes, and classical features. Although Vyrl never knew how to respond when people exclaimed over how he resembled his father, he considered it a compliment, more because he admired his father than because he cared about appearance.

"Where have you been?" Eldrinson asked, frowning.

"Out in the plains." Vyrl tried not to look guilty about his missed schoolwork. His father would never understand. No one could. Vyrl was all brimming confusion and desire. Although his older brothers sometimes saw girls in the village, he was certain none of them had ever felt the way he did about Lily, as if his heart could soar one moment and shatter the next.

Eldrinson came over to him, and Vyrl again had the unsettling experience of looking *down* at him instead of *up*. He had yet to become used to being taller than his father, and he was still growing.

"And while you were running in the plains," his father inquired, "who was doing your lessons?"

Vyrl imagined a black velvet cloth over his mind, hiding his thoughts about Lily from his father, who was a strong empath. "I'll finish them tonight."

"You shouldn't leave them until so late."

"I can't study all day," Vyrl grumbled. "I'll turn into a mad marauder."

"A marauder?" Eldrinson tried to hold back his smile. "We can't have that."

Although his father had guarded his mind, Vyrl could tell he wasn't angry, either about the missed homework or about Vyrl dancing, which he had probably seen.

"I feel suffocated in here," Vyrl said. "I need to run."

His father tried to look stern. "If you intend to carry through with this idea of yours, to earn a doctorate in agriculture someday, you have to study."

"If I go to the university, I'll have to go off-world." The prospect dismayed Vyrl. "Maybe I could attend through the computer webs instead."

"You mean in a virtual classroom?"

"Yes." Vyrl's mood lightened. "Exactly."

Eldrinson rubbed his chin. "I don't really understand it, these machines and things of your mother's people."

Having grown up with the technology his mother had brought to Lyshriol, Vyrl had never shared his father's unease with it. Eager now, he said, "I've been checking colleges. Many have programs for virtual students. I would never have to leave Lyshriol." He longed to learn the science behind the farming he loved. Lyshriol was more than his home; the plains, the suns, the land itself were part of him at a level so deep he couldn't separate them from his identity.

His father spoke carefully. "Many possibilities exist."

Vyrl could tell something more than unfinished homework was troubling his father. Disquieted, he looked around. "Where is everyone?" Usually the house bustled with life. He had six brothers and three sisters, all at home except for Eldrin, his oldest brother.

"They went to the festival in the village," Eldrinson said. "I've been looking for you."

"For me? Why?"

"To talk." His father's expression had become unreadable. "If you stay here on Lyshriol, your life will have many constraints. You wouldn't have to accept those limitations if you went off-world."

Apprehension brushed Vyrl. "I don't want to leave."

"You may change your mind when you're older."

He pondered his father. Although Eldrinson didn't seem overly upset, he wasn't happy either. Vyrl had tended to avoid his parents lately, but this cautious conversation bothered him. His father was shielding his mind more than usual. It didn't feel right.

Vyrl went to the stairs and sat on the fourth step, stretching out his legs. "What happened?"

Eldrinson came over and leaned against the banister, his elbow resting on its gold curve. "You are familiar with the House of Majda?"

"I guess." Vyrl knew Majda the way he knew the other noble Houses, as institutions he studied in school and otherwise gladly forgot. In this age of elected leaders, the Imperial nobility were an anachronism—including his own family, the Ruby Dynasty, which topped that antiquated hierarchy.

He winced, reminded of the history lessons he had neglected yesterday, earning his tutor's disapproval. His mother's ancestors had ruled the Ruby Empire until that interstellar civilization had fallen, stranding its colony worlds. During the ensuing dark ages, many colonies had lost their technology. Only in recent centuries had his mother's people regained star travel and begun rediscovering the lost colonies, such as this one on Lyshriol. Although Vyrl knew the House of Majda had been a strong ally of the Ruby Dynasty throughout history, he had never met a single member of that venerated line. Majda belonged to off-world politics, like a distant fog.

"Devon Majda heads the House of Majda," his father said. "She inherited the title of Matriarch ten years ago, just after her twenty-eighth birthday."

"Oh." Vyrl leaned back with his elbows on the stair above him.

Eldrinson shifted his weight, then cleared his throat. "As Matriarch, Devon has... responsibilities."

"I see." In truth, Vyrl had no idea what his father was talking about. He couldn't pick up anything from Eldrinson's guarded mind. He wondered if he could make it to the festival in time to have dinner with his brothers.

"Do you know what those responsibilities are?" Eldrinson asked.

Was this a test? Maybe his father was more annoyed with him for playing truant than he realized. If he had to stay in tonight while everyone else enjoyed the festival, he wouldn't see Lily.

He tried to sound knowledgeable. "As the head of her House, Devon Majda has a seat in the Assembly." Vyrl scoured his memory. "Most councilors in the Assembly are elected leaders who represent various worlds. Only the noble Houses have hereditary seats. It's left over from the days when the Ruby Dynasty ruled instead of the Assembly." He squinted at Eldrinson. "You and Mother have seats, too, don't you? Mother is the Councilor for Foreign Affairs."

"That's right." His father paused. "Your mother's seat is more than hereditary; she ran for election and won. It gives her more votes."

"Oh. Yes." Although Vyrl admired his mother's work in a theoretical sort of way, right now he had more concern for his growling stomach. Lately he was hungry all the time. He ate twice as much as his younger siblings, but it never seemed to be enough.

"The Ruby Dynasty and Majda must balance their power with that of the Assembly," Eldrin said, still guarded.

Vyrl knew he was missing whatever his father wanted him to see. "I didn't finish my studies on Majda," he admitted.

Eldrinson hesitated, discomfort leaking past his mental barriers. He didn't even admonish Vyrl for his lack of scholarly effort. Instead he said, "As the head of Majda, Devon must ensure that her line continues."

Although Vyrl wasn't sure why his father cared, he could well imagine that the House of Majda was upset, if their matriarch had reached the age of thirty-eight without producing any children. "She needs heirs."

"That's right."

When his father said no more, relief spread through Vyrl. Apparently the lesson was over. He stood up. "Shall we join the others? I'm starving."

"Vyrl, wait." Eldrinson raked his hand through his hair. "We need to discuss this."

Vyrl stopped, then slowly sat again. "Discuss what?"

His father answered quietly. "Your betrothal."

What? The word thudded in on Vyrl. Betrothal? He must have misheard. "I'm not betrothed to anyone." His voice cracked on the last word.

"I realize this is unexpected." His father gave him a look of apology. "Your mother and I had intended to take more time, to let you adjust to the idea. This visit caught us by surprise. We've just received word that Brigadier General Majda—that's Devon—will be here in two days."

A constriction tightened Vyrl's chest, making it hard to breathe. "Brigadier General? At *thirty-eight*?" He was no military expert, but even he knew that however old it might sound to him, that age was young for such a rank.

"She's good at what she does. Very good." His father added dryly, "Her family connections don't hurt either."

Vyrl struggled to mask his turmoil, to hide the chaos of his emotions. Surely an escape existed from this disaster. "This is too fast."

Sympathy washed across his father's face. "I'm sorry it is such a shock. Your mother and I want you to be happy. Vyrl, we spent a great deal of time checking out Devon. She is a good person. And as the Majda consort, you can follow pursuits you could never have here." Awkwardly he added, "Including an, uh, artistic career, if you wish."

Vyrl barely heard him. All he could see was Lily, her lovely face bright in the sunshine, like a lost dream. Betrothals among the noble Houses were political arrangements; his parents and Majda had probably been negotiating for months, even years. These matters carried the weight of governmental decrees. Nineteen-year-old Eldrin, his oldest brother, had married the Ruby Pharaoh three years ago, his own kin, as tradition dictated. But it wasn't fair. He wasn't Eldrin. He wasn't the firstborn. He had three older brothers and three younger ones. His parents had turned down offers for his other brothers, considering the matches unsuitable. Vyrl had never expected they would accept one for him, especially with the highest placed member of the most powerful House.

What made it even worse was that he understood their reasoning. He was more family-oriented than his older brothers, more suitable as a consort. If Majda needed an heir, she had to marry relatively soon, which left out his younger brothers. And more than anything, he understood the gift his parents wanted to give him, the chance to pursue his love of dance, something he could never do here on Lyshriol.

It didn't matter. He couldn't marry a female warrior. He *couldn't* do it. Just as men never danced on Lyshriol, so women never fought in battle. His stomach clenched. If he revealed how he felt about Lily, his parents would have her sent away, to remove a distraction that might interfere with his betrothal. He couldn't bear the thought.

He struggled for calm. "I don't want to marry."

Eldrinson spoke in the kindly voice Vyrl had trusted his entire life, but which gave him no mooring now. "It's all right. You will have time to get to know her, to feel more comfortable with this situation."

"Why can't Althor marry her?" Vyrl thought of his brother; at seventeen, Althor was preparing to go off-world to a military academy. "He wants that life. He would be perfect for her."

"You're the one she offered for."

"But *why!* Althor is older. So is Del-Kurj." In truth, Vyrl couldn't imagine anyone marrying his wild brother, Del-Kurj, but that didn't make this any easier.

Eldrinson's face turned thoughtful. "I can only guess as to Devon's motives in regards to Althor. Majda is a conservative matriarchy. I suspect Devon doesn't want a fighter pilot for a husband. As for Del-Kurj..." He made an angry wave with his hand. "Let's just say he has had a few indiscretions."

Few, Vyrl would have laughed if he hadn't been so upset. Del-Kurj already knew more about women than most grown men in Dalvador. He liked girls and they liked him, and he made no secret about it, despite the trouble it caused him. Del hadn't fathered any children yet, but if he kept up in the way he'd begun it would only be a matter of time.

Vyrl spoke in a low voice. "Does the Assembly want this betrothal, too?"

His father nodded. "Stronger ties between Majda and the Ruby Dynasty will cement alliances the Assembly sees as crucial to the stability of our government."

"I don't want to stabilize a government." He couldn't keep the pain out of his voice.

"Ah, Vyrl." Eldrinson's voice held deep regret. "I am terribly sorry this news is unwelcome. If it helps to know, your mother and I truly believe this can be a good match. Devon Majda will treat you well, with respect and honor."

"She's *ancient*"

His father's expression lightened. "If she is ancient, I fear to ask what that makes your mother and me." His smile faded. "We do have concerns about the age difference. But with modern techniques to delay aging, eventually you won't be so aware of it." Gently, he added, "You may come to love her, in time."

Vyrl could only shake his head. His dreams were slipping away, like the glitter from a ruptured bubble spreading on the wind.

2

The Silvered Plains

The circular chamber was high in a tower of the castle. Vyrl stood at the window looking out over the countryside. The three figures crossing the Dalvador Plains were too far away to see clearly, but he recognized his mother's streaming gold hair and his father's confident stride.

Beyond them, about a fifteen-minute walk from Dalvador, the starport made a cluster of whitewashed buildings with blue turreted roofs. It resembled a Dalvador hamlet—except for the gold-and-black spacecraft that crouched on the landing field like an intruder. The shuttle had come down from one of the battle cruisers that orbited Lyshriol. Vyrl had never thought much about the ships up there, beyond knowing they provided one of the

best orbital defense systems in settled space. If only they could have defended him against the arrival of Brigadier General Devon Majda.

He wished he could fly away, beyond the suns in the lavender sky. The larger orb was eclipsing the smaller, like a great golden coin surrounded by a halo. To the east and south, farms drowsed in the sunlight, uncaring of interstellar politics. Nearer by, his parents and their guest reached the village. He lost sight of them as they walked in among the houses.

Vyrl bit his lip, his heart aching for Lily. He glanced toward her home, a round white house on a hill, surrounded by other houses. He hadn't dared talk to her in the past two days, since their afternoon together. He had never made it to the festival that night, having been grounded for his truancy. He missed her so much, as if someone had taken out his center and left him with a hole only she could fill.

Yesterday he had seen her while he was walking to his father's farm with Althor and Del-Kurj. She and some other girls had been carrying baskets of bubble fruit. Before he could even think, he had started toward her, his heart surging, his pulse racing. He had gone only a few steps when his brothers called him back.

He couldn't confide in them. Given that one of his brothers might have to marry Devon if he didn't, he doubted they would want Lily distracting him, but neither would they want to betray his trust. Rather than put them in that awkward position, he said nothing. They knew he was hiding his moods, but they respected his privacy and never pried, neither with word nor thought.

Disheartened, Vyrl turned from the window and sat on an elegant stone bench against the wall. He came here when he needed to soothe his agitation. His mother had once referred to this chamber as a "balm for his tempestuous soul." He wasn't sure what she meant, but he did like the austere beauty of this room, with its polished bluestone walls, domed ceiling, and a floor tiled in squares of blue and white stone. Designs in bas-relief bordered the ceiling and floor, as if the chamber were a round gift box—with him as the present.

That last thought dispelled his tenuous serenity. With every fiber of his being protesting, he made himself stand up. He crossed to the arched door of the chamber, but he paused without opening it. Such a beautiful door. He could stay here all day admiring it. Really. He loved its vibrant color. Made with layers of blue-stalk from the Stained Glass Forest, it glowed like a mountain lake. His mother had told him about an off-world substance called "wood" that came in brown shades and didn't glow. He found it hard to imagine such dullness.

As much as he would have been happy to appreciate the door for the rest of the day, he could no longer procrastinate. So he left the chamber and descended the bluestone stairs that spiraled down the tower. He had dressed formally today, in blue trousers with a darker belt embossed in silver. Soft boots came to his knees. Gold-leaf designs bordered their top edges and also the cuffs and collar on his white, bell-sleeved shirt. Thongs laced up the front of the shirt.

At the second story of the castle, he exited the tower into a hall of lavender ash-stone. Wall sconces held purple-glass lamps lit with flames. He thought of stopping to turn on the superconducting light rods hidden in the ceiling, but he didn't pause. It would only delay the inevitable by a few moments, and besides, today he wanted no reminders of off-world technology—or off-world technocrats.

Far too soon, he reached the top of the stairs that went down to the Hearth Room. The great staircase curved around, this part hidden from view of the hall below. Vyrl stood on the landing, straining to hear. Voices came from below, his parents and a woman with a husky contralto. He clenched the banister, unable to continue. He couldn't go down. He *couldn't*.

But if he didn't appear soon, his parents would send someone for him. So he fortified his resolve and descended. Halfway down he came around the curve of the staircase; stopping there, he looked out over the Hearth Room. His parents and an unfamiliar woman were standing at the far end, near the hearth, unaware of him, sipping from ruby goblets. A girl with gold curls had just served them, judging by her empty silver tray. As she walked down the hall, she glanced up. Seeing Vyrl, she started, her mouth opening. Then she averted her gaze and hurried on her way, leaving the room.

Vyrl's face burned. He had known her for years. She and Lily were always giggling together, often at him, though he had never understood why they found him so amusing.

Now she wouldn't even acknowledge him. After the news about his betrothal had spread in the village, his friends no longer seemed comfortable with him. Did they look away because he had become different, his title made real, the son of a mysterious queen who came from above the sky?

No one else had realized yet he was on the stairs, so he remained still, watching. His mother looked every bit her Ruby Dynasty heredity. Tall and statuesque, in a soft blue jumpsuit, she stood by the fireplace with a posture of quiet confidence. Gold hair curled around her face, cascaded over her shoulders and arms, and poured down her back. His father stood next to her, one elbow on the mantel as he spoke to their guest.

Devon Majda.

Vyrl couldn't stop staring at the general. She wore a trim uniform, green with gold on the cuffs, and polished knee-boots that made her taller than his parents. Her black hair hung glossy and straight to her shoulders, framing a face of austere, aristocratic perfection, from her aquiline nose to her dark, upward-tilted eyes. With her long limbs and athletic build, she projected a sense of energy. An aura of power surrounded her, as if she took her rank and heredity for granted. Indeed, she should; only one other family had more status or wealth than Majda—the Ruby Dynasty.

Vyrl didn't care about ancient empires, modern politics, or wealth. He just wanted his own family and a farm. Unfortunately, that probably had a lot to do with why Devon had chosen him to sire her heirs. Thinking of what went into that siring, he flushed, certain his face was turning bright red. Given the differences in their ages, he hadn't expected to find her so attractive. But she still seemed old to him. He couldn't imagine her as his wife.

Glancing toward the stairs, his mother caught sight of him. With a smile, she raised her hand, beckoning. Devon idly glanced his way, then did a double take, her gaze widening. A surge of appreciation overflowed her mind; she apparently liked what she saw. Acutely aware of them watching, he came down the stairs. He grew even more self-conscious as he crossed the long room to the hearth.

When he reached them, Devon bowed deeply from the waist. As she straightened, Vyrl nodded with the formality his title required. Raising his head, he found himself looking straight into her eyes. It startled him. He was used to the girls in Dalvador, who came only to his shoulder, if that much. He took after his mother's people, with their greater height.

Devon spoke in Iotic, the language of the nobility. "My honor at your presence, Your Highness."

Although here in Dalvador he rarely needed to follow the protocol of the Imperial Court, Vyrl had learned its ways. He answered in flawless Iotic. "And mine at yours, General Majda." He wondered if he sounded as awkward as he felt.

She smiled, her expression formal but not unfriendly. "Devon, please."

"Devon." He tried to smile back, though the expression felt stiff on his face. "Please call me Vyrl."

She repeated his name in her Iotic accent, making it sound like *Vahrialle*, which was, he supposed, the proper pronunciation. All his friends drawled *Verle* in the rural Dalvador dialect.

They talked for a bit, a stilted conversation. He could think of almost nothing to say. Standing with his parents while he met the woman that half the galaxy expected him to impregnate was about the most mortifying experience he could imagine.

His father was watching them closely. To Devon, he said, "Perhaps you would like to take a walk? Vyrl can show you the countryside."

"I would like that," Devon said.

Vyrl's shoulders relaxed. The idea of being alone with her didn't ease his agitation, but at least his parents wouldn't be watching. Although his mother smiled at him, he felt the sadness she tried to hide. Her heart had ached that same way when Eldrin had left home and when Althor had received his acceptance to the off-world military academy.

I never wanted you to look at me that way, Vyrl thought to her. *I've always wanted to stay on Lyshriol*. But he couldn't say it out loud, not in front of General Majda.

Walking with Devon across the plains made Vyrl twitch inside. Just two days ago he had run free here and held Lily in his arms. It tore at him to return to this place with a stranger, but he did his best to hide his sense of loss. He could almost hear his brother Del-Kurj deriding him: *Enough of your melodramatic adolescent angst!* As if what Vyrl felt for Lily couldn't be serious, or as if Del-Kurj was so much more incredibly mature. Vyrl could tell his parents also believed he was too young to fall in love. None of that mattered. *He* knew what he felt for Lily was genuine.

Devon walked at his side, her dark hair ruffled by the wind. She spoke politely. "This is beautiful countryside."

"I've always thought so." Vyrl glanced around at the nodding grasses that brushed their hips and the lavender sky with its blue puffs of cloud. He wanted to add, *I love it with every part of my being. I can't leave.* But he remained silent.

"Two suns." She peered at the sky, shielding her eyes with her hand. "It's an unstable configuration, you know."

"The suns?" He had thought the problem was with the planet. Contradicting her would hardly be tactful though.

She lowered her hand. "I meant this world, Lyshriol. Its orbit is unstable. The binary star system perturbs it."

"Oh. Yes." Vyrl pushed back the curls blowing across his face. "My tutor says astronomical engineers from the Ruby Empire moved Lyshriol here and terraformed it for human colonists. They had technologies we've yet to recover."

"Yes. They did a good job." She smiled, her aristocratic face warmed by the sunlight. "It's very pretty."

Vyrl had never thought of the land that sustained his people and his dreams as "pretty." At a loss for an appropriate response, he remained silent.

They strolled toward a distant herd of lyrine grazing on bubble stalks. He stopped about a hundred meters away, reluctant to disturb them. "Those are my father's livestock."

Devon studied the herd. "They're genetically engineered from horses, aren't they?"

"That's what we think." Biology was one of the few subjects he actually liked. "But if that's true, they've become very different animals."

She laughed softly. "I must admit, I've never seen pastel blue horses before. And those horns of theirs are charming. They act like prisms, yes?"

"Well, yes, I guess so." He had always liked the way sunlight refracted in rainbow flashes through the translucent horns of the lyrine. Their hooves produced the same effect, making it look as if they struck sparks of color from the ground when they ran in sunlight. It had never seemed unusual to him, but perhaps it was more so than he realized. Or maybe she was simply trying to make conversation.

He motioned at several boulders that crested the grass, which spread around them like an ocean of reeds. "Would you like to sit?"

"Yes, thank you."

They settled side by side on the largest boulder, which was shaped like a huge table. Devon continued to gaze over the plains. The wind whipped back her hair, accenting the classic bone structure of her face. To Vyrl, she seemed out of place here, a technocrat with an impeccable pedigree transplanted to a rustic setting that offered her no challenge. He had a hard time reading her mood. When he tried, he ran into the mental wall she used to shield her mind. Nor could he relax his defenses around her. With Lily, his barriers had dissolved without his even realizing it, but now his mind felt as closed as a fortress.

Devon spoke gently. "You're different than I expected."

"Different?" He blinked. "How?"

"Quieter." She considered him. "More polished."

Although he said, "Thank you," her words didn't feel like a compliment. He followed the manners his parents had taught him. That he lived a rural, simple life didn't make him crude.

Devon leaned back on her hand. "What do you like to do, Vyrl, when you aren't in school?"

"Come out here." He motioned at a nearby field of nodding stalks, each weighed down with orbs as large as a fist. "We're going to harvest the bagger-bubbles soon." He smiled, warming to the thought. "I'll work with Althor and Del, razing the stalks."

"Cutting plants, you mean?" She seemed bemused.

Cutting plants seemed a prosaic way to describe the joy of working with the land and the riches it produced. He wasn't sure, though, if Devon would understand his stumbling attempts to explain feelings he couldn't fully describe even to himself, so he only said, "Yes. Cutting plants." . "Ah."

They sat for a while. When the silence became strained, Vyrl asked, "Are you on vacation now?"

"I suppose you could call it that. I've five days leave, measured in Lyshriol time." She sat forward and rested her elbows on her knees. "The dates for the Metropoli summit have been moved up. That's why I had to reschedule this trip. I have to give a presentation there about the ground-based defense systems for Metropoli."

"Oh." Vyrl had no real idea what she meant. "It sounds important."

Devon grimaced. "Committee meetings always sound important. The more elevated the description, the less we get done." She shook her head. "I see no point in stockpiling more weapons on Metropoli. The planet is already as well guarded as we can make it. But its economy will benefit from the industry. Metropoli has a big population, ten billion, so it holds many votes within the Assembly." Wryly, she added, "Hence my presentation."

He tried to look interested. "I hope it works out."

"I'm sure it will." She didn't sound convinced. He was picking up traces of her thoughts now. She didn't expect the summit to achieve anything useful. He wondered why they bothered with meetings if they didn't think it would help. »

After another silence, Devon cleared her throat. She wouldn't look at him, just kept staring across the plains. "The Assembly sent me many files about you."

Vyrl stiffened. What was the Assembly doing with files about him? "Where did they get them?"

She glanced at him. "They have dossiers on every member of your family. Surely you knew that."

His face was growing hot. "No."

"Oh." Now she looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound intrusive."

"You didn't." That wasn't true, but it wasn't her fault he hadn't known the Assembly kept a dossier on him. Although it made sense, it had simply never occurred to him.

"I've also spoken at length to your parents." She stared hard at the lyrine herd again, avoiding his gaze.

Vyrl wondered what she was trying to say. "They didn't tell me much about the negotiations."

She finally turned to him. "They are terribly proud of you, you know."

"They are?" As far as Vyrl could tell, his truancy and procrastination annoyed them no end.

"Yes. Very much." Now she looked self-conscious. "They've made it clear that if I don't treat you well, I will answer to them."

Vyrl winced. *That* sounded like his parents. "I'm sorry. They say things like that sometimes."

To his surprise, Devon gave an affectionate laugh. "I imagine they do." Her smile faded. "They also made assurances, discreetly of course."

Vyrl waited for her to clarify that mystifying statement. When she didn't, he said, "What do you mean?"

Devon cleared her throat. "There are, ah, certain expectations for the consort of Majda." She squinted at him, her cheeks tinged with red now. "Parents may have idealized views of their children that aren't, well, uh... realistic."

Vyrl had no idea what she meant, and he didn't think he wanted to know. But he couldn't restrain his curiosity. "What kind of views?"

. "They might assume a certain... innocence..." Her blush deepened as her words trailed off.

"Oh." Now Vyrl understood. He knew exactly what she meant. He spoke stiffly. "My parents know me well." There. Now that he had humiliated himself with his lack of sexual experience, maybe she would leave it alone.

Mercifully, she just went back to watching the lyrine. Apparently his father had been right about at least one reason why Devon hadn't offered for Del-Kurj. Vyrl suspected Del's brash lack of discretion was the problem more than his actual experience; if the noble Houses had truly required male virginity on the wedding night, they probably would have died out by now for lack of mates.

He focused on Devon—and one of her memories jumped into his mind, a scene so vivid that it escaped her barriers. A tall man of about thirty-five, with dark hair and eyes, stood with his hands spread out from his sides,

laughing as he pretended confusion about something, as if he were teasing the person watching him. Vyrl felt Devon's rush of love, followed by a sense of loss, the kind that came from separation, a loneliness so deep it made him ache.

Saints almighty. What an insensitive clod his parents had birthed. Here he was bemoaning his own miserable fate, and it had never occurred to him that this arrangement might be ruining her life, too. Why would she want to court a half-grown stranger when she had a lover her own age whom she would probably be far happier to make her consort, if politics, heredity, and duty hadn't interfered?

Devon turned to him with a strained smile. When she touched his cheek, a tingle went through Vyrl, but it only made him think of Lily. Before he could stop himself, he whispered, "It's not fair."

"I know." She didn't even need to ask what he meant. "But this is how it works for those like you and me." Then she slid her hand behind his head and drew him forward.

Vyrl hadn't expected her to kiss him. When her lips touched his, it jolted him, but from surprise rather than desire. The kiss was just, well... lips pressing his. No heart. No passion. Nothing.

After a moment she drew back and gave him a rueful smile. "Perhaps it takes the sparks a while, heh?"

He wanted to crawl under the rocks. "My apologies if I disappointed you."

"Ah, Vyrl, no, I didn't mean that." She sounded as if she wanted to hide under a few boulders herself. "I'm sorry. I'm bungling this terribly."

"No. Don't say that." He struggled to smile. "It's all right."

So they sat on their rock, gazing at the plains, trying somehow, someway, to find a common ground.

3

Beneath the Lavender Moon

Gusts of wind tried to knock Vyrl off the castle wall. In the light of the two moons, which were both in the sky tonight, he climbed down from his window, hanging on to cracks in the stone. Despite the wind, sweat dribbled down his neck. He had on too many clothes, not only those he had worn earlier today when he met Devon but also a sweater and thicker boots. He had rolled up his cloak and tied it onto his pack, which he wore on his back. Altogether it made him hot, heavy, and clumsy. Even worse, it would make it harder to run if anyone saw him.

Finally his feet touched ground. He hunkered by the wall, hiding behind a cluster of bubble stalks in the garden. Then he checked his palmtop. The silvery sheet unrolled in his hand and lit up with holos, showing the house security system. Nothing had changed since he had turned off the alarms that guarded his room. It hadn't been difficult; the system was meant to keep prowlers out, not hold him inside.

Vyrl reset the system to hide his activities, then tucked the palmtop back into his pack and stood up, scanning the area.

He took off at a steady lope, headed for the starport.

Vyrl clung to the windowsill, praying he didn't fall and smash himself on the gravel two stories below. A night-triller sang in the distance, its musical call echoed by another triller farther away.

"Come *on*," he muttered, scraping his fingernails over the recalcitrant window. "Open, you bog-boil."

With a protesting screech, the window abruptly swung inward. Vyrl froze. Gods, he was going to look stupid if someone caught him hanging here on the wall of a private home in the middle of the night. It had taken him longer than he expected to finish his business at the starport; it meant he hadn't reached here until well after midnight had passed in Lyshriol's twenty-eight hour day.

Mercifully, no one seemed to be out. This late at night, few people wandered these high, twisting lanes of Dalvador. No one came storming out of the house, and no one yelled from any other house to find out what was going on.

When the trillers began singing again, Vyril breathed out in relief. He nudged the window wide open, grateful it made no more noise, and peered into the shadows beyond.

Moonlight silvered the room below. The cozy chamber looked as he remembered it, though years had passed since he had last been here. The bed was just below him, but even the screeching window hadn't awakened its occupant. Vyril grinned. Lily had always slept like a rock; he had long suspected it had something to do with her rock-headed stubborn nature.

He let himself down into the room, gripping the sill as he slid lower. Then his feet touched the bed. Exhaling, he knelt next to the slumbering Lily, his head bent while he caught his breath. She murmured, turning restlessly. This time the surge in his pulse had nothing to do with a fear of being caught. He wanted to touch her, but he held back, having no idea how she would react when she discovered him kneeling in her bed.

Lily rolled onto her back and sighed, her eyes slowly opening. For a long moment she simply stared at him, her gaze fogged with sleep. Then she said, "Vyril?" She sounded as drowsy as she looked, warm and snuggled in her nest of blankets. The embroidered flowers on her white nightgown gleamed in the moonlight.

"It's me," Vyril said. For some reason the temperature in the room seemed to be rising. How different Lily made him feel, compared to the enigmatic, cool General Majda.

Her lips curved in the teasing smile she always used with him. "You're a terribly misbehaved fellow, to climb in my window. I must yell and make a great fuss."

"Lily!" His whisper came out fierce. "Your father would kill me."

"You better hide, then." Her voice had an unexpected tremor.

With a start, Vyril realized she *wasn't* her usual teasing self. She was shaking! In all the years he had known Lily, he had seen her laughing, mischievous, glowering, joyous, annoyed, teasing, and earnest, but she had never been afraid of him.

Vyril lowered his mental barriers, unsure, but trusting that her thoughts wouldn't hurt him. As her mood permeated his mind, he realized she feared he would leave her forever, disappearing from her life, lost to rumors he had to marry an off-world queen. His crawling in her window didn't frighten her; she trusted him the same way he trusted her.

He touched her cheek. "It's been a long time."

She folded her fingers around his with that new, charming shyness of hers. "Too long."

Vyril sighed, his memories rushing in. When he and Lily had been small children, they had often curled here in a pile on her bed. Then one day her parents and his had told them that they could no longer take naps together. Now Vyril felt as if he were returning home, but with full knowledge of why their parents hadn't wanted them together this way. They had been right. If he were Lily's father, he would take a sharpened farm implement to any youth climbing in her window late at night.

But he wasn't her father, he was the boy—no, the man—who dreamed of her every day. He stretched out next to her, still wearing his backpack and sweater, and pulled her into his arms. A jolt went through him, ten times stronger than the shiver Devon had evoked. Nor did this fade. It leapt like fire on oil.

"You make me crazy," he whispered, fighting the urge to put his hands everywhere on her. He pressed his lips against her cheek. "You torment my nights."

She slid her arms around him. "But I've done nothing, good sir." Instead of offering sympathy for his travails, she sounded inordinately pleased by his declaration of unrequited passion.

Vyril caressed her face, pushing aside her disarrayed curls. He found her lips with his and held her close, losing himself in her tenderness. He savored their kiss all the more for having so painfully labored to accept, these last two days, that he could never hold her again. She parted her lips, her embrace tightening, her body fitted against his, her touch uncertain but so very, very fine.

With reluctance, Vyril lifted his head. She smiled, her big eyes luminous in the shadows. Ah, but he could lie here forever, lost in her arms. That was the problem, though. If he didn't stop now, his plan would fail because he would end up staying the entire night. He and Lily would be found in the morning, thoroughly shocking her parents and his. Everyone would hush up his scandalous behavior, and his parents would probably lock him up in his tower room until he was safely married to Devon.

As Vyrl drew away, Lily made a low protest. He swallowed, even more aroused by her sweet, guileless desire. Determined to control himself, he sat up. She regarded him, puzzled and hurt, while he took her hands and drew her into a sitting position. The covers fell away from her body, revealing the soft sleep-gown that outlined her figure.

Vyrl's concentration flew out the window. With a valiant effort, he tore his gaze away from her curves and made himself focus on her face. "Lily Opaline, I have an important matter to discuss with you."

"And what might that be?" Although she tried for a mischievous smile, she looked more scared than playful.

He took a deep breath. "I'm running away."

Her tremulous smile vanished. "Vyrl, *no!* Don't go." Softly, she said, "Please don't leave. Even if you have to marry that—that person, at least we can be friends."

Vyrl couldn't imagine being "friends" with Lily. It would cut out his heart. Nor did Lily understand; to marry Devon, he would leave Lyshriol and go live in some palace with a staff of hundreds, which he would be expected to manage while his wife attended her military duties.

"Lily, we can't be friends," he said firmly. He forced out the words. "General Majda, the woman who came from the sky—the leaders of my mother's people say I must marry her. My parents agree."

A tear ran down her cheek. "Don't say good-bye this way." Her mischief had vanished. "I can't bear it."

"Don't cry." He wiped his knuckles across her cheek, smearing her tears. Then he went deep in himself, calling up his courage, and spoke the words he had come to say. "I want you to run away with me."

For a long moment she didn't react, not in her face, her posture, or even her mood. Then her emotions flooded over him. He couldn't sort it all out, but two responses came through strong and clear: She both feared and hoped he meant what he said.

"It's true." He could hardly believe that he had actually asked her. "Come with me."

"But we can't." She drew his hands together and held them as if they were a treasure. "Your parents will bring us home. With their magics, they will easily find us."

Vyrl had long ago given up trying to convince his friends that technology had nothing to do with magic. "I know they can find us. But I have a... well, a—a solution."

"Solution?" Her emotions were clearer now: apprehension that she would lose him; uncertainty in how he felt about her compared to the mysterious adult who had trespassed in their midst; a desire for him that she didn't fully understand; and the shyness that came with that desire, a self-conscious recognition of Vyrl's masculinity, an awareness she had hidden this past year by tormenting him with mischief.

Emboldened, he plunged ahead before he lost his courage. "By the time they find us, we will be married." Then he stopped, terrified. What if she refused him? He would die of shame, curl up into a ball the size of a bubble pod and blow away on the wind, never to be heard of again.

Lily stared at him. Then she gave an uneasy laugh. "You're teasing me."

"I'm not." Vyrl raised her hands and pressed his lips against her knuckles. He spoke with all the persuasion he could muster. "Be my wife, Lily. You're the only one I've ever wanted, the only one I ever will. Say yes." He had gone too far to turn back now. "Tell me you will marry me. Tonight."

She let go of his hands and covered her cheeks with her hands. When she said nothing, he added, "I would court you, but we haven't time, I'm afraid. You have to decide now."

Instead of accepting or refusing him, she just lowered her hands. He could no longer catch individual emotions in the tumult of her thoughts. Why wouldn't she speak? Had he offended her? Maybe he had been a fool, presuming where he had no place. Chagrined, he felt his face heating.

"You're always so impatient," she chided, her voice quavering behind her bravado. "This is worse than the time you pushed me into the lake."

"You would have taken the entire summer to jump if I hadn't pushed you." His voice softened. "Be brave now, Lily. Say yes. We may never have another chance. Everyone is busy arranging my marriage. General Majda needs heirs and she's thirty-eight, so she can't wait much longer."

Lily's face changed slowly, her expression unlike any she had shown him before. No imp this, no child. This Lily looked... older. When she spoke, her voice caught. "Then, Havyr! Valdoria, I—I would be honored to marry you."

Yes! She had said yes! He wanted to shout her answer to the sky, and he would have if it hadn't meant her father would come thundering in here, threatening to skewer him for invading his daughter's bedroom. He took her hands again and spoke in a low, intense voice. "I will make you a good husband, I swear it."

Despite her best intentions to look somber, naughtiness crept into her voice. "But how do I know? You must give me a sample." She put her arms around his neck and tilted her pretty face to his. "Unless you're afraid to kiss me..."

He grinned, rubbing his hands along her back. "I'm not afraid, you rascal. But we have to leave. We need to cross the Backbone Mountains tonight and find a Bard in Rillia to marry us. If we ask one in the Dalvador Plains, he will probably recognize me and refuse to do the ceremony without talking to our parents. But I look at least two years older than I am, Lily, and that's old enough for us to marry without parental consent. If we go to the Rillian Vales, we can have it done." Vyrl didn't care that in the interstellar culture of his mother's people, he was many, many years away from the age of majority. On Lyshriol, he was almost an adult. Lily nodded, her eyes glimmering. "Then let us go."

The war-lyrine raced across the plains, thrilling in its speed, releasing its pent-up energy much as Vyrl did when he ran through the endless grasses. Unlike the graceful, slender lyrine he had shown Devon yesterday, this powerful animal had a massive build and a violet coat, almost black in the moonlight. Its muscles rippled as it ran. The Dalvador Plains spread everywhere, an ocean of translucent reeds blued by the moonlight, as if enchanted. Behind them, the village of Dalvador dwindled in the plains; ahead, still a ride of a few hours, the Backbone Mountains speared into the sky.

Vyrl sat astride the lyrine with Lily in front of him, his arms around her waist, his hands gripped on the reins. The Lavender Moon rode high in the sky, bathing them in violet radiance and drawing glints of light from the lyrine's horns. The crescent of the Blue Moon hung above the horizon.

Moonglaze had the full liquid gait of a well-bred lyrine, his muscles bioengineered to even out his motions, making his run so smooth that Vyrl and Lily could speak in full sentences even with their mount racing across the plains. Vyrl's mother had expressed surprise to his father at the poetic names his people gave their war mounts but it made sense to Vyrl, who had been raised on Lyshriol. His mother's people seemed overly pragmatic to him.

Leaning against Vyrl, Lily pulled her cloak tight. "I've never ridden on such a glorious animal before."

"I'm not surprised. The great stallions like Moonglaze let few people touch them." Vyrl didn't want to think what his father would do when he found out his son had absconded with his best war-lyrine. But Moonglaze had always taken to Vyrl, and tonight he needed the animal's strength.

Moonglaze had gone to "war" only a few times; conflicts on Lyshriol were minor, more like arguments than combat. But beyond this simple world, an interstellar civilization teemed with life and violence, caught in a world-slugging war that most people here could never comprehend. Vyrl knew that to survive, his mother's people needed military leaders much as Devon and Althor.

Vyrl had no wish to fight; he wanted only to raise crops and babies with Lily. Although his father had trained him in the use of a sword and bow, he seemed content with Vyrl's preference for farming, certainly the most prevalent lifestyle in Dalvador. However, Vyrl was the only farmer here who wanted a doctorate in agriculture. He could do it without leaving home, as a virtual student, if he could just buckle down to his studies. Lily would help in that; she always seemed to settle him.

As Devon's consort, he could earn as many doctorates as he wanted. And then? Skolian nobility didn't farm. He might like research; he didn't really know. But it wasn't his dream. He had no grievance with Devon; she seemed an honorable person. Even so, he could never imagine life in the Imperial Court. She wanted the innocent farm boy, but if she took him away from the land and life he loved, it would destroy him.

If he hadn't loved another woman, perhaps he could have accepted the arranged marriage. It would have given him a great gift, freeing him to pursue a life he had never dared imagine could be his. He loved to dance and had trained all his life, but only in private where no one except his family and off-world teachers knew. It wasn't accepted among people here that men dance, not under any circumstances, not even at festivals.

It didn't matter. Without this woman in his arms, his life would be infinitely poorer. By the time their parents learned what he and Lily had done, it would be too late; they would have consummated their marriage. Their wedding would be public knowledge. Devon could no longer wed him even if his parents annulled his union.

Vyrl pulled Lily close, and she settled against him. He knew he had made the right choice in asking her to marry him.

He just hoped it didn't cause an interstellar crisis.

Snow pummeled Vyrl and Lily as they rode through the mountain storm, an unexpected tempest after the clear weather down in the plains. He kept his arms and cloak protectively around Lily. His backpack, their most valuable possession right now, was securely lashed in the travel bags Moonglaze carried.

"—there!" The wind caught Lily's voice and tore it away from his ears.

He leaned his head over hers. "What?"

"Need shelter... we could be..." Gales stole the rest of her words.

"Be what?"

"Hurt," Lily said.

Vyrl clenched the reins. Inside his gloves, his fingers had gone numb. Had he brought his love out here only to lose her to the fury of a blue storm? No! He would never let it happen. He would die first—yes, he would—before he allowed anything to hurt Lily. Not that he was sure how his dying would help matters, but that was how he felt.

Lily was right, though; if they didn't locate shelter, they could find themselves in serious trouble. He couldn't see much of anything. Moonglaze's head was barely more than a shadow in the swirling flurries. The lyrine had slowed to a walk, stepping carefully along the trail.

"—down," Lily was saying. "We're probably safer on foot."

"Yes, I think so." Vyrl reined in the lyrine and dismounted, then steadied Lily as she slid down next to him. Clutching the reins, he put his arm around her shoulders. Darkness whirled around them and wind ripped at their cloaks. His teeth chattered with cold.

Their best hope was probably to take refuge within the clumps of boulders that dotted the meadows on either side of the trail, if they could find some. He took a cautious step, drawing Lily through the swirling storm, almost blind in the darkness. Moonglaze followed, crowding them, his body too close.

"Don't do that," Vyrl muttered at the lyrine.

"He wants to protect us," Lily said.

Vyrl swallowed, recognizing she spoke the truth. What if his rash decision to run away ended in tragedy? Steeling his resolve, he took another step into the icy dark. "I can't see a blasted thing."

She spoke with reassurance. "We'll manage. We've been through worse."

"That's true." He said it to comfort her. Although he had experienced bad weather up here before, he had been part of a well-equipped caravan then. They had simply set up enviro-tents and sat out the weather in comfort. Right now he had nothing but his palmtop; his already stuffed pack hadn't had room for much else. The palmtop could do little more than tell him they were in trouble, which wasn't exactly a great revelation.

Lily tugged on his arm. "Over here!"

He squinted into the darkness. "You see something?"

She pulled his hand forward until it hit rock. "This."

Vyrl frowned. The trail had no outcroppings this close to the road. "It shouldn't be here."

"I think we're farther along than we realized."

His hope surged. "The cliffs above the meadows have caves."

"Little ones, but that's enough."

He groped along the wall with one hand, drawing Lily and Moonglaze with him, all of them faltering through the storm, their progress slow. Snow dusted Vyrl's eyelashes, making it hard to see, and he shivered constantly

despite his heavy cloak. He had checked the forecast twice that afternoon. It had predicted chill weather in the mountains, yes, but it had also claimed the night would be calm, with only a dusting of snow.

Suddenly he stumbled into an open space. He regained his balance with ease, never losing hold of Lily or the reins. Mercifully, the storm had quit tearing at them. He drew in a ragged breath, his first full one since they had dismounted.

"You did it!" Lily hugged him hard, as if he had just performed a great feat instead of lurching about in the dark like a dolt. He smiled, his heart warming even if his body felt half-frozen.

When he pulled her close, he felt her shaking. "It's all right," he said. "I think I know this place." He drew her farther into the cave, waving his hand in front of them. The lyrine moved at his side, a large presence in the dark.

His knuckles hit a wall with painful force. "Ah!" Grimacing, he shook his hand. "I found the back."

Lily's cloak rustled as she felt the wall. "We can wait out the storm here."

"Yes." Vyrl reached around for the lyrine, with no success. Dropping his hand, he brushed its back. "Hey! Moonglaze is lying down." Although it wasn't unheard of for a lyrine, it was unusual enough to startle Vyrl.

Lily turned in the small space. "Are you well, Moon?" The lyrine nickered to her.

"He made a wall for us," she said. "He's going to sleep that way, I think."

"He's warming the cave." Although Vyrl still felt cold, he was no longer shivering. He scratched the base of Moonglaze's horn. Although lyrine would let people ride them, the animals rarely showed much affinity for humans, especially the great beasts like Moonglaze. In rare instances, a war-lyrine would decide it liked a particular human, though Vyrl had never figured out what made them choose a person. He wondered if the Ruby Empire biologists had tried to breed loyalty into them, but it either hadn't fully taken or else millennia of genetic drift had changed its manifestation. Whatever the reason, he was glad Moonglaze accepted his company and seemed to approve of Lily.

Lily put her palms against Vyrl's chest. In the darkness he could just make out the pale oval of her face. "Do you think the snow will trap us here?" Her voice quavered.

"Don't be afraid." He curled his gloved fingers around hers. "If this is the place I think, it's under a shelf sticking out from the cliff. It would be almost impossible for snow to block our way out."

"It will be an adventure."

He bent his head and brushed his lips over hers. "I do so love you."

Complete silence.

"Lily?" When she remained silent, alarm surged in Vyrl. She couldn't have been hurt, not in the few moments

"Hai, Vyrl," she murmured. "And I do love you, too."

He gulped, comprehending what he had done. Caught up in their predicament, he had spoken his love aloud for the first time. Embarrassed, he started to stutter, but she put her finger against his lips, rescuing him from the need to answer.

Vyrl tugged her close, and they sank down onto the rocky ground, wedged between Moonglaze and the wall. He wrapped his cloak around them both, drawing her inside the warmth. But when he tried to kiss her, she ducked her head.

"Lily, let me," he coaxed. "We'll be married tomorrow."

"Goodness, be patient." She stroked his cheek. "Would you have us grapple in a cold, hard blizzard instead of having a proper wedding night?"

Grappling with Lily anywhere sounded just fine to Vyrl, but he could tell this wouldn't be right for her. So he made himself say, "I guess not." He still held her close, though, settling her body against his.

For a while they just sat, listening to the storm. Vyrl imagined how the snow must look, drifted in great blue swells. Eventually he said, "Do you know, snow isn't blue on other worlds."

Lily stirred. "What color is it?"

"White."

"White? How dull."

He laughed. "Their clouds are white, too, or gray."

"People must like coming here to have good water."

"Actually, the water makes them sick."

"But why? It tastes so good."

He kissed her temple. "We have nanomeds in our bodies, little biological machines to deal with the impurities that turn our water blue. Our ancestors were engineered that way. Most people don't have them. My mother had to receive treatments before she could live here."

"It must be strange and wonderful, to live above the sky." Her voice had an odd sound now, as if she feared her own questions. "Don't you ever want to go there?"

"Not really."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all." Lowering his head, he slipped back the hood of her cloak and nibbled at her ear. "Everything I want is here."

"Even if you could marry a great off-world queen?"

Ah. Now he understood. "Even then."

Her relief flowed over him. "She does seem awfully old."

He laughed. "I must seem awfully young to her."

Mischief danced in Lily's voice. "But you are so very fine, especially when you are falling over after running in the plains."

Vyrl glowered. "I'm not clumsy."

She snuggled closer. "If I tell you a secret, you must promise to tell no one."

His interest picked up. "All right."

"You aren't clumsy." With shyness, she added, "The way you move is, well... sexy."

Heat spread through Vyrl. "Ah, Lily," he murmured, trying to kiss her again, his hands searching for a way under her clothes.

"Now you stop that." She thumped him on the head. "Behave yourself."

He groaned. "You torment me."

"You can't tell anyone what I said."

"All right," he promised. "I won't let anyone know that you like me. Certainly they will never guess. We're only getting married, after all."

"Even so."

His good spirits faded as guilt gnawed at him. He owed it to Lily to tell her the truth about himself.

"Lily Opaline." He spoke in his serious voice, but then paused, unsure how to continue. What if his secret disgusted her? She might not marry him. But she had a right to know before they took such an important step.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "You're so warm."

"I have to tell you. You should know—about me..."

"Have you misbehaved?" Her laugh chimed. "Do tell."

"I'm serious." He wanted to tease her, to lose his worries in familiar banter, but he couldn't. If he didn't tell her now, he wasn't sure he would have the courage later.

"You sound somber," she said.

He forced out the words. "I'm not normal."

She snorted. "Well, I know you're not normal. I mean, really, I have never seen any boy eat as much as you do."

Exasperated, he said, "Lily, I'm extremely serious here."

"You sound terribly serious," she said amiably.

There was nothing for it but to reveal the dreadful truth. "I dance."

Silence.

"Lily?"

"You do what?"

"Dance." He waved his arms around. "You know. I spin and kick and jump around to music."

"But you can't dance. Men don't do that."

"I know. But I do. Every morning I have at least three hours of class with my instructors. Often more."

"Oh, that." She laughed, relief in her mood. "Everyone knows you exercise a lot. It makes you strong, good with a sword."

"Yes, well, 'everyone' doesn't know all of it. Lily, I *dance*. Classical, mostly, but some modern and jazz."

"What is jazz?"

"An art form from the world Earth."

"You are making fun of me."

"No. It's true." He stopped, unable to voice his next question. *Will you still marry me?* What if he repulsed her now?

She spoke uneasily. "I don't like this game."

"It isn't a game."

"Men don't dance. Only women." In a matter-of-fact voice, she added, "And, Vyrl, you are definitely not a woman."

"No, I'm not. But I dance." He shifted her in his arms. "Before my mother ran for election to the Assembly, she was a ballet dancer. Men among her people perform, too. No one thinks them strange."

Lily was silent again. Apparently he had appalled her beyond speech. She kept her mind well guarded, shielding the worst of her revulsion. He hadn't realized she could raise mental barriers that strong.

Finally she said, "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Do you hate me now?"

"Hate you? Saints above, what a thing to ask."

"Will you answer?"

"I could never hate you." She sighed. "Although sometimes you do truly drive me crazy."

He squinted at her. "You think I'm crazy?"

"Broadie Candleson told us once that he saw you spinning around, like you were dancing. We laughed at him."

"I *was* dancing." Vyrl felt as if he were poised at a chasm. "You haven't answered me."

Silence.

He couldn't believe his stupidity. Why had he opened his fool mouth? If he had never said anything, and never danced again, she would have never known. Now he had lost her because he had to make his blasted declaration.

Lily spoke slowly. "You must have to hide it all the time, always watching everything you say and do."

"Always."

"Do your parents know?"

"Yes. Also my brothers and sisters."

"But they never talk about it?"

"Not outside the family." His brother Del-Kurj gave him a hard time, but only in private. In a family of empaths, it was too obvious to everyone how much it meant to Vyrl; they knew how deeply it would hurt him if they ruined his joy in dancing by letting people outside the family ridicule him. He could sense her pondering, but the unusually strong guards around her mind made it impossible to judge how much his confession had repulsed her.

"Will you show me?" she asked.

He blinked, confused. "Show you what?"

"Your dancing." She relaxed against him. "If you have trained so much, for so many years, you must be very good."

"Saints above." Lily wasn't hiding her revulsion. She didn't feel it. That couldn't be true. It *couldn't* be. Could it? In a voice tight with his fear of rejection, he asked, "Does that mean you will still marry me?"

She pressed her lips against his cheek. "I would marry you if you were a beggar in Tyrole, if we had to sit in the market pleading for food."

He tried to answer, but his voice caught. So instead he held her tight, unable to speak.

"Uh... Vyr!." Her words came out strained. "I can't—breathe."

Mortified, he loosened his grip. "Hai, what an idiot you fell in love with."

Her laugh trilled, rippling over him like water. "You are a force of nature, Vyr!, sometimes stormy and sometimes sunny, your moods changing as fast as the wind, but you are most certainly never an idiot."

Moisture threatened his eyes. Incredibly, she had learned his darkest secret and still chose him.

A nicker came out of the dark. Something nudged Vyr!, and he realized the lyrine was nuzzling him, its horn poking his arm. He scratched its head again. "She still wants me," he told Moonglaze.

That night, huddled against the wall of a cliff, wrapped in a cloak, he slept for the first time in the arms of the woman he loved. He prayed it wouldn't be the last. The storm had delayed their trip and tomorrow their parents would realize they had run away.

Then the search would start.

4

Bard of Emeralds

Moonglaze loped through the meadows at the foothills of the Backbone Mountains. The gray cliffs behind them wore cloaks of snow, but down here only a few patches of melting blue remained. Swaying reeds sparkled in the sun, topped with bubbles. Larger spheres dotted the meadows, vibrant in blue, red, purple, green, and gold, some floating off their stalks and drifting in the breeze. Every now and then one would pop, showering the ground with glimmering rainbow dust. The lyrine raced out of the hills and into the Rillian Vales, stretching his long legs as if he would leave the ground and fly. Lily and Vyr! held on, exhilarated as fresh morning air rushed past their faces. His cloak whipped back from his shoulders and rippled behind them, a swath of blue in the sunshine that streamed across the land.

They thundered past the first villages. Unlike the Dalvador Plains, where houses were whitewashed and had colored roofs, here the entire structures were glowing hues: blue, green, ruby, or gold-stalk. Although Vyr! could have sought out the Bard in any village, he headed for Rillia itself, the largest city in the settled lands. The Bard in a small town might wonder why an unfamiliar young couple went to him rather than their own Bard, but in a large town with many visitors, it would be more natural.

However, going to Rillia also carried risk; Lord Rillia, who ruled both the Dalvador Plains and Rillian Vales, knew Vyr!'s father. As the Dalvador Bard, Vyr!'s father was the highest authority in the Plains, or at least as much an authority as their people accepted. He not only served Dalvador; he also presided over the Bards in the other Plains villages. But Lord Rillia held authority over all the Bards, including Vyr!'s father.

The Bards acted as judges and mediators, performed marriages, officiated at naming ceremonies, and recorded the history of their people in ballads. Vyr!'s father had a glorious baritone, a voice Vyr! loved to hear. Every village also had a Memory. She recorded current events in her mind, performed rites of celebration at festivals, and served as a scholar in the women's temple, where acolytes learned and stored knowledge. Together, the Memory and Bard formed the government of a village.

This morning, Vyr! watched the skies constantly, fearing to see a flash of gold-and-black metal. He had "neglected" to tell Lily that before he had shown up at her house last night, he had gone to the starport—and sabotaged the shuttle. Lily would chide him when she found out, but even so, it had needed doing. His tampering

wouldn't hold off pursuit for long, only until the port staff repaired the shuttle or the military sent down another from the ships in orbit, but Vyrl and Lily didn't need long. Only today.

They reached the city of Rillia in late morning. It was large enough to need several Bards, none of whom Vyrl had met. He chose one who lived on the city outskirts in a green-stalk house that glowed like an emerald. As Moonglaze trotted into the courtyard, Lily twisted around to look up at Vyrl, her eyes as huge as a colt startled by a loud noise.

He cupped his hand around her cheek. "Shall we go in?"

She gave him a tremulous smile. "Yes. Let's."

He swung off Moonglaze, his cloak swirling, his booted feet landing with a thump on the ground. Then he helped Lily off the powerful lyrine. A towheaded boy came into the yard and waited to take Moonglaze back to the glasshouse, to be tended and fed. Vyrl gave the boy two turquoise stones for his trouble. Although the youth was only a few years younger than Vyrl and Lily, he treated them as if they were adults.

Moonglaze, however, nickered when the boy tried to lead him away. Then the lyrine nudged Vyrl's shoulder, pushing him toward Lily.

"See?" Vyrl grinned at her. "He knows."

She patted the animal's head. "You're a good lyrine, Moon. You go ahead. We will be fine."

Moonglaze snorted, then shook his head and turned away. He walked regally past the boy, his horns held high, his violet coat glossy in the sunlight. The youth hurried after him and grabbed his reins, trying to look as if he were leading the great lyrine instead of the other way around.

Vyrl held his hand out to Lily, and she put her small one in his large grip. Together, they walked to the Bard's door.

Flames flickered within jade lamps, and candles burned around the chamber, filling it with radiance. Vyrl, Lily, the Bard, and the Bard's wife had crowded into the circular room. The Memory stood by the curving emerald wall, her green robe brushing the floor; with her holographic memory, she was recording the ceremony, every word and promise, and images as well.

Vyrl stood facing Lily, holding her hands and gazing down at her face. She filled his sight, her pretty face tilted up to him, a wreath of silvery-green fronds and gold bubbles braided into her hair.

The Bard continued in his mellow voice. "May the love you share fill your lives, and that of your children, grandchildren, and more, keeping alive the line of your heart."

Guided by his words, Vyrl and Lily promised their lives to each other. Then the Bard sang for them, his lustrous tenor filling the chamber, his words graceful in their evocation of love under the Blue and Lavender Moons.

Vyrl's thoughts overflowed with *Lily*. No matter where their life took them after today, he had found his home, not in a place but in the heart of this girl he had loved his entire life.

The Bard and his wife accompanied Lily and Vyrl into the courtyard. While they waited for the boy to bring Moonglaze, Vyrl scanned the heavens and was relieved to see nothing unusual, no metallic glints, just the normal lavender sky and blue clouds.

The Bard pointed out a half-finished tower that rose above the roofs of the town. "The metal-works needs laborers for the new building they are raising." He glanced kindly at Vyrl. "A big, strong fellow like yourself could earn a place to live, meals for your family, and stones for trade."

His wife smiled at Lily, the lines around her eyes crinkling. "They're needing counters, too. Always looking for a girl with a sharp mind to keep records. It could be a fine start for a young couple."

Their good-natured concern touched Vyrl. "We thank you, kind lady and sir." Lily murmured similar sentiments. Vyrl wished they could lead the simple life these fine people envisioned for them, setting up a home with no worries beyond food, shelter, and children. "Perhaps when we return, we will visit the metal-works boss."

The Bard chuckled. "Ah, I am too old. What newlyweds want to start work the day of their marriage, eh?" He paused as the boy came around the house leading Moonglaze. Then he asked, "Where be you off to now?"

"We aren't sure," Lily admitted. "We're traveling."

Moonglaze walked grandly up to them, watching Vyrl first with one large eye, then the other, turning his head to give himself a good view. The lyrine growled deep in his throat.

"What, ho?" Vyrl scratched him behind his horn. "Are you angry with me?"

Moonglaze nickered, mollified by the attention. He butted Lily's arm, pushing her against Vyrl.

The Bard laughed. Then he slapped Vyrl on the back. "Off with you, eh? You two go have your time together."

"My thanks, good sir." Vyrl was pleased to find Moonglaze had been well tended and the backpack was still secure in the travel bags. Excellent! He swung up onto the animal, relishing the motion, his body thrumming with energy. Reaching down, he helped Lily up in front of him. Then he hugged her hard, leaning his head around to kiss her cheek.

"A safe journey to you," the Bard called up to them.

The Bard's wife started to speak, then paused. Although Vyrl couldn't pick up emotions from other people as well as he did from his family, he sensed her turning over ideas much as he might glimpse a wisp of mist curling through glass-stalk trees.

She spoke thoughtfully to her husband. "I have some concerns about our cabin. With no one to look after it, the place lies empty and unattended. Who knows what might happen?"

"Ah, so, this is true." The Bard considered Lily and Vyrl up on Moonglaze. "Then again," he continued, as if speaking to his wife even though he was looking at his guests, "perhaps we may convince some nice young couple to spend a few days looking after the place."

Vyrl hesitated. His first impulse was to decline; the future was too uncertain for them to take on new responsibilities. But his empath's mind felt their intent, like a meadow creek burbling with goodwill. They were offering their secluded cabin so he and Lily could spend their wedding night in safety and warmth instead of sleeping in the forest.

"Lily?" Vyrl asked in a barely audible voice.

"Yes," she murmured, understanding his unspoken question.

Vyrl nodded to the Bard and his wife, letting his gratitude show. "We would be honored, gentle lady and sir, to look after your cabin for a few days."

The woman beamed at him. "Such good manners."

The Bard tilted his head, studying first Vyrl, then Moonglaze. A shiver of unease ran up Vyrl's back as he caught the man's mood; the Bard wondered at his visitor's accomplished style and magnificent lyrine. At home, as a farmer's son, Vyrl tended to forget he was the son of the Dalvador Bard and the queen of an Imperial dynasty. His background probably showed more than he realized.

Whatever the Bard thought, he didn't say. Instead, he gave Vyrl directions to a cabin in the Blue Mountain Dales, deep within a wild forest of stained glass trees that spread their gem-bubbles over the hills. Vyrl thanked him and gave the couple a gold chain for the marriage service.

Then he and Lily rode into the hills, headed for the cabin, where they could complete the marriage that would sunder the plans of an interstellar empire.

Flames crackled in the hearth. Vyrl leaned his arm against the stone mantel and stared into the shifting play of orange and red. With only fire lighting the cabin, shadows filled the corners. Handmade furniture covered with cushions warmed the room, and a four-poster bed with a blue-and-gold quilt stood against one wall.

The door opened behind him, and he felt more than heard Lily enter, her mood bathing him like sunshine. He turned as she closed the door. She stood watching him, twisting her hands in her skirts, smiling shyly, a pretty girl with red-gold curls tumbling around her body to her waist and tendrils curling around her face. Her lavender dress molded to her torso and swirled around her knees, adorned with laces and slits in tempting places. In the flickering light, her face seemed to glow, so beautiful to him that it almost hurt to see. He didn't know what the morning would bring, but tonight he had everything he had ever wanted.

Lily spoke softly. "Are you hungry?"

"Saints, I'm famished." Belatedly, Vyrl realized that wasn't the most romantic declaration. An inspiration came to him. "For you."

Lily laughed, her melodic voice a delight. "Hah! You don't fool me. You want dinner."

He grinned. "I need my strength."

Her expression turned sultry, yet with innocence; he could tell she didn't realize her anticipation showed in her gaze or that it would arouse him. "Well, then," she murmured. "Let us build up your strength."

Vyrl swallowed, suddenly wondering if he wanted dinner after all. He watched Lily walk to the finely engraved table where he had left his pack. Her hips swayed with each step. Taking a deep breath, he picked up a poker from beside the hearth and stirred the flames. This high in the Blue Mountain Dales, the nights were cold. It had taken the entire day to reach this cabin; stars had been sparkling in an icy sky by the time they arrived.

"Hai, Vyrl!" Lily admonished. "What did you put in this pack? Rocks?"

He turned with a start to see her digging out the last of the trail rations. She held up his pack in one hand and the food in the other, her expression baffled.

Reddening, he strode over and hoisted away the pack. "It's nothing."

"It is so. Look! It sparkles." Reaching past him, she tugged the pack farther open. "See." She brushed her fingers over the apparatus inside, making yellow lights twinkle on its edges. Holos scrolled across its glossy black surface.

"Oh, Vyrl! It's lovely." She beamed at him. "Are those magic lights from your mother's people?"

He winced, knowing that when she found out what he had done, she would scold him. But he had to tell her the truth. "The symbols are from a language of my mother's people. They're warning you to stop banging the jammer."

"Jammer?" She took the pack away from him and peered inside. "Whatever have you stuffed in here?"

"It hides us," he explained. "It can trick radar, sonar, infrared, UV, visual, even neutrino probes."

She regarded him dubiously. "You are making up these words."

"I'm not. Really. It means my parents will have trouble finding us."

Lily took a moment to absorb his words. "I think you are very clever, to hide us. But are you supposed to have this? It sounds—" She hesitated. "Arcane."

"Arcane?" He tried to laugh, but it came out scared rather than amused. "It's military equipment you need a security clearance to use. I'm not supposed to touch it."

Her gaze widened. "Are we in trouble?"

"Not you. But me, yes." Although stealing equipment from Imperial Space Command wasn't as bad as admitting to her that he danced, it came close. Add to that the damage he had done to ISC property at the starport and he was in it deep.

"Ah, Vyrl." Instead of rebuking him, she did something even harder to deal with. She came over and laid her palms on his shoulders, looking up at him with trust. "We are together now. If they take you away, they must take me, too." Resolve showed on her face. "Where you go, so do I."

Vyrl sighed, putting his arms around her. "I don't deserve you."

"Well, that's true." Impudence filled her voice. "But nevertheless, you have me."

He glared at her. "I swear, you can sorely bedevil a boy."

Her face and voice, even her posture, softened. "But you are no longer a boy, my husband."

His chagrin vanished, replaced by a more primal emotion. Holding her, he let his mind melt into hers. He could relax his defenses with her in a way he could do with no one else. Her mischief was a disguise; behind it, a nervous young woman faced her wedding night with uncertainty as well as anticipation. He drew her closer, forgetting the trail rations. Stroking her hair, he savored its silky texture against his calloused palms. No prince's hands, these, but those of a farmer.

Tentative, she laid her palm on his cheek. As her eyes closed, he bent his head and let his lips touch hers. She held a curl of his hair as she kissed him, more confident in her response, or so he thought, until she began to pull his hair without realizing it. He folded his large hand around her small one, loosening her grip.

Lily made a small sound, half a sigh, half a moan. He kissed her deeply, wishing he could lift her up and carry her to the bed.

A thought nudged his mind, like Moonglaze pushing him; he *could* carry her off exactly the way he wished. He slowly pulled away, one hand splayed on her back. Bending, he slid his arm under her legs and hefted her into his arms.

"Oh!" Lily flushed. "Goodness, Vyrl."

Once he would have grinned, maybe pulled her hair. No longer. He felt only tenderness tonight, and a desire that he wondered how he would hold in check, or if he should. He carried her to the bed and laid her on the downy quilt. She watched him, her lips parted, a rosy flush on her face, the firelight dimly golden around them.

Kneeling next to her, Vyrl pulled his sweater over his head. As he dropped it on the ground, Lily reached for him, her arms outstretched, her expression trusting. He lay next to her and his pulse jumped, tingling through him. It was so good finally to have her to himself. As they nestled together, he felt her heartbeat against his chest. When he pressed his lips on the creamy skin of her neck, her pulse beat there as well, strong and vibrant.

She helped him with the laces on her dress. For all that they had resisted his efforts, they unraveled for her at the slightest pull. He and Lily explored each other while they undressed, their touches sweet with the newness of discovery as they joined in the dim light from the embers of the fire. Together they moved in a rhythm more ancient than the Ruby Empire. His heart overflowed; he felt as if it were an airy hall filled with stained glass windows. His love for Lily poured like light through the windows, turning many colors, each window a symbol of another way he knew her. The stained glass was so beautiful it hurt to imagine—for he knew it could shatter under the reality of life.

But in this miraculous night, the colors glowed within him.

5

Blue-Crystal Shards

The pounding dragged Vyrl awake. A booming noise bombarded his head.

"Hai!" He sat up groggily, covers falling away from his body, his eyes bleary. Morning light slanted through a window he hadn't even noticed last night. Across the room, the door shook under the force of someone's hammering fists.

Lily rolled against him, pulling the quilt around her shoulders. Seeing her that way, warm and cozy in a nest of covers, Vyrl wanted nothing more than to stay in bed with her.

"*Valdoria!*" The bellow could have shaken a stone wall. "Open this door, you scum of a mush-bog slime, or I'll break it down."

Lily opened her eyes, wincing. "That is, without doubt, my father."

With a groan, Vyrl grabbed his trousers off the floor and yanked them on. He pulled on his shirt as he scrambled out of bed. With the shirt laces untied, its tails untucked, and his feet bare, he stumbled across the room. He shot a glance at Lily, to urge her to cover up, but she had already pulled on her dress.

At the door, Vyrl shoved out the bar that locked it—and he barely had time to jump back as the door crashed open. Lily's burly father, Caul, stood framed in the entrance. Vyrl had one instant to see Lily's mother hurry by them before Caul grabbed him, hurled him around, and slammed him against the inside wall.

"No slime-mold dishonors my daughter," he roared, swinging his meaty fist.

Vyrl dodged in time to keep his face from being smashed, but the blow caught his shoulder and pain shot through him. Although Caul had neither Vyrl's height nor agility, years of toiling on his farm had muscled the man's already husky build. Vyrl raised his arm up in time to block Caul's next blow, but then Caul used his other fist to sock him heartily in the stomach.

Vyrl grunted and doubled up with pain, wrapping his arms over his abdomen. Lily was crying out and other voices filled the air; from seemingly nowhere, people crammed the small room. His ears rang with the commotion.

Suddenly Caul was no longer pummeling him. Vyrl gasped, but it was several moments before he could straighten up. When he did, he saw his older brothers, Althor and Del-Kurj, holding back the enraged farmer. As hard as Caul struggled, he couldn't free himself. Althor was six feet six, with a massive physique. Del-Kurj had a lankier build, lean rather than bulky, but he was still a good half-head taller than Vyrl and had plenty of strength. Caul finally gave up fighting them and glowered at Vyrl as if his stare could incinerate his new son-in-law.

Vyrl swallowed, regarding his brothers. "Thank you."

"I wouldn't be so grateful," Althor said dryly. "You're in a load of trouble."

Del-Kurj smirked at Vyrl. "Who would have guessed it. I didn't think you even knew what to do with a girl."

Vyrl scowled at him. "Go blow, Del."

Caul jerked his arms away from Althor and Del-Kurj, and this time they let him go, sensing his calmer state. To Vyrl, he growled, "I'll deal with you later."

Behind the men, Lily's mother was holding her daughter. She was an older, plumper version of Lily, maternal rather than nubile, still as pretty as Lily. Seeing her, Vyrl could imagine his wife in twenty years, and it made him love her all the more. Right now tears streaked Lily's face, making his heart ache. As much as he wanted to go to her, his brothers and Caul had him penned in the corner. From the look of Lily's mother, he doubted she would let him near her daughter anyway. Vyrl knew where Lily had inherited her stubborn side.

Althor had unhooked a palmtop from his belt and was talking into its com. "The house is about half a klick from where we landed."

The voice of Eldrinson, Vyrl's father, came out of the com. "We'll be there right away."

Caul fixed Vyrl with a baleful stare. "If I were your father, I would thrash you from here to the Tyrole plains."

Vyrl used his most respectful voice. "Good sir, I would never dishonor your daughter. Lily and I were married yesterday by a Bard in Rillia."

"Don't you give me excuses," Caul bellowed. "I'll make you sorry—" He stopped, blinking. "Married? You, a prince, marry the daughter of a farmer? You expect me to believe that?"

Vyrl didn't think this was the best time to point out that Caul was hardly treating him like a prince.

"Father, it's true." Lily was still trying to escape her mother. "Just ask the Emerald Bard."

A deep voice spoke from the doorway. "Apparently my Emerald Bard is conveniently off on a trip."

Vyrl almost groaned. As if the situation wasn't bad enough already. The last person he wanted to face right now was Lord Rillia. No, make that the second-to-last person. Facing his father was going to be even harder.

Hard or not, however, he had no choice; both his father and Lord Rillia had entered the cabin. The two men were well matched in build and coloring, though Lord Rillia had darker hair and more height. Rillia was also older, more austere, with silver streaks in his hair and an aloof dignity that had always intimidated Vyrl.

But when Vyrl saw his father's face, he felt even worse. Dark circles rimmed Eldrinson's eyes, and lines showed that hadn't been there two days before. His exhaustion seeped into the cabin. Sensing his father's mind, Vyrl realized Eldrinson had barely slept for the past two days.

"Thank the saints," a woman said, her voice catching.

Vyrl turned with a start. His mother, Roca Skolia, stood in the doorway, her usual brightness dimmed. Like his father, she looked as if she had been awake for much too long.

Vyrl made himself speak. "I am truly sorry."

His mother considered him, then answered gently. "For frightening us, yes, but not for running away."

Vyrl winced. Living in a family of empaths had its drawbacks. He couldn't deny her words; as much as he regretted causing them pain, he would run away again given the chance.

"It's not his fault," Lily said. "It was my idea."

Everyone turned to her. "Yours?" Her father snorted. "I hardly think so." He waved his hand at Vyrl. "You've always had far too much sense for this boy. This is his kind of fool stunt."

"It's true," Lily said earnestly. "I told Vyrl I couldn't bear the thought of his marrying the queen from the sky. I begged him to come with me." She watched them with a wide-eyed gaze. "Really."

Her mother sighed. "Oh, honey."

Caul fixed Vyrl with a hard look. "As if you hadn't caused enough trouble, now you have my daughter lying."

Vyrl met his gaze. "I love your daughter for trying to defend me, sir, but the truth is that I'm the one who urged her to come with me. The idea was mine."

If a stare could have skewered a person, Caul's would have pierced Vyrl straight through. "You better be telling the truth about marrying her."

Lord Rillia spoke. "The marriage is easily checked." He considered Vyrl. "Did a Memory record the ceremony?"

"Yes, sir." Vyrl realized the Bard who married them must not have been the person who had revealed they were at the cabin. Odd that the fellow had chosen now to take a trip. Remembering the man's thoughtful consideration, Vyrl wondered if he and his wife had left deliberately, to avoid having to reveal what they would rather not say.

"Your Lordship," Vyrl began. "If I may ask...?"

"Go ahead," Lord Rillia said.

"How did you know we were here?"

Althor started to speak, then glanced at Rillia. The sovereign nodded, giving Althor leave to continue. In the balance of interstellar hierarchies, Vyrl's family had far more power than Lord Rillia, but here on Lyshriol, Rillia held sway, and Vyrl's parents treated him with the respect due that position.

Althor turned to Vyrl. "The *Ascendant* finally broke through the jamming fields you set up."

Vyrl blinked. "The who?"

"The *Ascendant*. A battle cruiser in the ODS." Sensing Vyrl's confusion, Althor added, "In the Orbital Defense System."

Roca frowned at her wayward son. "As opposed, Vyrl, to the planetary defenses—which includes the equipment you stole and the shuttle you damaged."

Vyrl wondered if the military officers on the *Ascendant* would feed him after they threw him into the brig. He did his best to look repentant. "My apology for any difficulty I caused."

"Please," Lily said. "Don't let anyone hurt him."

Roca glanced at her new daughter-in-law, her expression softening. "I am so sorry, Lily, that Vyrl involved you in this."

"But why?" Warmth radiated from Lily's mind. "It is the most wonderful thing that could have happened."

Sadness came from Vyrl's mother. "Then I am truly sorry."

Lily turned to Vyrl, her gaze questioning and uncertain. Even more uneasy now, Vyrl looked from his mother to his father.

Eldrinson spoke quietly, but in a voice that brooked no argument. "We have the shuttle outside. We will leave now."

"Now?" Vyrl tensed. "You mean Lily and me?"

"No." His father's voice was firm. "Not Lily."

Vyrl went rigid, but before he could protest, Lord Rillia addressed Caul. "I would be pleased if you, your wife, and your daughter would be my guests for a few days. I regret that this affair took place in my city. I hope you will allow me to compensate you for your troubles."

Caul bowed to him. "We would be muchly honored to stay with you, Your Lordship."

"Wait!" Vyrl cried. Everything was moving too fast. "I can't leave Lily here."

His father crossed his arms. "You will do as we say. I want no more argument."

Vyrl protested anyway, but it did no good. His father and brothers marched him to the shuttle, and try as he might, he couldn't get past them. Lily strained to reach him, but both of her parents were holding her back now. With tears streaming down her face, she called to him. Vyrl went wild then, pounding at Althor with his fists. It was like hitting an immovable barrier. Neither his brothers nor father fought him, they just held him back. He felt everyone's dismay; no one liked tearing him and Lily apart. But it didn't stop them from loading him into the shuttle.

As the craft lifted off, Vyrl pressed his palms against the view screen. It showed Lily on the ground below, her face turned up as she watched the ship rise into the sky.

Sitting on the floor, wedged in a corner, Vyrl pulled his legs to his chest and folded his arms on them. Then he dropped his forehead onto his arms and sat in silence. He had come to this studio in the basement of the castle to work out, but he couldn't muster the energy. Since his parents had taken him from the cabin this morning, he hadn't even felt like speaking, let alone moving. He would have run into the plains, but they wouldn't even let him outside.

The footsteps were so quiet Vyrl didn't hear them until cloth rustled nearby. Raising his head, he saw his mother a few paces away. Dressed in a simple jumpsuit with her hair pulled back, she looked more like a farmer's wife than an interstellar potentate.

He spoke in a low voice. "Is Devon Majda still upstairs?" She nodded, sitting gracefully on the gold-stalk floor near him. "But the colonel who came down from the *Ascendant* has left."

Vyrl tried not to hide his fear. "Will ISC send me to prison?" "No." She spoke firmly. "But you will be expected to work at the starport until you pay off the damages you caused."

Vyrl exhaled. As much as he disliked working at the port, his penalty could have been a lot worse. He forced out the harder question. "And Majda?" Although he hadn't seen Devon yet, he felt the tension filling his home.

Her voice quieted. "We may be able to mend the fracture between Majda and the Ruby Dynasty. But you and Lily did great insult to Majda."

Vyrl had no excuses. So he said nothing.

Roca pushed her hand over her hair, pulling tendrils out of the clip. Compared to her usual elegant demeanor, now she seemed drained. "A split between our family and Majda could destabilize the government."

"Why? The Ruby Dynasty no longer reigns. We're just a bunch of farmers."

"Do you really believe that?"

He met her gaze squarely. "Yes."

His mother paused. "It is true that the Ruby Dynasty no longer rules the Imperialate. But we still wield a great deal of power. With that comes responsibilities. Our actions, policies, and alliances have great impact on the Assembly. We and they are inextricably linked. So is Majda, to us and to the Assembly." She brushed back the tendrils of hair curling around her face. "When we suffer discord, it weakens the Assembly, and so weakens the Imperialate."

Vyrl thought of his father upstairs with Devon. "So now we have discord with Majda." He knew that, on an interstellar scale, the union of Majda and the Ruby Dynasty was far more important than the happiness of two young lovers. But that knowledge didn't lessen the pain in his heart.

His mother lifted her hand as if to lay it on his arm as she had often done in his younger years, offering comfort. When he stiffened, unable to accept her solace, she lowered her arm. Gently, she said, "Devon is still willing to take you as consort, after we annul your marriage."

No! Vyrl felt as if a cage were closing around him. "Doesn't she know how you found me this morning?"

Roca nodded. "Yes. Despite that, she is willing to accept the arrangement."

He clenched his fists on his knees. "You can't annul my marriage."

His mother frowned. "Young man, we most certainly can. You and Lily are both underage, even for Lyshriol."

He scowled at her. "Then I can't marry Devon either."

"You can with parental consent."

"What, my consent doesn't matter?"

Her anger disintegrated. "Hai, Vyrl. I am so sorry."

He blinked. It was easier to be angry with his parents when they were angry with him. Sympathy and compassion were harder to handle. In a quieter voice, he said, "I'm not a political arrangement. I'm a human being."

"Yes. You are. A special, remarkable human being." She indicated the room around them. "What do you see here?"

Her question baffled him, and he couldn't tell from her mind what she was about. The room looked the same as always: large, longer than wide, and mirrors along one wall with a bar at waist-height. His athletic bag hung on the bar. The ceiling shed uniform light, leaving no shadows; the floor was gold-stalk, polished by years of use.

"It's just the dance studio," he said.

She smiled. "When you children were small, I practiced here everyday. For some reason it affected you more than the others." She indicated an area by one wall. "When you were a baby, you would sit in your carrier there and watch me, laughing and kicking your legs with the music."

Vyrl had no idea why she was telling him this, but it brought back wonderful memories. He had taken his first steps in this room, trying to mimic his mother's dancing, which had seemed magic to him. From that day on, she had taught him what she knew, until seven years ago when she had brought in off-world instructors, including Rahkil Mariov.

He couldn't help but smile. "I'm glad you didn't tell me to stop following you around."

"I was delighted." She gave him a rueful look. "Your father was less pleased, to put it mildly. But we could feel how much you loved it, and he couldn't bear to deny you that."

Suddenly he saw, or thought he saw, why she brought this up. "Lily knows I dance. She has accepted it."

A blend of emotions came from her mind, relief at his news, but also sadness. "I'm glad. I can imagine how much that means to you. But I wasn't thinking of Lily." She sighed. "You're a bright young man, Vyrl, but in most things you have so little focus. Convincing you to do schoolwork is like trying to extract a tooth without benefit of modern dentistry."

He grimaced at the apt image. "School is boring. I can't put my heart into it."

Her voice softened. "Three times in your life, I've seen you pour your heart into something. The results have been incredible."

Although he felt her sincerity, empathy could only tell him so much; her specific meaning eluded him. He indicated the studio. "Do you mean this?"

"Yes. This." She regarded him with a respect that startled him, particularly now, when he was in so much trouble. "I wonder if you fully realize what you do. I know of few if any other dancers who have trained like you."

He spoke dryly. "Given that I'm probably the only man on the entire planet who dances, that doesn't say much."

"I wasn't speaking of Lyshriol."

Puzzled, he said, "But I thought you danced with the Parthonia Royal Ballet."

Her gaze remained steady. "I did."

Her comments made no sense. Parthonia was a ballet company of interstellar renown. "Didn't they train?"

"Yes. Of course." With that unrelenting compassion of hers, she said, "But no one in their youth did what you've done. A minimum of three hours a day all your life, almost since you could walk. And now what is it? Four hours? Five? I've seen you spend the entire day dancing, when you have nothing else to do. It's incredible."

He shrugged. "It's fun." In truth, it was a great deal more, so much a part of his life that to stop would be like trying to quit breathing. But he didn't know how to put that into words.

Roca regarded him steadily. "Vyrl, you are more than a 'good' dancer. Rahkil Mariov tells me you are the best he has ever worked with."

Vyrl thought of his instructor. "If he only takes one student at a time, he can't have worked with that many." It surprised him; he considered Rahkil a truly gifted teacher.

"Before he came here, he trained hundreds of dancers. Prodigies. He was one of the most sought after masters." His mother motioned skyward, as if to encompass all settled space. "In his prime, Rahkil was also considered among the greatest male dancers in modern history."

Vyrl could see why. He had watched holos of Rahkil performing. He was magnificent. And despite Rahkil's constant curmudgeonly disapproval, Vyrl thoroughly enjoyed his classes. Sometimes Rahkil even forgot himself and complimented his young student.

But his mother's comments perplexed him. "If Rahkil is so in demand, why would he come here to teach one boy who will probably never make dance his career?" As soon as he spoke, he saw the answer. Stiffening, he said, "Because I'm a Ruby prince."

"We didn't tell him who you were when we sent holos of you dancing."

Vyrl's anger fizzled. "But—then why did he come?"

She spoke with kindness. "Because you have an incredible gift. You could walk out of here today and win a place in any major dance company. Rahkil says you will someday surpass what he achieved in his prime."

Vyrl gaped at her. "That's crazy."

"Ah, Vyrl." Her voice held a mother's pain. "Shall you spend your life hiding this spectacular gift? Will you live ashamed of a talent and dedication that together could make you a legend in a profession you love more than almost anything else?"

Vyrl couldn't answer. Yes, it hurt, having to hide what he loved, but Lyshriol was his life, all he had ever known. He couldn't imagine anything else.

He spoke in a low voice. "You said you had seen me put my heart into three things. Dance is only one."

"Farming, too."

"I can't farm as the Majda consort."

"You could become an agriculturist. A research scientist."

"I don't want to do research. I want to make my living from the land." Despite the betraying moisture in his eyes, he found himself smiling. "Working in the fields, caring for livestock, making a life out of golden days—that's *magic*, Mother, real magic." Softly, he said, "And you've still only mentioned two things."

Regret washed out from her mind. They both knew the third dream that inspired his heart. "She's a lovely girl," Roca said. "In a different universe, I think you and Lily could have been very happy."

"Not could have been," he whispered. "Will be."

Her voice caught. "I am so, so very sorry." With the grace he had always admired, she held up her hand as if to offer him the studio. "We can't have all our dreams. But we can have some of them."

Vyrl struggled against the heat in his eyes. He wouldn't cry, not now, not in front of his mother.

What made it so hard was that, deep inside, he yearned for the gift she offered, the chance to follow his most secret dream.

Even expecting it, Vyrl jumped when the knock came at the door. He suddenly wished he hadn't chosen this chamber, the circular room high in the tower. When his father had asked where he would like the meeting to take place, he had thought he would be calmer here, but instead it felt as if his sanctuary was being invaded.

Clenching his blue-glass goblet, he swirled its liquid, inhaling the tangy fragrance. Normally his parents didn't let their children drink wine, but today his father had made an exception, treating him as an adult instead of a child. Although Vyrl appreciated the gesture, it didn't help. He had never liked the taste of wine.

The knock came again.

Taking a deep breath, Vyrl stood and walked across the blue chamber. Then he mentally steadied himself and opened the door.

Devon stood on the landing outside.

Instead of a uniform, today she wore suede trousers and a gold shirt. She even had on a gold necklace with a hawk design, the emblem of Majda. She seemed subdued, her face drawn and her eyes dark with fatigue.

She bowed from the waist. "My greetings, Prince Havyrl."

So they were back to titles. He nodded. "My greetings, General Majda." Moving aside, he invited her to enter.

Devon entered the chamber. "This is beautiful."

"It's... calm." He couldn't say more. To tell her what this place meant to him would be a betrayal of a trust, somehow, though he wasn't sure to whom. Himself, perhaps.

She waited until he sat on his bench, then settled on another one nearby that curved against the wall.

With stiff formality, Vyrl spoke the words he had been practicing all day. "Please accept my apology for my offense to Majda. I deeply regret any insult my actions gave your line. I hope our House and yours may remain allies."

Devon answered without delay. "Majda accepts your apology. We look forward to a fruitful alliance with the Ruby Dynasty."

Vyrl exhaled. There. It was done.

So they sat.

When the silence grew strained, Devon said, "Vyrl, I—" in the same instant that Vyrl said, "My father—" They both stopped and gave awkward laughs. Then Devon said, "Please. Go ahead."

"My father told me what you and he discussed."

Devon gave a tired nod. "Perhaps it is best to do this soon instead of waiting. As long as you live on Lyshriol, you will be..." She hesitated.

"Distracted?" He heard his bitterness. "By memories of my former wife?"

Devon said, simply, "Yes."

Vyrl tightened his grip on his goblet. "So let's just marry off the recalcitrant groom now and get the whole business over with."

She shifted on the bench. "I am sorry you see it that way."

"Everyone is sorry." He looked out the window, trying to hide the pain he knew showed on his face. "Lady Devon, you should marry the man you love. Not me."

Startled tension snapped in her voice. "What are you talking about?"

Vyrl turned to see her sitting rigidly, gripping the edge of the bench. He said, "The handsome man with the dark hair and eyes."

She seemed to close up. "I have no idea what you mean."

"I saw him. In your mind."

For a long moment she remained silent. Just when he thought he had made a fool of himself with his assumption, she spoke quietly. "If the Matriarch of Majda were to marry a commoner, it would be a great scandal. An outrage. She would be stripped of her title and her authority. Nor would the children of any such union be considered Majda heirs."

Gods. What could he say? He and Devon each had their duty, and love had no place in it. What did it matter if they died inside a little more every day, as long as the pillars of the Imperialate remained strong?

Devon gentled her voice. "Vyrl, I won't ask for anything you aren't ready to give. We can live at whichever of my estates you prefer. And you will have advisors, people to help you learn your new role. No one expects a youth your age to manage a palace with a staff of many hundreds. You will have time to adjust."

"Adjust." Vyrl felt as if he were caught in a nightmare that kept going. He would never wake up.

She spoke carefully. "It is true that Majda has certain expectations for your behavior. But this isn't the Ruby Empire. Those days are long in our past. I don't expect you to stay in seclusion or cover yourself in robes. You are free to pursue your interests."

If that was meant to reassure him, it had the opposite effect. "What do you mean, expectations for my behavior?"

"You will be a highly placed member of the Imperial Court. Certain protocols are required."

Vyrl finished his wine with a long swallow, trying to wash away the bitter images. Yes, he knew court protocol. He couldn't imagine living that constrained lifestyle, always under scrutiny by the noble Houses, caught in their webs of intrigue. And regardless of what Devon promised about modern-day freedoms, he knew he would be viewed and treated as her possession.

He stared at his empty goblet. Then he lifted it and let the glass drop. It shattered on the tiles, blue crystal shards scattering everywhere. "That is what you will do to me if you make me leave here."

When Devon stiffened, he feared he had gone too far and destroyed the long hours of conciliation his parents had spent, repairing the rift he had created. What was wrong with him? He had nothing to accomplish by antagonizing the person he would spend the rest of his life with. But if this was any sample of their future, he didn't see how he could bear it.

Devon stared at the broken glass strewn across the floor. Then she braced her hands against her knees. "I can't do this. I feel like a monster."

Do what? "I don't understand."

She turned to him. "The betrothal."

It was his turn to go rigid. Surely he misunderstood, his heart hearing what his brain knew was false. "What do you mean?"

She took a long breath. "I can't force a child to become my consort against his will." Although she watched him with a guarded expression, there was no mistaking the pain that came from her mind. "If you choose to end this arrangement, I will accept your decision without rancor to your family."

Vyrl's heart lurched. "You mean, I could stay married to Lily?"

Devon exhaled. "Yes."

Yes. Yes! He almost shouted it, but he managed to hold back his exuberance, aware of the insult it would add to the injury he had already done Majda.

Devon continued in her throaty voice. "But, Vyrl—before you decide, consider this: If you choose to stay here, you will never realize your dreams."

His joy crashed down again. He told himself it was only his fear that she would withdraw her offer. That was true—in part. But he longed for the freedom to dance, to perform, to explore the limits of his ability, and to do it without shame or guilt, admired instead of scorned.

The dream tempted him like a siren call.

A small cleaning droid whirred through the doorway. It nosed around the shards of glass, then began to vacuum them into its interior.

"I've seen holos of your dancing," Devon said.

Vyrl froze. "Who showed you?"

"Your teacher. Rahkil Mariov."

He wanted to sink into the floor and let the droid vacuum him up, too. "I hope it didn't offend you."

"Offend me?" Incredulity washed across her face. "You really have no idea how you look, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I work out facing the mirror." It showed every mistake, again and again, until he fixed the problem.

She spoke slowly. "I have often wondered what it does to a person to stare for hours into a mirror for the sole purpose of finding flaws. Your dancing seems a cruel art."

"But it isn't." He didn't know how to describe what was intuition for him. "It can be frustrating, but when you see improvement, it's magic."

"Magic, yes." For the first time since she had entered the room, her face warmed with a smile. "When you dance, it is extraordinary. Mesmerizing. With your gifts and your spectacular looks, you could have an empire at your feet." In her throaty, compelling voice, she added, "I can give that to you."

Vyrl stared at her, unable to respond. He could barely imagine people tolerating his dancing, yet Devon promised him an empire. Of all the inducements Majda could have offered, she had chosen the single one that made a difference.

Devon stood up. "I'll wait downstairs. Take as long as you need to decide."

After she left, Vyrl pulled up his knee, rested his elbow on it, and gazed out at the rippling plains. Today his tower chamber offered no serenity. He could have what he wanted—Lily and a farm—but it would weaken crucial alliances built on the expectation of his marriage to Devon. Nor could he perform. If he accepted the marriage, he

would lose Lily and Lyshriol, but he wouldn't have to give up farming completely, and he could have the dance career he craved, one almost beyond his imaginings.

The droid whirred around his feet, cleaning up the last shards, hiding the broken pieces inside itself. Once again, the chamber was spotless and smooth, like a polished box.

A tear gathered in Vyrl's eye and slid down his cheek. He knew the decision he had to make. He went to the door and descended the stairs, headed toward Majda.

Maybe he could never escape the pain—but he could hide it inside.

6

Dreams

Vyrl tried the combination of steps again, studying his technique in the mirror as he skimmed across the floor. His reflection showed a young man with long legs and red-gold curls, in black pants and a black pullover, all soaked with sweat. Frowning, he tried the steps yet another time. Pah, No wonder he kept stumbling on the last jump. He was leaning to the side, almost imperceptibly, but enough to throw off his balance.

"Are you going to glare at yourself all day?" a voice drawled from the doorway.

Vyrl refocused on the mirror, looking at the reflection of the doorway. His brother Del-Kurj stood there, resting his lanky self against the frame, his arms crossed. Vyrl glowered at him via the mirror, but he decided to be civil. For all that Del-Kurj could be a bog-boil, he had been remarkably decent lately, even showing sympathy for his younger brother's melancholy.

Vyrl turned to him. "Has the broadcast started yet?"

Del nodded. "In the Hearth Room."

Vyrl felt as if a lump was lodged in his throat. The meditative calm of his dancing vanished. He cleaned up and changed into trousers and a white shirt, then followed Del upstairs.

His siblings were already gathered around the hearth: Althor in an armchair, his large size and self-assurance dominating the room; Chaniece, fraternal twin to Del-Kurj, poised and regal, gold hair spilling over her arms; thirteen-year-old Soz, with wild, dark curls, busily taking apart Althor's laser carbine, trying to figure out how it worked; twelve-year-old Denric, smaller than his brothers, with a mop of yellow curls and violet eyes; eight-year-old Aniece, also dark-haired, small and pretty, curled on a sofa by their mother; and four-year-old Kelric, a strapping toddler with gold curls, gold eyes, and the kind of heartbreakingly angelic face that only beautiful young children could have. Their father was sitting in a large armchair, his booted legs stretched across the carpet. Only ten-year-old Shannon was missing.

Seeing his family together, knowing this would soon all change for him, Vyrl wanted to hold this moment close, like a treasure within a box. He would miss them more than he knew how to say.

Del-Kurj dropped onto the sofa next to Chaniece and sprawled out his long legs. On the other couch, Soz eyed Vyrl dubiously, as if she hadn't decided yet whether or not brothers qualified as human. But then she moved over, making room for him.

Vyrl sat down, with Soz on one side and Althor on the other. As he settled in, the room lights dimmed.

"Got dark," Kelric stated.

"So it did." Roca picked up the small boy and put him in her lap.

A news-holo formed around the hearth, encompassing the entire area. It unsettled Vyrl; he suddenly seemed to be sitting in a balcony of the Assembly Hall on the planet Parthonia. Hundreds of men and women packed the amphitheater, rank upon rank of interstellar leaders, dignitaries, diplomats, military officers, and newscasters.

In the past, Vyrl had never had much interest in such broadcasts. Nor had he paid enough attention to his physics to understand how this transmission came to Lyshriol, many light-years away, except that the technology bypassed spacetime, making light speed limitations irrelevant.

After a moment, Vyrl located Devon. She was standing on a dais in the center of the amphitheater by a podium. Seeing her, he felt the proverbial shimmerflies in his stomach. She made an impressive sight, resplendent in her dress uniform, tall and strong, like an ancient warrior queen from the Ruby Empire.

People surrounded her, aides and dignitaries. More were seated at consoles below the dais, probably minor clerks recording the Assembly session. An unfamiliar woman was speaking at the podium, and many people in the amphitheater were talking as well. It seemed like bedlam to Vyrl, but perhaps the meeting had an organization he didn't see.

Finally the speaker finished and moved aside, glancing at Devon. The general nodded to her, then stepped up to the podium. As Devon tapped the com, the newscasters zoomed in, so that instead of being in a balcony, Vyrl abruptly found his virtual self only a few meters from Devon. It gave him vertigo.

Suddenly Vyrl froze. At a console across the dais, a dark-haired man was talking into a com. Heat spread in Vyrl's face. He knew that man. He had seen him in Devon's mind.

Vyrl leaned toward Althor and spoke in low tones, trying to sound nonchalant. "Do you know who that man is? The one with the gray sweater and dark hair?"

"I haven't a clue," Althor said. "Why?"

"I just wondered."

Althor pulled off his palmtop and flipped it open. While Althor worked, Vyrl watched people argue and yell in the Assembly session.

After a moment Althor spoke discreetly. "His name is Ty Collier." When Vyrl turned to him, Althor added, "He's a recorder for the Imperial Library."

"That's it?" Devon was in love with a clerk? Vyrl had expected more. But perhaps that wasn't fair to Collier.

Althor gave him an odd look. "Do you know him?"

Vyrl avoided his gaze. "I thought he looked familiar, but I was wrong." He could tell Althor didn't believe him, but his brother didn't push. Vyrl wondered how he would feel if he met Collier. Right now, Devon showed no sign she even knew Ty sat a few meters from where she stood.

When Devon began to speak, the amphitheater went silent. Vyrl could almost feel people leaning forward. Her throaty voice rolled over the audience.

"A great deal of speculation has occurred in regard to my marital state." She stopped while more newscasters zoomed in. Ty Collier had stopped working and was watching her with poorly disguised pain.

"Rather than let rumors proliferate," Devon continued, "I have prepared a statement." She paused. "It is true that I plan to marry."

"What the hell?" Vyrl's father said.

"The Ruby Dynasty and House of Majda have long been allies," Devon continued. "Strengthening ties between our Houses offers many advantages to the Assembly and its governing bodies." She raised her head, surveying the amphitheater. "The House of Majda honors the Ruby Dynasty. We esteem the Imperial line and welcome the idea of joining our Houses through the Majda Matriarch and a Ruby prince."

Vyrl felt blood drain from¹ his face. No. No! This couldn't be happening. "She told me she would accept my decision! She gave me her word."

His father spoke tightly. "She certainly did. We all heard her."

Lights glittered as newscasters recorded Devon's next words. "And it may be that someday such a joining will grace our House—if my sister Corejida Majda so wills."

"Corey?" Vyrl's mother said. "What the blazes?"

Voices rumbled in the Assembly Hall, and Devon paused, waiting for them to quiet.

Eldrinson gave his wife a puzzled look. "Have we spoken to Corey Majda?"

"Not that I know of." Roca spread her hands in a shrug, then quickly brought them back to keep Kelric from falling off her lap. "I've no idea what Devon is about."

"Devon has a sister?" Vyrl asked.

His mother nodded. "Two sisters. Corey and Naaj. Corey is next in line. She's ten years younger than Devon."

"Maybe she's making Corey her heir," Althor said. "She has to do something, or she will lose power within her House."

Devon was speaking again. "A young man once told me something I found true, words with a wisdom well beyond his age: 'For all that our dreams bring meaning to our lives, we cannot have them all. What we give up may cause regret, even grief, but we must find a balance we can bear. Otherwise our hearts will shatter.'"

Vyrl gaped at her. She had just repeated the words he had spoken when he told her that he couldn't become the Majda consort.

Devon had an odd look now, as if she were about to jump off a precipice. "In this matter of balance, I, too, must choose." Her voice carried throughout the amphitheater. "For that reason, I am abdicating my position as the Majda Matriarch."

"Gods al-flaming-mighty," Vyrl's mother said.

"Has she gone mad?" Eldrinson demanded.

The newscasters exploded with questions. Vyrl couldn't sort them out, the session had turned into such a tumult. Devon stood calmly, waiting for the clamor to subside.

"Why would she *abdicate!*" Roca said.

"Corey is next in line," Eldrinson said. "Saints, Roca, she's making Corey the Matriarch. That's what she meant."

"Corey," said Kelric, snuggled against his mother.

Vyrl absorbed Devon's words. Abdication. It would create a far bigger furor than his refusing the marriage. Had he caused this? When he had spoken with Devon, it had seemed everything would be all right. Had her House demanded she abdicate because her betrothal fell through? That made no sense. Devon was a force to reckon with. They couldn't just make her abdicate, besides which, she could arrange another marriage, if not with the Ruby Dynasty, then with a man from another noble House.

As the amphitheater quieted, Devon resumed her speech. "I do not make this decision lightly. I have considered it for years." Then she held out her hand—to Ty Collier. In front of an audience spread across interstellar space, she asked him, "Will you join me?"

Ty stared at her with undisguised astonishment. Apparently the news had surprised him as much as everyone else. When Devon gave him an encouraging smile, he visibly shook himself. Then he rose to his feet, his movements uncertain, as if he wasn't sure what to do. But he didn't hesitate; he climbed the dais and went to Devon. Taking her hand, he stood side by side with the general at the podium.

Devon spoke into the com. "Marriages of nobles and commoners are not unheard of among the Houses, but such has never been permitted for the Matriarch." Dryly, she added, "Especially not Majda." Still holding Ty's hand, she said, "I cannot marry a commoner and retain my title. So I release the title, abdicating to my sister, Corejida Majda."

Exclamations burst out in the hall, cries, people calling out questions. A rare serenity lightened Devon's face, and Ty stood with her, looking dazed but happy. Vyrl had never heard of such a powerful sovereign giving up her title for love. No doubt holobooks would be written about Devon and Ty, scholarly treatises published, holomovies produced.

Beneath the din, Althor spoke to Vyrl in a low voice. "You knew, didn't you?"

Vyrl shook his head. "Not that she intended this. Just about the man. She thought about him a lot."

The lights suddenly came up in the Hearth Room, jarring and bright. Blinking, Vyrl looked around. His ten-year-old brother, Shannon, had wandered into the room.

"I'm hungry," Shannon announced.

Roca made an exasperated noise. "Shannon, where have you been?"

"With Moonglaze. I missed him."

Vyrl sat up straighter. "Moonglaze is back?" Lily's family had agreed to bring the lyrine home with them after their stay with Lord Rillia. If Moonglaze had returned...

He realized everyone was watching him.

His father smiled. "Go on, son."

Vyrl jumped up, knocking Althor's arm off the chair. He mumbled an apology, then strode from the room.

Within moments he was outside, running through the winding streets of Dalvador. His feet pounded the blue cobblestones as he sped along the familiar route. When he was halfway up the last hill, someone came out of a house at the top and ran down toward him, her red-gold hair flying about her body and her blue dress whipping around her legs.

They collided in the middle of the street. Vyrl threw his arms around her, hugging as hard as he could, until she gasped for breath. He pulled her into a kiss, uncaring of the pedestrians around them. Lily was crying and laughing, trying to talk and kiss him at the same time.

Eventually they calmed down enough just to hold each other. Vyrl stroked her curls off her tear-stained cheeks. "It's so good to see you."

She took his face in her hands. "Your father's runner reached us in Rillia. He told us you weren't going with the sky queen."

"I'll never go away. Never, Lily." For all that he would always wonder what he had given up, he could live with that loss. He couldn't live without Lily.

He touched her cheek. "My parents say that if we want, we can live with them until we are ready to run our own farm. But they will help us no matter what we decide."

She ran her hand over his arm as if marveling that he was real. "I don't think I would like to live with parents."

"I neither." He spoke earnestly. "But even with their help, setting up the farm will be a lot of work. And I must finish my schooling. That was the only way they would let me stay married to you."

"We can manage." Her mood shone with optimism. "Lord Rillia gave my father three lyrine and many crop cuttings as compensation. My father says you and I can have it all to help us start out."

Vyrl blinked. "Your father said that?"

She laughed softly. "Actually, what he said was 'If you intend to stay with the damn fool boy, you better take this, because you'll need as much help as you can get.' "

Dryly, Vyrl said, "That sounds more like your father."

"He likes you. Really. He's just worried about us."

Vyrl pulled her close. "I'll make you a good husband, Lily, I swear." He finally became aware that other pedestrians were watching them. His parents were a few nouses farther along the road, talking with Lily's parents. Taking Lily's hand, Vyrl drew her off the lane into an alley between two houses, where a bubble tree hid them from view. As they brushed the tree, one of its bubbles detached and floated into the air.

Then Vyrl took his wife into his arms.

Epilogue

Light sifted from the hall into the darkened bedroom. Vyrl stood with Lily in the doorway, watching their two youngest children, toddlers of two and three, sleeping on the downy bed.

"They're so sweet when they're asleep," Lily whispered.

Vyrl laughed, quietly so he didn't wake the boys. "And terrors when they're awake."

"They're angels," she admonished. When he didn't look suitably chastised, she tickled him. Vyrl picked her up and swung her away from the door, with Lily struggling not to laugh or make noise. It amazed him how light she felt. He had kept growing after their marriage and his shoulders had broadened even more. Now, at nineteen, he had reached his full height of six feet two.

He set her down outside their daughter's bedroom, and they peered in at the four-year-old snuggled under her quilt. Then, as quiet as mumble-mice, they walked into the living room of the farmhouse their families had helped them build. Rugs warmed the floor, hangings brightened the walls, and bubble plants in pots added touches of color.

Lily tugged Vyrl toward their bedroom, but he shook his head. "I need to study." He suddenly felt heavy. Sometimes the weight of his responsibilities seemed to sink into him. He was so often tired, working the farm,

raising the children, and keeping up his studies. Even having delayed his entrance into Parthonia University until this year, he didn't feel ready. If their families hadn't helped so much, he didn't know how he and Lily would have managed.

She laid her hand on his arm. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

Vyrl smiled at her. *Don't worry*. "How often you've said that to me. And how often you've been right." She made him want to dance.

He had less time to work out now, but he managed to keep up his training with Rahkil. That he and Lily had two sets of parents happy to spend time with their grandchildren meant more than he knew how to say. It gave Lily time to learn more about the farm while Vyrl studied. It astonished him that Lily was so good at running the farm. She could do sums faster in her head than he could on his palmtop. But as much as he worried about his university work, he liked the challenge. Lily settled him, and now that he could pursue his own interests in agriculture and biology, it was easier to concentrate on the subjects he dreaded. And no matter how much the children exhausted him, he loved them so much that sometimes he thought he would burst with it. Perhaps someday, many years down the road, he could think of dancing beyond Lyshriol, but until then this was more than enough.

Vyrl pulled Lily into his arms. "Dance with me."

"Always," she murmured.

They twirled around the living room, moving to music they heard in their minds, and Vyrl's heart filled with the stained glass colors of joy.