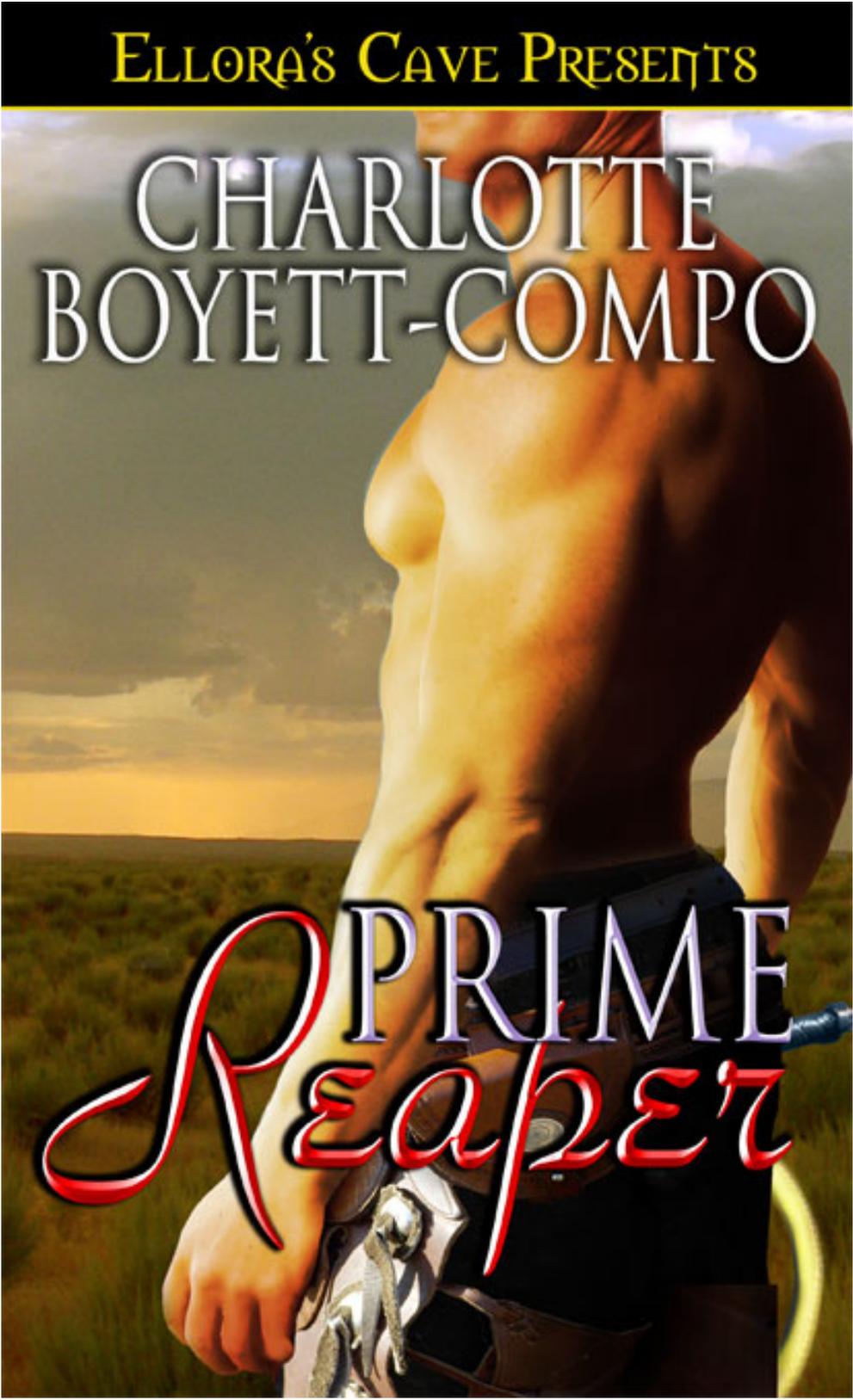


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

CHARLOTTE
BOYETT-COMPO

PRIME
Reaper



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorasave.com

Prime Reaper

ISBN # 9781419905827

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Edited by Mary Moran.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: January 2007

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WESTERNWIND:

PRIME REAPER

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Prologue

*Haines City in the Exasla Territory
The wedding night of Arawn and Danielle*

Her skin was as soft as silk and as he dragged his rough, calloused palm over that sweet expanse, he shuddered from the strong emotions roiling through him—emotions he had never experienced before and that could bring him to his knees if he but let them. There was such protectiveness, such possessiveness churning within his body and soul that he could barely draw breath. Not once in his life had he ever held such a treasure in his arms—had never expected to, had not wanted to—and now that it was in his grasp, he would ruthlessly kill anything or anyone who tried to take it from him.

She was his treasure, his priceless jewel.

She was his wife.

Carrying her over the threshold, he kicked the door shut with his boot, wincing at the too loud sound it made.

“They’ll think we’re eager, *mo shearc*,” she said with a giggle.

Hearing her call him her love sent waves of pride coursing through the Reaper. He paused on the way to the bed and looked down at her. “Do you care, wench?” he asked, his eyes burning into hers.

Danielle’s slow, saucy smile made his groin tighten painfully. “If I’d cared, I wouldn’t have chased your uptight ass all over Haines City until you caught me,” she responded.

The Reaper arched a dark brow. “Who put that notion into your head, may I ask?”

“To chase you?” she asked, caressing the hair at the back of his neck.

“That you chased me until I caught you,” he countered. “Sounds like something Aingeal Cree would say.”

“Mayhaps she might have suggested it,” Danielle replied.

“Aye, I figured as much,” he said, and continued over to the bed. With deliberate slowness, he let her slide down his body until her feet touched the floor. His arms still around her, he held her to him, gazing down into her upturned face. “Mayhaps you should take what Aingeal says with a grain of salt, wench.”

She smiled and lifted a hand to his lean jaw to caress him. “Then I should be afraid of you, milord?” she asked softly.

Arawn’s brows drew together. “Why should you be?”

Danielle pressed close against him. “You said not to pay heed to Aingeal’s words, yet she was quick to say I should not fear you or what a man and woman do in the

privacy of their room." She lowered her chin then looked up at him through her lashes. "Should I tremble at what you have in store for me this eve?"

Caught in a trap he had a notion had been lying in wait for him, he shook his head. "Wench, the only trembling you will do this eve is with pleasure. I'd no more cause you hurt than I would slam my dangly with the door a'purpose."

Danielle giggled. "I would hope not, *mo shearc*," she said. "That would make it hard for you to make me yours I'd think."

Shaking his head at her impish look, he moved his hands to her shoulders. "You're going to be a handful, aren't you?" he queried.

"Aye," she agreed, "but I'll be your handful." She stepped back away from his light hold and turned her back. "Undo me, please?"

A shaft of heat careened through the Reaper and he was shocked to see his hands trembling as he lifted them to the long row of tiny buttons that held the back of her gown together. He felt clumsy and inadequate as he worked them apart, aching to simply grab the neckline and rip the garment from her.

"Where will we be living, milord?" she asked. She ran a hand over her side, easing a twinge that plagued her from time to time.

He looked up and realized he could see the two of them in the mirror above the dresser across the room. She met his gaze with her head tilted to one side as she waited for his answer.

Having to concentrate on the small buttons he was undoing, he had to look away from her to watch what he was about. "I have an apartment in the Citadel," he answered. "Outside the apartments of the Shadowlords, because I'm the Prime it is the most opulent. I think you'll like it there." He glanced at the mirror to see she had tucked her lower lip between her teeth. "Is that a problem?"

"We won't be living in Haines City?" she asked.

Arawn shook his head. "Cynyr has been given this place as his home base. If you want to live out west, it will have to be in another territory."

"Such as?"

He had undone enough buttons down her back that he could see the pale blue silk camisole beneath the gown. It caused another shaft of lust to ripple along his nerve endings.

The Reaper frowned. "I don't know, wench. That would depend on the Shadowlords. I will be stationed where they choose. If they are agreeable to me going west, it might be Oklaks, Moilia or Nemcone. Bevyn's home base is in the Armistenky Territory but he's at the Citadel more than he's home."

"He told me Lea likes it at the Citadel," Danielle told him.

"Mayhaps you will too," he said as he undid the last button. He had no desire to live anywhere else but if his lady would be unhappy at the fortress of the Shadowlords, he would live with her elsewhere.

"We'll see," she said, and continued to stand with her back to him. "Will you help me undress, Ari?"

He nearly groaned at her use of the nickname his fellow Reapers called him. It sent shivers of delight through him and made his heart swell. Feeling like an untried youth, he put his hands on the top of her dress and eased it down her arms, down her hips, holding his breath as the creamy smoothness of her back was revealed to him. Lowering his head, he placed a soft kiss at the juncture of her shoulder and neck as the gown slid into a silken pool at her feet.

"Umm," his lady said.

"Like that?" he asked in a throaty voice.

"Very much."

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of her petticoat and tugged it downward over her lush hips, allowing it to fall atop the gown as it slid down her legs. Heat coursed through his cock when he caught sight of the white lace garter belt that held up her silk stockings.

Moving his lips along her silky neck, he worked his way up to the curve of her ear and then took the tender flesh of her earlobe between his teeth, grinning at the little squirm that pushed her backside against his hardening erection.

"I'll give you an hour to stop that," she told him.

He chuckled as he slipped his tongue into her ear, exhaling softly.

"Ari!" she whimpered.

"Danni!" he responded, and snaked his arms around her waist to pull her taut against him, rubbing his hardness across her rump.

"Oh god!" she said, and felt her knees giving way beneath her.

Laughing, he dipped his knees and swung her up into his arms, stepping forward to lay her on their bed as gently as though she were a fragile piece of spun glass.

Danielle looked up at her husband and suddenly felt shy. She was lying there in only her camisole, underwear and stockings.

Arawn held out his hand. "Sit up, wench."

She didn't hesitate but put her hand in his. When she was up, he reached down to pull her camisole off, laying her bare breasts open to his view.

"By the gods, milady," he whispered as he reached out a trembling hand to lightly cup her left breast. He eased his thumb across the nipple and when she shivered, he splayed his hand between her breasts and urged her to lie down.

"You are so beautiful," he said, his eyes roaming over her. He sat down beside her on the bed, his hip against the side of her leg.

She could think of nothing to say to his compliment and couldn't have spoken if she'd tried for he was running his hand down the inside of her silk-clad thigh to her knee. The sensation was a giddy one that sent chill bumps all along her spine. As his

hand curved under her knee to draw her leg up, she had to bite her lip to keep from groaning.

The Reaper bent her leg toward her chest so he could remove her shoe. He took his time slipping it from her foot and then treated her other leg to the same sensuous action. When the shoes were on the floor beside the bed, his hand went to the garter belt that held her stockings in place and very carefully, very slowly, very seductively, he removed the silky material from each clasp on her right leg.

“You have such a gentle touch, milord,” his wife whispered.

Arawn smiled. He’d never had someone tell him that before. Much of the time he was accused of being too heavy-handed. That his lady found his touch gentle made him grateful for his self-restraint.

Dreading snagging the silk with his calloused hands, he took the top carefully between his fingers and began easing the stocking down her thigh, over her slightly bent knee and then down her leg. Slipping it from her foot, he was relieved he hadn’t caused a snag in the flimsy material. He was equally as careful with the other stocking, holding his breath in the hope he wouldn’t put a run in the soft material. Tugging down her underwear until she lay completely nude before him was an exhilarating experience he knew he would relive many times over in the years ahead.

The feel of her husband’s fingers against the bare flesh of her leg sent shivers of delight through Danielle. She curled her fingers into the fabric of the bedspread in an effort to keep herself still although she wanted to writhe beneath Arawn’s tender ministrations.

When both legs were bare to him, Arawn scooted farther down on the bed taking her left foot into his hands and began massaging it firmly, his thumbs pressing little circles into her instep.

Closing her eyes to such a glorious feeling, Danielle felt like the most desirable woman in the world. She gloried in her husband’s touch, and as he flexed each of her toes and ankles, she sighed with utter contentment. So relaxed was she that when she felt Arawn’s warm, moist mouth closing over her big toe, she nearly melted into the mattress. Keeping her eyes closed—though she ached to see the look on his face as he suckled her toe—she grabbed handfuls of the bedspread to pull it toward her.

Never before had Arawn ever dreamed of doing what he was at that moment. Not once when he was entirely human had he entertained the notion of nibbling on a woman’s toes, but nibble he did and with the greatest of pleasure. He ran his tongue between her toes, licked at the top of her foot, took a light nip on the side of her instep and when she jumped as though prodded with an electric current, he grinned like a schoolboy.

“Bad Reaper,” Danielle said, opening her eyes to give him a heated look that made his cock leap. “Bad, bad Reaper!” She tried to pull her foot out of his grip but he wouldn’t allow it.

“Big, bad Reaper,” he growled, and tickled the bottom of her foot.

“Arawn!” she yelled, and managed to get free of him. She scooted up on the bed, her feet planted firmly on the mattress, her back to the headboard. She watched him warily as he bent over to pull off his boots.

“It’s good to know you’re ticklish,” he said, arching a dark brow at her.

“You keep your tickling to yourself, mister,” she warned, and felt a trill of suspense writhe through her when he snorted at that order.

He stood up and his fingers went to the black leather tie at his neck. Slowly, sensually, he loosened the knot and then pulled it apart, sliding the tie from his neck to let it drop to the floor. Next he tugged his black silk shirt from the black leather uniform pants and began working the buttons open with one hand.

Danielle could feel her heartbeat accelerating as she watched her husband undo the cuffs of his shirt then shrug out of the garment, letting it fall to the floor to reveal his brawny chest. Her attention dipped for a moment to the crisp, curly hairs between his manly paps, down over the tiger line that disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants then moved back up to his eyes. When his hands went to his belt buckle, she flicked out her tongue to lick her upper lip.

Arawn stilled—stone-hard as a statue—as he saw that sweet, pink muscle moistening his lady’s full mouth. He could feel the blood pounding in his temples. With a hot look that could have peeled paint from a wooden post, he flicked open his belt buckle and pulled the belt through the loops slowly, his gaze locked with Danielle’s.

Trembling slightly as her husband unbuttoned his fly then pulled the zipper down, she reached above and behind her to grab hold of the scrolled spindles on the brass headboard, tightening her hands around them when Arawn pushed his pants down his long, muscled legs and his manhood sprang into view—jutting out like an iron filing toward a magnet.

“Oh my,” she breathed, unable to look away from that powerful tool. “Will all that fit inside me?”

Arawn stepped out of his pants and kicked them away. “Oh it will fit, wench. I guarantee it.”

As naked as the day he was born, he leaned over her and captured the peak of one breast between his lips. His wife purred like a kitten, her hands smoothing his dark hair as he moved from one taut bud to the other, licking his way across, laving the puckered flesh, suckling her.

“I never imagined...” she said dreamily.

Her Reaper released the swollen peak upon which he was feasting and looked up at her. “You have yet to experience the unimaginable, wench,” he told her, and he rose up to his full height, shoulders squared. His cock stirred, dragging her immediate attention down to its glistening head.

Once more Danielle licked her lips, this time more from anticipation than nervousness.

"Wench?" he questioned softly.

She managed to tear her avid stare from his cock to look up at him. What she saw set her juices to flowing.

He was a fine specimen of a man, an exceedingly handsome man with broad shoulders, chiseled pecs, abdominal muscles upon which she could do her wash and bulging biceps that flexed as he stood there with his legs apart, arms loosely at his side. His dark brown hair and amber eyes gleamed with health, his tanned flesh sleek and smooth though there was a puckered scar just above and to the left of his belly button.

"An innie," she whispered approvingly.

Arawn frowned. "What?"

"Your belly button," she said, staring at that little indentation. "It's an innie." She smiled. "That's the best kind."

The Reaper laughed. "If you say so."

"It is," she stated. "It—" She stopped for he had put his left knee on the side of the bed and she knew he was about to join her in his glorious nakedness. She stopped him by putting her fingertips to a wicked, puckered scar that stretched across mid abdomen from hipbone to hip, instinctively knowing whatever had caused the disfigurement must have caused him great pain. "What did this, *mo shearc?*"

Arawn shook his head. "Nothing I ever wish to talk about, wench," he said, his voice brooking no argument.

The bed dipped beneath his weight as he knelt in front of her, his hands on the tops of her feet, caressing her for a moment before his fingers encircled her ankles.

Danielle saw pure mischievousness sparked in his golden eyes just a second before he pulled her legs apart and jerked her toward him.

"Oohhh!" Danielle gasped as she slid toward him.

"Gotcha," he growled when she was lying with her legs to either side of his lean hips. He ran his hands up her legs until he was kneading her luscious thighs.

She tried to close her legs by bringing her knees together but he wouldn't allow it. Before she could stop him, he had slid his hands under her rump and was lifting her hips upward. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"What a man does to his lady," he replied. "Trust me."

"You just..." she started to say, but he had lowered his head and his lips were pressed lightly to the expanse of flesh just above the pale triangle at the junction of her thighs. Her lips parted in a shocked O and she couldn't have protested had her life depended upon it for his mouth drove southward until her nether lips felt the soft warmth of his breath blowing across them.

He looked up at her through his long, dark lashes then flicked out his tongue to lap at the entrance to her sheath.

Danielle nearly jumped out of her skin. Her hands went to his dark head, her fingers threading through the thick tresses.

"What's wrong?" he cooed, dragging another slow lick across her sensitive flesh.

"You're not b-bad," she said breathlessly. "You're evil."

"Baby, you ain't seen nothing yet," he said in a deep voice.

Absolute bliss shimmered over her entire body as her husband used his tongue to elicit sensations she never knew existed. Shock waves of feelings she couldn't begin to identify coursed through her until she was unabashedly writhing beneath Arawn's mouth. Her hands were buried in his hair and she was arching herself up to him with abandon. When she came, she screamed, the sound cut off when her Reaper slid up her quickly and covered her mouth with his.

The thrust of his tongue into her mouth, the vibrations fading away between her legs, her blood pulsing in her veins like molten lava, all Danielle could do was lie there and tremble beneath the climax that had shaken her world.

Arawn tempered his kiss until it was a soft, gentle nibbling, a sweet lick of his tongue across her swollen lips. He could hear her heart thundering in her chest and the smell of her was in his nostrils, the scent now clinging to her mouth.

Emboldened by the intense pleasure she'd just experienced, Danielle let go of her husband's hair and pushed one hand between their bodies, reaching for the hardness that was stabbing against the side of her thigh.

"You," she said in a throaty moan. "I want you. I want to know..."

Having given his lady the delight that was her due, Arawn was more than ready for his own relief. He cautioned himself to go slowly, easily with Danielle. The last thing he wanted to do was spoil this first Joining for her. With infinite care, he moved so his cock was positioned at the opening of her moist heat.

"Relax," he whispered, reaching down to take her wrist and bringing it up to place it beside her head. He took her other wrist and did the same. "Relax, wench."

It was the hardest thing Danielle had ever done but she took a deep breath and tried to do as he bid. The weight of him lying upon her had to be the most powerful awareness she had ever known. His chest was slightly damp with perspiration and the wiry little hairs tickled her flesh. Along the insides of her thighs she could feel the hard, manly strength of his limbs and she shivered with delight.

Arawn nudged his shaft to her opening, felt her tense and shushed her with a soft exhalation of breath. As soon as she let her body uncoil with its tenseness, he pressed a bit farther inside her, allowing her to grow increasingly more at ease with his size and invasion.

Danielle could feel herself stretching around his rigid length. His flesh was velvety smooth, moist and filling her with such pleasure she felt tears gathering in her eyes. She wanted the whole of him inside her and arched up to meet his next light push.

The Reaper went perfectly still as he felt her hips lift from the bed. He was primed to thrust into her, aching to do so, his cock as hard and burning as he had ever known it to be. He itched to possess his woman. He *needed* to do so.

“Arawn?” he heard her beg as her fingers flexed beneath his hold.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed all the way inside her, feeling the give of the membrane that whispered to him he was her first.

Danielle tensed for just a moment then reacted with a brazenness that stunned her. She lifted her legs, locked them around her husband’s lean hips and clung to him like a second skin as he began to move inside her, bringing back the building need she had experienced earlier.

“Aye, Arawn!” she encouraged him. “Aye!”

Nothing save a nuclear explosion in his ear could have prevented the Prime Reaper from claiming his woman. His thrusts increased in speed and depth until he felt as though he were grazing her very womb. She was latched on to him with a strength at which he marveled and was meeting him thrust for thrust, her luscious little bottom writhing beneath him.

When he came, he squeezed his eyes shut and saw bright bursts of light behind his closed eyelids. The pleasure was so intense, so raw and so virile he threw back his head and howled with the release, burying his face against her sweet bosom to muffle his cry.

Danielle held him to her, feeling his hot breath fanning across her chest. His breathing was ragged, his heart pounding against hers. She smoothed the hair back from his forehead and lifted her head to plant a sweet kiss on his brow.

“Milady, you have drained me,” he whispered.

Arawn Gehdrin rolled over with Danielle cradled against him and stared at the ceiling of their bedroom. He tightened his grip on her, one strong hand buried in her lush blonde waves. Their bodies were slick with sweat, their blood pumping wildly, hearts thundering. Her breath washed rapidly across his chest to stir the hair growing thickly there. She was trembling from the force of the climax that had rocked them both and he could smell her virginal blood oozing down his thigh.

“Did I hurt you, wench?” he asked softly, dreading her answer.

“No more than I expected,” she stated, spreading her fingers over his chest. “I barely felt the breach.”

He breathed a sigh of heartfelt relief. With no experience of untried female flesh before his Transition from human to Reaper, he had been nervous about taking his lady’s maidenhead. At the very moment he had pierced that delicate membrane, he had felt a searing pain lance through his body. He knew the hellion within him was protesting his taking of a mate and was punishing him. Fleetinglly he wondered if his fellow Reapers Cynyr Cree and Bevyn Coure had felt the same agony when they had mated and made a mental note to ask.

“Have you rested long enough?” Danielle asked.

Arawn blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and gazed up at him. “Are you rested so we can do it again?”

The Prime Reaper—a man rigorously feared by his targets and deeply respected by the men with whom he worked—could only stare at his wife of less than two hours. The guilelessness in her beautiful blue eyes entranced him and the sweet little tongue she swept over her full lips ignited a fire in his loins that rocked him to his foundation.

“Wench,” he said, finding it hard to speak, “you need to give me a few more minutes to...to...” He sought the correct word, his face heating with the effort.

“To reload?” she asked innocently.

Arawn groaned. “Wench, don’t say such things!”

Danielle slid her hand down his chest to his waist. “Moirra said it takes a man a while to get primed to do it again.” Her hand moved lower. “She said—”

He shot his hand down to grab hers, keeping her from touching the part of him that was already lifting its head in speculation. “I need to have a long talk with that nosy old biddy,” he said from between clenched teeth.

His wife sighed. “Cake, Arawn,” she said.

“What?”

“Cake,” she stated. “You said you wanted cake.”

The Reaper’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know—”

“You came to our house and demanded I give you cake,” she reminded him. “Well, you got the cake and now I want the cream to go with it.”

He could feel his cheeks turning red at her unseemly words. “Danielle Brewster Gehdrin, you’ve got a mouth on you and—”

She slithered down in the bed. “Aye, that I do. Let’s see what I can do with it.”

Before he could stop her, she had moved over him, wriggled down him, the lower part of her lithe little body pinning his legs to the bed. Realizing what she was about to do, he swept a hand through the air to cleanse himself—hoping it worked for he’d never tried such a thing previously. With relief he noticed the different feel on the flesh of his cock only a second before she took him into her mouth, eliciting a gasp that almost choked him.

“By the gods!” he gasped, his hand raking through her hair of its own accord.

Digging his heels into the lumpy mattress, Arawn thought he would rocket off the bed and into the wilds of space as his lady’s lips plied his suddenly rigid flesh. Her tongue was swirling over the tip, slipping gently into the slit, and her lips were suckling him, milking him in such a way he thought it would drive him mad.

“Where did you learn that?” he asked, shock rife in his strained voice.

“Moirra said—”

“Hush!” he ordered, his amber eyes shooting sparks of crimson fire. As he was making another mental note to speak with Moirra McDermott first thing come morning, all thought completely evaporated as the fire in his groin became a raging inferno. He became lost in the sensation of Danielle’s warm, moist mouth as she gave him the most

intense pleasure he'd ever experienced. Rapidly approaching climax, he actually whined when his lady slid her mouth from him and she slithered up him like an eel.

"Want some more cake, Arawn?" she teased.

With the flames of the firestorm now leaping in his demon's eyes, the Reaper slammed his hands to her hips, lifted her effortlessly and sat her down upon his stony erection. "Want a ride, Danni?" he countered evilly as he thrust his hips up, burying his cock deep inside her velvet sheath.

"Oohh baby! Aye!" Danielle whooped, tossing her waist-length hair over her shoulder. She leaned back to brace her palms on his hard thighs and met him thrust for thrust, her breasts jutting forward to capture and hold his attention.

Unaware there was a devilish grin on his lips, the Reaper watched those bouncing breasts and slid his hands up to cover them, his thumbs going automatically to the hardened little buds to rake back and forth across them.

"Aye, Reaper," Danielle said, letting her head fall back. "Aye!"

What a glorious surprise his lady was, Arawn thought as her fingernails dug into his thighs. She was totally uninhibited and as free as the wind that skirled against the windowpanes. With her head thrown back and her long, slender neck exposed to him, he ached to drag his tongue over that creamy expanse, longed to nip her, take just a few drops of her spicy blood to make this mating complete.

"Harder, Arawn!" she hissed at him, and shock shot through him just a nanosecond before pure lust hit his loins. He increased the upward thrust of his hips, slamming into her with force.

Just at the peripheral edge of sanity, Arawn could hear the noise of the bed bouncing on the floorboards and a small, impish part of him gloried in the knowledge that there would be at least four sets of ears – if not more – that were aware of just how rigorously he was loving his woman. He could well imagine the knowing grin on one old woman's wrinkled face and could almost hear her cackle of glee.

Chapter One

Danielle caught her husband's eye as they stepped from the train car at Boreas. She arched a brow at him for he'd awakened her three times during the night with his questing hands and probing muscle. While it was true they were newlyweds and she immensely enjoyed their private, sensual times just as much as he did, she was fair worn-out from his overactive play, and they'd only been Joined for less than three weeks. On the way from Haines City to the Citadel on Cynyr and Aingeal's railcar, she'd found reasons to spend time with Aingeal Cree and Lea Walsh, Bevyn Coure's woman, just to avoid being alone with her randy husband in their sleeper car.

"I've created a monster," Danielle had told the other women with a groan.

"No, you've just unleashed a Reaper," Lea had replied with a laugh. "Bless your heart, that is worse yet."

"And to think he tried to escape your clutches," Aingeal giggled.

"What was that look for?" Bevyn asked the Prime Reaper as they headed for the coach that would take them from the depot up the treacherous mountain to the Citadel.

Arawn shrugged. "Don't ask," he mumbled. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his black uniform pants.

Bevyn and Cynyr exchanged glances and both men smiled.

"Has our Prime been tamed?" Bevyn asked, digging an elbow into Cynyr's side.

"Your Prime is in no mood to have his men insulting him," Arawn growled. "Cease your prattle, Coure, or I'll have Lord Kheelan have an intense word or two with the both of you."

Arawn glanced over at Danielle and saw that look again in her eye. He felt heat rising to his cheeks and tore his gaze from her. Had they been alone, he would have fallen upon her like a rutting beast and taken her with the same abandon he'd employed the night before and—the gods help him—he could barely walk as it was! Where Danielle was concerned, he had no restraint whatsoever and that shocked him to his foundation. Never would he have believed himself such a randy bull. Shaking his head, he dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands.

"You know, Ari," Bevyn said. "It's all right to love your woman."

"You know, Bevyn," Arawn drawled, turning his head to spear his second-in-command with a lethal glare. "It's all right to assign your Reaper to the outermost realms of Calizonia if he pisses you off one time too often."

Bevyn pursed his lips together and fell back.

"How does it feel to get your ass handed to you?" Cynyr queried.

"Humbling," Bevyn mumbled.

"Then you'd best leave him be," Cynyr suggested.

"Aye," Bevyn agreed.

Aingeal slipped an arm around Danielle's waist. "Whatever you're doing, Danni, keep it up. That blush is extending all the way up to the top of Ari's ears."

"I think keeping it up is exactly what Danni has been doing," Lea said sweetly. "Does it appear to you he's walking a little funny?"

Danielle hid her face in her hands as the blood rushed to her face but she giggled along with her friends and when she risked a look through her fingers at Arawn, he was glaring back at her, a muscle ticcing in his jaw.

Cynyr lagged behind to put a hand to the back of his wife's neck, pulling her to his side. "Leave off, wench. Gehdrin is starting to blow smoke out his nose."

"What did I do?" Aingeal asked in an innocent voice, batting her eyelashes at her husband.

"The same thing Lea is doing and I believe Bevyn is about to put an end to that side of the equation."

Bevyn, indeed, had stopped to take his lady's hand in his. He bent his head to say something to her and the smile slipped from Lea's face. She looked up at her Reaper with a heated expression that could have melted ice on a cold winter day.

The large coach pulled by six strong horses could seat six passengers although not all that comfortably with three people on each side facing one another, elbow to elbow. Bevyn was first to help his wife into the coach and they sat side by side behind the driver. Cynyr and Aingeal were next so that when Danielle climbed the steps into the enclosed conveyance, she and her husband would be forced to sit opposite one another, which seemed to suit Arawn just fine. Once he was inside, he took the last seat beside Bevyn and then turned his head to look out the window, seemingly ignoring his wife. As the coach started forward, a loud whistle blew a long, piercing note.

"What was that?" Danielle asked Cynyr who was sitting beside her.

"That's to let the guards up on the mountain know the coach is leaving the depot," Cynyr said.

Danielle turned to look out across the treeless plains that stretched around the base of the mountain. Large black craters dimpled the land beyond the roadway that snaked up the mountain. "How barren this looks," she commented. She was absently rubbing her side. It was a habit Arawn found endearing.

"The Citadel used to sit on fairly flat land with lots of woodland surrounding it, Danni," Bevyn told her.

"Aye, but that was before the War and before the massive earthquakes that followed close on the heels of the cessation of hostilities," Cynyr clarified.

Danielle's eyes widened. "You mean there wasn't a mountain there before?"

Cynyr smiled at her. "It's not really a mountain, wench," he said. "It is a man-made summit the Shadowlords had constructed as part of the defense of the Citadel."

"It was made?" she whispered.

"During the fighting, powerful explosives were dropped from the air and that's what created the craters you see. There were tons and tons of debris that was used to fashion the mountain upon which the Citadel now sits," Arawn told his wife. "It was deadly chemicals from the explosives that killed all the trees and pretty much scorched the surrounding land so that it will never again know plant life."

"Those explosions nearly flattened the building from which the Citadel was raised," Cynyr added.

"The explosives brought on an earthquake and the earthquake buckled the land along the coast," Bevyn said, continuing the history lesson, "and entire cities in what became the Pameny Territory disappeared into the sea. Millions of people were killed."

"A huge wave of water washed over a good portion of the states all along the sea coast," Arawn said, "pushing debris from the destroyed cities up onto the land around here. Beneath the North Sea, that water you see to the south of the mountain is a cemetery that was more than just sacred ground to the Terrans. It housed their honored heroes and leaders."

"Lord Kheelan once told me that a wreath is taken out to sea each May thirtieth and dropped as tribute for the warriors whose tombs are now deep beneath the waves," Arawn stated.

"Lord Kheelan is the High Commissioner of the Shadowlords," Aingeal explained to Danielle.

"I'm curious, Ari," Lea said. "Were the Shadowlords here before the War?"

Arawn shook his head. "No. Morigunia brought them here to rule when She saw what a mess the Terrans were making of their world. You see the War began across the ocean in what was called the Middle East and nearly every country on three continents was destroyed and their population along with it. There had been conflicts in that part of the world since the beginning of time and it escalated to such a point that peace was impossible. Terra was on the very brink of complete annihilation when the War began, with this country getting involved in the very thick of things."

"There were only a few thousand survivors across the ocean when Morigunia finally intervened," Cynyr put in. "She'd already extracted Her Reapers from Terra before all hell broke loose."

"By the time She brought us back, this world was little more than a junkyard being overrun with *balgairs*, rogues brought here by the Ceannus," Bevyn remembered. "Disease was rampant and there was a plague that nearly wiped out all of humankind."

"The Ceannus are evil men from another galaxy who want to rule Terra," Aingeal clarified for Danielle. "Our menfolk destroyed the last batch sent here to do us in."

Cynyr patted his wife's hand and winked at her.

“Are there Reapers across the ocean?” Danielle asked.

“No, but there are Revenants over there,” Bevyn said. “They –”

“What are Revenants?” Lea asked.

“You don’t need to know,” Arawn said firmly. He shot his second-in-command a fierce look.

“What harm – ?” Bevyn began but the Prime Reaper’s voice was like a laser whip lash.

“No, Coure,” Arawn said.

“But –”

“What part of the word did you not understand, Reaper?” Arawn snapped. “Is it the *n* or the *o* that you are having trouble with?”

Bevyn blushed and mumbled an apology.

Silence settled over the coach as the horses labored to draw the vehicle up the switchback trail that snaked up the mountain. Cynyr’s and Aingeal’s fingers were threaded together and his lady’s head was resting on the Reaper’s shoulder. Lea’s hand stroked Bevyn’s thigh as he stared down at the coach’s floor. Both Danielle and her husband were looking out the coach window. When the coach stopped, two guards came to the doors and asked for the identification papers of the men.

“Prime Reaper Arawn Gehdrin and Danielle Gehdrin,” the Prime Reaper said, handing over both his and his wife’s credentials which he carried on his person. He indicated his wife sitting across from him.

The guard looked closely at the papers, compared the photographs attached to them with the two people then handed the credentials back to Arawn.

“Reaper 2-I-C Bevyn Coure and Lea Walsh,” Bevyn told the guard who stood at the other door. He extended his set of papers to the waiting man.

When the guard was satisfied with Coure’s papers, Cynyr handed him both Aingeal’s and his.

“Security is tight today,” Bevyn commented as the coach started up again. “I can’t ever remember being stopped like that before.”

“Neither can I,” Arawn agreed, a tight frown on his face as he returned the papers to the pocket of his uniform shirt.

“Wonder what’s happened,” Cynyr joined in.

The three Reapers remained quiet the rest of the short trip to the entrance to the Citadel. Their eyes held a worry that their ladies didn’t miss and so the women were equally silent as they were helped out of the coach.

At the entrance to the Citadel, a dozen guards were stationed to either side of the doorway, six to each side, three feet apart, and in their hands were laser rifles.

“I’m liking this less and less,” Arawn said.

"Why don't they give us laser rifles?" Bevyn asked, and when the Prime Reaper gave him an irritated look, he held up his hands. "Just asking."

"Do you realize the technology involved in maintaining those things? Even a handgun?" Arawn demanded. "You have to recharge them every gods-be-damned fifth time you use them and believe me when I tell you they drain quickly during a firefight. You must have a base station to slap them in for that and even a rapid-charging base station takes time. Where are you going to find one out in the desert or up in the mountains, Coure? How many towns have you been through that have electricity on a continual basis? Ones where electricity isn't sparingly regulated?"

"Give me a trusty six-shooter and a regular carbine you just load and shoot," Cynyr said. "No technology there to speak of."

Giles D'Brickshaw, one of the Citadel's guides, was waiting for the warriors as they escorted their ladies inside the building. Beside him was another man dressed in the same dark brown uniform as Giles. Ranged about the entry hall were other guards, each carrying weapons.

"Welcome home, milords," Giles said. "The Shadowlords are awaiting you." He turned to the man on his left. "This is Samuel and he will take Miss Lea and Miss Danielle to your apartments."

"What of my lady?" Cynyr asked, his hand tightening on Aingeal's.

"Lady Aingeal is to accompany you, milord, to the High Council," Giles replied.

"I've got a bad feeling," Bevyn said softly to Arawn. "Something's up."

Arawn nodded. He told his wife to go with Samuel and gave her a shrug when she sent him a questioning look. "I'll be along when I can," he said to her.

Following behind Giles, the men were grim-faced and Aingeal was filled with concern. Though she was technically a Reaper, she was not a warrior and she wondered why the Shadowlords would require her presence at one of their meetings. Everywhere she looked, she saw armed men and her worry increased.

Arriving at the anteroom of the High Council's chamber, the three women who manned the receptionist desk looked up in unison from whatever paperwork upon which they'd been working. There were no smiles from the women and that in itself was a foreboding sign.

"Please take a seat, milords and lady," the silver-haired woman in the middle instructed. "The Shadowlords will be with you shortly."

Aingeal's gaze was locked on the beautiful woman. "How are you, Argent?" she asked.

Cynyr glanced at his wife. He'd never heard the silver-haired woman's name before and wondered how his lady knew it.

"We are well, your ladyship," Argent replied with an elegant tilt to her head. "We were saddened to hear of your loss but we understand congratulations are in order."

"Aye, the gods have blessed us with another child," Aingeal replied.

"We are so happy for you," the woman said, though she did not smile.

As she sat down beside him, Cynyr leaned over to whisper to his wife. "Do you know the names of the other two women?" he inquired.

Aingeal looked at him. "Of course. The redhead is Corallin and the blonde is Aureolin. Why?"

"Humph," Cynyr grunted with surprise. "Just wondering," he mumbled.

Obviously Bevyn was curious too for he also leaned over and asked Aingeal why Argent had used the term *we* instead of *I*.

"Because they are sisters and as the eldest, she speaks for them," Aingeal told him. "Why else?"

That surprised the two men and they turned to look at the women. Though each was stunningly beautiful, they bore no resemblance to one another.

"Same mother, different fathers," Aingeal said.

"Ah," all three men said in unison, letting Aingeal know Arawn had been listening to their conversation.

"I hate redheaded women," she heard Arawn mumble in a fierce voice.

For nearly half an hour the four Reapers sat in the very comfortable, formfitting chairs that seemed to mold to their bodies as they shifted about. They were offered refreshments by the blonde woman but they declined. Just as Arawn was about to ask how much longer they would need to wait, the door at the end of the hallway opened and the other four members of his Reaper team came walking toward him.

Owen Tohre, the fourth highest-ranking Reaper, was followed by Phelan Keil, Glyn Kullen and Iden Belial.

"I'm liking this less and less," Bevyn remarked as he stood up along with Cynyr and Arawn.

"You may go in now, milords and lady," Argent announced.

Arawn took a deep breath and led the way to the door that opened into the High Council chamber. As soon as he saw the faces of the three Shadowlords, he knew something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

Chapter Two

Lord Kheelan Ben-Alkazar of Rysalia was the High Lord, the High Commissioner of the Shadowlords and by right the most powerful of the three men. He sat between Lords Dunham Tarnes from Oceania and Naois Belvoir from Serenia. Before the dais upon which they sat were nine chairs arranged in a semicircle.

Arawn and Bevyn exchanged a glance as they counted the chairs.

"Be seated, Reapers," Lord Kheelan ordered. "Lord Arawn, sit in the center chair."

His frown deepening, Arawn sat down with Bevyn to one side of him and Cynyr to the other. He could feel the uneasiness among his men and had intercepted Aingeal's nervousness. Each one of them was keenly aware of the empty seat on the far left side.

"We have a situation," Lord Kheelan said. "One we neither anticipated nor were aware we had until a few days ago." He was sitting back in his chair, his elbows resting on the arms, fingers pressed together.

"That is the reason for the heightened security measures," Lord Naois put in.

"Rest assured you and your women are safe within these walls," Lord Dunham added.

Arawn started to speak but Lord Kheelan lifted a hand to halt him. "When we have explained the state of affairs to you, then you may ask questions. Until then, just listen," the High Lord stated. He looked to a door at the side of the chamber and when it opened, he turned his gaze to Cynyr Cree.

The man who came into the chamber and took his seat beside Glyn Kullen was tall and dark, handsome in a steely kind of way. Dressed in a black robe, the cowl had been thrown back to reveal black hair combed straight back from a wide forehead and falling in thick waves to his broad shoulders. Dark, mercilessly steady eyes looked straight ahead of him as he took his seat. He did not acknowledge the man to his right.

"Akhkharulian," Bevyn hissed, making the word a curse.

Arawn had leaned forward and was studying the man. The Prime Reaper's gaze dropped to Cynyr's tightly clenched fist and when he raised his gaze to Cree, he saw murderous intent blazing on Cree's face. "Who is he?" he asked Cynyr.

"Lord Kasid Jaborn," Lord Kheelan answered. "Twin brother of the rogue Khnum, a man executed by Lord Cynyr."

Aingeal also was staring at the man. She knew who he was, what he was, and had once accepted his blood as Sustenance when Otaktay had taken her captive. She could easily read his mind and knew he was uneasy, afraid though not a muscle of his face showed his anxiety. Although Jaborn had not been particularly kind to her, neither had he abused her, though she knew he would have if he had not had a grudging respect for

her as a Reaper. She had seen real fear in his eyes when she had sprung at him in her lupine form.

"What is he doing here?" Cynyr snapped. "And why the hell are you giving him the title of Lord? He's nothing more than a rogue!"

"We will answer all your questions, Lord Cynyr," Lord Dunham advised. "Be patient."

"A few days ago, my fellow Shadowlords and I were having lunch when we looked up to see Lord Kasid standing in the room with us," Lord Kheelan explained. "Needless to say we were quite annoyed. Not only because an outsider had slipped undetected through our network of guards, but that a *balgair* had been the one to infiltrate our defenses."

"Such a breach was inexcusable," Lord Naois said. "Believe me when I tell you heads rolled that day."

Arawn shifted in his chair, alarmed something like that could happen. Jaborn had been Cynyr Cree's responsibility to take out—just as he had removed the Akhkarulian's twin—and he knew Cynyr had to be seething with outrage that the man was alive and there in the midst of the High Council.

"Had it been Lord Kasid's intent to assassinate us, he quite probably would have taken at least one of us out before the other two could have reacted. As it was, he came to us unarmed and went to one knee to beg us to spare his life."

"Something I'd have damned sure not done if I had been there," Cynyr said, his jaw clenched.

"And had that happened, we would not have been made privy to the dangerous situation now brewing in Calizonia," Lord Naois told him.

Aingeal reached over to lay her hand over her husband's fist. "Let's hear them out, *mo shearc*," she said quietly. She could hear her husband's teeth grinding.

"We could easily have disintegrated Lord Kasid as he knelt there if any one of the three of us had sensed treachery from him," Lord Dunham said. "But we did not. We delved into his soul and learned he had come here to ask for our help, not to murder us."

"Did it not occur to you that you hadn't sensed him in the first place?" Cynyr asked. "If he slipped past your guard—"

"Lord Cynyr," Lord Kheelan interrupted, "we understand your animosity toward Lord Kasid and we remember well our order to you to remove him, but we are now demanding your attention to the matters at hand. Put aside your hostility and listen to what he has to say. If after that the two of you wish to engage in combat, then so be it."

"Combat?" Arawn asked, his brows drawn together. "Reaper to Reaper?"

"Aye," Lord Kheelan stated.

"You are making him one of us?" the Prime Reaper demanded.

"He is already one of you, Lord Arawn," Lord Naois reminded him. "He is simply no longer rogue."

Cynyr snorted, his eyes blazing with hatred.

"Lord Kasid, please stand and relate why you came to the Citadel," Lord Kheelan commanded.

Coming to his feet, Kasid kept his gaze straight ahead. His hands were hanging loosely at his sides, his fingers curled into fists almost as rigid as Cynyr's. After taking a deep breath, he began.

"I came to Terra as part of the Ceannus team that landed in the mountains above Haines City," he said. "I was brought here to help my fellow *balgairs* eliminate the Reapers and to destroy humankind." He lifted his chin. "I came with vengeance in my heart, seeking to kill the man who had taken my brother's life."

"You can try," Cynyr growled.

As though Cynyr had not spoken, Kasid continued.

"I had no love for the Ceannus and even less respect for the rogues who accompanied me here but I feared the power of the Ceannus and would have done whatever they ordered." He lowered his head. "Until I saw the power of the goddess and the supremacy of Her wrath." He looked at Lord Kheelan. "I knew then there was no greater authority than that of Queen Morrighunia."

"And so you ran," Cynyr scoffed. "You and that coward Otaktay."

Jaborn flinched but he could not dispute what Cree had said, for in truth that was exactly what he and the Jakotai brave had done. "And I ran again," he admitted, "when I realized the Ceannus had lied to us. There were seven Reapers in Haines City awaiting Otaktay, and I knew he would die at the hands of Cree. I did not wish to die alongside him."

"Two cowards," Cynyr called him.

The Akhkarulian turned so he could glare at Cynyr. "I could have slain your woman many times in that cave. I could have because she belonged to you, my enemy, but I did not!" he said. "I gave her my own blood to feed her. I tried to explain to her what was happening to her to make her Transition easier. For that can you not at least hear me out without insulting me?"

Cynyr opened his mouth, but Aingeal shushed him. "Aye, Jaborn," she said, holding her husband's angry glower. "He will."

"Go on with your tale, Lord Kasid," Lord Kheelan ordered.

Jaborn inhaled a long breath before he continued.

"I fled to the southwest, wanting nothing more than to live. I reasoned that if I did not attack humans as the rogues did, if I laid low and kept only to myself, taking Sustenance from animals to sustain me, you Reapers would not have reason to come after me. I had no more love for Khnum than he for me and I laid aside my vow to

avenge his death." He shook his head. "I did not think of the tenses I had with me running out."

"Ah, so now we know why you came here," Bevyn said.

"No," Jaborn denied. "That is not why." He looked at Coure. "I found tenses in Calizonia, Lord Bevyn. All the tenses I would ever need."

"How?" Arawn asked. "Where?"

"From the Ceannus encampment where hundreds of *balgairs* are being readied for their attack on the Citadel," Jaborn stated.

Shock drained the color from the faces of the Reapers. They were too stunned by the revelation to utter a sound as they stared at Jaborn. When he sat down, he never even glanced their way.

"When Lord Kasid informed us of what he'd discovered in Calizonia, we sent a recon ship there immediately," Lord Kheelan said.

In unison, the Reapers—save for Lord Kasid who was already privy to the knowledge—turned to stare at the Shadowlord.

The High Lord nodded. "We have ships of our own and the men to fly them. This was the first time we had sent one out."

Arawn slumped in his seat. He had had no idea that the High Council had either flying ships at their disposal or the wherewithal to fly them. He was as surprised as the rest of his team—and angry that he hadn't been told.

"Our ships have stealth capability," Lord Naois said, and at the confused looks on the Reapers' faces explained that meant the ships were as undetectable to the Ceannus as their ships had been to the Shadowlords.

"What the recon crew found was exactly as Lord Kasid explained it to us. There is a large settlement of Ceannus beyond the mountain range in Calizonia, hidden until now from us by their technology. As best we could count, there were three hundred *balgairs* residing in the camp and at least half that many cybots."

"Sweet Merciful Alel," Owen Tohre whispered.

"As soon as I learned of the encampment, I tried to contact the goddess but—as yet—She has not responded," Lord Kheelan said. "There is no way we can defeat a Ceannus team that large and that well equipped without Her help."

"The Amhantareans provided us with a security system that will destroy any ship launched against us. That technology has been in place above the Citadel since Morigunia brought us here," Lord Dunham said. "We have never feared an attack from the skies on the Citadel. The Net is programmed so only Morigunia can enter here whenever She takes the urge."

"What we should have done was extend that protective Net around the entire planet and not just over the area around the Citadel," Lord Naois declared. "Had we done so, the first Ceannus ship would not have landed and the ghorets released."

“That oversight will need to be corrected but it will take a few months more to spread the Net to that part of the country. Charge pylons will have to be erected and that is no easy task,” Lord Kheelan told them. “But it has to be done. No other ships should ever land on Terra without our consent.”

“Nor leave without it,” Lord Dunham said.

At the mention of the ghorets—the deadly pit vipers from which one bite would instantly kill a human—Arawn sucked in an audible breath. “Have they brought more of those vile things with them?”

“We don’t know,” Lord Naois said. “But my guess is they did.”

“The first batch was brought here as eggs,” Lord Kheelan said. “They may be incubating for all we know.”

“We don’t think any hatchlings have been released,” Lord Dunham said. “Not as yet anyway.”

Cynyr ran a shaking hand over his face where sweat had suddenly formed. He knew all too well how bad a ghoret bite could be. It was something he wouldn’t wish on anyone—even Jaborn.

“If you have ships, why can’t you just go and bomb the hell out of the encampment and—?” Arawn began, but Lord Kheelan was shaking his head. “Why not?”

“Because the Ceannus are holding captives in the camp as shields,” the High Lord replied.

“Even so, we’re talking about many lives compared to a few,” Glyn Kullen spoke up. “I hate to have us lose even one human life but—”

“The captives are children,” Jaborn said quietly. He looked around at Kullen. “They are being used also for Sustenance for the *balgairs*.”

Aingeal looked sick as she put her hand to her belly where her child was growing.

“How many children?” Arawn asked Kheelan.

“We believe somewhere in the vicinity of a hundred, perhaps more,” the Shadowlord answered.

“What?” the Prime Reaper gasped. “How could that have happened? Where did they get that many children from?”

A brilliant white light pulsed through the room along with a howling wind that dropped the temperature at least fifty degrees. “From Me!” came an enraged voice.

Morrigunia hovered just above the floor, Her wings outstretched so that they nearly touched each opposite wall. Her eyes were scarlet red and gleaming with a feral intensity that made the flesh on the arms of Her viewers stir.

“How did you let this happen, Ben-Alkazar?” the goddess screeched so loudly those gathered slapped their hands to their ears.

Seeing Lord Kheelan dropping to his knees beside his chair—his normally placid face strained with abject terror—was something the Reapers never expected to observe.

“*Mo Regina...*” he started to say, but the shrill shriek of the goddess cut him off.

“They took My children!” She screamed at him so loudly a crack formed in the concrete wall behind the Shadowlords and snaked its way from floor to ceiling. “They invaded the *guirreyder* and took My sons!”

Aingeal turned to her husband. “What does that mean?”

“Incubator,” Arawn answered for Cynyr. He shuddered as he and Cree stared at one another, the implication of what was being said clear to them both.

“I want My *guirt* back!” the goddess roared. “Do you hear Me?”

All three Shadowlords were on their knees before the wrath of the goddess. The Reapers were too stunned to do anything other than sit where they were until She swept Her vermeil glower over them. Each—including Aingeal—shot out of the chairs and knelt before Morrighunia’s fury.

“I want My *guirt* back! I want My hatchlings!”

“We will see to it, *Mo Regina*,” Lord Kheelan vowed. “I swear it to You.”

A hot wind swept through the room—bringing the temperature up to a blistering degree that instantly soaked the Reapers and Shadowlords with sweat. Another blinding light flashed and the goddess was gone, leaving behind in Her wake the terrible stench of brimstone.

For several long minutes no one spoke. They did not get to their feet but continued to kneel on the floor, each trembling at the rage that still clung to the room like a wet blanket. Hearts hammered in chests, breaths came out in quickened pants, blood had run cold to chill their very marrow.

“I guess this answers your question, Cynyr,” Arawn said in a shaky voice.

“What question was that, Lord Arawn?” the High Lord inquired in a voice equally as unsure.

Arawn got to his feet, plowing a hand through his hair. “He asked for what purpose the goddess would have stolen our sperm.”

“Our what?” Owen sputtered.

“Cynyr was given my Queen when he succumbed to the ghoret bites. Because I still had fledglings of that Queen inside my body, I will forever have an attachment to Cree, one that runs deeper than just the sharing of our blood. When Morrighunia offered him Her blood to help him heal faster, I was an unwitting witness to memories that were in Her mind, memories she never meant for Cynyr to remember. I saw Her take him and as I did I knew each of us had been taken in the same way, our sperm captured by Her body. She took the sperm to create a pure kind of Reaper, even more powerful than we are.”

“Then the children in Calizonia...”

“Are our sons,” Arawn whispered.

Chapter Three

"Did you know about this?" Bevyn asked the High Lord.

Lord Kheelan sat down heavily in his chair. "Aye, we knew. Now I suppose we know why She did not answer us when we called." He let out a ragged breath. "She had gone to check on Her *guirt*."

"Which is where, do you think?" Cynyr asked.

"Somewhere beyond time and space," Lord Kheelan replied. "But obviously somewhere Raphian knew about and could send His minions to steal them."

At the mention of the depraved demon, the Destroyer of Men's Souls, who had created the first evil Reaper, those gathered shivered.

"Can't She just go after the Ceannus like She did in the mountains? Take Her dragon form and destroy them?" Iden Belial, the youngest Reaper, asked.

"And risk harming the *guirt*?" Arawn asked. "I would think not."

"Does *guirt* mean the children?" Aingeal asked.

"Aye," Cynyr said. "It translates as the hatched."

"Obviously the children were not inside Her body," Lord Naois said. "Like the ghorets, they were brought here as embryos and have now come to full term."

"Then they are just infants," Aingeal said, worry creasing her beautiful face.

"How old would you say the children you saw were, Jaborn?" Arawn asked.

"I know little of children but I believed them to be around nine years of age," Jaborn replied.

"How can that be if they have just been born?" Aingeal asked.

"Because Reaper children mature at a much faster rate than human children," Glyn Kullen said. "Think ten years to your human one, Aingeal."

"At least ten years," Owen agreed.

"Think on this," Lord Naois said. "We don't know how long the Ceannus camp has been in Calizonia. We haven't had any reason to send a Reaper to that territory for a long time."

"And while we were just discovering them in the mountains above Haines City and discovering a way to catch them if they tried to land another ship on Terra, that camp in the southwest could have been there for quite some time," Lord Kheelan added. "If that is the case, they have had plenty of time to plan their attack on us."

"So what do we do?" Bevyn asked.

"We must get the *guirt* back for Her or She will wreak havoc the likes of which this world has never known," Lord Dunham told them. "The Burning War will have seemed like a child's game compared to what She could do here."

"And if they've unleashed more ghorets?" Cynyr asked quietly.

"Ghorets mate like rabbits and their gestation period is far shorter than most reptiles," Lord Naois said.

"How short is short?" Iden asked, fear making his amber eyes gleam.

"Half of a Terran reptile's," Lord Dunham reported. "A month at most."

"The land between here and Calizonia could be teeming with them in a few months' time," Glyn whispered.

Aingeal listened to the men arguing amongst themselves about the likelihood of the venomous creatures slithering their way across the territories and how long it would take them to kill the humans in their path. She held up her hand to quiet them. "Don't snakes hunt sensing the warmth of its prey?" she asked.

"Aye, but what does that have to –?" Lord Kheelan snapped.

"Don't snakes have heat in their bodies too?" she interrupted him.

"Every living creature has heat," Lord Naois said. "No matter how cold-blooded the beast."

"And you can track that heat, can't you?"

The High Lord glared at her. "Wench, what are you trying to ask?"

"Can your flying ships detect heat?" she demanded.

"Of course they can. What –?"

"If the ghorets are writhing their way from Calizonia this way, would your flying ship be able to detect them?" She put her hands on her hips. "There are a lot of unpopulated miles between Calizonia and Nemcone. Could the flying ships pick up the movement of the ghorets along the desert sand?"

Cynyr stared at his lady, his face filled with pride. "And wouldn't those ships be able to fire some kind of weapon to incinerate those slithering beasties?" he asked, grinning at Aingeal.

"Fire laser pulses that would burn those bastards to a crisp?" Arawn joined in.

Lord Kheelan's mouth dropped open. Once more Aingeal Cree had backed him up against the proverbial wall and – just as she had the first time – she allowed him no quarter. Naois and Dunham were looking at him. The Reapers were watching, waiting, breaths held. He had no choice but to answer her, to acknowledge her question and once again, the High Lord gave ground to the slip of a woman facing him.

"Can you do it, milord?" she queried.

"Aye, wench," the High Lord said quietly, his voice husky. "We can do all that and more."

“Then I suggest while your Reapers are en route to Calizonia to whip the asses of the Ceannus, you clear the way for them by ridding the land of those slimy vipers.” She cocked her head to one side. “Don’t you agree?”

Cynyr Cree hid his amusement behind a hand hastily clamped to his mouth. His golden eyes were dancing, his lips pursed tightly together to silence the whoop of delight he longed to emit. From the corner of his eye, he could see Arawn’s lips twitching and Bevyn’s smug look. Even Jaborn was grinning at Aingeal’s audacity.

Lord Kheelan arched one thick sandy brow. “You won’t be accompanying them, Lady Aingeal,” he said.

“Of course not,” she agreed. “Someone has to stay here to keep you on your toes.”

“Whoa!” Cynyr said before he could stop himself. Pride beamed from his gaze.

Arawn knew he should reprimand the Reaper but he was too astonished to say a word. No one had ever spoken to the High Lord in such a manner – not even the other Shadowlords – and he could tell by the look on Lord Kheelan’s face that the man was shocked by Aingeal’s brazen retort.

Lord Naois stepped back quickly as the High Lord came to his feet. Lord Dunham did the same, both coming down from the dais as though afraid of the emotions that had turned Ben-Alkazar’s face a fiery red color. Joining the Reapers, the Shadowlords waited for the explosion they knew was about to erupt.

“Any other sage comments you wish to make before I have my say, Lady Aingeal?” Lord Kheelan growled in a tone of voice that was meant to cower the female but which only made her smile.

“Aye, there is one other thing,” she said.

“Wench, you’re pushing it,” Cynyr warned in a low voice.

“And just what would that be?” the High Lord grated, eyes narrowed.

Despite her husband reaching out a hand to stop her, Aingeal strode to the dais and stood there looking up at the Shadowlord. “It concerns precautions you should make before the men leave,” she said.

“What kind of precautions?”

Aingeal propped her elbow on the edge of the dais. “Remember when my husband nearly died from the ghoret bites?” she asked.

“I’m not likely to forget it,” Lord Kheelan snapped.

“His Queen died and one had to be taken from Lord Arawn or my husband would have died along with his hellion. You had two men who were weak and unable to do their job down at the same time until the hellion took firm hold in one and an alpha hellion grew to maturity in the other.”

“What has that to do with anything?” the High Lord grumbled.

“Would it not be a good idea to have hellions taken from each of the men in order that they be available should one of the men ever need a fully mature one again?” she asked, bracing her chin in her hand. “When you send them out into the field, could they

not have a healer accompany them as a member of the team with one of their hellions in hand should it be needed while you keep the other hellion safely here at the Citadel? Even if you won't allow the healer to accompany them into battle, could you not at least have him close by – say in Haines City, for instance – where one of the men could fly quickly to retrieve the hellion from him?"

Arawn slipped an arm around Cynyr's shoulders in a brotherly embrace neither man would have considered doing before they had met this stalwart woman. She had brought them together not only as brothers in arms but as friends. Because of her, there was no longer any stilted aloofness that once had branded them Reapers.

Lord Kheelan blinked several times as he contemplated Aingeal's suggestion. His gaze was locked on the woman, and from the expression on his face, no one else save the two of them were in the room. He slowly took his seat, never taking his eyes from her.

"Does that include you, Lady Aingeal?" he asked. "Will you donate your hellions to Healer Dresden?"

"I am a Reaper," she stated.

The High Lord was silent a good long time as he sat there and when he spoke, there was a slight smile on his lips.

"Aye, wench," he agreed. "You are indeed a Reaper and I believe what you suggest has merit. If your fellow Reapers agree –"

"We do!" Arawn said for them all.

Lord Kheelan inclined his head. "Then I will ask that you gentlemen report to the infirmary and so inform Healer Dresden of this development. Bid him take –" He arched his brow again at Aingeal. "How many do you think?"

"Three," she said, glancing at Arawn who nodded his agreement.

"That shouldn't weaken us," Arawn told her.

"Three it is then," the High Lord concurred. "One hellion will accompany the team on their mission and two will remain here for safekeeping."

"Thank you, Lord Kheelan," Aingeal said, stepping back and saluting him in the fashion she'd seen her husband extend to him.

"Lord Cynyr, Lady Aingeal and Lord Kasid, please remain behind," Lord Kheelan said. "The rest of you go on to the infirmary. When you have donated the hellions, rest a while then we will begin the briefing for your mission. We'll meet back here at six and have supper." He cast Aingeal a look. "If Lady Aingeal agrees, that is."

Aingeal blushed. "I bow to your authority, milord," she said contritely.

The High Lord snorted and shook his head. "Lords Arawn and Bevyn, bring your ladies to the meal with you," he said then waved a hand to dismiss them.

When the other Reapers had left the room, Lord Kheelan motioned Cynyr, his lady and Jaborn to sit. He waited until Lords Naois and Dunham were once more seated on

the dais alongside him before he sat forward, his hands clasped, and leveled the three Reapers with a no-nonsense stare.

"I know there is bad blood between the two of you," the High Lord said, looking from Cynyr to Jaborn. "Each of you has sworn to kill the other but that is no longer an option for either of you. Do you understand this?"

Aingeal was sitting between her husband and the Akhkarulian. She could feel the animosity radiating from both of them. Her husband had stiffened and he was sitting with his arms folded. Jaborn was sitting as equally rigid with his hands doubled into fists on his thighs.

"Lord Cynyr?" the Shadowlord probed.

"He is a *balgair*," Cynyr said, a muscle working in his jaw.

"Was a *balgair*," Lord Kheelan corrected. "He has taken the Reaper's Oath."

"That doesn't make him a Reaper," Cynyr stated.

"Lord Kasid, will you uphold the Oath to which you swore?" the High Lord asked. "An Oath you made to protect your fellow Reapers' lives as though they were your own?"

Jaborn nodded. "I have so sworn and I stand by my vow."

"Just as you swore to avenge your brother?" Cynyr snapped. He turned to glare at the other man. "I don't trust you."

"What is to say you will not attempt to kill me?" Jaborn threw at Cree. "I don't trust you either!"

"Lady Aingeal," Lord Kheelan said, drawing her troubled eyes to him. "Did Lord Kasid harm you in any way while you were a prisoner of the Jakotai?"

She shook her head. "No, but he encouraged Otaktay to beat me on several occasions."

Cynyr sprang to his feet, his fist drawn back to hit the Akhkarulian but Aingeal jumped up and grabbed his arm. "You son of a bitch!" Cree yelled at Jaborn. "I'll take your head off for that!"

"You'll do no such thing!" Lord Kheelan shouted. "Sit your ass down, Cree!"

"He told that fucking brave to beat my woman and you want me to sit down?" Cynyr bellowed. "You can go to hell and take him with you!"

It was all Aingeal could do to push her husband back, to keep him from physically attacking Jaborn who had also come to his feet, his fists up to meet the threat. One moment the two men were straining toward one another and the next they were literally flying backward through the air, slamming into chairs at the opposite end of the row, sitting as firmly in the seats as though they had been lashed to them with ropes. Snapping her head around, she saw the High Lord standing with his arm pointing straight out in front of him—palm toward the Reapers—his eyes blazing with rage.

"I told you to sit down!" Lord Kheelan thundered. He shifted his attention to Aingeal. "And that goes for you too, wench!"

Aingeal hurried to the middle seat in which Arawn had sat and quickly lowered her shapely rump. She stared at the Shadowlord with eyes wide as saucers and lips parted.

Cynyr and Jaborn looked like statues as they sat in the chairs. Neither of them was able to move nor speak.

Lord Kheelan took his seat slowly, his face as hard as granite. The two men sitting to either side of him sat as straight as the two Reapers and said not a word as the High Lord adjusted the front of his gray robe, obviously attempting to get his breathing under control. When he was situated, his merciless stare was directed at Aingeal.

"I have spent many a sleepless night trying to decide whether or not to take a woman as my mate. It has been a lonely life for me and one in which I'd like to someone or something share to make that loneliness more bearable. But when I see the mischief, the harm you women can accomplish without even trying, I lean closer and closer to that companion being canine or lupine. The gods save me from the trouble you just unknowingly brewed with one simple statement!"

Aingeal flinched and slumped in her seat. She knew perfectly well to what he was referring and realized she shouldn't have spoken. The Shadowlord's next words confirmed that insight.

"Think before you open your mouth, wench," Lord Kheelan advised. "Aye, 'tis true what you said but you should have known the reaction of your husband. To him, beating a woman is a sin. To Jaborn, it is a way of life. The men of his world have total dominion over their women. He gave no thought to suggesting the Jakotai make you submissive to him." The High Lord shifted his stony glower to Jaborn. "Would you have hit this woman?" he demanded, nodding to give the warrior permission to speak.

"Nay, Your Grace. It was not my right to do such a thing with the one responsible for her conduct at hand," Jaborn stated.

Lord Kheelan sighed audibly. "We will overlook the fact that the Jakotai had no such right either. Both you and he believed he did, but he did not lay a hand to the wench either, did he?"

"Nay, Your Grace," Jaborn replied.

"Regardless of whether or not you believed Otaktay the rightful owner of Lady Aingeal, would you have beaten her?"

Jaborn's face drained of color. "Nay, Your Grace!" he was quick to say.

"And why not?"

Striving to move, to turn his head toward the Shadowlord but completely unable to do so, Jaborn simply began to sweat in his agitation. "Because I was afraid of her as a Reaper."

"Afraid she would attack you?"

"Aye, Your Grace."

"And why did that concern you, Lord Kasid?"

"Everyone knows a she-wolf is far more dangerous than the male," Jaborn said, "and far less predictable."

Lord Kheelan nodded as though that was the answer he'd been seeking. "When I hold men in the state in which I hold the two of you, you must understand that it is impossible for those men so entranced to lie," the High Lord said. "What they say under my control is the gods' own truth." He swung his attention to Cynyr. "Is that understood?" Once more he nodded to give permission for the Reaper to speak.

"Aye, Your Grace."

"Do you understand Lord Kasid meant neither any disrespect nor harm to your lady?"

Cynyr looked as though had it been possible he would have been squirming in his seat, but since only his eyes and mouth had movement, he squinted before he answered. "Aye, Your Grace, but I still don't trust him."

"Lord Kasid," the High Lord called out, "will you protect the mates of your fellow Reapers?"

"Aye, Your Grace, I will!" Jaborn pledged.

"And take the backs of your fellow Reapers in combat or whenever it is needed?"

"Aye, Your Grace!"

"Will you uphold the Reaper's Oath?"

"I will, Your Grace!"

"Do the both of you understand that I am watching each of you and that should either of you step out of line, I will make you regret it? Nod if you understand."

Both men nodded.

"Then that is all I need to know," Lord Kheelan and with a wave of his hand, broke the hold he had over the two Reapers. As both men sagged in their seats, the High Lord leaned forward, piercing them both with a steady glare. "If either of you give me reason to regret letting this situation go, I will bring you both back here and throw the two of you into adjoining containment cells for no less than a six-month term of punishment. Is *that* understood?"

Cynyr's eyes flared for he knew all too well what it was like to endure punishment in a containment cell. "Understood, Your Grace," he was quick to say, his voice hoarse with unease.

Although Jaborn had never known such punishment, he too agreed that he understood.

Lord Kheelan settled his dark gaze on Aingeal. "And do you understand that should another incident occur between your husband and Lord Kasid, they will both be remanded to the containment cells together?" he asked.

Aingeal lifted her chin. "I understand, Your Grace." She got to her feet, her hands at her side. "And do you understand that should you punish my husband for something someone else does, I will be your enemy for life?"

Cynyr groaned, squeezing his eyes closed, biting his tongue to keep from yelling at his lady. He didn't dare look at either his wife or the Shadowlord.

"Aye, Lady Aingeal, I am very well aware that would happen," the High Lord said softly. "My advice to you is to caution prudence with your man."

That said, Lord Kheelan rose and stepped down from the dais, disappearing behind a concealed door through which his fellow Shadowlords followed.

Jaborn had been holding his breath and now let it out in a long rush of air. He turned his head and gave Aingeal a look that could only be described as one of admiration. Shadowlords were powerful beings and for one to back down to a woman was unheard of in the Akhkarulian's world. Surely Lady Aingeal had a great deal of power herself for such a thing to happen.

"Don't," the lady said as her husband stood up and started to speak to her. "We've no reason to discuss this further."

Cynyr shook his head. He looked as though he wouldn't have known what to say to her in the first place. Walking over to her, he held his arm out to her. Aingeal took it then looked around at Jaborn.

"Will you walk with us, milord?" she invited, holding her hand out to him.

Though Cynyr stiffened, he said nothing as the Akhkarulian came over to them and proffered Aingeal his arm in much the same way her husband had.

"It would be my pleasure to walk with a warriress of your caliber, milady," Jaborn stated.

* * * * *

Lord Naois flopped down on the sofa in the room to which he and his fellow Shadowlords had retired. He shook his head when Lord Dunham offered him a libation from the bar.

"What ails you, Nat?" Lord Kheelan asked as he took a snifter of brandy and walked to the fireplace to look down at the shimmering flames.

"Lady Aingeal," Lord Naois said.

"She's something, isn't she?" Lord Kheelan asked.

"Do you realize it makes you look as though you kowtowed to her?"

Lord Kheelan shrugged, turned away from the fireplace and took a seat on the sofa. "Perhaps but she meant what she said. If I punish her man, she will hate me for as long as she draws breath." He grinned, bringing the rim of the snifter up to his lips. "She's still pissed at me for that other punishment he went through." He took a sip, pursed his

lips and then settled his head on the high back of the leather sofa. "But she is willing to let bygones be bygones unless I hurt him again."

"That puts you at a disadvantage, doesn't it?" Lord Dunham asked.

"She'll keep his ass in line," the High Lord prophesied. "That was my intent in the first place."

"Ah," Lord Dunham said, pouring himself a generous amount of brandy. "There was a method to what Nat and I thought was pure madness."

"Madness like that of a fox," Lord Naois said. "I should have known."

While his comrades discussed the Reapers – and in particular the female warrior – Lord Kheelan lounged with his long legs out in front of him, the snifter resting on his flat belly. Had either of his companions noticed the sadness on his face, they might well have guessed the real reason he had not taken Aingeal Cree to task for daring to threaten him. As it was, he stared into the flames, letting the ache in his heart subside.

Chapter Four

The evening meal had been excellent, the conversation lively, and when the diners had cleared out of the dining room and reassembled in the office to which the guide Giles ushered them, they took comfortable upholstered seats facing a large drawing sitting on a stand at the back wall of the office. When they were settled in, the Shadowlords joined them, two of them taking seats at a long desk that sat to the left of the map.

"I trust no one left the table hungry?" Lord Dunham inquired with a grin as he stood before the map.

"If anyone did, Your Grace, it would have been their own fault," Arawn replied for them all.

"Afraid I ate far too much," Lord Naois said, massaging his belly. "I'll pay for it later."

"Are we all comfortable?" Lord Dunham asked, and at the chorus of ayes, he asked Giles to lower the lights. He waited until Giles and two helpers had turned the wicks down on the lamps then picked up a pointer and placed it against the drawing. "This is a map of our land."

Other than the three Shadowlords, no one in the room had ever seen a map of the country. It was a strange experience, letting them know just how vast the land was in which they lived.

"This," Lord Dunham said, taking the bottom of the page and folding it over and to the back of the stand, "is the way our country used to look."

Gasps of surprise rushed through the Reapers and women. The map upon which they were looking was nearly twice the size as the one they'd just seen.

"What you see here is before the Burning War," the Shadowlord said. "Before the tidal waves on the eastern coast, the earthquakes on the western coast and the buckling of our land caused by the bombs set off during the hostilities." He tapped a spot on the map. "This is where the Citadel once was located. Take note of it." He moved the pointer to the center of the map. "These states were once called Nebraska and Colorado." He waited for everyone to study the place he'd indicated and then reached behind the stand to pull the first sheet over back in place.

A goodly portion of the land that had existed before the War was gone with water having spread nearly to the very center of the place where the Shadowlord had indicated the state called Nebraska. Half of each of the lands that been the two states he'd named were now under water.

“When the tidal wave came, we lost eleven entire states and more than half of three others. What was once called the Northeast tier of states no longer exists,” Lord Dunham said. “The small portions of what was once Nebraska and Colorado are now in the Nemcone Territory. Beyond that is Calizonia. We lost half of our land to the fierceness of nature and the greed of man.”

“Not only did we lose millions of people to the War,” Lord Naois injected, “we lost many more than that to disease, famine and a host of other troubles too many to go into here. Let it suffice to say, the country in which we now sit was devastated by the War but not as severely as the lands across the oceans.”

“When She brought us here,” Lord Dunham said, “Morrighunia placed us where She believed we would be of the most help. Nearly overnight She used her majestic powers to stop the spread of disease and eradicated much of it. Some destruction She obliterated, but most of it was left to remind us of what a terrible thing war is.”

“What She did was have those who had survived start again, giving them memories She had of the way She wanted this land to be,” Lord Naois said. “It was a past life, a past season to which She returned Her humankind. It was to a time when there was honor and growth, when man had scruples and morals and hope. It was She who caused the railways to appear on the scarred land, putting the routes where She wanted them to be.”

“Some knowledge, some inventions She destroyed forever,” Lord Dunham said. “Some discoveries She felt were not of benefit She erased, every mention of those disappearing from the archives we had found beneath the last floor of the Citadel. In all things, it would be Her design that was undertaken and with Her plan, humankind would never again tread the path to war.”

“And that has worked well for us until now,” Lord Naois said.

“What changed?” Lea dared to ask.

“Raphian and His evil, wench,” Lord Dunham replied. “The Destroyer sent His minions here to install the *balgairs*, the rogues, to wipe out mankind and it became necessary for Morrighunia to provide Reapers to stop the rise of that evil.” He looked at Cynyr. “We had all but wiped out the *balgairs* when the Ceannus returned and this time with not only *balgairs* but with ghorets.”

“And still we prevailed,” Lord Naois said. “As good is wont to do.”

“But we did not know about what was brewing in Calizonia,” Lord Dunham said.

“Now we must wipe out the Ceannus once and for all,” Lord Naois said. “If we don’t, they will destroy us.”

Aingeal was watching Lord Kheelan. The High Lord was sitting in his chair, his head lowered, fingers steepled, as his fellow Shadowlords took the floor. His eyes were closed, his face sallow. He looked as though he might have a hellish headache. She nudged her husband and indicated the Shadowlord by a jut of her chin. “He looks none too well,” she whispered.

"He has headaches too," Cynyr confirmed. "Ones, I'm told, that are much worse than those we Reapers suffer. Shadowlords take tenses for that reason alone."

"To control the headaches?"

"Aye."

"Can he shape-shift?" she asked.

Cynyr shook his head. "No, but he has other deadly powers more wicked than being able to turn men into statues as he did me and Jaborn this afternoon." He lowered his voice. "Stop talking about him, wench. He hears everything that is said and will not appreciate being discussed."

Aingeal saw the High Lord's lips twitch and knew he was smiling. When he opened his eyes and cut them across to her, she saw him wink. Her face burned and she looked away from him quickly.

Arawn could hear the exchange between Aingeal and her mate as clearly as though they were speaking to him though they were at opposite ends of the seating from him. His connection to Cynyr made this possible and he tried to block out the conversation. Having given his fellow Reaper the Queen from his own body to save Cynyr's life, the tie between them would always be strong and unbreakable. He could feel both Cynyr's annoyance with his mate and his fear the Shadowlord would retaliate in some way for them impinging on his privacy.

"I would not do that," Lord Kheelan told Arawn, "but it's just as well he believe it could happen. It'll keep both of them on their toes."

Knowing those words had come to him alone, Arawn nodded, relaxing for he'd feared that whatever was directed at one, the other would be privy to, and that had made him uneasy.

Danielle glanced at her husband and wondered if he was in communication with someone within the room. She knew that was possible and it intrigued her. Arawn had mentioned as they dressed for supper that he would need to take some of her blood so he could stay in contact with her while he was gone and she was on edge, wondering if it would hurt. She put a hand to her belly and winced.

"Too much shrimp, wench?" Arawn asked, leaning over to whisper in her ear.

"I fear so, *mo shearc*," she said, rubbing her right side.

"They're probably squirming around in there," he teased, for his wife had practically made a pig of herself scarfing down the boiled delicacies she had not known existed until this evening.

"Oh but that sauce was so tangy and so sweet and so hot it made my nose run!" she countered dreamily.

"Aye, and now it's given you a bellyache," he said. "In moderation, my love. Everything in moderation."

"I know," she said with a sigh.

“From Lord Kasid’s eyewitness account and the aerial recon of our drone, this is what we have learned of the Ceannus camp,” Lord Dunham said, and flipping both maps over to show a third and it was a sobering sight.

It was a black-and-white photograph similar to those in newspapers that the Reapers and their ladies were viewing but on a much larger scale. The details were sharp and clear, so precise it almost seemed as though they were looking out a window at the scene. There were rugged mountains in the background, a bright wash of what must be the ocean butted right up to a seawall built to contain the splashing waves. Round hut after round hut rimmed the perimeter in concentric waves with a large, square building sitting in the center of five rows of huts.

“The large building is where the children are being kept and from what we can discern, is also the headquarters. This—” Lord Dunham pointed to an X-shaped craft sitting off to one side of the encampment “—is no doubt the ship that brought them here. It is ten times larger than the craft Morigunia destroyed in the mountains over Haines City.”

“And it is no doubt their power source,” Lord Naois said. He too took up a pointer and slapped it against a tall towerlike construction. “At night, the entire scope of the camp is lit as brightly as if it were day.”

“So much for a stealthy night attack,” Owen Tohre commented.

“Look here,” Lord Dunham said, and ran his pointer all along the eastern side of the encampment where a thin line curved in an arc from seawall to seawall like a giant smile. “These are buried alarm wires. If anything crosses this line, it is automatically incinerated by land mine.”

“Oh for joy,” Bevyn grumbled. “Then how the hell do we get in?”

“Good question, Lord Bevyn,” Lord Naois said. “We can’t air drop you because there is a Net like the one we are employing over the Citadel. You would vaporize the instant you came into contact with it.”

“We could channel underneath it,” Jaborn spoke up, and though every Reaper there turned an annoyed look on him, they seemed to grudgingly accept his suggestion.

“That would take some digging since we’re talking about very loose sand out there,” Arawn reminded them.

“Aye, but there is one way in they sure as hell won’t be considering and I dare they’ve bothered to secure it,” Glyn Kullen said.

“Where’s that?” Lord Dunham asked.

Glyn exchanged a smile with Phelan but it was Iden who answered. “The water,” he said. “We can swim along the seawall and climb up. Are there alarms along the seawall?”

“Yes and no,” Lord Dunham said with a grin. “As you say, they didn’t consider an attack might come from the water. When the Net was put into place, it touched the sand just beyond the seawall, encompassing the facility completely. It is static, stationary,

with set dimensions that are not flexible. As time has passed and the tides have eroded the coastline, a gap has formed between where the Net ends and the coastline begins. It's a gap large enough for a man to wriggle under without detection so aye, taking the encampment from the sea is the only way we can do this."

Bevyn looked uncomfortable with that suggestion. "I can't swim," he said.

"No Reaper can," Jaborn snapped.

"Not true," Glyn told him. "The three of us swam the Misery River and that's a wide plain of water."

"Aye, but the water in the Misery isn't as rough as the waves of the ocean," Lord Naois reminded him.

"If you're a strong swimmer – and we three are – that's not a problem," Phelan said. He looked at Arawn and then Cynyr. "You two were swimmers, weren't you?"

"Aye," both drawled. "But it's been a long time."

"It's like riding a horse," Glyn said. "You never forget."

"But I can't swim," Bevyn complained.

"Then you'll stay here," Lord Kheelan spoke up. He raised his head and looked at Bevyn. "We were going to keep one of you here anyway. We just hadn't decided who as yet."

"Why?" Bevyn challenged. "I'm 2-I-C and –"

"Never again will we send the entire team to any fight," Lord Kheelan said. "We almost lost one of you to the ghourets. We could have lost you all. We won't take that chance again."

"But I am –" Bevyn began.

"You will stay here," the High Lord stated. "There will be no argument."

Arawn caught Bevyn's eye and shook his head. He understood the necessity of keeping one of the Reapers out of harm's way just as he'd understood the need for them to donate hellions to the repository.

"Lady Aingeal's suggestion to have a healer accompany you men was a good one and we have assigned Healer Sorrel to you. He will be leaving with you in the morning and will take along a goodly supply of tenses as well as a spare fledgling for each of you. We are having a special medical train car outfitted as we speak," Lord Dunham reported. "We will base it in Haines City as Lady Aingeal advised."

"Since the rail line ends in Towertown in the Nemcone Territory, you will take the train from here to there. From Towertown, you will need to take your horses into Calizonia," Lord Naois said.

Arawn stood. "May we see the map of the country as it is now?"

Lord Dunham lowered the map into place and looked to the Prime Reaper for explanation.

Moving from his chair and going to the map, Arawn studied it for a moment or two then reached out to draw a line from the Exasla Territory to the ocean. "Wouldn't it be best for us to ride to the coast then take a ship closer to the place where we plan to infiltrate the Ceannus camp?" he asked. "Don't you imagine their guards will be watching for us to come across the desert for an invasion and be prepared?"

"There are many hundreds of miles between Nemcone and the encampment, Lord Arawn," Lord Naois stated. "How could they know exactly from where you'd start?"

"True, but I would think those miles would be watched closely. They will know we would come by rail and they may have spies already in Towertown. But if we got off the train a few stops before in Lewisville in the Exasla Territory and traveled by horse along the border with Diabolusia, is it possible to get a sailing ship to take us from the western coast of Diabolusia, close to the Ceannus encampment?"

Lord Kheelan came to stand beside Arawn and he too studied the map. "It would have to be at night so the ship wouldn't be seen easily but that would work well enough, I believe." He pointed to a jagged edge of land at the base of Diabolusia. "Before the earthquakes, this was a solid land mass. Now, getting a sailing ship through from the Flagala Territory would be easy enough to do."

"I haven't swum since I was a boy," Jaborn said. "I'm not sure I could make it through such rough surf."

"We'll be there to help you," Arawn said. "Remember, we'll have the tides at our back. We could practically body float to shore."

"And riptides lurking under the waves to draw us out to sea and drown us," Jaborn said through clenched teeth.

"The hellion isn't going to allow you to drown," Glyn said. "When I was swimming, I could feel it making my arms and legs stronger, giving more buoyancy to my body. I believe Bevyn could jump in and the revenant worm would instruct him instantly on how to swim."

"I could hear the thing telling me to kick," Iden said. "It wasn't happy we were in the water but neither did it punish us for having carried out the experiment."

"I think anything that strengthens us also strengthens the hellion," Phelan said. "I could hear mine actually trilling as though it was enjoying the swim along with me."

Jaborn frowned. "Why tell us to keep away from water then?" he demanded.

"Because that's one more way to control you, Lord Kasid," Lord Kheelan replied. "Going in by sea makes sense so that's how it will be accomplished."

"What about the ghorets?" Cynyr asked.

Lord Naois cleared his throat. "We will send the drone out tomorrow night. If it is true the Ceannus brought eggs and have dispersed them in the desert around their encampment, the vile things should be hatching soon. As Lady Aingeal pointed out, we can look for what is called a heat signature—the amount of living energy something

puts out. We know what to look for and as soon as we see it, the drone will begin firing laser blasts until there are no ghorets left crawling.”

“But won’t the Ceannus—” Cynyr began.

“Stealth laser blasts are not visible to the eye,” Lord Kheelan interrupted, “otherwise the Ceannus would know our men are out there. We will provide special field glasses designed so the Reapers will know when the attack is under way. The drones will be cloaked and they will make no sound so their presence won’t be detected by Ceannus sentries. Only the Reapers will know the drone is there.”

“It may take several passes of the drone for not all hatchlings will pop the shell at the same time,” Lord Dunham reminded them. “Hopefully, there will be no humans nearby for the beasties to strike. We have put a perimeter to the west of Towertown, telling the residents the lands have been quarantined due to an outbreak of plague in Calizonia.”

“That should keep the curious from venturing out that way although from all we’ve learned, there have never been many who have settled in that territory for fear of new earthquakes and tidal waves,” Lord Naois told them.

“All right, we’ve discussed how you will get there and how we intend to destroy the threat of the ghorets,” Lord Dunham said. “Let’s discuss what you’ll do when you arrive in the Ceannus camp.” He folded the map over the top and put his pointer on the X-shaped craft. “This we need to take out immediately for two reasons. One, the control of the cybots will be handled from the ship. Shutting the ‘bots down is the most important thing you should do first. They will be the encampment’s first line of defense and they will have weapons. Those weapons will be hooked into the ship’s main generator. Blow the generator and the ‘bots will be useless.”

“And the second reason?” Iden asked.

“We can’t allow the Ceannus to leave. Taking out the ship will prevent that from happening,” Lord Naois answered. “We want these bastards crushed, destroyed and unable to regroup anytime soon. If we can keep them from coming back to Terra, all the better.”

“Taking out the main building will be next,” Lord Dunham said. “The Ceannus are living there and the Net is controlled from there. We—”

“The children are in there too,” Cynyr reminded him.

“Aye, and while you are killing the Ceannus and the *balgairs*, I will take My *guirt* to safety!”

Jerking around in their seats, those gathered watched the Triune Goddess appear at the back of the room, Her aureate wings folding in behind Her as She strode forward. Her red hair was flowing free like a living cape around Her slender white shoulders and every man there felt a tightening in his groin as She passed.

“I want no *balgair* left alive come the dawn, Reapers,” She stated. “Do not let worry over the *guirt* concern you. I will let nothing harm My offspring. Keep your minds only on destroying the monsters who dared steal them from Me!”

"They are our children too," Arawn said.

Morrigunia swung Her gaze toward him and he felt a debilitating heat wash over him. He staggered under the weight of the goddess's anger.

"They are Mine and Mine alone, Gehdrin!" She bellowed. "I bore them in *My* womb! You only provided the fertilizer!"

"But You can't go in and retrieve them without our help, *Mo Regina*," Lord Kheelan said. "You need us to shut down the Net so You can fly the children to safety."

Her emerald eyes glowing with unholy light, the Triune goddess flew at Lord Kheelan and wrapped Her hand around his neck, lifting him as though he weighed no more than a feather. "Curb your tongue when you speak to Me!" She hissed at him then tossed him away as carelessly as if he'd been nothing more than a used tissue. Her height increased until She was as tall as the ceiling and then She bent over Lord Kheelan, Her nose to his. "I made you, boy, and I can end your life just as easily!"

Lord Kheelan reached up a shaky hand to wipe at the thin stream of blood that was oozing out of his left nostril. "Aye, *Mo Regina*," he said.

Shrinking back to human size, the goddess turned to face Her Reapers. "Enough talk. You are not stupid men. You know what you need to do. Go and sleep now. Come the first light, be ready to leave this place and do your duty to Me!"

Scrambling like ants, the Reapers and their womenfolk hurried out of the room. Not a one of them was willing to risk the goddess's ire. Even the Shadowlords hastened to do Her bidding. Only Lord Kheelan remained behind and only because he was struggling to get up.

Rounding on the High Lord, Morrighunia reached for him and with Her hand wrapped around his waist, lifted him and sat him down in one of the chairs so hard his teeth clicked together. Once more She bent over him.

"Take care you do not insult Me ever again, Ben-Alkazar," She warned him.

"I will not, *Mo Regina*," he swore.

Her gaze was hot, the emerald eyes glowing a sickening green that made the Shadowlord's headache intensify with agony. She glared at him for a moment then stepped back. "While he is gone, train Cynyr's wench to be of usefulness to Me," She ordered, and then with a brilliant flash of orange light was gone.

Lord Kheelan was swallowing rapidly to keep the bile from rushing up his throat. He was in so much pain he could barely push himself out of the chair but he managed to gain his feet, swaying like a reed in a storm. "How? She's with child," he whispered. "Train her how? For what?"

The word came like a rushing wind through the room — "*Healer!*"

Chapter Five

Danielle went to her husband and slid her arms around his waist, laid her cheek against his bare back as he gazed out the window at the still, dark night. "You are worried, *mo shearc*."

"I had hoped to have more time with you," he said sighing, wrapping his hand around hers. "I certainly never thought I'd be going out again this quickly."

"You have a job to do."

Arawn rubbed her hand. "Aye, but sometimes it gets in the way."

"It never has before," she said softly.

"I never had you before," he replied, and brought her hand up to kiss the palm before placing it over his heart. "*Fán liom go deo*."

Danielle came around him so that she was nestled in his strong arms. "I *plan* on staying with you forever, *mo shearc*," she vowed.

"*Tá mé caillte gan tú*," he said, telling her he would be lost without her.

They stood that way for quite some time, with her listening to the steady beat of his heart and he with troubled eyes on the scarred land that stretched out beyond the long row of windows.

"Are you worried about the children?" she asked.

"Aye." He lifted a hand to rub at his forehead. "I can't begin to imagine what it will be like seeing Reaper children."

Danielle had tucked her lower lip between her teeth as she smoothed her hand over his chest. "We haven't discussed our children, *mo shearc*. What are your feelings about them?"

Arawn rubbed harder at his forehead. "I've never given them any thought, wench," he answered. "I had never thought they would be a part of my life." He lowered his hand to stroke her back. "Even when I learned about the sperm Morrigunia had taken from us and figured there might be sons somewhere, I refused to dwell on it."

She looked up at him. "Why not?"

Her husband shrugged. "Because I knew there was nothing I could do," he replied.

"What of now?" she asked softly.

Arawn swallowed, feeling his heartbeat accelerate. "Do you want sons, Danni?" he countered.

"I'd like one of each," she said, but when he shook his head, she looked up at him, her eyebrows drawn together with hurt. "Just one then?"

"Nay, sweeting," he said. "That's not—" He took a deep breath and explained to her the hellion inside him would not allow her to conceive anything but sons. "My Queen, my hellion, won't allow it. She's a jealous parasite and won't allow female offspring to form in your womb."

Danielle flinched and stepped back from him. "Your parasite will be in my womb?" she asked with a gasp.

"Wench," he said, reaching for her but she took another step back, horror turning her beautiful face pale. "I don't know the particulars of it. I only know what I've been told and that might not even be true. If a Reaper *can* swim, perhaps there are other things we've always been told that aren't accurate."

"What of the parasite though?" she asked. Her eyes widened. "Arawn, please tell me that thing hasn't gotten inside me!"

He went to her and pulled her into his arms though she was stiff against him, her palms braced on his chest to keep a modicum of distance between them. Her standoffishness sent a wave of hurt through him.

"We have been told our sperm is rife with the parasite," he explained to her. "If it is in our sperm..."

Danielle jerked away from him. "It is already inside me!" she hissed.

"Not in the way that would make you one of us," he denied. "That can only happen with Transference, Danielle, and I won't let that happen if it frightens you like this."

His lady was rubbing at her right side as though trying to push the parasites from her body. She began to pace, her face as white as a sheet. "I don't want to be a Reaper," she said. "I don't want that. I don't!"

"Then you won't be," he assured her. He came closer but she backed up, lifting a hand to stave him off. "Danielle, I promise you. You don't have to worry."

"You swear?" she asked, her lips trembling.

He put his hand over his heart. "I swear," he said.

A tear eased down Danielle's face. "I want children, Ari. I have always wanted children," she said, her voice breaking. "I want your children."

"And you can have them," he said. His heart hurt as if he'd been stabbed there as he looked at her tears. "Milady, I will give you all the sons you want. I just can't give you daughters."

She ran a hand under her nose. "You promise me, Ari?" she said. "You promise I will have your child?"

"It is my vow to you, dearling," he stated, but when her eyes widened again and she became even paler, he thought he would cry himself. "My love, what?"

Danielle was trembling all over. "Will our sons be...?"

Despite her hand denying his coming any closer, he knocked it gently aside and took her into his arms despite her protest. "Danni, no," he stated firmly. "They will no more be Reapers when they are born than you would be without Transference of the

parasite and a taking of my blood. That much the Shadowlords told us when Aingeal was with child the first time."

"I don't want our sons to be like you!" she sobbed.

Hurt drove deep in Arawn Gehdrin, and for the first time in his life he felt ashamed of what he was. He felt tears prickling behind his eyes but he refused to allow them to fall.

"If that is your wish, Danielle," he said, squeezing his eyes shut, "then we will leave it up to them to choose. If they wish it when they are of age, then it will be their right to decide. That is not a decision either of us should make for them anyway."

Somewhat mollified, Danielle finally relaxed in her mate's arms. Her fingers plucked at his black silk shirt. "I didn't mean to hurt you," she said.

"It's all right," he said, but when he opened his eyes, there was misery in the amber depths.

"Maybe I should have left you alone," she told him.

Arawn's nerves were already raw and that statement dragged across them like a rusty rasp. He wrapped his hands around her upper arms and pushed her away from him so he could look down into her face. "Why would you say that?" he asked.

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be, Arawn. You weren't looking for a mate. I know that. Maybe I jousting with Fate and —"

"Do you love me?" he cut her off. His gaze held hers.

Danielle stared up at him. "From the moment I saw you, I've loved you, Arawn Gehdrin," she said. "I took one look at you and it felt like a lightning bolt struck me. You were the handsomest man I'd ever seen and you were standing there in the street so tall and so powerful and there was such an edge of danger to you. I felt my heart beating faster just looking at you." She tilted her head to one side. "And the first time you looked at me, you looked away then your gaze jumped back as though you'd been hit by the same lightning bolt I had. You stared at me for only a moment, but I felt like I was a cup of water and you were dying of thirst. I felt your look all the way to my toes. When you looked away, all the brightness went out of my day."

Arawn's gaze narrowed. "I don't remember that," he said.

"Moirra says men rarely do," she told him.

"Meddling old woman," he mumbled.

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be, *mo shearc*," she repeated. "If I hadn't chased after you —"

"I wouldn't have caught you!" he snapped, shaking her just a little. "By the gods, wench. Do you really think I didn't want you as much as you wanted me?" He shook his head when she started to interrupt him. "No one could have made me love you, Danielle. No one! I might have fought it—and I'm sure Moirra has some sage words about that as well—but I knew what I wanted and I wasn't about to let you get away with giving Owen cake and me not having any!"

Danielle blinked. "What has Owen got to do with—?"

"You were flirting with him!"

"I most certainly was not!" she said, affronted that he'd dare accuse her of such a thing.

"Aye you were! You were flirting while I was away killing rogues. You gave him some orange cake and you had him bring Cyn back a piece. You didn't even ask me if I wanted any and it—"

"Made you so danged jealous you came storming over to the house demanding I give you cake," she finished for him. "The whole town saw you on my porch yelling about cake."

He sniffed. "Well, I like cake," he defended his actions.

"And pies and tarts and popovers and candy and anything else with cups of sugar in it," she said with a sigh. "You Reapers will eat most anything."

"Except grits," Arawn stated emphatically. "And boiled peanuts."

"I know one Reaper who loves grits," she countered.

"Aingeal doesn't count," Arawn told her. "She liked grits before she became one of us."

They didn't say anything for a moment then Arawn lowered his head. "I couldn't live without you, Danni," he said. "I could exist, but I couldn't ever live again without you at my side." He looked at her. "I will never rue the day I came looking for that cake. It was the sweetest thing in the world to me then and it is even sweeter now."

Danielle moaned as he pulled her against him. Her arms went around his waist and she pressed her cheek to his brawny chest.

"Don't ever say us being together wasn't meant to be, wench," he said. "I'll tear any man or any thing apart who says otherwise and the gods help any fool stupid enough to try to keep me from you." He narrowed his eyes to dangerous slits. "And if you ever dare say such a thing again, I'll turn you over my knee and let you feel the weight and heat of my palm on your bare ass!"

"You will, will you?" she challenged, the tears gone from her eyes to be replaced with a wicked glint.

Arawn dropped his hand to her thigh and began dragging her skirt up her leg until he could slide his hand around to the soft flesh at the crease between her buttock and thigh. "Aye, wench, and I'd enjoy every slap on this delicious little rump." He cupped her, insinuating his fingers under the edge of her panties to knead the satiny skin of her ass. "But I bet can think of something far better to do."

"Can you?" she said.

"Aye," he said, lowering his head to nuzzle her neck. He kissed his way up to her earlobe then drew that succulent flesh between his teeth, breathing in her ear as he pulled her bottom tighter to his lower body. "I can think of a lot of other things to do."

Danielle shivered as he thrust the tip of his tongue into her ear. "But, milord!" she said in a high-pitched voice. "I am an innocent girl. Please do not compromise me!"

Arawn jerked back, releasing her, his eyebrows slashing like sabers above his nose. "Beg pardon?" he practically squeaked.

His wife put the back of her hand to her forehead as though she might swoon. "I am a naïve country girl in the big city for the first time. Pray do not molest me," she stated, her eyes closed.

The Prime Reaper stared at his lady as though she'd lost her mind, but when she opened her eyes and batted her eyelashes at him like a coquette, a devilish grin started to tug at his chiseled lips.

"A naïve country girl, eh?" he asked, one eyebrow lifting. He folded his arms over his chest and joined in her play. "And have you come to bail your reckless brother out of my jail?"

"Aye, *mo tiarna*," she breathed. "May I visit with him to assure myself he is well?"

Arawn Gehdrin had never known such a woman as the beauty facing him. She was as mercurial as that shiny element and just as slippery. One moment she had been wide-eyed with fear he'd turn her into a Reaper and that a parasite had somehow found its way inside her, and the next she was flirting outrageously with him, playacting with an ease that set his juices to flowing like molten lava and brought instant joy to his jaded heart.

"Wench, you must know I will demand payment before I allow you in to see the fool," he replied, enjoying himself more than he could ever have imagined.

Clutching her hands to her chest, Danielle gave him a beseeching look. "Pray you will not make me do something immoral to help my poor, addlebrained brother."

"Well now, that depends," he said, turning his back to look out the window again. He had to force his lips to be still as she came timidly up to him, placing a light hand to his shoulder.

"What must I do to ensure my kin's comfort, *mo tiarna*?" she asked in a voice he could swear was trembling.

A careless shrug was his only answer and as she slipped slowly, hesitantly around him to stand in front of him, he lowered his eyes to her lovely face, locking gazes, yet he kept his arms folded over his chest.

"Please, *mo tiarna*. What will you have me do?"

"Tell me what you can do, wench," he said in a husky voice. "To what lengths will you go to aid your brother?"

Danielle bit her lip before putting her hand to the center of his chest. "I would do anything for Elbert," she said.

Arawn caught himself before he laughed. If she'd had to invent a brother, why couldn't she have given the man a decent name? As it was, his face scrunched up in an effort to keep from laughing. "I hope Elbert is worth it, milady," he managed to say.

She wrapped her fingers around his black leather tie and tugged on the knot, loosening it. "He is a wonderful man and his poor wife and nine children miss him greatly."

"Nine?" Arawn asked, thinking old Elbert had been a busy beaver—or rather his wife had.

"With one on the way," she said, sliding the tie from his neck.

"Yet he's been in my jail for well over a year?" he countered.

"Ah well, there was that one conjugal visit you allowed him," she was quick to point out.

"Oh aye," he said, the right side of his mouth quirking upward. She was a fast thinker on her feet, his lady. "I'd forgotten about that visit."

She put her hands to the button that kept his shirt close to his chin and flicked it open. "It was most gracious of you to allow them that time together, *mo tiarna*," she said, and worked loose the second button. "I am grateful to you."

Arawn unfolded his arms and let them hang at his sides as she unbuttoned his shirt all the way down to the waistband of his leather uniform pants. As she gently tugged the shirt hem out of his pants, he felt his pulse quickening.

"I can be a very accommodating man given the right encouragement, wench," he said, aching to grab her and toss her to the bed a few feet away.

Danielle reached for his left arm and unbuttoned his cuff. "And I know you would never take advantage of a poor lass who has only good on her mind."

"You think not?" he queried as she took his right wrist and unbuttoned the other cuff.

"Would you make me an unchaste woman, sir?" Her hands were on the sides of his shirt and she was peeling it from his shoulders.

"You are a virgin, wench?" he asked, and could feel the blood pounding in his temple.

"Aye, *mo tiarna*. I am," she said, batting those ridiculously long eyelashes at him again.

"Then I suppose I'll have to be gentle with you when the time comes," he growled.

Forcing her eyes wide, Danielle clenched her fingers together at her chin. "Oh *mo tiarna*, you would not dishonor me, would you?"

"Nay, but I will deflower you, wench," he told her.

"Oh no!" she shrieked, and started to flee but he caught her arm and pulled her tight to his naked chest, his index finger crooked under her chin to lift her face to his, his arm snaked around her back to hold her still.

"You are mine to do with as I please, milady," he said. "You knew that the moment you came to my lair. There is no escape for you."

"But I am an innocent!" she protested, beating her fists lightly against his chest.

"You won't be when I've had my way with you," he stated, and bent his head to slant his mouth across hers.

Danielle's fingers arched against the wiry curls covering his chest. Her husband's tongue was dueling with hers, slipping in and out with such heat she could feel her knees weakening. It was all she could do to pull her lips from his.

"*Mo tiarna!*" she protested. "'Tis unseemly what you do!"

Arawn bent her backward in his arms until he was glaring down into her sweet face. "Either pay up, wench, or tomorrow will see Egbert—"

"Elbert," she corrected.

"Aye, Elbert," he mumbled, "swinging from the gallows."

"No, *mo tiarna*, no!" she said.

"Then give me my due," he said, and released her. "I've other wenches waiting to pay my fee."

Danielle staggered, flashing him a warning look as he returned to his stony stance of arms folded over his chest, his legs spread wide.

"You drive a hard bargain, *mo tiarna*," she said, lifting her chin.

"How would you know? I've yet to drive my bargain hard into you, wench," he said with a cocked eyebrow.

Rolling her eyes at his play on her words, she sidled up to him and put her hands on his belt buckle. The silver heron insignia sent a chill down her but she unhooked his belt and slid the leather from his lean waist. Carefully, she unhooked his zipper and pulled it down, forgetting that her man never wore underwear and when his shaft sprung free, she nearly jumped back.

"He's an eager barterer," Arawn said, grinning at her look of surprise.

She was staring at his cock, feeling heat curling low in her belly. Her husband was a large man and although she had never viewed any other man's member, she was relatively sure his was larger than most. Long and thick, the head oozing with a pearly drop that drew and held her attention, the shaft leapt and Danielle groaned low in her throat.

She went to her knees in front of him.

Arawn sucked in a breath as her lips drew him in. He closed his eyes to the sweetness that was rolling around his taut head, which caressed his length, which lapped gently at his sac. He wanted to howl as she nipped at him then suckled him strongly as she reached up to cup him and knead his testicles.

"Wench, you are evil," he said, and when she released him, he could have whimpered.

"Then punish me, *mo tiarna*," she said, licking her lips as she stared up at him. "Take me in hand for daring to be so forward."

"I shall do that, wench." He shifted so his legs came together. "Take off my boots," he ordered, and lifted his foot.

With his hand braced behind him on the windowsill, she pulled off first one then the other of his boots and set them aside. His cock was jutting out at her so stiffly, so beautifully full, it made her mouth water. As she peeled the socks from his feet, that steely length grazed her cheek and made her tremble with anticipation.

"Now take off my pants."

"Nay, *mo tiarna!*" she said, looking up with pretend fear in her beautiful eyes. "I will unleash a monster if I do!"

"You'll unleash my temper if you do not," he said sternly, lifting his head to stare across the room.

Danielle made a whimpering sound, acting as though she were hiccupping from crying, and reached up to tug the garment down his long legs. She slid them down so slowly, so erotically, the hairs on her husband's legs prickled.

"Wench," he said, swallowing in order so his voice did not break, "you are trying my patience."

A long, heartfelt sigh erupted from Danielle and she pushed the pants to the floor, biting her lower lip when he stepped out of them and kicked them to the side. On her hands and knees, she lifted her head and gazed up at him.

"What now, *mo tiarna?*" she asked.

The Prime Reaper bent over, took her by the arms and brought her to her feet. His gaze ran hotly over her from head to toe and then settled on her breasts. He met her gaze then arched a brow.

"You wouldn't," she said, reading his mind, and started to step back but before she could, his fingers were entangled in the neckline of her gown and he tore it down the middle.

"Arawn!" she complained, looking down.

"I'll buy you a hundred such gowns, wench," he said, tugging the ripped garment down over her shoulders.

"You'd better believe you will, Reaper," she muttered beneath her breath.

The gown was halfway down her back and at her words he pulled against it, jerking her to his naked chest. "Do you dare to admonish your master, wench?" he asked, his amber eyes flashing.

Danielle raised her chin and met his penetrating stare. "I will not go easily to my defilement, you brute!"

Arawn's lips twisted into a devilish grin that made his lady's womb clench. "Fight me then," he said, jerking the gown down to her hips. "Let's see what you've got."

Before she could react, the gown was sailing across the room—the front of it from torn bodice to hem ripped in twain by his strong hands. She stood there in her camisole,

panties and slippers, and felt a shiver run through her at the lusty look on her man's handsome face.

"Show me your fire, wench," he said in a low, soft voice. He snapped her to him and placed his lips to her ear. "Hit me. Scratch me. Bite me. Give it your best shot."

Danielle quivered again as his tongue spiraled into and around her ear. She was aching between her legs, wanting this man so intensely she would have done anything he bid.

He saw the witch in her emerge, knew she was about to try to escape him and loosened his grip on her arms. At the moment she tried to jerk free, he snagged his fingers in the bodice of her camisole and ripped it down the front.

"Arawn, for the love of—"

"Such beauty," he said, reaching out to cup her unbound breasts, "should not be covered."

"I hope you have a lot of credit at the Citadel exchange," she grumbled.

His thumbs dragged over her nipples and Danielle moaned. He was cupping her, kneading her, and one strong leg had insinuated itself between her legs and was pressing against the heated core of her. Even through the silk of her panties, she could feel the wiry hairs on his thigh grazing her tender flesh. She did not utter one sound when he stepped back and trailed his hands to the waistband of her panties. He tore those as well from her body. She simply stood there trembling with passion as he slid his palm between her legs.

"Ah, wench," he said, satisfaction rife in his husky voice. "You are wet and aching for me, aren't you?"

"No, you evil man," she said, flinging her head. "I am but a poor maid at your wicked mercy. You might force me to your bed but you will never hear me cry quarter."

He slipped one finger into her moist center. "You think not, wench?"

Danielle shook her head though she was tempted to throw her arms around him and beg him to take her. It was the anticipation she sought—for herself and her lover—that she sensed when fulfilled would be the best he had ever known. She meant to send him from her with glorious memories to keep him warm each night until he returned.

"Do your worst, *mo tiarna*," she challenged. "I will take it like a woman."

"No quarter, eh?" he taunted, rubbing his palm back and forth across her swollen heat. He dipped his middle finger deeper inside her on each pass.

"N-none," she said, beginning to pant.

Arawn rubbed the base of his hand against the silken curls at the junction of her thighs. "Then I'll give none, milady," he said.

He jerked her to him so her highly sensitive nipples came into direct contact with his chest hair. Abrading himself against her chest, he once more slid his leg between hers.

"You are awful," she said.

“Nay, wench,” he said as he dipped his head to flick his tongue over the hollow at the base of her throat. “I am the best you will ever have.” He reached down to cup her buttocks in both hands, cocking his head to the side. “I am the *only* one you will ever have.” Deliberately dragging her upon his thigh, he smiled at her quickly indrawn breath.

“You may take my body, you lecherous marauder, but you will never have my soul!”

“You think not?” he cooed, licking at the sweet column of her neck.

“I know not,” she stated, and tried not to shiver as his teeth nibbled gently at the underside of her chin.

“Let’s test that, shall we?” he asked, and released her. “Get on the bed, wench.”

Danielle crossed her arms over her bare chest. “You won’t hurt me, will you, *mo tiarna?*” she asked.

His amber eyes turned molten. “If there’s hurt, wench, it will be a good hurt, believe me.”

She sniffed and turned around to walk to the bed like a martyr. Sitting down primly, she slipped one slipper off with the toes of her foot then removed the other shoe in the same manner. After taking a deep breath, she stretched herself out on the bed and flung her arms wide as though she were a sacrifice.

“I am prepared to endure your immoral machinations,” she stated.

Arawn padded slowly over to the bed and looked down at his lady. Her eyes were closed, her legs pressed tightly together, her arms out with the palms up. She looked almost as virginal as she pretended to be. Had it not been for the slight, knowing grin trying to break upon her luscious lips, he could almost convince himself she was the naïve country girl she portrayed.

“Spread your legs for me,” he said, his voice deep and filled with need.

Obediently she obliged him.

“Wider.”

Again she did as he ordered.

He took his time looking at her naked beauty. He wanted to memorize every freckle, every mole, every little imperfection that made her the woman she was. His gaze blanketed her with a heat that made her squirm and when her eyelids fluttered open, he knew she was getting impatient.

“What are you about, *mo tiarna?*” she asked.

“You belong to me,” he replied. “I own you. I am merely inspecting my property.”

“Inspecting your...” Danielle sighed deeply. “Is that all you intend to—”

One moment he was standing beside the bed and the next he was upon it, positioned between her legs, sitting back on his haunches as he put his hand to either side of her vaginal opening and spread her wider.

"I am inspecting my property," he said again.

"Arawn, you –"

"Hush, wench," he said sternly. "I'll tell you when you may speak."

Danielle clamped her lips shut and narrowed her eyes at him in warning. It was a warning he ignored as he bent forward to get a better look at the prized flesh he had splayed open to his view.

He studied her as though she were the first woman whose body he had ever looked at so closely. Taking her hips in his hands, he pulled her closer to him and lifted her so her most vulnerable area was only a foot from his face. Bracing her lower body on the incline of his thighs, he dragged his index fingers down the inner channel of her outer lips, spreading her open so he could watch the sweet wetness of her ooze from her core.

"*Mo tiarna*, you are embarrassing me," she whispered.

He looked up at her. "Did I give you permission to speak, wench?"

She shook her head, tucking her lower lip between her teeth.

His index fingers made the return trip up her moist channel, his fingernails grazing the tender flesh. "I love your smell," he said, and thrust one finger deep into her. He pivoted it then withdrew, holding her gaze as he put his finger in his mouth and sucked her juice from it.

Danielle groaned and writhed, flexing her hips against his thighs.

"I love your taste," he told her then took her clitoris between his thumb and middle finger to gently roll it, pushing aside the thin hood that covered it with the index finger of his other hand.

It was sheer torture what he was doing to her body. Heat flowed through her lower belly and settled between her legs, making her throb and ache and want and need. She reached up to grab the pillow beneath her head and crushed it in her hands.

Arawn bent forward and captured her clit with his lips, drawing on that delicate nubbin as he slid first one then two then three fingers into her waiting sheath – going deep, withdrawing, going deeper still, withdrawing then straining tight inside her until it seemed he touched her very womb.

"You are torturing me," she said, and at his elevated brow, she whimpered, clamping a hand over her mouth.

He licked at her swollen clit, he nibbled it to send shivers all the way down her sides and along her thighs. Withdrawing his fingers from her, he moved down so he could insert the middle one into her anus.

"Oh!" his lady gasped, and nearly bucked herself off his thighs.

Putting a hand to her belly, he pressed down gently but firmly as he swiveled his finger into her puckered flesh – bringing it nearly out of her then probing deep again.

Danielle was panting, her face screwed up as though she were in great pain. Her hand had gone back to the pillow and she was drawing the two edges over her face, her entire body shuddering beneath his artful touch, her breasts jiggling.

It was the sight of her luscious breasts that brought him up and over her so his mouth encircled one dusky areola. He slithered the midpoint of his body between her spread legs as he suckled her, nipped at her nipples, laved her aching flesh. Not wanting to show partiality, he moved to her other breast to give it the same attention he had given its sister.

His lady was shaking so violently beneath his touch, he knew a moment of pure, heady lust and reared up, flipping her to her belly in one quick movement. Grabbing her hips, he yanked her to him and impaled her on his shaft, thrusting his sword deep inside her silken scabbard.

"Arawn!" he heard her gasp as he increased his speed and the urgency of his passion. Reaching down and around her, he found her clitoris and began fingering it to the same rhythm with which he was piercing her sweetness. His free hand was wrapped around her shoulder as he pulled her body back toward him for each of his forceful thrusts.

They came at the same moment and it was a climax that shook the Prime Reaper to the core of his being. He felt as though the top of his head would come off as he spilled his seed into her lush body. The fierce quivers of her body around his left him mindless and when he collapsed atop her—their sweaty bodies slick and smelling of their union—he did not hear her small, hitching breaths. His breathing came in ragged gasps as he strove to get his racing heart under control.

"Danielle, I love you," he said, forcing his arms under her body to mold them tighter together.

"Arawn," she said with a grunt. "You're heavy."

Laughing, he rolled over, taking her with him so she was lying atop him, one hand kneading her breast while the other stroked her nether curls.

"Take pity on me, *mo tiarna*," she said, her voice strained. "It is too hot this close to you."

"I make you hot, do I?" he queried.

"Aye, you do. I am burning up," she admitted as she drew in quick, shallow breaths.

He was reluctant to allow her to slip off him but he did. Turning to his side to face her, he put his hand on the concavity of her belly and massaged her.

"Quarter!" she said, taking his hand and moving it away from her.

He grinned. "Uh-huh, I knew I'd get you to say it."

She turned her face to him. He was such a devastatingly handsome man that it made her heart ache just to look at him. To know he was hers—would be hers for as long as she lived—gave her a heady power that brought tears to her eyes. "I love you, Ari," she said, her heart in her eyes.

"I know," he replied. "Almost as much I love you."

"Impossible," she denied.

“And I own you, wench,” he said with a cocky glint. “Heart, body and soul.” He blew his breath over her damp body to cool her.

“Aye,” she said, lifting his hand to her lips. “That you do, *mo shearc*, and that you always will.”

They fell asleep facing one another, his strong hand held lovingly in hers.

Chapter Six

The morning brought with it a harsh gray day with rain heavy in the sodden clouds. A brisk wind had come in from the North Sea and was bombarding the land, whipping up ash and debris from the craters pockmarking the land around the mountain upon which sat the Citadel.

With the specially made oversized coach already having made one run down the mountain to the depot with the Reapers' weapons and gear as well as the healer who would be accompanying them, it was now slowly making its way back up to take the seven warriors down to the train that had been designed to carry them west.

"Do you believe he's wearing a Reaper uniform?" Phelan asked Owen. The two men were staring at Kasid Jaborn where he stood apart from the others, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his black leather uniform pants.

"*Cuir síoda ar ghabhar agus is gabhar i gcónaí é,*" Owen mumbled.

"What did he say?" Aingeal asked Cynyr.

Her husband grinned. "Put silk on a goat and it's still a goat."

"Remember what Lord Kheelan said, *mo shearc,*" she told him. "Don't give Kasid a hard time else the two of you might wind up howling together in the con cells."

"Con cells?" Cynyr asked, a dark brow arched.

"That's what the healers call them," she told him.

"Well, I plan on leaving Jaborn alone unless he gets his ass in trouble," Cynyr said. "Rest assured, *a ghrá mo chroi,* I'll guard him as closely as I do my brethren."

Aingeal sighed at being called his heart's darling but there was a gleam in his wicked amber eyes she didn't think love had placed there. Casting a look at Jaborn, she could tell the former *balgair* was unsure of his safety with the Reapers.

"You know," she said loud enough for Phelan and Owen to hear her as well, "he didn't have to come here to tell the Shadowlords about the Ceannus. He could have joined them but he didn't, even though it would have been the easiest way out for him."

Jaborn lifted his head and looked at her for a long moment. When she smiled gently at him, he nodded respectfully to her then went back to studying the ground at his feet.

"Makes you wonder why he didn't join them," Iden said in a low voice.

"My guess is he feared them," Glyn remarked.

A horrendous crack of lightning branched across the sky then the rain started down in a violent downpour that drove the Reapers and their womenfolk under the roof of the Citadel's portico. Coming down so hard the coach was obscured by the onslaught, the rain made a loud rushing sound that drowned out normal conversation.

“Not an auspicious beginning for the mission,” Arawn told Bevyn who was sulking at not being allowed to go out with the other members of his team.

“This isn’t right, Ari,” Bevyn snapped. “If they had to leave someone behind, why couldn’t it have been the Akhkarulian?”

“Because,” Arawn said, holding up his thumb. “The Akhkarulian knows the *balgairs* better than we do and—” he held up his index finger “—you can’t swim.”

“Shit,” Bevyn said. “That sucks.”

“Then learn to swim while we’re gone,” Arawn suggested. He clapped his 2-I-C on the back. “Get Danni to teach you. She tells me she taught many of the children in Haines City. Surely she can teach you.”

Bevyn rolled his eyes. “I’m not a child,” he complained.

Arawn shrugged. “You’d never prove it by me the way you’re acting.” He glanced over at Lea. “Wench, come get your man before I shove his ass out in the rain.”

Lea giggled and came to thread her arm through her mate’s. She leaned her head against his wide shoulder. “Behave, *mo shearc*.”

Another brutal blast of lightning pierced the sky and a heavy roll of thunder followed close behind. The coach rolled up and the driver looked as forlorn as the horses as the cold water came down in thick, slanting sheets. While the driver kept control of the uneasy steeds, the man riding shotgun jumped down to open the coach door for the Reapers. Huddled in his slicker with rain pouring off the rim of his hat, he gave the warriors a mean look.

“All aboard!” he shouted to be heard over the downpour.

“Guess this is it,” Cynyr said, and snaked an arm around his lady to bring her to his chest. He placed his hand on the soft mound that seemed to have shown up overnight on his lady’s body and rubbed lovingly. “You take care of little...” He frowned. “What are we calling him again?”

“Briton,” Aingeal said with a slow shake of her head. “Then Chastain, Dayton, Ennus, Finian, Galvyn...”

“No. No Ennus,” Cynyr said emphatically. “Too close to penis. Poor kid would have to fight every day of his life. Evan would be better.” He gave her a stern look. “You be good and stop trying to antagonize the High Lord.”

“He’d best stop trying to antagonize me,” Aingeal replied as her husband nipped at her lips twice before claiming them in a heady kiss that made her toes curl in her boots.

“We don’t have all day, Cree!” Arawn called out but there was no anger in his voice for his lady had suddenly come out to the portico carrying a small wicker picnic basket.

Cynyr glanced at the Prime Reaper. “Have you noticed how all of a sudden that man has started to smile?”

“It’s his lady,” Aingeal reminded him. “You smile a lot now too.”

“I do?” Cynyr shrugged. “I guess I do.”

Danielle came to her husband and extended the basket toward him. "Something for your journey, *mo shearc*," she said. "Pray do not open it until the train is on its way."

"What's in it?" Arawn asked, whistling for Glyn to come take the basket on board the coach.

"Just something to tide you over," she said. When Glyn took the basket from her, she put her arms around her husband's waist and pressed against him. "I will miss you."

"As I will miss you," Arawn said, feeling his heart aching already. He hooked a finger under her chin and tilted her face up so he could kiss her goodbye. It was a chaste, sweet kiss he bestowed for he was cognizant of others watching them. "Take care, *a stóirín*."

One last gentle, loving kiss. One last long look into the other's eyes. One last squeeze of her fingers and the Prime Reaper ventured out in the pouring rain – walking and not running as his men had. He climbed up into the coach, sat down as the door shut behind him and turned to keep his lady in sight for as long as he could.

The Prime Reaper looked past their womenfolk and Bevyn to see the Shadowlords standing in the doorway of the Citadel. He nodded to them then directed his words to his second-in-command. "*Is maith an scáthán súil chara*," he said.

"What does that mean?" Danielle asked.

"A friend's eye is a good mirror," Bevyn replied. "He's bidding me watch over you."

Danielle lifted her hand and blew her husband a kiss and everyone there was surprised when the Prime Reaper put up a hand and pretended to catch the kiss, placing it over his heart.

"Giddyup!" the driver called out, and the coach rocked back on its hinges before lurching forward.

"*Go raibh an choir Ghaoithe I gcónaí leat*," Bevyn shouted to his fellow warriors as Arawn and Phelan unhooked the rolled window covers and lowered them to keep out the rain.

"May the Wind be always at your back," Aingeal translated for Danielle. "It is the Reaper's Creed."

Danielle watched until the coach was nothing more than a blur in the driving rain. She could feel the coolness of the water peppering her face but she refused to move until all sight of her husband had been taken from her. After taking a deep breath, she turned to Bevyn and put a hand on his arm.

"Will you take me to the infirmary, Lord Bevyn?" she asked.

Aingeal and Lea exchanged a look. "What's wrong?" Aingeal questioned.

Danielle's blue eyes touched the three of them for only a second or two before she glanced past them to where Lord Kheelan was making his way toward her, his face mirroring his concern. "Do not speak of it," she said. "Do not think of it."

"What?" Bevyn asked but Danielle was already falling.

"Catch her, Coure!" the High Lord bellowed.

* * * * *

Arawn felt a strange sensation pass over him and he shifted his broad shoulders beneath its weight. He frowned.

"Did you forget something?" Cynyr asked him.

The Prime Reaper shook his head. "Not that I know of," he muttered.

"You took blood from your lady, didn't you?" Cynyr inquired.

A confused look came over Arawn's face as he pondered the question and then he nodded. "I believe so."

Cynyr snorted. "Either you did or you didn't."

"I did," Arawn said, nodding emphatically. "I remember doing so."

Jaborn sat across from Arawn Gehdrin. He was an outsider despite the black uniform he wore and of which he was immensely proud. The others didn't even look his way nor, as they spoke amongst themselves, include him in the conversation. His curiosity however, got the best of him. "Why would you need to take blood from your woman?" he asked.

The other Reapers looked at him but said nothing, leaving the answer to come from the one to whom the question had been directed.

"So I will be able to touch her with my mind," Arawn explained. "Should the need arise, I would be able to find her no matter where she went." He rubbed a fleck of lint from his pants. "It is a safety measure and it also allows those of us with mates to know how they are doing."

"I see," Jaborn said. "Did you give her yours?"

Arawn frowned. "No," he answered, and settled back in the seat, pulling his hat down over his eye, effectively ending the conversation.

Cynyr's attention was riveted on the Akhcharulian. "Why would you ask that?" he demanded.

Jaborn shrugged. "It seems to me it would be warranted if he took her blood that he would make an exchange with her. Could he not speak with her in her mind then? Would not that link them together as it does with us?"

Cynyr pursed his lips at the reminder that each of them had been ordered to down a portion of the Akhcharulian's blood just as Jaborn had been ordered to partake of theirs.

Arawn—sensing Cynyr wasn't going to answer—tipped his hat back and eyed the man across from him. "Aye, that would be the best thing to do, Jaborn, but if your lady has a great fear of your hellion, it is best not to make an exchange."

"Ah, I see," Jaborn said. "Thank you, milord, for explaining."

"Fàilte oirbh," Arawn mumbled, lowering his hat again.

The Akhkarulian's brows drew together.

"He said you're welcome," Cynyr provided.

Jaborn nodded politely. Their eyes met for a moment then both men looked away.

* * * * *

Lord Kheelan began another circuit of the infirmary visitors' room. It was unlike him to show such nervousness in the presence of others and his fellow Shadowlords were keeping quiet, more loath than was normal to intrude on the High Lord's preferred solitude.

When Healer Dresden came from the exam room wiping his hands on a towel, he went straight to Lord Kheelan. "Do you wish privacy for our talk, Your Grace?" he asked.

The High Lord glanced around at Lords Naois and Dunham, at Bevyn, Aingeal and Lea then shook his head. "Just tell us what's wrong with her."

"Did she tell any of you she was ill?" Dresden asked.

"No," Lord Kheelan snapped, "and don't make me have to ask you again what ails her, healer!"

"She is dying," Dresden said.

"What?" Bevyn yelled, coming to his feet in a bound. "How can that be?"

Aingeal and Lea took hold of each other's hands as tears filled their eyes.

"I am very sorry to report the Lady Danielle has ovarian cancer," Dresden told them.

Aingeal's lips were quivering. "Did she know she was so sick?"

"If she did, she didn't tell Arawn," Bevyn said.

"She knew something was wrong," Dresden said, "but she didn't think it was anything serious. If she had come to me even a month earlier..." He lifted his hands.

"How was it possible for her to keep this from her husband?" Lea asked. "Reapers are so attuned to one another, to their mates."

Lord Kheelan slumped against the wall. "She hid it from him as she hid it from us," he said, flinging a hand toward the other Shadowlords.

"But how could she do that?" Bevyn demanded. "Don't you know everything?"

The High Lord rubbed his hand over his face. "One of the reasons we did not balk at Lord Arawn taking her as his mate is because we knew her to have certain abilities that we thought would be of help."

"Help to who?" Aingeal sneered.

"To whom," Lord Naois corrected her, and for his trouble received a flashing glower from Aingeal. He tugged at the collar of his robe, his cheeks red.

"She is a mindshilder with the ability to misdirect or confuse thought," Lord Kheelan went on. "To deflect anyone delving into her own thoughts."

"We don't have that power," Lord Dunham said.

"And you wanted it," Aingeal said, grinding her teeth.

"It would be useful to your husband, Lady Aingeal," Lord Kheelan said. "To all Reapers."

"To do what?" Aingeal asked. "To damage and hinder enemies? To interfere with normal thought?"

"Precisely," Lord Dunham said. "The benefits would be—"

"To hell with your benefits!" Aingeal interrupted him. "You wanted to use Danielle so you allowed Arawn to have her." Her upper lip arched. "How magnanimous of you!"

Lord Kheelan looked at her, his face filled with hurt. "That is not the only reason, Aingeal. They were in love and desired to be together. We are not the heartless bastards you believe us to be."

Aingeal gave him an arched look but remained silent, her facial expression leaving doubt in no one's mind what she thought of Lord Kheelan's statement.

"How long does Lady Danielle have?" Lord Kheelan asked, looking away from Aingeal.

"It's hard to say, Your Grace," Dresden replied. "She was in a great deal of pain so I gave her a rather strong dose of tenses." He sighed. "Her pain will only get worse from here on in unless we intervene."

"Intervene how?" Lea asked, glancing up at her mate.

"The cancer must be excised, of course," Lord Dunham said. "Go ahead and set up for that, Dresden."

"That is not a cure, Your Grace," Dresden told him. "It is only a stopgap measure, and at this point would only cause her more pain and quite possibly shorten her life."

"I thought the goddess removed all disease from Terra," Lea said. "How did She miss this?"

"Why don't you ask Her the next time you see Her," Aingeal snorted.

"Arawn is going to be crippled by this," Bevyn predicted.

"You speak of her as though Danni is already dead!" Aingeal said. She stood up. "The solution lies right in front of you. Why aren't you snatching it?"

"Aingeal, no!" Lea gasped. She too came to her feet. "Don't even suggest such a thing!"

"There is no need for Danni to suffer, Lea," Aingeal said. "No reason for Arawn to lose her."

"She doesn't want to be like you," Lea threw at her. "You know that!"

“And so we just let her die because she fears what she doesn’t even know?” Aingeal demanded. Before Lea could answer that, she held up her hand. “Just because you are so gods-be-damned terrified of having one of Bevyn’s fledglings Transferred to you, don’t believe for one moment he wouldn’t override your fears if it were your life in danger.”

Lea turned to her Reaper. “Is that true? Would you go against my wishes even after you promised you would never do that to me?”

Bevyn held his lady’s angry gaze. “I once told the others I would not but now I know I would.”

Disbelief and shock pinched Lea’s pretty face. “Even knowing I would hate you for it?”

The Reaper flinched. “I would rather you be alive to hate me than to be forced to go to your grave to mourn you when I could have prevented your death,” he answered.

Lea lifted her hand and struck her mate hard enough to stagger him. The slap was loud and left a fiery imprint on Bevyn’s cheek. Before he could reach out to stop her, Lea turned and ran down the hall, ignoring his call to come back. When he would have followed her, Lord Kheelan put out a staying hand.

“Leave her, Lord Bevyn. Her sensibilities are of little import at this moment. A decision must be made about Lord Arawn’s lady,” the High Lord stated.

“I don’t see there being any decision to make,” Aingeal threw at him. “Give her one of Arawn’s hellions and—”

“That would destroy her ability to hide her feelings from him and right now—considering where he is and what he is about to undertake—it could be disastrous,” Lord Naois said.

“You can’t keep this from him!” Aingeal shouted. “He has a right to know!”

“I agree and we will tell him,” Lord Kheelan said. “After the fact.”

“He’ll know as soon as the hellion is Transferred,” Bevyn said.

“Not unless one of us contacts him and I highly suggest you don’t,” the High Lord asserted.

“How can you keep it from him?” the Reaper asked. “The moment you put one of his hellions inside Danni—”

“We will use one of Lady Aingeal’s fledglings,” Lord Kheelan said.

“Works for me,” Aingeal said. “Let’s do it then.”

“As soon as the fledgling enters her body, it will attack the cancer,” Lord Kheelan said. “It will rid her of it and save her life. That is the most important thing to remember here. Her life will be saved and she will no longer have the pain she must have been experiencing for quite some time.”

“I’m all for sparing her any more pain,” Aingeal said, trying not to think of her own pain she’d soon be experiencing with the removal of a hellion from her body.

Chapter Seven

“Ashton Rhys-Norbert,” the thin, lanky man introduced himself with a graceful bow. “I will be your steward, milords.”

Cynyr breathed a sigh of relief. “I was praying it wasn’t going to be Harry,” he said with a snort.

Aston’s lips twitched. “I am acquainted with the gentleman, Lord Cynyr. I believe you will find me a different kettle of fish.”

“Anything would be an improvement over Harry,” Cynyr mumbled.

“What do you prefer to be called?” Owen asked.

“My friends call me Ash,” the tall man said.

“Ash it is then,” Owen said. “I hope you can cook.”

“Like a veritable demon, milord,” Ash agreed. He put his index finger to the flesh beneath his right eye and pulled at the eyelid. “And I brought copious amounts of sugar with me.”

All the Reapers except Arawn laughed at the remark. Arawn was still uneasy as he settled down on the plush, red velvet seat in the special train’s social car. The rain was beating against the window beside him, obscuring the landscape and as several successive bright flashes of light strobed beyond the glass, he reached up to pull the shade down.

Glyn placed the wicker basket Danielle had given her husband on the floor at Arawn’s feet. “I hope you will share that bounty with us, Ari,” he remarked.

“We’ll see,” Arawn said. He didn’t know why he felt so. The left-handed Reaper kept absently fingering the thumb break strap on the six-shooter strapped to his leg. On his right hip in a silver sheath threaded through his black leather gun belt he carried the dragon-claw handle of his laser whip.

Healer Sorrel slipped on board quietly and greeted the Reapers. He was a small man who sported a thin goatee and thick wire-rimmed spectacles. With a sparse head of hair and a kindly face that made him look much younger than his years, he appeared very shy and seemed to meld into his surroundings as though not wishing to be observed. As soon as he took a seat, he pulled out a thick book and buried his face in it.

The Reapers’ gear was being loaded on the baggage car of the ten-car train while their mounts were being led into the cattle car at the rear, in front of the caboose. Including the engine and coal cars, caboose, social car, baggage and cattle cars, there were two sleeper cars, a dining car and the cooking car—in which Ash had his private quarters.

“Lord Arawn, would you like something to drink?” Ash inquired.

Arawn looked up. "A double whiskey would hit the spot," he replied.

"At nine o'clock in the morning?" Cynyr questioned. He was seated across the car from the Prime Reaper.

Arawn narrowed his eyes. "*An rud nach mbaineann duit ná bain dó,*" he growled.

Cynyr held up his hands. "*Ceart go leor.*"

Owen translated for Jaborn. "In essence, our fearless leader just told Cree to mind his own business and Cree said okay."

"The people of my land do not partake of alcohol or drugs," Jaborn said. "It is difficult for me to take the tenses and it shames me that I have become addicted to it."

"Couldn't live without it," Owen said.

"Aye, but I could," Jaborn said, "but what kind of life would that be?"

"As a wolflike monstrosity uglier than sin?" Owen asked. "Not much of one I'd say."

"Why would Lord Arawn be drinking this early in the day though?" Jaborn inquired. "Is that normal for him?"

"Not at all," Owen replied. "Something's bothering him. See the way he keeps fingering the thumb break on his holster? But if he wants us to know what's troubling him, he'll tell us. He tends to be a man who plays his cards close to his vest, if you get my meaning."

"That is beautiful workmanship on his rig," Jaborn said, eyeing the hand-tooled leather and belt. "What is that symbol?"

Owen ignored Phelan and Iden frowning at him for speaking to the Akhkarulian. "It's the heron, the symbol of the Gehdrin clan. Each of us has a tat of our clan animal." He turned his face so Jaborn could see his. "Mine is a blackbird."

"What is the meaning of your symbol?"

"The blackbird represents magic, a mage." He crossed his leg so the ankle rested on the opposite knee. "I am the magician on our team."

"I too have a tattoo," Jaborn said, "but I wish to the gods it was not upon my flesh."

"Why? What is it?" Owen asked.

After a moment of thought, Jaborn unbuttoned the cuff of his left shirtsleeve and pushed it up. Owen recognized the symbol immediately and leaned away from Jaborn.

"I should not have shown you my shame," Jaborn said, quickly lowering his sleeve. "All *balgairs* are branded with the sign. We were not given a choice of the symbol but we could choose where we wished it placed."

"Did you volunteer to become a rogue?" Owen asked, locking eyes with Jaborn.

"No. I was given no choice. My twin enlisted with the Ceannus and when they came for me, I was taken and branded as one of theirs before the Transference."

"Then the shame belongs to those who did that to you," Owen stated.

"It is a vile symbol and one that bothers me greatly," Jaborn said, looking down at the sleeve now hiding the mark. "I wish now I had not asked for it on my arm for then I wouldn't have to see it."

"What symbol is that, Jaborn?" Arawn asked.

The Akhkhharulian lowered his head. "A ghoret coiled upon my forearm, Lord Arawn."

At the mention of the dreaded pit viper than had nearly claimed his life, Cynyr got up from his seat and walked over to Jaborn. "Let me see," he ordered.

"Lord Cynyr, I—"

"Let me see!" Cynyr insisted.

Jaborn did as he was told and when the silver and green tattoo was revealed on the Akhkhharulian's arm, Cynyr hissed as though he were a serpent as well.

"By the gods but I would carve that shit from my arm!" he snarled.

"I tried," Jaborn said, "but my hellion healed the wound and the tattoo appeared upon the skin once more."

"I'd keep trying until the filth was gone!"

"Trying won't make it so. That's the way of the Queen," Arawn said. "Whatever scars you had before you became a Reaper, you still have, Cynyr. That is why they tattooed him before he became a *balgair*."

"That is an evil thing!" Cynyr said, staring down at the triangular head of the viper.

"I agree, milord," Jaborn said, and once more pushed his sleeve down to hide the symbol.

Cynyr took his seat again. "Aingeal wants a tat, but thank Alel it wouldn't take on her."

"A tat of what?" Owen asked.

"A damned swan," Cynyr said in a mincing voice.

"Swans are beautiful creatures, Cyn," Arawn said. "They symbolize faithfulness, innocence, grace and sincerity. All those things describe your lady."

Cynyr shot him an annoyed look. "And if your lady were to be tattooed, what glorious emblem would you give her?"

Arawn tilted his head back against the high seat. "Not that I would ever allow her to mark herself in that way but hypothetically, I would think a butterfly. It is the symbol of being carefree and my lady is that if nothing else."

"Lea got a tat," Iden said. "Bevyn just about shit a brick when he saw it."

Owen's eyebrows shot up. "He didn't tell me that."

Iden chuckled. "Most likely he was too pissed to do so. Only reason I know of it is they were arguing so loudly as they took the stairs to his apartments I heard every word they shouted at one another."

"What is the tat of?" Phelan asked.

"I haven't seen it, but I'll never forget Bevyn's bellow when he stopped her on the stairs to get a look at it. She must have taken her boot off to show him," Iden said. "He yelled, 'A deer? You put a fucking prancing deer on your fucking ankle, wench?'"

The men laughed. Those who knew Bevyn well could hear him yelling.

"Is deer a bad symbol in the Wind Force?" Jaborn asked.

"No, just the opposite. Deer represent gentleness, love and kindness and that describes Lea perfectly," Owen said. "Why would Bev be pissed about such a positive symbol?"

"It isn't the symbol or its meaning, but the marring of his lady's flesh that set him off," Cynyr said.

"But it is her flesh, is it not?" Jaborn asked. "Does she not have the right to do with it as she wishes?"

"No," Arawn and Cynyr said in unison.

Ash came from the kitchen car with a tray of orange juice for Iden and Owen and the double shot of whiskey for Arawn. He served them their beverages then left.

The train whistle blew and the car jerked as the iron wheels began to turn. Between the chugging of the engine, the squeak of the wheels and the pounding rain drumming on the car's roof, Arawn managed to drown out the low voices of his companions. He had no idea why he felt the urge to blister his tongue with the whiskey or why he thought doing so might help the prickly feeling rubbing against his nerves. But after the first sip of the heady brew, he took off his hat and stretched his long legs out in front of him.

"What's in the basket, Ari?" Cynyr asked.

Arawn glanced down at the wicker container. "I've no idea."

"He's going to be a greedy gut and not share whatever it is with us," Owen complained.

"You're full of it, Tohre," Arawn said, and set his whiskey on the table beside his seat. He bent over and retrieved the basket. Opening it, he pushed aside a towel to locate what was concealed beneath. When he saw what was in there, he started laughing so hard tears came into his amber eyes and he had to nudge them away with his crooked knuckle.

"What did Danielle give you to cause that reaction?" Cynyr queried.

Arawn slipped his hand inside the basket and lifted up a cake covered with bright orange-zest frosting.

"Can I have a slice?" Owen asked.

A deadly gleam entered Arawn's eye. "Not if you were starving to death, Reaper, and 'twas the only food available." He placed the cake back into the basket with care. "But if anyone else wants a piece, feel free to come and get it."

* * * * *

Danielle was barely strong enough to lift her head as Aingeal placed the cup of Sustenance to her lips. She ached in places she rarely felt but the horrendous pain she had lived with for months was gone from her side. She felt hollow inside. Although she had said nothing of what she had experienced – neither blaming nor acknowledging to those around her that she knew what they’d done – the telltale misery in her gaze said more than mere words could have.

“Your first time is always the hardest, Danni,” Aingeal said gently.

Meekly swallowing the salty liquid that by rights should have made her gag, Danielle remained silent. It was her husband’s blood she drank – frozen blood kept on hand by the High Council for him when he was in residence. It was the only Sustenance Danni would accept. When the Sustenance was consumed, Aingeal slipped her hand from beneath Danni’s head and stepped back. “Can I get you anything?” she asked.

Without a word, Danielle turned over, her back to Aingeal. Her hands were pressed together under her cheek, her knees drawn up into a fetal position as she stared listlessly at the wall beside the bed.

“If you need to blame someone for this, don’t blame Arawn,” Aingeal said. “He doesn’t know what happened here and he had no part in the decision. The decision was Lord Kheelan’s and Lord Kheelan’s alone.”

A single crystal tear eased slowly down Danielle’s pale cheek but still she said nothing.

Aingeal took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She wasn’t accustomed to people ignoring her and now neither Danni nor Lea were speaking to her. “All right,” she said. “I’ll leave you alone but if you need me, will you have someone come get me?”

There was no answer, no acknowledgment of the request.

Leaving the room, Aingeal was surprised to find the High Lord waiting by the door. He looked drawn and haggard and guilty. “I doubt she wants to see you,” Aingeal said.

“I’m sure she doesn’t, but I want to –”

“Put your wants aside, Lord Kheelan, and think of someone other than yourself for a change,” Aingeal snapped at him. “The entire world does not revolve around you nor does that world give a damn about what you want!” That said, she turned and stormed off.

He watched her until she turned the corner then hung his head. The feelings he had for her were way out of line. Thoughts of her should not consume him, yet they did. Day and night she haunted him, and with every insult she flung at his head – deserved or not – a part of him withered away. He had never known such unrelenting melancholy in his life and saw no way to rid himself of it. He wanted what he knew he could never have and that was a bitter pill to swallow. Though he had tried to force her from his mind, from his heart, he realized she was firmly entrenched and no amount of

reasoning or rationalizing could make it otherwise. It was a burden he had finally learned to accept.

Feelings aside, he knew where his duty lay and knocked softly on Danielle's door before opening it and going inside.

It had been four days since Danielle Gehdrin had gone from human to Reaper. Her Transition had not been an easy one and she had fought it every step of the way. Her howls had been pitiful to hear and as she thrashed in the containment cell—scratched deep grooves into the walls—those who kept vigil outside felt keenly the burden of what was happening, knowing the woman had not wanted it. Kheelan Ben-Alkazar had no doubt at all that had he been in the cell with her, she would have torn him limb from limb and devoured his still breathing body. The only good thing about the episode was that it hadn't lasted as long as normal.

"I hate you," she said, her first words since that fateful day when the Transference had been made.

"I know you do," the High Lord said. He was standing at the foot of her bed. "If it would make you feel better to attack me, I will not fight you."

She turned over so she could see him. "Have you told my husband what you did to me?"

Lord Kheelan shook his head. "No, but I plan to contact Cynyr later this evening. They reached Lewisville this morning and are getting ready to ride down to the Diabolusian border." He wrapped his fingers around the brass rail at the foot of her bed. "I thought it best to have Cynyr break the news to him."

"Coward," she labeled him, and turned back over.

"You women have such wonderfully high opinions of me, don't you?" Lord Kheelan grumbled. When she didn't reply, he shook his head. "Don't blame Arawn for this. He—"

"I know who to blame," she told him. "Now get the hell out of my room before I sink my fangs into your worthless jugular and drain you dry."

That she could make such a statement gave him reason to hope she was becoming adjusted to her new way of life. After all, anger was better than apathy. He tried to slip into her mind to make sure she was all right but the barrier was like a solid granite wall he could not scale. There were no openings, no seams or cracks, and it was buried so deep, there was no way to get under it, so wide there was no getting around it. Her mindshield was firmly in place and would remain so to whomever she wished to keep out of her thoughts. He doubted even the woman with whom she shared a parasitic connection could breach Danielle's mind.

"Is there anything you wish Cynyr to tell your husband?" he asked as he reached the door.

"Tell him to let Ari know I think you're a bastard," she replied, and swiveled her head around to pierce him with a steely glower. "Are you man enough to do that, Ben-Alkazar?"

The High Lord raised his chin. "If that is your message, I will convey it."
"It is," she said, and dismissed him by turning back to face the wall.

* * * * *

Lewisville was a bustling rail town with several trains sidetracked as they were loaded with goods from the Exasla Territory. The noise was earsplitting as jingling horse trappings, thumping wagon wheels, hawking vendors, lowing cattle, whinnying horses and squealing pigs lent their sounds to the fray. The streets were wide, unpaved and dusty since rain hadn't fallen on that area of the country for several months. Just walking from the train car to the hotel for a meal not eaten to the accompaniment of singing rails, the Reapers' black uniforms were coated with a thin powder of red dust.

"Don't you just love being stared at?" Iden asked Phelan as they followed their fellow Reapers to the Hotel Atkinson.

Phelan glanced around them. People gawked until caught then lowered their heads and hurried off. "It isn't every day seven Reapers get off the train in your town," he said.

"And don't go by how the folks of Haines City treated us," Cynyr said, turning to look back at Iden. "These people think we're demons."

"That means you mind your manners while you're here, Glyn," Arawn said. "Keep a low profile."

"Me?" Glyn asked. "Why single me out?"

"I heard how you and Owen expected the folks of Haines City to wait on you hand and foot," the Prime Reaper replied. "I don't want to have anyone tell me that again. You are there to protect and to serve, not be catered to."

Owen and Glyn looked at one another. "When did we do that?" Owen asked.

"The first time you two went sauntering through Haines City," Cynyr said.

"Before the seven of us were there together as a team," Arawn clarified. "My father-in-law told me how you two acted up."

"I heard all about it from my lady who heard about it from Moira," Cynyr added.

"*An áit a mbíonn mná bíonn caint agus an áit a mbíonn géanna bíonn callán,*" Glyn stated.

Phelan turned to Jaborn. "Glyn said where there are women, there is talk and where there are geese, there is cackling."

"Damned interfering old biddy," Owen muttered of Moira.

"But she bakes a mean blueberry pie," Iden said wistfully.

"Aye, as long as your back holds out chopping wood for that gods-be-damned pie," Arawn growled.

The Hotel Atkinson was serving lunch when the Reapers strolled in, taking off their hats politely to the three women who were leaving the establishment, their faces pale as

they recognized the warriors for what they were. Owen held the door open for them and they were quick to draw their skirts aside lest the material come into contact with his leg.

"I don't bite, you know," he called after them. "Unless you want me to."

"Tohre, what did I tell you?" Arawn snapped, his eyes blazing with anger.

Owen snapped his hat against his leg. "They acted like I had cooties or something," he complained.

"And you wonder why I don't want a woman?" Phelan asked.

The proprietor of the hotel came bustling toward them, bowing as though they were royalty. "A table for seven, milords?" he asked.

"Nine," Arawn corrected. "We have a healer and our steward with us."

If the hotelman was surprised the Reapers would condescend to eat with anyone other than their own kind, he hid it well. He took their order for coffee and iced water and left them with menus.

"It's going to be a hot trip down to the border," Cynyr observed. "I'll bet its ninety-five degrees out there already."

"Are you planning on us staying here today or riding out as soon as the horses are offloaded?" Phelan asked.

"We'll ride out and camp down near the border tonight," Arawn informed them. "I've had enough confinement for a while."

The other Reapers nodded. None of them liked to be inside buildings at too long a stretch and being on the train had been just as confining as any building.

"What looks good to you men?" Owen asked.

"Everything on here," Iden replied. "Ah! Blueberry pie!"

When the healer and Ash joined them, the men ordered a large breakfast and delved right into it the moment it arrived. No one spoke as they ate and the other patrons were equally as silent out of fear and respect for the warriors. By the time the Reapers had finished eating, the room was bare of diners.

"There's going to be a whole lot of indigestion in Lewisville this afternoon," Glyn remarked with a snide grin.

"I've never seen people shoving food into their mouths so fast," Phelan commented. He looked at Owen. "Thanks to you and your cooties."

Owen shot him an irritated look. "*Póg ma thoin*," he purred.

Phelan grinned. "Bend over and I'll fuck it, but I won't kiss it, Tohre."

Arawn gave them a warning growl that wiped the humor off the men's faces.

After paying for their meal, the Reapers, their healer and Ash set off to the stables where the warriors' mounts had been taken.

"I'll need a pack mule for our supplies," Ash told them, and one was purchased.

Picking two sturdy, calm-looking horses for the healer and Ash from the stableman, the men mounted up and headed out of town.

"You can almost hear the collective sigh of relief that we aren't staying," Glyn complained.

"They don't want cooties," Cynyr said sweetly. "They're hard to get rid of."

"Actually cooties—or rather body lice—are easily cured," Healer Sorrel piped up. "First you shave the infected area and then slather—"

"We don't want to know," Owen cut in. "I don't have cooties."

By the time the sun set, the men had crossed the Big River and were trailing along the border between Serenia and Diabolusia. The desert had been stifling hot all day and waterholes few and far between. Sweaty and tired, the Reapers had ceased speaking to one another and simply concentrated on making the best time they could. The healer and Ash—unaccustomed to riding—were sore and sunburned, wincing with every jolting step of their mounts.

Iden had ridden ahead looking for a good place to camp and was cantering back toward them.

Arawn held up his hand and the others stopped behind him. He took off his hat and arched the sweat from the side of his face.

"There's a good spot about a mile ahead," Iden told them. "There's a river and it was calling my name."

"Fresh, cool water," Owen said. "What are we waiting for?"

The spot to which Iden led them was more than adequate. Shaded by tall, twisted cottonwood trees, a tributary of the Big River meandered by their campsite. The ground was soft enough around the stand of trees to cushion their bedrolls. Since supper was going to consist of jerky, biscuits and beans washed down with trail coffee, the men set up camp slowly and as Ash started the coffee to brewing, the men wandered over to the stream. Owen, Glyn and Phelan were already stripping out of their uniforms as quickly as they could. Iden was already in the water, his bare ass gleaming in the light from the setting sun.

"My hellion is tearing into my kidney," Cynyr said. "Are you sure we can do this?"

He and Arawn were standing at the river's edge, the water barely lapping at their boots.

"Mine is bunching up under my skin, that's for sure," Arawn replied. He was watching Owen, Glyn and Phelan running out in the river and diving into the very heart of it.

"I too feel my hellion punishing me," Jaborn said.

"Well, there's only one way to find out if we're going to be able to swim from that boat to the seawall of the Ceannus camp," Arawn said, and put his hands to the buttons of his shirt.

Cynyr sighed deeply and began to undress as well. "Don't know that I care to be bare-assed in that water with Phelan Keil," he said.

Jaborn cast Cree a puzzled look. "Is he of that bent?" he inquired.

Arawn frowned. "We don't know because we've never asked and besides, that's Phelan's business, now isn't it?"

"Get hopping, Jaborn," Cynyr said. "You ain't going in that water with your uniform on."

Reluctantly Jaborn did as ordered though he continually winced as his hellion buckled and prodded at him, once nearly taking him to his knees.

"You coming in or you just enjoying watching our danglies flopping in the water?" Owen called out.

"My hellion is chewing its way through my kidney," Arawn complained as he reluctantly unbuttoned his shirt.

Iden came out of the water, totally unconcerned with his nudity and came up to the Prime Reaper. "Here, feel."

Arawn jumped back as though he'd been scalded. "Get that thing the hell away from me!" he snapped.

Iden rolled his eyes. "My hellion, Ari. I want you to feel my hellion. It's purring," he said, turning his back to his leader. "Put your hand on my side and you can feel it."

"Get...the...hell...away...from...me," Arawn stressed, each word coming through his clenched teeth. He shrugged out of his shirt and threw it to the ground.

Jaborn went over and laid his hand on Iden's back even though the youngest Reaper appeared to not be happy about him doing so.

"I can feel it," Jaborn said. "It is like touching a contented cat."

"Touching pussy I can handle," Cynyr said, and stepped up to Iden and placed his hand where Jaborn's darker one had been. "Aye. I can feel it. It is purring."

"Well, if the two of you are finished *feeling* it, get the hell in the water and swim over to the other side," Arawn snapped.

Finishing undressing, Cynyr and Jaborn followed Iden to the water. Both men were shivering and Arawn could see their hellions bunching up under the flesh of their backs and knew it had to be excruciating. When Iden dove into the water, Cynyr followed with Jaborn only a heartbeat behind him.

Arawn breathed a long sigh of relief when he saw the two men surface in the middle of the river and race one another across. Although he was in agony, he kicked off his boots, stepped out of his pants, took off his socks and with his jaw clamped tight ran to the bank and dove in.

Almost as soon as his body hit the water and went under, the godawful pain in his back ceased and he could feel the creature within him uncoiling, relaxing. He could even hear it purring in his mind. Stroking his way under the water for as long as he could hold his breath, he knew a peacefulness he hadn't felt in centuries. He shot to the

surface and with strong strokes reached the other side of the river then jackknifed in the water and started back, swimming as fast as he could under the surface, enjoying the freedom and the delicious feel of the waves rolling over him.

"He's like a dolphin," Ash said. "I've never seen such a strong swimmer."

"Arawn is good at everything he does," Owen said as he came out of the water and took the towel the steward had waiting for each of them. "That's why he's the Prime."

Long after the coffee had brewed, the beans heated and biscuits baked, all the Reapers save Owen continued to frolic in the water until they wore themselves out. By the time they stumbled onto shore and wrapped themselves in the towels, the desert air was chill and they were trembling, fumbling with their clothing to get warm.

"I had forgotten how wonderful that was," Cynyr said, hurrying on with his clothes. He took a tin cup of coffee from Ash and wrapped his cold hands around it. His dark hair was dripping water down his face and he flung his head to get the tendrils out of his eyes, spraying water over Owen in the process.

"Watch it, Cree," Owen grumbled.

"I don't think any of us will have any trouble swimming from the boat," Arawn said. He was putting his uniform back on, lips quivering from the cool night air.

"Lord Cynyr, walk away from the camp."

Cynyr recognized the voice speaking to him and frowned. Apparently no one else had heard the High Lord and that concerned the Reaper.

"Do as I say and do it now," Lord Kheelan ordered.

"I gotta piss," Cynyr said, getting up.

"Like anyone cares," Owen snorted.

"Maybe he needs someone to hold it for him," Phelan joked.

Cynyr slapped Phelan on the back of his head as he passed the younger Reaper and walked out into the darker shadows beyond the campfire. When he came back, he was paler than anyone had ever seen him—even when he'd almost succumbed to multiple ghoret bites—and his eyes were bleak as he met Arawn's gaze.

"What's wrong?" Arawn asked, his hellion writhing beneath his skin.

"I need to talk to you," Cynyr said. "Alone."

Arawn felt keenly the Rift in the Veil and slowly got to his feet. "Anything you have to say you can say in front of my men," he said. His heart was trip-hammering in his chest.

Cynyr's face crinkled with pain. "It's about your lady."

The Prime Reaper stumbled back, putting up a hand to ward off whatever Cree was about to say.

"Arawn, she's alive but—"

"No," Arawn said, reading the knowledge in Cynyr's mind. "No."

"There wasn't anything else they could do."

"No," Arawn repeated, shaking his head. "I don't want to hear this."

"Ari, listen to me. She was very sick and she didn't want you to know. She —"

"Shut up!" Arawn yelled. "Just shut the fuck up!"

"Would you rather she had died?" Cynyr challenged.

Horror filled Arawn's expression and his knees buckled. He went to the sand with a grunt, his hands on his thighs. He looked up at Cynyr like a little lost child and when he spoke his voice broke. "I promised her. I swore to her I'd not allow her to be tainted by what I am!"

"They gave her a fledgling?" Jaborn asked softly.

Owen nodded. His face was grave. "Aye, they must have."

A single tear eased down the Prime Reaper's face. "Cynyr, no. I promised her," he whispered. "I promised my lady!"

Cynyr hunkered down beside him. "Ari, they had no choice if she was to live."

"What was wrong with her, Cyn?" Phelan asked although the other men hissed at him for asking.

Aingeal's Reaper looked around, giving Phelan a warning look. "Ovarian cancer."

"Did they remove the diseased organs?" Jaborn asked.

Cynyr shook his head. "No, once they gave her the fledgling, it took care of the cancer. The revenant worm consumed the diseased organs then regenerated them as they should have been."

"God, no!" Arawn moaned, burying his face in his hands. His shoulders shook beneath the weight of his grief. "The pain had to be brutal for her!"

Cynyr started to put a hand to Arawn's shoulder but thought better of it. The man's pain was tangible and with the linking that had been established between them in Haines City, the sharing of a parasite Queen, he could feel Ari's agony like a sentient life form. "I am so sorry, Arawn," he said gently.

"Bastards," Arawn whispered.

Unable to bear the weight of his anguish in front of the other men, Arawn scrambled to his feet and ran out into the darkness of the night. When Iden would have followed to comfort the Prime Reaper, Cynyr called him back.

"He's going to have to deal with this on his own," Cynyr said.

"That is why I don't want a woman," Owen told Jaborn. "It makes you too damned vulnerable."

"Perhaps that is why she sent him on this mission without letting him know she was sick," Jaborn suggested.

"She shouldn't have married him if she knew she was sick," Phelan said around clenched teeth.

"She didn't know it was as bad as it turned out to be," Cynyr stated. "She thought it was a bad stomachache."

"I saw her rubbing her side many a time," Iden said. "I thought it merely a nervous habit."

"How could he not have known?" Owen said. "Wouldn't he have picked up on something not being right when he took her blood?"

Cynyr took off his hat and ran his fingers through his dark hair. "It seems Ari's lady has abilities none of us sensed." He sat down fully on the ground with his legs crossed. "She can mindsheild."

"A powerful talent," Jaborn commented. "There was a woman in my village who had such an aptitude."

"What does that mean?" Iden asked.

"What part of mindshield is unclear to you, brat?" Owen growled. "She can shield her mind, her thoughts."

"And confuse others' thoughts, cloud them," Jaborn added. "Make them think one thing when in actuality it is a different thing altogether."

"Like making him think he took her blood when he obviously didn't," Cynyr said, "else he would have known."

"And he could have come on this mission with his mind on her and not on what we have to do," Owen put in.

"And that won't be the case now?" Phelan demanded. "Apparently the Shadowlords spoke to you or you wouldn't have known about Danni. Why couldn't they have waited until after we had done our job to hurt him like this?"

"Lord Kheelan had his reasons," Cynyr said, "but had it been me, I would have waited."

"If you look at this from the Shadowlords' point of view," Jaborn said, drawing everyone's eyes, "they knew eventually Gehdrin would attempt to contact his lady, to touch on her. Perhaps he would have done this on the eve of going into battle. When he could not touch her, he would have become very concerned. Would he not have thought her dead?"

"Aye, and with his mind so divided..." Cynyr shrugged, not needing to finish.

A loud wail followed by a fierce howl broke the stillness of the night and the Reapers shuddered, turning toward the spot from which the sound had come.

"He's Transitioning?" Phelan asked, aghast.

"The better to deal with his turmoil," Jaborn said. "I do the same thing."

"It is a waste of energy," Phelan snapped. "Shifting expends too much energy when we're not in Transition."

"We each deal with our problems in different ways," Owen reminded him. "Me? I get shitfaced."

"A drunken Reaper," Glyn said as he poured himself another cup of coffee. "Now that is an image I'd rather you had kept to yourself, Tohre."

Cynyr's gaze was locked on the darkness and as the men around him spoke to one another, he closed his eyes and opened the link between Arawn Gehdrin and him. Should Ari need him, he would be there.

* * * * *

Out on the cool sands of the desert, the red wolf ran as fast as its legs could carry it. Its thick fur glistened in the moonlight, its fangs showing. The chuffing noises it made as it sped over the dunes and leapt over fallen trees sounded very much like a man crying. For an hour it ran full-out until its heart began to fail, its legs began to give out, and when it stopped high atop a bluff with its sides heaving, its body quivering from the exertion of its blind run, it threw its head back and howled, trilling the air with a hopeless, pitiful sound. It howled again then fell to the ground, laying its head down between front legs.

When Cynyr made his way to the spot where Arawn Gehdrin was curled up in a fetal position, the desert air had turned from cool to cold and a brisk wind was whipping about the sand. The moon had hidden behind highflying clouds. Without speaking, Cree sat down beside the Prime Reaper. With him he carried a spare uniform from the pack mule, and he placed the folded shirt and pants so Ari could see them then placed the extra pair of boots beside them.

"Damn if it ain't colder than a witch's teat tonight," Cynyr observed, drawing his legs up and enclosing them within the perimeter of his arms. "You suppose the ocean water is going to be cold?"

Arawn said nothing. He was staring out into the darkness without blinking. His hands were pressed together between his knees as he lay naked on the sand. The tracks of his salty tears clung to his cheeks but he was done with his crying.

"You know I can feel your pain," Cynyr said softly, but Ari remained silent for a bit longer.

"Do you know I don't give a fuck?" Arawn finally growled.

"*Take up your field glasses.*" The command had been clear in Cynyr's mind and he reached for the glasses hanging around his neck. For a long while Cynyr said nothing as he scanned the darkness then flashes of light to the north of them drew his attention and he stared at it for a moment, thinking it lightning but then realized it wasn't jagged as lightning would be. He got to his feet to study the phenomena more closely, puzzled at the streaks of brilliant reddish light spearing down from the heavens.

"*What is that, Cree?*" Owen sent to him for he too was looking through his set of field glasses.

"*I don't know,*" Cynyr shot back. He could feel the ground beneath his feet moving but knew he had to be at least fifty miles from where the light was landing.

As the streaks increased until they appeared to be a solid sheet of light streaming down to the ground, Arawn spoke. "What the fuck are you looking at?"

"Red lightning," Cynyr replied. "It's—"

"It's the lasers from the ships," the Prime Reaper said listlessly. "It's taking out the ghorets."

Cynyr's mouth dropped open and he stared with horror at the continuous barrage of red color lighting up the night. "By the gods, Ari," he breathed. "There must be hundreds of those gods-be-damned things!"

"Aye," Arawn said and sat up. He reached for his pants. "You had to know the Ceannus would have brought more this time."

"But so many?" Cynyr said, shuddering. "What if even one of those vile things gets past the ship's notice?"

"It won't."

Lying back on the ground to drag on his pants, Arawn never took his attention from Cynyr's worried face. He pulled on his boots then stood, snagging his shirt from the sand. "Stop fretting about it," he snapped.

"How close do you think they got to where any humans might be?" Cynyr asked, worry rife in his deep voice.

With his shirt buttoned, Arawn tucked it into his pants then zipped up his fly, buttoning his pants before he answered. "Too close."

Cree shivered again. "God, I hope no one got bit by one of them."

"If they did, they're free of this shit we call life," Arawn snapped.

Cynyr turned away from watching the laser lights to look at his boss. "I know you are angry, Ari, but—"

"I should have been there for her," Arawn said.

"It wouldn't have changed anything," Cynyr reminded him.

A muscle ticced in the Prime Reaper's lean jaw. "She didn't want to become one of us." He continued to stare at the light show. "I swore to her I wouldn't let that happen."

"And you know as well as you are standing there that had you been at the Citadel, you would have chosen to save her life," Cynyr told him.

Arawn turned a fierce snarl to Cynyr. "You don't know anything about it!"

"I don't?"

The Queen that once had been hosted in Arawn Gehdrin's body and now resided within Cynyr Cree called out to her fledglings and the nest inside Ari gave him a scalding burn that staggered him. He slapped a hand to his back and groaned with the punishing burn, bending forward with the agony of it.

"I almost lost Aingeal, Ari, and I wasn't going to allow that to happen. You wouldn't have allowed Danni to leave you either and you know it—promise or no promise."

Arawn went to one knee. "Stop torturing me, you fucking bitches!" he hissed at the hellions and the pain slowly resided. He massaged the area where the Revenant worms

had hurt him. "My lady will have to contend with shit like this," he said, tears welling up in his stricken eyes. He tilted his head back to look up at Cynyr. "This is the very thing Danielle feared!"

"But she's alive, Ari," Cynyr said, understanding the other man's anger and helplessness. "She's alive and healthy. Doesn't that count?"

The expression on his face said he knew he was beaten, knew he had no way to fight what had been done. He lowered his head and squeezed his eyes shut. When his shoulders began to shake, Cynyr knelt down beside him and took the Prime Reaper in his arms.

"Let it out, my friend," Cynyr said softly. "Let all of it out."

* * * * *

Iden lowered his field glasses from the fiery streaks of light stabbing the distance and told the others quietly that Cree and Gehdrin had returned. It had been over an hour and still the lights in the sky continued to rain upon the earth but the frequency and distance between each strike had lengthened considerably.

"We guessed it was the High Council's ship," Phalen told Cynyr as the two men came over to the campfire to warm themselves.

"Aye, that's what it is," Cynyr agreed.

"There sure were a lot of those vipers," Iden joined in.

"I'm not sure I understand what it is that is happening," Ash said as he took two cups of coffee over to Cynyr and Arawn. "What exactly is it the Shadowlords are destroying out there?"

"Ghorets," the healer answered for the Reapers. He—like Ash—had been silent most of the evening, preferring to listen to the men for whom they held the deepest respect. "They are pit vipers the likes of which this world can not imagine."

"One bite from one will kill a human like you in less than a heartbeat," Owen said.

"They are evil personified," Glyn stated.

"What of you Reapers?" Ash inquired. "Would you succumb to one of their bites?"

Every man there except the steward looked at Cynyr.

"Let's just say a Reaper would just as soon not like to feel the piercing of its fangs," Cree replied.

"Cynyr once had multiple bites, Ash," the healer said quietly. "He almost died."

"Why would the Ceannus unleash such evil?" Ask queried. "Surely they had to know the vipers would kill every human on—"

"They knew," Arawn cut him off. "That was their intention." He took a sip of the scalding hot coffee as he stared into the fire. The flames cast an eerie shadow on his handsome face and his amber eyes gleamed behind the steam from the coffee.

"We need to destroy them once and for all," Glyn said.

“There was a man from a neighboring village,” Jaborn said, “who fought the agents sent to impress men into the service of the Ceannus. He was a veritable tiger and he seriously wounded several of the press-gang members before they took him down.”

Except for Arawn, all attention shifted to the Akhkarulian.

“He was a large man with the largest hands I’d ever seen,” Jaborn continued. He held up his hand and turned the palm toward him with the fingers splayed. He looked at his palm. “He wasn’t a warrior but a woodcarver and you had to wonder how a man with such large hands could do the intricate detail work needed to create the figurines he carved.”

“And your point is...?” Iden inquired.

Jaborn continued to look at his hand. “This Ceannus threatened to cut off his fingers one by one if he did not behave.” He lowered his hand, rubbing the palm on his pant leg. “None of us knew what we had been brought into. We knew nothing of the Ceannus or what they did. We knew nothing of *balgairs* or Reapers. All we knew was that we were now enslaved to them.”

“Is this going somewhere or are you simply talking to hear yourself talk?” Iden demanded with the impatience of youth.

Jaborn ignored the question.

“When we were undergoing the Transfers of the hellions, this man was among the first to Transition and I remember watching him as he sat staring down at his paws. No doubt he was thinking he would never carve again, that he would remain an animal until he died. I felt pity for him. He was so horrified at what he had become he began gnawing at his paws. He gnawed until they bled and then he began to chew off each toe.”

“How bizarre,” the healer said. “Whatever could he have been thinking?”

“He wanted to die,” Glyn said. “To kill himself.”

“Aye, but then the strangest thing happened,” Jaborn said, turning his head to look at Arawn. “The toes began to grow back.”

Iden shook his head. “I can’t see what the hell any of that has to do with—”

“Anything a Reaper loses after the Transference, the Queen will regenerate if it is destroyed,” Cynyr said, turning his gaze to Arawn.

“That man’s toes came back,” Jaborn said. “Had they been removed before the Transference, they would not have. I was told the re-growth was more painful than when he chewed them off but—”

“Shut the fuck up, Jaborn,” Cynyr snapped, casting a quick look to Arawn.

Arawn narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. He took another sip of his coffee.

The conversation ended and the Reapers began unrolling their bedding for the night. Overhead, the sky was now as black as pitch, the laser flares to the north ended at last. A faint scent hovered on the evening breeze and it wasn’t a pleasant smell. Only

two men sitting at the campfire had experienced that burning odor once before and knew it came from the charred remains of ghoret.

When Arawn and Cynyr finally bunked down, the two Reapers lay side by side a foot apart. Cynyr lay on his back with his hands behind his head, staring up into the darkness, unable to sleep. Arawn lay on his side faced away from Cree, likewise wide-awake.

"Did I ever tell you about the first time Aingeal Transitioned?" Cynyr asked. When Arawn didn't reply, Cree chuckled softly. "She was so damned proud of her tail. She kept swishing it, trying to see it. I thought she'd get dizzy going around and around looking at it." He grunted. "Here I was worried about what I'd done to her and she goes over and pisses in the corner."

Arawn twisted so he could look at Cynyr. "She what?"

Cynyr sighed. "She pissed on the floor, just as unconcerned as anything."

"Bad she-wolf," Arawn commented.

"I told her the same thing," Cynyr said.

"So she took to it without a problem?"

"The only concern she had was that she could read my mind but that won't be the case with Danielle."

Arawn turned over so he was facing Cree. "Why not?"

"Because it wasn't one of your hellions she was given. They gave her one of Aingeal's."

The Prime Reaper frowned. "Why?"

"My guess is to keep you from knowing what was happening to her and wouldn't feel her Transitioning."

Arawn let out a long sigh. "I am so tired of all this, Cyn," he said. "I'd like nothing better than to go to some place like Haines City and live quietly with my lady."

"You could do that," Cynyr suggested. "Move out to Haines City with us. I know Aingeal would love to have Danielle near her."

"How do you propose I do that?"

"You could retire."

Arawn was quiet for a long moment. "If I did, who would assume the Prime Reaper status? Bevyn is next in line but we both know he isn't capable of handling the job." He propped his head in his hand and looked at Cynyr. "Do you want it?"

"Hell, no!" Cynyr said. "I'm happy with things the way they are."

"Owen?"

"Maybe or Glyn," Cynyr said. "Phelan?"

The men exchanged a look and said no at the same time.

"And Iden is just a babe," Arawn said.

"In more ways than just age," Cynyr agreed.

"There's Jaborn," Arawn stated.

"The men wouldn't follow him. They don't know him and they don't trust him, though he seems on the up and up."

"It's a moot point," Arawn said, lying down again on his side. "Ben-Alkazar isn't going to allow me to retire any time soon."

"You won't know until you ask," Cynyr told him.

"I'll think about it," the Prime Reaper said. He tucked his hand under his cheek and closed his eyes.

Cynyr was almost asleep when Arawn woke him with a question. "What?"

"She liked her tail, huh?"

Cree grinned. "She thought it was an uncommonly fine rump she had and I'll tell you something, Ari—there is nothing like running full-out with your she-wolf at your side, nipping at her flanks, taking her down and tumbling over and over in the grass with her. Mating in lupine form is one hell of an experience."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah," Cynyr said with a groan.

Chapter Eight

It was a fiercely bad dream of which each man—including the healer and the steward—was subconsciously aware as they slept, but it was Cynyr who experienced it as the sleeper did while Arawn walked in the Realm of Tromluí, the violent land of nightmares. Had he not been worried about his friend, Cree would have shaken himself awake, pulling out of the private torments of Arawn Gehdrin, but as it was, he lay there reliving the last moments of the Prime Reaper's time on his world and the experience was shattering.

Hordes of determined invaders swept down upon the Castle Annwn with battering rams and grappling hooks, arrows tipped in pitch and catapults primed to toss boulders against the defenders' walls. Wagonload after wagonload of wood, stone and barrels of tar came squeaking down from the hills as the attackers set up camp for the siege. Horsemen with broadswords – at least a thousand strong – stood at the ready, awaiting their leader's command. Archers, spearmen and mace wielders likewise awaited the call to arms. The encampment of the enemy dotted the Plains of Liath from horizon to horizon and to the foot of Mount Siochain, speckling the land like flies. A mighty noise accompanied the would-be conquerors and the stench of sweating men and horses, the cheap perfume of the camp followers, filled the air.

High atop the battlements of Castle Annwn, a man in gray stood with his hands braced on the stone ledge as he observed those who besieged his home. He was the king of Annwn and his people looked to him to protect them from the marauders who were poised to overrun the castle. He glanced up for a moment at the pennant that snapped in the breeze. It bore the crest of his family – a black heron on a white background. A small banner reading Ní neart go cur le chéile – There is no strength without unity – gripped in its talons.

"They be a thousand to our one, Highness," a wizened old man in the billowing red robes of a mage told the king. "We dunna stand a chance agin them."

There was no expectation of his people winning a victory against so many of the enemy and the king knew it. Though the people of Annwn would fight bravely – to the last one standing – they were hopelessly outnumbered and would fall. He bowed his head, all too aware of the only thing that might possibly save the lives of his people.

"I must turn myself over to her, Griffith," the king said in a low voice.

"Ye canna do that!" the mage denied. "She will kill you!"

"If I can barter the lives of my people..."

"Ye only have Queen Duwessa's word that they'll not attack if you submit to her, Highness, and of what good is that? Her word is less than a spit in the ocean!"

The king turned bleak eyes to the old man who had raised him from an orphan of five to the thirty-eight-year-old he was this day. Griffith had been father and mother, older brother and confessor to him all these years and he knew the mage loved him as the elderly man did no other.

"What choice do I have, Griffith?" the king asked. "Either way, I'll die."

"'Aye, but 'tis better to go down with a sword in your hand than die as that witch intends!" Griffith replied.

"And in the doing take my people with me?" he countered. He shook his head. "I won't do that."

"What if she attacks us anyway?" Cairell Banning, the king's master-at-arms asked.

"I can only hope she won't but if I fall, I would rather you take the easier way out than have Duversa's army slaughter you."

Cairell looked to the cauldron in which a vicious, unsettling brew had been cooked. There was enough poison in the blackened vessel to kill every inhabitant of Annwn and all it would take would be one tiny sip of the blood-red contents.

"Promise me if I go down, you won't allow anyone to see what she does to me. She will want you to see, but take that time to give everyone a cup of the brew. If she turns and leaves, then so be it. If she orders her men to attack, I beg you let not one infant be alive when they come through yon gates."

"Highness..."

"Swear to me, Cairell!" the king ordered, taking hold of the soldier's arm.

They stood staring at one another – these two men who had been friends practically from the cradle, who had fed from the breast of the same wet nurse, Cairell's blessed mother Eilis.

"I will not let her hurt you, Arawn," Cairell said, tears already in his eyes.

"And I would give my life that she not hurt you," the king said gently, and drew Cairell into his embrace. "Promise me you'll not let my people come beneath the blades of her butchers while they still live."

Cynyr tossed in his sleep, grunting. Cold sweat broke out on his face and under his arms. He could feel the weight of the sorrow that was pressing down upon Arawn Gehdrin. He could taste the metallic tinge of fear that flooded the king's mouth as he descended the steps of the curtain wall and entered the barbican. He could hear Arawn's rapid heartbeat as he bid his guards open the gate for him to leave.

"Highness, please don't do this!" the chief guard pleaded. "Not for us!"

Arawn put a hand on the man's shoulder. "If not for you, for whom?" He squeezed. "If the gods are with us, she'll be satisfied with my head on a pike and leave the rest of you alone."

"She'll not be satisfied until the lot of us are in our graves," the man said. "Stay with us, Highness. Take the poison and foil her evil plans for you."

The King of Annwn shook his head. "If there is the slightest chance she will leave you be, Pierce, let you live, I must take it."

Whimpering, Cynyr flipped over to his belly and grabbed a handful of his blanket, twisting it in his sleeping agitation. He took every step across the winter field with Arawn as the king walked toward the center of the horde that had congregated to hand him a humiliating defeat. Total silence had settled and not even a horse neighed as warriors parted quietly to allow the man they had come to break walk past them. Some even removed their helms in respect of Arawn Gehdrin's bravery.

It was toward a bright scarlet tent that Arawn headed and Cynyr wanted to reach out and stop him, to pull him back and into the safety of Castle Annwn but – as with all dreams – there was no turning back. The end would come whether Cynyr woke or not.

The woman who lounged upon a satin mound of thick pillows was the most beautiful Cynyr had ever seen. With long, red braided hair that hung well past her lush bosom, green eyes spiked with sooty lashes and a mouth to tempt a monk, her smile when Arawn entered her tent was predatory. She gazed up at him with a sultry look, her lush lips pouting prettily.

"So you have come to spare your people, my love," Queen Du vessa of Cearbhall said in a sensual voice. "A wise choice, Ari."

He went to one knee before her, his head bowed. "I am yours to do with as you please, my Queen."

"Such a devoted husband," the queen said, and when Arawn raised his head, gave him an arched look. "When it suits you."

"It matters not what you do to me, 'Vessa," he said. "All I ask is that you allow my people to –"

"Our people," she corrected him.

A spasm clenched Arawn's jaw. "I ask that you allow my people to live."

Queen Du vessa tilted her head to one side. "Did you have Griffith brew up your little potion for them to drink if I decide to attack, mo tiarna?" When he didn't answer, she smiled hatefully. "Oh I know you did. You don't trust me."

"You've given me no reason to trust you," he told her.

She sat up – her abundant breasts nearly spilling from the low-cut, diaphanous pale green gown that barely covered her curvaceous figure. Drawing up one shapely leg, she clasped her knee in her hands and arched a brow. "And why is that, Arawn?" she countered. "My father had to drag you kicking and shouting to our Joining Day. He had to chain you to my bed until you performed your husbandly duties and then – like a thief in the night – you broke your fetters and fled back to Annwn at the first chance you got."

Arawn lifted his head. "I had no desire to be shackled to you," he said.

The queen's eyes flared at the insult but she let it pass, leaning back instead, one arm thrown over a silken pillow. "Or to any woman save your little trollop Jilline," she said, acid dripping from her tone.

At the mention of the young woman Arawn had loved since childhood, the King of Annwn trembled with impotent rage. He wanted to throw himself upon his wife and wrap his fingers around her swanlike neck, to choke the spiteful life from her whoring body.

"My men enjoyed her immensely. Did you know that?" she taunted him, rubbing salt into the gaping wound that was his heart. "They used her until there was nothing left and then I had them throw her to the dogs for she was nothing but scraps by then. I am sure she was a tasty morsel though."

Arawn dug his fingernails into his palm until blood seeped from the half-moon wounds but he kept silent. As much as he hated the woman in front of him, as much as he longed to tear her apart with his bare hands, he dared not if there was the slightest chance she would leave his people in peace.

"You disappoint me, Ari," the queen said. "Can I not get even a tiny rise out of you?" Her smile was ruthless. "Although, as I remember, the only thing I got out of you was a tiny spurt of lust so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"You drugged me else I would not have taken you then!" he threw at her, unable to hold his tongue. "Give any man an aphrodisiac such as what you had your men pour down my unwilling throat and that bastard would hump you!"

"I've had far better men than you thrusting between my legs, Arawn Gehdrin!" she said. "Even a lowly serf serves me better than you did that night." She flung out an arm. "Strip him!"

Cynyr felt Arawn's humiliation and could almost feel the rough hands of the guards taking hold of his arms to hold him as they did the Prime Reaper. He struggled in his sleep—reliving that terrible day just as Arawn had lived it—and in the doing knew the same helplessness Arawn had felt as the clothes were torn from his body.

"Oh my," the queen said as she came to stand over him. "Despite all your faults, you are a most delectable man, Arawn." She put out a slippered foot to nudge his cock. "Such a waste of that glorious staff."

The guards had knelt down to hold him spread-eagled to the ground. He would not give them or his bitch of a wife the satisfaction of seeing him struggle. He lay perfectly still with his wrists and ankles pinned down, the cold of the wind coming in through the flap of the tent to wash over his bare flesh. Though he had to bite his tongue to keep from groaning as Duessa pressed her foot harder upon his groin, he refused to look away from her hateful smile.

"Has the hurdle arrived yet?" she asked in a merry voice.

"Aye, Your Highness. It awaits your pleasure," the captain of the guard reported.

Arawn could not stop the shudder that rippled down his body.

"And the gallows?" she inquired sweetly.

"On one of the wagons, Your Highness. Would you like us to erect it now?"

"Oh yes," the queen said, and ran the bottom of her slipper up Arawn's belly to his chest. "Place it where his people will get a good look and make sure the rope is sturdy and will hold. He

is a weighty man." She rubbed the toe of her slipper on his pap. "We would not want it to break before he does."

Restless, Cynyr flipped over to his back, breathing hard as though he'd run a long race. He flung an arm over his eyes and whimpered. He was locked in the same nightmare in which Arawn was being held and he could feel the same emotions that were rocketing through Gehdrin—the fear of not being able to withstand the coming torture, the fear of unmanning himself, the very real fear that he would scream while he met his doom, the concern for his people, the weight of their souls settling upon his shoulders whether or not they lived or died—was a crushing burden that pressed down upon the King of Annwn.

She sent everyone away save her personal maid and the four guards who held her husband staked to the floor of her tent. The sound of the gallows being hammered into place was the only sound heard as her hands went to the opening of her gown and she unburdened herself of the flimsy garment.

"Bring me the tenerse, Jocelyn," she ordered.

Arawn clenched his jaw shut, knowing full well what she intended. His eyes were filled with disgust, unbridled fury and a hopelessness that made him want to cry.

The maid squatted down at his head. In her hand was a crystal goblet filled with a cloudy white liquid he knew was milk mixed in with the strong narcotic that was tenerse. She put her free hand on his chin and attempted to pry his mouth open so she could pour the contents into his mouth.

"Oh it will be a hard deed to accomplish, Jocelyn," the queen laughed.

Squatting over him, Duessa sat down on Arawn's belly, the wiry hairs of her nether curls feeling like worms crawling over his flesh. She bent forward and put her fingers to his nipples, twisting them brutally in an attempt to make him open his mouth in protest.

Staunchly refusing to give in to the cruelty, Arawn kept his lips tightly closed although the pain ricocheting through his chest was nearly unbearable. The weight on his belly made it hard to breathe and when his wife slid down him so she could take his flaccid penis in her hands to continue her torture, he squeezed his eyes shut.

"You'll give in, Arawn," the queen said. "You know you will. Why not open your mouth and make it easier on yourself."

She twisted his cock and yanked at it, pinched and scratched it until it bled yet he managed to keep his mouth closed. She squeezed his balls unmercifully.

"Might I make a suggestion, Your Highness?" he heard one of the guards ask.

Duessa stroked his cock gently. "Anything that you think might help would be of interest to me, soldier."

Cynyr groaned in his sleep. He knew it took a man to know how to hurt another man and he cursed as he struggled with the connection locking Arawn and him

together in this brutal nightmare. He felt the wave of terror washing over the Prime Reaper at the guard's words yet there was nothing he could do. What was tormenting Arawn now had happened long, long ago—on a different world and in a different time—and there was no changing it.

"When a man reaches maturity," the guard explained, "his balls descend from his body cavity."

"Aye, I understand that," the queen said in a bored voice.

"What comes down, Majesty," the guard said, looking down at his prisoner, "can go back up and when the balls are held into place, it is very painful."

Arawn opened his eyes and looked into the merciless stare of the guard. The man was a burly hulk whose face was pitted with acne scars.

"Show me," Duwessa ordered.

Cynyr did not feel the brutal torture that followed but he felt Arawn's shame as the guard's hands closed around that most intimate part of his body. He heard the silent scream that reverberated through the Prime Reaper's soul. Squirming on his bedroll as the agony went on and on for what seemed like an hour and when at last that silent scream became one that forced Arawn's mouth open, Cree knew a defeat that nearly shattered his mind.

Sputtering a portion of the liquid from his nostrils as the tenses-laced milk was poured down his throat, his jaw clamped shut to make him swallow the evil potion, Arawn bucked beneath the hold that anchored him. As soon as the tenses flooded his system and his cock jumped in anticipation of the wet cunt sitting so close it, impaling itself upon it, the maid released her hold on his jaw and got up.

"Ah, now we can have some fun," the queen said as she lowered herself upon him, taking his cock in her hand to thrust it up inside her.

It was a maddening itch that had Cynyr writhing on his blanket. His own cock felt the fullness of blood rushing through it and he began to experience the burn of lust. He turned over, pushing himself against the folds of the blanket in an effort to relieve the ungodly need that boiled through his groin. But there was no release and he nearly woke himself with the whimper that pushed from his throat.

She rode him until he was bloody and so sore he whined with each lift of her hot cunt on his flesh. He had come so many times inside her he could not conceive there was any more juice left in his cock when at last she rolled off him to lie at his side panting, sated with such an evil grin on her face he felt it to the core of his being.

"You got me with child that time, husband," she said. "I felt it." She reached out to stroke his chest. "Did you not feel it, Arawn?"

He had and it shamed him to know there would be get from this day's wicked business. That he would leave behind a child of his loins to be at the witch's mercy filled him with despair. Tears fell from the corners of his eyes and his lips trembled. Only the gods knew what harm Duwessa would do a helpless child.

"It seems a waste to destroy such manly beauty," she said as her hands wandered over him. "If you will promise to be a good little boy, I might consider letting you live. Of course, this time, I guarantee you'll not break your chains and leave me!"

There was no way he would consent to being kept as her plaything. He despised her – had long before he had ever been forcibly taken from his estate and forced into joining with the bitch. Her reputation had been one of cruelty, deceit and debauchery and he had wanted no part of her. All he had ever wanted was Jilline and Duwessa had savagely destroyed that sweet, precious girl long ago.

"What say you, husband? Would you rather live as my pet or die as my enemy?" she asked, rubbing her hand over his raw and bleeding cock.

"I would rather die."

Cynyr stood to one side and watched as Arawn was dragged from the queen's tent. The hurdle – a framework made of rough branches – had been attached by a sling to the back of a mule and stood waiting as the guards pulled Arawn toward it. Naked, the King of Annwn was lashed down to the hurdle in the same spread-eagled position and the horse set into motion. On the hard framework, the Prime Reaper was dragged toward his castle, in clear view of the defenders who manned the battlements.

Walking slowly beside the conveyance that carried Arawn to his fate, Cynyr could feel the weight of the eyes of Arawn's people and their hopelessness. The man they loved was being taken to his death because of them, yet when he slipped gently into Arawn's mind, there was no regret there – only an abiding hatred for the woman who had caused this to happen.

They had unlashed him from the hurdle then bound his hands behind him, pulling him toward the gallows that stood waiting. The queen herself had dropped the noose around his neck and had stood there smiling as they hoisted him up, legs scissoring as the hemp cut into his flesh, cutting off his air, choking him. By the time they let him drop to the ground, his vision was nothing more than a black blur with zigzagging stars spinning through the darkness.

Once more they lashed him to the hurdle but this time would be the last. He was more dead than alive, gasping for breath, unable to speak, the rope burn around his neck stinging brutally.

In the distance thunder rumbled ominously and dark clouds began to form. A winter storm was brewing. Lightning stair-stepped through the heavens to the west.

He barely felt the first plunge of the knife into his belly but as his flesh was sliced open, the pain became so intense it brought a cry from his lips. When the executioner reached into him to pull out his intestines, he could not stop the godawful scream that trilled from his lips.

Cynyr woke as he felt the connection to Arawn broken and he turned over to see the Prime Reaper walking out into the desert. He got up and followed him.

"I had forgotten there was a link between us," Arawn said as Cynyr came to stand behind him. "I am sorry I disturbed your sleep."

"I am sorry that was done to you," Cynyr said. He had never been one to embrace another man but he ached to take Arawn into his arms and hold him.

"The storm got much worse," the Prime Reaper said. He was leaning against a cottonwood tree with his arms crossed, staring out into the night. "It was so violent they rushed Du vessa back to her tent. Hail as large as your fist began falling all around me but not once did any of it hit me."

"Morrigunia," Cynyr said.

Arawn nodded. "I was in such pain I wished the hail would knock me unconscious so I could die in peace. My guts were spilled out beside me, hanging over the frame of the hurdle. I could smell them and the stench was disgusting. I doubt I had a cup of blood left in me by the time She came swooping down out of the boiling heavens." He glanced at Cynyr. "I don't think anyone saw Her but me. She came down like some kind of giant white bird with Her wings fluttering. All I remember is Her picking me up and soaring over the mountains with me in Her arms. At some point I passed out or died. I'll never know which. When I came to, I was lying beside Her on a soft fur rug with hundreds of candles lighting whatever room we were in. I do remember Her giving me the Revenant worm but after that, everything is a blank."

"We know now there was more, don't we?" Cynyr asked.

"Aye," Arawn said, bitterly.

"I ache knowing how horrible your death was, Ari."

The Prime Reaper shrugged. "We all had to die in some way, Cyn, or we wouldn't be here together now."

"Do you know whatever became of Du vessa?"

Arawn snorted. "The only thing I asked—the only thing I've ever asked of Her—was to keep my people safe, to punish Du vessa for killing me. Whether She did or not is something else I don't guess I'll ever know. I can only hope She did and that Du vessa is rotting in hell and has taken on the title of Queen of Maggots."

"I would never have imagined you to have been a king before your Transition," Cynyr said. "You don't act like how I imagine a king acts."

Arawn actually laughed at that. "No one is ever really what we think they are, Cyn," he said. "Now? Now, I am just as much a slave to Morrigunia as you or Owen or Glyn." He looked down at the ground. "Maybe even more so."

“Why do you say that?” Cynyr asked.

Arawn smiled grimly. “Think of the history here, Cree. We were told that Morigunia eradicated disease, especially cancer, yet She allowed my lady to get that vile sickness.” He gave Cynyr a narrowed look. “Either allowed her to get it or gave it to her. Take your pick.”

Cynyr’s eyes widened. “But why would She do that?”

“To force the issue of my lady becoming a Reaper,” Arawn said, looking away. “Why? Only She knows but it makes me even more beholden to Her for Danni’s life.”

“It’s going to be all right,” Cynyr said, and when Arawn met his eye, “with Danielle.”

A sad smile tugged at the corner of the Prime Reaper’s mouth. “I hope so, my friend. By the gods, I hope so.”

Chapter Nine

Danielle stayed in her apartment, refusing to see anyone. Her meals were left at the door and – thankfully – were eaten but no one saw her for several days after her first Transition had occurred. Once Aingeal had gone by with the determination to make her friend open the door and talk to her but she had heard chuffing noises that told her Danielle had deliberately reverted into Transition. Surprised and concerned, with her fist raised in preparation of knocking, she had decided against it when she heard what sounded like a laugh coming from behind the door.

“Danni?” she called out, and when there was no answer, she started once more to knock but a low voice from the other side of the portal stopped her.

“Go away, Aingeal. I’m not ready to come out yet,” Danni said.

“We need to talk.”

“We will, but not now. Please respect that,” the newest Reaper requested.

Against her better judgment, Aingeal had left, her brow furrowed. She had gone straight to her husband’s second-in-command who was working out in the room set aside for the Reapers. She walked up to him where he lay on a bench pushing a bar of heavy weights up and down, grunting as he strained, his biceps flexing in such a way she wanted to run her tongue up and down his bulging arm.

“That is doing strange things to the area between my legs, Coure,” she complained with a flick of her long braid over her shoulder. “Stop it this instant.”

Bevyn blinked, his mouth dropping open as his face turned a particularly strange red color. He quickly dropped the bar of weights into the stand at the top of the bench and practically levitated off the bench, grabbing a towel to hide his naked chest from her. He clutched the towel in front of him as though it were a shield. “W-what are you –?”

“Where the hell is your lady?” she demanded with her hands on her hips and her foot tapping out a dangerous rhythm. “Why isn’t she in here protecting you from women flooded with hormones who might leap on you and have their way with you for looking too damned good?”

Coure swallowed and backed up another step, putting distance between himself and the wild woman who was glaring at him. “Aingeal, what the hell has gotten into you?” he asked nervously.

“Cynyr Cree got into me, that’s who!” she yelled. “And look what he did to me. Again!” She pointed to her burgeoning belly that seemed to get bigger with every passing day. That said, she broke down crying, her hands covering her face.

At a complete loss to know what to do, Bevyn just stood there – his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

“She’s in there reverting back and forth like a gambler flipping a coin and I don’t know how to help her,” Aingeal sobbed.

Bevyn’s dark brows drew together in confusion. “Who?” he asked. “Lea?”

Aingeal lowered her hands to give him a vicious look that made him take another step back. “No, you moron!” she shouted. “Danni! Danni! Danni! Who the hell did you think we were talking about?”

The Shadowlords had warned Bevyn that the closer to term Cynyr’s woman got, the stranger her behavior would be, and he now understood what they’d been talking about. As much as he would have liked to have gone to her and taken her in his arms as Cyn would have done had he been there, he was just a little bit wary of getting too close to the raging termagant. She was looking at him as though he were a tasty side dish and that was doing strange things to his own libido.

“Stop sweating!” she bellowed. “You have no idea what watching the sweat dripping down the side of your neck is doing to me, Coure! Are you taunting me on purpose?”

Eyes wide, Bevyn yanked the towel farther up his body and swiveled his head from side to side, looking for an answer – and failing that – an easy way out of this situation.

Lord Kheelan appeared behind Aingeal, his face grave. He glanced at Bevyn and cocked his head to one side in an unspoken command for the Reaper to make his exit quickly.

Bevyn obeyed, rushing past Aingeal without bothering to retrieve either his shirt or his boots.

Aingeal spun around – prepared to scream her rage at the fleeing man – but when she saw the High Lord, she stiffened, and her eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. “What did you do to Bevyn?”

“I think you should go see Healer Dresden and have him give you a posset to get you in a better humor, wench,” he stated.

If it were at all possible, Aingeal’s eyes narrowed even more lethally. “Would you like me to tell you where you can stick your posset, Ben-Alkazar?” she growled.

Not at all concerned with her attitude, the High Lord just looked at her. “What ails you, Aingeal?” he asked in a soft voice.

She opened her mouth to insult him again then her anger deflated and her shoulders slumped. “She’s...” She waffled her hand back and forth then sat down on the exercise bench Bevyn had left and hung her head.

“Not everyone will embrace the Transitioning as you did, sweeting,” Lord Kheelan said. “Each must deal with the change in her own way.”

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I...”

"You are experiencing the vagaries of your hormones," he said, sitting on another bench across from her. "It is perfectly understandable."

"I'm being a bitch," she complained, her head down once more.

"Well, you surely scared the shit out of Lord Bevyn," he agreed, and when she grinned, he chuckled. "He needs someone to lay the law down to him from time to time. Lea doesn't seem inclined to do so."

Aingeal sighed. "I'll go apologize to the poor man."

They were silent for a moment and when Aingeal looked up, she found the High Lord staring at her with an expression that she would have had to be blind not to see. Her face flamed and both of them looked away.

"Danielle will come around," Lord Kheelan said. "When she realizes two very important things occurred with her Transitioning, she'll open her door and come out to join us as though nothing ever happened and she'll not speak of it again."

Aingeal's brows came together. "What two things?"

The High Lord doubled his fist then stuck up his thumb. "First, she will realize that had she died, Arawn would have been destroyed completely. She is his mate and he would mourn himself to death for want of her." He extended his index finger toward her, making his hand look like a child's imitation of a six-shooter. "Second, she will begin to see that she will now be able to be with Arawn as it was meant for her to be. They will live a long and happy life and she will bear him the children they desire."

"I hope you're right," she said, unable to look him in the eye.

"I am always right, wench," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Just ask me and I'll tell you."

She smiled at his conceit. "Then all will be well with the world then, eh, *mo tiarna*?"

"Not quite," he replied. "The problem lies with Lea."

"How so?" she asked.

"She is terrified of becoming a Reaper and her fright is all-consuming. It was bad enough before Danielle's conversion. Now Lea believes that should the opportunity arise, Bevyn will go back on his promise not to bring her into his world. She has made up her mind to leave him."

Aingeal flinched. "She can't!" she said. "Doesn't she realize what that would do to Bevyn?"

"I doubt she has even considered his feelings in this," he replied. "She thinks only of herself and always has. It won't be the same devastation to him as if she were to pass away but it will, nevertheless, devastate Bevyn Coure. A Reaper has a mate but once in his lifetime and should Lea decide to take another man into her life, into her bed and body, Coure will tear that man apart with his bare hands." He shook his head. "I don't think Lea has thought out the ramifications of her leaving him."

"This isn't good," Aingeal said, and then blinked, looking past the High Lord's shoulder.

Lord Kheelan turned to find Danielle standing there with her hands on her hips.

“So what do we do to convince Lea becoming a Reaper isn’t so bad?” Danni inquired.

* * * * *

Mumbling to himself, Bevyn took the stairs up to his apartment two at a time. Grateful each Reaper had his own floor – actually one entire side of one floor in the five-pointed structure – and that his was on the same level with Arawn’s, Cynyr’s, Owen’s and Glyn’s with Phelan and Iden one rung below them and housed with the healers, there was no one about save Aingeal and Danielle to make noise. At the moment he believed Danni locked in her apartment and he knew Aingeal to be in the gymnasium wreaking havoc upon the High Lord.

The thought of Lord Kheelan being scourged by Aingeal Cree’s tongue caused Bevyn to laugh out loud. If anyone could set the High-and-Mighty Ben-Alkazar back on his heels, it was Cynyr Cree’s lady.

As it always was when Lea was with him at the Citadel, the door to their apartment was wide open. Like him – and every Reaper – Lea had a dislike of closed-in places. Even with the expansive apartment nearly as large as a grand house, the door was always wide for few ventured up to the Reapers’ abodes without an express invitation to do so.

“Lea?” he called out, turning left and heading toward the bathing chamber, unbuttoning his pants as he went.

There was no answer so he made for the shower. Just as his fellow warriors dearly loved to stand for as long as they could beneath the onslaught of warm water, Bevyn was looking forward to stripping off his pants and allowing the water to beat the kinks out of his muscles. He came up short when he saw Lea standing at the end of the hall.

“Didn’t you hear me calling you?” he asked, going on into the shower area.

“I heard,” she said. “I just didn’t care to answer you.”

Bevyn paused as he started to push his pants down over his hips. He frowned then went back to the door and looked down the hall at her. “What did I do now?” he asked with a loud sigh.

“Take your shower then we’ll talk,” she said, turning and going into their bedchamber.

Putting his hands on his hips, Bevyn let his head sag to his chest. He knew that tone of voice and when his lady used it, his ass was in trouble. Forgetting about the shower, he padded barefoot to the bedroom they shared and found her sitting on the side of the bed.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, coming to stand in front of her. When she didn’t answer, he squatted down in front of her and put his hands to either side of her on the edge of the mattress. “Did something happen?”

“You smell,” she said, pulling back from him. “Go take your shower then we’ll talk.”

He looked at her for a long moment then got up and went back to the bathing chamber. Turning the water on as hot as it would go, he shucked off his pants, kicked them into the corner of the room then snatched open the glass doors that never failed to amaze him. Stepping inside the tiled area, he ducked his head under the water and just stood there with his hands on the wall in front of him to allow the water to drum against his shoulders, closing his eyes to keep the hot liquid out.

Several thoughts went through Bevyn Coure’s head as he ground his teeth to the fiery blast of the water. It was a punishment now and not the relaxing interlude he’d been looking forward to. His agile mind touched on the glass doors that had been found stacked in a storage room deep beneath the original foundation of the Citadel. There had been enough of the doors for the chambers of the Shadowlords and the Reapers with a few left over for senior healers. From the strange doors, his wanderings took him to the confrontation with Aingeal in the exercise room and he sighed deeply. He’d never liked confrontations and especially not with women.

Opening his eyes, he straightened up, grabbed the soap and began lathering himself. He took the shortest shower of his life and when he stepped out and jerked a fluffy white towel off the rack to dry himself, he called to Lea.

She didn’t answer.

A sickening dread twisted in his belly and he hastily wrapped the towel around his hips and stalked down to the bedchamber. He knew before he entered that she was gone.

The closet doors stood open and all her hanging clothes were gone. He knew if he went to the armoire, the dresser, the chest of drawers, he’d find only his own clothing.

Hurt entered his dark eyes and for just a moment he stood there, uncertain what to do. He knew she couldn’t have left the Citadel for from the moment the team had left for their mission, the entire facility had been placed on lockdown. There would be no visitors in and no residents out—for any reason. That meant she had made arrangements for some other place to stay and that pissed him off as nothing had in a long, long time.

With his jaw clamped tight, a muscle working furiously, he stomped over to the closet, grabbed a pair of black jeans off the shelf, snatched a black T-shirt from the dresser and dragged the garments on. Not bothering to put on any boots, he left his apartment in search of his woman.

* * * * *

The silver-haired Argent was sitting alone at her desk with her fingers threaded together. She looked as though she had been expecting Bevyn and smiled gently at him. “You may go on in, Lord Bevyn,” she said.

The High Lord was standing at the windows, looking out into a misty rain that had speckled the panes. Storm clouds were rolling in from the ocean, turning the middle of the day dark.

"Where is she?" Bevyn asked without preamble.

Lord Kheelan didn't turn around. He continued to stand with his hands behind his back, watching the coming storm. "She asked for privacy, Lord Bevyn, and I have granted her request."

"Why?"

"You know why."

The Reaper cursed and flung himself into one of the oversized chairs. Stretching his long legs out in front of him, he crossed his ankles and laid his head on the tall, leather back, gripping the thickly upholstered chair arms as though he were choking an adversary.

"What should I do?" he asked.

Turning around, Lord Kheelan came over to sit in a chair across from his Reaper. He almost smiled at how young Coure looked barefoot and with his hair wet and clinging to his forehead and neck. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have severely chastised the young man – perhaps even remanded him to a con cell for a few days – but he knew Bevyn was more upset than he'd been since his untimely death.

"Lady Aingeal and Lady Danielle have agreed to speak with Lea," the High Lord informed Bevyn.

The Reaper had been staring at his bare toes. He looked up. "Danni is out of her room?"

Lord Kheelan nodded. He clasped his hands together and put them behind his head, reclining in the chair as his guest was doing. "It seems she wanted to experiment with her new station in life without having anyone seeing her. She has come to terms with the Transference."

Bevyn nodded then smiled, the twin dimples in his cheeks making him look even younger. "Cyn said Aingeal is really proud of her tail."

"And rightly so, I'm sure," the High Lord agreed. "I believe Lady Danielle believes her ruff is quite fetching."

The Reaper grunted then raked his fingers through his wet hair to push it back from his forehead. "I can't allow Lea to leave me, Your Grace," he said.

"You can't or you won't?"

Bevyn looked him straight in the eye. "I won't."

"The decision is yours," Lord Kheelan said, surprising Bevyn. "The Shadowlords will not interfere."

"I should have settled this with her long ago," Bevyn said.

"Aye, you should have."

“Will the Shadowlords stand behind me if I give her a fledgling?”

Lord Kheelan frowned. “We’ll not censure you if that is what you are asking and we are prepared to allow you to legally Join with her, but we will not condone the use of violence. You know that.”

Bevyn groaned. “What am I going to do if she won’t accept Transference? If she continues to want to leave me?”

A shadow passed over the High Lord’s face. “If you wish her to remain here, she will remain here. That is a given. Our first priority is you. That is the chance you take when you mate. That is why we would prefer you not do so. She may never accept Transference and since she was the mate you chose, you will never have another. If she refuses you from now on, you will be a miserable man, I’m afraid.”

“For joy, for joy,” Bevyn mumbled.

“Let’s see what Aingeal and Danielle can accomplish with your lady. Perhaps they will make her see the advantages to becoming a Reaper.”

Bevyn nodded. He was quiet for a long time then seemed to shake off his worry. “Have you heard from the team?”

Lord Kheelan nodded. “They left for the eastern coast of Diabolusia to rendezvous with the *Bonnie Doneen* later this afternoon.”

“How’s Arawn?”

“Handling the situation quite well according to Lord Cynyr. He had a few touchy moments but he sees the advantages in having a Reaper mate as I hope your lady will.”

* * * * *

Arawn looked up as a seagull soared above them. He could smell the salt tang in the air though they had yet to see the water. He was completely unprepared for the soft voice that touched his mind gently.

“Mo shearc?”

The Prime Reaper drew in his horse. “Danielle?” he questioned, and motioned his men on ahead. “Are you all right?”

“I am fine. How are you?”

“Worried sick about you, a ghrá mo chroí,” he told her. “Why did you hide your illness from me? Don’t ever do that again! I am your husband and it is my right to know these things!”

In his mind he heard her sigh and could picture her shaking her head at his demand. Her words only underscored the exasperation he felt coming to him from across the miles.

“I did what I thought best, Ari.”

“Aye and in the doing you took a hundred years off my life, wench,” he complained.

“Tá aiféala orm,” she said, telling him she was sorry.

"*You should be,*" he said then smiled as he heard her laughter across the distance. "Tá grá agam duit," she whispered to him.

"*I love you too.*" He scowled. "*Danni, how is it you are speaking to me now? We did not share blood and –*"

"*Lord Kheelan gave me Sustenance from you. He did not know if we could communicate but it seems we can.*"

"*That is because you are a mindshields,*" he said with a slight hint of censure in his tone. His scowl deepened when he heard her laughing at him.

"*You poor baby,*" she said. "*Does the big, bad Reaper have a problem his little she-wolf needs to take care of?*"

Arawn's eyebrows shot up. "*Do you think you can?*"

"*Well, let's see...*"

He felt her lips on his cock and drew in a ragged gasp, nearly tumbling from his horse. She had sucked him in and was deep-throating him so strongly he could barely draw breath from the pleasure of it. His thighs clamped together against his saddle and he let his head fall back, closing his eyes to the delicious warmth plying the flesh restrained in the fabric of his leather uniform pants.

Then the most wondrous thing happened to Arawn Gehdrin. He was no longer sitting astride his mount in the desert but was lying naked on a mat of cool, fragrant grass under the massive, spreading arms of a midnight tree. Opening his eyes and lifting his head, he stared in amazement at his lady kneeling between his open thighs.

"How?" he whispered.

"*Mindshields have talents I believe you will find welcome, mo shearc,*" she said before bending over his rigid shaft. Her tongue swirled around the head, dipped into the opening to send shivers of delight racing through him.

Somewhere in the greensward surrounding him Arawn could hear a night bird calling to its mate. Crickets chirped and the leaves above him rustled as his lady's lips and tongue plied his rigid flesh. He could smell the hint of gardenia wafting through the darkness and it only added to the fevered lust that was shimmering through him.

He pushed away from the grass and reached for her, completely amazed he could feel her flesh as solidly as if they were actually together. He took her upper arms in his hands and turned so that she fell lightly to the grass.

"*Was I not satisfying your needs, mo shearc?*" she asked with a pout.

"*There are needs and then there are needs, milady,*" he told her as he stretched out atop her then slid down her until he could take her sex into his mouth.

Wickedly plying his tongue against her clit and the sweet, honeyed folds – the scent from which drove him made with desire – he slid one finger into her cunt and another into her anus, half smiling at her gasp of delight.

"*Isn't magic wonderful?*" she asked with a sigh.

He dragged his tongue along her pink folds as he fingered her, gently easing those strong digits in and out of their tight sheaths. His teeth grazed her swollen clit and the moment he felt her hands spike through his hair to hold him still, he laughed – sending warm breath between her quivering thighs.

She arched her hips up to give him better access to her moist heat. Her fingers tightened in his hair as he stabbed his tongue repeatedly against her clit until she began to writhe on the soft, sweet grass.

“Have pity, *mo shearc!*” she said. “I need you in me!”

“Not yet, little she-wolf,” he said, and pulled away. He reached for her ankles, pushed her legs up to her belly then flipped her over, dragging her beneath him as he stretched out upon her back.

His weight was delicious as it pressed her to the ground. The ripe, fertile scent of the soil and the sweet fragrance of the grass were intoxicating as she lay there with her cheek against the earth. His heavy cock was wedged between her thighs, her ass riding its steely length.

“Beast,” she whispered, and wriggled her bottom against his hard erection.

Coming up on his knees between her legs, he put a heavy hand to her shoulder and drew her up so she was on all fours in front of him. His cock poised at the entrance to her sex.

“Are you bragging or complaining?” he asked her, his right hand tight on her shoulder as his left reached around and under her to roll her clit.

“Arawn!” she gasped. She bounced her bottom against him. “Stop playing with me!”

He bent over her so he could lightly sink his teeth into her left shoulder, rolling her clit expertly as he ground his shaft along her cleft.

Danni bucked under him and growled low in her throat. His fingers were torturing her and the feel of his rod sliding just along her folds was driving her insane. She wanted that hard, long, pulsing cock inside her to satisfy the itch already beginning to form.

The Reaper flicked his tongue over the shallow bite then swept it up to her ear, thrusting it into the sensitive spiral chamber and chuckling at his lady’s irritated groan.

“Damn it, Reaper!” Danni snarled. “Do me!”

He reached down with his left hand to guide his cock into her, thrusting deep – going all the way to the hilt so that his wiry curls tickled her soft ass. “Like that?” he taunted.

She ground against him, arching her hips, pushing against his stiffness. His right hand still gripped her shoulder – pulling her back against him then pushing her away as he set the rhythm for their lovemaking. His left hand had returned to her clit and his fingers were rolling that swollen nub and stroking it until Danni was nearly mindless with lust.

Their bodies rocked together as Arawn thrust hard and deeply into her moist channel. He once again sank his teeth into her shoulder and when he did, he felt the first vibrations of release undulating through her cunt. With his teeth locked on her flesh he told her to come for him, to give him all she had.

Danni was panting and slamming back against him as hard as she could. Her rocking motion made him grunt with the force. She wanted to draw him all the way into her, to suck his body deep into hers and hold him there forever. The strength of his erection, the width and breadth of his deliciously hard cock, the slap of his balls between her thighs, his fingers plying her clit, his teeth gripping her shoulder—tongue swirling over the flesh—all combined to start a snapping flame of pure lust deep in her very core. As that flame leapt to life, it rushed through her cunt like a wildfire and flashed along the walls of her channel. Tiny bursts of energy flashed along with it and the climax that shot through her was so violent, so intense, she screamed with the pleasure it wrought.

Arawn's cock was like steel as he pistoned in and out of her fiery slit. His knees were digging into the fecund earth as he rocked, as he slammed into her. At the moment he felt her release begin and the warm wash of her fluids flowing over his straining cock, he unleashed his own shattering climax that felt as though her hand was inside her milking him, pulling on him, dragging at his flesh, squeezing and teasing and pleasing him in ways he'd never experienced.

"Danielle!" he howled as he came, spurting into her so hotly, so thickly, so copiously, that he felt bathed in the seminal fluid. He continued to pump into her until every last drop of him had been drained and when he felt the last pulse of his rod, he collapsed atop her, driving them both to the ground.

They lay there in the darkness beneath the spreading oak tree with its massive, moss-draped branches and listened to the night sounds that were so soothing, so calming, that nothing else save their love mattered. The evening wind played over their naked bodies and the scents of the greensward vied with the heady scents of their spent lust.

"I love you," he said, and gently kissed the nape of her neck.

"I love you too, my Reaper," she said.

And then as quickly as it had begun, it ended and Arawn's eyes snapped open. He groaned to find himself fully clothed atop his steed, the horse's reins held tightly in his sweating palms.

"Hurry home, mo shearc," she said, the last words fading away on the wind.

Arawn hung his head and sighed deeply. The magical pleasure she'd given him would have to last until he could hold her in his arms once again. He had no idea how long his interlude with her had lasted but he doubted it had been as long in reality as it had been in his soul.

Cynyr was waiting for him just before a rise over which the other men had already ridden. Cree was sitting astride his horse with his arms crossed over the pommel. He smiled at Arawn as the Prime Reaper reined in beside him. "Your lady is well?"

"*Sí grá mo chroi,*" Arawn said, still basking in the afterglow of the pleasure he'd been given.

"As Aingeal is the love of my life," Cynyr acknowledged. "But...?"

"I may have bitten off more than I can chew by Joining with a mindshilder," he said. "She fair rode me to the bone tonight."

"Oh," Cynyr said, and looked away, grinning.

"I told her she had shortened my life with her antics."

"*Mairg darab galar an grádh,*" Cynyr said with a chuckle.

"Aye," Arawn agreed. "Love is a sickness."

"But one we gladly endure, eh?"

They kicked their mounts into motion and crested the rise. It was a glorious view that greeted them with a crescent-shaped bay formed like a luscious turquoise sheet of satin undulating to the pristine white shore. A little ways out, a black schooner lay at anchor, her black shrouds furled tight to the crosstrees.

"Now that is a Reaper ship if ever I saw one," Owen commented as Arawn and Cynyr joined the other men. "Look how she gleams in the sunlight."

"She'll have the ability to skip across the shoal waters to a mark of six fathoms and take us fairly close to the seawall of the Ceannus camp," Jaborn said. When the men turned to give him a surprised look, he shrugged. "I spent time on a pirate ship before I died."

"Six fathoms is...?" Iden asked.

"Thirty-six feet," Arawn answered.

"That's a lot of water to close over our heads," Phelan commented.

"The Misery River is forty feet deep in some places," Owen stated.

"Not where we were swimming," Phelan grumbled.

"We'll take a jolly boat in," Arawn reminded them. "There'll be hardly—if any—moon tomorrow night so we won't have to worry about being seen. We'll just row very quietly, beach the boat, wriggle under the opening between the land and the Net, and slip over the seawall, do what needs doing."

"They're rowing out to pick us up," Phelan commented, nudging his chin toward the boat being lowered into the water from the schooner. "What the hell are we going to do with the horses?"

"Good question," Iden said. "I'm not leaving my mount out here on the beach."

"A few of the *Bonnie Doneen's* crew will be taking care of them for us. The horses will be waiting for us in Mezza when we sail back this way," Arawn said. "Mezza is

about ten miles north of us. There's no need for you to worry. The beasts will be well cared for, Iden."

"How can we be sure the mounts will be there when we return?" Phelan queried. "I've never had much trust for Diabolusians."

"Can you think of anything else to worry about, Kiel?" Arawn snapped.

Phelan sniffed. "I'm sure I could think of something if needs be."

The Prime Reaper bared his fangs at the younger man then threw his leg over his horse and slid to the ground. Sometimes Phelan tended to rub him the wrong way.

Going out into the water to help the crewmen pull the small boat to shore, Cynyr and Owen explained to the men who would be caring for the horses that Reapers held their destriers in high regard.

"We will guard them with our lives, milords!" one of the men swore, his hand to his heart.

"You will if you intend to keep that organ beating in your chest and out of my claws," Phelan snapped as he handed his reins to the sailor.

"Kiel," Arawn growled in warning.

"I'm just saying..." Phelan mumbled as he climbed into the boat.

"Shut your fucking mouth and don't say anything!" the Prime Reaper ordered.

"We will take good care of the horses, milord," the sailor promised Arawn, touching a finger to his forelock.

"What the hell's the matter with Kiel?" Cynyr asked Owen in a low voice as the two of them took up the oars.

"That time of the month, I guess," Owen said with a shrug. "You know how his kind get."

Jaborn leaned forward and asked Owen what exactly that meant. "Is Lord Kiel a half man?"

Owen cocked a shoulder. "I don't think he even knows, Kasid. He has this way about him that just seems off-kilter sometimes, you know? He visits whorehouses just like the rest of us without mates do but—"

"For what purpose do you do this?" Jaborn interrupted, shock shifting over his dark face. "Are not Reapers only allowed to mate with one female?"

"Orally, Kasid," he said with a wink, "a Reaper can get relief. He just can't penetrate the whore or he's bought her."

Glyn had been listening to the quiet exchange and tapped Owen on the shoulder. "It's never come up before but—"

"Take matters into your own hands then," Owen quipped.

Glyn hissed at his best friend. "Damn it, will you be serious?"

"What pearl of wisdom do I need to impart to you today, child?" Owen inquired.

“A Reaper is only allowed to mate with one female,” Glyn said. “To actually penetrate one female. But if it isn’t a female he wants, does the rule still apply to a half man or can he have multiple sexual partners?”

The Akhkarulian glanced over at Phelan as the younger man took a seat beside Iden. “It is forbidden on my world to be a sodomite and if one is caught, the punishment is death. I do not like to think a Reaper could be such an abomination.”

“We don’t look at half men in that way over here, Kasid. A man or woman’s sexual preference is their own and not governed by law,” Owen said. His eyebrows drew together. “As for multiple male partners? You’ll have to ask Lord Kheelan about that. If I had to make a guess though, I’d say a mate is a mate whether female or male.”

Glyn nodded and he too was staring at Phelan. “How would Kiel know if he was a half man or not unless he actually put his cock in another male?”

Jaborn shuddered and sat back. “Please, I do not want to hear of such sickness.”

“I suppose he could have had another half man lick his stick at some point,” Owen said. “Wouldn’t you think he’d know then?”

Arawn was the last man to climb into the boat, taking the place on the seat beside Jaborn. He crooked his finger, motioning Owen closer. When Tohre leaned back, the Prime Reaper wrapped his hand around Owen’s neck and squeezed hard.

“I heard every word you said and I’m sure Kiel did too,” Arawn growled, his eyes blazing. “One more speculation from either you or Glyn about Phelan and I promise you I’ll spread-eagle you to the beach and allow Kiel to have his way with your teeny-tiny stick. How’s that?”

Owen’s face turned bright red and he risked a look at Phelan sitting in the back of the boat. Kiel smiled nastily back at him then doubled his fist, put it up to his open mouth and—with his tongue poking at his jaw—pretended he was doing something that turned Owen’s complexion from red to green.

Cynyr howled as Arawn ordered Owen to start rowing.

Chapter Ten

The *Bonnie Doneen* quietly lowered its one hundred-pound anchor into the midnight black waters, the heavily greased windlass making no sound at all as the giant hook slipped below the surface. Running without lights, the ninety-six-foot, sleek, two-master, gaff-rigged ebony ship sat two hundred yards from the seawall of the Ceannus camp like a lurking phantom—undetected by the lookouts in the seven towers that shined light down on the enemy site.

There was no moon in the dark clouds above the schooner. The air was cooler than the Reapers would have liked but with a trace of rain hovering about them and a light fog drifting in, it made for a murky night that better hid them from sight.

With hand signals, the jolly boat was lowered just as silently as the anchor had and it settled without sound. The seven black-clad men climbing barefoot down the rope ladder one by one moved like the wind and equally as purposeful. Taking up the oars from which the safety chains had been removed, Iden Belial and Kasid Jaborn began rowing, thrusting the black-stained oak oars softly in the water so no splash could be heard. The boat glided silently over the waves. Not one word was spoken by the men as each of them protectively stroked the thick oilskin bags that held their laser whips, guns and holsters, and dragon-hilt daggers. In two of the bags were three arming devices to blow to hell and back the Ceannus starship and headquarters building. The bags would hang from straps buckled to their waists as they swam.

Although a few of them normally wore small gold hoops in their left earlobes, two wore wedding rings and four wore gold medallions around their necks, on this night the adornments were gone. They would each go naked into the ocean, fashioning magically their clothing—uniforms, boots and hats—on themselves when they reached the beach.

The rowers ceased their movements and allowed the oars to rest gently in the oarlocks, winding hemp around the oaken implements to keep them in place since the safety chains had been removed. Silently, Glyn Kullen slipped over the side of the boat and—treading water—reach up to take the anchor from Phelan, sinking noiselessly beneath the surface to make sure the anchor made no sound as it touched the bottom.

One by one, the men eased themselves over the side of the jolly boat and with light movements of their feet to avoid splashing, set out for the shore, trying to ignore the bone-chilling feel of the water.

Having been given the exact location of the breach in the Net's circumference it was toward that spot they moved.

Crouched low as they came up the beach toward the seawall where the Net did not extend all the way to the sand, the Reapers stretched out on their bellies, pushed their

oilskin bags ahead of them then took turns wriggling like eels under the gap. They then separated, hiding in the shadow of the seawall. They brought forth from the very air around them their clothing then quickly opened their oilskin bags and put on their weapons. Armed, Cynyr and Glyn went north to begin systematically taking out the guards on the first three towers. Iden and Phelan went south to do the same for the four towers located there. Arawn and Jaborn headed for the starship docked at the far side of the encampment as Owen made his way toward the main building to shut down the Net so air strikes—should they be necessary—could be sent in by the High Council and Morigunia could fly in to extract the Reaper bloodsons.

Working like a well-oiled and efficient machine, the men slipped like dark specters through the night. Each knew his job, his strength, and had the ability to deal death as silently, quickly and dispassionately as any raptor diving on the thermals after its prey.

* * * * *

It was to a vast cadaverous room the four of them had never entered that they had been summoned in the dead of night. They had been given no choice of whether or not to obey the High Council's order for unsmiling guards had issued the order and had marched behind them to the meeting place. Taking the zigzagged stairs farther and farther below ground, Bevyn and the three women—Aingeal, Danielle and a very reluctant Lea—descended in silence, each wondering what was about to happen.

Now they sat on plush, black velvet chairs ranged in a circle along with the three Shadowlords, the three women who were the gatekeepers of the High Council's chamber, Healer Dresden and four men they had yet to meet.

The round room had a high-vaulted ceiling with walls as black as pitch. Placed midway along the soaring walls were numerous long, cast iron torches set five feet apart and hanging in broad brackets. Flickering flames from the torches provided the only light in the room. Beneath their feet was a thick black carpet with two golden-rimmed circles. The outside circle was emblazoned with five strange blue symbols painted on a golden background. The inner circle encompassed much of the room and its background was black. A five-pointed star with intersecting lines lay in the center of the large circle. Triangles formed where the outside lines of the star met with the inner most-like constituting a pentagram and with each triangle dyed a different color. The top point of the star was behind the Shadowlords and dark blue in color. The eastern point was dark deep green while the western point was dark brown. The southeastern leg of the star was gray and the southwestern was red. The pentagram in the center of the star was a black.

No one spoke so that when the High Lord drew their attention to him with a lift of his right hand, every eye and ear was directed to him.

"The Reapers have begun their work this night. It is our duty and our privilege to do what we can to ensure their mission is a success. Toward that objective, we have assembled here to provide a Circle of Protection for our warriors. The Circle has been

handed down to us from the beginning of time. In it is represented the Five Elements of Emotion.”

Lord Naois, who sat to the High Lord’s right held up his hand and continued. “The first element is water and from it we draw our fear.”

In unison the Shadowlords chanted, “May our warriors have no fear of their enemies.”

“The second element,” Lord Dunham said from his position at the High Lord’s left side, “is earth and from it we draw our sympathy.”

Once again, the Shadowlords spoke. “May our warriors have no sympathy for their enemies.”

Argent, the silver-haired gatekeeper of the High Council who sat to Lord Dunham’s left held up her hand. “The third element is wood and from it we draw our anger.”

“Great is the anger of our warriors toward their enemies,” the Shadowlords said.

Argent’s blonde sister Aurelion held up her hand next. “The fourth element is metal and from it we draw our grief.”

“Our warriors will show no grief for the deeds they must perform,” spoke the men of the High Council.

Corallin—the third sister and red-haired gatekeeper—named the last element. “The fifth element is fire and from it we draw our joy.”

“Sublime will be the joy of our warriors when their mission is completed,” prophesied the Shadowlords.

Once more the High Lord held up his hand. “From the limitlessness of space we have drawn our existence and it will be to the infinity of it we shall return. We ask the Guardians of the Universe to hold us in the palms of Their mighty hands.”

Healer Dresden held up his hand, drawing attention to him. “Before the Five Elements of Emotion came the Four Elements of Creation. Creation was given to us by the Guardians of the Universe and it sustains our life.”

One of the unknown men raised his hand. “The first element is air. It is that which signifies new beginnings, clarity, diligence and discernment. We invoke Raphael of the East to aid us.”

The gatekeepers chanted, “To our warriors grant clarity of purpose, diligence of performance, discernment of what needs doing and a satisfactory end to their endeavor.”

The second unknown man put up his hand. “The second element is fire. It is that which signifies energy, courage, strength and loyalty. We invoke Michael of the West to aid us.”

“To our warriors,” the three sisters said, “grant the energy to perform their duties, courage and strength to see those duties to fulfillment and the loyalty to defend one another as brothers in arms.”

The third man lifted his hand. "The third element is water. It is that which signifies compassion, healing, conscience and tranquility. We invoke Gabriel of the South to aid us."

Again the gatekeepers spoke in unison. "To our warriors grant compassion to those who deserve it, healing to those who require it, tranquility to those beyond help and clearness of conscience to do what must be done."

The fourth man stuck his hand into the air. "The fourth element is earth. It is that which signifies security, endurance, concentration and thoroughness. We invoke Uriel of the North to aid us."

One last time the gatekeepers' voices lifted in chant. "To our warriors grant complete concentration on their task, endurance to see their tasks to the end and thoroughness of action so there will be security for them and for us."

A soft wind began to swirl about the room and with it came delicate, intermingled scents of lavender, tangerine, gardenia and honeysuckle.

The three Shadowlords spoke in unison. "Protect us, Holy Ones, and lend Your assistance to our warriors whose lives we place into Your compassionate hands."

Lord Kheelan stood and stretched his hands toward the center of the circle. "Guide our warriors and grant them the strength of purpose and the honor of completion of the tasks set before them. Return them to us as they journeyed forth. Let no harm befall them that can not be undone."

Lord Naois stood and he too stretched out his hands toward the center of the circle. "Lend Your support to the loved ones of our warriors and keep them as well in the protection of Your hands. Let no harm befall them that can not be undone."

Lord Dunham took the floor and arched his hands over the circle. "Delve into the hearts of those gathered here before You and see that we have come to ask Your blessings in the name of righteousness and not evil. Let no harm befall us that can not be undone."

The gatekeepers rose and joined hands. Their voices blended into one.

"We are the Female spirits of the Universe, the earthly representation of She who is One in Three. We are the mothers and daughters and aunts, the sisters and wives and lovers. We are Birth and Death and War. Ours is the vastness of space and the infinity of existence. Over our warriors we spread the Triune safeguard of protection—the blanket of defense, the shield of security, the cloak of safety. Let our warriors return to us as they journeyed forth."

When his fellow Shadowlords and the gatekeepers sat down, the High Lord remained standing. "Each of you has someone dear to your heart that will be placed in danger this night." His eyes shifted for a moment to Lea and then away. "Pray to the Guardians of the Universe that your loved one will be spared and that he will return safely to us. Ask that no harm will befall him that can not be undone."

Bevyn had not missed the look Lord Kheelan aimed at Lea. He turned to look at her where she sat with Danielle between them. Who was he—he wondered, his heart

aching—among the Reapers for whom she had loving thoughts? Was this why she wanted to leave him? Had she given her heart to one of his teammates? Was it Arawn or Cynyr, Owen or Glyn or Iden? Jealousy reared its ugly head and he ground his teeth.

“For those of us gathered here, take now a silent moment to send your strength and love to those who have placed themselves in harm’s way. Do not attempt to contact our warriors for to do so might distract them and endanger their lives. Send only your strength and love to them. Do not speak to them in their minds. When you have said your prayers, you may leave but speak no words until you are well clear of this room for what is said here carries forth to the Guardians,” the High Lord said softly then once more took his seat, bowing his head—as did his fellow Shadowlords and their gatekeepers.

Long after everyone else had left the chamber, Bevyn sat where he was, his mind in chaos, his very soul hurting. With his connection to the members of his team he could see them behind his closed eyelids and knew the exact moment in which the first of them engaged the enemy and took that man’s life.

As he sat there remotely viewing in his mind the actions of his team, a startling realization crashed down upon him. A Reaper would die this night!

His eyes snapped open and he stared blankly at the wall—feeling the agony of that foresight crippling him—then got to his feet. He climbed the stairs purposefully, his jaw rigid and set, his fingernails biting half-moons into his palm.

* * * * *

Lea swiped at the tears that fell from her eyes. She was terrified for the man she loved so powerfully and feared this night would take him from her forever. Like Bevyn, she had not missed the look the High Lord sent her way. Over and over she mumbled a litany of prayers for the safety of the man who meant more to her than her own life as her fingers twisted at her bodice. So wrapped up in her sorrow, so steeped in her turmoil of spirit, she did not hear the stealthy footsteps behind her. She did not sense the danger coming at her. Nothing registered with her until the burning thrust of the ice-cold dagger drove deep into her back—piercing her aching heart—and she began to fall, blackness reaching up with greedy hands to drag her down into the Abyss. She did not see the face of her murderer nor the shadow that stood over her as her life’s blood spread warmly around her. The last word on Lea’s lips was her lover’s name spoken with true regret.

* * * * *

His business settled, Bevyn quietly made his way to the reception hall. He was not surprised to find the door leading outside unlocked and unguarded. He went out into the darkness of the night, looked up at the black velvet of the sky, let the soft mist of icy rain fall gently into his face then took to the air—an ebony crow as midnight as the

world around it flying straight for the life-destroying Net that blanketed the heavens over the Citadel.

Chapter Eleven

Cynyr and Glyn entered the operations room of the first tower as easily as a hot knife slicing through butter. Two guards were playing cards but neither looked up as the Reapers removed the laser whips from the sheaths at their hips and silently flicked open the deadly weapon. Two heads rolled to the floor with barely a thump and Glyn was sprinting up the stairs to take out the third guard as Cynyr calmly retrieved the dead men's heads and put them back on the bodies. Upstairs, Glyn was repositioning the tower light so it did not shine directly on the ground. The grim task done, the third guard dispatched, the men slipped out of the guard tower and into the darkness, sprinting quickly to the next tower. The entire lethal enterprise had taken less than two minutes.

At the other end of the line of towers, Iden and Phelan completed their first bloodless work with just as much ease. Moving on to the next tower, one of the dead men had turned to see his executioner and had cried out, alerting the two men in the tower. But Phelan had acquitted himself well by snapping forward his whip to dispatch one man and taking out the other on the backswing. The tower light moved so it cast its illumination higher, the Reapers left the building.

"Smooth," Iden had pronounced of Phelan's expertise with the laser whip and the men melded as one shadow into the darkness.

Methodically working their way from tower to tower, repositioning the lights, the four men met at the last one, grimly nodding to one another as Cynyr and Iden entered the tower to complete that end of their assignments. Glyn frowned as he noticed the pale flash of blue light as the guard in the tower was taken out.

"I hope no one saw any of that," he told Phelan.

Waiting until the towers were secured and there was no direct light illuminating the exterior of the ship, Arawn and Jaborn made sure the other four men were in position around the courtyard before moving up the steps. All around them cybots were trundling past from hut to hut or lumbering into the main operational building but not a one of them seemed to be aware of the Reapers' presence.

It was well after midnight and the camp's inhabitants – except for the guards – were snug in their beds, confident they were being protected. A thick fog had moved in from the water to help hide the warriors stealthily moving about the compound. The only rooms lit save for the guard towers were at the front of the operational building. Elsewhere, the buildings were dark.

"This is too damned easy," Arawn whispered to Jaborn as they entered the ship. He had not expected the starship to be unlocked and was uneasy that no one was either

outside or inside guarding the vehicle. It seemed all too vulnerable and that vulnerability set off alarms in the Prime Reaper's head.

"Don't borrow trouble, *mo tiarna*," Jaborn said, using the term of respect he'd heard people at the citadel give Arawn.

Arawn glanced around at him. "We are equals, Kasid. We are *bráithre*." He smiled. "Brothers."

Moisture formed in the Akhkarulian's eyes and he lifted his head with pride. It was the first real show of mutual respect and camaraderie he had been shown from his fellow warriors and it had come from their leader. It touched something long dead in his soul. He nodded, unable to acknowledge Arawn's words.

"Let's shut down those ugly, little rolling bastards out there," Arawn said.

The interior of the ship was dark save for flickering lights on the instrument panels that washed an eerie greenish-yellow light over the faces of the Reapers.

It had been over two decades since Arawn had been inside a ship. Neither he nor Jaborn had ever flown one but in a sealed pouch he carried inside his uniform shirt, Arawn had instructions on where to place the device Jaborn was carrying in a similar pouch. Once activated, the device should block signals to the cybots, effectively ending their usefulness.

Jaborn unbuttoned his shirt and removed the oilskin pouch that lay inside. Opening it, he gingerly pulled out the strange-looking device. He looked at Arawn who was reading the schematic.

"It goes there," Arawn said, pointing to one portion of the instrument panel. "Program it for —"

"Program it?" Jaborn repeated.

"Set it," Arawn corrected, and the Akhkarulian nodded.

"Set it for how long?"

"Two minutes."

Their task done, the two men moved quietly back outside and positioned themselves in strategic spots along with the other four Reapers. Only Owen was not among them. With any luck he was already inside the operational building and setting the multiple charges that would deactivate the Net.

It was the waiting that grated on Arawn's nerves. Even after the faint popping noise came from the starship and a cybot rolling past came to an abrupt halt—others along with him—the Prime Reaper experienced escalating nerves. He could see Glyn, Iden, Phelan and Cynyr. His men had laser whips in one hand and six-shooters in the other. They were poised to take out anyone who showed their *balgair* heads in the courtyard of the compound. All they were waiting for now was Owen.

"Where the hell is he?" Cynyr asked Glyn.

Worry was emblazoned on Glyn Kullen's face. Owen was his best friend and the two were as close as brothers.

"I don't like this, Cree," Glyn said. "I've got a really bad feeling in my gut."

Five long, tortuous minutes passed and Arawn began chewing on his lower lip. He could feel sweat slicking his palms and trailing down his face. He wiped the sweat from his face and cast a worried look at Jaborn.

"Something's wrong," Jaborn said.

Arawn turned to look at the main building. He caught Cynyr's eye across the compound and Cree shrugged helplessly. Cree pointed at his own chest and then at the operational building but the Prime Reaper shook his head. If anyone were to investigate, it would be him. As his 2-I-C was not with them, Arawn trusted Cyn's judgment, but if he'd lost Owen, he didn't want to lose another man. He held his hand out—palm down—and made a staying motion to let Cyn know to hold his position.

Off in the distance, the Prime Reaper heard the slow, steady flap of giant wings and knew Morrighunia was nearby. He also knew the goddess could not descend to rescue the *guirt* until the Net had been shut down. He wasn't entirely sure but he had a fairly good notion that not even an immortal could get past the deadly security without all hell breaking loose.

Tendrils of thick fog obscured the main building and caused the oil lights inside the structure to give off a strange yellowish glow. There didn't seem to be any observable activity beyond the closed doors of the building. Whatever was happening inside was taking place quietly. Had Owen been discovered, surely an alarm would have been raised already.

Jaborn tugged at Arawn's sleeve and when the Prime Reaper looked around at him, the Akhharulian's face showed strain. "Let me go," he offered. "I can still pass for a *balgair*."

Arawn looked at the man for a long moment. He searched Jaborn's mind—they had shared the ritual blood between them so they could communicate mentally—and he saw no treachery there, only a desire to be of help.

"If Tohre has been captured or killed," Jaborn said, "we need to know. The Net still has to be shut down. Perhaps I can get to the devices he carried with him."

Arawn nodded. "All right, but be careful, Kasid. Our success rests in your hands."

The Akhharulian straightened his shoulders. "You can count on me."

Cynyr's eyes widened as he saw Jaborn stand up and begin walking calmly across the fog-shrouded courtyard. His head snapped back to Arawn. They dared not speak mentally to one another for fear the transmission might be intercepted by the enemy.

Across the distance Arawn held his astonished stare then deliberately looked away. The decision had been his to make and if it turned out to be a bad one, there would be no one to blame but Arawn Gehdrin. He strived to hear the flapping of Morrighunia's wings but only a soft moaning wind wafted out of the night, swirling the low-lying fog into an undulating blanket of white over the courtyard.

* * * * *

Without a stitch of clothing on his chilled body, Bevyn Coure slid down from the back of the dragon and walked on unsteady legs to a rock. He plopped down and buried his face in his hands, bending over, fearful he'd be sick. For the last two hours he had been perched precariously on the goddess's back, clinging for dear life to a pair of copper scales at the base of Her long neck. One moment he had been flying in the night sky and the next the beastess had come up under him and he had found himself in human form straddling Her massive back. The imprint of Her sharp scales were stamped on his bare thighs and legs.

"Hold on tight, my Reaper," She had laughed in his stunned brain.

Soaring along faster than he ever could have imagined, Bevyn knew a fear unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Barely able to draw breath as they sped along, he was trembling from head to toe. Her forty-foot wingspan pounded powerfully at the air to send them careening across the night-darkened land so rapidly, everything below them was a blur.

Hearing a vile curse, he looked up through his fingers to find the goddess in Her human shape pacing back and forth. She was so beautiful his groin ached with a fiery burn that made him groan with helplessness.

"What is taking them so long?" Morrighunia snarled. Her red hair floated around Her shoulders like seaweed on the surface of the ocean. The pale green gown She wore was diaphanous and did nothing to hide the lushness of Her shapely body. Even the pale gleam of reddish curls at the apex of Her thighs was visible.

For once Bevyn hated his ability to see clearly without light and turned away from the sensual sight of Morrighunia's long legs and ample bosom. He shuddered violently, clutching his arms around him.

"Oh here!" the goddess snapped and Bevyn's uniform—complete with six-shooter, laser whip, dagger, boots and hat—appeared on his body. *"How, may I ask, did you think you would enter the fray naked as the day your dam birthed you and weaponless, Coure?"* She threw at him.

Bevyn hadn't thought that far in advance. He'd simply wanted to be with his teammates. Shivering from the cold that had lashed at him as he had clung so desperately to the goddess's back, he was grateful to have his nakedness covered.

"T-there's a Reaper in deep trouble," he managed to stutter.

"Aye, I know," Morrighunia growled, and the sound sent prickles of terror through Bevyn Coure. She continued to pace—whipping around vigorously with each circuit, Her nails digging furrows into her palms. *"Come on, Jaborn. Come on!"*

Bevyn looked up. *"Jaborn is the one in trouble?"*

"Tohre is," the goddess replied.

Bevyn liked Owen and the news made his heart ache. *"Will he die?"*

Morrigunia spun around and fixed Her Reaper with a look that would have killed a lesser man. "Aye, he will die," She thundered. "And he will die in agony!"

* * * * *

Owen lay on his belly, his wrists and ankles pinned down by four gruesome beings he knew must be the Ceannus. Above him stood a fifth Ceannus—a female—and she was smiling at him with such hatred he felt the hair stir on his arms. When she bent over him to rip his shirt down the back, he knew what she was about to do but when the deep cut bit into his flesh, he forced himself not to make a sound.

"Take them all," the female said, "but be especially careful of the Queen. Harvest her gently."

One by one, in twos and fours, in clumps, a sixth Ceannus pulled the hellions from the Reaper's back and dropped them into a large beaker held by the female. It was an excruciating agony that brought a bloody sweat to his body. Nothing else save the drawing of his organs from his body could cause such devastating pain as spread over him when his Queen was pulled from him. His jaw was clamped tightly shut, his eyes as equally closed and his hands were clenched into fists as the torment continued until he could feel the Ceannus' hand fishing around inside his back.

"I believe I have them all, Your Majesty," the being said.

"You had best have them all!" the female growled.

"I do," the being stated. "I am sure I do."

"Good," the female said. "Now turn him over."

His black blood was all over the wooden table to which they had pinned him and as Owen was flipped over to lie on his back, he could feel the congealing slickness of that blood. But even knowing he was about to die—his Queen removed along with her offspring—the hideous form leaning over him put stark horror in the Reaper's amber eyes.

The female Ceannus was seven feet tall with arms and legs as thin as rope and equally as flexible. She had thin hands with bulbous sucker-like pads on the exceedingly long and spade-like fingers while her thumbnails were wickedly long and sharpened to a point. No hair grew on her pale, gray warty body and she wore no clothing to cover that vile expanse. Her oversized slanted eyes were black in color and lacked pupils, appearing as evilly faceted as those of a housefly. She had no lips—only a thin slit of a mouth behind which small, barbed teeth could be seen in the stark white orifice. Her chin was sharply pointed and her wide nose was vented with triple rows that served as nostrils. The only clue he had to her sex was the mesmerizing voice that came from her pencil-thin neck and the fact she had introduced herself as Alalexisa Acklard, daughter of the martyred High Lord and Chosen Consort of Raphian Himself.

Owen was dying, his strength rapidly fading. He was bleeding out from the massive cavity that had been opened in his back. All he could do was lie there and stare up in to the loathsome face of his executioner.

“How many came with you, Reaper?” she asked. “Where are they now?”

When he did not give her the information she sought, she bid the two beings holding his ankles to remove his boots.

“Perhaps a cut up each instep will loosen your tongue,” she told him, and nodded at one of her helpers.

The Ceannus holding his right ankle easily held down Owen’s leg with one hand as he used the wicked thumbnail of his other hand to cut a deep furrow along the bottom of the Reaper’s foot.

Pain lanced through Owen but he kept his lips firmly closed though he panted from the effort of doing so.

“No?” the female asked, making a tsking sound. She rested the pads of her fingers on his cheek for a moment. “Should I have Tragel gouge out an eye instead?”

Owen turned his face away from her touch.

Cringing from the repugnant sweep of her fingers down his face and along his neck, he grunted when she ripped the remainder of his black silk shirt from his body and tossed it aside, trailing those disgusting appendages over his flesh.

“I like hair on a man’s body,” she said, swirling her fingers over his thick chest hair. She idly rested one sucker-like pad over his pap and the bulbous mouth of it closed like lips on his shrinking flesh to suckle him.

“Get your fucking hands off me, you ugly bitch!” Owen bellowed, unable to bear the sickening feel of her finger on him.

The female tilted her oversized head to one side. “You do not appreciate my touch, Reaper?” she asked, and the slits of her nostrils flared.

It was then Owen felt something wriggling under his skin and realized it had to be one of his fledglings. One was left inside him and it was gnawing into his kidney with a vengeance! The pain was fierce and he was hard-pressed not to show it but the very agony gave him hope that he just might survive to pulverize the bitch tormenting him.

From the corner of his eye, Owen saw Kasid Jaborn enter the room. The Ceannus did not notice the Akhkarulian’s arrival for they were absorbed completely in the man they held pinned to the table. He saw Jaborn discover the two devices Owen had been about to activate sitting on another table. He knew he had to make sure the Ceannus did not realize Jaborn was in the room and give his fellow Reaper a chance to shut down the Net.

“I’d rather have a ghoret in my britches than have you put your foul hands on me, you cunt!”

Fury hissed from the female’s mouth and she put her hands on the waistband of Owen’s leather uniform pants and with a strength that stunned him, ripped them as

easily from his hips as if they were made of tissue paper. "Let's see how much you'll enjoy this then!" she shrieked at him.

The slimy feel of her fingers wrapping around his cock sent waves of nausea through Owen Tohre. There was some kind of acid oozing from her palms and it was stinging him so brutally, he howled with the agony of it. It seemed to be eating through his flesh. His balls were on fire and he shuddered, jerking forcefully beneath the fierce hold of the Ceannus. She was twisting his genitals, jerking upon them. He could hear the males laughing at him and it was a hideous sound that brought shivers to his spine. Between their braying laughter and his trills of agony, none of them heard the twin pops that disabled the Net and shut it down.

It was the head of one Ceannus flying across the room that alerted the female danger had found her. Her head snapped up and she glared at the Reaper who—even as she watched—took the head off a second and third Ceannus.

Owen bucked in the horrid grip of the female. Her hand was still wrapped around him, the pads of her fingers sucking against his sac so forcefully he couldn't move even when the two Ceannus who had been holding his ankles slid heedlessly to the floor and the one holding his right arm followed close behind.

Jaborn snapped the laser whip and the Ceannus holding Owen's left arm lost his head, his body whirling around like a top as it pitched to the floor.

The female spat like a cornered cobra and with a speed Jaborn could not have imagined, grabbed the arm of the only surviving Ceannus—the one holding the beaker in which Owen Tohre's hellions were housed—and shot out of the room in a blinding blur.

Owen screamed so hideously that Jaborn staggered back, appalled at the sound. He barely noticed the other Reapers crashing into the room behind him as Tohre flipped off the table to land facedown on the floor among the headless bodies of the Ceannus.

"The Net is down and Morrigunia is coming after the *guirt*," Arawn managed to tell Jaborn before the Prime Reaper hurried over to Owen.

Glyn was right behind Arawn and the two of them carefully lifted Owen up.

Owen was unmoving. His body was covered in his own black blood.

"Get him on the table," Arawn snapped and as soon as they'd laid the still man on his stomach, the Prime Reaper had his dagger drawn. He flipped the blade around and extended the hilt toward Glyn. "Take my Queen from me now!"

"No," Glyn said, refusing the blade. He ripped his shirt open. "You take mine."

Iden and Phelan pushed a table over beside the one on which Owen was lying and Glyn stretched out on his belly. From his place at the door with Jaborn, Cynyr looked out to see a bright flash of light shooting away from the compound.

"There was another ship," Jaborn commented.

"Aye," Cynyr said in disgust.

The two men moved closer to where Owen lay.

No one spoke as Glyn's Queen was harvested from his back and placed inside Owen. They could hear the voices of children outside but none of them went to investigate for they were waiting, hoping, praying, the cut on Tohre's back would close. Every eye was glued to the long incision. They didn't even notice when Bevyn walked in.

"Come on, Owen," Arawn said. "Don't give up."

Glyn was holding Owen's hand and the ragged cadence of Kullen's breathing was loud in the room.

For what seemed like hours the men stood there beside their fallen teammate. Now and again they could see the Queen buckling under the still man's flesh as though she were looking for a place to burrow. Once, she poked her scaly green triangular head from the slit on his back and glared at them then slithered down inside him once more.

"Someone go get Her," Arawn said, his jaw clenched.

Cynyr turned to do as the Prime Reaper commanded, saw Bevyn and blinked. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

The others turned to look. "How the hell did you get here?" Arawn demanded.

"She brought me," Bevyn said. "I'll go get Her."

"I don't think you'll have to," Glyn said quietly.

The men gathered round and watched in silence as the incision in Owen's back began to slowly close. For a full torturous minute the flesh knitted itself together—tendrils wrapping around tendrils, filaments of flesh bonding—and when the strain became almost more than the Reapers could take, Owen Tohre took a quick, ragged breath, his lungs inflating with a sharp wheezing sound.

* * * * *

Arawn sat down on the edge of the water trough and ran a tired hand through his thick hair. His men were still in with Owen for none of them wanted to leave the stricken man. The sight that had greeted them as they had turned him over had ripped through them all like a heated sword.

"They castrated him!" Glyn had howled.

As Owen lay there breathing shallowly, as pale as death, Jaborn had explained to them what the female Ceannus had done.

"She must have torn off his genitals when she left," Jaborn said.

Arawn was sickened by what had happened and though he knew Owen would live, it was a hideous fate the Prime Reaper knew Tohre faced. He hung his head, closing his eyes to what the future held.

"*Dia duit, mo athair.*"

The young voice greeting him as father surprised Arawn and he looked up.

Six feet away, a young boy with dark hair and amber eyes was standing beside Morrighunia, whose hands lay lightly upon the lad's shoulder.

A lump rose up in Arawn's throat for looking at the child was like going back in time. The boy was a carbon copy of Gehdrin at the same age.

"*Dia duit, mo mac,*" Arawn managed to return the greeting to his son. He looked up at Morrighunia.

"His name is Guaire," the goddess said. "He has yet to learn any language other than the old one."

"*Conas tá, Guaire?*" Arawn asked his son how he was doing.

The boy shrugged and the mannerism was so like his own, Arawn felt tears gathering in his eyes. "*Táim go maith.*"

Morrighunia bent down and whispered something in the child's ear. Guaire nodded gravely then lifted his hand in farewell. "*Go raibh an Ghaoth go brách ag do chúl, mo athair,*" he said gravely.

"*Go raibh an Ghaoth go brách ag do chúl,*" Arawn said in a choking voice, bestowing on his son the Reaper blessing of the Wind.

"There was a single fledgling left in my Owen before that bitch took his manhood," Morrighunia said. "Have no fear for him, Arawn."

Before he could ask Morrighunia for more about Owen, the goddess and the child of Arawn Gehdrin vanished in myriad twinkling, sparkling multicolored lights that rushed upwards to the dark heavens and dissolved.

Chapter Twelve

Cynyr yawned as he and Bevyn tossed the last of the cybots into the bonfire along with the bodies of the four headless Ceannus and stepped back. The stench from singed wiring, plastiform flesh and crisping Ceannus was overpowering. Other than the eight Reapers, there was nothing left within the Ceannus camp that could walk, crawl or roll. Each of the more than three hundred *balgairs* had been dispatched in their beds as they slept—a gruesome token of Morigunia’s vengeance the Reapers had found upon investigating the encampment. Burned to a cinder, the hapless men had not known what was befalling them.

“The charges have been set on the starship,” Jaborn told Arawn then flinched as another horrible yowl came from one of the containment cells within the main building.

“Iden,” Arawn called out. “You and Phelan go check on the boat. Bring it up on the shore. As soon as Owen’s Transition is over, we’ll go back to the *Bonnie Doneen*.”

“Aye, my liege,” Phelan grumbled.

Glyn sat off to one side, his head down. He was still very weak from having donated his Queen to Owen so he hadn’t been assigned any jobs. To add to that, he wasn’t handling what had happened to his best friend very well and no one wanted to intrude on Kullen’s enforced solitude. When Arawn asked him how long Owen’s Transitions usually lasted, Glyn answered quietly that he didn’t know.

“We could be here another day or more,” Cynyr said as he and Bevyn came over to stand with Arawn and Glyn.

“Has everyone had their Sustenance and tenerse?” Arawn asked.

Cynyr scratched his stubbled cheek. “Everyone but Owen.”

Another enraged yowl came from the containment cell and the Reapers shuddered. The sounds they were hearing were not normal. There was true wrath and fury in the skirling howls.

“The gods help him,” the Reapers heard Glyn say.

Hours later it was Iden, Phelan and Bevyn who went in to check on Owen. They stood outside the heavily fortified cell and stared in at their fellow Reaper who had quieted down to a pitiful keening sound that broke their hearts. Standing well back lest the lupine creature lying on its side in the cell lunge for the bars and their throats, the three men assured themselves Tohre was all right and turned to go.

“What the hell is he doing?” Iden asked.

Phelan and Bevyn turned to see Owen in his wolf form sitting up on its haunches. He had twisted his neck and was lapping at the raw wound between his legs.

“Eeewww,” Iden said. His voice was filled with disgust. “That’s just wrong.”

“What?” Phelan asked. “Haven’t you ever licked your own stick when you were in Transition?”

“No!” Iden stated.

“Hell, no!” Bevyn growled, stepping back from Kiel when Phelan looked at him.

“Don’t knock what you ain’t tried,” Phelan said. He pointed at Owen. “And it’s helping. His stick is finally growing back.”

Iden and Bevyn glanced at what was happening then quickly away. They knew it would happen but didn’t know when. They took Phelan’s arms and pulled him out of the building though Kiel seemed inclined to stay and watch.

“He’s healing,” Bevyn told Arawn. “Thank the gods that one fledgling remained else he wouldn’t be.”

“Aye, but is he *healing*?” Cynyr asked quietly.

“Being emasculated is something you never get over,” Arawn said. “Let’s just hope he learns to deal with it.”

“I’m wondering though,” Cynyr said. “How do you think his new Queen is dealing with the old fledgling?”

Arawn shrugged. “I’ve no idea but if the two start warring, Owen’s temperament might suffer because of it. He might—”

“*Lord Arawn?*”

The Prime Reaper frowned. The last person he wanted to hear from was the High Lord. Tossing away the stick he’d been whittling, he got up and moved away from the others. “Aye, Your Grace?” he said aloud, letting everyone know he was being summoned.

“*Don’t take that tone with me,*” Lord Kheelan snapped.

Arawn felt a sharp pain writhe through his body and knew he’d been chastised. Sighing deeply, he continued walking, sheathing his dagger then jamming his hands into his pockets. “He’s still in Transition. He—” he told the High Lord.

“*Lady Lea was murdered last eve,*” Lord Kheelan interrupted him.

Stumbling to a stop, Arawn’s lips parted. “In the Citadel? Who would have done such a thing?”

“*We do not know. A culprit has not been found.*”

“Is she...?”

“*She is now one of you and she is a very angry she-wolf.*”

Arawn turned to look at Bevyn. His 2-I-C was sitting on the ground talking to Cynyr. “Bevyn doesn’t know,” he stated.

“*It happened before he left last evening.*”

A nagging suspicion darted through the Prime Reaper’s mind. “You don’t think Bevyn would have—”

“*He had reason.*”

"No," Arawn denied. "Bevyn would not have killed his lady to bring her over. He made a vow to her that he would not turn her and he would not have."

"Then who did, Lord Arawn?" the High Lord asked in a steely voice.

"It wasn't any of my men," Arawn said.

There was a moment of silence then Lord Kheelan asked if Lady Aingeal or Lady Danielle would have done such a thing.

"Absolutely not," Arawn declared. "Whoever did it either wanted to help Bevyn or meant to do Lea harm. Who found her?"

"I did," Lord Kheelan said. "There was no choice as to what had to be done but she will hate me for the remainder of her life."

"Bevyn might too," Arawn said then heaved a long, tired sigh. He—like the rest of his men—had had no sleep and he was looking forward to the uncomfortable bunk on the *Bonnie Doneen*. "I'll tell him what's happened."

"Before you return, send Lord Cynyr out to gather as many kumquats as he can find. They grow copiously near there, I hear."

"Kumquats?" Arawn asked, his brow furrowed.

"Cravings," was the last word the High Lord said and it was expressed with annoyance.

Chuckling, Arawn turned around and started back to his men. He caught Cynyr's eye and cocked his head for the Reaper to join him.

"Gehdrin!"

Every eye turned toward the main building and the infuriated voice that had shouted Arawn's name.

"Gehdrin!"

"I guess he's out of Transition," Cynyr said as he came up to Arawn.

"Cyn, gather up several buckets. Take a few men with you and harvest as many kumquats as you can."

Cynyr blinked. "What the hell are kumquats?"

Arawn shook his head. "I don't know and I don't care. Just find them. They are for your lady-wife."

"Why would Aingeal want—?"

"Just go get the fucking things!" Arawn snapped. "She's craving them."

"How am I supposed to get them if I don't know what the fuck they are?" Cynyr demanded.

Jaborn had overheard and he strolled up to the men. "Kumquats are like little tiny pear-shaped oranges." He held up his thumb and index finger to define the size of the fruit. "The skins are very sweet but the insides are very, very tart with numerous seeds. I will help you find them."

"Gehdrin!"

"All right, the gods-be-damn it!" Arawn yelled, anger shifting over his face. He felt as though he was being pulled in three directions at once. "Hold your horses. I'm coming!" He started stomping toward the main building.

"We brought the boat in," Phelan called out to him.

"I'm so thrilled," Arawn growled. "You and Iden go with Cree."

"For what?"

"Just do it!" the Prime Reaper bellowed.

"Poor man," Bevyn said. "He's going to need a vacation after this."

"He needs his lady," Glyn said.

"Don't we all?" Bevyn asked with a sigh.

Arawn heard Bevyn's remark and had to bite his tongue to keep from saying anything. He would have to tell Coure about his lady and Gehdrin was not relishing doing that. As soon as he walked into the main building, he could hear Owen yanking on the bars of the containment cell and snarling.

Owen Tohre's hair looked like it hadn't been combed in a week. It had fallen down over his forehead and as he stood there jerking on the bars, his chest was glistening with sweat from the exertion.

"Let me out of here!" Owen snarled.

Arawn swept his attention over the Reaper—making sure he was healed in the place he and the others were the most concerned about—and reached for the key that would unlock the cell.

"Hurry the hell up, Gehdrin!"

The Prime Reaper stopped with his hand almost touching the key then slowly turned his angry glare to Tohre. "You want to spend another few hours locked in there?" he asked in a deadly voice.

Owen opened his mouth but must have thought better of whatever he started to say for he clamped his lips shut and shook his head mutely.

Allowing his man time enough to calm down a bit, Arawn unhooked the key and walked over to put it in the lock. "I know how you feel right now," he said.

"No, hell, you don't!" Owen hissed.

Arawn locked eyes with Tohre. "Aye, hell, I do."

Owen snorted.

"I was hanged, drawn and about to be quartered when I died, Tohre," Arawn told him. "The quartering had already begun with my cock but thanks to the goddess they never got any farther along."

The naked Reaper's face paled and he lowered his eyes to the man glaring at him. "Then you know why I'm not in a good place in my mind right now," he mumbled.

"I know all too well," Arawn said, unlocking the cell and pulling the door open. "Don't take it out on those around you. We weren't a part of what was done to you, Owen." With a wave of his hand, he clothed his teammate.

Owen nodded once and came out of the cell raking his hands through his tousled hair. "I need a bath," he said.

"Aye, you do," Arawn agreed, "and you can have one when we get back to the ship."

"Did the female escape?" Owen asked, a strange glow radiating from his amber eyes.

"The Ceannus? At least two of them escaped. They had another ship hidden in one of the huts. Had we known about it, we would have put it out of commission."

The two walked outside together. Glyn looked up and smiled hesitantly at his friend, but Owen did not respond. His golden scrutiny swept over Bevyn. He must not have found whatever it was he was looking for in the Reaper's gaze for his body became less rigid.

"It'll take time," Arawn said. "You aren't alone in this."

Owen didn't reply. He looked about him. "Where are the others?"

"Searching for kumquats," Arawn said with a sigh.

If Owen thought that strange, he made no comment. Instead, he asked if anyone had found his weapons.

"I have them," Glyn said, and reached behind the stone slab on which he was sitting. He lifted Owen's gun belt, dagger and laser whip. "Although I don't know what happened to your hat."

Owen shrugged as though it didn't matter and went over to retrieve his weapons. He mumbled a "thank you" to Glyn then strapped on the gun, making quick work of tying the tie-down securely to his thigh.

Bevyn came to stand beside Arawn. "He looks like a man who hates the world right now."

"I imagine he does," Arawn acknowledged. He took a deep breath then asked Bevyn to walk with him.

Coure fell into step beside his leader. "What's wrong, Ari?" he asked.

They were well away from Owen and Glyn when Arawn stopped. He turned and looked Bevyn in the eye. "There's no easy way to say this. Your lady was murdered last night."

Bevyn staggered back, completely unprepared for such devastating news. All the color drained from his face and his mouth dropped open. No sound seemed capable of escaping his lips. He was staring with horror at Arawn.

"Lord Kheelan found her and he has made her one of us," Arawn said quickly to allay Bevyn's fear.

The Reaper 2-I-C flinched as though he'd been slashed by a sword.

"He says she's very angry at him but he doesn't think she'll blame you."

"Who?" Bevyn managed to get out, tears filling his eyes.

"The High Lord says they don't know. I believe he thought you did it but I set him straight on that."

"Me?" True shock encompassed that one word.

"Someone either did you an enormous favor or tried his or her best to destroy you, Bev," Arawn said. "I'm inclined to think it was the former. Lord Kheelan suggested Aingeal and Danielle."

"Neither one of them would have done that," Bevyn stated with conviction.

"I know. I told him as much."

Turning away, Bevyn stared out at the ocean where the bright morning sun sparkled like liquid diamonds on the waves. "She had left me," he told Arawn.

"Because of Danielle?"

"Aye. She feared if something happened to her, I'd bring her over."

"You would have," Arawn stated.

Bevyn hung his head.

"Lea will need you now," Arawn said. "Perhaps this will set things to right between you."

"Who would have done such a thing, Ari?" Bevyn asked. "Who could have—?" He stopped as though someone had called his name. His head came up and he appeared to be listening.

Arawn didn't want to intrude on Bevyn's privacy so he walked away. He saw Cynyr, Jaborn, Iden and Phelan returning, each carrying a bucket overflowing with orange fruit.

"I have cravings, too, mo shearc," a sweet voice trilled through his mind.

The Prime Reaper smiled softly, thrilled to his soul to hear his lady's gentle voice. *"Whatever they are, I will move heaven and earth to provide them for you, mo chroi,"* he sent back to her. *"You are well?"*

"I am and I am waiting for you," Danielle replied. *"We've many wicked games to play, Reaper so I can gain those cravings."*

Arawn laughed out loud and when the others looked at him curiously, he shook his head. "Bad she-wolf," he mumbled under his breath.

"Lusting she-wolf," she whispered, and then withdrew.

With the exception of Owen, the other Reapers were curious about the kumquats and tried them. To a man they decided the skins were delectable but the pulp was too tart for their tastes. As they walked down to the beach to climb into the boat, Iden nudged Jaborn.

"Ever had grits?" Belial asked.

The Akhkarulian shook his head. "What are they?"

"Salted sand," Arawn sniped.

"Pulverized parchment," Cynyr comment.

"They don't sound appealing," Jaborn remarked.

"You have to try them with red-eye gravy," Owen mumbled, and when the others turned to stare at him, he glowered back.

"What is red-eye gravy?" Jaborn asked Iden in a low voice.

"You don't want to know," Iden said with a shudder.

Chapter Thirteen

The captain had relinquished his aft cabin to Arawn out of respect for the man's rank and position and perhaps a bit of fear. Cabins were allotted to the remaining seven Reapers with Cynyr, Bevyn, Glyn and Owen sharing the first mate's cabin—extra hammocks strung across the room—and Iden, Phelan and Jaborn sleeping in another. Healer Sorrel and Ash had been given hammocks in the day room. Where the captain and his first mate were bunking was anyone's guess.

Since none of the men had slept the night before, once the *Bonnie Doneen* was underway, the warriors lay down with only their uniform pants on, each weary and for once not finding it difficult as Reapers do to slip into the arms of Morpheus. Even Owen succumbed to slumber though he tossed and turned in his bunk and moaned now and again. A light rain began to fall gently on the ship, aiding the men to sleep soundly.

It was the horrendous scream that woke them and the men moved like lightning to Owen's side. Arawn ran from his cabin and pushed aside his men to get to Owen. The Reaper was pressed up against the wall—his knees drawn up, eyes wide in terror, mouth open in a silent scream. He was trembling violently and when Arawn sat down on the bunk beside him, Owen lashed out trying to hit the Prime Reaper but Arawn easily caught his flailing fists and kept a taut grip on Owen's wrists.

"It's me, Tohre. Everything's all right and you're safe," Arawn said gently, but his voice was stern and brooked no argument. "Calm down now. We've got your back, brother."

Owen shuddered once then his shoulders slumped. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Merciful Alel, but I dreamt—"

"We know," Arawn said and he drew the Reaper into his arms. If his actions surprised his men, they gave no indication but rather moved out of the cabin to allow Arawn and Owen time alone. As Bevyn was leaving, Arawn asked him to send the healer in to them.

Arawn ran his hand up and down Owen's back until the younger man relaxed and his breathing grew less ragged. Owen's forehead rested on the Prime Reaper's shoulder, his body clammy with cold sweat.

Healer Sorrel came in and it was obvious he knew what was needed for he carried a full vac-syringe of tenses with him.

"You need to rest, Owen," Arawn told his warrior. "The healer is going to give you an extra measure of tenses so you can sleep without dreams."

"No, I'll be defenseless!" Owen gasped, his eyes wide once more.

“We are right here with you. No one is going to hurt you, Owen,” Arawn said. “We would never allow it. Your brothers are here with you.”

“Don’t leave me alone, Ari,” Owen pleaded, his wounded eyes searching Arawn’s. Arawn could feel the man’s heart pounding brutally against his side. He glanced up at the healer and Sorrel bent over to administer the fiery payload from the vac-syringe into Owen’s neck.

Moaning at the pain that lanced through him, Owen clenched his teeth and when the needle was withdrawn, slapped a hand over the puncture. “Sweet Alel, that hurts!” he said. Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, his eyes rolled up and he slumped against Arawn.

“Damn it if that shit doesn’t work faster than hot peppers through a man’s bowels,” Arawn commented, moving off the bunk to ease Owen down into a supine position.

“I gave him a little something extra in with the tenerse,” the healer said. “As soon as I heard him screaming I knew he’d have need of it.” At Arawn’s cocked brow, Sorrel told him he’d been informed of what had happened to Lord Owen. “I assure you, *mo tiarna*, it will go no further.”

“It had best not,” Arawn agreed in a lethal tone. He adjusted the pillow under Owen’s head then straightened up. “Ask Glyn to come in, will you?”

After bidding Glyn to be close to Owen when the unconscious Reaper awoke, Arawn went back to his cabin. He was still tired and his eyes felt as though the lids had been scoured with sandpaper. He fell into his bunk and stretched out, pulling the pillow over his face to block out what gray light came in through the bank of windows on the port side of the cabin. Almost as soon as he had the pillow comfortably over his head, he was asleep.

* * * * *

Soft hands plied his flesh gently, stroked him, massaged him and ran fingernails over his aching tip, probed at the oozing slit. A sweet, moist tongue ran along his tightening staff to send tremors of pleasure racing through his body. Insistent lips suckled his sac and a tender mouth blew warm breath between his thighs.

He lay on his back with his arms flung wide, his legs apart. Completely at the mercy of his phantom lover, he writhed on the sheets, grunting with each lick, each swirl of a wicked tongue on his more-than-willing flesh.

A gentle, firm pressure eased inside him and he groaned as his cock leapt at the invasion. Silken fingers cupped his ass as a finger moved in and out of him, increasing the fire building in his loins.

Weight—slight but solid—flowed over the right side of his body to pin him to the mattress as pliant lips closed around his pap to draw upon the puckered flesh, to tease, to nibble tenderly. His blood began to boil. His hips began to thrust upward.

In and out that slick little finger went in his anus as teeth closed on his pap and he strained to push his rigid cock against the velvety phantom body lying beside him. He groaned, wanting, needing, release from the building lust spiking through him.

Lips covered his and a sweet tongue thrust past his to sweep over his teeth, to flick along his palate, to drive deep until he could taste the honey of a loving, giving mouth. Hands were suddenly all over him—tweaking, stroking, massaging and lightly twisting—until he was panting, his breath dragging into his lungs in gasps.

Soft as velvet, warm as sunshine, a slick sheath settled over his rigid cock and he shuddered, sighing with utter content as that moist channel began sliding up and down him, lightly squeezing, vibrating around him with increasing urgency.

He whimpered. He growled deep in his throat. He arched his hips up to meet the spectral body impaled upon his. He dug his fingers into his pillow and held on as the undulating rhythms of a warm, wet cunt gripped and released him. Gripped and released him, drew upon his burgeoning flesh.

He could feel the tight points of satiny, firm breasts touching his chest and he longed to fling his arms around his lover but there was no corporeal body to embrace. It was a shadow that rode him so lovingly, so thoroughly, that plied his flesh in ever-increasing pulses that made him as hard as stone. The slide of velvety thighs rubbing along the outside of his own sent shivers of pleasure racing down his sides. Warm, gentle hands gripped his hips with urgency and held him in place for ravishment.

“Milady,” he whispered, and once more that phantom mouth covered his to muffle the roar of release that suddenly claimed him, to send his lower body thrusting up from the bunk.

Spiraling down as though he had soared to the heights of the heaven, Arawn Gehdrin slumped against the mattress, feeling his heart racing, his blood pumping furiously through his body. He was glistening with sweat and when he opened his eyes, he was amazed to see a pair of beautiful blue eyes peering out of the darkness of his cabin. Astonished, he saw one perfect little orb wink then the eyes vanished to leave a slight trace of gardenia floating about him.

“I love you,” he whispered as he lay there spent, sated.

“*And I love you,*” she whispered in return. “*Go back to sleep.*” There was a pause then a girlish giggle before she amended, “*For now.*”

Arawn swept his hand over his pants to rid himself of them and for a long moment just lay there naked and vulnerable, hoping his lady would return. When he realized she wouldn't, he sighed deeply and waved his hand to cover his lower body in a pair of black silk pajamas. Turning over to his side, he fluffed the pillow beneath his head and lay basking in the afterglow of the easing his Danielle had sent to him from thousands of miles away.

“*Liked that cake, did you, mo shearc?*” she cooed to him.

He smiled and closed his eyes, wondering if she would come to him again before the morning light.

He had two hours of uninterrupted sleep before her hands began to crawl over his body once more.

* * * * *

Owen woke to Glyn's arms wrapped tightly around him, Kullen's gentle voice telling him everything would be all right. He turned to bury his face against his friend's shoulder and refused to let loose the tears that pricked at the back of his eyes.

No, Owen thought. Nothing would ever be the same again.

* * * * *

In the privacy of her bedroom at the Citadel, Lea lay wide awake and stared angrily at the ceiling above her. In lupine and human form she had torn the room apart in her fury and nothing remained there that had not been ripped, crushed, broken or wrecked. Destruction reigned in the once beautiful chamber beyond as well. It looked for the entire world as though a fierce tornado had whipped through the rooms.

Claw marks dragged down every wall and large holes had been punched through in places. Fang marks scored the arms of chairs. A rancid, pungent smell clung to the carpet.

Crouched naked on all fours in the ruin of what had once been the bed she had shared with the mate who had claimed her as his, she snarled like the cornered animal she considered herself, her lips peeled back from her teeth. Her eyes tracked back and forth as those of a predator would—searching for prey. She threw back her head and howled in frustration for there was nothing left upon which to vent her rage.

Bevyn had never allowed her to see him in Transition and she now understood why. The pain involved in changing was nearly unbearable and it would have torn the heart from her to see her mate suffering so. Her own pain she could endure but Bevyn's? That would be too much to be asked to view. That such agony would be hers from now until the end of time instilled in her a rage that was hard to contain.

"Bastard," she hissed, but it was not her mate she labeled in that way. She knew all too well who was to blame for the condition in which she now found herself.

Thoughts of Bevyn pushed aside the grim face of Kheelan Ben-Alkazar and Lea hissed again, hating the High Lord with every fiber of her being. Her back arched like that of a cat and she howled again—so loud that what was left of the chandelier in the sitting room tinkled. She spun around on the destroyed mattress then collapsed to her side, making a keening sound that hurt her own ears.

"Bevyn," she moaned.

She loved him. He was the only thing in her life she had ever loved but she had known she would never be what he wanted her to be so she had been prepared to leave him. She had known as surely as she drew breath that had death reached up to claim her, Bevyn would have taken her—kicking and screaming—into his world. She would

have fought him tooth and nail but in the end, his will would have prevailed and she'd always known that. He would refuse to live without her and she didn't want to live with him under the threat of becoming like him.

Now, the point was moot. The decision had been taken away from either of them and for that she was nearly insane with grief and rage. Her body had not been her own since the day she had met Bevyn Coure, but now her life no longer belonged to her either. She existed in a horrifying world that made her part human, part animal and she was finding it as terrifying and disgusting to accept as she knew she would.

"Bevyn!" she spat, and reached for the nearest thing upon which to take out her aggravation. It was a slender silver necklace he had given her on the anniversary of their fifth year together.

Gripping the delicate chain between her hands, she meant to rip it asunder but the small claddagh medallion that hung from it caught her eye and she whimpered.

"The heart signifies my love for you. It beats for you and you alone," he had said as he placed the chain around her neck. "The hands are my hands held out to you in friendship and for protection. The crown is there to remind you that I will forever be loyal to you. No other will I have for as long as there is time and beyond."

Tears slid unbidden down Lea's cheeks and she clasped the necklace to her breast. It felt cool against her skin but—just as her mate's fingers always did when they touched her—it turned warm and with it came an image of Bevyn's boyish smile.

She knew it would be wrong to blame Bevyn for what had happened to her. He might be the one to reap the benefits of someone else's perfidy and would most likely curse her assailant for hurting her, but secretly he would bless her attacker as well for allowing him to have her at his side forever.

Now that the deed was done and there was no turning back, Lea had begun to grudgingly accept it, though it hurt her to her very soul that she had had no choice in the matter. She doubted she would ever embrace it as Aingeal and Danielle had, but once Bevyn was home, she would not rant and rave against her predicament. What good would that do? she asked herself.

Something else had been driven home forcefully to Lea Walsh. She had come close to not only losing her life but losing the reason she had for living. She had known Bevyn would find a way to join his team and Lord Kheelan had warned her in his roundabout way that it would happen. Her fear for her mate's safety had been uppermost in her mind and it was because she had been so engrossed in that fear that she had not sensed the presence of her killer.

Her eyes cut across to the empty beaker of Sustenance that had been delivered to her that morning. There had been one wild moment when she started to pour the vile liquid out but the hellion inside her would not allow it. Crying hysterically, she had drunk the hideous liquid, consigning Kheelan Ben-Alkazar to the farthest reaches of the Abyss for what he had set into motion. When the healers and their assistants had forced their way into her room and held her down for the tenses—that godawful brew—to be

administered, she had fought and cursed them until the wretched pain that had been plaguing her had subsided then died away altogether.

"You will need the Sustenance and the tenses every day from henceforth, Lady Lea," Healer Dresden had told her. "You will experience no more pain now."

"Whose blood was that?" she had shrieked.

"Your mate's," the healer replied.

With the taking of Bevyn's blood, she had felt an immediate closeness to him and discovered she could *sense* him though he was thousands of miles away. As she had not before, she now understood why he had insisted upon taking a small portion of her blood when they had begun living together.

"I will be able to find you wherever you are," he had said, and at the time, the words had chilled her for she knew she would never be able to escape him. "I would know if you needed me."

Why had he not known she was in dire trouble the evening before? she wondered. Why had he not come back for her unless someone had the power to keep it from him?

The sure knowledge of who had taken her life, of who had made it possible for her to become a Reaper came to Lea like a cold, wet blanket thrown over her shoulders. She shuddered violently.

"Bevyn?" she said, reaching out to him with her newfound ability.

He didn't answer and though she tried many times, she knew her entreaties were being blocked and there was only one person powerful enough to keep that from happening.

* * * * *

The weather turned violent and the *Bonnie Doneen* was being bombarded with vicious waves that poured over her railings to slosh across the teakwood decks. Howling like a banshee, the wind whipped around the schooner as the seas rose and fell, plummeting the ship into deadly troughs one minute then pitching it high in the air the next.

Battling with the sea, the helmsman's eyes were steady, his hands locked upon the wheel. Securely lashed to eyebolts on the deck, a heavy hemp rope tied around his waist anchored the sailor to keep him from being swept overboard. Nevertheless the hapless man was being pitched to and fro by the force of the water driving against him and his flesh had turned a disturbing shade of blue from the chill.

In their cabins, the Reapers kept out of the way of the sailors who scurried about to batten down all that might move or be pitched overboard with the violent tossing of the ship. All lights had been extinguished for fear of fire.

"There is a reason Reapers shouldn't be on water," Iden said. His face had a greenish tinge to it and he was clutching his belly as he lay huddled against the wall by his bunk.

Phelan bent over the chamber pot once more and strained although there was no longer anything left to be brought up. He was paler than anyone had ever seen him, his usual cocky attitude gone. Clinging to the rim of the porcelain pot, he was grunting quietly.

Jaborn was sitting with his back to the wall, his forearms braced on his raised knees. Like Iden, he had been allotted a hammock but couldn't lie in the thing for it was swinging wildly with the pitching of the ship.

Joined by the healer and Ash, Bevyn, Glyn and Cynyr were playing cards in their cabin. Due to the heavy dose of medication Owen had been given, he was sleeping soundly, oblivious to the storm outside but now and again every man there turned to look at him for he would groan and his body would flinch.

"He'll be all right, won't he, Sorrell?" Glyn asked as he threw down a card.

"Physically, he will," the healer replied. "Emotionally?" He shrugged. "Well, that's another matter."

"He'll be fine," Cynyr said, his face grim.

Arawn appeared in the doorway. "Captain Ramos says we'll be heading for a sheltered cove about five miles east of our present position. It will be safer to ride out the storm there."

"I just want to get off this bobbing cork," Ash said. "I've never cared for sailing."

"How's Owen?" the Prime Reaper asked.

"Sleeping like a baby," Cynyr answered. "We half expect him to stick his thumb in his mouth."

Glyn chuckled. "Well, if his bipee needs changing, don't look at me, Cree." He shook his head and threw in his cards. "I'm out."

"Me too," Bevyn said. He sat back in his chair and put the heels of his hands to his eyes. "I could use some of Moira's blueberry pie right about now."

Bracing himself in the doorway, Arawn folded his arms over his chest. "Why don't you come with me and we'll raid the galley. My stomach is sticking to my ribs right about now."

Bevyn nodded and got up to accompany Arawn.

"I don't know how you men can eat anything," Ash grumbled, "but I'll come along to help."

"There's no need," Arawn said.

"'Tis my job, milord," Ash stated. "As your steward—"

"Stay put, Ash," Arawn ordered. He gave the man a look that said there would be no argument.

Under the table Cynyr nudged Ash with the toe of his boot and when Ash glanced at him, Cree shook his head. Ash stayed where he was.

"Has Lea tried to reach out to you?" Arawn asked when Bevyn and he stumbled along the companionway, heading for the galley.

"No," Bevyn said. "I imagine she's still pretty damned pissed at me."

"She's not mad at you," Arawn disagreed. "By now, they will have given her your blood as Sustenance. It concerns me that she hasn't tried to contact you."

"She's pissed," Bevyn repeated. "I know Lea."

They made it into the galley to find the cook preparing cold sandwiches for them. As the man and his assistant worked, Arawn motioned Bevyn off to one side.

"What are your plans once we get back to the Citadel?" the Prime Reaper inquired.

Bevyn cocked a shoulder. "I will ask her to marry me. I should have done that long ago anyway."

"And if she refuses?"

Coure looked away. "I don't know, Ari. Things weren't good between us when I left. Now?" He shoved his hands into the pockets of his black leather pants. "I honestly don't know what I'll do. I love her more with every beat of my heart."

"And if she decides to leave you?"

Bevyn's gaze was direct. "I won't let her go."

"It will be different now," Arawn said. "She'll be stronger and she'll have a Reaper's powers." He ran a hand over his face. "I'll be facing something similar with Danielle when I get back."

"Aye but Danni has accepted the Transference," Bevyn reminded him. "I know Lea. She has cursed it."

"Will you go back to the Armistenky Territory?"

Bevyn blew out a long breath. "That's where I've been stationed for the last ten years. She likes it there although she prefers the Citadel. The people in the nearest town have never had much to do with us and more than likely they'll like us even less now that Lea is—" A muscle jumped in his jaw. "On second thought, we might just move somewhere else within the territory. It's a big section of the country."

The cook had made two trays with enough ham sandwiches, sliced celery, carrots and sweet pickles for the Reapers and the two men accompanying them. Taking the trays, Arawn and Bevyn headed back to the cabins. Overhead, they could hear the sailors scurrying about as the ship headed for the cove Captain Ramos had mentioned.

Phelan was too sick to eat and Iden just waved them away. Jaborn looked at the sandwiches and shook his head, explaining he could not partake of the ham nor could he take the bread and cheese that had touched the forbidden animal's flesh. He took the vegetables and sat there munching quietly. Bevyn offered to go get him some bread and cheese but the Akhcharulian declined.

"I am not hungry," he said.

Going back to Bevyn's cabin, Arawn joined the men—except for Ash—in gobbling down the food. The Reaper's steward left the room, the smell of the food making him nauseous.

"Sounds like they just dropped anchor," Cynyr remarked.

"Ramos says we should be able to take the boat ashore," Arawn said. "I'd like to take a walk on solid ground for a while."

It was close to midnight by the time the jolly boat was lowered and the Reapers, the men who had come with them, Captain Ramos and three of his sailors landed on the shore of Quanto Cay. The wind was surging with even more violence and the schooner was straining at its anchor. Overhead the palm fronds were lashing with a harsh rustling sound and the waves were crashing to the beach.

"There is a village just to the north," the captain yelled over the skirling wind and pounding rain. "Raoul will lead you there while I see to getting the rest of the crew to shore."

Trudging along behind the sailor leading them, Glyn and Cynyr were carrying Owen on a litter. Still dead to the world, the Reaper was snoring lightly, the rain beating down on the hood Arawn had thrown over his face to protect him.

"I'm never going to let him live this down," Glyn grumbled, shifting the unconscious man's weight.

"I just hope he'll be able to look back on it and laugh," Cynyr said.

After they were settled in a hut provided for them by the tribal chieftain, the Reapers sat before a cheery fire and ate a basket of fruit the chieftain's wife had provided. With the storm lashing the structure, it was difficult to think about sleeping. As the night wore on though, one by one they curled up on the comfortable pallets given to them.

"Bevyn?"

Coure straight up on his pallet, swinging his head from side to side. "Lea?" he asked softly, not realizing he had spoken aloud until one of the men around him grunted with annoyance at being disturbed.

"Where are you?"

He knew that tone of voice all too well. His lady feared the dark, feared being alone, and when storms raged, she spent the night practically tucked beneath him as the tempest roared.

"I'm with you in my heart, milady," he said, reaching out to her the only way he could—with his mind.

"I need you."

There were tears in his lady's voice and such great sadness, it brought tears to his own.

"I will be there with you as soon as I can, Lea," he whispered.

"She killed me." It was a plaintive statement.

"Who, milady?" he asked, clenching his teeth to her misery.

"I need you," she said again, and he could hear her crying.

No matter how many times he tried to contact her again, she did not answer. His heart was aching, his soul hurting.

"What's wrong, Bevyn?" Arawn asked from across the fire.

"I have to go to her," Coure said, throwing off the light blanket that covered his legs.

"In this storm?" Cynyr asked, sitting up.

The other men stirred—even Owen who came awake with a start—and they all sat up.

"What's going on?" Cynyr asked.

"You'll be flying right into the storm," Glyn reminded him.

"I have to go to her," Bevyn repeated. He stood up.

Cynyr tossed his own blanket aside. "Then I'll go with you."

"We'll all go," Arawn said. He looked at Iden. "Go tell the captain we'll be flying out of here. Have Sorrel and Ash pick up our weapons and the horses and head back to the train."

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Ari?" Glyn asked. He glanced at Owen who looked groggy. "Tohre won't be able to—"

"Tohre will be just fucking fine," Owen snapped. He raked his hands through his hair. "Is it raining?"

"It's storming," Glyn informed him. "We're in the midst of what may very well be a hurricane and we're going to go flying through it? This is not the brightest thing we've ever done and battling headwinds like this will wear us the hell out."

Arawn was on his feet, buckling on his gun belt. "Who said we were going to wing our way there?" He looked up at the palm frond ceiling. "Where are you, *Mo Regina*? We need you."

Bevyn's eyes flared. "Oh no! I'm not hopping up on Her back again, Arawn!"

"Not even for your lady?"

The voice was sultry and it arrived only a second or two before the beautiful red-haired goddess. As naked as the day She had been born of wild wind and foaming sea, She stood before them with green eyes sparkling.

"I am not going to—"

Morrighunia lifted Her hand and in the blink of an eye, the Reapers were high above the raging storm, looking down from a large wicker gondola that was gripped in the brutal-looking talons of an iridescent green dragon.

"You know She could have taken us to Calizonia like this and saved us a lot of time," Glyn said.

"Do you dare question the things I do, Reaper?" Morrighunia's voice was sharp and chastising in Glyn's ear and he slapped his hands to his head.

"No, Mo Regina!" he was quick to reply, but the ringing in his ears was painful.

"Good, for I never do anything without a reason but just for your information, this sort of thing is as taxing to Me as you rearranging molecules to fashion your uniforms is for you. Imagine a thousand, thousand times the expenditure of energy for you and you will understand why I thought it best to conserve all My energies for the coming fight." There was a wild screeching sound as though the goddess were hissing. *"Do not ever question Me again!"*

The other Reapers had heard Morrighunia's words and were grimacing from the discomfort—nowhere near as bad as Glyn's—punishing their hearing.

"Think before you speak again," Arawn warned Glyn.

The storm was far below them and they could see the swirl of its tempestuous winds and rain. No rain hit them but the wind passing over them was nearly as frigid as the Serenian Alps.

"Holy fucking shit," Cynyr said as he clung to the rim of the basket. *"How far up are we?"*

"High enough," Jaborn whispered.

The forty-foot wingspan of the dragon flapped lazily and the clouds skittering along beneath the gondola's base passed like lightning.

"How fast are we going?" Phelan asked, too scared to do anything but sit huddled on the floor, his knees drawn up into the perimeter of his arms.

Owen stood staring over the side of the gondola. He appeared to still be drug-dazed. Glyn was standing close to him with Bevyn on the other side.

"Faster than we've been lately," Arawn said, the wind rushing through his hair. He grinned, loving the feel of flying without having to use wings.

"I barely remember the ship that brought us here," Bevyn said.

What would have taken them days to do was accomplished in less than two hours and when the gondola settled gently in the courtyard of the Citadel amidst a light, cool rain, the men watched as their goddess took wing once more and soared away toward the lightening rays of luminance to the west. In the east, lightning still flashed from the violent storm that had passed.

"The Net must be down," Cynyr said as he unhooked the wicker gate of the gondola.

"He knew we were coming and She can always get through," Arawn said, and no one needed to ask whom he meant. He walked out of the gondola and looked toward the dark building where torchlights had suddenly appeared.

"Mo shearc!"

Arawn opened his arms as his lady came running barefoot toward him. Grunting as she flung herself at him, he swung her around then lowered his head to claim her lips as she lifted her legs to clamp them tightly around his waist.

"Attaboy, Prime. Set a good example for us mate-less guys," Iden laughed. He nudged Phelan. "Cree looks to be a happy camper too."

Cynyr and Aingeal were locked in a solid embrace. Though her feet were on the ground she was pressed so tightly against him, a feather couldn't have been wedged between them with her very pregnant belly molded to her mate.

But it was Bevyn to whom everyone—including the husbands and wives—looked when Lea stepped hesitantly from the rear portico of the building and came slowly toward her mate. Her blonde hair looked as though it had been whipped by a mighty wind and in the torchlight her gray eyes were filled with shadows, her lips trembling.

"Milady," Bevyn said as he walked to her. "I—"

Lea allowed him to get no farther for she rushed to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her cheek to his chest and began to sob.

On the portico steps, the Shadowlords—their gray robes fluttering in the wind—stood watching their warriors and the warriors' women. The High Lord nodded to Arawn but remained silent.

Bevyn swept his lady up in his arms and carried her toward the portico. He met Lord Kheelan's gaze as he passed him but said nothing to any of the Shadowlords. Taking his woman inside, he spoke softly to her, attempting to calm the piteous sobbing that made her body heave against him.

"That's the first we've seen her since the Transference," Danielle told her husband. "Aingeal and I were going to batter down her door in the morning if she didn't show herself."

"Bev will handle it," Arawn said. He looked down into the eyes of his mate. "We have a problem I believe you might be able to help us with, wench."

Danielle's attention shifted from her husband to the Reaper standing alone by the gondola, his hands shoved into the pockets of his uniform pants.

"He is hurting," Arawn said.

"I can feel it," his wife replied.

"Will you speak to him in the morning?"

Danni nodded. "I will do whatever I can, *mo shearc*." She threaded her fingers through her husband's. "Now though. We have our own problem with which to contend."

Arawn frowned. "Has something happened?"

She sighed deeply. "It's Elbert," she said. "He's been thrown in jail again."

It took the Prime Reaper a moment to realize who she meant. His look turned wicked and he arched a thick brow. "And I suppose you want my help in setting the simpleton free."

His lady batted her lashes at him. "I'll do whatever it takes to see him liberated, *mo tiarna*."

“Aye, wench,” he said, his hand tightening around hers. “That you will.”

Cynyr and Aingeal were right behind Arawn and his lady going up the steps of the portico. He heard Lord Kheelan informed the Prime Reaper that he and his team should take a few weeks off to relax before going back to their assigned duty stations.

“More whole weeks here?” Aingeal groaned. “We could get a lot done if we were back in Haines City!”

Glancing down at his wife’s large tummy, he laid a hand there then jumped back as though he’d been burned. His eyes flared. “Wench?” he gasped.

“Your son has been doing that all day,” Aingeal told him with a snort. “He’s an anxious one.”

His hand trembling, Cynyr reached out to touch his lady’s stomach again and as soon as he did, his face lit up as bright as the torches on the portico and tears filled his eyes. “Does it hurt?” he asked as he gently rubbed her belly.

“It feels strange but it doesn’t hurt,” Aingeal replied. “The hurt will come when I birth this little brat of yours.”

Cynyr flinched. “Milady, I—”

“Don’t say it,” she warned him, linking her arm through his as they entered the building. “It takes two to wrangle, *mo shearc*.”

Iden and Phelan invited Jaborn to have an early morning snack with them and turned to ask Glyn and Owen if they’d like to come too.

“You go on,” Glyn said.

“Go with them, Kullen,” Owen said. “I’ve business with the Shadowlords.”

“I can wait.”

Owen shook his head. “This may take a while.” He met his friend’s worried look. “I’ll meet up with you later.”

Glyn hesitated – undecided – but when Owen half smiled at him, he turned away.

Taking his time following the rest of his team, Owen Tohre walked up to the bottom of the portico steps and stared up at the Shadowlords. His face was hard and set, his shoulders rigid, his hands still thrust deep into his pockets.

“How long will you be gone?” the High Lord asked softly.

“Until I return,” Owen said in a harsh tone. A muscle flexed in his jaw. “I may never come back.”

“You will always be welcome here, Lord Owen,” Lord Naois told him.

“Aye, well, it’s nearly the only place where a Reaper is welcome,” Owen stated.

“Haines City being the exception,” Lord Dunham spoke up.

“H.C. is Cree’s bailiwick,” Owen replied. He turned to go then stopped, looked back over his shoulder, meeting Ben-Alkazar’s eye. “They’ll be back, you know.”

The High Lord sighed. “Aye, Lord Owen, they will.”

A grim, lethal smile tugged at the Reaper's mouth. "Let's hope the bitch is with them. If she is, she's mine." With that said, he walked back toward the gondola, changing as he went, shedding his humanity and taking on a freer form.

The Shadowlords watched the blackbird as it soared up from the ground, banked to the north and then disappeared into the light, misting rain.

"You can turn the Net back on now, Dunny," Lord Kheelan said. "Our troubled Reaper has flown the nest."

Epilogue

Arawn Gehdrin had known horrific cruelty in his life. He had known disloyalty, spite, betrayal and had endured a gruesome death that would have crippled a lesser man. He was due for the good things in his new life and he knew everything he could ever want was to be found in the beautiful blue eyes of his lady.

“Poor Egbert just can’t keep out of trouble, can he, wench?” the Prime Reaper asked as he unbuckled his gun belt.

“Elbert,” his lady corrected. “And nay, he surely can not.”

“What did he do this time?” He re-buckled the belt and hung it over the foot post of their brass bed. He sat down on the edge of the bed to pull off his boots.

“I am at a loss to say, *mo tiarna*,” she said meekly. “Whatever the cost of freeing him, I have no recourse but to pay.” She looked up at him through her long lashes. “What is your pleasure, sir?”

“How can I tell until I know the extent of your brother’s perfidy?” he countered as he slowly tugged his shirt from his uniform pants.

Danielle clasped her hands in front of her. “I believe it had to do with something he said, *mo tiarna*. An insult to one of the Shadowlords, perhaps?”

“An insult, eh?” he asked. He unbuttoned the cuffs of his silk shirt then began unbuttoning the front. “Opened his mouth a bit too wide and too often, perhaps?”

She sighed, shaking her head sadly. “And stuck his foot in it, I’m sure.”

The Prime Reaper shrugged out of his shirt and let it fall to the floor. His hands went to the closure of his pants. “I can think of a fitting tribute for you to pay then, wench,” he said. “Kind unto kind if using his mouth was his crime.”

“You can?” she asked, her eyes wide. “What, pray tell, might that be, *mo tiarna*?”

“Aye, I can.”

Danielle flicked out her tongue to run it along her lush lips. As her husband unzipped his pants and pushed them down over his hips—his steely erection springing into view—she slipped off her clothing then dropped gracefully to her knees.

“Oh *mo tiarna!*” she said breathlessly, reaching down to help him step out of the leather pants. “Are you going to savage me now?” She looked up at him, her lips parted. “Do terrible, bad things to me with that fearsome weapon between your legs?”

“Do you wish your brother free of his latest incarceration?” he inquired, folding his arms over his naked chest and looking down at her with a crooked brow. “Will you pay my price, wench?”

His lady's shoulders slumped. "What choice do I have but to endure your every whim if I am to see Egbert rid of his prison cell?"

"Elbert," Arawn mumbled. "What choice indeed, my pretty."

Her hand trembling, her lips quivering, the Prime Reaper's lady reached out to touch his rigid manhood. "Oh but it is such a brutish thing, is it not?"

"Not when you use it gently with that sweet mouth and pliant tongue of yours," he said in a husky voice.

"You want me to put *that* in my mouth?" she gasped.

"Aye, wench," he growled. "I want you to swallow it."

"But do you think it will fit?" She eyed him saucily. "What with it being so big and all."

Arawn said nothing, just looked down at her with the most wicked gleam in his amber eyes.

"Oh well, I suppose if I have to," she said with resignation. She leaned forward but stopped just before taking him into her mouth. She looked up at him. "Aren't you afraid your little she-wolf might take a bite out of this delectable serving, *mo shearc?*"

He unfolded his arms to thread his fingers through her hair. He anchored her head and pulled her closer to his erection. "Not when she knows how much pleasure that meat can give her," he replied.

Danielle smiled and slid her lips over his throbbing flesh. She heard his sigh of contentment and plied her tongue along his flesh in a way she knew he enjoyed. His hands massaged her scalp as he held her to him, shifting his legs apart to give her freedom to cup his sac in her hands.

"Aye, milady," he whispered, feeling the fire blazing in his loins. "You have such a sweet mouth."

She suckled on his flesh and milked him of the salty fluid that seeped from the aching slit at the end of his cock. Her lips had him as rigid as stone and he was panting as she worked her sensual magic on his willing shaft.

When he bent down to jerk her to her feet, spinning her around so he could fall with her upon the bed, she could do no more than gasp as his cock slid deep inside her and his fingers dug into the soft cushion of her ass.

"Take all of me, wench," he said, thrusting into her hard and ever deeper. "Take all that is me."

Danielle wrapped her legs around his hips and tightened until she heard him grunt. "Take all of me, Reaper," she countered.

Arawn reveled in her fingernails gouging into the flesh of his back. It was a sensation that sent shock waves of pure lust rampaging through his system. He increased his thrusts and lifted her higher against him so he could penetrate her silken sheath even more.

“Come for me, wench,” he said, pounding into her. “Come for me and milk me dry as you do!”

He could feel the tremors beginning along the length of her moist cavern. She was clutching him so tightly he was having trouble drawing breath but he didn’t care. He would gladly die in his woman’s arms. She was all to him and without her he would be lost. The sobering thought of just how close he had come to losing her sent an agonizing pain through his chest and he increased his movements, needing desperately to lose himself in her willing body.

“Aye, Reaper,” she said, and her lips moved to the hollow of his throat where a rapid pulse thundered. “I will come for you.”

Ripples undulated through her warm sheath—tugging at his cock, suckling him, drawing forth his response that came with a burst of juices that made him bellow with the release.

She shrieked her pleasure.

He growled his release then collapsed atop her as the last spasm faded away and he lay still.

Danielle’s arms were wrapped around him. Her legs kept him captive against her. His head was upon her breast, his lips pressed to one taut nipple.

“I love you, Arawn Gehdrin,” she whispered to him.

He was breathing hard, a light sweat glistening on his naked body. “You are my heart, Danielle Gehdrin,” he replied. “I worship you.”

She let him sleep for a little while. He woke to her fur tickling his nose, her wet muzzle pressed against the side of his neck. Opening his eyes, he looked into the blue eyes of his beautiful she-wolf. She flicked out her sweet tongue and licked him across his lips.

“Evil little she-wolf,” he responded, reaching out to stroke her thick white fur.

She nipped at him then jumped from the bed, flicking her lustrous tail to encourage him. She padded gracefully to the door that was cracked open a bit. Looking back at him over her silky ruff, she growled low in her throat.

“Now?” he inquired, feeling desire hardening him. “You want to play now?”

She shook herself and bared her teeth in a silly grin that set him to laughing.

“All right,” he said, and with one lithe move, he was beside her. He brushed his reddish-brown fur against her soft white coat.

* * * * *

Lord Kheelan watched the two wolves running across the courtyard in the early dawn light. He smiled at their antics until the playfulness became something more, something too private for him to view. He turned away, a sad wistfulness—an aching,

longing—for that one woman he knew he could never have plundering what soul he had left.

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 39 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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