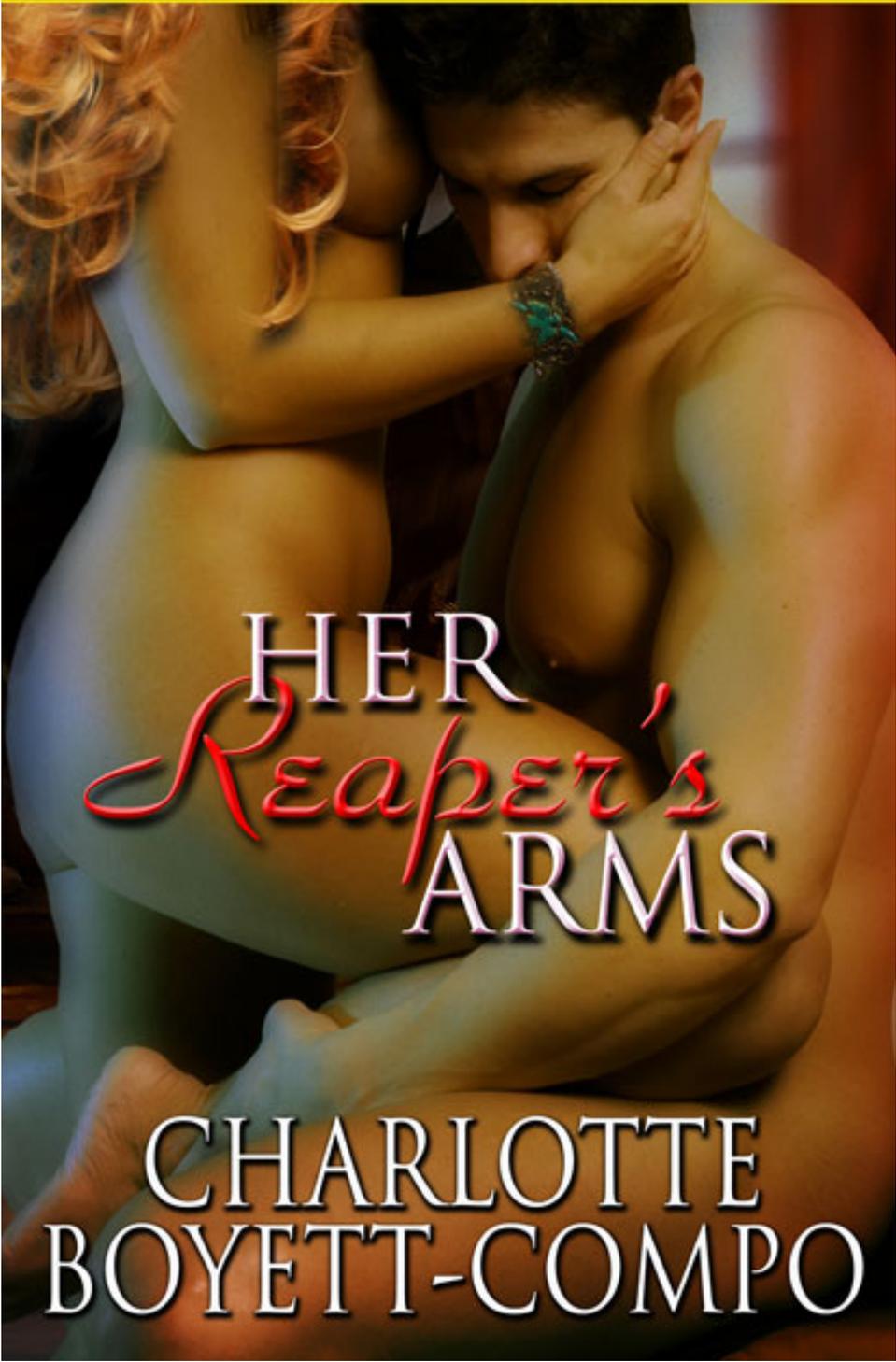


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



HER
Reaper's
ARMS

CHARLOTTE
BOYETT-COMPO

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Her Reaper's Arms

ISBN 9781419911149

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication August 2007

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HER REAPER'S ARMS

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Prologue

At Críonna in the Aneas Quadrant

All living things must die, he thought as he looked up at the bright blue sky. It was a shame his existence was ending on such a beautiful day when life was burgeoning all around him. Birds were singing sweetly in the trees and a soft, gentle wind was caressing his face. The scent of the ocean wafted beneath his nostrils and he inhaled deeply, knowing it would be his last unsullied breath this side of heaven—wherever and whatever that was.

Remanded to the Execution Mound, his hands had been chained above his head to the concrete pillar at his back. They had piled the dried branches thickly at his feet and had sprinkled oil upon the wood. Before him, the people of the keep were gathered to watch him die and there was not a tearful eye among those who glared hatefully at him. He had—after all—unwittingly caused them grief for when their mistress was angry, her people suffered.

Only one face in the crowd bore a smile and it was a brutal, vindictive smile awaiting revenge. It did not help that the face was the loveliest thing he'd ever been allowed to see in his lifetime or that her face had once gazed upon him with heated passion—albeit one that held no resemblance whatsoever to normal desire. Now her eyes bore into him as fiercely as the flare of the torch waiting to set the rushes afire, burning into his flesh a pathway of hatred.

Taking one last look at the brilliant, calming sky, he lowered his head and found those savage eyes, locking gazes with the Countess Kennocha Tramont. Her red lips glistened in the sunlight as she swept the tip of her pink tongue across them in anticipation. In the regal ianthine robes of her ancestry, her milk-white complexion was framed perfectly, her lush cleavage above the low neckline of the bodice drawing the eye of every male among those assembled. Sweeping almost to the ground, the crowning glory of her midnight black hair shimmered with blue highlights in the sun and was held in place by a golden circlet upon her forehead.

For over a month he had endured the worst kind of hell in the dungeon of Rathlin, the imperial seat of the Tramont clan. During that time, he had been subjected to the most evil and perverse torments ever devised. The inquisitors had beaten and burned his body, torn his flesh, broken fingers and toes, stretched his limbs until the joints had been dislocated, driven wood slivers under his fingernails, repeatedly held his head under water until he was forced to drag the liquid into his lungs—all under the guise of eliciting a concession he was unwilling to make.

“Will you give yourself to me now?” he had been asked over and over again, but refused to answer.

"Submit!" they had screamed at him.

"To what?" he had pleaded. "An evil I care not to embrace?"

The one responsible for his imprisonment had been there in the dungeon, seated in her soft, comfortable chair, eating food he could not have, drinking water he was not allowed, watching as his body had been broken and his spirit crushed, that enigmatic smile hovering on her full lips.

"Give in," she had whispered to him.

"How will I live with myself if I do, milady?" he had pleaded, barely able to speak.

When at last she grew bored with the torture, she had calmly ordered his death. By then he longed for the surcease of the agonies being inflicted upon him and did not care that his life would soon be forfeit. He embraced the sentence, knowing the final anguish of the bonfire would put an end to his suffering. Learning that he would not be allowed the humane reprieve of being strangled before the fire was lit had only marginally dampened his eagerness for death. When it was done, it would be done.

He smiled sadly at his tormentress as she stood on the balcony of Rathlin Keep, her slender white hands resting on the stony balustrade, elegant jewels flashing in the sunlight. Despite what he was—or rather what he had been—he knew he should forgive her for what she was doing to him but he could not dredge up the energy or the will to do so. Perhaps he was not the man he had believed himself to be after all for there was anger in his broken heart, vengeance of his own seething in his tired mind. He would die cursed for the sins weighing heavily upon his battered soul—the sin of desiring revenge, the sin of anger.

Tearing his gaze from her, he looked out across those assembled.

"Heretic! Degenerate! Sinner!"

What lies had she told them? he wondered. What evil accusations had she flung? How badly had she sullied his name? His honor?

The inquisitor had called him many things with the passing of blades and barbed scourges across his bound body, but he knew himself to be guilty of none of those things. Now he would pay for sins he had not committed, be made to atone for unspecified evils he had never entertained.

His eyes were drawn to the executioner as the squat man dressed in black, his face hidden beneath a hood, came toward the branches with the torch. Through the twin slits in the ebon mask he could see spite gleaming back at him. As the man's arm lowered the fire to the oil-soaked sticks and twigs, he thought he heard a sinister laugh from beneath the thick hood.

"Die, you worthless bastard," she called out from the balcony. "Die and spend eternity in the Abyss!"

Smoke rose up in spiraling columns to burn his eyes. It clogged his nostrils, was sucked down his throat to gag and choke him. Long before the first lick of the flames touched his body, his lungs were seared and he was gasping for breath. The pain leapt

up his legs—the fabric of his robe going up with a *whump* of sound. He tried not to scream as the agony ate at him but he was not that strong a man.

He writhed in the flames as the burning torment moved up his chest and flicked at the underside of his chin. The reverberation of his howls echoed over the courtyard as he struggled wildly and in vain to break free of the chains binding him to the upright.

But as the flames fanned across his face, the sunlit day grew dark, forbidding as gunmetal gray clouds came out of nowhere to block the sun. The air grew chill. The wind whipped the flames, helping them to consume him. A mighty rhythmic *whomping* began and vaguely he heard the people screaming. He could no longer see for the fire had taken his vision but in the periphery of his anguish, he thought he heard the thunder of running feet. Lightning zinged across the heavens and rain began cascading down in thick sheets, putting out the flames, turning the ground beneath his ruined body to a smoldering pile of steaming ashes.

He felt his arms falling away from the chains, felt his body being lifted. Cold wind flowed over and around him.

In the arms of the Gatherer, he thought as he soared through the air to the accompaniment of mighty flapping wings.

Pain engulfed him from head to toe. It was an agony that not even the chill streams of air could assuage. He felt the agony all the way to his bones and when he took his last breath, he drew that fierce torment down into his very soul.

If he had thought the pain of his death had been bad, the pain of his rebirth was a thousand times worse. That pain would last him through eternity.

In his nightmares he would remember the feel of rough ground beneath him as he was lain down, his ravaged body screaming in protest though he no longer had vocal cords with which to make sound. He would remember the taste of something thick and cloying trickling down his gullet, remember swallowing convulsively as a scaly hand massaged the charred flesh of his throat. He would remember being turned to his belly and the godawful agony that had come after his back had been slit open. Overwhelming anguish, staggering agony had invaded his body and what had come from that invasion of his being would forever be his rebirthright.

Though he would not remember what had happened to him after the Transference of the Revenant Worm—the parasite that would give him the strength and longevity of ten men and heretical abilities beyond his ability to imagine—he would remember the face of the white-haired hag who had gazed down at him with a snaggle-toothed grin when he could see once more.

“You have given me your seed, now reap the benefits I will bestow upon you!”

He could not move as She pressed Her odorous mouth to his. The feel of Her slimy tongue thrusting past his lips had sickened him as Her hands had roamed over his body, touching him in places he found repellent.

“You are Mine, boy and you always will be! I will have you as I desire you to be!” She had stated and then he was once more flying through the air. Looking up, he had

seen a huge creature with bright copper scales that glistened under the glow of the moon, its wings rising and lowering with a soft, pounding sound.

He would never know where She had taken him or how long She had held him there. When next he was fully aware, he was lying in a strange room on a strange world with three unknown men hovering over him. His burned flesh was whole again except for the myriad scars that were testament to his torture.

“Welcome to the Citadel, milord,” the tallest man said. “We are pleased you have joined us.”

Chapter One

Armistenky Territory, 3473

Reaper 2-I-C Bevyn Coure hated remembering how he'd been introduced into death. For days afterward he would be moody and bleak, his eyes filled with alternating strata of rage and despair. When he could sleep, his dreams would be filled with swirling smoke, the odor of burning flesh, the residual pain still carried deep within his consciousness. He would wake sweating profusely – as though still trapped in the heat of the conflagration – and his throat would be parched, his lungs feeling seared. When he was forced to relive that horrendous day, his flesh crawled, his body shuddered, his belly ached, and today was such a day.

The Cherchocreechi medicine man raised his buckskin-clad arms skyward, the fringe on his sleeves waving in the wind, and called out to the Great Spirit to look with favor upon the warrior who had passed from this world into the Land of the Ghosts. Chanting the merits of the deceased warrior, the *didanawisgi* bid He Who Listens and She Who Waits to take into account the good things the dead man had accomplished and to overlook that which did not please Those Who Judge.

Beneath the scaffolding upon which the warrior had been laid, his family and friends piled oak branches and bundles of sweet grass as the *didanawisgi* continued his recitation of the warrior's glories. As the People worked, they softly sang the burial song that would hasten their loved one on his way. Wrapped securely in a gaily decorated blanket tied with rope, the feet of the warrior faced south where his journey would begin. Around him were his most prized possessions, which would accompany him into the afterlife.

Standing apart from the mourners, Bevyn marveled at the mix of religious beliefs that had been incorporated into the Cherchocreechi tribe's rituals. He knew at one time there had been four distinct tribes but the Burning War, disease and myriad other calamities had struck to devastate the People until only a hundred or less were left from among the Four Nations. Some of their customs had been abandoned, forgotten, morphed from one belief into a new one that better served its worshippers. He knew that had happened for many of the natives of Terra.

"You look very sad, *danitaga*," Chief Amaketai said as he came to stand beside the Reaper. "You should rejoice for Onisca. He will soon be with Those Who Have Gone Before."

"Although I am saddened by your son's passing, that is not what haunts me this day, *oginalii*," Bevyn replied. "It is the sight of the pyre that disturbs me."

"Ah," Amaketai said. The old man had sat many hours with the Reaper before the campfire, hearing tales of lands far beyond the green hills of Armistenky. He knew how

the young man had met his end in that alien world so unlike his own. "It is the burning you dislike."

"Only because it brings back memories," Bevyn admitted.

"I understand," Amaketai said. He gave the man beside him—the man his people called *danitaga*, blood brother—a gentle look. "Life has not been kind to you, has it, my son?"

"Life has kicked my ass, old friend," Bevyn said with a faint smile. "Many times over."

Onisca's widow was given the honor of lighting his funeral pyre and she placed the burning sweet grass sheaf to the bundles intertwined with the oak branches. A loud, trilling ululation rose up from the throats of the mourners as the fire took hold and the flames rose. The bitterly sweet odor of burning flesh rose in the air.

Bevyn turned away, unable to watch the body catch fire. The stench was more than he could bear as well and his hands were trembling, his shoulders hunched as though he expected the fire to reach out to ensnare him. Bidding a hasty farewell to Amaketai, he strode purposefully to his horse, grateful the chief did not try to stop him. Grabbing a handful of Préachán's thick mane, he swung up into the saddle and dug his heels into the horse's black flanks. He needed to put distance between him and the burning man who had been like a brother to him.

He needed a drink, he thought as he raced his mount across the plains. He needed something strong, something that would numb the memories, something to erase the feeling of impending doom that had reached out to entrap him. Sometimes the only way he could make it through a week of loneliness, the isolation of his job, was to drown himself in whiskey and attempt to sleep it off.

The trouble with his kind was they had trouble sleeping. Even with a full bottle of rotgut sloshing in their bellies, the nightmares always hovered close by to claim them and to torment their rest, to drag them hissing from the land of Nod. Past deeds rose up to jeer at them and the cries of the dead they had dispatched haunted their restless slumber.

It was a hell of a way to live.

As Préachán—his big black stallion—raced over the ground, Bevyn thought of the *balgair*, the rogue, he had executed for murdering Onisca. He had hunted the bastard down, driven him to ground and had used his laser whip to slice off pieces of the rogue's body a little at a time until there was nothing left but mush on the blood-soaked ground. He had reveled in the man's screams, had inhaled his fear and agony as though they were perfume. He had taken out his wrath in painful increments that had lasted for hours until his whip arm grew numb and heavy and his energy flagged. Still he had slashed at the body—long after he had sliced the head from the corpse with an expert flick of his wrist—until the killing rage had finally passed, and he had been stunned to see what he had wrought.

"I have avenged you, *diganeli*," he had offered up to Onisca's ghost, calling him his blood friend.

But it had been more than vengeance he had meted out upon the rogue. It had been frustration and disappointment and an attempt to alleviate the bitter loneliness that was slowly driving him insane. The devastation he had perpetrated against the *balgair* had been excessive and he knew it but it had felt good – at least at the time – to vent.

For the last five years he had carried out the assignments the High Council had handed to him, never once questioning what was expected of him, never balking at the deeds done that were necessary to do what was required. He had killed in the name of justice without a shred of conscience staying his lethal hands. His anger over his own death was still a raw wound in his mind and a dark blot on his soul and nothing seemed to be able to calm the fury riding him with bloodied spurs.

The sun was low on the horizon and spearing into his eyes. Ahead of him was the town of Orson and a saloon where there was a bottle with his name on it. He licked his lips at the thought of the liquor burning its way down his throat, the promise of oblivion, the siren call to forgetfulness. The town wasn't much, the people dispensable in the grand scheme of things. He hadn't been there in quite a while, and the last time he'd passed through, he had spent two days in a drunken stupor he wished to experience again. Perhaps while he slept, a *balgair* would sneak in and take his head and the pain would finally stop.

Riding into the rundown town with its beaten-down citizens, Bevyn smiled grimly as those civilians scattered, rushing to hide behind locked doors and pulling draperies rather than garner the notice of a Reaper. Dismounting in front of the saloon, he glanced around, not surprised to find himself alone on the dirt street, to hear the eerie silence as breaths were held and lips mumbled in silent prayer that he would not stay long in their town.

Hitching up his gun belt, adjusting the dragon claw handle of his laser whip in its thin leather sheath, he tied Préachán to the hitching post and stepped up on the boardwalk, his spurs jangling against the weathered gray boards. Putting his hands on the batwing doors leading into the saloon, he was keenly aware that all noise inside the establishment had ceased and knew those inside had either scrambled out the back door or were waiting for him with trembling knees. Out of habit, he swept the interior of the building with his psychic powers and detected no threat to him. He pushed the doors open and went inside the smoke-filled, stale-smelling, darkened interior.

Lea Walsh stood beside a sticky table she'd been cleaning when Luke Desmond had come rushing in to tell them a Reaper was headed their way. She'd glanced at Mable, the saloon owner, who had hastened to tell the working girls to stop what they were doing and stay put. She winced at the noise of chairs scraping across the floor as the patrons of the saloon had run for the back entrance, not wanting to be there when the Reaper came in.

Mable was behind the bar and Lea could see her trembling, her red lips quivering. She had snatched up an unopened whiskey bottle and a shot glass and put them on the bar. The white feathers adorning her silk gown were fluttering at the neckline as the older woman swallowed convulsively.

The other saloon girls—Merrilee, Keesha and Su Lin—stood flanking the roulette wheel, their faces drawn, their bosoms rising and falling rapidly. Their eyes were locked on the saloon entrance.

“He ain’t a bad sort if you leave him to what he wants,” Mable said quietly. “Most likely he won’t ask for one of you but if he does, don’t look him in the eye, don’t speak to him lest he asks you a question and do whatever he tells you. Do it quickly and you’ll be all right. I ain’t never heard tell of him hurting a woman but with his kind, you never know what might set him off.”

Lea had not been at the White Horse Saloon the last time the Reaper assigned to the Armistenky Territory had come through town. In her twenty-three years, she’d never seen one of the infamous lawmen, and she had hoped she never would. When she heard the clink of his spurs on the boardwalk, she began twisting the bar rag between her hands, her heart pounding fiercely in her chest.

The saloon doors opened and the black-clad warrior came striding in as though he owned the place. His six-shooter was strapped low on his right hip and the handle of the fabled lightning whip lay strapped to the other. His black felt cowboy hat was pulled low over his forehead, the silver concho band on the crown catching the light. He walked with a swagger that was unmistakable as he belled up to the bar.

Bevyn’s gaze flicked to the woman standing off to one side, swept over the three huddled together and then settled on the blowsy tramp behind the long, rough bar. He strode purposefully toward her, ignoring the tremulous smile of greeting on her painted face. He glanced down at the bottle then back into her frightened face, waiting for her to pour the rotgut. She was quick to oblige him and he picked up the shot glass, knocked back the potent liquid and then set the glass down for another round.

“Be about your business, ladies,” he said quietly to the other women, not liking that they were behind his back. He could see them in the long sweep of mirror behind the bar but he was never comfortable with anyone lurking at his back.

Merrilee, Keesha and Su Lin made themselves scarce, taking the stairs to their living quarters without a backward glance at him. Mable stayed where she was like a deer caught in a spotlight.

Bevyn propped a foot on the tarnished brass rung that ran along the bottom of the bar and hunched over with his elbows on the nicked top, pushing his once again empty glass toward Mable to refill. “Anything I need to see to while I’m here?” he asked the saloonkeeper.

“I think there might be, milord,” Mable said as she poured his third whiskey. “I can send for the sheriff.”

He nodded, swept his glance past her to the mirror to watch the girl behind him as she moved to another table with her bucket and rag. "I don't remember her being here last time," he said.

"She wasn't, milord," Mable said. "If you want me to send her upstairs..."

"Leave her be," he said, and continued to watch the girl as she worked. It surprised him that she'd stayed and it intrigued him that she didn't cast furtive looks at him as she went about her job. His curiosity was further piqued that she was dressed for what she was doing and not decked out in whore finery as the other women.

Lea could feel his eyes on her from the mirror. His steady stare was unnerving. She knew if she left the room, Mable would dock her for the day's work and she desperately needed the pitiful wages she got for cooking and cleaning at the White Horse. Thankfully the men in town left her alone and she wasn't expected to turn tricks like Merrilee, Keesha and Su Lin, although she'd had more than her share of men groping her since she'd been working for Mable.

"I'll need a room," she heard the Reaper say.

"Of course, milord," Mable readily agreed. "Lea, get upstairs and make sure our best room is made ready for Lord Bevyn."

He had not taken his eyes from the girl as he spoke. Despite the faded blue calico she was wearing—the cuffs and hem and neckline frayed—she was the prettiest thing he'd seen in a long, long time. Her breasts pressed against the tight bodice but he figured that was because she had outgrown the dress rather than making an attempt to emphasize the lushness of her chest. As she hurried for the stairs, he turned his head and lowered his gaze to her boots. They were badly scuffed, the soles coming away from the uppers, and when she lifted her skirt to climb the stairs, he could see her stockings had holes in them.

He continued to drink steadily—his shot glass never empty for long—until the girl came back down the stairs. He went back to observing her in the mirror as she took up a broom and began sweeping.

"She got a man?" he asked Mable as he rocked the shot glass between his fingers, staring down into the dark liquid.

"No, milord," Mable said.

He drained the glass and set it down. He straightened, his hands on the rolled edge of the bar. "Is she clean?"

Mable's eyes widened. "She's not one of my girls, milord," she said, her gaze snapping nervously to Lea. "She just cooks and..."

"Is she clean?" he repeated, his voice hard.

"Aye, milord, but..."

"I want her."

Lea heard his low statement and felt her heart skip a beat. Her head snapped around and she met the Reaper's steady gaze in the mirror. She could see little of his

face beneath the broad brim of his black hat, but she knew he was staring straight at her. She felt herself begin to tremble.

"Milord..." Mable began, but the amber eyes of the Reaper leapt to hers.

"Same room as before?" he queried, cutting her off, holding her captive in the unwavering glint of his attention.

Mable nodded. "Aye, milord, but she's not..."

"Send someone to take care of my horse and to bring my saddlebags in."

"Of course, milord, but..."

"Tell her to bring another bottle when she comes," he said, snatching up the one on the bar along with the glass.

"Milord, please," Mable said. "She's..."

He wasn't listening. He took the stairs—a bit unsteady for he'd had nothing to eat that day and the booze had gone straight to his head—with the neck of the whiskey bottle clutched in his left hand, the shot glass hooked under his index finger.

Looking to Mable for help, Lea saw the older woman shake her head.

"Ain't nothing I can do, girl," Mable said. "He won't hurt you. Leastwise, I'm pretty sure he won't. He won't fuck you. His kind don't do that but he'll expect you to jerk him off or blow him. Just be quick about it and hightail it outta there so he can sleep."

Lea's face flamed. She had no experience with that sort of thing. Although she'd had her breasts pawed and her ass pinched, her lips slobbered on and her belly rubbed by stony erections, she had never lain with a man. She'd never even seen a man's privates much less knew what to do with them.

"Mable..." she said, tears filling her eyes.

"Look here," Mable said, coming around from behind the bar. She extended her left index finger then grabbed it with her right hand, fingers wrapped around. She showed Lea what was expected. "Don't squeeze too tight and be careful of his balls. Go slow at first then faster, pulling on his meat with a firm, steady grip. That's how to jerk him off. If'n he wants you to suck him, just pretend his cock is a lollypop. Lick him around the knob and down the whole of him. Lick his balls. Draw him into your mouth and suck, but you'll have to relax your throat to take it all the way in. I've heard he's big down there. Try not to gag. It might offend him. Be careful of your teeth. Don't graze him with 'em. And whatever you do, don't bite him, girl. The gods know what he'd do if you were to bite him!"

Tears spilled down Lea's cheeks. "I don't think I can do this," she whimpered.

Mable stiffened. "Well, you'd fucking well better if you know what's good for you, girl! I'm sorry you gotta do this but you don't dare gainsay a Reaper if you want to live."

Lea glanced at the door, her breathing loud and quick. "I..."

"Girl, if you run, he'll come after you. I promise you that," Mable warned. "He's done marked you for what he wants and if you don't give it to him, there's no telling

what he's liable to do to you and me!" She went back around the bar, grabbed another bottle of whiskey and brought it to Lea, shoving it at her. "Here, before he starts wondering where you are!"

Shivering like a leaf in a violent storm, Lea nearly dropped the bottle. She was so frightened her teeth were chattering.

"Go on, girl," Mable said. She put out a hesitant hand to pat Lea's shoulder. "Go on now. Don't keep him waiting. As Reapers go, he ain't a bad sort. Ain't never heard of him hurting a girl."

"Mable..."

"Lord, girl, you don't keep a Reaper waiting! Go!"

It was the hardest thing Lea had done since burying her mother. As she took the stairs to the Reaper's room, her legs felt as though they would give out beneath her with every step. A hazy red film had invaded her vision to go along with the loud buzzing in her ears. Each step was a trial, a test of strength as she climbed. Every squeak of the old wooden steps set her nerves on edge. On the landing she stopped, looking back down at Mable, who was standing at the foot of the stairs, her wrinkled hands twisting against one another. She saw the saloonkeeper nod in encouragement and turned away, her fearful eyes going to the door of the Reaper's room, yet she could not seem to take a step toward it. She was panting as though she'd run an exacting race and her heart was thudding dangerously fast against her breastbone. When the door to his room opened and he appeared in the opening, she could not stop the moan that escaped her lips.

"I've not got all day, wench," he said in a gruff voice.

His black silk shirt was unbuttoned and hanging free of the black leather pants to reveal the thick matting of hair on his broad chest. The belt was gone from his pants and the top button had been undone. He stood there barefoot, his left hand braced on the doorjamb, his amber stare boring into her. One look at the dark blue tribal tattoo that stretched from his temple to his cheek on the left side of his face labeled him the deadly warrior that he was. Despite the unbelievable male beauty of his face, his swarthy complexion, the thick crop of curly brown hair that covered his head, the sight of him standing there elevated her terror to the point she thought she would pass out. She flinched when he cursed and took three long strides to reach her, snaking out a hand to snatch the whiskey bottle from her.

"You're starting to piss me off, wench!" he snarled. He pivoted, clamping his hand around her upper arm, drawing her behind him.

Lea stumbled as he ushered her into the room and then kicked the door shut behind them. She stood still—shivering uncontrollably—as he uncorked the bottle with his teeth, spat out the plug and lifted the bottle to his lips, sloshing some of the whiskey over his stubbled cheek as he swallowed the fiery brew. She watched it trickle down his throat and onto his broad chest. Wide-eyed, she saw him drain half the bottle before lowering it and running the back of his arm over his mouth before staggering to the bed

and sitting down on the mattress, the bottle gripped tightly in his hand as it dangled off the edge of the bed.

"Stop looking at me like I'm going to gobble you up, wench. I'm not going to fuck you," he said in a slurred voice. "Couldn't get it up now if I wanted to."

She swallowed convulsively, not knowing what to say, what to do, how to act. She didn't service the men who came to the White Horse and had no idea what was involved in doing so. Her hands were buried in the folds of her skirt, clutching the fabric for dear life.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"L-Lea," she managed to croak.

"Lea," he repeated. "Lea what?"

"Walsh."

He nodded then lifted the bottle for another long slug. When he lowered it, he held it out to her.

She shook her head, too afraid to tell him she didn't drink.

He shrugged then leaned over to put the bottle on the table beside the bed. His large body seemed to shrink some as he sat there with his shoulders slumped then he lifted his hand, motioning her with his fingers to come to him. When she didn't move—seemed unable to do so—he narrowed his eyes dangerously.

"Come here, wench," he ordered in a gruff tone.

Biting her lip, Lea reluctantly came toward him, her feet dragging, her hands so tight in the material she could feel her fingernails scoring her palms. As soon as she was within range, he lashed out a hand and took her wrist, pulling her closer, spreading his thighs to draw her up to him.

Lea was not a tall woman and the bed upon which the Reaper was sitting was high up off the floor. She was on eye level with him as he pulled her between his legs, his hand still gripping her wrist. Up close, the natural high heat of his Reaper body, the spicy cinnamon scent he gave off overpowered her senses to make her head reel. She could barely breathe as he lifted her right hand and looked down at it, twisting her wrist gently so he could see the palm.

Her hand was work-roughened, reddened, calloused, and her fingernails chewed down to the quick. The flesh smelled of harsh soap as he laid his free hand over hers to gently stroke the flesh, pulling his big palm along hers. He stroked her palm gently.

"You're not one of her whores," he said then lifted his head to fuse his eyes with hers. "Not with hands like these."

She didn't think he wanted a confirmation of his guess so she said nothing.

He studied her face for a long time—making her very uncomfortable beneath his close scrutiny as his gaze crawled over her features, but she could not look away from that intense golden stare. It almost felt as though she were falling into those smoldering

orbs, being drawn down into the very soul of their owner. Then he tilted his head to one side.

“Don’t be afraid of me, wench. I won’t hurt you,” he said.

He turned her hand sideways and brought it to his cheek, closing his eyes as the coolness of her flesh contacted the heat of his. He leaned his face into the cup of her palm and when at last he opened his eyes, it was then Lea saw into the Reaper’s soul, and what she discovered there made her heart hurt for him. Loneliness cried out to loneliness, holding out a hand to be touched.

This man was alone but it was not his solitude that spoke to her. It was the deep isolation in his gaze, the desire for something other than the trail and the next kill, the next burden to handle or the next wrong to set aright that caught and held her enthralled. She thought she could see down to the very core of him and what she glimpsed pulsed from him in waves of desperation. She knew he was but a hair’s breadth away from becoming completely irretrievable. In that moment, she lost all fear of him, the unease fading away as though it had never been.

Bevyn felt her hand tense on his cheek and thought she was going to pull away, but instead she caressed him, smiling tentatively when he gave her a surprised look.

“What would you have me do, milord?” she asked, though every instinct in her body screamed at her to run—to run before it was too late and she could not ever escape him. “How can I ease your pain?”

No woman—or man for that matter—had ever dared speak to him without first being bid to do so. He was startled by her bravery and more than a little unnerved by the way she was meeting his direct look. No one looked his kind directly in the eye unless bidden to do so.

“You’re a brave one, wench,” he mumbled.

She shook her head. “No, milord. I am scared spitless,” she said.

He felt ashamed, the burden of his position, the nature of his existence having worn him down to the quick just as she had savaged her nails. People feared his kind and he could see that fear in her pretty gray eyes, but she was gamely holding his stare though she was trembling beneath his steady gaze.

She eased her hand from his and knelt down in front of him, her trembling hands going to his thighs. She could not seem to look away from his bewildered stare. “How can I help you, milord?”

Bevyn needed something to which he could not seem to put a name. He ached for just a solitary moment of comfort, one single bolstering act that would help him through the next day, the next hour, even the next breath. What he sought had eluded him all his life. He never thought to find it and certainly had never looked for it in the perfumed arms of a stranger.

“Lie with me,” he said. “Let me hold you. That is all I want.”

Lea felt heaviness between her legs that she did not understand and she could have sworn moisture gathered there at his words. Her belly did a tight little squeeze that she thought odder still.

"You don't have to undress," she heard him saying, his words slurred. "I just want to hold you."

He was drunk and more than likely unaware of what he was saying. She could tell by the way he mumbled his words the liquor was rapidly claiming him, but she did not doubt he would keep his word. A Reaper's word was law, drunk or not.

There was sweat glistening on his chest and she remembered someone once remarking that Reapers' body temperatures were higher than normal.

"You are hot, aren't you?" she asked, and at his nod, she rose to her feet and reached out to push the shirt from his body, helping him draw his heavily muscled arms from the sleeves. The moment she saw the stylized grim reaper tattoo on his left pectoral, she tensed.

"Was that burned into your flesh, milord?" she asked.

"Aye," he whispered, still surprised, and a bit confused that she would dare question him.

She met his gaze. "It must have hurt."

"Not so much," he lied.

Her gaze roamed over his flesh and it was all she could do not to flinch as she took in the myriad scars that lined his broad chest. There were unmistakable burn marks, long cuts, places where it looked as though the flesh had been torn away.

"A pretty sight, huh?" he asked.

"You are a warrior, milord," she said. "Such a sight is to be expected."

She was holding his silk shirt in her hands and began to fold it carefully, trying not to look at the scars. She laid it aside as he swung his legs up on the bed and stretched out, one knee cocked. Since he was close to the edge of the bed and she would have had to crawl over him to lie down, she skirted the bed and went to the other side. Sitting down, she lifted her legs, removed her worn boots and stockings and then drew her feet onto the mattress. Then she lay there as still as a corpse, her hands crossed over her stomach, not knowing what he desired her to do.

Bevyn rolled over to his side, facing her – not touching her though he longed to. She turned her face toward him, her gray eyes a bit wary. He liked the way the sunlight coming in through the window shone on her bright blonde hair. It was piled up in a haphazard way upon her head with little tendrils falling down and he desperately wanted to take the pins from it, to see it hanging free. He shook himself to get rid of that tempting notion.

"How did you come to work here, wench?" he asked, memorizing every freckle, mole and tiny imperfection on her lovely face. His fingers itched to trace a small scar on the underside of her chin, wondering how she'd come by it.

“My mother was the town’s seamstress,” she said, shifting so she was lying on her side too. One small hand lay pressed against the mattress, the other she tucked beneath her head. “When she died, I had no way to fend for myself but to work. The house we lived in was a rental and not even the furniture was ours. The only things Mama owned outright were her sewing machine, the tools of her trade and a dress form. When she died, those things were auctioned off to pay for her funeral. Mable was kind enough to offer me the job as her cook and maid. I had no other options and no money to journey elsewhere for work.”

“There were no men courting you, wench?” he inquired. As pretty as she was, he found it hard to believe the men of Orson had not been camped on her doorstep.

“There are few single men in town, milord, but those who would have me would do so without benefit of Joining.”

Bevyn’s head was swimming. No food, too much booze too quickly, the nearness of the lovely woman lying willingly beside him – all combined to put a pleasant fuzziness to his world. He found himself relaxing, something he rarely did in the company of others.

“You should have a husband, wench,” he said. He slid his hand to hers, entwining their fingers, liking the contact.

“One day,” she said. She arched her hand, pulling his fingers beneath her own as though it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

His eyelids were growing heavy. Normally, he would have sent the girl from his room before he even thought of sleeping, locked the door behind her, keeping his gun close at hand in case some hard case decided to get up the courage to challenge him.

“Were you born here in Orson?” he asked, trying to hide his yawn.

“In Prescott, just west of here,” she replied. She was studying his face so close to her own, mentally tracing the tribal tattoo, her gaze dipping to the crimson Reaper insignia on his chest.

“I spent a month there one night,” he joked. “Shitty little town.” He yawned again and the flash of his very white teeth against the dark tan drew her attention.

“You don’t have fangs?” she asked.

Bevyn’s eyes had nearly closed but he snapped them open, frowning. “Why would you think I had fangs?”

She shrugged. “I thought all Reapers did.”

The frown smoothed out from between his brows. “Only when we Transition,” he said, “and I’m not near to my cycle.” He could not seem to keep his eyes open.

“So I don’t have to worry about you biting my neck?”

Once more he forced his eyelids open and the smile he gave her was purely evil. “Not unless you ask me nicely, wench,” he said, and winked.

She smiled, and that smile – combined with a very feminine giggle – transformed her face from merely lovely to breathtakingly beautiful and it chased away his

drowsiness in a heartbeat. He stared at her, transfixed. No woman had ever looked at him in that way, but then again, no woman had ever met his gaze before.

"Where are you from, milord?" she asked.

"A long way from here," he mumbled, not wanting to think or talk about his past.

Lea felt his hand tense on hers and knew she had asked something she shouldn't have so she said nothing more. When he suddenly tugged on her hand, pulling her toward him, she moved over, laying her head on his shoulder as naturally as though she had done it a hundred times before. She snuggled against him as he enclosed her in the perimeter of that strong arm, his fingers curling around to cup her shoulder. Unsure of what to do with her hand, she laid it gently in the center of his chest, liking the feel of those crisp hairs beneath her palm, her other arm trapped between their bodies, her fingers touching the leather of his pants along his hip.

For a long time they just lay there with his arm cradling her, their breaths mingling, their heartbeats seemingly synchronized with one another. He covered the hand she had placed on his chest with his, caressing her fingers gently. When he at last broke the silence, it was with a question that stunned her.

"Would you consider being my *compánach*, Lea?" he asked. "My companion?"

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked up at him with shock clouding her gray gaze, her full lips parted. "Milord, I..."

"I don't mean as my mate," he was quick to tell her. "I would not ask that of you or any woman—I can not ask it—but just to be here when I pass through, to lie beside me, to keep me company." He squeezed her hand. "You would not have to service me. I would not ask that either."

She heard such longing in his voice and a touch—of what? Self-pity?—that broke her heart. He looked like a little boy asking his mother for a toy, the light in his eyes expectant, enthusiastic.

"I would buy you a house," he said. "Furnish it. Give you a comfortable allowance. I would take care of you."

"In exchange for just being held, milord?" she asked softly. "Just talking to you?"

He smiled hopefully. "Aye, wench," he said eagerly. "Nothing more. I swear it."

"You would not expect me to...to..." Her face flamed.

"Service me?" he asked. "Not unless you willingly offered."

She eased her hand from beneath his, trying not to react to the keen disappointment that flitted through his hopeful eyes. She laid her palm on his cheek. "You sell yourself too cheaply, milord," she said. "You ask little of me but are willing to give so much." She caressed his face. "Too much. Surely you know any woman would jump at the chance of having you as her protector. I am not much to look at and—"

"You are beautiful!" he interrupted her. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Milord..." she said in a chiding tone.

"You are."

She nearly laughed, thinking he was joking, but the earnest look on his face stilled her twitching lips. "You are serious," she said.

"Reapers do not lie," he said, and sat up, twisting to look down at her. She watched his pectorals jump as though he were offended she would consider that he could tell a falsehood.

She realized he was holding her hand to his thigh and stroking the back of it with his other hand. Looking up at him, her gaze wandering over his tousled hair – one dark curl hanging over his eye – she wanted to thread her fingers through that dark mass to discover if it was as soft as it looked.

"I could give you everything you have ever dreamt of, Lea," he told her. "You would want for nothing."

Lea searched his gaze and realized he was offering her something far beyond her ability to understand. Reapers were feared, avoided until needed, and once their job was finished, the townspeople wanted them gone. What would it be like to be his woman? How would the good folk of Orson treat her?

"I could take you wherever you wish to go," he said, reading her mind. "It does not have to be here."

Self-conscious to be lying there with him huddled over her, she sat up, feeling the tremendous strength in his hand as he helped her. "This is my home," she said. "I am content here."

"You would be more content if you did not have to toil like a commoner," he said. "What pleases you, milady? Gardening? Reading? Painting?" He hitched a shoulder. "Sewing?"

She smiled. "I never could sew a decent stitch and I seem to kill whatever I plant. The only painting I have ever done was a bedroom." She tucked her lower lip between her teeth before telling him that she loved to read but books were scarce in Orson.

"Then I'll ship you a library!" he said. "I spend a lot of time reading myself."

Lea thought on that for a moment. "Do you mean it, milord? Would you send books for me to start a library for the town?"

Bevyn blinked. "A library?" he repeated. He was unaccustomed to women thinking of anyone other than themselves. "You would do that?"

"There used to be one here before the War but it was destroyed in the fighting. I know there are those who would gladly welcome having a place where they could come and read, take home a book or two."

"Then I will see to it," he declared, his word law. "Orson will become my primary residence."

Before she could say anything else, he stretched out beside her, drew her into his arms and rested his chin atop her head.

"I can sleep now," he said as though the entire matter were settled, and within a matter of moments he was snoring lightly.

Lea marveled at the ease with which he could simply close his eyes and shut down the world. She had a terrible time falling asleep each night—no matter how tired she was. Lying in his arms, hearing his steady, even breathing, feeling the overwhelming strength of him protecting her, she closed her eyes and finally drifted off to sleep, the strange quiet of the saloon helping to ease her.

Chapter Two

Bevyn was disoriented when he woke the next morning and more than a little hung over. His belly was cramping and he lay there realizing he hadn't eaten at all the day before. He was famished and started to turn over only to find his arm held fast. For just a brief moment panic seized him and he snapped his head toward whatever was fettering him to the bed. When he saw the sweet, smiling face of the most beautiful girl he'd ever encountered looking back at him, his body relaxed, the previous day's memories coming back to him like a soft, gentle breeze.

"Good morn, milord," she said.

"Good morn," he said, struck anew by her beauty and realized it was indeed a very good morning. He didn't feel the overpowering sense of dread that always accompanied him upon opening his eyes.

"Do you want me to go downstairs and have water drawn for your bath?" she asked.

He shook his head. "That can wait. I'm hungry," he said. "Starving actually."

"That would be my job," she said, and started to get up only to find his hand lightly gripping her wrist, restraining her.

"Let someone else do it. You are a servant no longer, wench," he said. When she laughed – an easy, unforced sound that pleased him greatly – he found himself wanting to kiss her, couldn't take his eyes from her lovely lips.

"If we had to wait for someone else to fix your meal, milord, we would be waiting until one of the housewives got up the courage to volunteer. The women here at the White Horse do good just to boil water."

"Then I'll help you," he said, and let go of her wrist, bounding out of the bed too quickly for the all-but-forgotten hangover he had. He staggered, his hand to his head, and his handsome face turned a particularly odd shade of green.

"I think you'd best rest here while I see to your food, milord," she said with a giggle. "I've no desire to clean up your puke."

Bevyn sat back down on the edge of the bed, his hand to his forehead. "How much did I drink?" he asked.

"One and a half bottles, I believe," she said, drawing on her tattered stockings and rundown boots.

"Damn," he said. "No wonder my head hurts like a herd of cows stepped on it." He smacked his lips and made a terrible face. "And left behind their droppings."

"Your saddlebags are outside the door," she told him with a laugh. "I did not want to wake you to tell the stable boy to bring them in."

He stared at her. No one had ever refrained from waking him while he slept and to know that he had not awakened once during the night to prowl the streets, to sit in the saloon and drink himself sick, only added to his sense of wellbeing.

She went to the door, opened it and bent over to retrieve his saddlebags. "Do you have something in here for a hangover?"

"No, but I've something else I'm in bad need of," he said, eyeing the saddlebags. "Bring them here, wench."

She came over to him and handed him the saddlebags. When she went to leave, he bid her stay.

"I would teach you to do this for me."

She nodded as he opened the saddlebags and rummaged inside. Her brows drew together when he pulled out a vac-syringe and an ampoule. "What is that, milord?"

"Tenerse," he said as he loaded the hypodermic. "A Reaper must have it to maintain his cycle." He thumped the air bubble down inside the glass cylinder then explained to her how she was to administer the drug, drawing up a small bead of his blood first. He expected her to recoil but she took the implement without comment and did as he asked, although he could tell it bothered her to do so.

"Was that a test, milord?" she asked as she handed the vac-syringe back to him. She had not missed his indrawn breath or the slight flinch that accompanied the injection of the thick purple liquid. Without missing a beat, she put her fingertips to the puncture wound and massaged his flesh gently.

"Did the sight of my blood disturb you?" he asked, enjoying the feel of her cool fingers on the burning sting of the wound.

"No, but hurting you did," she answered truthfully. "I knew your blood would be black. Everyone knows that." She met his eye. "Why is that, milord?"

"It is the parasite within me that causes it," he answered truthfully, and saw a slight flicker flash through her gaze.

"Can it be passed from you to me?" she asked.

"Not unless you want me to give you one," he said. "There are advantages to it, wench."

She shook her head but didn't say anything.

"You'd live a long, long time and never look any older than the day you accept it," he said. "You'd have strength and..." He stopped for she was shaking her head faster.

A frown had appeared between her lovely gray eyes and then she shuddered. "I would not want to have such a thing inside me," she said. She held his gaze. "You won't make me take it, will you?"

"Not if you don't want it," he said, disappointed.

"I don't."

"Then you need not worry on that score, wench." He pulled his legs up on the bed and stretched out with his knees crooked, giving the tenses time to work.

"You rest and I'll fix your breakfast," she said.

He nodded although he hated to have her leave him. Once she was gone, she seemed to take the brightness of the day with her. Her refusal to take a parasite concerned him but for now he'd let it ride.

Turning his head, Bevyn stared out the window at the sunshine. He could not remember sleeping so soundly since he had become a Reaper. No nightmares had come to drag him out of the bed. For the first time in a long, long time, he did not feel the nearly unbearable loneliness that accompanied his every waking breath.

"Lea," he said, her name rolling off his tongue like warm honey. Almost instantly his body swelled, his cock stirring to aching hardness. Her scent was on the pillow beside him and he reached for it, drawing it to his face. He inhaled, closing his eyes. He was still clutching the pillow when she came back to the room, his breakfast on a tray.

"I hope I didn't bring something you hate," she said as he scooted up in the bed.

"I would have come down, wench," he said. No one had ever catered to him in such a way—especially not those who had raised him—and when Lea placed the tray on his lap, he felt tears gathering in his eyes.

"The sheriff is waiting downstairs for you," she told him. "I bid him wait until you had eaten."

He looked up at her. "What are you going to eat?" he asked.

Lea's eyebrows shot up. She thought she had brought more than enough food for the both of them but obviously that was not the case. "I'll eat while you're with the sheriff," she replied, her lips twitching with amusement.

"Okay," he said, and delved into the food as though he hadn't eaten in a week. "You cooked this?"

"Aye," she said.

"Good," he said, mopping a piece of toast through a sunny yellow glob of egg yolk. "Really good."

She sat in the chair beside the bed and watched him devour every single morsel of the food and drink the entire pot of coffee she had brought. When he was finished, she got up to remove the tray from his legs.

"Thank you, Lea," he said, gazing up at her with a look that made her womb clench.

"You are welcome, milord," she replied. "Are you feeling better now?"

He was still hungover and his growing need for Sustenance was an uncomfortable itch but that was a condition he was more than accustomed to. He didn't want to bring up his need to consume blood at first rising for fear of frightening her. He gingerly swung his legs from the bed and carefully stood, testing his equilibrium. "Aye, I'm fine now," he lied, for his head felt twice its normal size and was aching like the very devil.

She started out of the room with the tray but stopped when he called her name.

"Tell the sheriff I'll be right down," he told her, reaching for his shirt.

"Aye, milord."

"Bevyn," he corrected.

She gave him a bright smile. "Aye, Bevyn," she said.

Unaware he was grinning like an idiot until he caught sight of himself in the mirror, the Reaper shook his head, forcing his face into its customary scowl, but he couldn't seem to keep from smiling as he thought of the pert young woman who had slept beside him during the night. By the time he started downstairs, he was biting the inside of his cheek to stop from breaking into a grin. As soon as he saw the sheriff, his need for Sustenance tripled.

Sheriff Buford Gilchrist was standing by the bar, his hat in hand. He bowed his head respectfully at the Reaper but said nothing.

"You've a problem, Sheriff?" Bevyn asked.

The sheriff nodded. "Aye, milord. If it pleases you, I will speak of it."

The Reaper glanced at Mable. "Where can we talk privately?" he asked.

"In there," Mable said, pointing to the small room she used as her office.

"Let's go," Bevyn told the sheriff, and as soon as he had the door closed behind them, gave a silent command for the sheriff to stand still.

It took only a moment to take out his blade, cut a deep nick on the sheriff's forearm and take what he needed to start his day. As soon as he had drunk his fill, he flicked his tongue over the wound, closing it, planting the image of having scratched himself on a thorn bush in the sheriff's mind. He waved a hand across the older man's face and the sheriff blinked.

"Aye, milord. If it pleases you, I will speak of it," the man repeated as though there had been no break in time.

Bevyn nodded, folding his arms over his chest. He was annoyed with himself that he had come downstairs without his hat or his weapons, something totally unusual for him. "Tell me," he said in a tight voice.

"There's a rogue by the name of Roy English who's been plaguing us for a few months now," the sheriff reported. "He's killed several ranchers just north of us. Bled them dry, he did. I've led posses after the bastard but we can't find where he's gone to ground."

"He's gone rabid," Bevyn said. "It happens even to rogues. Did you send word to the Citadel?"

The sheriff nodded. "I did, milord, and received word back that you'd be along this way shortly. That was about four days ago." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, extending it toward the Reaper. "Got this for you."

Bevyn took the handkerchief that was peppered with black-colored spots. He brought it to his nose, the iron scent of spilled blood filling his nostrils.

"One of the ranchers' sons nicked the bastard before he got away and the lad was smart enough to mop up the specks with his snot rag," the sheriff said. "Is there anything else I can do for you, milord?"

"Nope, this is all I need, Sheriff. I can track him wherever he goes," Bevyn told the middle-aged man. He stuffed the handkerchief into a back pocket. "Anything else I should be aware of?"

"We got a few other problems but nothing I need to bother you with," the sheriff reported. "I reckon me and my men can handle them."

Bevyn nodded then opened the door, walking out ahead of the sheriff. "Then I would ask a favor of you," Bevyn said quietly, aware the saloonkeeper was listening.

"Anything, milord!" the sheriff was quick to respond.

"You know the lady who cooks here?" he asked.

"Lea?" the sheriff inquired. At the Reaper's nod, he frowned. "Aye, milord. I've known her since she was knee-high to a grasshopper. Has she offended you in some way?"

"Far from it," Bevyn replied. "She is now under my protection and I would take it as a boon if you would look after her for me when I am not in residence here."

Buford Gilchrist's mouth dropped open. "R-Residence?" he croaked. "H-Here?"

Bevyn glanced at the saloonkeeper whose mouth was gaping open. He looked back at the sheriff. "Aye," he replied. "I've taken Lea as my *compánach*, my companion." He put a firm hand on the sheriff's shoulder. "Orson is now my seat of operation and as such will be entitled to my full attention if trouble occurs."

"Oh milord!" the sheriff said, his shoulders going back. "We are honored!"

"And you will look after my lady as though she were your own?" Bevyn inquired, locking gazes with the man.

"Aye, milord. Aye!" Sheriff Gilchrist vowed. "I will guard her with my very life!"

"Good man," Bevyn said, slapping the sheriff on the back. "Now if you'll send someone to fetch my steed, I'll be after ridding the world of this rogue of yours."

"Aye, milord!" the sheriff agreed, bowing respectfully. "I will see to it myself!"

Bevyn turned away, catching Mable's gawking stare. He frowned. "You know Lea won't be working here anymore, don't you?" he asked.

Mable nodded, unable to speak.

"Where does she stay?" he asked.

"Out back," Mable answered. "She has a room by the privy."

Bevyn's frown deepened. There was no hotel in town and he doubted there was an empty house but he asked anyway.

"No, milord," Mable said. "No empty places that I know of."

"Then she'll stay in the room you gave me until I can have a house built for her," he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills, peeling several off as he walked to the bar. "This should cover it." Bevyn laid the money on the bar. "I am entrusting my lady to your care while I am gone. See she has whatever she needs and that no harm comes to her." His amber eyes bore into her. "Is that clear?"

"Aye, milord," Mable said, realizing he'd laid down more money than she would see in six months' time.

"And make gods-be-damned sure every man who lives in this town or visits it knows she's under my protection," he said sternly. "Any swinging dick who dares insult her or—the gods forbid—lays a hand to her will have me to reckon with. Is that clear as well?"

"Perfectly, milord," Mable agreed.

Bevyn turned away from the bar, assured Lea would be well taken care of. He went back upstairs to get his weapons and saddlebags. He found Lea making the bed when he walked in.

"You are to stay here, sweeting," he said, and smiled at her when she looked up from tucking the coverlet under the pillows. "This will be your room until I can get a house built for you."

Lea slowly straightened up. "A house?" she echoed.

"Aye," he said as he plucked his gun belt from the chair and swung it around his lean hips. "You didn't think we'd live here, did you?"

"You were serious about staying here?" she said.

His left eyebrow crooked upward. "Wench, I never say anything I'm not serious about." He thought about that for a moment. "Well, almost never."

She came around the foot of the bed as he bent over to tie his holster in place. "And you were serious about keeping me as your woman?"

He nodded. "Aye, I was damned serious." He straightened to find her holding his hat out to him. He took the cowboy hat in his left hand then stepped closer to her, putting the palm of his right hand against her cheek. "You are under my protection, wench." His thumb stroked over her bottom lip. "You belong to me."

Lea was looking into his amber eyes and what she saw there made her womb tighten. It was an honor he had extended to her that only a very few women on Terra would ever know.

"You honor me, milord," she said, her heart soaring.

He slid his hand behind her neck and pulled her face up to him, lowering his lips to hers in a soft, gentle kiss that made her toes curl in her worn-down boots.

"The honor is mine, milady," he whispered against her mouth.

Lea slid her arms around his waist, stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his, kissing him firmly. When she pulled back, she could tell she had shocked him for his eyes had widened. "You will be very careful, won't you, Milord Bevyn?" she asked.

"Aye," he said.

"And you will hurry home to your woman?"

"I will," he vowed.

She removed her arms from him and stepped back. "All right then," she said with a smile. "Be careful out there, okay?"

Bevyn backed away from her, unable to speak past the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. He was unaware that he was rotating his hat around and around in his hands until she stepped forward and stilled the movement.

"It goes on your head, milord," she said with a grin.

"Aye," he said, grasping the black felt at the crown and settling it on his head, tugging the brim down as was his custom.

She reached for his saddlebags hanging over the footboard of the bed and held them out to him. "You have everything?" she asked.

"Aye, milady," he said softly.

Lea stepped back. "May the Wind be always at your back, milord."

Bevyn's throat clogged with emotion and he turned abruptly away before he unmanned himself before her. His eyes were stinging as he thundered down the stairs, needing to put distance between him and the beautiful woman to whom he knew he'd already lost his heart.

The sheriff was waiting in front of the saloon when the Reaper came out. "Don't worry about nothing, milord," he told Bevyn. "I'll take good care of your lady."

Bevyn inclined his head as he took the reins and vaulted into the saddle. "I've a favor to ask of you, Sheriff," he said.

"Anything, milord. Just name it."

"Find me some land within the scope of the town's limits onto which I can build our home," he said. "An acre will do."

"I will see to it, milord," the sheriff agreed.

"And assemble some men to construct the place for us. Ask my lady to tell them what she desires our home to be. No expense is to be spared in the building of it. Understood?"

"Aye, milord!"

"You watch over her for me, Sheriff," the Reaper instructed. He dug his heels into Préachán's flanks and the black stallion took off like a bat out of hell.

"I will guard her with my life," Buford Gilchrist swore to the departing warrior.

By the time the sun set on Orson, every man, woman and child in town was abuzz with the news that they had garnered their very own Reaper. It was an honor they all took to heart.

* * * * *

As Bevyn's mount galloped over the dusty road, he kept going back to the conversation with the sheriff.

Our home, he had said.

A place for us.

My lady.

The Reaper's heart did a tight little squeeze in his chest. He had never had his own home, his own place. He had never owned anything save the clothes on his back and the horse upon which he sat. He'd accumulated very little since becoming a Reaper and what he personally owned could be carried within the confines of his saddlebags. Though he took great delight in reading, he didn't own a single book. He borrowed them from the larger libraries that still stood and was careful to return them when they were due. Not once had he been forced to pay an overdue fine.

"A bookcase," he thought as Préachán's long stride ate up the miles. "A bookcase along one entire wall filled with tomes I have yet to read. Books I can collect, books I can have as my own."

It took him nearly a half hour of riding before he realized he didn't have a clue where he was going. Reining in his mount, he sat there laughing at the absurdity of his actions before taking out the handkerchief and sticking the tip of his tongue to a fleck of the rogue's blood. Almost instantly, an image formed in his mind of the man whose blood he had tasted and he turned his head to look back the way he'd come.

Sometimes, he thought as he stuffed the handkerchief in his back pocket, the devilish little imp that sat on his shoulder demanded his attention when it thought he should be concentrating on the matter at hand. It tended to rake his tattooed cheek with the sharp, pointed little toe of its miniscule iron boot and draw symbolic blood.

"Pay attention, you fucking Reaper!" it would seem to hiss in his ear, its vicious little teeth mauling his earlobe if only in Bevyn's imagination.

That had just happened, thrusting him out of his self-induced euphoria regarding Lea and back into the sordidness in which Reapers existed.

"You're close by, aren't you, *balgair*?" he asked quietly. He sniffed the air, his eyes narrowing at the stench. "Aye, you bastard. You are very close by."

For a moment longer he sat there until his savage instincts took over and the fleck of blood he had tasted pointed him straight toward the *balgair's* location. He pulled on Préachán's reins and turned the ebon steed, directing it back the way they'd just traveled. The closer he got to the rogue, the sharper his lateral incisors became until the points were raking his bottom lip. With conscious effort, he retracted them, though the sharp claws that had sprung from his fingertips were harder to control. It wouldn't do for a civilian to see him in the process of Transition.

Not that he had much to worry about in that department. For as far as his sharp eyes could see no human was about. But the vile stench of *balgair* was rife in his nostrils and growing stronger with every yard Préachán covered.

The Reaper frowned deeply for there was another scent—an obscene one—that washed over him the farther along the meandering dirt path he traveled. That scent was horrendous and it made the hackles stand up on his back. Reining in Préachán, he turned his head from side to side, drawing in the odor, trying to place it. The longer he sat there inhaling the vastly unpleasant smell, the more he rolled his shoulders as though something were slithering down his spine.

He inhaled deeply. It wasn't a ghoret, he thought. That was an odor he could never mistake for what it was. The pit viper was the most evil thing he'd ever encountered and once in contact with one, its smell was never forgotten.

So what was the stench that made him feel as though he'd been dowsed with slime?

Walking Préachán slowly along the trail, he saw nothing that drew his attention. Someone had passed this way recently, but not in the last day or two. The tracks weren't fresh and though the scent of the *balgair* was strong, Bevyn had a strong notion the evil bastard wasn't alive. Nevertheless, he moved carefully, his eyes whipping back and forth across the trail, scoping out the territory, his palm on the handle of his laser whip.

The shack was sitting in a grove of cottonwood and Osage orange trees, half hidden by the shimmering leaves on the spreading lower branches. A horse neighed greeting to Préachán and the Reaper's steed snorted in reply.

Once more Bevyn halted his horse, allowing his Reaper senses to home in on the shack, to test the vibrations that were undulating down his taut spine. His acute hearing picked up no sounds, his eyes found no movement other than the impatient and—to him—the nervous shifting of the other horse.

Dismounting slowly, he upholstered his laser whip—his *speal*—and advanced quietly toward the shack, keeping his senses alert to the most minute of changes in the air, the ground beneath his feet.

The closer he came to the rundown building with its gray weathered boards and swayback roof pitted with missing shingles, the more the squirmy feeling along his spine shifted. Beneath the black silk, his flesh felt wet, the shirt's material clinging to his back and chest as though offal had been smeared on the garment. It was a very unpleasant sensation that bothered him intensely.

He stopped and listened for any movement at all, his gaze intent on the shack's door that was slightly ajar. He could detect no sounds and though his ears were perfectly capable of hearing a heartbeat from ten feet away, he heard absolutely nothing save the buzzing of flies.

It was the sudden sound that disturbed him more than the atrocious odor coming from the shack. Death was inside the cabin and the stench that was now so overpowering, so vile, burned the membranes of his nostrils.

From one of the Osage orange trees, a hedge apple fell, clunking on the dilapidated roof and rolling down it. The light green wrinkled ball landing with a dull thud in the dirt as it hit the ground.

Now sick to his stomach from the smell, he took out his black silk handkerchief and tied it over his face to filter the odor. To anyone who might have seen him at that moment, he looked like a bank robber sneaking up on the door to the shack.

His spurs jingled against the rotting porch floor as he went to the shack's door and he felt a board crack under his weight. Putting his boot to the door, he nudged it open, flinching at the piercing shriek of its rusted hinges. The buzzing sound was louder and despite the protection of his handkerchief, the stench was overwhelming, drifting up from beneath his chin, making his eyes water.

The interior of the cabin was dark but there was no mistaking the horrors that lined its walls. Bevyn stopped in the doorway, staring at the awfulness that assailed his eyes. For a moment or two he could not move, so devastating was the scene upon which he'd come. Eyes wide, struggling to draw air through his mouth to blot out the putrid odor permeating the air, he stumbled back and barely made it off the porch before he whipped off his handkerchief and puked, relieving his belly of its breakfast.

Tears stung his eyes—a valiant attempt made by his soul to wash away the horrendous sight he had beheld inside the shack. Clutching a rough upright that barely held up the porch roof, he puked again and again until there was only bitter vetch flooding his mouth. Wiping the back of a shaking hand across his lips, he realized his entire body was trembling. Nothing had ever affected him as strongly as what he'd just seen.

Staggering off the porch, the Reaper put distance between him and the shack and made his way to a fallen log, plopping down on it, leaning forward to put his head between his legs in an attempt to calm the fury of his body. He was sweating profusely, his mouth watering so copiously he feared the puking wasn't finished. After a moment or two he slowly lifted his head and looked at the cabin, every humane instinct in his body shuddering with disgust.

The bodies he'd seen hanging on the walls had been brutally tortured with an instrument he had hoped never to see again and certainly never expected to find on Terra. He'd spied it leaning against one wall, its business end coated with blood, and had felt a shiver of cold wriggle down his spine.

No one should ever lay eyes upon what he'd just seen, he thought. The sight could well pitch a sensitive soul into unremitting madness and a less susceptible one into a lifetime of gruesome nightmares. What lay beyond the slivered walls of the shack had to be destroyed, put to rest, and it was Bevyn's job to see to it. No one should ever suspect the vileness that had taken place in the shack.

Getting to his feet, stamping down the urge to throw up again, it took every ounce of his courage and stamina to enter the shack again. He had to make sure the rogue was dead as Roy English lay on his cot, his face bloated and black from the rabies that had infected him. Using his laser whip, Bevyn had severed the *balgair's* head from his neck and incinerated the weak revenant worm that flopped out upon the floor. The creature was dying but still it opened its maw of a mouth and hissed at the Reaper, the red-tinged spines along its segmented back bristling feebly. The stench from its pale green

body as it burst into flames was even more sickening than the odors coming from the horrors lining the walls of the shack.

The Reaper went back outside and began gathering fallen branches of dead wood and piled them around the perimeter of the shack. When he was finished, when he'd stacked as much incendiary material as he could at the base of the rotting walls, he untied the rogue's horse from its place on the far end of the porch and walked it out to where Préachán stood patiently waiting. Tying the animal beside his own mount, Bevyn took a box of matches from his saddlebags and lit the debris around the shack, standing back as the dried wood caught fire with a loud whoosh.

It took the cabin over an hour to burn to the ground, the roof timbers caving in, going up in tall flames to singe the branches of the green trees and wither the leaves to blackened ash. While the fire hissed and popped and cleansed the world of the horror housed inside the shack, Bevyn had stood with his mount and the *balgair's*.

His head ached miserably and he knew one of the debilitating migraines that plagued his kind was about to take hold. The pain was rapidly approaching. It hurt even to mount Préachán, but once in the saddle, once sure there was nothing left but the smoldering ruins of cabin, he kicked his mount into movement, leading the *balgair's* scrawny beast by its reins.

"Are you all right, Lord Bevyn?"

It was Lord Kheelan's voice that broke into Bevyn's thoughts as the Reaper rode back toward Orson. Disinclined to answer the Shadowlord's question, it wasn't until the High Lord spoke again—this time in a voice that brooked no ignoring—that he replied.

"I'm here," Bevyn said aloud, his jaw tight.

"We felt your revulsion, Lord Bevyn," Lord Kheelan stated. *"To remedy such things are why you are in this world."*

"Aye," Bevyn agreed. In his mind's eye, he saw again the atrocities that had been hanging from meat hooks along the walls of the shack.

"There was nothing more you could have done for the rogue's victims," Lord Kheelan reminded him from the Citadel, that bastion of armed protection many, many miles away.

"Had I known of English sooner—" the Reaper began, but the High Lord cut him off.

"We did not know of it, Lord Bevyn. How could you?" came the reprimand.

Bevyn swiped at the sweat that was rolling down from the headband of his hat. He ran the back of his hand under his chin. *"I should have made my rounds of Orson long before now,"* he said, his voice harsh.

"There are many of them and few of you, Lord Bevyn. You can not be in two places at once and you were needed in Beverton."

"I was needed *here!*" Bevyn snarled.

"Do not blame yourself for what the rogue did. You could not have prevented it, Bevyn. We understand you need time to get over what you saw," Lord Kheelan said. *"Take a few days, a week, and then join us here at the Citadel."*

Bevyn felt the High Lord withdrawing. He had been given an order and was expected to carry it out. How magnanimous of his masters to allow him time for the horror to diminish in his mind. Not that it ever would. He was sick to his very soul and the pain lacerating his temples only added to the hell in which he now found himself.

He could imagine the healers at the Citadel sitting down with the Shadowlords to soberly discuss their Reaper's frame of mind. There would be much exchanging of ideas of how best to handle him when he presented himself before the High Council, what would be required to return him to a state of semi-normalcy—as if there were such a thing with his kind.

If there was one thing Bevyn Coure hated more than being forced to witness the evil perpetrated by the rogues, it was being handled. Kennocha Tramont had handled him—gods how she had handled him!—and his body still bore the scars of that handling.

Looking down, he took his left hand from the reins and gazed at the back of it. A star-shaped scar stood out faintly on the tan of his skin. He stared at the old wound—realizing his hand was shaking. His right hand bore the same scar but was even fainter than this one. The pain that had accompanied the searing of his flesh by the Dóigra had been but a taste of Kennocha's revenge against him.

Where, he wondered, had the rogue found a Dóigra? From what Amazeen warriress's hand had he taken the long mahogany spear with the glass-tipped star-shaped laser bulb at the end? Were there now Amazeens on Terra?

That last question set his teeth on edge. If those bitches were here, if they were in league with the rogues, Terra had been thrust closer to the Abyss and the evil that resided there.

Chapter Three

Lea was helping Mable and her girls do their wash when news came that the Reaper had returned and had been seen down at the stable. She dried her work-roughened hands on her apron and went through the saloon, pushing open the batwing doors to look toward the stable. Debating whether to wait for her man there at the saloon or to go to him, she tucked her lower lip between her teeth and nibbled on it. Would he be offended if she met him at the stable?

At that moment, she saw him coming out of the building, his head lowered, his face hidden behind the brim of his down-turned hat, the silver conchos on the headband glinting in the sun. His saddlebags were slung over his shoulder and must have been very heavy for his footsteps were slow, almost dragging, and his shoulders were stooped.

“Look at me, warrior,” she whispered to him, wondering if he would hear though he was a long way from her.

The Reaper’s head lifted and his eyes met hers. His face was so grave, the look he gave her grim.

Something had happened, she thought as she let go of the batwing doors and walked out onto the boardwalk. Though she had only met this man the day before, she was so finely attuned to him already that she knew he was hurting. Without a qualm, she stepped off the boardwalk and ran to him, her face filled with concern.

They met in the center of the dusty street, completely unaware of the townsfolk who had stopped their business to watch them. She reached out a hand to him and he took it, bringing it to his lips.

“Are you all right, milord?” she asked.

“I will be,” he answered, and released her hand to put his arm around her waist as though he needed the support of her body to hold himself up.

Lea slid her arm around his body and they headed for the saloon. She was keenly aware of their hips touching as they walked and the rub of his holster against her leg. She said nothing—just held him—as they made their way into the saloon and up the stairs side by side.

“You’ve been keeping busy,” he said quietly. He could smell the scent of wash powder on her hands.

Lea nodded. “I don’t like idleness,” she said. “I had to do something while I awaited your return.”

Her words were a balm to his soul and they slipped unerringly into his black heart and began to make a home for themselves there. No one had ever awaited his return

before – not even the Shadowlords. No one had ever cared whether he ever returned or not.

She opened the room door and went ahead of him, easing her hand from his waist to go to the window and pull the drapes shut for she had not missed his squinting eyes while they had been out in the sun. Instinctively she knew the light was bothering him.

Bevyn shrugged off the weight of the saddlebags and let them fall onto the chair beside the bed. He took off his hat and put it over them, staggering a bit.

“Is it your head?” she asked, for he had put a hand up to rub at his right temple.

“Aye,” he answered. “It hurts like a bitch.”

“Would something cold to drink help, milord?” Lea asked him. “Perhaps a wet rag for your head?”

“Aye, sweeting,” he said, his hands at the buckle of his gun belt. “That would be good.”

She glanced at him before she went out the door. He was moving so slowly – as though every movement cost him dearly, every eye blink hurt. She went to him and brushed aside his fingers as he struggled with the buckle. “Let me,” she said.

He stood perfectly still as she took off the gun belt and slung it over the post at the headboard of the bed where it would be handy should he want it. She undid his belt and removed it. Tugging gently, she pulled the silk of his shirt from his pants and then unbuttoned the front and the cuff, helped him out of it before pushing him gently to the edge of the mattress, bidding him silently to sit while she saw to his boots.

Bevyn sat down heavily and stared at the top of her golden head as she knelt at his feet, removing his boots and socks. He obediently stood when she took his hand to lever him to his feet so she could undo the fly of his pants and slide them down his long legs. He had to brace himself with a hand to her shoulder as he stepped out of his pants and just touching her gave him a strength of which he was in desperate need at that moment.

She moved behind him and threw back the covers. “Lie down,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Like a child, he did as she ordered, lying down on his back, his eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling as he waited for her to come back to him. He could hear her downstairs speaking quietly to the saloonkeeper, ordering her to close her doors for their Reaper was not feeling well.

“‘Our Reaper’,” he repeated her words aloud. “‘Our Reaper is not feeling well.’”

She was back with a basin of water, a rag tossed casually over her shoulder, and Mable followed close behind with a pitcher and ewer clutched in her wrinkled hands.

“Put them there,” Lea ordered the older woman, and Bevyn could not help but smile. The roles had been reversed and Mable was now Lea’s servant instead of the other way around.

“Anything else he might need?” he heard Mable whisper.

"I'll see to it," Lea answered. "Close the door behind you."

The pain thundering between his temples was getting worse by the moment and he knew he needed something for it. As much as he hated taking another dose of the tenses—the one each morning was bad enough—he knew he'd never be able to sleep without help, and sleeping was the only way to rid himself of the brutal agony hammering at him.

"Wench," he said. "Get the needle and vial from my saddlebags."

Lea nodded without speaking, knowing he was watching her as she poured him a glass of water. She brought the glass to him, slid her hand under his neck and lifted his head for him to take a sip. When he had, she lowered his head then set the glass aside to do as he'd asked. When she brought the vac-syringe and vial to the bed, he instructed her on how to load it and lay there watching her move as efficiently as any healer he'd ever known.

"You do that right well, wench," he complimented her, turning his head so she could have access to his neck.

"I imagine I'll get plenty of practice over the years," she replied, unaware that her words had given him a stronger dose of relief than any amount of tenses ever could.

Placing the empty vac-syringe on the night table, she massaged the pain she had given him, her fingertips cool against his heated flesh, then she wet a rag and wrung it out, folded it and laid it across his forehead.

"Lie with me?" he asked, reaching up to catch her wrist before she turned away.

"I will," she said. "Let me see to the door first."

He watched her go to the portal and slide shut the latch. That she had thought to keep them safe while he was incapacitated made his heart swell with pride. His eyes tracked her every movement though it hurt to even move them.

Lea went around to the other side of the bed just as she had the day before and sat down, removing her boots and stockings but this time when she had done that, she stood to draw her gown over her head. In just her chemise, she draped the gown over the footboard then climbed up into the bed with him. She sat with her back propped against the headboard.

"Come here, milord," she said, holding her arms open to him. She had no qualms about his nudity, the fact that his powerful body was bare except for the horrendous scars that streaked across it.

Bevyn did not question her order. He simply moved so he could lay his head in her lap, curled beside her in a fetal position, wriggling one arm behind her back and the other falling over her thighs.

The minutes ticked by as she sat there smoothing the hair gently back from his high forehead, her free hand splayed between his shoulder blades, feeling one brutal wound puckered beneath her palm. She was looking down at him, wondering how long it would take for the medicine to take effect. His eyes were open and he was staring

unwaveringly across the room without blinking. When the first sob took him, she tightened her arm across his back.

"Oh god," she heard him moan, and then a solitary sob became a torrent that shook his entire body.

Whatever he had seen, whatever he had been a part of had taken a violent, brutal hold on him and was digging in with cruel barbs. His tears saturated the thin cotton of her chemise and ran down between her thighs. They were scalding tears and the sounds that came from his very soul shook her as he cried. She was unaccustomed to hearing a man cry and to hear a man like this one—a Reaper—do so was unnerving and it sent chills down her back.

"Tell me, milord," she whispered to him. "Let it out."

He was whimpering as he cried, as though whatever he was remembering was so terrible, so exacting, that it was refreshing itself over and over in his mind. It had a strong grip on him, refusing to let go, and she could tell he was battling with that evil, straining to break away from it.

"Let it out," she said. "Don't keep it bottled within you."

"No," he whined.

"Share it with me, milord," she said. "Let your burden become mine. We will banish it together."

The bed was shuddering beneath his sobs and the keening sound he made caused her eyes to fill with sympathetic tears.

She didn't think he was going to tell her, but then the tale spilled from his trembling lips as he squeezed his eyes shut against the tears that continued to fall unchecked. She sat there in stunned silence as he told her what he had seen hanging from the walls of the rogue's shack, of the evil that had been wrought in that isolated place, of the atrocities that had been done.

"They were young women," he sobbed. "And they had been tortured."

Lea could have told him of the nunnery near Dixonberg that had burned to the ground a year earlier, of the nuns who supposedly had succumbed to the flames but she knew he would remember hearing of it. Twenty females—many no older than thirty—had been reported to have perished in that fire of unknown origin. Obviously at least some of them had not.

"Their bodies were hanging on meat hooks," he said, and shuddered so violently she thought he would come apart in his struggle. "If he hadn't already been dead, I would have stripped the skin from him inch by inch for what he'd done."

How long did it take for the medicine to claim him? To knock him out?

She laid her fingers over his lips to keep him from speaking aloud any more of the horrendous things he had witnessed in that vile place. If she could reach into his mind and extract the scene of such carnage, could erase it, she would.

He sobbed brokenly for so long, she feared he would make himself sick. His tears had soaked the sheet beneath them and still he shuddered with such pitiful cries he was getting hoarse. His body trembled, his hand clutching hers as he vented his sorrow.

"Help him," she prayed to whatever gods still listened to the people of Terra. "Please, help him."

All of a sudden the scent of gardenia drifted through the room and Lea looked up, stunned, for there were no flowers nearby. It seemed darker in the room and cooler, and then the delicious aroma increased until it was almost as though it were being poured upon her skin. It flowed over them along with a soft breeze that came out of nowhere.

"Forget for now, my Reaper," a sigh breathed through the room.

Bevyn's body was tense as a steel spring one moment and in the next, it was as limp as a string of silk. When at last his sobs died away to hitching breaths that shook the bed, the terrible grimness smoothed from his face and he lay quietly, his head heavy in Lea's lap, his fingers relaxed and slightly curled toward his palm.

"Morrignia," she heard him whisper, and looked about the room with fright for the Triune Goddess was rumored to be a fearful sight.

But only darkening shadows filled the room. No creature with flaming red hair hovered in the corner to rush at them with wicked talons. No fire-breathing entity lurked to snatch the Reaper from her arms.

Yet Lea's arm stiffened around her man, holding on to him protectively. If she needed to fight for him, by all that was holy, she would.

She stroked his forehead and cooed to him, humming a lullaby from her childhood. Over an hour had passed since they had lain down but it felt to her like an eternity.

She felt his fingers running along the underside of her arm as though he were testing the softness of her flesh. As he spoke to her, she could hear the gruff roughness of his strained throat.

"I want you," he said.

"I am here," she replied without hesitation.

He moved, lifting his head from her lap, pushing up in the bed until his face was mere inches from hers.

"You are mine, Lea Walsh," he said, putting a hand to her cheek to cup her face.

"I know I am."

"You will always be mine."

"That I will, Bevyn Coure," she agreed.

Had he not been under the influence of the very potent drug racing through his system, she did not think he would have cast aside his normal cautions. Had not the memory of what he had seen not been hanging there to remind him of how fleeting human life could be, she wondered if still he would have acted upon his need.

His hand moved from her cheek to behind her neck and he pulled her toward him, put his lips on hers in a soft, tender kiss. He plied her mouth gently, his tongue caressing her lower lip, the creases, then he moved back.

"I want you," he said again, searching her eyes.

"Then take what you need, milord," she told him. "I offer it freely."

His hand shook as he lowered it to her breast, caressing her through the worn material of her chemise. He held her gaze even as his thumb swept over her nipple, causing it to harden.

"I need you," he whispered, and moved his hand so he could insinuate it beneath the fabric, could touch the softness of her breast, could center the puckered nubbin in his palm. He cupped her. "More than I need breath, I need you."

There was so much hurt in his amber eyes, so many injuries streaking his soul, that she would have moved heaven and earth to bring joyous light back into those bleak depths. Her heart ached for this man—wounded so deeply that the scars had become badges of honor to him. She could see the loneliness in his gaze, feel the barrenness of his very being looking back at her. She knew something of such loneliness, such emptiness, and it called out to her—like unto like.

Yet she hesitated.

"What worries you, sweeting?" he asked gently, sensing her reluctance.

"I don't want to be like you," she said.

"You can't be like me," he said. "Not unless I give you a fledgling and that I will not do if you are against it."

She nibbled her bottom lip, eyes locked with his and filled with quiet desperation. "But when you... Will what is in you...?" Her face burned scarlet and she ducked her head, breaking eye contact. "You know."

Bevyn's brows drew together then understanding lit his golden gaze. "You think that what is inside my cum will contaminate you?"

If possible her face turned redder still and she bobbed her head in silent agreement.

"Look at me," he said, and reached out to tilt her face to him. He smiled softly. "Sweeting, while it is true my seed is rife with Revenant spore, it will not infect you. You can not become a Reaper in that way. Only extracting one of my hellions and implanting it in you—"

"I don't want that!" she said as her face leached of the blush that had been there only moments before.

He caressed her cheek. "Then you have nothing to worry about for I will never force you to do anything you don't want to do." He ran the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. "Do you understand?"

A fleeting smile touched her lips. "Aye, milord. I understand."

"There is no reason to fear what is inside me."

"All right."

"And no reason to ever fear me. If you don't want to do this..."

"What if we m-make a baby from this?" she asked. "Will she—"

"He," he corrected her. "Reapers can only give their mates male children."

She asked why that was.

"My hellion, my Queen, is a jealous thing," he said. "She would see to it that one of the spores destroyed a female..." He flung out a hand, searching for the word. He did not think she would understand what zygote meant. "A female..."

"Embryo?" she provided.

"Aye!" he said, pouncing on the word with relief. "She would destroy it in the womb." Such talk disturbed him and he stirred her away from it, having no intention of ever getting her pregnant.

"But if you don't want to lie with me, I will understand."

"Would a child of ours be like you?" she asked, and Bevyn wanted to groan with frustration. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, aye, he would, but only when he comes of age," he replied uneasily. "After he reaches puberty. Hell, I may not be able to give you a baby, sweeting. Did you think of that?"

She considered his handsome face. A man as sensual and powerful as this one could not be anything but virile and—she blushed—potent. "If he will be like you in all else, I think I could live with that. I would love him despite the thing inside him."

Bevyn's heart twisted and he gave her a look that he was certain had made her womb clench for she drew in a tremulous breath.

"That's a long way off. Let's not worry about it," he said, wanting this conversation finished. "But like I said, if you don't want to make love with me..."

"I belong to you, Milord Bevyn," she declared, chin raised defiantly. "Take what you want."

For a long moment he stared at her then took a deep breath, pushing all his own worries aside.

"I will pay for it," he said. "By the gods, they will make me pay for it, but I can no more stop making you wholly mine than I can cease to breathe."

He rose up in the bed and knelt there on his knees, sliding her chemise from her shoulders and down her upper body, waiting patiently as she arched her hips up so he could pull it free. She lay there beneath his scrutiny as he swept his gaze over her nakedness, claiming it for his own.

"You are so beautiful," he said, holding his hand out to her to help her sit.

She cocked her head to one side, wondering at his motive until he put his hands to her hair and began to take the pins from the blonde curls, pulling the long locks over

her shoulders, fingering them, lifting them to his nostrils to inhale the scent of lemons that clung to the tendrils.

"So beautiful," he said with a sigh, letting the lock he held fall to her shoulder.

"I am as you see me," she said. She held no illusions of how she looked. To her, she was nothing special – simply an ordinary woman with commonplace looks. She had no way of knowing that to him she was the most beautiful woman to ever walk the face of the earth.

He wanted – no he *needed* – to lose himself in her soft, wet folds. He knew it was wrong, that he should not do it. He knew the consequences but he didn't care. All of his life he had been denied what he wanted, had his needs and hopes and longings laughed at, subjugated, pushed aside, denied.

No more!

He wanted and he would take, penalties be damned.

Lowering his head to her breast, he drew her nipple between his lips, glorying in the feel of her hands threading through his hair to hold his head. He plied his tongue across the swollen tip – tasting her, suckling her, drawing strength and courage from her sweet offering. He laved her, swirled his tongue around her engorged peak, planted soft kisses along the firm globe he held in his hand.

Shifting until he was atop her, pushing her legs apart with his hips, he settled down into the sweet valley between her thighs and clasped her other breast, holding it as lovingly as he did its mate. Alternating his attention from one silken mound to the other, he licked her nipples, gently nibbled them and raked them softly across his lips and cheek and chin. All the while, his eyes were on hers – melded, fused, locked.

"You are an incredibly handsome man, milord," she told him. Her fingers plowed slowly, sensuously through his dark curls.

"I am as you see me," he repeated her words back to her. He flicked his tongue over her nipple then drew it into his mouth.

Lea stared into those beautiful amber eyes with their long, thick lashes and shivered. His face was flawless without a nick or a cut to mar the flesh. Not one blemish showed on those fine features except for the dark blue tattoo. She traced the sweep of one stylized wing with her fingertip.

"What manner of bird is this?" she asked.

"It is the Coure crow," he replied, his teeth lightly clamped to her nipple. "It symbolizes good judgment although there are those who would argue I possess such a trait."

She smiled. "What trait would you say you possess, milord?" she asked.

He snorted and released her nipple with a loud pop. "Stubbornness perhaps?"

"And are the Coure men known for being stubborn?" she inquired.

"Stubborn and willful, I'm told. The reason the Coure clan has the tattoo is because of Beldyn Coure, the patriarch of our family. He had it inked on his cheek to denote that

he had fallen prey to the wiles of a designing woman by the name of Justine Crowe. She all but destroyed the clan before he besieged her keep and took her captive, later strangling her with his bare hands. To me, the tat symbolizes a man thinking with the part of his anatomy that is the least wise of his organs."

"I've heard each Reaper has his own facial tattoo," she said. "What...?"

"Enough talk of other men, wench," he said, dragging his body up hers, grinding his hard cock against her pubic mound. "You need only think on one man and that is the one about to make you a woman." His amber eyes turned dark gold. "His woman."

Lea gasped as he plucked at her nipples—first one then the other—with his teeth. It was a heady sensation that held no hurt within it but sheer, mindful pleasure that sent chills down her sides and made her belly clench. The sweep of his tongue swirling over and over, around and around her swollen buds made her slam her hands to the sheets to keep from brutally grabbing his hair. She grabbed handfuls of the rough cotton and twisted.

"Ah, wench, that is nothing," he drawled, and moved down her until he could flick his tongue into the concavity of her navel. That too brought waves of shivering to her body.

She could not have stopped him even if she had been of a mind to as he slid lower still and his hot breath fanned across her nether curls. She raised her head to look down at him as he buried his face against wiry hair, rubbing his whiskers against it as though he were a cat marking his scent.

"You like that?" she asked.

"Shush," he said.

He didn't want to think. He wanted to act. He didn't want to consider consequences or penalties or what it was going to cost him to do what he had set his mind to. He simply wanted to feel.

Lea Walsh would have been astounded to learn that the man whose hands were molding her breasts so expertly as his breath mingled with her pubic hair was as much a virgin as she. Though his staff had been suckled by many a woman, had been handled by even more as they eased him—and at times jerked him—to pleasure, he had not once slid that steely cock into a feminine sheath.

"*You must never touch your staff except to hold it to relieve your bladder,*" the brothers had warned him when he had taken his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in that lifetime before he had been reborn a Reaper. "*To spill your seed is a wasteful sin and punishable by being thrust into the fires of the Abyss.*"

"*Do not stroke your cock when you are in Reaper form!*" Morigunia had sternly told him. "*If you do, you will suffer My displeasure!*"

While the Triune Goddess had implied it was all right to relieve his need if he were in Transition, Bevyn had never once done as he'd seen animals do. He had never licked that part of him when he was in wolf form. He thought it a disgusting thing and morally wrong. That, Morigunia had told him, was what whores were for.

"But never stick your cock into a female unless you want her as your lifelong mate!" the goddess had also warned.

With Lea's warm, spicy scent in his nostrils, he knew this female was his. She had been born to belong to him. He knew it as surely as he knew his heart was beating in synchronized rhythm to hers. He needed no permission to take what was—by rights—his, though there was no doubt in his mind that a price would be exacted.

He stroked his thumbs over her nipples—back and forth, back and forth and smiled when she arched her hips up against his chin. Trailing his fingers down her chest, over the sweet indentation of her belly, across the soft flange of her hips, he molded his fingers around her upper thighs, caressing her as he rubbed his chin against her mound.

"You smell so good," he told her, once more finding her eyes locked on his. "I could lie here all day."

"We'd never get anything done like that," she teased.

He smiled lazily and slid his hands to the insides of her thighs, feeling her shiver delicately as he touched the sensitive flesh, kneading the smooth muscles. He nudged her thighs farther apart until he could see the dark pink creases of her sex.

"That," he said, easing a finger to her softness, "is what I want to devour."

Lea gasped as he touched a part of her that sent goose bumps prickling all over her skin. She writhed beneath that contact, feeling to the very marrow of her bones. "W-What did you do?" she asked.

"This?" he asked, and began a slow, rhythmic circling with his thumb around whatever it was he was touching.

"Aye!" she said with a hitching breath.

"So soft," he whispered. "So supple."

He stroked his thumb between one slick fold and then the other—slowly, methodically, whisperlike, his nail grazing her flesh, bringing scent and moisture from between her legs.

"Milord, please," she said, her head whipping back and forth on the pillow. She had no notion of what it was he was doing but it was pleasure-pain that was fast controlling her every breath.

"Lie still, wench," he ordered, and turned his hand palm up to slowly drag his index and middle finger upward along the valley of her sex.

She wriggled, arching her hips up, seeking something she did not understand, wanting something for which she had no name.

He stroked her until she was moaning and undulating her hips, mercilessly tormenting her with his strong fingers, his well-groomed nails. By the time he put his mouth to her clit, she was nearly mindless with need.

Her hands plowed through his hair and she held him where he was, her neck arched back as he lapped at her dewy flesh, tasted her, making soft, smacking sounds that only added to her arousal. Her heels were digging into the mattress, her legs

splayed as far apart as her bones would allow, her hips arching up to his seeking mouth.

She tasted of honey – warm and spicy – and the scent of her reminded him vividly of peaches fresh from the vine, cut open in the hot sun to seep their juices from the slit. He spiraled his tongue over and around her clit and nibbled it, pushing the hood back to gain the very most of that receptive nub. He dragged it over her folds and stabbed with lightning forays into the creases, keeping well away from that dark, sensuous dell into which he wished to plunge.

He felt her tugging on his hair and yet it felt good to him. It gave wildness to the moment that did nothing save spur him on as he flashed the tip of his tongue at her opening then moved a finger to that creamy entrance where her juices were freely flowing.

“Bevyn!” she cried out, and he knew that minute touch, that small sortie into her folds had brought about her first sexual release.

He lifted his head and looked up at her wide eyes as she stared at him with her lips parted, her tongue sweeping across the full lower flesh to make his loins burn with need.

“What was that?” she asked, her body quivering as the last spasm faded away.

“The beginning, my love,” he whispered. “Only the beginning.”

He eased his finger deeper inside her until the first joint and then the second disappeared from view. She tensed around him, her vaginal muscles locking on to him with fervor.

“Relax,” he said, putting his free hand to her belly and pressing lightly. “Relax and let your man pleasure you.”

Lea’s heart soared at the name he had called himself. He was indeed her man and she was without a moment’s hesitation his lady. She was reveling in his touch, was mesmerized by it, and as his finger moved inside her – circling and slightly withdrawing, going a bit deeper until she could feel his folded fingers on the entrance to her opening, she moaned, grazing his scalp with her nails.

“That’s my woman,” he said. “Pull if you want to.”

She could not imagine herself ever hurting him but when he thrust a second finger inside her, her hand jerked spasmodically in his curls and she heard him grunt then release a low chuckle.

“Leave some up there, wench,” he teased.

He was slowly rotating his fingers inside her cunt and Lea was lost in a rush of pleasure so great she could only close her eyes and enjoy it. She felt a third finger join the other two and wondered if his cock would be as wide, would stretch her as his fingers did.

“That is what I am doing, wench,” he said as though reading her mind. “I am preparing you for him.”

She was slick, her juices coating his fingers. He knew she was but a hair's breadth away from another orgasm so pushed his fingers deep and held them there, his other hand pressing down on her belly to send the blood flooding into her groin.

"Oh god!" she cried out, and the wave of squeezes that clutched at his fingers nearly made him come. His cock was steel-hard and burning with desire, his balls so tight he thought they well might burst from their fleshy sacs. He had to tamp down his building release until he was sure she was primed for his entry.

"Easy, milady," he said, soothing her as he would a stallion he was readying for the saddle. "Easy."

The last tremors faded inside her and yet Lea knew there was something extra for which he was preparing her, something more that would bring the stars down from the heavens.

With her eyes on his, he withdrew his fingers from her body – puckering his lips at her groan of protest as though he were reprimanding her – then opened his mouth to lick her juices from his flesh.

"Ah Bevyn!" she sighed, shuddering. She was nearly beside herself wanting him to slide his body over hers, to press her down, to capture her. She ached to know what it felt like to have him inside her, his rigid cock – the cock that pressed so hard against her thigh – seated deep.

Her taste was unlike anything he had ever known and it felt right. It tasted right. It *was* right but he wanted more so he went to the source, journeyed to the well to take his next sip.

His mouth on her nearly sent Lea up in flames. He was suckling her opening, drinking from her, slipping his tongue inside, lapping at her folds and then lifting her hips to flick that wicked muscle around her anus, pressing it into the tiny opening.

Another hard wave of spasms shot through her and she raked her nails across his shoulders, unable to keep herself from doing so. She trembled as he dragged the broad plane of his tongue over and over and over her slit as she came, the flood of her juices coating him.

She was well primed, he thought as her arms fell to her sides, and then he was up and over her, shifting one hand under her delectable little rump, lifting her for his penetration. His other hand went to the base of his cock and he positioned himself, readied his shaft to impale her.

"Look at me, sweeting," he ordered, and watched her eyelids flutter open. "Watch my eyes while I take you."

She knew there would be pain. Mable and the other women had warned her, but there was no pain when he slid into her, only the most remarkable pleasure, the most intoxicating gratification she could ever have imagined. He went slowly but firmly into her and pressed as deep as his large rod would go then he stilled, allowing her body to adjust around him.

"It didn't hurt," she said.

“I would never hurt you, milady,” he said.

He waited until she moved her tight ass before he eased out of her a little then drove back in slowly. His jaw was clamped tightly shut to control the urge to pound into her, to relieve the hot ache, the brutal tension that was racking his body.

“I love you,” she said.

It was those three little words—words he had never expected to hear ever said to him—that were Bevyn Coure’s undoing. He lost all sense of gentleness and what little restraint he had.

“Put your legs around me,” he grated out between clenched teeth. “Lock your heels together.”

She didn’t question his instructions but lifted her legs and clamped them around his waist, her eyes going wide at the exquisite pleasure that brought between her legs. He was so big, so full inside her, yet as he began pumping into her, there was no discomfort, only the most delicious sensation that caused her nails to arch and dig into his back.

He knew she had meant the words she had spoken to him. He had already seen the growing affection for him in her mind, but to know she trusted him, wanted him, ached for him as he did for her was a glorious feeling that flooded his entire being. His thrusting sped up, went deeper, until they were both grunting and striving for that culmination he was gods-be-damned sure might well blow the top of his fucking head off.

Lea was clinging to him, riding out the storm of passion that had erupted from his body. His fingers were digging into the soft flesh of her rump as he pistoned his hard, full cock in and out of her with meaty slaps that might have been funny to hear if it weren’t so sensual. At the moment she felt the first squeeze of her vaginal muscles around his cock, she tightened her hold on his waist and arched closer to him, wanting every inch, every hard pounding inch striving to touch her womb.

Bevyn came with a deafening roar that by rights should have cracked the fragile glass chimney of the hurricane lamp sitting on the bedside table. He threw his head back and howled his release, pumping into her as hard and as long as he could until the very last spurt of his cum was free. Beneath him, the bed shook, the headboard pounding the wall until a shower of plaster fell down upon his naked back from the ceiling.

Lea was lost in her own release, trilling like a song bird as her orgasm ripped through her lower body and up into her belly. Her thighs were like vises around his hips and one heel was digging into the crack of his ass as she clung to him. With the last little ripple echoing away, she collapsed like a broken toy, arms and legs splayed like the wanton she felt.

“By the gods,” Bevyn whispered as every muscle in his body began quivering. He was shaking as he rolled off her, the heat from their bodies, the sweat that heat had generated cooling under contact with the cool air flowing through the room.

Never, he thought, had he known such ecstasy could be found in the silken arms of a woman. Never, he knew, would he ever seek that release again from any other. This woman whose body lay alongside his, whose breath was rushing in and out of her lungs as tautly as his own, whose heart was thundering in tandem with his, would be the only pleasure he would ever know this side of paradise. With the last ounce of his strength, he eased his hand to hers and entwined their fingers.

"Tá grá agam duit, a ghrá mo chroi," he said in his native language, but there was no need to translate. He knew she had gleaned his meaning but he did it anyway. "I love you, my darling."

She turned to face him, her body slick with their combined sweat. "You'd better, Reaper," she said. "I am the only woman you're ever gonna have."

Bevyn smiled for he knew she did not understand that her words were as true as any she would ever speak. Not only because he had lost his heart to her—and thought perhaps he had that first night—but because the Triune Goddess had made it a *Geas*, an unbreakable prohibition from ever lying with another woman and taking her body with his once a Reaper had claimed his eternal mate.

Lea watched him close his eyes and knew he had worn himself out, first with the crying and now with the loving. He might be a fierce warrior, a savage Reaper, but he—after all—was a man and he was tired. He did what all men do after an intense bout of sex—he fell asleep.

She smiled. How easy it was for him, she thought, to just close his beautiful eyes and fall into a deep slumber. Snuggling up to him, she laid her arm protectively across his belly and held him, shutting her eyes to that marvelous piece of flesh crooked at his thigh that had satisfied them both so well.

She had no way of knowing that such easy slumber was as strange and unknown to Bevyn Coure as the love she was so willingly bestowing upon him.

Chapter Four

“What will we do today?” he asked from the bed as he watched her looking around for her clothing.

“Have you seen my dress?” she asked, bending down to look under the bed, though how her clothing could have gotten there was a mystery.

“After a hearty breakfast of course,” he amended.

She was standing there at the foot of the bed as naked as the day she was born with her hands on her hips, a frown marring the perfection of her lovely features. When he didn’t respond to her question, she gave him an arched brow. “Where are my clothes?” she asked.

He was lying there with his hands behind his head, his legs crossed at the ankle, as completely unconcerned about his nakedness as if he’d been alone. He cocked one shoulder. “How would I know, wench?” he asked. “Where did you last see them?”

Lea narrowed her eyes. “What did you do with my clothes, Reaper?” she growled.

“Think you I could wear them, Lea?” he asked innocently. “They’re not my color.”

Too innocently, she thought, and her suspicion increased, especially so when she saw his lips twitch.

“Bevyn?” she asked in a warning tone.

“Lea?” he threw right back at her in the same tone.

She stomped her bare foot and that seemed to delight him no end. A wide smile broke across his handsome face, telling her all she needed to know.

“Where are my clothes?” she snapped.

He took one arm from beneath his head and waved his hand, and in the blink of an eye, the most beautiful and soft cotton green-and-white-gingham gown and silk chemise appeared on her body.

“You mean those clothes?” he asked, sticking his arm under his head again.

Lea jumped, startled by such magic, and she stared with wide eyes at the dress. She shrieked and hopped skyward when a pair of soft kid slippers suddenly showed up on her bare feet.

Bevyn was howling with laughter, doubled over, pointing an accusing finger at her as she stood there. “If you could see your face!” he managed to get out in between chuckles.

Her eyes narrowing, her lips pursing, fingernails digging into her palms, she advanced on the bed. “That’s not funny, Reaper!” she accused. When he continued to laugh, she jerked the pillow out from under his head and began pummeling him with it,

which seemed to only increase his mirth as he threw up an arm to avoid her bludgeoning.

"You idjut," she named him. "Don't you be doing stuff like that without warning a body first!"

He snaked out a hand as quick as lightning, yanked the pillow out of her hands and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her down atop him, rolling with her until he had her beneath him, her legs imprisoned within the confines of the long skirt of the dress, her wrists pinned to the bed beside her head.

"Poor little wench," he mumbled, and bent to rub his whiskers along her chin.

"Faith, Reaper!" she yelped. "That's worse than sandpaper! You're scraping off my skin!"

"Would you rather I rubbed my chin on your...?" he began to say, but a soft knocking on the door brought his head up and around, his amber eyes flashing. "What?" he snarled.

"I have your breakfast, m-milord," Mable said from the other side of the door.

"Oh dear lord!" Lea whispered. "I hope she didn't cook it!"

Bevyn's stomach rumbled loudly at hearing the word "breakfast". He flung himself off Lea and stomped to the door, slapped the lock back and jerked the panel portal open, completely unconcerned that he was nude.

Mable's eyes shifted down the tall man's muscular frame—caught for a moment between his legs—then flicked up to his face. "B-Breakfast?" she asked in a meek voice that was barely a squeak.

The smells coming from the overloaded tray in the older woman's hands made the Reaper's mouth water. He stepped aside with his jaw clenched to allow her to enter the room.

Mable cast a quick glance at Lea, seemed relieved to see her fully dressed, and walked over to put the tray on the small table beside the closet.

"Who cooked that, Mable?" Lea asked suspiciously. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her new skirt tucked decorously around her legs.

"The widow James," Mable said. "She volunteered last evening."

Bevyn's mouth was watering and he was licking his lips. "Can she cook?"

"She's the best cook in five boroughs," Lea replied.

"Better than you?" he asked, his chin raised.

"I guess you'll find out," Lea said as she watched him rubbing his stomach with his palm. "As soon as you get some clothes on, that is."

Lea and Mable both made hissing sounds as he waved a hand and his black Reaper uniform appeared out of nowhere to fit his body like a glove. They looked at one another then Mable shrugged as though she saw such things every day.

"Come, wench," Bevyn said, pulling out the chair for her.

Scooting off the bed, Lea came over to him, glancing up at his handsome face. No man had ever held a chair out for her, and not a single one of the men she'd ever come into contact with had ever looked at her the way Bevyn was at that moment. That look told her he'd just as soon have her for breakfast as the delicious-smelling fare sitting before him.

"Widow James said to tell you that you can have her spare room 'til you get your house built, milord, and that she'll be providing all your meals for you," Mable said.

"What's wrong with my cooking?" Lea asked, a bit hurt.

"Your serving days are done, milady," Mable said before Bevyn could.

"Milady'?" Lea questioned with a blink of her gray eyes.

"Milady," Bevyn confirmed as he took a seat across from her.

Mable winked at her then left, closing the door firmly behind her.

"She's going to see the blood on the sheets," Bevyn commented as he reached for a piece of hot buttered toast and spooned a copious amount of jam across it.

Lea's eyes widened and she put a hand to her mouth. "I hadn't thought of that." She turned to look at the bed.

"Want me to take care of it?" he asked, crunching the toast between his strong white teeth. He chewed a few times, flicked his tongue across his lips and then told her he could make the sheets disappear.

Staring at the bed for a moment, Lea finally shook her head. "No. It's best everyone know I came to your bed pure." She met his eyes and her brows drew together when she saw him grinning. "Why does that amuse you, milord?"

"Because I was thinking the same thing," he said. He finished off the piece of toast and piled jam on another, demolishing it in two big bites.

She took one of the two linen napkins on the tray and laid it in her lap. "When you left yesterday, I was a bit concerned how folks would treat me," she confessed.

He stopped with a heaping forkful of eggs halfway to his lips and frowned. "Why?"

Lea shrugged as she took a piece of toast and smeared it with jam. "I knew they would know I'd spent the night with you."

Thunderclouds shifted over the Reaper's face. "And?" he prodded.

She bit her lip. "I was afraid they might view me as they do the other girls here."

His fork clunked to his plate though he still kept hold of it. "They'd gods-be-damned better not view you as they do those whores!" he growled.

"They don't!" she was quick to tell him. She held his irate stare and repeated that the townspeople did not see her in that light.

"All right then," he finally said, and shoveled the eggs into his mouth. He downed three strips of bacon and the rest of the eggs before she'd barely started on her food.

By the time she'd finished eating, he had consumed everything on the tray she hadn't wanted and had taken a spoon to the jam, polishing it off as though it were dessert.

"You like sweets," she observed.

Bevyn shifted uncomfortably in the chair. He needed his tenses and he needed Sustenance, but his cock was in dire need of something else and he felt like kicking himself as he looked at the empty jam dish.

"Milord?" Lea queried.

"Wench, there are two things I need when I rise each day," he said.

"Oh!" she said, and scraped her chair back. "I forgot about your medicine."

He watched her go to the saddlebags and take out the vac-syringe. His heart did a funny little squeeze as he saw her load the hypodermic then come over to him to administer it. He held very still as she injected the fiery payload, trying his best not to flinch but looking forward to having her massage away his pain with her cool little fingers.

"What else do you need, milord?" she asked.

She was so close to him—her scent invading his nostrils, stirring his cock—and the overload of sugar he'd consumed was making his shaft as hard as flint.

"Sustenance," he managed to say, shifting again in the chair to try to relieve the pressure of his erection.

"B-Blood?" she asked, swallowing hard.

"I usually carry some with me but I ran out and I've had to take..." He stopped, looking up at her suddenly pale face. "Wench, no! I'll not be sinking my teeth into you. Don't..."

"Why not?" she asked although she was trembling. "I am your mate, am I not?"

He frowned. "Aye, but..."

"Is that not my right?" she asked. "My duty to you?"

"It doesn't have to be," he said. "I can ride over to Clewiston. Each territory has a refrigeration unit that houses the plastibags. The Citadel sends out Sustenance by train on a regular basis for the Reapers. I..."

"Here," she said, sweeping her long hair away from her neck. "It is my right and my duty. Take from me."

He shook his head. "No, wench. I..."

"Clewiston is an hour's ride away," she said. "Your hand is shaking and that will be a long ride, now won't it?"

Bevyn looked at her neck then shook his head again. "Don't tempt me, milady," he said. "That's not fair."

"Fair?" she repeated. "Take what you need, Reaper! I demand it as my right!"

A part of him needed something far different from her and the more he looked at her beautiful neck, the more he wanted it. Before he gave it any more thought, he hopped up from the table and scooped her into his arms, carrying her to the bed.

Lea thought he was simply lying her down so she'd be more comfortable but when he flung her skirts up and out of the way and began fumbling with his fly, she just stared at him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Too...much...sugar," he said, crawling atop her. "Entirely...too...much...sugar!"

He was inside her before Lea could react to his curious words. Full and thick and pulsing within her, his shaft was a wondrous delight that had her circling his neck with her arms. She was a bit sore from the previous night but his warmth inside her was starting a fire that she realized she was eager to have spread through her.

"Is this how you want to start each day, milord?" she asked with a laugh.

"Is there a better way?" he countered, grinding his hips against her.

"You still need Sustenance," she reminded him.

"Aye," he said, and bent to her neck, his fangs lengthening.

Although his body was beating at him to pump wildly into her to assuage the burning need in his cock, Bevyn had just enough patience and discipline to cloud her mind of the pain his fangs caused as he sank them gently into her neck, impaling her, drawing her sweet blood into his mouth. He heard her sigh and felt himself jerk inside her.

A light mist of numbness had spread over Lea's mind but her lower body was responding to the hard rod sliding in and out of it. She was aware of his mouth at her throat, could feel her life's blood being drawn, but there was no pain. If anything, it was highly erotic and when he swallowed, she trembled in his arms, her sheath tightening around him.

He gave as he took and with his hands under her delightful little rump holding her tightly to him, he stoked her fires as he stoked his own and they came at the exact same moment, her climax the sweetest thing he could imagine as he lapped at the dual wounds on her neck, closing them. Retracting his fangs, he rolled off her, carrying her with him, holding her atop him as he looked up into her sated eyes.

"You have bewitched me, milady," he said in awe. "You are fast becoming an addiction I know I will never break nor is it one I would ever wish to."

"Is it not time you had something of your own, something that belongs only to you, Bevyn Coure?" she asked.

Why she said it, Lea would never know, and she was as shocked by the words that came out of her mouth as was the man lying beneath her.

"Milady," he whispered, and gathered her to him, tears flooding his golden eyes.

They lay like that for a long time with his arms tightly around her, Lea's cheek on his shoulder. Her fingers danced gently along the buttons—undoing them slowly—

until his shirt lay open, peeled back from his broad chest. She threaded her fingers through his chest hair, tracing spirals and whorls, plucking playfully at the crisp curls. His fingers were smoothing her hair.

"Sheriff Gilchrist says he found a plot of land behind the mercantile store that you can buy," she told him. "It has a wonderful view of the creek where everyone goes swimming."

His arm constricted around her and his hand stilled on her head. "You don't go swimming, do you?" he asked.

She lifted her head. "Not if you don't want me to," she answered.

He looked into her lovely gray eyes. "Do you know how to swim?" he asked.

"Aye, but I know you can't so if you—"

"I always wanted to learn but now it's a moot point," he said. His forehead creased. "Are you a good swimmer, Lea?"

"A very strong swimmer," she said. "But—"

"Then I see no reason why you can't continue as long as there are others around who could aid you if you needed them," he said. "I don't want to change your life so drastically that you will hate me for it."

She reached up to stroke his lean jaw, rubbing her palm over his whiskers and loving the sensation. "Nothing could ever make me hate you, milord. I will love you for as long as I draw breath, and if there is truly a land beyond, I will continue to love you through eternity."

How, he wondered, had he chanced upon such a treasure as the one he held in his arms? For once life wasn't kicking his ass but extending a friendly hand to him. He only hoped the Fates did not decide happiness for Bevyn Coure had been a mistake.

"I'd like to see that land," he said, and released his firm hold on her.

Lea wriggled off him, gazing pointedly at his cock. She giggled. "Hanging there like that, your staff looks like a snail trying to come out of its leather shell."

Bevyn glanced down at his shaft. "Aye, well, why don't you stuff him back in, wench?" he challenged.

She knew by the look on his face he didn't expect her to take up the gauntlet he'd thrown so when she reached for him and wrapped her slender fingers around him, he drew in a ragged gasp.

"Poor little fella," she said.

"Wench," he said in warning, feeling himself harden in her hand. "You'd best not grip him like that else..." He stopped for her eyes were glowing with heat and when she bent over, he held his breath, afraid even to move.

Though she had never lain with a man before her Reaper, Lea had heard the other women talking over the months she'd worked at the White Horse. Mable had also given her a few tips while Bevyn had been gone and though Lea didn't think she'd ever use

the saloonkeeper's advice, she wasn't so sure when her man's rod responded as it did to just her touch.

The Reaper's hands shot to the headboard of the bed the moment his lady's mouth closed around him. His entire body shook for just a second or two as the warmth and the wetness surrounded him, and he felt the gentle pulling of her lips and the roof of her mouth on his suddenly stiff cock.

"Oh my god," he breathed, his chest shuddering. He stared down at the top of her head as she placed herself between his legs, elbowing aside his thighs as he'd done with hers. He nearly came out of his skin when she insinuated a hand into his pants to cup his balls as she suckled him. As it was, he let go of the headboard just long enough to wave his clothing away, the heat of the leather on his legs and the cling of the silk on his chest too much to bear.

Lea smiled around the salty treat between her lips. She raised her gaze to his and when she winked at him, she watched the most breathtaking smile pull at his lips.

"You wicked little wench," he told her, and sucked in another quick breath when she raked him gently with her teeth.

She would have milked him to release had he not reached down to cup her shoulders and pull her up him.

"Straddle me," he said in a husky voice. "Let me come inside you, dearling."

"Fan away my dress then," she said.

He shook his head. "No, I want you just as you are."

Wrestling with her long skirts, she managed to pull them up, pouting at his refusal to unclothe her. Doing as he instructed, she eased herself down on his hard cock, her eyes widening at the wonderful sensation that greeted her.

"Ooh," she said. "He's so deep inside me."

Her words were like a prod to the Reaper's libido and he put his hands to her hips to show her the rhythm, the movement that would bring them both to climax. As she ground her sex on him, lifted and lowered her sweet sheath upon his staff, he put his palms over her breasts and squeezed, running his thumbs over the material to turn her nipples to hard little pebbles beneath the cloth.

Lea let her head fall back, her long hair tickling his thighs as she rode him. The pulsing that began deep within her was an itch she quickly realized could be scratched on his stony rod.

Watching his lady through half-closed eyes, Bevyn was in absolute heaven. Her tight muscles were squeezing him. His climax was rapidly approaching. He arched his hips to meet her downward push and felt the ripples begin in her velvety warmth.

"That's it, wench," he said, guiding her, helping her to push harder upon him. "Come for me, baby. Come for your man."

Lea ground against him brutally, rotating her hips as he showed her and the bursting of the sweetest pleasure shot through her on long, tightening waves that made gooseflesh pop up on her arms and legs.

Pulsing into her in a thick stream, Bevyn held himself still until the last jerk of his cock told him there was no more cum to release. They were both breathing heavily and when she stretched out atop him, he thought he could die right then and still be the happiest man on the face of the earth.

"Is this normal?" his lady asked, her palm splayed over the Reaper tattoo on his shoulder.

"It is for us, milady," he answered. "I don't think I can keep my hands off you."

"You'd best not try," she warned him. She pushed against his chest and climbed off him. "But we can't spend the day doing this, Bev."

Bev? He questioned as she stood at the side of the bed flouncing her skirts. No one had ever called him "Bev" and he found he liked it.

"We need to go thank Widow James," she said. She walked to the window to push aside the curtains.

"Aye, we should," he agreed with a sigh. Waving his uniform back on, he swung his legs from the bed. "First I want to see that land."

With his gun belt strapped on his hip, he escorted Lea down the stairs, nodding politely to the women who were sitting together at one of the tables. They looked unhappy and the cause did not escape him.

"You can have your customers come back, Mable," he told the saloonkeeper. "I think we'll take the widow up on her offer to stay at her place."

Relief appeared on the older woman's face for she would hate to turn away a customer while the Reaper was in residence in her establishment. No man wanted to cause even a moment's trouble for Bevyn Coure, and not being able to laugh and carry on while drinking, whoring and gambling was a right hard thing to keep from doing.

Strolling out into the bright sunlight, Bevyn was astounded at the activity around him. Normally when he rode into a town, the people scattered, not wanting to garner his attention. Now they treated him as though he'd been living there all along—smiling, nodding, waving to him and Lea.

"You're ours now," Lea told him when he voiced his surprise. "This will be your home base and we are your people. They know you will protect them better than you will any other town in your territory."

"But they've always been scared shitless of me before," he said, tipping his hat to a pair of elderly ladies who nodded regally to him.

"Aye, but that was before you became one of us, milord," she said.

"Huh," he grunted, not really knowing whether he was pleased or annoyed at the sudden attention.

The parcel of land to which Lea led him would indeed suit a nice little clapboard house that Lea insisted would not be pretentious or gaudy.

"Something small but comfortable," she'd insisted.

"But large enough for a good-sized study," he argued.

"With plenty of bookshelves," she added, her hand clutched tightly in his.

He thought of his promise to give her a library and realized such a thing would keep her occupied and safe when he was out taking care of business. A trip to the sheriff's office netted them another look at an empty store that would be ideal for such an enterprise.

"Let's get some carpenters in here and start gutting the building," Bevyn said. "Milady can draw up a plan for where she wants shelves and furniture."

"We'll be a city before you know it!" the sheriff said with a grin then coughed, realizing he'd spoken out of turn.

"Say what you want when you want, Buford," the Reaper told him. "You and I will be working closely together to keep our people safe." He held out his hand. "I think of us as partners."

The sheriff's mouth gaped open. "P-Partners?" he repeated. He grasped the Reaper's hand.

"Friends too, I hope," Bevyn said.

Buford Gilchrist could not find the words to answer that. He just beamed from ear to ear, his shoulders thrown back with pride for the first time in many a year.

"Okay, so now, we're off to see the Widow James," Bevyn said, easing his hand from the sheriff's tight grip. "If you'll set things into motion on the library, I'll have the plans drawn up for the house before the week is out."

"Aye, milord," the sheriff agreed, his head bobbing. "I'll get right on it!"

Cornelia James opened her door to the Reaper and his lady with a hand on her very ample hip. "'Bout damned time you finally got your skinny little butts over here," the large black woman said with a sniff. "Well, don't just stand there. Get on in here!" She hobbled back to give them room to pass her.

"Sorry," Bevyn mumbled as he tried to smile at the dark face, but the widow just glared at him. He felt like a little boy again.

"The breakfast was delicious, Miss Cornelia," Lea said.

"Uh-huh," Cornelia agreed, closing the door. She folded a pair of huge arms over a very impressive chest and just looked at them.

Bevyn cleared his throat. "We'd like to take you up on the offer of the room," he said.

"Uh-huh," came the reply.

The Reaper exchanged a look with his lady. "I'll be glad to pay you for—"

Cornelia snorted. "Son, you won't do nothin' of the sort. Don't want no money for the offer. I ain't running no bed and breakfast here." She sniffed. "You'll earn your keep."

"Ah, well, now, I don't..." Bevyn began, his eyebrows drawn sharply together.

"What is it you would have us do, Miss Cornelia?" Lea cut him off, giving him a warning look.

"Done done it so far as I'm concerned," Cornelia said.

Bevyn just stared at her. "I beg your pardon?"

Cornelia arched a nearly non-existent eyebrow. "You went and took this little girl here as your lady and that's all the payment I need." She smiled to reveal two missing front teeth. "Now, who wants some egg pie?"

Half an hour later, Bevyn was shifting uncomfortably on the chair in the kitchen, wishing he were anywhere else. He had already downed four glasses of water but the sugar overload that was rushing through his system wasn't abating and he gave another nasty look to the empty pie plate that sat on the counter.

"One dozen eggs, two cups of sugar, two cups sweet cream, one teaspoon each of vanilla and nutmeg..."

He tried not to listen to Cornelia giving Lea the recipe for the ultra-sweet pie that had turned his cock into a living nightmare between his legs. There was no way he could stand up without the women seeing the evidence so he just sat there—sweating and silently cursing his Reaper's need for sweet food, holding the tablecloth close to his stomach to hide himself.

"Son, what ails you?"

Bevyn jerked, his eyes going guiltily from the pie plate to Cornelia.

"You want another piece of pie, just ask for it," the black woman said. "I got another one in the icebox and—"

"No!" Bevyn stated emphatically. "No more sugar!"

Lea's face turned bright red and her gaze snapped to the pie plate. Both she and Cornelia had had small slices of the heavenly concoction but her Reaper had practically inhaled the rest of it, gobbling it up as though there were no tomorrow. "Oh," she whispered.

"You got the diabetes or somethin', son?" Cornelia demanded.

Bevyn gave Lea a pleading look.

"Why don't we go into the parlor, Miss Cornelia," Lea said, hooking her arm through the older woman's.

"What for?" Cornelia asked.

"He's...the pie...well..." Lea shrugged. "Sugar does things to him."

"Wench!" Bevyn hissed.

Cornelia looked from one red face to the other then nodded. “Uh-huh,” she said. “Guess I won’t be offering him none of my homemade lemonade then. It’s got two cups of sugar in it too.”

“Best not,” Lea agreed.

“Humph,” Cornelia commented, and ushered Lea out of the kitchen with a last-minute order for the Reaper to get matters in hand then come join them.

Long after the two women had left him, Bevyn sat where he was, gritting his teeth and willing his cock to behave—which it didn’t feel inclined to do. It stayed hard and full and burning, so aroused he could feel every breath he took pressing against his crotch. He was acutely embarrassed then confused, then annoyed and finally amused. This was a situation he’d never run up against before and although it was nothing to report back to the Citadel, he would bet his last pay credit that his fellow Reapers would find it comical.

Not that he’d met any of his kind except for the Prime—Arawn Gehdrin—and he was in awe of that man. He could imagine Gehdrin giving him a scowl for letting such a thing happen.

Thoughts of the Prime brought thoughts of the Citadel and then of the Shadowlords—one in particular, who was going to be more than unhappy with what Bevyn had done.

“Reapers do not need mates,” Lord Kheelan had lectured. *“Mates are a liability you men can not afford.”*

Well, he thought as he eased himself more comfortably in the chair, thoughts of the High Lord very effectively diminishing his erection, he had fucked up royally and would pay for it, but if he had it to do over again, he knew he’d make the same decision. Lea was his and he was going to keep her—no matter what he had to do in order for that to happen.

“Mistakes are paid for in blood, Lord Bevyn,” Lord Kheelan had once told him. *“In blood and sweat and pain.”*

Aye, he figured he would be shelling out some of that coin once he returned to the Citadel, and he had a fairly good guess what would happen to him, how he’d be forced to pay for going against orders. The problem was, he was not willing to leave Lea behind in Orson, not knowing how long he’d be forced to stay at the Citadel.

“Are you all right now?” Lea asked, peeking her head in the kitchen door.

Bevyn looked up. “I’ve got to report to the Citadel next week,” he told her. “I want you to come with me.”

Lea came into the kitchen, her eyes worried. “I’m not a good horsewoman, milord. I...”

“We’ll take the train from Clewiston,” he said.

Her face brightened. “The train? We’ll take the train?”

"Aye," he said. "They have sleeping cars and it's a sight better than camping on the ground or looking for hotels decent enough to stay in between here and there."

She came to him and squatted down beside his chair. "I've never ridden on a train," she said.

He cupped her chin. "You'll enjoy it, wench," he said, leaning down to briefly touch his lips to hers.

Lea glanced down at his lap. "Is everything back to normal?"

He laughed. "As much as it can get back to normal," he said. He released her and pushed the chair back, extending his hand to help her up. "We'd best go socialize with our new landlady before she changes her mind about us staying here."

"I don't think we have anything to worry about there," she said. She slipped her arm around his waist. "She thinks you're one delectable white man."

"Did she say that?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

"She did, but don't let it go to your head, son," Cornelia said as she came into the kitchen. "Now get gone while I see to supper."

"Can I help you?" Lea asked.

"No, you most certainly can not," Cornelia said. "Don't want no skinny white gals getting in the way of my serious cooking. Take that boy and go off somewhere before you get him all worked up again."

"Come on, Bev," Lea said, pulling on his arm.

"That boy?" Bevyn repeated as Lea ushered him out the back door and into Cornelia's immaculate yard. "Did she really call me a 'boy'?"

"I don't think she meant it as an insult, milord," she was quick to appease him.

"I didn't take it as one," he said, looking back at the kitchen door. "It's just that no one has ever called me a 'boy' before."

"Even when you were a child?" she asked, leaning into him as they walked.

He turned his head back around, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants. "Not even then. And no one ever called me 'son' either."

Lea looked up at him. "What did your parents call you?"

Bevyn was staring at the creek to which they were walking for it ran across the far end of Cornelia's property, curving back toward the plot of land where he would build their home.

"I didn't have any," he said quietly.

"No parents?" she queried. "What were you? Hatched?"

He glanced down at her. "No parents I knew of," he corrected.

"Oh I see. You were orphaned," she said.

"No, I was thrown away," he said.

They stopped on a rise that overlooked the shimmering waters of Willow Glen Creek. Around them were tall cottonwoods and black walnut trees interspersed with maples and poplars. It was a quiet, peaceful setting and the grass was lush and green.

Lea let go of his arm and sat down, bending her knees to one side, smoothing her dress over them. He hunkered down beside her and picked up a long blade of grass, running it through his fingers.

"Tell me," she encouraged.

He wanted to. He just didn't know where to start. She seemed to understand he was marshalling his thoughts for she was quiet, waiting for him to speak, giving him all the time he needed.

"They found me under a pile of trash in a vacant lot," he said quietly. "I was only a few hours old. Whoever the woman was who'd given birth to me sure as hell didn't want me and didn't expect anyone to find me, I guess."

"Who was it that found you?"

"Two priests from the Brotherhood," he said. "It was by chance they were passing by and heard me crying." He tossed away the blade of grass and sat down beside her, drawing his knees up into the circle of his arms. "They took me to the monastery to be raised as a brother."

"You were a priest?" she asked, surprised.

He nodded. "I took my final vows when I was twenty-eight and was given my first assignment just after my thirtieth birthday."

"How old are you now?" she asked.

"A lot older than you," he said. He was staring at the creek but his eyes were seeing something other than the light shining on the rippling waters.

Lea sensed he didn't want to tell her just how old he was. "So did you forsake the priesthood to become a Reaper?" she asked.

He laughed bitterly. "You must die to become a Reaper, sweeting," he told her, "and I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"I would like a fireplace in the kitchen," she said, and when he turned his head to her, she nodded. "A big fireplace made of fieldstone and I want the kitchen to be large enough for a sitting room for when it snows outside."

"Does it snow *inside* here in Orson?" he asked, lips pursed.

"It has been known to," she said with a twinkle in her eye at his teasing.

"A big kitchen with a fireplace sounds nice," he agreed.

"And a big window so we can look out and watch it snow."

"A big window with mullions," he added.

"And shutters."

"Naturally."

"And nice plush carpeting," she said wistfully. "Dark green."

He turned his back to her and lay down, putting his head in her lap, staring up through the tall tree branches at the blue sky. "And a copper tub big enough for the both of us."

She ran her fingers through his dark hair. "A big porch that wraps all the way around the house."

"With a swing in the back for sitting on cool summer evenings," he amended.

"A tin roof for when it rains."

"Aye," he said, and sighed. He crossed his legs at the ankle and threaded his fingers together over his flat belly. "Everything that will make it a home."

"Our home," she said as she gazed across at the land where their house would be built.

"Our home," he repeated.

He was quiet for so long after that, Lea did not need to look down to know her Reaper was asleep. When she lowered her gaze, she smiled, her heart filling to the brim with her love for the man. His dark lashes were like smutty little crescents over his tanned cheek and his full lips were slightly parted to reveal the stark whiteness of his even teeth. To her, he was perfection, the most handsome man she'd ever had the pleasure of knowing.

Her attention went to the tribal tattoo on his left temple and cheek, and she wondered how he came by it. If he had not known who his father was, how was it he had a particular clan's marking? And at what age had it been applied? Once more she wondered how old he was, but something told her he would never reveal such information to her.

Sighing, she stilled her hand on his hair, not wanting to wake him for he looked so peaceful, so...well...young as he lay there.

It was nearly sunset by the time Bevyn awoke and he was surprised to find himself on the ground, his head in Lea's lap. He looked up at her to find her gazing down at him with a small smile on her lips.

"Hey there, sleepyhead," she said, tugging gently on his dark curls.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

"At least three hours," she said. Her legs had gone to sleep along with him.

"Oh man," he said. "I've never done *that* before."

"What? Falling asleep in the middle of the day?"

"Aye," he replied. "Reapers don't sleep all that well. Sleeping so soundly when I'm with you truly surprises me."

She smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "Did you know you snore?"

"I do not," he said indignantly.

"Shh... Listen!" she said, her eyes sweeping back and forth as though danger were close by.

Bevyn held his breath, tuned his hearing to their surroundings, but heard nothing. "I don't hear anything," he said.

"That's because your snoring scared all the birds away," she said in a stern tone.

He snorted and sat up, running his fingers through his hair. "Funny," he countered. Getting to his feet, he put his hands to the small of his back and stretched, his backbone cracking beneath the strain.

"I bet you're hungry," she said as she looked up at him.

"I am starved," he told her, "but steer me away from any more sugar for the day, will you?" He held his hand out to help her up.

"That would be best," she said with a giggle.

Walking back to Cornelia's house with their fingers entwined, Bevyn stopped and looked around them, a frown on his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

It wasn't that something was wrong per se, he thought, but that everything wasn't right either. He felt as though he were being watched and the feeling had settled between his shoulder blades like a wet, slimy rag. He shifted his shoulders and the feeling faded away.

"Nothing," he said, but unease lingered in the depths of his golden eyes.

Supper was ready when they entered the black woman's immaculately kept house. Baked ham, corn on the cob, mixed greens with a tart vinegar and pepper sauce sprinkled on them, sliced tomatoes and cornbread hit the spot and Bevyn consumed two plates full of food before finally pushing back from the table, refusing a third glass of cold milk.

"I'm stuffed," he admitted, rubbing his flat belly.

"Won't offer you none of my blueberry pie," Cornelia said as she brought the savory confection to the table and began cutting a piece for herself and Lea.

Bevyn licked his lips, for the aroma coming from the tart berries filled his nostrils with sheer delight.

"No," Lea said. She didn't even glance his way.

"Most assuredly not," Cornelia agreed as she handed Lea her slice of pie.

Bevyn sighed deeply like a man much put upon, but had to agree he didn't need any more sugar. He got up and left the women to their eating, though his mouth watered to try just a forkful of the pie.

Lea found him on the back porch after she'd helped Cornelia clean the kitchen. His hands were hooked around the support beam that ran the length of the construction and he looked almost as though he were hanging there. He was staring intently at the creek.

"Is something wrong, milord?" she asked, sliding her arms around his waist and laying her cheek on his broad back.

"Nothing I can put a name to," he said. "Just a feeling, sweeting."

"What kind of feeling?"

"That someone is keeping an eye on me," he said. "I don't care for the notion."

He took his hands down and shifted so he could pull her into the safety of his arms, putting his chin atop her head. The night air was a bit chill with just a hint of wind wafting over the grass. They stood that way for a while until Lea yawned.

"Let's go in," she said. "It's been a long day."

The Reaper's hawklike gaze was still scanning his surroundings. He felt acutely uncomfortable but could find nothing out of the ordinary that would cause the sensation. As he escorted his lady inside, he felt keenly the weight of unfriendly eyes on him and shifted the muscles of his back again to rid himself of the notion someone had a bead right between his shoulder blades.

Climbing the stairs, they were a bit surprised to find Cornelia on the landing, her arms crossed over her large chest. She nudged her chin toward a door on her right.

"That is your room, Lea," the black woman said. "The one on the other side of mine is yours, milord."

Bevyn blinked. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, his hand tensing around Lea's.

Cornelia shook her head. "You two ain't married and until you are, while you're under my roof, one of you won't be living in sin."

"But we've already..." he began, his voice sounding like a little boy's who was being denied his favorite toy.

"Won't be no hanky-panky being done under my roof," Cornelia said. She unfolded her arms and shook a finger at Bevyn. "And I am a light sleeper, son, so don't think you'll be sneaking into her room later on this evening. You hear?" She narrowed her eyes. "Do you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled, and caught himself before he could kick at the carpet with the toe of his boot in a show of his irritation.

"That goes for you too, Lea," Cornelia said. "No trying to tippy-toe into his bedroom."

"No, ma'am," Lea agreed. "I won't."

"So kiss her good night, son."

It was a chaste kiss with a minimum amount of pressure applied, but the looks the two exchanged could have set kindling afire. Bevyn watched his lady go into her room and close the door before he let out a long, heartfelt sigh.

"This just isn't right, Miss Cornelia," he complained.

“You’d best marry her if you want to sleep with her under *my* roof.” Cornelia sniffed and went into her own room, trusting he’d do as he vowed and not go into Lea’s room. She – like every one else – knew Reaper vows were always kept.

Chapter Five

Lea wasn't the least surprised to find Bevyn had been up long before sunrise and had already eaten a hearty breakfast before she'd even turned over to find the sunshine streaking through the window curtains.

"Reckon he went to gather up a work crew to start that house," Cornelia laughed.

Sure enough, Lea found out her Reaper and the sheriff had ridden to the sawmill in Clewiston with two buckboards to bring back lumber to begin the foundation.

"They can have the shell up in two weeks if the weather holds," Cornelia told her. "I'm thinking the weather darn well better hold for that boy!" She'd slapped a meaty hand on her thigh, laughing.

After a small morning meal, the women had gone out on the back porch to shell peas for lunch. Sitting on the swing, Lea could see men clearing the lot where the house would be built. Trenches were being dug for the waterlines that would run from the central water tower.

"That boy means business when he does something," Cornelia observed. "A gal could do worse to have a husband like that."

Lea bit her lip as she looked at the black woman.

"Uh-oh," Cornelia said, her plump hands lowering to the pan of peas. "I don't like that look. What kind of look is that supposed to be, child?"

Lea said nothing for a moment as she gathered her thoughts, wanting to say the right words, needing the older woman to understand. At last, she lowered her head, unable to look at Cornelia as she spoke.

"I don't want to marry him, Miss Cornelia," she said quietly.

Cornelia's thin eyebrows shot up. "Why not?" she asked. "You know darn well he's a good man and even a blind fool can see the boy loves you."

"It's not that," Lea said. She lifted her head, giving Cornelia a steady look. "I love him with all my heart, Miss Cornelia. I fell in love with him that first night but I'm not going to marry him." She looked down at the peas in the porcelain pan. "I can't marry."

"Why not?" Cornelia demanded. She waited impatiently for the younger woman to reply.

Lea cocked one shoulder. "You know what he is," she said.

"Aye," Cornelia stated, narrowing her eyes. "What of it?"

"There is something inside him that makes him what he is," Lea said.

"I've heard tell it's some kind of creature that gives him his powers. You afraid it might jump out at you and say boo?"

Lea's lips stretched in a reluctant smile. "No," she answered, and then the smile wavered away. "But I don't want it in me either."

Cornelia was seated in her favorite rocking chair. She set the chair into motion, her hands in the pan shelling peas. "Who says you have to have it in you to be married to him?"

"Being married to a man means having to do whatever he tells you," Lea said. "He'd have the right to demand things I don't want to do. He'd have the law on his side."

"Does he know you don't want the creature?" Cornelia asked.

"I've said as much," Lea answered.

"And he agreed that you didn't have to have it 'less you wanted it?"

"We haven't really talked about it, but I won't ever accept having such a thing inside me. If I marry him, he'd have the right to insist. I'll live with him, be his mate, but I won't take the Joining vows with him," Lea declared. She shrugged. "And he hasn't asked."

"If you don't take his hellion," Cornelia said, showing she had more than a slight notion of what was inside the Reaper, "you'll die long before he does. Reapers mate only once, girl, and it will be a long, lonely life for him after you're gone."

"I know," Lea said, "but that can't be helped. I won't ever marry Bevyn Coure."

"I can't ask her to marry me," Bevyn was saying at that exact moment as he and the sheriff halted their buckboards so they could tighten down Buford's load.

"There will be those who'll look down on her for living with you outside the bonds of matrimony," the sheriff warned.

"They'd best not do so and let me know about it," Bevyn snapped as he jerked on the tiedown.

"That's just human nature, milord," Buford said. "Can't keep folks from yapping about what bothers them." He took off his hat and blotted the sweat from his brow with his bandana. "Why don't you want to make an honest woman of the girl?"

Bevyn's eyes flashed auric fire but he didn't chastise the older man for his words. He'd given Buford leave to talk to him as he would his own sons, but the man's question still rankled.

"She doesn't want one of my parasites and if we were married, I might renege on my promise not to give her one," he growled.

"Is having one of them things in you so bad?" Buford asked.

"If you'd asked me that when it was first put in, I'd have said 'aye', but I've had a long time to adjust it. It takes some getting used to, that's for sure, but the benefits of the relationship are such that I have come to accept the negatives like the need for tenses and to drink blood, transitioning to a wolf-like state four times a year or so."

Buford braced the undersides of his forearms on the wagon bed. "Can I ask what kind of benefits there are, milord?"

"A long, healthy life for one," Bevyn answered. He too took off his hat and arched away the sweat. "Then there's the strength of ten men, the ability to influence minds, to speak to the Shadowlords though they're thousands of miles away, the facility to rearrange the molecules in the air to fashion clothing."

Buford had no idea what a molecule was but didn't want to annoy the Reaper by asking. "Seems the benefits outweigh the negatives to me," he commented. "Can't see why the girl wouldn't jump at the chance to have all that."

"I can't either," Bevyn said, "but it seems to frighten her so I'll leave it like it is."

They climbed up on their respective buckboards and set the horses into motion. It was only a few miles more to Orson and the sun was already high, the day becoming a sweltering distraction.

Lea and Cornelia had been joined by a half dozen other women who had prepared lunch for the workers readying the building site. His lady was pouring iced tea for a group of diggers, who were stripped to the waist, when Bevyn drove his wagon onto the lot. She looked up, smiled at him, but then went on with what she was doing.

"Miss me?" he asked as he came over to her.

"I did," she said, and was amazed that he would give her a kiss on her cheek in front of everyone. She saw glances exchanged, for no doubt the others were as surprised by his public show of affection as she was.

"Got any food left for me and Buford?" he asked.

"It's just chicken salad sandwiches, veggies and fried sweet potato chips," she told him. "Will that be enough?"

"Sounds great to me," he said. "Let me wash up." He unbuckled his gun belt and hung it and his hat on the wagon's brake then headed for the water pump behind the mercantile store.

Lea set about preparing him a plate while Cornelia made one up for the sheriff. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he splashed water from the big white enameled basin, washed his hands and then dried them on a big towel. He and Buford were talking and then the Reaper laughed, drawing everyone's attention.

"Now that is a content man," Cornelia observed. "Don't see that often in one of his kind."

Lea watched men and women greet her lover as he came striding toward her. She saw him smile, nod his head in passing and stop to answer a question put to him by Nate Bundy – the foreman of the work group. She saw amazement spread over Bundy's face when the Reaper slapped him casually on the back before walking away.

After downing five sandwiches and a fresh batch of sweet potato chips, an entire bowl of tomatoes and several glasses of milk, Lea was shocked to see her man unbuttoning his shirt and stripping it off.

"Oh my," she heard one of the women say, and every female eye there gravitated to the muscular build of Bevyn Coure.

"Now that is one fine specimen," another woman whispered.

Despite the vicious scars that covered his upper torso, the Reaper had the body build every man there envied and every woman wanted to run her hands over. His abdominal muscles were sharply etched, the pectorals and biceps bulging, his shoulders broad and waist lean. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on him.

No one else noticed the change in the air as he swept a hand over the lower part of his body, so none of them noticed the disappearance of his tight uniform leather pants and the sudden appearance of black denim that was a looser fit. Lea however, had not missed that handy little trick, and when he glanced at her and winked, she knew he had meant for her to be a witness to his unique power. Looking down at the dress he had created for her, she sighed. Life with her Reaper was going to be anything but boring.

Long into the afternoon, she sat with the other women who had brought their sewing and mending, their peas to be shelled, their corn to be shucked, and gossiped as the men raised the skeleton of the Reaper's house. She kept an eye on Bevyn as he toiled alongside the other men—accepted, teased and insulted the same as every other man there. She could see the happiness flitting across his sweaty face as he pounded a hammer or jerked a saw blade back and forth over the timbers. His upper torso glistened with sweat as he worked, straining to lift weights the other men could not.

"You are one lucky woman, Lea Walsh," May Bundy, Nate's wife, said. "There ain't a woman alive what wouldn't want that tall drink of water between her sheets."

The other women nodded, not a one of them looking with anything other than lust at the Reaper, and that didn't surprised Lea. Where before the people of Orson were terrified of their assigned Reaper's erratic appearances, they had now gladly accepted them and taken him in as one of their own.

"You gonna marry him, Lea?" Angie Carmichael inquired. "Father Tony will be coming through week after next."

Lea shook her head. "We're going to the Citadel next week," she said as she snapped beans, "so we won't be here for the priest's arrival."

"Lucky you," someone said. "Gonna take the train?"

"Aye," Lea said, squirming in her stiff ladder-back chair.

"Now that will be a trip and a half," May said. "I've heard tell that's some place to see." She lowered her voice. "Not that anyone around here's ever been invited to the High Lords' keep."

"You make note of everything so's you can tell us about it, Lea," Angie said wistfully.

Though she had never been equated with the other women of the White Horse—none of whom had been invited to help with the workers' noontime meal—Lea had not been extended the same courtesies as the other women of Orson. Whereas before she'd

been merely tolerated, yet ignored, for the most part she—like her Reaper—had finally become a part of the community. Whereas before people would nod stiffly at her but not go out of their way to speak to her, she was being included in the other women's activities. All of a sudden she had garnered respectability.

"Guess he wants to take you to meet the Shadowlords," May said. "Gotta get their approval for the Joining, I guess."

Lea felt a twinge of worry. What was going to happen when they came back from the Citadel and still did not marry? Would the women think less of her? Pity her? Look down on her for living in sin with the Reaper?

"Do Reapers get married?" Angie asked, and all eyes turned to Lea.

She looked up at the other women. "I don't know," she answered truthfully. "We haven't discussed it."

"Better get a ring on that man, dearie," May suggested. "Can't hold 'em if you don't have that band of gold 'round their finger to remind 'em who they belong to."

"That don't always hold a man," Virgie Watson proclaimed. "Many a man's strayed what got a ring 'round his finger."

"Aye but not a one what's got a ring through his nose!" someone else stated, and all the women laughed including Lea.

"Well, I don't think Lea's got nothing to worry about," Cornelia put in. "Reapers ain't gonna stray from their mates. We all know that."

"Still, you'd do well to have the words spoken over you, girl," May declared, and all the other women save for Cornelia and Lea nodded in agreement.

Bevyn had been listening on and off to the women's conversation, curious to know how they were treating his lady. Though their voices were soft and low, he had no trouble listening in with his keen hearing, even if none of the other men could. The issue with the Joining would have to be dealt with if only to make gods-be-damned sure Lea was treated with the respect she deserved as his mate.

As he hammered, he realized he was not opposed to the Joining. Although he didn't need words spoken over them by a man of the cloth or a piece of a paper stamped with the territorial seal to tell him Lea was his, such things meant a lot to the civilian population. He would need to have a serious discussion with Lea about marriage.

"Rider coming," he heard a man say, and turned to look where some of the others were staring.

A cloud of dust was streaking up behind a horse that was coming at top speed, its rider whipping the reins back and forth to hasten the speed of the beast.

"Looks like Jed Halsey," Buford said. He glanced at Bevyn. "Lives over to Lawler, that little hole in the road on the way to Beverton."

Bevyn nodded and hooked the claw of his hammer over a two-by-four and hopped down from the scaffolding where he'd been standing. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a dark blue bandana and wiped it over his face.

"Looks like trouble to me," Ned Bundy put in.

The men all stopped what they were doing, waiting for the rider to reach them. Halsey saw them and directed his mount to where they were all assembled. He jumped off the steed, his chest heaving as he headed for the sheriff, only to come up short when he noticed the Reaper in their midst. He went to one knee, his head bowed.

"Don't do that," Bevyn snapped. He'd always been uncomfortable with such overt acts of fealty. "Get up and tell us what's happened."

"Milord," Halsey said, gasping for breath as he scrambled to his feet. "I did not know you were here." He swallowed hard. "Rogues, milord. We got three of them."

"How long have they been there?" the Reaper asked, reaching for his shirt.

"Two days, milord," Halsey reported. "They have a couple of women with them."

Bevyn stilled. "Women?" he repeated. "Human women?"

"I think not, milord," Halsey said with a shake of his head. "I believe them to be rogues themselves."

"That can't be good," Buford said.

"It isn't," Bevyn agreed, waving his hand. "Have they killed any of your people?"

"None so far. They've just taken over the entire town," Halsey said. "I barely managed to escape. The women culled out the men and had them put in a barn together."

"These women," Bevyn said as he buttoned his shirt and began tucking it into pants that were suddenly leather instead of denim. "Are they carrying weapons of their own? Lance-like weapons?"

"Aye, milord," Halsey replied. "Spears that shoot fire from the tip."

"Amazeens," Bevyn mumbled as he swung his gun belt around his waist and buckled it. "I figured as much."

"Want us to come with you, milord?" Buford asked.

The Reaper shook his head. "I'll do better on my own," Bevyn said. "Station guards about. Make sure no one leaves town until I get back. Send word to get those living close to town to come in. Tell Mable I'll pay for them to have rooms at her place."

"The townsfolk may take some in," Cornelia spoke up.

Lea had been following the conversation with growing dread. She knew better than to voice her reluctance to allow her man to leave for this was his job. This was what he had been trained to do. It was a part of him. It was his reason for being, but it didn't make things any easier for her.

"You will be careful, milord?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Bevyn looked to her and saw the dread on her lovely face. Before everyone there, he strode to her, hooked an arm around her waist and drew her to him.

"Aye, milady," he said. "I will be alert."

With the townspeople watching, he kissed her long and hard then turned away, striding purposefully to the stable for his horse.

"Oh lord," Lea whispered, a trembling hand to her lips.

"It is for men to fight and women to wait, girl," Cornelia said softly. "That's been the way of it since time began."

"But it doesn't make it any easier," Lea said, swiping at a tear that ran down her cheek.

"No," Cornelia replied. "I know it don't."

The livery owner hurried beside Bevyn without being asked. Bevyn sent him over to Cornelia's to retrieve his saddlebags since he didn't know how long he'd be gone and might need the tenses inside those bags. By the time Préachán was saddled, the stableman was back, handing the saddlebags to the Reaper.

"Tell the sheriff to keep an eye on milady," Bevyn said as he swung atop his mount.

"We'll all see to her, milord," the livery owner vowed. "Don't worry on that account."

Nodding his acknowledgement of the promise, Bevyn kicked his horse into motion and thundered out of town, taking the road to Lawler.

"Lord Kheelan? Talk to me," Bevyn sent to the Citadel. "Tell me what's in Lawler."

He was two miles out of Orson before the High Lord's voice intruded on his thoughts.

"*You have our apologies, Lord Bevyn. This situation somehow escaped our notice. There are three rogues and two Amazeen,*" Lord Kheelan informed him. "*We've no idea how the women warriors got here. This is a first and it should be interesting to find out what the hell they're doing here.*"

"Who is their leader?"

"A man named Thiess," the Shadowlord replied. "He looks to be a bad one."

"Where are they holding up in Lawler?"

There was a slight pause.

"*They have made the saloon their base of operations. The younger menfolk are in a barn at the outskirts of town being guarded by the Amazeen. The older men and male children have been crowded into the jail. The women and young girls were herded into the church and the doors and windows were boarded shut. Doesn't look like the rogues are interested in them.*"

"If they've mated with the Amazeen, they wouldn't be interested," Bevyn stated. "Can you tell whom they've taken Sustenance from?"

"We believe only the younger men."

Lawler was a thirty-minute ride from Orson and Préachán's mighty hooves were eating up the miles. Bevyn was concentrating on bending low over the steed's neck to alleviate some of the wind drag as the horse raced over the prairie.

"They are gone, Bevyn," the High Lord suddenly said in a low voice. *"The young men have disappeared from the barn."*

"Shit," Bevyn exclaimed. *"Is there a ship lurking up there somewhere?"*

"There must be but we've not the technology to sense it," came the disgusted reply. *"We need to get the Net operational over the Citadel and spread it over the rest of the country. Another week and we'll have complete protection of the High Council at least."*

"Well, I can't do anything about the men now but I can stop the rogues from doing it again," Bevyn snapped. *"They'll move on to the next town if I don't."*

"Lord Naois is checking to see if they've hit any other towns before this," Lord Kheelan said. *"Let's pray this is the first."*

"I saw a Dóigra at English's cabin," Bevyn said, full memory of the horror he'd seen there surfacing in his mind's eye to nauseate him. *"He came into contact with the Amazeen somewhere."*

"Do you need help with this? Lord Arawn is available."

"I'll let you know," Bevyn answered.

"Stop them, Lord Bevyn," Lord Kheelan said. *"No matter what you have to do. Stop them from transporting any of our people off-world."*

Bevyn knew the Shadowlord had withdrawn.

"Call on me if you need me, Lord Bevyn," came another voice close on the heels of the Shadowlord's departure.

"I will, milord," Bevyn replied, knowing it was the Prime Reaper who spoke.

Lawler set in the midst of a small vale with lush, green rolling hills cupped around it. It was a pleasant little burg that was well kept and fairly prosperous. A serpentine river ran to the east of the small settlement that was fairly new by Terran standards. The town had come into existence a few years after the Burning War had all but destroyed the entire country, therefore the clapboard buildings wore adequate coats of white paint and the wood had yet to begin deteriorating in the harsh winters the land was now growing accustomed to.

Tying Préachán beneath a stand of beeches, Bevyn got down on his belly and scooted to the rim of a hill overlooking the center of town. He was being careful to block his approach from those in the town, spreading a wavering mist around him that would make it impossible for the rogues to pick up on his presence.

Surveying the deserted streets, he saw nothing to alert him and wondered if the rogues were also cloaking themselves. There appeared to be no guard posted to keep watch, no movement from any of the windows to indicate anyone was watching. The church was boarded up and he knew that had to be hell for those inside for the day was

sultry, little wind blowing to cool the humid air. Spying the jail, he stared at it for a long time. Casting his senses to both buildings, he was a bit surprised that no one was speaking although everyone inside both places was alive and well. He could pick up on their heartbeats and was a bit concerned those beats were slower than they should be. Shifting his attention to the saloon, he heard the slap of what had to be cards hitting felt, but not one word from the mouths of the rogues.

He picked out the barn he figured the young men had been kept in, but in scanning it, he could not find a single female and especially not the body heat of an Amazeen, which was nearly as high as his own and the rogues. He strained to hear even a single heartbeat but there was none inside the barn. The situation was getting stranger by the minute.

The Reaper knew he could not contact the Shadowlords, for to do so would alert the rogues to his presence. It took a great deal of energy to cloak himself and his thoughts so he tried to expend as little physical and mental agility as possible as he pushed to his feet and began skirting the rise, looking for an easy pathway down into the vale.

Careful to keep from disturbing even one pebble as he moved toward the town, Bevyn constantly swept his eyes back and forth over the town, but knew there was no way he could know if he was being watched from the air. He had no doubt the Amazeen had taken the young men up into a craft of some kind—most likely a Long Range Cruiser—and those men were lost to them at this point in time. If the bitches were on Terra to gather stock for their breeding farms on Amazeen and this was their first batch, they could be hovering up there waiting to snatch up more and that made the hair stir on the back of his neck. They could be watching him as he stealthily made his way toward the saloon.

Glancing skyward, he narrowed his eyes, but there was nothing but unrelieved blue above him, no cloud cover whatsoever. That didn't mean the craft wasn't there. It just meant it was far enough away that even his supernatural eyesight could not detect it.

Crouching low, feeling as though unfriendly eyes were boring into his back, he ran behind the saloon, pressing himself close to the building, listening intently for any movement inside. Once more he heard the near-silent slapping of cards to baize but nothing else, not even a single heartbeat, which told him the rogues were cloaking themselves as he was and that they were expecting him.

Easing his six-shooter from its holster, he crept around the side of the building, glancing down at his boots. The spurs would give him away on the boardwalk in front of the building the moment he stepped up on it. With a concentrated blink, he rid himself of the footwear, annoyed that he had forgotten to put on socks that morning but unwilling to expend another fragment of his energy to materialize a pair. He winced as a stone cut into his instep before he could step up on the boardwalk that ran the length of the buildings flanking the saloon.

Moving as quietly as a feather floating on the wind, the Reaper advanced slowly toward the saloon's large window. The base of it was set high enough to the floor that

he could bend over and pass beneath it without being seen from inside the shadowy confines of the room. He knew he had two choices—rush past the window while maintaining his body cloaking then burst through the batwing doors, taking aim at the rogues and hitting them between the eyes before flicking the *speal*, the laser whip, to shear off their heads, or crash through the window, taking a chance at cutting his own head off with shards from the glass.

“Batwings,” he mumbled, and sped past the window in a blur of speed, diving under the batwings as bullets flew over his head, rolling along the floor and coming up to shoot three times in rapid succession—fanning the hammer with the edge of his palm—and making neat black holes between the eyes of two of the rogues. The third bullet went wide of its target and he felt a piercing pain in his shoulder as the third rogue fired at him. Swiveling his gun toward the man standing by the bar, the Reaper’s fourth bullet hit the rogue in the heart but not before the bastard fired again, his next bullet catching Bevyn in the right bicep, making him drop his gun.

Scrambling to his feet, ignoring the pain in his right shoulder and arm, the Reaper drew his laser whip and took the third rogue’s head off cleanly, grinning at the surprised look on the dead man’s face. It took less time to flick the laser to the necks of the other rogues, whose parasites were trying in vain to heal their hosts, and dispatch them, a bit more time to wait for the hellions to wriggle out in order to turn them into crispy ash on the barroom floor.

“Three down,” Bevyn sent to the Citadel just as he felt the strange humming around him and the pull against his flesh.

“They are trying to draw you up!” Lord Kheelan’s voice shrilled in Bevyn’s ear.

There was no need for him to ask who. It was the Amazeen and they had latched on to him in an attempt to pluck him from Terra. The pull against his flesh was sharp but he felt as though his feet were nailed to the floor. It was an exacting sensation and it hurt like hell.

“Morrigunia!” he cried out in agony, feeling as though he were being pulled apart at the seams.

The Amazeens’ ploy might well have worked had not the Triune Goddess interceded. Her fury vast as She suddenly appeared in the saloon, green eyes blazing with rage, long red hair floating like seaweed on a turbulent tide.

“No one fucks with my Reaper!” the goddess shrieked. She lifted Her arm, fingers splayed wide, and inscribed a large circle in the air and then crushed Her fingers together as though snatching something from the air, jerking Her arm downward quickly.

Under Bevyn’s feet, the floor of the saloon shook as a loud explosion rent the early afternoon sky and he felt whatever had been drawing him cease. He dropped to all fours, panting with the brutal pain that had been squeezing his insides, elongating them like taffy at a pull. Falling over to his side, he drew his legs up in a fetal position and lay there as the debilitating pain slowly faded from his muscles and joints.

"The gods-be-damned!" Morigunia hissed. "There is another!"

The entire room trembled as though it were about to collapse. As suddenly as She had appeared, the goddess disappeared in a flash of rust-colored dust, a violent wind whipping through the wind, smelling like rotting vegetation.

Rolling onto his back to draw ragged breaths into his lungs, Bevyn stared up at the ceiling and the violently swaying oil lights that cast flickering shadows across the walls as the building settled down. The pain in his arm was bad since his parasite could not close the wounds for healing until the foreign substances—the lead bullets—had been removed. He was bleeding badly as he pushed himself up to lean against a wooden column, fumbling with his left hand for his blade. It was going to be a bitch digging the bullets out of his shoulder and bicep but it had to be done before he could heal. He was trying to do just that when the goddess returned, Her beautiful face hard and set.

"There is a Blackwind out there," She told him, coming to hunker down before him. "I hate Blackwinds more than I hate Nightwinds."

Though it had been many years since he had been face-to-face with the Triune Goddess, he was still as unnerved by Her beauty and the savage glint in Her green orbs as he had been on the day She had made him. His hand was still on the blade though it was deep inside his shoulder.

"How goes it, my Bevyn?" She asked, taking the blade from his grasp.

"Not as well as I would have liked for it to, *mo Regina*," he admitted, trying not to look into Her lovely face.

With efficiency, She popped the bullets from his flesh with the tip of the dagger, snorting at his indrawn breath as the pain hit him, and then flipped the blade over, extending it to him hilt first.

"You are not the most careful of my Reapers or the smartest," She chastised him, Her ivory face with its strange dusting of freckles cocked to one side. "Perhaps now that you have something to live for you will be more careful in the future."

He met Her glowing eyes. "You sent Lea to me," he said softly. "My heartfelt thanks, *mo Regina*."

Her smile was brief but dazzling as She got to Her feet. "Take care of your toy, Bevyn Coure. You'll not get another."

With that, She was gone in a burst of swirling multi-colored flecks of light that were so bright they hurt his eyes, and he had to turn his head away and close his eyes to keep from being blinded by the intensity.

Stumbling to his feet, he waved away his torn black silk shirt to better view the damage done. Already the wounds were closing, only the red edges showing harshly against his tanned skin. Going behind the bar, he found a clean rag and a pitcher of water to wash away the spilled blood before fashioning a new shirt for himself.

Surprised he felt so weak, he poured a shot of whiskey, knocked it back then another before heading out of the saloon to make his way to the church. The sweltering

heat had to have taken a toll on the women imprisoned there and he was anxious to set them free. As soon as he'd pulled the two boards crisscrossing the set of double doors, the women nearly ran him over trying to get out in the cooler air. As soon as they saw him, they staggered back, clustering in a little group as though they were as afraid of him as they were of the ones who had trapped them.

Bevyn pointed at one of the women. "You, go set your menfolk in the jail free," he said, and saw the younger ones turn their heads toward the barn at the far end of the street. He did not have the heart to tell them he knew their loved ones were dead. He just turned away, heading back to his horse.

"Milord?"

Surprised one of them would dare speak to him, he turned to find a middle-aged woman stepping away from the little clump of women. Her lips were trembling, her hand out to stay his departure.

"Aye, wench?" he asked.

"The young men?" she pressed, and tears entered her eyes. "My sons?"

The truth must have been stamped on his face for he watched the woman lower her head into her hands, heard her first faint sob as her shoulders bowed beneath the weight of her sorrow.

"It..." he began, and was keenly aware of every eye on him. "It was quick," he finished. "They did not suffer."

"The explosion?" another asked.

Bevyn nodded and winced as the wailing began. He watched women fall to their knees with their grief. There was nothing he could do for them and as their older menfolk and young sons began running toward them, he headed for his mount tied up on the hill.

As he reached Préachán and untied the steed's reins, he felt eyes on him again. Malevolent eyes. Angry eyes. Eyes that meant him harm. Though he scanned the immediate area, he saw nothing, detected nothing, but nevertheless he knew something was there.

That something had a name.

It was a Blackwind, a warrior woman trained for tracking and exacting revenge on Reapers.

Chapter Six

Penthesilea Aracnea squatted by the creek and scooped water into her strong, capable hands. She drank her fill then wiped her forearm over her lips, studying her surroundings for the marauding goddess from whom Penthe had managed to barely escape. Beside her, the glass head of her Dóigra caught an errant beam of sunlight and the grass around the star-shaped bulb shriveled, burnt to ash in seconds.

No one fucks with my Reaper! she had heard the fire-haired termagant bluster before destroying the LRC that had brought them to Terra.

"Aye, but that particular Reaper belonged to the Aracnea clan before You ever laid Your hands to him," Penthe hissed.

Having sworn vengeance for her Amazeen ancestor Kennocha Tramont, the Blackwind sat down on the creek bank and stared into the sparkling water. It had taken her thirty years to find Bevyn Coure and now that she had, she intended to see he was returned to Críonna and the fate reserved for him. How she would do that now that her transportation had been destroyed was a major problem.

"Greedy bitch," Penthe growled, thinking of the captain of the *Ostria*. Had it not been for greed, things would not have gotten so out of hand. But the Amazeen captain had taken a look at the fine, strapping lads of Lawler and had decided they would make good breeding stock on Amazeen. Despite Penthe's objections, Captain Antimache had ordered the young ones taken.

"There are hundreds of such prime specimens of maleness scattered across Terra," Antimache had argued. "We can take them easily and come back for more!"

"You won't be coming back from the arms of the Gatherer," Penthe said with an ugly snort. "Nor will those prime specimens of maleness."

Angry that her transportation home had been demolished and with no guarantee another LRC would be forthcoming, Penthe kicked at the sand beneath her bootheel. Her anger was such that she felt the blood pounding in her temples. She had not only the covetous Antimache to thank for her situation but the bastard Reaper as well.

Thinking of Bevyn Coure, Penthe stretched out on her back, her knees drawn up as she glared at the lacy leaves canopied over her head. For days she'd been tracking the Reaper—keeping close watch on him, waiting for just the right moment to throw a net around his handsome head and draw him up. Had Antimache not overruled her, Coure might well be on the LRC at that very moment, though Penthe had not counted on the interference of the Triune Goddess in the matter.

"But you should have," she chastised herself. "You should have known She'd not give him up easily."

Realizing she might well be stuck on this backward world for the remainder of her days, Penthe cursed fluently and sat up, slapping her wrists atop her drawn-up knees and glaring across the bucolic creek. Her vow to bring Coure back for punishment might never be fulfilled, but she would take pleasure in hunting him, causing him as much irritation and grief as she could.

"I want him hurt," Kennocha had said on her deathbed. "I want him completely destroyed."

Penthe had read the bitter memories boiling inside her great-great-grandmother's head as the old woman lay there wheezing for breath. She had seen the handsome young priest as the flames had swept upward to devour him. She had witnessed the unbelievable rescue that had plucked Bevyn Coure from his just reward and had commiserated with Great-Great-Grandmere Kennocha that justice had not been served that day. Truth be told though, she couldn't have cared less about the alleged injustices Coure had supposedly perpetrated against her kinswoman. She wondered at Kennocha's state of mind as the old woman continued to rail so vehemently against the priest.

"Pain of the highest order," Kennocha had decreed. "Give him pain he will feel throughout eternity!"

Such things came when a woman allowed herself to become obsessed with a male, Penthe scoffed, knowing that would never happen to her. She herself had no use for what she considered the weaker sex. Men were born to be used until they were used up and then discarded for a newer, better model. They were not meant to be kept and cosseted as the priest had been at Rathlin. Nothing good ever came from sheltering the dirty little beasts from life's travails. To her way of thinking, Great-Great-Grandmere Kennocha had gotten what was due her but family obligations were more important than personal feelings, and she would do what was needed to avenge her great-great-grandmere.

Not to mention, Penthe thought as she got to her feet, she had her own personal bone to pick now with Bevyn Coure. Because of him, she was trapped, whether permanently or temporarily, on Terra and he would be made to pay for his part in the problem. Dusting off the seat of her jumpsuit, she bent over to retrieve her Dóigra, thinking of the one that had been taken from Asteria Kleite, the Amazeen who had accompanied Penthe to Terra to retrieve Coure.

Asteria and Penthe had been more than partners. They had been lovers for over eight years and Penthe intensely mourned her loss. The rabid rogue who had brought Asteria down had savagely bitten her, tearing Asteria apart. The *balgair* had died for his sins but Penthe had been so devastated at Asteria's death, she had not thought to retrieve Asteria's weapon and had been careless in not making sure Roy English could not rise from his rabid state to kill more women. When she had gone back to the shack where Asteria had met her end, dreading to see once again the atrocities English had committed, Penthe had found it burned to the ground, the Dóigra destroyed along with the deplorable contents of the shack. A scan of the area had brought Coure's scent. She

knew he had finished what she should have seen ended and that irritated her beyond acceptance.

It was just one more thing for which Coure would be made to answer when Penthe had him in her clutches.

* * * * *

Leaving Lawler behind, Bevyn drummed his heels against Préachán's flanks, urging the steed into an easy gallop. He rode with his right hand on the reins, his left braced on his thigh, his uneasy thoughts drifting back to the Blackwind. He knew he'd have to go after the Amazeen, take her down, but for now there was nothing he wanted more than to find his woman and hold her, lose himself in her sweet scent.

The memory of what he had found in the shack had come back to haunt him and was sitting heavily on his soul. He knew it always would for such things were an abomination—once seen, never forgotten. He suspected the Triune Goddess had clouded his mind for a few hours of brief relief but now the sights were sitting in his mind's eye like a canker. That too would be Her doing.

"Lord Kheelan?" he asked, reaching out to the High Lord.

"*We are here,*" the Shadowlord replied.

"Were there any survivors of the crash?"

There was a long pause. "*No, Lord Bevyn. Unfortunately not.*"

"How many men died?"

"*Fifteen.*"

Bevyn closed his eyes. He wanted to ask how many had been married, how many had fathered children, but a part of him didn't want the burden of the knowledge weighing down on his shoulders.

There were no more words from the Citadel. He knew the Shadowlords would be discussing him still again and another tick would go on the healer's chart—one more thing about which to counsel Coure when he came to the bastion.

He reached up to take off his hat, arched the sweat from his brow and then pulled the hat back on low over his forehead to shield his eyes from the sinking sun. Once more his head was throbbing with pain. He needed the cool strength of his woman.

His woman, he thought as Préachán dug its hooves into a hill and climbed effortlessly. It felt good to know there was someone so special waiting for him, someone who wanted him, who loved him. Her bright smile, her open arms were like a beacon toward which he traveled.

Another smiling face flashed across his memory and he frowned.

"*Kennocha,*" he whispered fiercely.

Her false smile and clinging arms were a curse from which he had fled, only to find himself caught in an unbreakable trap.

The past rose up before him to blot out the last of the sun's dying rays, casting him into a bleak landscape he had never wanted to travel again...

"You will go to Rathlin," Archdeacon Janus had decreed. "There you will assume the position as junior prelate for that district."

There had been much talk of Rathlin at the monastery and the talk had not been good. Over the years, the keep there had gone through priests like a sharp blade through hot butter. Those assigned had simply vanished, never to be heard from again. Where they had gone was the stuff of wild speculation—much of it centered on the mistress of Rathlin, the Countess Kennocha Tramont.

"They say she is a witch," the brothers whispered among themselves.

"The count holds his lady-wife hostage at Rathlin," Archdeacon Janus had explained to Bevyn. "They say he captured her in battle and keeps her chained on the third floor of the keep."

"Is that not wrong, Your Grace?" Bevyn had asked.

"What a man does with his lawful wife is no concern of the Brotherhood," the archdeacon had replied. "Our only mission is to tend his mortal soul. If he is true to the Teaching—and Count Culbert is—that is all that matters in this life. What do we care what he does with his woman?"

Completely unaware of what a man and woman did within the confines of their marriage, Bevyn had pushed aside any worries he might have pertaining to Count Tramont's lady-wife. It was the man and his knights whose souls would be the thrust of Bevyn's interest and attending.

But upon arriving at Rathlin Keep, Bevyn had found great turmoil and strife. Tramont was at war with a neighboring duchy and the lord of the keep had been sorely wounded in the fray, lying on his death bed with wounds too numerous to heal. His body as white as the sheet upon which he lay, he had weakly grasped the front of Bevyn's robe and drawn the young man nose to nose with him.

"She set this ill-begotten war into motion," the dying man whispered, his voice hoarse, blood gurgling in his throat. "She is the cause of it."

Culbert Tramont had taken one last wheezing breath and had lain still, his eyes wide, mouth ajar, drawing flies to the mortal cuts and holes that peppered his corpse.

Every knight sworn to Rathlin had been slain in the battle, their squires as well. Only the foot soldiers who had turned and fled the melee escaped the hacking deaths that had turned the fields around Rathlin crimson.

With no captain of the guard left to countermand the order, the countess had demanded she be set free from the imprisonment her husband had forced upon her. The household staff had responded quickly, afraid of what the countess would do if she were ignored.

"She's a witch!" the chief steward had told Bevyn in a shaky voice. "A daughter of the Abyss!"

Upon meeting the woman who was now mistress of Rathlin, Bevyn had seen the fires of hell gleaming in Kennocha Tramont's gaze. He had felt a shiver travel down his spine the moment her hand had touched his cheek, her pale pink tongue sweeping across a thin upper lip as she assessed him.

Despite his vehement protests, she had put her hands to his arms, his shoulders, his thighs, had ordered him stripped naked, staring avidly at his utter humiliation as he was held steady for her perusal.

"Good legs," she'd remarked, walking around him. "A goodly sized staff."

"Milady!" he had gasped, his face flame-red.

"You'll do," she'd declared, and turned her back on him, going back to the chamber in which her husband's still body lay upon its death bier.

He would learn a few days later that she had taken a war ax and had chopped her dead mate into a hundred pieces, venting her rage upon him until his bedchamber was a sea of gore.

Held captive in the dungeon for over a week – as naked as the day on which he had been born – Bevyn had finally been brought before the countess and once more she had put her hands to him. This time it had been his staff she had wrapped her fingers around.

"Give yourself freely to me and I will let you live," she had told him. "Deny me and you will meet your doom in the bonfire."

Bevyn had reminded her he was a priest, a man of the cloth who had taken vows of poverty and chastity, but she had merely laughed at him.

"If you want to live, Bevyn Coure, you will give yourself to me and service me as I wish to be serviced. Unlike your fellow priests, you will be mine and not Cul's."

The whole of the tale would be told to Bevyn on the night before his torment began. Those who had come before him had been nothing more than playthings to the lord of the keep. Count Culbert had sodomized and tortured the men then murdered them to keep the news of his atrocities from reaching the ears of the Brotherhood. The dead were dropped into the moat to feed the denizens that slithered and snapped there, all traces of their existence wiped away in the scaled bellies of the crocs.

"You will meet the same fate, boy, unless you give her what she wants."

"I am a man of the cloth," he had protested. "I can not –"

"Make her yours," the jailer had cut in. "Please her and you might live a day or so longer."

"I will not do that," Bevyn had sworn.

"Then you'll die a terrible death," his jailer had declared.

For weeks on end he had been tortured, and at the end of each session had come the question – "Will you give yourself to me now?"

The answer had always been the same no matter how much had been inflicted upon his body, how much blood he had shed. He would not forsake his vows to satisfy the lust of a crazed woman, for it had become a test of wills – his and hers.

She had taken delight in pouring and rubbing salt into his wounds. She had laughed at his screams of pain, his tears and his trembling body. She had enjoyed watching him barely able to crawl from the rack to his pallet where he would lie senseless until the next session began.

“And now, Bevyn?” she had whispered in her silky voice on the morning he had been condemned to die. She caressed his genitals, stroking him suggestively. “Will you forego the agony of the flames and take my body unto yours?”

“No, milady, I can not,” he had forced himself to say, and thought for just a moment he saw respect in her insane gaze before she pronounced his death sentence.

“Take him out and burn the little bastard! I will show him who is mistress of his useless life!”

Too weak to speak, in too much pain to do anything save draw shallow breaths in and out of his lacerated chest, he had been taken to the courtyard to meet his fate. There he had been lashed to the column and Kennocha had come out to watch him die.

“But I didn’t stay dead, did I, milady?” he asked aloud.

Ahead of him was Orson and the sweet arms to which he would ride for as long as the goddess allowed him, and then in a sudden bright burst of awareness – reining in Préachán because that awareness hit him squarely between the eyes like a ton of brick – he realized that at last he had something, someone, to live for.

“Sweet, merciful Alel,” he whispered as tears gathered in his eyes.

He sat there trembling as that realization took hold of him, wrapping him in warmth he had never known, soothing him with a peacefulness he did not know could exist. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Lea.”

Her name on his lips was the sweetest sound, the most glorious feeling. He ached to see her, to hold her, to hear her gentle voice.

“My Lea,” he said, and a smile broke across his handsome face.

Putting heels to his mount, he raced down the hill and into town, striving not to whoop like a wild man as he drew his horse to a skidding stop and vaulted from the saddle, running up the little fieldstone walkway to Cornelia’s front porch, taking the four steps two at a time and snatching open the door.

“Lea?” he called out, and when he saw her at the top of the stairs, he grinned like an idiot.

“You’re home,” she said, hurrying down the steps.

"I am home!" he said. He opened his arms and she threw herself in them, laughing gaily as he swung her around, set her down for a moment then picked her up in his arms.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he headed for the door.

"We're going to Mable's where a man can show his woman he loves her," he said determinedly.

"All her rooms are taken," she said.

He paused at the door, swiveling her back and forth in his arms, his forehead puckered with agitation. "Where, Lea? *Where?*" he demanded.

"Oh for the love of Peterson! Take the girl upstairs, son," he heard Cornelia say from the parlor. "Just this once, mind you. You ain't gonna make a habit of it."

Practically taking the stairs two at a time, Bevyn didn't question their landlady's reprieve. He took his lady straight to his room, bumping the door open with his hip. He carried her to the bed, plopped her down, rushed back to shut the door and with a wave of his hand, eliminated the clothing Lea was trying desperately to remove as she sat up on his mattress.

"That is a wonderful talent, milord," she said with a gasp.

"You ain't seen nothing yet, wench," he told her, flying onto the bed and landing atop her.

"You goofy oaf!" she complained with an *oomph* of air escaping her laughing mouth.

His mouth slanted down on hers and his tongue thrust wickedly between her lips. His arms went under and around her, and he wedged his lower body between her legs, holding her so tightly she could barely breathe.

Lea loved the weight of her Reaper lying atop her. Her hands were clutching his hard biceps and that too was a glorious feeling that made her feel safe, protected and loved. His tongue was thrusting in and around hers, and those sweet, firm lips of his were making warm heat flow between her thighs.

"I love you," he whispered against her mouth. "With all my heart I love you!"

Bevyn's cock was stiff, the tip moist. It was wedged between them along her belly as he held her. When she slid her hand from his arm to run it between them and grasp that hard shaft, he drew in a quick, shuddering breath.

"Show me how much, milord," she said, her fingers wrapped around him.

He shifted so she could guide his cock into her. The sweet heat of her, the slick feel of her sheath enclosing him was the closest thing to heaven he knew he would ever experience. He slid into her moistness with his eyes closed tight, his breath held.

Though every instinct screamed at him to take her hard, to take her quickly, to carve a niche for himself within her, to master her with that fleshy tool, he held back and very slowly and with great care began to move gently inside her.

Lea sensed the shifting of his feelings from immediate gratification to loving restraint and she eased her arms around his shoulders, holding him closely to her.

"I love you, Bevyn Coure," she whispered in his ear, drawing his earlobe between her teeth, her tongue lightly plying the interior.

Bevyn shivered at that feeling and increased the depth of his penetration just a little, though he held himself in check, kept his body from crushing her as heavily as it had a moment before. He was bracing his body above her, his hands doubled into fists, his weight resting upon them.

In and out with slow, precise strokes that brought warm honey to coat his shaft. He felt as though he were sinking into the purest of pleasures and the ache that he was experiencing in his rod was so intense, so powerful, sweat was popping out all over his body along with the gooseflesh.

Lea lightly dug her nails into his back to speed up his thrusts. She was aching for him to ride her, to grind against her and she lifted her hips in invitation.

"Slowly, wench," he said through clenched teeth. "I want it to last."

She smiled against his neck, her lips trailing along his salty flesh. "I am here for the duration, milord," she replied. "Make it last as long as you wish."

She was his, he thought as he felt her words drive straight to his libido. She was entirely his – no one else's – and she had given herself completely to him. It was such an exhilarating feeling he experienced at that moment, he thought he might well be able to do anything he set his mind to.

But the moment she lapped at the vein pumping so furiously in his neck, the exact instant that warm, wetness stroked over his skin, he could not restrain the wild emotion that reached out to grip him. His entire body itched to thrust into her. His cock hardened to the point it was acutely painful and he had no choice but to pump into her with strong, sure strokes that had the bed beneath them rocking.

"I've got to remember that," Lea mumbled to herself for the next time she wanted to spur her Reaper on.

She brought her legs up and locked them together behind his waist. Her arms held him surely – a willing captive to her sweet scent and honeyed flesh. Her fingernails dug a bit deeper into the flesh of his back.

"Ahh, Lea!" he groaned with deep satisfaction, his speed increasing, his thrusts coming hard now and deep.

In the parlor, Cornelia glanced up at the ceiling where the chandelier was swaying to the motion of what was happening in the smaller of her two spare bedrooms. There was a soft bumping sound, muffled grunts, a soft little whimper. The black woman's chubby face broke into a wide grin and she chuckled lightly as she snapped the two halves of the newspaper spread in her hands and continued reading.

* * * * *

Penthe had followed the Reaper on foot, running along as swiftly, tirelessly and professionally as she had trained on her world to perform. Though he was well ahead of her, she kept his scent in her nostrils and followed the trail unerringly. It helped that she already knew where he was going—had followed him there before—so when he outdistanced her, it didn't matter.

The town was silent when at last she entered it. She spied her target coming out of the stable then striding quickly to the dark one's house. A ripe moon had burst forth and was hovering golden red on the eastern horizon, lighting a path for him. There was no wind by which he could catch her scent, but from the way he walked—barefoot and shirtless—she knew his mind was elsewhere and not on her. As she made her way to the dark woman's house and looked up at the window behind which she knew the Reaper would be.

She sniffed the air and the odor of spent sex came to her from the open window and her lips twisted. Kennocha was no doubt rolling over in her grave knowing the priest had freely given a woman what her ancestor had demanded of him so long ago.

"No longer pure, are you, Reaper?" Penthe snarled, her fingernails digging into her palms. "You've taken a mate."

Thoughts of the pale woman she had seen walking beside Coure earlier that day flitted over Penthe's mind. She wasn't much, the Blackwind surmised. Short, her muscles flaccid, her abilities worthless—the human female was useless in Penthe's mind. She would be no match at all for Penthe's superior warrior's skills should it come to hand-to-hand combat.

Not that the human female would fight for the Reaper. To even contemplate such a thing was ridiculous and Penthe grimaced. A frail being like the one called Lea would not pose a challenge and was to be left alone. It would be punishment enough for the inadequate being to lose the Reaper to Penthe's Dóigra. The ineffectual creature was to be pitied not harmed. She was—when all was said and done—a female and deserving of some manner of protection, the Blackwind reasoned. It was not her fault she had succumbed to the dangerous black arts of the Reaper.

Glancing around her, Penthe decided to bed down in the stables with the mounts. She needed shelter and had no compunction about sharing space with her equine brethren. Stealthily, she made her way to the livery and slipped quickly inside, having no trouble finding the Reaper's mount among those stabled. She entered Préachán's stall and ran an expert hand over the black horse's withers.

"You are a worthy steed," she said, hugging the great head to her breast. "I shall claim you when I have taken the Reaper's head."

* * * * *

After using a washrag to bathe his dirty feet, Bevyn waved away his pants and climbed back into bed with his woman.

"All settled for the night?" she asked him.

"I would have felt terrible if I had left him tied to Cornelia's fence," Bevyn said of his horse. "I gave him some hay and a bucket of water." He chuckled. "If I know Préachán, he'll have overturned the bucket by now."

"What does his name mean?" she asked, snuggling up to her Reaper.

"It is an old Chalean word meaning 'crow'," he replied, and reached up to touch the tattoo on the side of his face. "It is also the name of my clan tat."

"Milord?" she asked softly. "Why is it you have the Coure marking? Did you learn who your father was?"

She didn't think he was going to answer her. His arm had tightened around her and she could hear him grinding his teeth. She decided if he did not wish to tell her, she would not ask again for obviously it was something that disturbed him.

"It was Morigunia who told me who my father was," he said at last, and his body was as stiff as a board beside her. "It was She who had both tattoos put on me. Had it not been by Her hand, neither would have stayed upon my flesh, for anything that was not there before I Transitioned would heal."

"Will you tell me of your father?" she asked.

Again he was silent for a long time. "I never met him so I only have second-hand information," he said at last. "He was dead long before I was born. I was told he died in battle but Morigunia did not believe him worthy of resurrecting."

He pushed himself up in the bed, leaning back against the headboard, pulling her up to sit beside him. She saw him look down at her and through the faint glow of the moonlight shimmering through the window, his face was expressionless.

"I will tell you this but once and then we will never speak of it again," he stated.

"All right," she said, holding his dark gaze for a moment before he turned his head and appeared to be staring across the silent room.

"There are twelve primary clans that are dear to the goddess's heart," he said. "Clans She reckons worthy of Her protection and help. She safeguards those clans, makes sure they survive from one generation to the next, one world to the next. They are not all in one universe but spread out in what She calls the megaverse. She calls them WindWorlds. From those twelve clans, She chooses those She will make Reapers and those whom She will make Shadowlords. Some clans have both Reapers and Shadowlords and some have only one or the other.

"Ben-Alkazar, Belvoir and Tarnes are always Shadowlords while Gehdrin, Kiel, Cree, Tohre, Kullen, Belial and Coure are always Reapers. The Jaborn and Sorn clans can have both. There are other clans She has given Reaper powers but they are not as important to Her as what She calls the *Dháréag*, the Twelve."

"*Dháréag*," Lea repeated.

"It is not spoken of, wench," he warned her. "That is to be kept between us."

She nodded. "I understand, milord."

"I don't know how my fellow Reapers met their fate, if they knew they were of the *Dháréag* before or after their Transitions by having the tribal tat placed on their faces. For all I know, I may be the only one who was marked during my rebirth. What I know of the man who sired me was that he was a prick of the highest order and I was a product of rape." He rubbed his fingers over his right eye. "When I asked the goddess why my mother did not attempt to expel me from her womb, She said She would not have permitted that to happen. She said She knew I was the one She would want from the moment of my conception and that She had kept me safe."

"So it was not truly by chance the priests came by where you had been abandoned," Lea said.

"I guess not," he said, not having thought of that.

"Were they good to you, milord?" she asked.

"The priests?" He shook his head. "No, wench, they were not. The Brotherhood of the Domination is not known for being good to its members. Pain and humiliation is beaten into the novices in order to make them strong or to break them. Either way, the brothers gain."

"What did...?"

"I won't speak of my time at the monastery," he said. "Not now and not ever. Let it suffice to say I was glad to have been sent from there to Rathlin until I found myself in hands nearly as evil as the brothers."

He was silent for a long time after that. Lea said nothing, giving him the time he needed to come to terms with whatever memories their talk had dredged up for him. When at last his body relaxed and his desperate hold upon her eased, he placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

"I am grateful I have you, sweeting," he said. "That is all that matters to me."

"A lot was done on the house today," she said, her palm flat on his chest, feeling his stalwart heart beating strongly against it. "I think you'll be pleased."

"It can't be finished quickly enough for me," he said. "I like sleeping beside you and if our taskmistress won't allow it beneath her roof, I'd just as soon move back over to Mable's until our place is finished."

Lea tucked her lower lip between her teeth, wondering why he had not mentioned the surest way to remedy Cornelia's restriction. Perhaps, she thought, he did not want to tie himself down to her with a Joining.

"It isn't that," he said, easily reading her mind.

She craned her neck to look up at him. "Can I ask why then?"

"Two reasons," he said. "One, I'm already in deep enough trouble with the High Council for having taken you to mate without first garnering their permission."

"Bevyn!" she gasped. "You didn't tell me that!"

He shrugged. "It's not all that bad. The punishment should be miniscule but—"

"Punishment?" she echoed. "What are you talking about? What kind of punishment?"

The Reaper sighed. "Sweeting, don't concern yourself about it," he said. "It will be negligible. Trust me."

"Bevyn..." she said, her eyes clouding with fear.

"I'll no doubt spend a week in one of the containment cells," he said. "Solitary confinement. That's all it means."

"No pain?" she asked.

"No pain," he lied, knowing full well that week would be spent without tenses or sustenance. It would be a minor hell but well worth it in his estimation.

If he was allowed to keep her.

He refused to consider otherwise.

"You promise?" she whispered.

"They are not going to torture me, wench," he said with a laugh. "Just punish me for acting rashly. Now had I compounded the issue with taking you to legal wife or transferring one of my hellions to—"

"No!" Lea snapped, pushing away from him. "That you will never do!"

"I have said I wouldn't and I won't," he said. He soothed her, running his hand down her arm.

"Swear to me, Bevyn," she said, and he realized she was trembling.

"I will not give you one of my fledglings, sweeting," he vowed. "On my love for you, I swear I will never do that."

And without doing so, he knew he could never legally join with her. He would not take the chance of leaving her his widow without the protection of a parasite to keep her safe. A leman, a mistress, was one thing. A wife was something entirely different in his world.

Lea calmed and returned her cheek to his shoulder—twirling a strand of his chest hair around and around her index finger. "Just the thought of having one of those beasties inside me scares me to death, milord," she mumbled.

"I know," he acknowledged.

Chapter Seven

Hiding in the stable loft, Penthe watched the men going to work on the shell of a house being built nearby. She crunched a couple of apples she'd found in a bin for her breakfast, wishing she had a cool dipper of water to wash it down with.

The Reaper had been up at dawn—his paltry human female alongside him—and Penthe could not help but admire the pure male beauty that was his as he began work. He had come out without his shirt and in denim jeans instead of the black leather that was part of his uniform. She thought his ass fit the jeans exceedingly well, the material lovingly cupping the strong muscles. Sweat was already glistening down his heavily muscled chest and she wondered what it would taste like to run her tongue over that trickling stream.

Though she knew he was off limits as far as breeding material went—Reapers only begat males since their tainted seed would not allow them to create females—she regaled herself with fantasies of chaining him to a breeding bed and raping his magnificent body over and over again, drawing that very substantial seed from a cock she knew would be just as glorious as the rest of him. Oh the sons they would make!

But that was indeed a fantasy—and a forbidden one at that—for to bring more Reaper males into the world would be a sin against her Amazeen heritage.

While it seemed as if the entire town had gathered around the house Penthe overheard was going to be the Reaper's abode, the Blackwind climbed down from the loft and went in search of something more substantial to fill her belly. She managed to gather quite an assortment of foodstuffs in a basket—along with several bottles of water—before slinking back to her hiding place, stretching out to watch the building construction.

Off to one side, the human female was sitting with several like herself but Penthe noticed her gaze was never far from the Reaper. The one called Lea was giving off a scent the Blackwind could not miss and apparently it did not miss Coure's attention either for he kept sending the female heated looks that no one else seemed to catch.

"She is your world, isn't she, Reaper?" Penthe quietly questioned as she swung her attention back and forth between Coure and Lea. "I wonder what you'd do if you lost her?"

That thought bore some speculation, Penthe thought as she munched happily on a pie she had swiped from some female's kitchen window where it had been left to cool.

* * * * *

Sitting on a spread quilt beside her man, Lea slathered mustard on still another two slices of bread as her Reaper lounged beside her on his side, one leg crooked at the knee, his bare foot planted on the quilt. His head was braced on one fist as he happily devoured the sixth sandwich she'd made him while impatiently awaiting the seventh.

"You realize this is the entire loaf of bread I brought, don't you?" she asked him as she slapped a big wedge of ham and another of sharp cheese between the bread slices.

"I'm a growing boy," he muttered, popping the last of his sandwich into his mouth and holding out his hand for the next one.

"You're going to be an obese man if you keep eating like this," she warned as he took a massive bite out of the fresh sandwich, licking away a dollop of mustard that oozed to the side of his mouth.

"Reaper metabolisms are different," he said around the glob of food in his mouth. "We require a lot of energy to maintain."

"Uh-huh," Lea agreed. She cut a small piece of chocolate cake for him, careful of how much sugar she was going to allow him.

He picked up his fork and shoveled several loads of potato salad into his mouth, gobbling the food as though he were a starved man and someone would snatch away his nourishment before he could eat it.

"It's a wonder you don't get indigestion," Lea told him.

"Won't happen," he said, munching away. He eyed the cake. "Is that all I get?"

"I see celery and carrot sticks, radishes, tomatoes and green onions still on your plate," she said. "If you eat all that..."

"Rabbit food," he called it, "and aye, I will eat it."

"Then you can have the cake," she said.

"But that's such a small piece," he complained. "There's not that much sugar..."

She just arched a brow at him.

"Oh all right," he mumbled, knowing where her mind had gone.

Sheriff Gilchrist came walking over to inform their Reaper that word had come from Clewiston that the train would be leaving in three days for the Citadel.

"I booked you and Lea passage as you asked, milord," Buford told him.

"My thanks," Bevyn said. "You eaten?"

"Had a bite or two," Buford said, "although I could go for some of that cake."

Bevyn frowned. He wanted the cake entirely to himself but Lea was already cutting a piece—and a gods-be-damned *big* piece at that!—for the sheriff.

"Much obliged, Lea," the sheriff said, taking a seat on their quilt.

Bevyn glared at the older man as Buford inhaled the creamy chocolate confection and held his plate out for more at Lea's offering.

"I don't mind if I do," Buford said. "That's right good cake."

Crunching a stalk of celery, Bevyn deliberately tore his stare from that second helping of cake and caught a glimmer of movement in the stable loft. Though he stared long and hard at the opening door, nothing else stirred.

"What do you see, milord?" Buford asked, glancing that way.

"The door's open on the loft," Bevyn said. "Must have been the wind swinging it."

"Want me to go check?"

"Nah," Bevyn said. "It's all right."

Now and again for the rest of the day, he would turn his gaze to the loft, but nothing else moved up there.

Penthe had scooted back when the Reaper's gaze shifted to the loft. She knew she'd been lax in giving herself away and was careful now to keep well out of sight.

Lying down, she decided to take a nap. Heat was shifting through the stable and wafting up from the hay in the stable below and she was sweating profusely. She'd consumed all her water and was thirsty for more but didn't want to risk being seen or heard climbing back down the ladder since the stableman and his helper had been in and out several times already.

Instead she thought of her trip on the *Ostria*, the Long Range Cruiser that had brought Asteria and her to Terra.

She missed her lover terribly but their relationship had just about run its course. Asteria had been flirting outrageously with one of the yeomen on the LRC so it was but a matter of time before she and Penthe had parted company.

Sighing deeply, Penthe's thoughts went to Captain Antimache and Lieutenant Myrine who had joined her in searching for Asteria's attacker. When they had come across the three rogues who were also hunting Roy English, there had been one helluva fight—one in which neither the three *balgairs* nor the three Amazeen had come out the victors. It had taken them all several days to recuperate from the vicious brawl.

"Join up with us and we'll help you find the Reaper," Eton Reece, the leader of the rogues, had suggested. "Six to one is good odds. He won't get away."

At the time, Antimache had thought it a good notion and though she did not outrank Penthe, she was in charge of the expedition. Her fellow Amazeens were angered at the gruesome death dealt to Artesia, and seeing the Reaper pay for a rogue's brutality seemed like a fair exchange.

It hadn't been clear why Reece, Bartlett and Dempsey had been looking for English, but the three rogues definitely had murder in their minds when they found him. Perhaps it was because English had come down with rabies and was a danger to everyone and everything around him, or it might have had something to do with the carnage the *balgair* had left behind in his rundown shack.

"By the gods!" Reece had exclaimed as he took in the slaughtered nuns dangling from the walls. "This is bad. This is really bad!"

But it had been the Reaper who had destroyed the evidence of English's perfidy and for that Penthe bore him a begrudging amount of respect. Had she not been engaged in the third day of mourning for Asteria, she would have come out from the place she'd been hiding to attack the Reaper, but the dictates of her religion had prohibited her the use of her weapons during the *Pentheo*, the triad of mourning days.

Antimache and Myrine had gone on with the three *balgairs* to Lawler while Penthe had stayed behind to bury her dead and say the prayers for Artesia's soul. Her only regret was that in her grief at losing her lover, she had failed to bury Artesia's *Dóigra* with her in the grave.

She hadn't been there when the *balgairs* had bought it at Coure's hands, or when Antimache and Myrine had taken the captured breeding stock up into the *Ostria*. If she had, she would be flying free among the shades as were the captain and lieutenant—or roasting alongside them in the Abyss.

She supposed she had Coure to thank for not having met her fate in the barn.

A deep frown shifted over Penthe's face. She tested what she was feeling at that moment as one would a decayed tooth—pushing at it, probing the sensation—and realized she no longer bore any ill will toward the Reaper for the destruction of the ship. He had not caused it. The Triune Goddess had and why?

"Because they tried to snatch Her precious Reaper," Penthe reasoned.

Okay, she thought as she mulled that one over. She didn't fault the Reaper for the destruction of the ship so she couldn't blame him for the possibility of remaining on this stupid world. Neither was his fault. But there was still the matter of avenging her ancestor's vendetta against Coure. But then, she realized, there was a problem with that as well.

"The man was a priest," Artesia had commented. "He had taken a vow your great-great-grandmere bid him break. Was there honor in that?"

Her lover's question had precipitated a violent argument that had lasted for days with Artesia reminding her that Coure had not been a male captured during a skirmish or even during a raid. He had been assigned as a priest to Rathlin and had not even been on Amazeen soil when Kennocha Tramont had him imprisoned for denying her.

"Think on what you have agreed to do, Penthesilea," Artesia had declared. "You are taking up a vengeance no other warriorress has agreed to in all the years since your great-great-grandmere declared the *Edikeō*, the Vengeance, because they knew there was no honor in it. Why would you? And why now?"

Penthe had her reasons and it was not so much that she had wanted to perform the *Antapodidōmi*, the Pay Back, by taking on the mantle of a Blackwind but that she wanted to leave Amazeen, to soar past the anomaly of the Carbondale Gate—that section they called The Sinisters—and journey into the vast unknown of the megaverse in search of...

"Adventure," Penthe whispered, disgusted with herself. She sat up and ran a distracted hand through her thick brown hair. "Adventure and glory at bringing home a Reaper."

But would her sisters be happy that she had taken on something none of them had been willing to do? Or that she had brought home to them a Reaper who—by rights—had done them no harm whatsoever? It was not as though he were their enemy, had caused them the first trickle of trouble. He had not. As far as the elders knew, the only bad thing Bevyn Coure had ever done was steal an apple from one of his instructors because the boy had not eaten in seven days.

Penthe turned her head and looked at the apple cores she had casually tossed into the corner of the loft. Had she not stolen to fill her belly? Was that not her only crime so far on this gods' forsaken, backward world? She had not gathered up the breeding stock nor locked the women in the church nor the older men and young boys in the jail. That had been carried out by Antimache and her lieutenant and the *balgairs*.

While all that was going on, she'd been lying in wait for the Reaper, ready to stun him with the *Dóigra* and carry him aboard the *Ostria*. She'd taken no part in the deaths of the Terran men.

Turning over, she crawled on her belly and carefully lifted her head to look out the loft. The sun was lower in the heavens but it was broiling hot outside. She saw the men toiling with the building, hammers busily rising and falling, saws rasping back and forth, tin panels being carried up to the rafters where the Reaper sat straddling a support, a clutch of nails between his lips.

By the gods, the man was prime as he sat there, his bare chest gleaming with sweat. He'd discarded his hat for a bandana that covered his thick dark hair and was tied at the nape of his neck. His muscles flexed and pulled as he hammered the tin into place. Though his fingers were sheathed in thick black gloves so he could handle those hot panels, Penthe could almost feel the strength in his hands, could see it bunching in his shoulders as his hammer rose and fell.

And then he was looking straight at her, their eyes locked.

"Oh shit," Penthe said, going completely still.

He had felt her presence and now he knew where she was. She stared at him unable to move as he poised there with his hammer at his shoulder, looking her way. Peripherally she saw other heads turn to see what had grabbed his attention and one man pointed to the loft.

Eyes were shielded as they turned her way. Everyone there was aware of her now. Though she could dematerialize into vapor as all Blackwinds could, where would she go?

Then Coure did something completely unexpected. He turned his eyes from her and drove the hammer hard against the nail.

"Come down, milady," the Reaper called out to her, "and join us."

For a long while Penthe lay there with her hands clutched into the hay, looking out the loft window, watching the townsfolk looking up at her, no one speaking, no one stirring save the Reaper who had moved to another section of the tin panel and was busily hammering away as though he had all the time in the world. His woman had stood up and was staring at Penthe with concern.

Her brows drawn together, the Blackwind considered dematerializing but her belly was rumbling and her thirst was such that her mouth was as dry as the dust flitting down from the stable's rafters. She licked her dry lips then sighed.

"Come down," she heard him whisper into her mind. "I mean you no harm."

"What if I mean you harm, Reaper?" she sent back to him, and was stunned when he laughed.

"I think I can handle you, wench," he chuckled.

Penthe smiled even though she sent him a mental snort. Getting up, dusting the hay shards from her jumpsuit, she slid down the loft's ladder—boots to either side of the ladder's uprights—not caring if she made any noise now. She strutted out of the stable, ignoring the stunned looks of the men and the uneasy looks of the women.

Lea was staring at the tall—she had to be at least seven feet—female with broad shoulders and short brown hair who came striding purposefully from the stable. The woman's long legs and wide upper body were encased in a type of one-piece garment that fit her like a glove. When she cast an insulting look over Lea before heading straight for Bevyn, that look made the hair stir on Lea's arms for the woman had a tribal tattoo that covered the whole of her right cheek.

Bevyn stopped hammering and sat there on the rafter with his wrist resting on his knee, his leg drawn up to ease the ache in his ass caused by the hard lumber upon which he'd been perched for over an hour. He stared down at the woman who came to stand directly beneath him with her hands on her hips. The dark green eyes looking back at him were filled with a vibrant emotion he could not ignore.

"I am Commander Penthesilea Aracnea," the woman stated. "I am the descendant of..."

"Kenocho Tramont," the Reaper interrupted.

"I came to take you back to Críonna," Penthe told him.

"You'll play hell doing it," Lea snapped.

Penthe flicked an amused look over the Terran woman and then returned her attention to the Reaper.

"I know little of Blackwinds," Bevyn said. "What is it they call what you have sworn to do?"

"*Antapodidōmi*," Penthe replied.

"Which means?" he probed.

"Pay Back."

"Pay Back for what?" Lea demanded.

"Her ancestor believes I wronged her," Bevyn said. He stood and walked the rafter like an acrobat, easily and without a moment's wobble. He climbed down the ladder and turned to the other workers. "That's it for today, men. I'm tuckered out."

"Wronged her how, milord?" Lea asked.

Everyone else was standing about as though they had been turned into statues. It was so quiet the proverbial pin could have been heard dropping.

"She wanted me and I refused her," he answered.

"I imagine many women wanted you," the Blackwind said softly.

"What is Kennocha to you?" he asked Penthe.

"She *was* my great-great-grandmere," Penthe replied.

"Ah, so the beastess is no more," Bevyn said, folding his arms over his chest. He was less than three feet away from the Amazeen Blackwind, his gaze steady on hers.

"She was laid to rest thirty years ago," Penthe declared. "It has taken me this long to find you."

Bevyn tilted his head to one side. "You can not be much older than that, wench. What are you? Thirty-four? Thirty-five?"

Penthe raised her chin. "Forty-four, but I thank you for the compliment, Reaper," she said with pride.

"You wear your years well, milady," he said. "So at the tender age of fourteen you declared yourself my enemy and began to seek me out."

"I would not say I declared you an enemy, Reaper, as it were. I simply wanted the pleasure of catching you and bringing you back. You must admit you would be quite the trophy." Observing his raised eyebrow, she shrugged. "Perhaps I was a bit hasty in seeking you out, milord," she replied, the closest she would ever come in her lifetime to asking anyone's apology.

They stared at one another for a long, long time without either blinking then the Reaper slowly smiled.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, unfolding his arms and walking past her, turning his back to her, though the men tensed and the women gasped, for the strange woman was holding a lethal-looking weapon in her hand as though it were a lance.

"I am starved, warrior," Penthe admitted.

"Then you'll be glad to know my lady is an excellent cook," Bevyn said.

Lea's eyes were narrowed as the tall woman fell into step beside the Reaper.

"I could eat a horse," Penthe noted, "although yours I would gladly fight you to possess."

"Préachán is a stalwart steed," the Reaper said. "And one for whom I would battle."

"Would you consider it?" Penthe asked. "Fighting me for the mount?"

Bevyn shook his head. "No."

Penthe shrugged. "Too bad," she said. "It might have been fun to have you stretched out beneath me."

Lea stiffened and opened her mouth to comment, but her Reaper reached out to thread his fingers through hers, drawing her to him. "I love you," he said so quietly only Lea heard him.

Penthe ignored the Terran woman whose hand was clasped in the Reaper's. She walked with him to the blanket, and when he dropped down, pulling his woman with him, she scowled. She looked pointedly at the basket from which the woman had fed Bevyn Coure earlier.

"Tell me what it is you expect to happen here, milady," Bevyn requested of Penthe as the Blackwind hunkered down on the blanket, the Dóigra clutched tightly in her hand.

"Unless my people come for me, I am trapped on this world," Penthe replied. "A warrioress among women scared of their own shadows." She raked Lea with an insulting glance.

"Let's you and me get something straight," Lea said, her hand tensing in Bevyn's. "Touch my man at your peril. I might not have your strength, I might not be a warrioress, but your back won't always be turned away from me and I can be a spiteful bitch when I want to be."

Penthe's green eyes flared. "Are you challenging me?" she hissed.

"No, she is not. She is simply warning you as I will warn you," Bevyn said. "If you touch one hair on her pretty little head, you'll have me on you in a way I promise you won't like, wench."

Penthe swept him a heated look. Up close the man was by far the most handsome she'd ever seen, and the tat on his left cheek made her womb clench with need. "I have never lain with a man and never expected to, but I could make an exception with you, Coure," she said boldly.

He snorted. "Won't happen," he stated. "I belong to her."

The Blackwind blinked. "A Reaper would dare say such a thing?" she asked.

"I belong to her," he repeated. "With my entire being and with every beat of my heart."

Sweeping Lea a hard look, Penthe asked her how she had managed to bewitch the Reaper.

"With love," Bevyn said softly.

Penthe rolled her eyes. "Love makes a warrior weak."

Cornelia came over to them and stood glaring down at the Amazeen. "And hatred won't keep you warm on a cold winter night or fill your belly with food or child."

"Food I want," Penthe admitted. "A child?" She waved a dismissive hand. "That I never want."

"Can't say as I blame you," Cornelia quipped. "They can be an ungrateful bunch." She turned her attention to Lea. "I need some help with supper."

Lea didn't want to leave her man with the statuesque beauty who was squatting down beside him, but when he gave her a look that curled the toes in her slippers, she got up and without a backward glance started toward Cornelia's house with her.

"You've trained your pet well," Penthe remarked. She lowered her rump to the blanket, sitting tailor fashion, placing the Dóigra upon the ground.

"How did the rogue manage to get hold of one of your weapons?" Bevyn asked her.

"He attacked my partner, ravaged her in his insanity," Penthe said. "He was rabid."

"It happens to *balgairs*," Bevyn said.

"But not to Reapers?" she asked, intrigued. "Why is that?"

"They don't know. Our Prime was once bitten by a rabid fox. He was sick but not as if it had been a ghoret bite."

Penthe shuddered. "Even hearing that word disturbs me," she said.

"You and me both," he admitted.

"He lived? This Prime?" she inquired.

"Aye, but I've heard tell that rogues succumb to the disease in a matter of days when bitten. Obviously their parasites aren't as strong as ours," he replied.

"Thankfully Artesia did not survive his mauling to contract the illness," Penthe said. "That would be a gruesome way to meet the Gatherer."

"How was it he managed to kill her?"

Penthe swept her hand along her thigh to brush away pieces of hay. "We had argued and she'd gone off on her own. In her state of mind, she wasn't being careful and he jumped her, tore her throat out before I could shoot him with my weapon. He saw me and took off running with Artesia slung over his shoulder, her Dóigra in his unworthy fist. I was amazed at how fast he could run."

"Rogues aren't as fast as Reapers in that department, but they can move when they feel threatened," he agreed.

"He took her to that hellhole where he had slaughtered the other women."

"Did you know he was rabid?"

She nodded. "His face was already turning black and his tongue so swollen he could not draw it back into his mouth. I knew it was but a matter of time before he succumbed. There was nothing I could do for Artesia so I just waited, hoping he'd come outside so I could shoot him and put him down. I never got the chance for he died a few hours later, howling and snarling the likes I hope to never hear again."

They were silent for a moment then Bevyn asked what she would do now.

"I have no idea," Penthe said. "By rights, I suppose I should stake you to the ground and avenge my grandmere."

Bevyn smiled. "I don't think I'm going to let you do that, wench," he said.

"Too bad," Penthe said with a sigh. "Torture is so entertaining and..." She swept him a sultry look. "I wouldn't mind putting my hands to you, Reaper."

"It was Kennocha who wronged me," he told her. "Not the other way around."

She waved a hand. "Aye, I realize that now, but at the time I accepted the Edikeō, I was young and somewhat foolish and—I will admit it—looking for adventure. Coming to Terra to extract you seemed worthy."

"And now you may be stuck here," he reminded her.

"Aye," she said, her lips twisted with irritation. "So what do I do, Reaper?"

He turned his head and looked up at the home he was helping to build. The foundation, walls and rafters were in place, much of the roofing panels laid. Come tomorrow, he and his crew would begin work on the inside.

"I will be journeying to the Citadel in the next several days," he told the Blackwind. "You are welcome to come with us and meet with the Shadowlords. Perhaps they can find something worthy for you to do."

Penthe sat up straighter. "The Shadowlords?" she repeated. "I have heard of them. They are here on Terra?"

"Three of them are," he replied.

"It would be entertaining to meet them," she said then gave him a wicked look. "Not as entertaining as putting my hands all over you but interesting, I would think."

Bevyn threw back his head and laughed. "You don't give up, do you, wench?" he asked.

Penthe bent forward and put a hand on his thigh. "I believe I could keep at it all night long, warrior. Your cock would be so sore, you wouldn't be able to move come morning."

Bevyn glanced up to see Lea coming toward him. His lady was not smiling and when her eyes flicked over the Blackwind, there was anger in them.

"What is it, milady?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"I need to speak to you," Lea said, and snaked out a hand to grab his arm. "Now!" She yanked him behind her, storming toward the stable.

"Be gentle with him, wench!" Penthe called out, and everyone still left at the building site laughed.

Bevyn stumbled along behind his lady, his eyebrows drawn together. She was furious and he could feel her anger snapping like lightning around him. "We were only talking, sweeting," he said, instinctively knowing it was the Blackwind who had caused Lea's fury.

"She wasn't talking," Lea snapped as she jerked the stable door open and pulled him inside. "She was flirting with you!"

"Nah, wench," he said. "Not really. She just —"

Lea let go of his arm and shoved him hard to send him crashing into an upright. He grunted as his back hit the wood.

"I won't have it, Bevyn Coure!" she snarled at him, coming toe-to-toe with him. "Do you hear me? I won't have it!"

"But, sweeting, she —"

Her hands were suddenly all over him and Bevyn gasped at her ferocity. She was snatching at his belt buckle, snagging down his fly, pushing the sweat-dampened denims down his hips.

"Lea, what are you...?" he began before she slammed into him, reaching up to grab his face between her hands to pull his mouth to hers.

Lea boldly thrust her tongue between her Reaper's lips and ravaged his mouth, her lower body grinding against his, his suddenly very attentive tool rising to the occasion. He turned her so her back was to the upright, tearing his mouth free of her frenzied kiss.

"Two can play at that, milady," he said through gritting teeth, and swept her gown up, his hard hand going under her chemise to pull it up as well.

The moment his fingers touched her core, Lea draped her arms around his neck and pushed her feet off the stable floor. His free arm locked around her and he lifted her up, her legs going around his waist as he held her against the upright.

"You are mine, Bevyn Coure," she said.

"I am," he agreed as he thrust himself up inside her. "You gods-be-damned better believe I am!"

Her hands were tight in his hair, pulling his mouth to hers. Her sheath was squeezing him fiercely as he rode her, pushing her hard against the upright. His thigh muscles were taut as he held her, his arms around her so tight it was hard to tell where his body stopped and hers began. His legs were spread wide as he worked her up and down on his hot, slick shaft and all the while their tongues were dueling, swirling around one another.

Lea reveled in his broad, sweaty chest pressed against her. His was a clean, manly scent that did wonderful things to her body and sent her into spasms of delight. She could feel her channel tightening around his rod, beginning the series of tremors that would bring forth such pleasure for both of them.

He nipped at her bottom lip and when her eyes widened, he swept his tongue over the slight pain.

"I want to taste you," he said huskily, and she knew he did not mean the musk that lay between her thighs.

Unable to deny this man anything, Lea arched her head to one side, exposing her neck to him.

Bevyn didn't hesitate. He wanted the taste of her blood on his lips, in his mouth, settling in his soul. He needed it for more than for just the carnal pleasure it would give

him, give her. He needed it to bond with her as no other male ever would. His fangs came out and he bit her—shallowly but enough to break the skin. Two tiny beads of her sweet blood bubbled up and he retracted his fangs, latching his lips unto the tiny wounds.

Lea tensed against him but the pain was so much more than the slight, momentary discomfort. It brought with it a surge of sexual intensity that made her groan. She could feel him drawing against her flesh, heard the soft swallow that told her he had consumed her very essence.

“Bevyn,” she whispered, attached to him more at that moment than mere flesh to flesh or body to body. She was being forged into him and she knew it.

The taste of her life force was so intoxicating he wanted to drown himself in it. He had drank from her vein before, had taken all he needed so that no matter where she went, where he went, he would be able to find her, track her, but he wanted to reinforce that bonding, needed to tie her to him so irrevocably she would never give thought to another man. Never would she be able to escape him now. Not even her thoughts could escape him for he was able to hear her thoughts, speak to her even though they were apart, and keep her safe in ways beyond the ordinary.

With her blood bursting down his throat, he felt his release pushing upward, burning his cock in waves of exquisite agony. He shoved hard against her. Thrust upward with such force she groaned for he had touched her very womb with his straining.

“Come for me,” he hissed. “Come for me, my love.”

And she did in ripples of pleasure that gripped him with silken fingers that squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until his cock jerked and he spurted long and hard inside her. Straining against her until the last of him shot deep, he buried his head against her shoulder, his chest heaving as he shuddered.

They stood there until his thigh muscles began to quiver and she unlocked her legs from his waist and he allowed her to slide down, his arms still clasped around her.

He lifted his head. “Look at me, Lea,” he said.

She looked up into his golden eyes.

“These eyes may see another woman,” he said, “but these arms will never reach out for her. This body will never hunger for her and this heart will never hold any save you within it. Never question my love for you, Lea Walsh, for it is now the air I breathe and the very blood coursing through my veins.” When she would have looked down, he put a hand to her chin and held her face. “Do you understand what I am telling you?”

“Aye, milord,” she said, “but you understand this—I might die in the trying but if any woman ever dared try to take you from me, I would do my gods-be-damned best to tear her apart.”

His smile was slow but filled with pride for her. “I don’t doubt that for a minute, milady,” he said.

"She will try to lure you away, Bevyn," she warned him.

"She can try but she'll not succeed," he vowed. "You – and only you – are the one I want."

* * * * *

Penthe watched the Reaper and his lady as they came out of the stable. She sniffed the air and caught the scent of sex permeating the couple. Digging her fingernails into her palms, she watched them coming toward her and knew before ere he spoke what the Reaper's words would be.

"This is my lady," he told her. "I guard her with my life."

The Blackwind forced herself to shrug as though it mattered little to her although she was raging inside, wanting something she knew she'd never possess but coveting it anyway.

"Do we have an understanding, Amazeen?" he pressed.

"We do, Reaper," Penthe replied. She got to her feet. "Now tell me more of this place you call the Citadel and the Shadowlords who rule it."

* * * * *

Cornelia joined them on the back porch after she had finished the last of the cleaning in the kitchen. Lea had helped her with supper and offered to wash the dishes but the older woman had shaken her head.

"Don't leave him out there with that woman warrior," Cornelia had said. "I don't trust that woman any farther than I can see her."

Sitting in the swing with his lady, Bevyn had his left arm stretched out along the back of the swing, one bare foot braced on the seat as he idly pushed at the floor with his other.

"I've never seen a man what likes to go barefoot as much as you," Cornelia said as she sat down in her rocker and lit the only pipe she enjoyed after a hard day's work. "Why is that, milord?"

Penthe sat in the other rocker, though the chair was motionless beneath her. She frowned when the black woman lit the pipe. "Such things are not good for your lungs," she commented.

"Ain't good for me, I know," Cornelia said, taking a deep draw on the tobacco, "but it's good to me, girl." She turned back to Bevyn. "You gonna tell me why you don't like to keep your boots on, son?"

Bevyn's right hand was sliding up and down the swing's chain. "I guess because one of the punishments I had as a novice was to have my feet bound so I couldn't walk. I hated it because I was forced to crawl on my knees – which was the whole purpose of a punishment meant to humble the wrongdoer."

"Did it hurt?" Lea asked. She had her right hand resting on his thigh and was enjoying the feel of the hard muscles bunching as he pushed the swing.

"Aye, it hurt," Bevyn said. "Most of the time now I can't even stand to have on socks because of it."

"When I was a novitiate in the Order of the Blackwinds, one of the rites of initiation was to have the bottoms of your bare feet struck with bamboo rods until they bled," Penthe said.

"The purpose being...?" Cornelia asked as she puffed away, clouds of fragrant smoke billowing above her.

"It was threefold actually," Penthe said. "The first was to see how much pain a novitiate could take before showing it. The second was to see how well she handled that pain and the third was to remind you to be very careful where you tread." She scratched her cheek. "If the novitiate cried out, if one tear fell, she was cast out of the Order in disgrace."

"I take it you didn't cry," Lea said.

"I never cry, wench," Penthe said with a snort.

A cool breeze shot through the porch a moment before lightning streaked across the night sky followed a few seconds later by a low rumble of thunder.

"Well now, that's a right beautiful sound and we sure do need rain something fierce," Cornelia said. "Can't work on your roof in the rain though."

"No, I suppose we can't" Bevyn replied. "I was hoping to get a lot done before we have to leave."

"When is it we'll be going to the Citadel?" Penthe asked.

Lea pursed her lips. She was very unhappy with the tall woman accompanying them—and for more reasons than having to share her unwanted companionship. Hearing the woman using the word *we* just made Lea that much angrier.

"Three days," Bevyn answered. "I'd hoped to have the house framed before I left so Nate and his crew could have it finished inside before we got back."

"How long you reckon on being gone?" Cornelia asked.

"At least two weeks," Bevyn said. "Maybe longer."

"I may stay there," Penthe suggested.

"With any luck at all you will," Lea mumbled under her breath.

Bevyn heard his lady and nudged her with his thigh. When she glanced at him, he winked at her.

"How many Reapers are there at that place?" Cornelia asked.

"There are seven of us but the only one who pretty much uses the Citadel as his base is our Prime—Arawn Gehdrin," Bevyn answered. "The others are out in their territories much of the time. We're only called in for important matters or to be punished."

"Is that why you are going there?" Penthe asked. "To have your hands slapped for something you did wrong, Reaper?"

"That's none of your business," Lea snapped.

Penthe grinned. "Never mind, Reaper. I have my answer."

Bevyn was tired and his body was aching from all the climbing about the rafters. He leaned against Lea and told her he would be sleeping in the stable that night.

"What are you talking about?" Lea gasped. "Why would you be sleeping in the stable when you have a perfectly good room here?"

"Penthe needs a room, Lea," Cornelia said, "so your man offered his. He's taking himself to the stable."

"I don't need a room," Penthe said. "The stable would be just as good for me."

"Aye, but I called it first," Bevyn said. "And since Miss Cornelia won't let us cohabit in her house..."

"I'll be sleeping with you in the stable," Lea stated.

Cornelia nodded as though she'd expected as much. "Best take you some bedding along, son," she advised.

Grumbling to herself, Lea got up and stomped into the house.

"Sure wish you two would get hitched," Cornelia said. "Then there wouldn't be no call for any of this."

"You're not Joined, Reaper?" Penthe inquired.

"She doesn't want it," Bevyn said as he got up and went into the house.

Penthe set her chair to rocking. "Now why do you suppose that is?" she asked.

"Don't reckon it's any of your bee's wax," Cornelia said with a sniff. "Best to keep your wondering to yourself, girl."

With a thick blanket spread over the soft mound of hay and the rain drumming down on the tin roof overhead, the Reaper and his lady lay with their fingers entwined, listening to the soft rumble of thunder.

"I love the rain," Lea told him.

"I'm partial to the wind," he replied. "I love the sound of it howling through the eaves."

"Aye, that is a pleasant sound."

They said nothing for a few minutes and then Bevyn turned over on his side so he was looking at her, though she could not see his face in the darkness. A horse neighed, another answered, and above them the rafters creaked.

"Lea..."

"I know what you are going to say," she cut him off. "Please don't. I don't like that woman and I never will. She came here to take you back with her and if she's ever given the chance, she'll do it."

"She might try," he said. "Do you really think the goddess would allow me to be taken?"

Lea thought about that. "No, I suppose She would not."

"Then don't concern yourself with the Blackwind. I am fairly sure she will remain behind at the Citadel when we leave."

"Why would she?" she queried.

"What is there for her here?"

"You," she stated.

"Well, she can't have me," he declared. "My woman would not allow it."

"Damned straight she wouldn't," Lea stated.

"Besides, I imagine the Shadowlords will insist she stay there and Morrighunia will more than likely have something to say about it although..." He paused then turned to his back.

"Although what?" his lady pressed.

"The goddess didn't make a concerted effort to stop Penthe from following me to Orson. Something tells me She has plans for the Blackwind."

"As long as those plans don't include you, I'm okay with it," Lea said.

From the dark corner of the stable where She sat perched in midair, Her pale green iridescent gown streaming around Her, Morrighunia smiled. She liked the feisty little human girl who had captured Bevyn Coure's heart and imprisoned his body. Had She not, Lea would never have been put in the Reaper's path to begin with.

But as for the Amazeen Blackwind...

The Triune Goddess narrowed her dark green eyes into angry slits. Though She had no intention of harming the warriorress, neither would She allow the bitch to cause the Reapers problems...especially not Bevyn. As for the Shadowlords, She could not have cared less what headaches the Blackwind caused Kheelan and his cronies.

Morning brought rain and the rain would stay on for the two days to follow, so that by the time the stagecoach in which Bevyn and the two women would ride to Clewiston arrived at Cornelia's, the roadways were nothing less than quagmires.

"By the gods, I hope you don't get bogged down on the way," Buford told the Reaper. The sheriff had insisted on having his best deputy drive.

Bevyn was standing at the coach door, his slicker running with raindrops, his hat pulled low over his face, water falling from the brim. "Take care of Préachán for me?" he asked as he climbed into the carriage.

"Aye, milord," Buford acknowledged, and tightly shut the door behind the Reaper.

Lea and Penthe were already in the coach, sitting on opposite sides, ignoring one another. It would prove to be a long ride to Clewiston with the window flaps down to keep out the rain.

"A bad day for traveling, Reaper," Penthe remarked as he struggled to pull off his wet slicker with Lea's help.

"That it is," Bevyn replied. He folded the slicker and put it under his seat. "Does your weapon draw lightning to it?"

Penthe had been unhappy that her Dóigra had to be lashed to the top of the stagecoach and wouldn't be close at hand. "Not as long as I do not direct it so," she answered. She cocked her head to one side. "How did you know it drew lightning?"

"Isn't that how it pulls power into the laser?" he asked.

The Blackwind arched a brow. "You know more of Amazeen technology than I would have imagined, Coure. How is that?"

Bevyn tugged the black leather glove from his right hand and held it up, its back to Penthe.

"Ah, she marked you," Penthe said. "That I did not know. Is the star on the other hand as well?"

"Aye."

Lea reached out to take Bevyn's hand. She had missed the faint burn mark on his flesh. "One of those things like she carries did this?" she queried. At her husband's nod, she brought his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"How touching," Penthe said with a smirk.

Bevyn shot the Blackwind an irritated look. "I've tried to recharge my laser whip in the same manner as Kennocha did her Dóigra but I haven't been able to."

"It is the glass filament in the head that stores the energy," Penthe told him.

"That explains it then," he said.

The hour's ride to the railhead took longer since the coach and horses were bucking a fierce headwind. The passengers were being tossed about inside as rain lashed at the windows, lightning cracked loudly and the wooden wheels rolled into deep ruts.

Bevyn was fidgeting in his seat. He didn't like being confined – no Reaper did – and his nerves were raw and on edge.

"How close are you to Transition, Coure?" Penthe asked.

The Reaper frowned. "About a month," he said, glancing at Lea. He never had any intention of allowing his lady to see him shapeshift into his wolflike form and didn't even like bringing the subject up around her.

"I've never seen a Reaper change," Penthe said. "I imagine it is quite a stirring sight. I look forward to it."

"I doubt you will ever be a witness to a Transition, wench," he mumbled.

Penthe narrowed her eyes. "What are the chances of my becoming Terra's first female Reaper?"

Bevyn grinned nastily. "A Reaper would have to volunteer one of his fledglings and I doubt that will happen, wench."

"Even if I swore allegiance to the Shadowlords?" the Blackwind pressed.

"Why would you want something so evil inside you?" Lea asked, horrified at the notion.

"Evil?" Penthe asked. "You think your man evil, Terran?"

"No, of course not but—"

"Then why do you think any part of him would be evil?" Penthe challenged.

"The thing inside him is immoral. It is vile!" Lea hissed, and snatched her hand from Bevyn when he would have taken it.

"Aye, well, now I can see why he won't Join with you, Terran," Penthe said. "You fear what makes him the very man you love!"

"That's enough," Bevyn said, his face hard.

"He knows I don't want that thing inside me," Lea defended herself.

"Then don't have it, but I would be honored to be the first female Reaper on Terra. There are others scattered about the megaverse and—"

"There are?" Bevyn interrupted. "Who told you such a thing?"

"I have met one," Penthe stated. "She is Amazeen. Her name is Kynthia Ancaeus and she is one of the Cree clan, her hellion having come from a great warrior named Cainer Cree."

"That's a lie," Bevyn said. "No Amazeen would be given a revenant worm!"

"Ancaeus was," Penthe declared. "On my honor as a Blackwind, I swear this to you."

The Reaper stared at the Amazeen warrioress and she met his eye, never once looking away until he had gleaned the truth of her statement as she allowed him entry into her mind.

"Do you believe me now, Coure?" she asked.

"I..." He shook his head. "The High Council needs to hear of this."

"I will tell them and I will ask to be considered for the honor of receiving a fledgling," she said.

"What if your people come after you?" he said. "If you became a Reaper, you wouldn't be allowed to return to Amazeen. Surely you must know that."

Penthe chewed on her lip for a moment then waved a dismissive hand. "It would not matter. To become a Reaper is an honor no sane woman would deny herself."

Lea made a rude sound.

"It's not likely to happen," Bevyn said. "But I would have said the same of finding an Amazeen on Terra to begin with."

"I can be an ally," Penthe told him. "I could fight at your back."

"That sure as hell isn't going to happen!" Lea snarled. "You are going to stay away from him!"

The two women glared daggers at one another and Bevyn was wise enough not to say anything that would make the situation worse. A deafening silence settled inside the coach with the sharp pelting of the rain against the windows and doors seemingly louder with every mile they traveled.

By the time the coach stopped at the railway station, the Reaper was more than ready to get out—pouring rain or not. Being cooped up had taken its toll on his nerves. Grabbing his slicker, he had even more trouble putting it on than he'd had getting it off, for Lea didn't offer to help, daring the Blackwind to offer with eyes that were darting lethal gray fire.

"Behave, ladies," Bevyn muttered to the two women as he forced the door open against the pummeling wind and rain.

"Keep embarrassing him like that and you'll lose him," Penthe warned Lea with a smirk.

"Go fuck yourself," Lea said, having borrowed that particularly pithy insult from one of the girls at the White Horse Saloon. She was angry enough to throw herself at the tall woman whose lip was lifted in a sneer.

"You're a fool," Penthe said, laughing. She got up and pushed open the door, moving out into the deluge.

Sitting there for another minute or two, Lea tried to get her anger under control. It wasn't in her to be so combative or confrontational and she had surprised herself. But Bevyn belonged to her and she belonged to him. She knew he wouldn't allow any other woman to come between them, but instinct told her the Amazeen wasn't going to give up easily.

Bevyn inspected the train car the three of them would be traveling on, had the deputy hand down Penthe's Dóigra and took it to the Amazeen's private compartment. The compartment he would share with Lea was small but far enough away from the one the Blackwind had been assigned that he should be able to keep the women apart much of the time. Daylight hours would be passed in the social car and the dining car.

"We will be serving lunch about an hour after we depart the station, milord," the conductor told Bevyn, nodding politely to the Amazeen as she came to join them.

"I've not been on one of these rolling tin cans," Penthe said. "Do you think they'd let me see the engine that pulls it?"

"I'll ask, but I don't see why not," Bevyn said. He was grateful the Amazeen was curious about the train. If she was inspecting it, she wouldn't be baiting Lea. He swept a

hand to the seats. "Sit wherever you like. I'm going to get my lady. Your weapon is in your compartment." He showed her the quarters.

Penthe watched him leave the train car and run to the stagecoach to open the door. He stood there for a moment with the rain pouring down on him, seemingly arguing with the Terran woman.

"Keep it up, bitch," Penthe said softly. "Annoy him and he'll start looking elsewhere for company."

Settling down in one of the seats so she could watch the Reaper, she laughed when he threw his hands up and slammed the coach door. But instead of coming back on the train, he began pacing the covered platform with his hands on his hips, his head down, as though he were striving to get his anger under control. Even through the downpour, she could hear his spurs plinking against the platform with each circuit he made. She saw him stop, lift his head and stare right at her.

"Don't let her put a leash on you, Reaper," she whispered to him.

Bevyn heard her words as clearly as though she'd been standing right beside him. He shook his head, annoyed even more, then stomped back to the stagecoach, jerked the door open and reached inside.

"Out!" he snapped at Lea. "Now, wench!"

Lea had no choice but to leave the stagecoach. He was pulling on her arm, and from the look on his face, the set of his clenched jaw, she knew he was upset. One glimpse at the woman sitting at the window watching them with a hateful smirk made Lea want to scream.

"I won't sit with that bitch!" she told her Reaper.

"I am not expecting you to," he said. "You can stay in the gods-be-damned sleeper car if you want."

"And leave her to paw all over you?" she gasped. "I don't *think* so!"

"Lea..." he began, and his shoulders slumped. "Wench, she means nothing to me."

"If you give her one of your parasites..."

"I won't!" he was quick to tell her. "Why would you think I'd even consider that?"

"I'm just saying," she said with a sniff, pulling her coat closer around her for the wind was sending across a mist of rain under the platform to chill her.

With the Amazeen and other passengers staring out the windows at him, the conductor paused on the steps with watch in hand waiting for him and Lea to come onboard. With the engineer peering out of the engine window with an annoyed grimace on his face, the engine hissing steam, Bevyn shot out his arm and grabbed Lea around the waist, jerking her brutally to him. He lowered his head to capture her mouth with his in a kiss that stunned every eye that saw it. He took his time and kissed her thoroughly—with lips and tongue and a hard-on that pressed savagely against her. When he was done, he let go of her, watched her stumble back slightly with wide eyes, a dazed look and swollen lips, and then reached down for her hand.

"Come along, wench," he said between clenched teeth. "We're holding up the train."

Lea followed behind him, striving to catch her breath. Her Reaper had put everything into that kiss and it left no doubt in her mind as to how he felt. Her toes had actually curled with that hard kiss and her womb had done a funny little squeeze. With her hand tucked firmly in his, he led her up the steps and didn't relinquish his grip even when he ushered her into a seat well away from the Amazeen, their back to her, Lea sitting by the window. He put his free arm around her even though they were both still wearing their coats.

"You've proved your point," Lea said as the whistle blew and the train began to roll.

"Did I?" he countered, not looking at her but staring straight ahead.

"Aye, you did," she said softly.

He let go of her hand, removed his arm from her and stood up in the aisle, shrugging out of his coat then tossing it to the seat across the way. He leaned down to help her remove hers then laid it atop his before resuming his seat, stretching his long legs out in front of him, wedging them partially under the seat in front and crossed his legs.

The conductor came by and Bevyn stopped him to ask if their traveling companion could go up to visit with the engineer.

"Well, we don't normally do that, but for you, milord, we'll make an exception," the conductor said. He bowed then went to speak to the Amazeen.

As soon as Penthe passed them on her way up to the engine car, Bevyn reached up and tipped his hat down over his eyes, folding his arms over his chest and lowered his head. "I'm going to take a nap now."

Lea smiled to herself and turned her head to look out the window at the passing scenery. The train was gathering speed, the rain streaking the windowpane. She'd never been this far east and just knowing she was traveling to the very end of the country was exciting.

From the corner of his eye, Bevyn was watching his lady. Her hands were on the glass, her forehead pressed against it. She was like a child at a candy store window as she stared at the bridges they passed, the farmhouses, the streams and lakes before they began the steady climb up into the misty mountains. It didn't appear as though she were missing anything and didn't even glance around when Penthe came back into the car, the Blackwind's hand trailing along Bevyn's arm as she passed him.

Sighing deeply, unable to sleep but just needing the solitude, the Reaper knew he was going to have to do something about the Amazeen. He didn't like her touching him. He didn't want her touching him. He knew damned well Lea didn't want it happening.

"Lord Bevyn?"

Bevyn flinched, the High Lord's angry tone drilling into his mind. *"Aye, Your Grace?"*

"One week, Reaper," Lord Kheelan snapped.

"Aye, Your Grace," Bevyn said, having known full well that would be his punishment for what he'd done.

"You have severely disappointed us, Coure. Lord Arawn will be here to discuss your behavior with you."

There was nothing for Bevyn to say. He'd screwed up as far as the High Council was concerned and he'd pay for it.

The Shadowlord said no more to him and the silence was a condemnation of its own.

Bevyn wondered if the High Council knew about the Amazeen Blackwind and decided since they knew everything else, they had to know about her. Obviously she wasn't as much a problem to them as Lea was.

Screw that, he thought. If they didn't like his relationship with Lea, he'd resign and take himself right back to Orson. To his way of thinking, he had more than earned a bit of happiness in his life.

He must have dozed for when he heard his lady's gasp, his eyes popped open and he felt disoriented, aware of the faster movement of the train beneath him.

"Milord, look!" Lea said, reaching around to snag his arm and pull him toward her.

Bevyn pushed his hat back and leaned toward her, staring out the window where she was pointing. A family of buffalo was grazing beyond a split-rail fence, two calves staring at the train as it chugged by.

"I never thought to see such animals," she breathed with awe in her voice.

"What are those, Coure?" Penthe asked and Bevyn realized she had moved so she was sitting directly behind them.

"Bison," he replied, uneasy that she was back there. *"Buffalo."*

"Strange creatures," Penthe remarked. *"Like fuzzy oxen on Amazeen."*

"They were a staple for the Native Terrans many centuries before. The decline of the animal signaled the decline of many tribes," he told her.

Lea's excitement was dimmed by her man and the Amazeen speaking to one another, and Lea sat back in her seat, her hands in her lap, no longer watching the scenery.

"Lunch is being served in the dining car," the conductor said, coming up the aisle from behind them. *"Lunch in the dining car, milord, ladies and gentlemen."*

"Let's go, sweeting," Bevyn said, reaching for Lea's hand. *"I'm starved."*

"I am too," Penthe announced.

"Imagine that," Lea muttered under her breath. *"I bet I know what she's hungry for."*

Bevyn stood, leaving his hat in his seat and stepped back so Lea could precede him. He was more than a little irritated when the Blackwind stepped close behind Lea, directly in front of him. Grinding his teeth and digging his nails into his palms, he glared at the back of the Amazeen's head, annoyed even more that she was as tall as he.

Unaware the other woman was behind her, Lea took the table to which the steward ushered her, glancing back with surprise to find the Amazeen between her and Bevyn. Since the steward was holding the chair out for her, Lea had no choice but to thank him and sit down. Having Bevyn pull the other woman's chair out for her made Lea want to kick him and the tall bitch, who was grinning hatefully at Lea, assuming she would be sitting beside the Reaper.

When Penthe was seated, Bevyn foiled the Amazeen's plan and skirted the table, taking the chair beside his lady's, beside the window, giving her a gentle smile when she looked up at him with gratitude in her pretty gray eyes.

They managed to chat amicably about the passing scenery as their meals were placed before them. No one watching would have suspected all three diners at that particular table were uneasy, restrained and anxious for the meal to be over. When the commotion at the front of the car began, it drew their immediate attention almost with relief until they saw the armed, masked men converging on them with guns drawn.

Chapter Eight

“This is a holdup. Nobody move and there won’t be no problems,” one of the five men said.

The train began slowing to a stop. No doubt another robber or two had broken into the engine room.

A woman cried out, was hushed by her male companion, and another one fainted, slumping down in her chair. There were twenty people other than the Reaper sitting in the dining car. One was a young couple with two small children, another young couple—the wife heavy with child—several older women obviously traveling together and a few older men with their wives. Save for one other man who had the look of a professional gambler about him, Bevyn doubted there was another gun among them.

“We want your purses and your money,” the robber decreed. “Valuables too. That includes rings, watches, jewelry of any kind.” He indicated one of the masked men. “Jake here is gonna pass by your table with his sack and you’re gonna dump your goodies inside.”

Bevyn and the women with him were sitting midway in the dining car on the north side where the tables sat four people each. The table across the aisle from them seated two—the unconscious woman and her husband who was fanning her with his napkin.

Another of the robbers leaned over to the man who apparently was the leader and pointed toward Bevyn. For just a split second, there was fear in the leader’s eyes then he straightened his shoulders.

“Well, whatcha know? Looks like we got us a genuine folk hero onboard, ladies and gents,” the leader quipped.

Strutting down the aisle, the leader kept his gun leveled at Bevyn’s head though the barrel shook.

“Don’t you try being a hero now, milord Reaper,” the leader said. “I’d hate to have to put a slug between the eyes of that pretty lady sitting beside you.”

“What’s a Reaper doing sitting with two women anyways?” another of the masked men asked.

The one the leader had called Jake was moving from table to table, the clink of money and jewelry going into his the bag he carried. “Leave him be, Nate,” he warned. “We don’t need that kind of trouble.”

“Ain’t gonna be no trouble, is there, milord Reaper?” the leader asked.

Bevyn didn’t reply. His gaze was steady on the leader, his hands in plain sight, not giving the men reason to think he’d go for his weapon, but the look on his face boded ill for those accosting the passengers.

"How 'bout you handing over your piece there, milord Reaper," the leader demanded.

Every eye except Lea's was on Bevyn. No one was looking at the Amazeen so no one but Lea saw the woman slowly beginning to fade until only a faint wisp of black mist drifted behind the leader and out the dining car entrance. It took every ounce of her willpower not to gasp as the woman vanished or to allow her stricken eyes to widen and give herself away.

Not questioning the leader, Bevyn started to ease his right hand down from the table.

"Uh-uh," the leader was quick to say. "Use your left hand."

The right side of the Reaper's mouth lifted just a bit as though he might smile but he reached across him and thumbed up the hammer strap on his six-shooter. He lifted out his weapon and extended it butt first to the leader, who stuck the black-handled gun into his belt.

"Now that whip I've heard tell so much about," the leader said.

Bevyn smiled then—as cold a smile as any he'd ever bestowed on another living thing. It was a slow stretching of his lips while his golden eyes gleamed with malice. "It won't do you any good," he said.

The leader pulled the hammer back on his weapon, the barrel moving slightly so he was pointing it at Lea. "Don't make me tell you twice, lawman," he snarled.

The Reaper shrugged and slid his left hand down to his hip to remove the *speal*. Silently he handed it over.

Snatching the laser whip from the Reaper's hand, the leader held it clutched in his own, fingering the dragon claw handle. "How you work this?" he asked.

"You don't," Bevyn said. "Only a Reaper can. It's worthless to you."

Trying to find a way to activate the weapon, the leader finally tossed it aside. "Where's your money?" he barked.

"Gotta get up to give it to you," Bevyn said with a steady grin.

"Don't let him stand up!" the one named Jake said.

"You better be worrying about me and not the Reaper," a feminine voice said behind the robbers.

Lea would forever see what happened next in her dreams for as long as she lived. She saw the leader's head snap around at the Amazeen's challenge, saw Bevyn scoop up the laser whip in one rapid movement as he gripped the edge of the table in preparation for shoving it against the leader's legs. She would hear the shrill zing of the weapon in Penthe's hands as the *Dóigra* came alive—a bright, burning red pulse shooting out from the glass-tipped head in a starburst that completely annihilated the robber closest to the Blackwind. The stench of burning flesh was overpowering.

In her nightmares there would be the screams of the women in the dining car as Penthe twirled her weapon in her hands then slammed it against a robber's head, the

hissing glass end taking the top of the man's cranium completely off. She would see the leader stumble back as Bevyn upended the table toward him, sending the leader crashing to the floor. She would hear the sizzle of the Reaper's *speal* as it powered up and the loud snap of it as Bevyn flicked it over his shoulder then forward to decapitate the man named Jake before taking a mortal bite out of the fourth man on the backswing. The leader – no doubt realizing he was going to die anyway – leveled his gun on Bevyn and while bellowing with rage, fanned six shots dead center into the Reaper's chest.

"Bevyn!" Lea screamed as her man pitched backward, the bullets slamming into his body. He landed heavily on the empty table behind them, collapsing it beneath his weight, and falling with it in a heavy thud to the floor. His black blood pumped out against the pristine white tablecloth beneath him as he lay staring up at the ceiling of the dining car, his hands to either side of his head.

"You son of a bitch!" Penthe howled, and the Dóigra sang as a blast of fierce red lightning sparked from the star-shaped bulb at the end to engulf the leader in flame.

Shrieking in agony, the leader ran toward the back of the car, passengers scrambling to get out of his way. He'd almost made it to the door when the Dóigra flared still again and the burning man simply ceased to be in a pulse of red mist.

Beyond the windows of the train, a sixth man was holding the horses of his fellow robbers. As soon as he realized what had happened inside the train, he wheeled his mount around and took off like a shot, whipping his horse and drumming his heels into the poor beast. A shout from toward the front of the train told everyone there was at least one other robber.

Lea would always remember how she had moved as if in slow motion, throwing herself to the floor beside Bevyn, her knees landing in a widening puddle of his ebon-tinted blood. She would see him slowly blink, his gaze wandering to hers. She would hear a strange rattling sound in his chest as he tried to speak to her.

Penthe would come rushing to them, going down on one knee beside the Reaper, scooping her hand under his head, lifting it up, half lifting him to a sitting position.

"He's drowning in his own blood!" the Amazeen hissed, bracing Bevyn against her.

One moment Bevyn was looking at Lea – still trying to speak as a trickle of his black blood eased from the corner of his mouth – and in the next, his head fell backward, his eyes wide.

"No!" Lea would scream over and over again.

The other passengers were gathering around except for the young couple with the children. They had tried to shield their offspring from the horrific sights as best they could and were now huddled together in the corner of the dining car, their bodies blocking the ghastly scene.

"Is he dead?" a man asked. "I didn't think Reapers could die."

"He's not dead," Penthe said. "He's unconscious, but these bullets have got to come out of him if he's to heal."

"Don't you touch him!" Lea shouted, her eyes wild. She was trying to take Bevyn out of the Amazeen's arms but the other woman shoved her back.

"Someone take this fool out of here," Penthe snarled.

"Come on, lady," someone said, and reached for Lea's shoulder. She hissed, knocked the hand away but the man persisted.

Lea fought the two men who reached down to drag her to her feet. She cursed them and twisted violently in their hold, but they pulled her away and out of the dining car despite her thunderous shrieks.

"How can I help you?" the man beside Penthe asked.

"Are you a healer?" Penthe demanded, eyeing him suspiciously.

"No, ma'am. I make my living dealing cards so I'm no stranger to violence," the gambler said.

"I need a sharp knife," Penthe said as she lay the Reaper flat on the floor and put her hands to his silk shirt, ripping it open to reveal the six puckered red holes where the leader's bullets had entered.

Snagging a hand into his coat, the gambler pulled out a dangerous-looking blade from a holster under his arm and extended it hilt first to Penthe. "You need it sterilized?" he asked.

"Won't make much difference to him," Penthe said. She looked up. "Somebody better check on that other robber."

"There were two more of them," the young pregnant woman said. "I saw them jumping on their horses and hightailing it with the other guy."

"I'll go check with the driver," the conductor said, motioning the steward to come with him.

As Lea was thrust into a seat and made to stay there, her hands over her face as she sobbed hysterically, she began doing something she hadn't in years — she prayed.

The Amazeen worked methodically and with sure hands as she dug into the Reaper's chest to extract the bullets, one of which was lodged close to his heart. He lay still beneath her ministrations, barely breathing and his chest barely rising.

"He's gonna need to drink," the gambler said. He shucked off his fancy coat and unbuttoned his sleeve. As he rolled it up, he met another man's horrified look. "A lot of something to drink."

Everyone standing above the Reaper glanced down at the blood in which he lay and which soaked the knees of the strange attire the tall woman was wearing.

"Can't we just put it in a glass?" someone asked.

"I imagine he'll take it however we give it to him," the gambler replied. "As much as these men do for us, this is the least we can do for them."

Penthe looked up and locked gazes with the gambler. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Riley," he answered. "Riley Butler."

She looked back down as she probed for the bullet that lay beside his heart. "You're not afraid of him biting you, Butler?"

"He's not going to turn me into one like himself, ma'am," Riley replied. "There's a sight more to it I've heard than that."

"You have to have one of the worms what's inside him," another man spoke up. "That's what makes him a Reaper."

"You a female Reaper?" someone else asked.

"Going to be," Penthe stated. "We are on our way to the Citadel for that very thing."

"More power to you, dear," one of the elderly women said. "If'n I was a day or so younger, I'd do it myself."

Penthe smiled at the brag. She handed the knife to Riley then stuck her finger inside the Reaper's chest. Her frown slipped away. "I can't quite get to this last one and it's too close to the heart for my liking."

"Can you just leave it?" the pregnant woman asked. "Won't his creature maybe rid him of it somehow?"

"I don't know," Penthe answered. She removed her finger and sat back on her haunches, wiping her arm across her brow.

"Will you look at that?" a man asked in a voice filled with shock.

Three of the wounds on the Reaper's chest were already closing, the flesh sealing itself as though there had never been a hole there. The fourth had ceased to bleed and the red striations around it were fading.

Riley glanced around at a couple of the men. "Find us something we can lay him on as a stretcher. We need to get him to bed."

"Right away," one of the men agreed, and he and another passenger left in search of something on which to carry the Reaper.

The gambler gave Penthe a hard look. "Are you gonna keep on trying to take out that last slug?"

Penthe shook her head. "I should but my fingers are too big. I can't get..."

"I got little hands," the pregnant woman said, and shushed her husband when he tried to get her to be quiet. "If'n you tell me what to do, I'll try it."

"Eloise!" her husband gasped. "Don't—"

"Come on down here, Eloise," Penthe said, picking up on the name. "There's no way you can hurt him any more than I already have."

Riley and Eloise's husband helped the very pregnant woman to her knees. Penthe instructed her and without so much as a qualm, the young woman leaned forward and put her index finger into the wound.

"Holy Merciful Ale!" Eloise exclaimed. "I can feel his heart beating!"

"Can you feel the bullet?" Penthe asked to keep the girl on track.

A thoughtful expression filtered over the young woman's face and she pursed her lips as though in deep thought. "I think I feel it," she said, and gently slipped her middle finger into the hole. "Aye, I feel it."

"If he were a normal man, we'd have sure as hell killed him by now," one of the elderly women commented.

Penthe looked up at the woman. "Lucky for us he isn't normal."

"They are good men, those boys," the woman said. "Hard men, I reckon, but good men. Don't know what we'd do without them."

"Treat them a sight better so they'll keep on being good men," Riley said softly. "Too many's the time I've seen how they are shunned. Got to be a lonely existence for them."

"This one's got a woman," Penthe said.

"You're a lucky girl," the older lady said.

Penthe didn't correct the misconception.

"Got it!" Eloise said, and gently, slowly and very carefully brought the slug up out of the wound. "Felt like one of his little critters was helping me push away from his ticker." She grinned. "Little bugger was a'ticklin' my fingers."

"You touched one of those things?" her husband gasped. "Dear lord, Eloise! Go wash your hand!"

"Oh hush up, Earl!" Eloise snapped. "I ain't gonna turn into a she-wolf and bite you on your scrawny ass tonight!"

Everybody laughed at poor Earl's expense, the young man's lean face turning bright red.

The men returned with a stretcher they'd found in the baggage car and lowered it down on the floor beside Bevyn.

"Let's get him up and to bed, men," Riley said. He helped them lift the unconscious Reaper onto the canvas sling, being careful to lay Bevyn's hands over his belly and not his healing chest, the last bullet hole closing nicely.

"Train's about to move on out, folks," the steward came back to tell the passengers. "Engineer wants to know how our Reaper is."

"He'll be all right," Penthe said.

Lea jumped up from her seat. She was trembling, her face drawn and pale, and her eyes swollen from crying as the men carried Bevyn down the aisle. "Is he...? She couldn't finish.

"He's okay," Riley said. "Got all the bullets out."

"We need to put him to bed," Penthe stated.

Lea ignored the Amazeen. "Milord?" Lea questioned, twisting her hands in front of her, aching to touch him.

"Can you show us to your compartment, ma'am?" Riley asked. At Lea's nod, he indicated with a sweep of his hand that she was to precede him down the corridor. The others followed them.

Lea opened the door to the compartment and stepped aside. Her anxious eyes were locked on Bevyn's still face and tears hovered in her eyes.

"Ease him down, men," Riley said, taking Bevyn's feet and helping to swing him from the stretcher to the bed. "Ma'am, you need to take that shirt off him."

Lea moved around Riley and wedged herself in between the other two men. She was grateful the Amazeen hadn't accompanied them into the compartment. Her eyes were on Bevyn's chest and was stunned to see no wounds other than those that had already been there.

"Looks to me like he's had a right hard life," Riley commented. "Somebody ran him through a gantlet of pain, I'd say."

"Could you get his boots, please?" Lea asked. "He hates wearing boots."

"It would be my honor, ma'am," Riley said, and began tugging on Bevyn's boots.

"You need anything else, little lady?" one of the two other men in the compartment asked.

"Some warm water and rags to bathe him and some cool water for him to drink," Lea said.

"Consider it done," the man said, and eased past Riley to leave the room.

"He's going to need –"

"We'll give him what he needs," Riley broke in, and when Lea looked at him, he smiled. "All he needs."

"Thank you," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"It's the least we can do, ma'am," the gambler responded.

For the next half-hour, Lea and Riley saw to the Reaper's needs, cleaning the crusted black blood from his sides and back and undressing him so he could rest comfortably beneath the crisp sheets.

Lea had asked for a chair to place beside the bed and Riley provided it for her, introducing himself at last as he set the chair down.

"You call me when he wakes up," the gambler told her then left her alone with Bevyn.

"Hey, look here," the man whose wife had fainted called out as Riley came back to the dining car. "My old lady wants to know if both them women are with the Reaper." He grinned nastily. "Got himself a little harem going there?"

Everyone seemed to be listening to the conversation, appeared keenly interested in the details, and Riley's voice lowered.

"Reapers have only one mate," Riley replied with a hard stare. "His lordship is with the pretty young one."

"Well, the way that there warrior woman was putting her hands all over him, we couldn't help but wonder if something wasn't going on there," the man said with a wink.

"Could be she's his partner," the man's wife spoke up.

"Reapers don't have partners," Riley decreed, "but I reckon she could be working with him."

"What I am to him is none of your business."

Gasps and averted eyes accompanied Riley's flinch as he turned to see the tall woman glaring at him. He put a finger to his temple.

"No, ma'am, it surely ain't," he agreed, and righted a chair to sit down.

The Reaper's body temperature seemed higher than normal to Lea but she supposed that was because of the gunshots. He was sweating lightly and she kept rinsing out a cloth, wiping his face and across his shoulders, down his arms—being very careful of his chest although not one sign of a bullet wound could be seen—as she tried to cool him. She smoothed his hair back and hummed quietly to him as she held his hand and stroked his long fingers. From time to time he would stir as though trying to wake but would lie still again, his chest moving gently up and down, his lips parted.

Lea didn't need to turn around to know who had come to stand at the compartment door. "He is still sleeping," she said.

"I don't like that," Penthe declared as she came on into the compartment.

"Thank you for killing the bastard who did this to him," Lea said. "I only wish I could have had the son of a bitch to myself for a few days."

"And done what exactly?" Penthe said with a snort.

"I'd have made him rue the day he ever hurt Bevyn Coure," Lea said, and met the Amazeen's eyes directly. "If I had your ancestor here, I would tear her to shreds for what she did to him."

Penthe arched a thick brown brow. "I believe you mean that, wench."

"You can take it to the bank, Amazeen. I'm not what you think I am," Lea said. "And when it comes to this man, I can be a cold-hearted bitch."

The Blackwind leaned against the wall and crossed her arms over her impressive bosom. "And here I thought Terran women were sissies."

"Aye, well, the female of my species is meaner and deadlier than the male when it comes to protecting our loved ones," Lea remarked. "Ask any Native Terran warrioress."

"He's a man well worth protecting," Penthe said.

"And he is mine."

Penthe inclined her head. "Aye, wench, I know that." She stared hard at Lea. "I might not like it, might wish it were otherwise, but I will respect it."

"Then we understand one another," Lea said, not giving an inch.

"It would seem so," Penthe said. She straightened up. "Be sure to call me when he wakes so I may help feed him. He will need it."

"I told Riley I'd call *him* and I will," Lea said, and she turned her head away.

"You would not allow me to feed him from my veins?" Penthe asked quietly.

"Not in a million fucking years," Lea stated.

"It would be an honor for me," Penthe said.

"Not going to happen."

"I protected his back today. I—"

"And you have my thanks," Lea said, and looked around, her face hard. "You have his thanks."

The Blackwind narrowed her eyes. "You are a liability to him," she said. "Had you not been there today, he would never have given his gun to the thief." She went to the door then turned to give Lea one last hateful look. "You think on that, bitch."

When the Amazeen left, Lea continued to sit beside Bevyn, gently stroking his hand. She bathed his face and arms and chest again, growing more concerned at the heat radiating from his body. He stirred now and again, his head thrashing slowly on the pillow as though he were striving to wake from whatever hellish place in which he dwelt. He mumbled but as day moved into night, he had still not awakened.

Riley stopped by the compartment not long after the sun had set. He rapped gently on the open door for Lea had her head down on the edge of the mattress. When she lifted her head and looked around at him, he smiled.

"How 'bout letting me watch him for a while?" the gambler asked. "You need to take a rest and eat something. They've got fried chicken in the dining car."

Lea shook her head. "I want to be here when he wakes up."

"Okay," Riley said. "Can I bring you a tray then?"

Her stomach growled at the suggestion. "That would be nice, Riley. Thank you."

"I'll be right back then."

Lea sighed and looked back around, stunned to see Bevyn's eyes open and looking into hers.

"Another conquest, milady?" he asked.

She got out of the chair and sat down gingerly on the mattress beside him. "How do you feel?" she asked, stroking his hair back from his forehead.

"Like I got kicked in the chest by a mule," he said. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?" she asked, her brows drawing together. She didn't like how hot his flesh had become and reached over to take the cloth out of the water to wash his face again.

"Was there a robbery?" he asked. He put a hand to his head.

"There was an attempted robbery," she reminded him. "You and the woman giant stopped it."

"Was anyone hurt?" he asked as he rubbed his forehead.

"You and the warriorress killed the five in the dining car but three got away," she said. She pushed his hand aside and ran the rag over his face and down his neck.

Bevyn's hand fell to his side as though it had been a real effort to hold it up. "They'll have to be found and brought to justice," he said.

"That will have to wait," she said.

"Is Penthe all right?" He shifted on the bed, sweat pouring out of his pores.

"The walking mountain is doing just fine," Lea said from between clenched teeth.

"Go get her for me," he asked. He was breathing heavily.

"Bevyn—"

"Now, wench!" he said, eyes flashing. "Go get her for me now!"

Lea took one look at the red glints in the depths of his eyes and shot off the bed. She had some idea what was happening and ran as fast as she could toward the dining car, figuring that was where the Blackwind would be. As soon as she saw her, she yelled at her that the Reaper needed her.

Penthe paused with a glass almost to her lips. "What's wrong?"

"I think he's about to Transition!" Lea said, trembling violently from head to toe.

"Oh hell!" Penthe hissed, and slammed her glass down on the table, shoved her chair back and practically flew past Lea.

Everyone sitting in the dining car turned pale. Lea barely felt Riley taking her arm to seat her at his table. She looked up at him with dazed eyes.

"Here," Riley said, pressing a glass of water into her hand. "Drink."

Penthe almost missed the door to the Reaper's compartment and had to snake out a hand to grab the doorjamb to halt her mad rush. She stepped back and as soon as she saw the naked Reaper on all fours in the center of the bed, his head swinging from side to side as he panted, she felt her insides turn to water.

"Lock. Me. In," he managed to say, his back arching.

The sounds coming from the Reaper's body sent chills down Penthe's body but she didn't question his command. She jerked the door closed and held the handle, bracing her feet on the opposite jambs as she held it, shouting for the conductor to bring his key. Hurrying toward her, the conductor's hand was trembling so badly he dropped his set

of keys and had to stoop down to snatch it up, whimpering as he poked unsuccessfully at the lock trying to get the key in.

“Hurry the fuck up!” Penthe yelled at the poor man.

Something hit the door hard and it rattled in the frame. Although the Amazeen had her full weight behind holding it shut as the conductor struggled to lock it, the portal gave just a little and she had to strain to pull it closed again.

“Damn it, man!” the Blackwind hissed. “Lock the damned thing!”

Snarls came from behind the door as the conductor managed to turn the key and lock the portal. Vicious scraping sounds down the wood made the hair stand up on the little man’s head. Growls and chuffing noises echoed from the room as things began hitting the door.

Despite knowing the door was locked, Penthe continued pulling on the handle, her booted feet braced halfway up the doorjambs as she put her weight behind holding the handle.

Total destruction was going on inside the Reaper’s compartment. He was howling fiercely and pounding on the door.

“What should we do?” the conductor asked, his face as white as parchment.

“If he breaks the window, he’ll...”

At that moment the sound of glass shattering and a triumphant howl told the Amazeen the Reaper had leapt from the compartment. She let go of the door and ran back through the sleeper car, the dining car – barely noting the looks of horror on the passengers’ faces – and sprinted through the social car and out to the observation car. In the distance, she saw a wolf streaking through the woods beyond the rails and knew Bevyn Coure was running free. She turned to find Riley behind her.

“Is he loose?”

“That he is,” she said.

“Should we have them stop the train?”

Penthe didn’t know how to answer that. If the Reaper had any control over himself, he more than likely would not attack the train but if he were lost to his animalistic nature, he might harm someone. She weighed the consequences, the options, then her shoulders slumped.

“No, I don’t think that would be wise,” she said at last.

“He’ll follow us,” Lea said, and they turned to look at her. “He doesn’t want me to see him like that.”

“I thought he said he wasn’t near Transition,” Penthe said.

“Perhaps the wounds altered his cycle,” Lea said. She was leaning against the open door of the observation deck, the wind from the moving train blowing her blonde hair, her arms wrapped around her. “His flesh was so hot I should have realized what was going to happen.”

"Well, there's nothing we can do," Riley said. He went to Lea. "Let's go get that food."

"I can't eat now," Lea said. "I'm too keyed up."

"You should try," Riley told her. "At least come on in and sit with us."

Penthe took one last look behind the train then came toward Lea. "He'll be all right, wench."

"Aye," Lea said, and moved back, her head down.

"He called me because he knew I had the strength to hold that door shut," Penthe said. "No other reason."

Lea lifted her head and met the Amazeen's gaze. "I know."

Riley walked behind the women as they moved back through the social car and into the dining car where everyone was looking up at them expectedly. "He's running somewhere off in the woods out there," he told them. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Will he be all right?" one of the elderly women asked.

"He's a Reaper," Lea answered. "He'll be fine."

* * * * *

Though his mind had been taken over completely by the animal side of him, Bevyn Coure was aware and as he sat hunkered over the deer he'd brought down, his fangs buried in the sleek brown neck, his thoughts were on Lea. Drawing the dead animal's blood deep into his own body to replenish what he'd lost, the Reaper held his woman's face firmly in his mind. She was his anchor to sanity that kept him from attacking a nearby party of trappers who were sitting around a campfire only a few hundred yards away.

Using the power that had been given to him, he closed his eyes and concentrated on finding Lea at that moment. With the small amount of blood he had taken from her, he could pinpoint her position and hear every word she spoke. He could sense her state of mind and knew she was worried about him. That made his heart ache.

"Do not worry, sweeting," he sent to her.

On the train, Lea jumped, hearing that voice in her head. She nearly choked on the cup of coffee she had been trying to drink.

"I'll join you when I am able, but don't be concerned if I am not there," he whispered to her. *"I can't predict how long the Transition will last."*

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Think the words, milady, and I will hear them," he told her. *"And aye, I am all right."*

There was a slight pause then she said, *"I love you."*

"I love you too. Sleep well, mo shearc."

"Not without you by my side," she told him, and was relieved to hear his slight laugh.

When he said nothing more, she knew he had terminated their conversation. Looking around her at the others, she met Penthe's steady look and knew the Amazeen must have realized Lea had been in contact with her Reaper for the Blackwind nodded to her then turned her head to look out the window at the dark scenery they passed.

Chapter Nine

The train pulled into the Boreas station on the North Sea in the midst of the rainstorm that followed behind them from Clewiston. Blustery wind whipped at the windows, sending sheets of rain cascading against the glass.

"I hate rain," Penthe said. She had her Dóigra clutched in her hand as they waited in a line to exit the train.

A cool breeze came in through the door the conductor had left open when he'd exited onto the platform. He stood conversing with two tall men in dark brown uniforms who Riley told them were guards from the Citadel.

"See that big coach over there?" he said, pointing at a large conveyance pulled by six horses. "That's what you'll be making the trip up to the fortress in."

Penthe and Lea exchanged a look, neither happy about striking out in the storm.

For the last two days Lea and the Amazeen had formed a touchy kind of truce. With Bevyn still gone, the women had settled into a relationship of sorts that would never be friendly, but at least was no longer purely antagonistic. It had helped that her Reaper had spoken psychically many times over those days to Lea, calming her fears and promising her he would meet her at the Citadel.

"Why do you suppose they have not filled in these awful craters or removed some of the fallen buildings, at least planted some trees to conceal the scorched land?" Lea asked as she peered out the window at the destruction she realized had to have been caused during the Burning War and subsequent cataclysmic disasters that had hit the area.

"There are those who believe the goddess Herself wants it kept this way to remind the Terrans of all they lost because of their warring ways," Riley said. "It is a vivid reminder, isn't it?"

"It is," Lea agreed. She stared up the manmade mountain that could be seen through the wavering lines of the rain on the windows. A steep climb wound its way up the mountain in a serpentine trail. Her stomach roiled at making the perilous journey.

"Your coach is ready, my ladies," the conductor said as he climbed onboard. He took Lea's bag but Penthe refused to allow him to touch her weapon, glaring at the man instead.

Thanking Riley for everything he'd done for them, Lea and Penthe bid the gambler farewell, Lea asking him to come to Orson to visit if he got the chance.

"I'd like that and just might take you up on the offer," Riley said. He tipped his hat to the women.

Following the conductor from the train, Lea and the Amazeen hurried to the Citadel guards, who respectfully greeted them. Penthe regarded the coach toward which they were being led and decided the vehicle was long enough to accommodate her Dóigra.

"Lord Arawn is waiting for you at the top," one of the guards told them.

A loud, piercing whistle sounded and the guard explained it was to alert the guards at the Citadel that the coach was on its way.

"Security is very strict here," the man told them. He eyed the Dóigra but said nothing when Penthe informed him she would keep it with her.

"Just don't point it at Lord Arawn," the man warned. "Our Prime Reaper is not overly fond of Amazeens as it is." His mouth twisted. "None of us are."

"Fuck you too," Penthe snarled at the man, dismissing him as she climbed unassisted into the coach.

Lea gave the guard a tremulous smile. "I'm sorry. She can be a bit rude," she apologized to him.

The guard tipped his hat. "Don't let it concern you, Lady Lea," he said. He held out his hand to help her climb the steps.

"Thank you," she said.

"You are our first Reaper's mate and it is my privilege and honor to serve you, milady," he said softly. "I hope you enjoy your stay at the Citadel."

Surprised the man knew she belonged to Bevyn, although she realized as she took her seat and he closed the door behind her, this was why her Reaper had been summoned to the Citadel. She was the reason he would be punished and that bothered her deeply.

"Looks like you're going to be treated like royalty," Penthe grumbled as the coach jerked forward and left the protection of the canopied platform. The rain hitting the roof nearly drowned out her next words. "As befitting a Reaper's mate."

Lea ignored the words. The glass windows did not allow that much to be seen for the rain was pounding against the coach, but she strained to see out until the climb became so steep it made her nervous.

It seemed to take forever for the coach to reach the summit of the manmade mountain upon which the fortification sat. The imposing sight of the legendary building caused both women to gape at it as the coach pulled up to the myriad steps leading into the building. Made of brick and mortar, the huge fortress had been constructed over a legendary Terran building that had been destroyed during the War. The five sweeping arms of the Citadel were fashioned along the lines of a flattened star and rose five stories high and included a huge basement that ran not only under the ten sections of the ground floor but the huge center courtyard around which each arm had been built. Covering twenty-nine acres and encompassing six million square feet of floor space, the Citadel was an impressive, forbidding stronghold.

"We've nothing like that on Amazeen," Penthe said.

"I doubt there is anything like it here either," Lea commented.

"Not even the Bastion?" Penthe said. "The one in the Northlands?"

Lea shrugged. She had no idea what the Bastion was.

A man in a brown uniform came down the steps with a large umbrella as the guards, who had driven the coach, got down from their seats and flanked the coach door. After returning the salutes of his men, the newcomer motioned for the door to be opened.

"Good day, ladies," the man greeted them. "I am Giles D'Brickashaw, the Primary Guide. Welcome to the Citadel." He held his hand out to Lea. "It is an honor, Lady Lea."

Lea took Giles' hand and was helped under the protection of the large umbrella, but even so, rain cascaded down around them and blew water against her gown. She glanced back at Penthe and was pleased to see the warrior woman frowning.

"You will grow accustomed to our weather," Giles said. "It rains very frequently here and there's a storm brewing out in the North Sea to collide with the one that followed on your heels."

"Has there been word of Lord Bevyn?" she asked as they began the steep climb up the steps.

"He is already here, milady," Giles informed her, "and awaiting you."

Lea breathed a sigh of relief. She had not heard from him since she woke that morning and had been growing worried.

"He is well, milady," Giles said with a smile. "His Transition did not last as long as normal since it was caused out of cycle by the severity of his wounds. He is most anxious to see you."

"Are the other Reapers here?" Penthe asked as they neared the top step.

"Just Lord Arawn, the Prime, milady," Giles answered. "The others are on assignment."

Lea reached out to touch Giles' arm, halting him. "Is he in a lot of trouble because of me?"

Giles smiled gently. "There is no need to worry, Lady Lea. As I understand it, his punishment will not be harsh. A week in a containment cell isn't a cakewalk but neither is it brutal punishment."

"Would it help if I went before the Shadowlords and...?"

"Milady, his sentence will be nothing that Lord Bevyn does not expect or for which he is unprepared. Had he not wanted to spend his life with you, he could merely have walked away." D'Brickashaw covered her hand with his. "He chose not to."

"But..."

“As a Reaper’s mate, you must be strong, milady,” Giles said sternly. “You must support him for it is his decisions that will direct your lives together. Honor him and the commitment he has made to you. Show the Shadowlords how you feel about him but do not grovel before them—they will be annoyed if you do. Do not show them disrespect by disputing their decisions—your mate will bear the consequences if you do. Be strong and stand behind Lord Bevyn, give him your support.”

“In other words, don’t let the Shadowlords know how much I hate what they will be doing to him because of me,” she said.

“Precisely,” Giles declared.

A man in a dark brown uniform came striding toward them. He stopped and smartly saluted Penthe. “I have been asked to escort you to the Security Section, Captain.”

Penthe blinked. “You have mistaken me for someone else. I hold no rank among the Amazeen,” she responded.

“With your permission, ma’am, Lord Kheelan has assigned you rank here. He will discuss this with you once we have you processed in,” the man replied.

“Processed?” Penthe repeated, her eyes narrowing. “Show me to this section of yours. We’ll see what the hell is going on!”

Lea breathed a sigh of relief as the Amazeen stormed off. She felt acutely uncomfortable anywhere near the woman.

Giles led her through the unbelievably beautiful reception area and down a long hallway until they came to the anteroom of the High Council, stopping now and again to point out something he considered might be of interest to her.

“Am I taking too much of your time?” she asked, fearful the Shadowlords would grow irritated and punish Bevyn for her tardiness in meeting with them.

“Not at all,” Giles assured her. “We want you to feel at ease here.”

He opened the door for her, allowing her to precede him, then took her toward a long desk at which sat three indescribably beautiful women. “Lady Lea, may I introduce Argent,” he said, indicating the woman in the middle.

“Hello,” Lea said, feeling very insecure in the presence of three such gorgeous ladies.

“Welcome to the Citadel, Lady Lea,” Argent said with a lovely smile. She had gray eyes a shade darker than Lea’s and silver hair that fell in soft waves to her shoulders. “These are my sisters Corallin.” She indicated the woman on her right who had an abundance of thick red hair and then the stunning blonde on her left. “And Aureolin.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Lea said.

“The pleasure is ours,” Corallin replied.

“Lords Arawn and Bevyn are in with the Shadowlords at the moment so please have a seat and make yourself comfortable.” Argent indicated comfortable-looking

chairs ranged along one wall. "May we get you anything?" she inquired. "Something warm to drink to chase away the rain perhaps?"

"No thank you," Lea replied. "I'm fine." She glanced around as the man in the brown uniform ushered Penthe into the anteroom.

"Ah, the Blackwind," Argent said, and the smile slide from her beautiful face.

Penthe took one look at the women behind the desk and stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes widened. "You are of the Multitude!" she said.

Argent lifted her head. "Aye, Amazeen, we are Breitheamhtái for the Daughters."

Penthe lowered her head. "I am unworthy to stand before you."

"That you are," Argent replied in a hard tone. "So sit and be silent. Your presence is disturbing to us."

Without another word the Amazeen scurried to a chair and sat down, not even glancing Lea's way.

Surprised by Penthe's behavior, Lea barely acknowledged Giles' goodbye as he left. She looked to the trio of women and smiled tentatively at Argent. She was relieved when the silver-haired woman gave her a bright, friendly grin.

* * * * *

Bevyn stood at attention before the lords of the High Council with the Prime Reaper—Arawn Gehdrin—at his side. For the last half-hour he had been standing rigidly as he was chewed out first by Lord Kheelan and then by his immediate boss Gehdrin. He was tired. He was hungry. His need for Sustenance was overpowering and the itching, burning, aching sensation caused from his lack of the daily dosage of tenses was making it hard for him to hold still for it felt as though a million biting ants were crawling all over his body.

"We will be offering the Amazeen a chance to aid in our mission here on Terra but we will not allow her to ever leave this fortress," Lord Naois Belvoir was saying. "If she refuses our offer, she will be permanently incarcerated here. We'll have no loose cannons at the Citadel."

"Bringing her here was not the wisest move you've ever made, Lord Bevyn, but it is reasonable under the circumstances," Lord Dunham Tarnes remarked. "We certainly could not have allowed her to run loose among the general population, not with her abilities."

"I understand she aided you on the train?" Lord Naois inquired.

"Aye, Your Grace," Bevyn agreed, taking the Prime Reaper's warning to heart that he speak as little as possible while before the High Council.

"And you saw her dematerialize?"

"Aye, Your Grace."

"Fascinating," Lord Naois observed. "That is a trick she must teach our men if possible."

His skin was on fire and itching so badly he had to dig his fingernails into his palms to keep from moving. Though he kept his eyes straight ahead – at a point just above the High Lord's head – his eyelids were flickering as he tried to maintain his control.

"You are hurting, aren't you?" Lord Kheelan asked.

"Aye, Your Grace," Bevyn replied.

Lord Kheelan nodded and the Prime Reaper reached into his pocket and extracted a vac-syringe, the contents of which he injected quickly and efficiently into Bevyn's neck. A long sigh of relief followed the hiss of pain the thick med brought to the Reaper.

"We can not have you greeting your lady in a state of severe discomfort," Lord Dunham said. "That would not be fair to her."

"And she is the innocent one in this," Lord Naois added.

Bevyn wanted to ask if he would be allowed to keep her but Arawn had already cautioned him not to.

"More than likely they will not take her from you but let them be the ones to give you the decision on their own terms and in their own time. If you piss them off, they're as liable to deny your keeping her as not," the Prime Reaper had warned. "Don't bring it up."

"Look at me, Lord Bevyn," Lord Kheelan ordered.

Bevyn lowered his gaze and met the eyes of the High Lord.

"Do you love this woman?"

"With all my heart, Your Grace."

"Will you be her friend as well as her lover, a faithful partner who will honor and support her, respect her as your mate and cherish her as the only mate you will ever have?"

"I will, Your Grace," Bevyn said.

"Will you protect her in good times and in bad, through joy as well as sorrow, see to her comfort in sickness and in health?"

Bevyn's heart did a strange little jump in his chest for he realized these were closely akin to Joining vows he was making yet he did not hesitate.

"Aye, Your Grace. I swear before all that is holy that I will," he said, tears blurring his vision.

"Then we entreat you never to leave her or to return from following after her for where you go so will she go, and where you stay she will stay. Your people will be her people and your goddess will be her goddess. Should you break even one of these vows to us, we will remove her from your care. Do you understand?" Lord Kheelan asked.

"I do, Your Grace," Bevyn said, his heart now pounding in his chest.

"At ease, Reaper."

Bevyn shifted his feet apart and put his hands behind him, his right hand gripping his left wrist at the small of his back.

"Lord Arawn, escort Lady Lea into our presence," the High Lord bid.

The Prime Reaper nodded and took one step back, pivoting gracefully on the ball of his foot before striding to the door. He opened it with a smile. "Lady Lea, would you join us please?" he asked.

Lea stared at the handsome man who stood in the doorway as she got to her feet. He had dark hair and amber eyes like Bevyn's, but appeared to be a few years older than her Reaper. In his left ear was a small gold hoop and the tattoo on the left side of his face was different from Bevyn's, but he wore the same black silk shirt and black leather uniform pants as did Bevyn. He was tall and muscular—another version of Bevyn with a smile just as white and even.

"I am Arawn," he said as she came to him.

"It is a pleasure, Lord Arawn," she said, looking up in his gentle eyes.

"Just Arawn, Lea," he said, and shut the door behind her. He walked beside her to the front of the room.

Lea was intimidated by the three older men who sat on a dais in front of which Bevyn was standing, his back to her. Clothed in dark gray robes, they were sitting so still she might well have thought them statues had not the one in the middle blinked.

"There is no need to be afraid of us, Lady Lea," the man said. "We won't bite unless you ask us to." He—like his fellow Shadowlords—was sitting forward in his chair, his hands clasped on the top of the desk.

"And then only very gently," said the one on the right.

"And neatly," the other agreed.

Lea couldn't keep from smiling. "I am grateful then, Your Graces, for I believe I will pass on being bitten."

"She is a very lovely lady, Lord Bevyn," the man on the left said. "I can see why you would give your heart into her keeping."

"I am Lord Kheelan," the man in the middle said. "The man on my right is Lord Naois and on the left is Lord Dunham. We are the High Council."

"Your Graces," she acknowledged with a clumsy curtsy.

"First, let us put your mind at ease," Lord Kheelan said. "Since Lord Bevyn has sworn to protect you and honor you as his mate, we will not remove you from his care unless he proves himself unworthy of you."

"A situation we do not feel will happen," Lord Dunham stated.

Relief flooded through Lea's body. The blood was rushing through her head and she felt faint at such wonderful news.

"Nevertheless," Lord Kheelan said. "Your mate acted without the sanction of the High Council and because he did, he must atone for his transgression."

Lea lifted her chin. "I understand that, Your Grace, and I am prepared to stand beside him and undergo whatever punishment you see fit to extend to me."

Lord Kheelan blinked again then sat back in his chair. "Milady, you are not the one at fault here," he said.

"I beg to disagree, Your Grace," she said. "I am a firm believer that if a woman stays in her place, the man will be forced to. I opened the door for Lord Bevyn and he walked through. I am as much at fault as is he."

Bevyn's pride in his woman soared. He could feel Arawn's respect as well and though he dared not turn his head to look at either one—Lea on his right and the Prime Reaper on his left—he could not stop the smile from twitching at his lips.

"I see," Lord Kheelan said. He folded his arms over his chest. "You are far wiser than your stubborn Reaper, milady. He believes he instigated the entire situation."

"Not so, Your Grace," Lea stated. "I desired him as much as he desired me."

Lord Kheelan tilted his head to one side. "And why is that, milady, other than the fact that he is a prime specimen of maleness?"

Lea relaxed under the High Lord's steady gaze for she sensed an ally in this man despite the fact that he was not smiling. His eyes were kind.

"Because I saw his loneliness, Your Grace, and it echoed my own," she said softly.

There was complete silence in the room for a long time. The three men on the dais were looking at her with unwavering attention and she could have sworn she saw moisture glinting in Lord Kheelan's gaze. When he spoke to her, he had to clear his throat before he could begin for it seemed he was finding it difficult to speak.

"Milady, you have our deepest admiration and our fondest wishes that your life with Lord Bevyn will be a long and fruitful one. We pray that happiness will ever be a guest in your home," Lord Kheelan said in a gruff voice.

Bevyn's lips were trembling when the High Lord shifted his attention to the Reaper 2-I-C.

"Lord Bevyn?" Lord Kheelan queried.

Bevyn snapped to attention at the tone.

"You are to take your lady to your quarters and make sure she is comfortable. We will give you one hour in which to say your goodbyes to her before you are to report to Level One," the High Lord ordered. "Do not waste a moment of that time in showing your lady what a true treasure she is. You are dismissed. Send in that annoying Amazeen."

"Aye, Your Grace!" Bevyn said. "Thank you, Your Grace!" He saluted then reached out for Lea's hand, tugging her with him as he started for the door.

"Reaper?" Penthe questioned as Bevyn and Lea came out.

"They want you in there," was all Bevyn said. "Hop to, wench, or you'll be sorry!"

Bevyn kept up a running commentary as he pulled Lea with him up the stairs to the fourth floor. He was like a little boy showing off his proudest possessions.

"There are ten suites on this floor. We each have our own suite and it's huge!" he said. "If you don't like the way it's painted or the furniture, just tell Giles and he'll get it changed."

"I'm sure I'll love it, milord," she said, stumbling along behind him, her skirt hiked up to keep from stepping on it.

"There's a big marble tub and a thing they call a shower," he said as he let go of her hand to press his palm against a strange-looking black glass panel to the side of the door. "It's like a mini waterfall and I've spent hours under it."

"Hours?" she questioned, not believing that for a moment.

"Reapers can't swim but they love water," he said as the door swung open as if by unseen hands.

The room into which he led her was the most wondrous thing she had ever seen. A large sitting room was illuminated at one end by a long bank of windows that overlooked the scorched plain, but beyond was the North Sea and the view took her breath away.

"Oh Sweet Merciful Alel," she whispered as she stared at the view. "Is that the sea?"

"Aye," he said. "And you can sit on the settee and stare at it all you like!"

There were three large settees, each of which had to be at least six feet long, that had been placed before the windows—one to either side and the other sitting at one end between the other two. A huge square table loaded with candlesticks both fat and tall covered the glass-topped table.

"I like to light them at night and just sit and watch the light reflected in the window," he told her.

Lea looked at him and recognized the loneliness in his tone. "We'll sit and watch the light together, milord," she said.

A grand piano sat in one corner of the room.

"I don't play," he said. "Do you?"

"As a matter of fact I do," she said. "Not well, but I do play."

"That's wonderful!" he said, and hugged her. "I can't wait to hear you."

"Well—"

He didn't give her a chance to finish for he was showing her the rest of the parlor. There were no curtains on the window, but curious things he called blinds that could be drawn across to conceal the glass. Finishing out the room in one corner was a tableau of two very comfortable-looking chairs with footrests flanking a small table with a lamp where he told her he spent many an hour reading. Behind the chairs on the two adjacent walls were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves groaning beneath the weight of many tomes.

“Most of them came from the lowest level,” he told her, running a hand gently and respectfully across the spine of a large book. “They’re not mine but I think of them as belonging to me.”

Before Lea could comment on that, he had grabbed her hand to show her what he called the galley.

It was a kitchen complete with large stove, an icebox, huge sink and so many cabinets and so much countertop space it would have done a hotel proud.

Next he took her past the formal dining room with its table large enough to seat twelve diners, down a short hall to the first bedroom.

“It’s one of two guest rooms but no one’s ever slept there,” he said, tugging her toward the last room he wanted to show her. “And this is our room.”

Lea’s mouth dropped open. The room was larger than the parlor and in the very center of one long wall sat the largest bed she’d ever seen.

“It could sleep three people comfortably,” he told her with a wicked gleam in his eye.

Made of brass, the bed’s headboard and footboard posts had to be as large—or larger—than her thigh. It was massive with swirls that caught the faint light from the rainy day. She knew it would be stunning in the full light of the sun.

Though the walls were a pale shade of green she found very pleasing, the rust-colored coverlet on the bed clashed horribly with the green-and-wine-plaid drapes at the window. The carpeting was a deep burgundy and so plush under the foot she felt as though she were sinking into it. She knew the only thing she’d change would be the horrendous coverlet.

“And in here’s the bathing room!” he said, his eyes bright.

Nothing could have prepared her for the opulence of the bathing chamber. As large as her mother’s parlor had been when Lea still lived at home, the room was tiled in a paler shade of green than the bedchamber walls, and the floor was tiled in dark green with flecks of gold running through the pattern. A black marble tub large enough to fit four people sat in one corner beside a glassed-in area Bevyn labeled the shower. The necessary was a beautiful black marble fixture with a handle he told her had been cast from pure gold. Dual black marble sinks had been sunken into a long counter with a mirror that covered nearly one entire wall behind the golden faucets.

“It is amazing,” Lea breathed.

“Now, time’s wasting. Let’s have sex,” he said, dragging her back through the bathing room.

“What?”

He pulled her to the bed, scooped her up and tossed her to the center of the bed, ripping off his shirt as she bounced on the mattress. Buttons pinged against the wall.

“Bevyn!” she chastised.

He was hopping on one foot as he yanked off a boot. "Sex," he said. "We're going to have sex. No argument."

She lay there braced on her elbows with her legs splayed, skirt hiked up to her knees, watching him discard his clothing, and when he was entirely naked, before he could throw himself on her, she held up a hand.

"What?" he whined.

"Why didn't you just poof your clothes away, Reaper?" she asked, trying not to laugh at his expression.

Bevyn's eyebrows slashed together then he slapped his forehead with the base of one palm. "Shit," he mumbled. "I didn't think of that!"

She lay down and held her arms up to him. "Come here, you bad man."

The Reaper grinned so manically, she could not keep from laughing as he came crashing down on her, pressing her to the bed as he fumbled her skirts up higher and cupped her between her thighs.

"Gods-be-damned bloomers! What a fucking nuisance!" he snarled, and in one lithe movement divested her of the offending garment, ripping them as they caught on the heel of her slipper.

He snatched off her slippers, tore off her stockings and nudged her legs apart, his hand going to her breast. His head swiveled toward the clock on the bedside table. "Forty minutes. I've got forty minutes."

Lea reached both hands to his face and turned his head toward her. "Bevyn," she said in a reasonable voice. "It only takes ten minutes to fully satisfy a woman. In forty, you could bend our world, my love."

"But it'll have to last us, wench," he said, his eyes filled with pleading. "I'll be gone a week and—"

"I will miss you every second you are away but when you return, just imagine how intense the reunion will be," she said calmly.

"Intense?" he echoed.

"*Very* intense," she said. "Now slow down and make love—not sex—to your woman."

She could feel his heart slamming against his chest, the heated pulsing of his erect cock stabbing against her stomach as he slid gently down her until he was lying between her thighs, nudging her legs farther apart. His hand shook as he softly kneaded her breast.

"I love you," he said, his heart in his gaze.

"I know, milord," she said. "And your love is returned a hundredfold."

It was slow, sweet love he made to her then. Gentle, caring, filled with the most tender expression of his emotions any man could ever express. The world and its problems were thrust aside. His impending punishment no longer hovered at the back

of his mind. All he cared about, thought about, wanted was to show his lady how much he loved her and needed her and would miss her.

His lips were soft as they plied hers. His tongue was a sweet, gentle caress slipping into her mouth to sweep across her lips and tickle her pallet, run between her bottom teeth and lip. His breath was warm and smelled of lemon drops.

Lea's hands were in his hair, stroking the thick curls, scratching lightly, seductively along his scalp. She tugged playfully at the deep waves and smoothed them back from his high forehead, meeting his needy gaze with a sultry one of her own.

"By the gods, you are my very heart, Lea Walsh," he told her.

His hand was on her breast, lightly kneading the fullness. He dipped his head and kissed her nipple through the fabric of her gown and chemise.

"Undress me, my man," she said. "Let me feel every inch of you."

He did not need a second invitation. Pushing to his knees, he knelt between her legs and helped her to sit up, drew her dress over her head, the chemise following in a heartbeat. His hands shook as he molded them to her lush bosoms.

"I never thought to know such happiness, sweeting," he told her. "I never thought I would find any kind of peace this side of the grave."

She put her fingers to his lips and smiled gently then lay down, her hands to either side of her head, his still on her breasts.

Bevyn stretched out atop her and took one glorious mound into his mouth, laving the nipple sweetly, flicking his tongue across it, swirling around it, drawing it deeply into his mouth. As her fingers threaded through his hair, he suckled her.

His weight crushed her in such a glorious way, Lea wondered how she had ever existed without it. It was as though it was a part of her, he was a part of her, and she would never be whole again were she to lose him. At that sweet moment of feeling him pressing her into the mattress, his strong, muscular body imprisoning hers, she could almost see herself accepting that part of him she found so repulsive, so she could be with him like this for as long as they both drew breath.

But it was a fleeting thought as he moved to her other breast to worship the sweetness there. She knew she would be hard-pressed to take into her body such a revolting thing as the parasite that lived within his no matter how much she loved him. The thought of having to drink blood, to exist on the strong drug she watched him inject so painfully into his neck...

She shuddered.

Bevyn lifted his head, looked up in to her eyes, and at that moment she knew he had been intercepting her wayward thoughts. "You need not worry about it, sweeting," he said. "I swore I would not and I will not."

"I know," she said, and put her hands to his cheeks to draw his mouth to hers but her hands were trembling.

He slid up her, luxuriating in the feel of her hard little nipples pressing against his chest. Where they touched his flesh, they practically singed him. He shoved his hands beneath her rump and lifted her to him.

"Then know this," he said. "I belong only to you. No one else, nothing else matters. I will be yours for as long as you want me."

He slanted his mouth across hers and kissed her deeply, passionately, as he pressed his hard cock against her stomach.

Lea reached down to wrap her fingers around his shaft, arching her hips to make him move back so she could position him between her legs. As the tip of him touched her core, he drew in a harsh, ragged breath, barely able to contain the pleasure driving through him.

She slid him inside her then moved her hand so she could cup his buttocks, seating him deep within her. Her fingernails dug into the hard muscles of his cheeks to goad him into thrusting.

And thrust he did. He lifted her ass up even as she scored his with her short nails and he pumped into her slowly at first then with increased speed as their kiss deepened and his rod grew impatient. Her folds were like warm honey around him—slick and sweet and coating him with their combined juices. Her muscles flexed about him in sweet little pulses that set his blood to racing.

His cock swelled inside her to such an unbelievable degree he thought he would burst. He was driving into her with such power, such heat, such juicy thrusts, that she was now clinging to him, making little groaning sounds as he touched some part of her that was giving her great pleasure.

"Aye, milord," she whispered as she tore her mouth from his and put her lips to his ear. "Take your woman. Take her hard!"

Her words were like a prod to his ass and he felt it all the way through his lower body and into his belly. His cock leapt then strained then began slamming into her with such force the bed rocked beneath them.

Lea lifted her legs and locked them around his hips, her heel digging into the cleft of his ass as he drove into her with wild abandon. She closed her eyes and held her breath for the spasms were beginning deep inside her and she arched herself up, bearing down on his shaft.

"Merciful Alel," she heard him say as he became a frenzied engine pistoning into her. The bed no longer rocked, it shook beneath them, the headboard slamming against the wall.

"Come, my lover," she whispered in his ear as her climax shot over her. "Fill me!"

Bevyn shot hot and long into her sweet body, his head thrown back as he howled his release. His hips swiveled against her, pumped into her, ground down on her as he shuddered violently with the coming, his entire body wrapped in the most intense climax he'd ever known.

Her legs tightened around him as she came a second time—even more intensely than the first—and felt as though her insides would shatter with the glorious strength of the pleasure. She writhed beneath him, lapping up the very last of his juices like a woman dying of thirst. She moaned. She hissed. She gave herself entirely to the experience and when she collapsed—lying as still as death with him pressed heavily upon her—she knew she had been loved and loved well.

“If we don’t conceive a child from that, we never will,” she told him.

Bevyn lifted his head and looked down at her with such a shocked expression it frightened her. “C-Child?” he repeated.

“Aye, milord,” she said, her forehead creased with concern. “Did you not consider it?”

He shifted off her, pulling free of her intimate hold on his cock and practically fell beside her, one arm draped over his eyes. She’d broached this subject the first time they lay together and he had pushed it aside then. He wanted to push it aside now, pretend she had not brought it up.

“Milord?” she questioned, sitting up, afraid of his reaction. “Did you not think it could happen?”

“It never crossed my mind. I didn’t want to think about it,” he said, and lowered his arm behind his head, looking up at her now with fear. “By the gods, Lea, women die giving birth.”

“Aye, some do but the majority don’t.

“I can’t lose you,” he said, and his eyes filled with tears. “Lea, I couldn’t live without you! I wouldn’t want to!”

She put her arms around him and drew him to her, his head to her shoulder and she comforted him, shushing him as he cried, his reaction so much more alarming than she could have ever imagined. She tried to calm him, but he would not be consoled. His hot tears ran down her breast and down her rib cage.

“You aren’t going to lose me, Bevyn,” she said. “The goddess did not give me to you for you to lose me.”

“She’s right, Reaper.”

Bevyn’s eyes popped open at the sound of the voice only he had heard. “*You swear?*” he asked.

“There will be no children for you, my Reaper. Not by her.”

A part of him rejoiced at hearing that but another part was wounded beyond belief. He gently probed Lea’s mind to see how she felt about children and was relieved to know she had no great desire to become a mother. He somewhat relaxed, though her next words raked at him with steely claws.

“Were I to conceive, we would be good parents to our child, milord,” she said.

“I know you would be,” he said, not so sure of his own ability to parent a child, Reaper son or not.

His eyes went to the clock and he saw he had only ten minutes left to be with his lady. Where had the time gone? It did not seem half an hour had passed. He would have to be up and dressed and gone far too soon. There were things he had to say to her before then and he had to get her mind off the subject of conceiving.

"Arawn will come fetch you for lunch and supper," he told her, lifting his head to rake a hand through his hair. "You'll be dining with him and the Gatekeepers each night."

"And Penthe?" she asked.

"I doubt the Gatekeepers would countenance that," he said. "They've no love for Amazeens."

"So I've noticed," she said.

"Arawn will give you a tour of the Citadel, if you'd like, and will show you the solarium. It's in the same section of the ground floor where the High Council has its facilities. There are some of the most exotic plants in the world in the solarium."

"That sounds nice," she said, and had to bite her lip when he eased out of her arms and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"Anything you want or need, just ask Giles. He'll provide it," he said, and stood.

She stared at the myriad scars that ranged down his back and cursed the woman who had been responsible for marring his perfect body.

"I'll be back in a week and then we'll be allowed to return to Orson," he said, and waved his hand, his black uniform settling in a flash over his tall frame.

"I like it here," she said.

He turned around to face her and she realized something new had been added to his uniform. He was now wearing a tie and collar insignia.

"We'll come here as often as we can then," he said, "but we'll also have our home in the Armistenky Territory."

"All right," she said, digging her fingers into the coverlet to keep from crying at his leaving.

"We'll have our own private railroad cars now with a steward who will be assigned to us, if you'd like," he said.

"I don't think I would, but whatever you decide is fine with me," she said, and could feel the moisture striving to break free behind her eyes.

"I don't care one way or the other so if you don't want it, we won't have it. We can ask for something else," he said.

"Like what?" she asked, although at that moment she didn't care about having anything except him in her arms, which were already feeling the emptiness of his leaving.

"I don't know," he said. "We'll talk about it when I come back."

“All right,” she agreed, and drew in a breath as he turned to walk out of her life for a week that she knew would be sheer hell for the both of them.

“I love you,” he said, his back to her, aching to rush back to her, hold her, but if he did, he knew it would be difficult to break free again.

“I love you too, milord.”

“Take care.”

“I’ll be with you in your heart,” she whispered.

Bevyn squeezed his eyes shut and left the bedroom. Every step he took away from her was an agony that ripped at his very soul. The coming week would be a torment far worse than anything Kennocha’s torturers had practiced on his body. When he opened the door to find two brown-clad guards awaiting him, his shoulders slumped. The Shadowlords had not trusted him to come on his own and he wasn’t sure he could have.

Epilogue

Bevyn took the bandana from around his head and dipped it into the bucket of water, wrung it out then retied it around his hair, pulling the ends behind his head and tucking them up. He was stripped to the waist and sweating, his face burning from the furnace blast of the sun's heat.

"You reckon it could get any hotter?" Burt Gilbert, one of the men helping the Reaper paint, asked.

"Only in the Abyss, my friend," Bevyn agreed. His chest was streaking with white paint and he had a smudge of it on his cheek.

"We didn't pick the best day to be slinging paint," Buford Gilchrist mumbled. The sheriff had been complaining all morning.

"He don't look none the worse for wear," Cornelia observed as she rocked in her chair and plied a battered wicker fan.

"He says it wasn't bad, but he would say that anyway," Lea said as she sewed a button on one of his shirts.

"Suppose so," Cornelia agreed.

"There was this look in his eyes when he came back," Lea said, pausing with the needle in the air. She studied her man. "It was bad. I could tell, but he didn't want me to know."

"Don't dwell on it, girl," Cornelia told her. "It's over and done with."

"It hurts me that I was the cause of him suffering," Lea said.

Bevyn turned and gave his lady a comical look, crossing his eyes to make her laugh.

Lea giggled and looked down at the shirt.

"He reads minds, don't he?" Cornelia asked.

"Aye, he does," Lea said with a sigh.

"Not a good thing in a husband," Cornelia said.

Lea shook her head. Although they had made no formal vows, were not legally joined, she thought of him as her husband and when he introduced her to people who did not know them, he introduced her as Lea Coure, a name she was very proud to bear.

"What about that Amazing woman?" Cornelia inquired.

"The Amazeen?" Lea corrected. "She stayed behind at the Citadel. The last I heard of her—the last I *ever* hope to hear of her—was that she would be helping train the marshals and sheriffs, the lawmen who help the Reapers in the territories. Lord Kheelan

made her a captain in the security section and she is also in charge of punishments for the lawmen. She seemed content enough with her lot."

"She looks the sort to enjoy punishing a man," Cornelia stated. "Reckon her people will ever come after her?"

"If they do, they won't get her," Lea said. "Not out of the Citadel. The Shadowlords have some kind of defense thing that doesn't allow entry by outsiders." She looked up from the shirt to watch Bevyn as he swept his arm up and down over the boards, the muscles in his broad back flexing with each circuit. "Not unless the goddess allows it, I suppose."

Bevyn stooped over to put his paintbrush in the can then lifted his arm to wipe his forehead.

"Your man looks hot," Cornelia told her. "Best go take him some lemonade, I reckon."

Lea laid the shirt down on the table between the two rockers and got up. She went to the frosty pitcher of lemonade and stepped off Cornelia's porch to the garden shed her Reaper and his friends had built for the black woman and were now painting.

"The gods bless you, milady!" Burt said as he saw her coming.

Bevyn turned around and smiled. "I've got her well trained, men."

"Humpf," Lea snorted as she poured first Burt then Buford a glass, leaving her sweaty, grinning lover the last to receive the cold lemonade.

"Remind me not to volunteer to build anything else," Bevyn told her as he took the glass and rubbed it over his forehead.

"Does your head hurt?" she asked, frowning. "Are you having one of your migraines?"

"Nope," he said. "Just hot." He took a big swig of the lemonade, a bit of it trickling down his chin, and he tipped his head back to drink.

"You sure?" she queried. He was prone to vicious headaches that sometimes resulted in her having to give him an extra dose of tenses.

"The only aching head I've got, wench, is between my legs," he said with a feisty grin.

"Way too much information," Burt grumbled. "Didn't need that image in my mind, Reaper."

Bevyn cracked ice between his strong white teeth, grinning like a little boy at Burt and the sheriff, wagging his brows at them.

"Behave," Lea told him as she turned to go back up to the porch and relative cool, but she gasped as her man snaked an arm around her waist and drew her to him, slamming her against his sweaty chest. "Bevyn!" she shrieked.

The Reaper lowered his head and nuzzled her neck, whispered something in her ear before she slapped at his naked chest and pushed him away, him laughing

uproariously at her red face. She took off as though the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels, looking over her shoulder at him as she hurried away.

"What did you say to make her run off like that, Bev?" Buford asked.

"And what's she running over to your house for in such an all-fired hurry, Reaper?" Burt inquired.

"I just reminded her how much sugar was in that pitcher of lemonade," Bevyn said, pulling off his bandana and striding purposefully after his lady, a wide, wicked grin on his handsome face.

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 40 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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