

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*Pleasure's Foehn*

*Charlotte Boyett-Compo*

PLEASURE'S FOEHN  
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# **PLEASURE'S FOEHN**

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

## Chapter One

Davan Shanahan was having a bad day. To say she was having a bad hair day would have been an understatement. She was having a horror hair day for her hair looked as though she'd placed her hand on the antique Van de Graaff generator at the Space Museum. Every dark auburn hair on her head seemed to be repelling each other and was standing on end. Staring at herself in the highly polished stainless steel doors of the elevator, she tried to smooth down the flyaway hairs escaping the tight bun she'd tortured her waist-length hair into that morning. Despite spritzing her thick curls with water, plastering it down with an old-fashioned hair lacquer, the shorter strands insisted on reaching skyward.

"I look like a walking dust bunny!" Davan complained as she allowed her shoulders to sag in defeat.

It hadn't help that she'd bumped into Lieutenant Ja'Klyn as they both hurried to the elevator earlier. Ja'Klyn's cup of hot chocolate had splashed onto the front of Davan's freshly pressed white uniform shirt and left a dark stain just over the right breast.

"What's with your hair today, Davie?" Ja'Klyn inquired. He also was staring at Davan's reflection in the mirror-like doors.

"I don't know," Davan complained with a whine. "When I got up, it was sticking up like this. Nothing seems to help!"

"Don't tell me all that tumbling around in the sack last night did that to your hair," he said. "I'm good but I ain't that good."

"Get over yourself, Veesi," she insulted him. "You're adequate at best."

Ja'Klyn pressed against her. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you sigh something like, 'Oh, Ja'Klyn, you really know how to trip my trigger and flip my switch'?"

"I did not!" Davan replied with a snort. "As I recall you were playing with your own trigger."

"Did I leave your switches un-flicked, Shanahan?" he inquired, one dark eyebrow lifted in challenge.

"No," she said, "but you certainly didn't curl my hair, either."

Ja'Klyn turned to look at his companion's mussed hair. "Well, I might not have curled it, baby, but it sure looks like I made it stand up to attention."

"I look like a hairball," she lamented.

The young officer's lips twitched. "You could always do a Khadeeja," he quipped.

Davan threw her elevator companion a squint-eyed look. "And you could always do a Majib," she responded.

Ja'Klyn winced. "Ouch," he said, flexing his shoulders. "That was cutting pretty low, Davie."

Both burst out laughing and as the elevator door swooshed open on the main deck, they were still chuckling. Bidding one another a good day, they went their separate ways—Ja'Klyn to the bridge and Davan treading reluctantly to the captain's office.

Yeoman Orion glanced up from her computer screen as Davan entered and did a double take. "What happened to your hair?"

Davan sighed heavily. "I wish I knew." She nudged her chin toward the door to the captain's inner sanctum. "Is he ready for me?"

"He's on a conference unit with Fleet Command. It'll be awhile, ma'am."

"Should I come back?"

"It won't be long. I suggest you wait," Orion said and was unable to take her eyes from Davan's frizzy hair.

Feeling the weight of the yeoman's stare like a heavy stone on her shoulder, Davan hung her head and walked over to a chair, taking a seat.

"Do you know how long Lt. Chid is going to be in the brig, Doc?" Orion asked.

"No, I don't. Why?"

Orion shrugged. "Lt. Kenna is a good friend of mine. I told her to leave Lt. Veesi alone but you're a friend of his. You know how he is."

Davan blinked. "I don't understand. What about her and Lt. Veesi?"

The yeoman lowered her voice. "He's been *seeing* both of them, Doc. Chid found out about Kenna and then all hell broke lose."

Shocked by the revelation, Davan's day just got even worse. She slumped down in the chair and buried her eyes behind her hand.

What should have been only a few minutes turned into an hour and Davan felt herself dozing off. As she drifted on a languid cloud of relaxation, her mind wandered back to the night before when she had discovered a remarkable bliss in the arms of Ja'Klyn Veesi...

*It had started with a stroll along the promenade in the Regent Room on the holograph deck under a misty moon woven with strands of fog. Waves gently lapped the creaking wood as they passed over the arched bridge and the smell of night jasmine filled the air.*

*Her hand was tucked possessively in the crook of Ja'Klyn's arm, her fingers resting on the soft brocade of his coat. The clank of his sword as he walked made her feel safe as they strolled the midnight air of Olde Towne.*

*"There is a sweet softness to the night that rivals the silk of your skin, milady," Ja'Klyn complimented her.*

*"Go on with you, sir," Davan responded. She could feel the heat of her blush as it crept across the low décolleté of her fashionably cut ball gown and lifted her free hand to whisk the air surrounding her face with a delicate ivory lace fan.*

*"Shall we sit awhile?" he asked, arching his hand toward an ornate wrought iron bench.*

*They had this particular suite of the holograph deck to themselves, having booked it well in advance of that evening. The door was securely locked and no prying eye was there to see what went on in the privacy of the program Ja'Klyn had written for them.*

*Davan gracefully swept the skirt of her satin gown aside and sat down, sighing as Ja'Klyn's arm went behind her back to pull her gently to him. She laid her head upon his broad shoulder.*

*"I fear I drank far too much champagne at the ball, Lord Veesi," Davan said, fanning the air more briskly. "I am surely overheated."*

*"Not as overheated as I hope to make you, my love," her companion responded and crooked his finger under her chin to tilt her face up to his. With sweet perfection, he claimed her lips with his and drew upon their honey.*

*Davan's pulse quickened as she felt his hand move to her breast and mold around the softness.*

*"Milord Veesi!" she whispered and sucked in a quick breath as his thumb hooked downward past the pale blue satin to pluck a turgid nipple from its precarious covering.*

*She dropped the fan and threaded her fingers through his thick brown hair as he trailed light kisses down her chin and throat and onto the shivering expanse of her chest. When his mouth closed over the exposed nipple, she let her head fall back, giving herself up to the delicious plying of his practiced lips.*

*Somewhere in the distance a loon called to its mate and was answered in a mournful echo. The water lapped against the shore behind the bench and lent a rhythm to the night, which seemed to imitate his actions – swelling and retreating, washing over and laving.*

*"Sweet," Ja'Klyn said as he dragged his tongue over her sensitive peak then nipped the swollen bud with his teeth.*

*"Ahhhhh," Davan moaned.*

*His firm hand was on the skirt of her gown, pulling upward with gentle and smooth little tugs. As the fabric retreated from her stocking-less legs, she felt the chill of the night air and the damp of the mist pebbling her flesh.*

*"You are the most beautiful woman in the entire kingdom," Ja'Klyn told her. "Surely, I believe, the most beautiful in the entire world."*

*"No," she protested as his fingers slid along the curve at the underside of her knee.*

*"Aye, but you are."*

*He took her hand and pressed it to the front of his britches. "He thinks as I do," he whispered in her ear. "Do you not feel his great approval?"*

*Beneath her hand, Ja'Klyn's cock was as hard as iron. It leapt at her touch and seemed to grow even larger beneath her palm. She withdrew her hand from his grip and placed it at her throat.*

*"You go too far, milord," she protested.*

*"Not nearly far enough, milady," he disagreed and slipped to his knees before her, gently shoving her skirts up around her hips and pushing her legs apart so he could position himself in front of her.*

*"Sir!" she gasped. "What are you about?"*

*"Nine inches, give or take a few," Ja'Klyn mumbled and dipped his head between her legs.*

*Shocking sensation spread over Davan like a warm blanket on a cold night. Shivers of excitement rippled through her lower body and she buried her fingers in Ja'Klyn's sable curls and held on as though he was her only anchor in a passion-swept sea. As his tongue slithered along her thighs and briefly touched the swollen bud of her passion, she let out a yelp that brought a chuckle from deep in his chest.*

*Before she could stop him, his mouth had latched onto that pearly button of pleasure, and his wicked tongue was making quick little stabs along the sensitive nub.*

*Warmth moved through the lower part of her belly and she began to pant as sensation after sensation built within her. The heat of his tongue, the smoothness of it dragging along the folds of her vagina was exquisite and when he flicked that devilish muscle into the core of her – stabbing deep – she let out a shriek of pleasure that brought her back to wakefulness.*

*"Ma'am? Doctor Shanahan?"*

*Davan's pale green eyes snapped open and she jumped as Yeoman Orion's face swam into view over the lusty smile of Ja'Klyn.*

*"What?" Davan queried, shaking off the last remnants of her bawdy dream.*

*"I asked if you were aware you have a blotch on your shirt?" Orion inquired.*

*Davan looked down at the offending stain. "Aye, and I should have changed. If I'd known I was going to have to wait this long –"*

*A chime sounded on Orion's Vid-Com and the yeoman informed Davan the captain was ready to see her.*

*Davan nodded and got up quickly, anxious to put distance between her and Orion. She walked to the captain's door, placed her hand against the ID inset and the door opened soundlessly.*

*Captain Bolivar's eyes widened and his lips parted as Davan came in. "What the hell is wrong with your hair?"*

*Davan shook her head. "I don't know," she replied. Her cheeks were flushed a dull red.*

*The captain snapped his mouth shut. "Well, do something about it. It is very disconcerting."*

*"Aye, Sir," Davan agreed as she reached up to try smoothing down her errant follicles.*

*"Very disconcerting," the captain repeated, motioning for Davan to sit down.*

*Taking a seat before the captain's desk, Davan's shoulders slumped. She started to reach up to try to smooth down her hair but let her hand drop to her lap.*

"And did we enjoy our morning beverage a little too quickly today?" the captain inquired, leaning back in his chair, steepling his fingers under his chin.

"A bit of a mishap in the elevator, Sir," Davan told him. "I apologize for my appearance and would have gone back to change but I was already running late and —"

Waving away the explanation, the captain resumed his prayer-like position. "Just do something with that hair, Doc. It is very disconcerting."

Davan sighed again. "Aye, Sir."

"Well, let's get down to business." The captain cocked his head to one side. "How is Lieutenant Majib this morning?"

"He was resting comfortably when I looked in on him at 0600," Davan answered. "It'll be a day or two before he's up and about."

The captain echoed Davan's sigh. "What could the man have been thinking mutilating himself in that manner?"

"It is part of their culture, Sir," Davan reminded him. "To us it is self-mutilation but to the Esvar, it is a rite of passage for young men who wish to join the monkhood after completion of their military obligation."

"But to slice off your penis..." The captain shuddered. "Just the thought of it makes me ill. It is very..."

"Disconcerting," Davan provided, striving to keep a straight face.

"Precisely!" the captain declared.

Davan looked down at her hands, which were folded primly in her lap. She knew she was about to get a new assignment and was afraid it would be back to Centauri Prime instead of to the warfront where she longed to be.

"And Khadeeja's wounds? Are they healing without difficulty?"

"We had a bit of a problem with one of the wounds, but there shouldn't be any further worries."

"What the hell is my crew thinking?" the captain grumbled. "Majib snips off his dangly. Lieutenant Chid stabs her bunkmate with a meat fork and Counselor Khadeeja pulls out plugs of her hair in a fit of pique!"

"I believe it was more than a fit of pique, Sir. The Counselor was enraged when she learned her father had betrothed her to a Satyrian." Davan frowned. "I think I'd be enraged, too."

"They are not as bad as people think," the captain snapped. "I spent four years on a Satyri outpost. They were nothing but polite and respectful to me."

"That may be true, Sir, but Satyrian men are not known for being faithful to their spouses, and they have a tendency to expect their wives to pleasure their friends as well. To a woman of Counselor Khadeeja's, ah, sensibilities, such a fate was devastating."



"Well, see, now that is disconcerting as well!" the captain said, pouncing on Davan's explanation. "It is unnatural for women to mate with other women. Khadeeja's father most likely felt the deep shame of his daughter's abnormal predilection and that is why he betrothed her to a strong male like Governor Hadib's son."

Davan flinched. "Sir, lesbianism isn't abnormal. Studies have shown—"

"I don't want to hear it!" Captain Bolivar interrupted. "Discussing such aberrant behavior makes me ill."

Clamping her lips closed against the narrow-minded intolerance of her captain, Davan looked back down at her hands, tightening the grip her left hand had on her right.

"At any rate, we're here to discuss your new temporary assignment," the captain said. He stared intently at Davan until she looked up at him. A slow smile eased over his thin lips. "You got your wish, Doc. You're going to the war zone, TDY for six months."

Davan's eyes lit up. "May I ask when, Sir?"

A twinkle glinted in the captain's pale blue eyes. "Oh, the orders are effective immediately. You need to get there as quickly as possible for the physician you are replacing is anxious to leave. He is retiring at the end of the month. A shuttle is being fueled for Aduaidh Quadrant even as we speak and I took the liberty of having a steward pack up your things for transport later."

"Aduaidh Quadrant," Davan repeated in a voice filled with awe. Her heartbeat had already sped up at the news that after two years she was being transferred off Bolivar's flying cargo ship the *Andraste* and into the war zone, but to find out she was being sent right into the thick of the fighting made her heart thud almost painfully in her chest. She felt giddy.

"I will, of course, hate to lose you, but I know you have been itching to get out where you believe your abilities can be better utilized."

Davan grimaced at the flippant way in which the captain dismissed her surgical training. She had graduated with high honors at the top of her class and had been proclaimed a brilliant diagnostician and skilled laser-surgeon by the academy's Dean of Surgery—no mean feat by any physician's standards.

"To which warship have I been assigned, Sir?"

The captain pursed his lips then hid them behind the camouflage of his steepled fingers. It was apparent he was trying not to laugh and a niggle of concern slithered down Davan's spine.

"Sir?" she questioned as the silence stretched out uncomfortably. "Which warship?"

The captain's cheeks tightened as he pressed his lips together tightly "Warship?" he finally queried. "You're not going to a warship, Doc."

Davan tensed. "A troop transport, then? A medivac shuttle?"

The captain shook his head slowly at each inquiry.

"A field hospital?"

Captain Bolivar could contain his laughter no longer and let out a choked-off guffaw. "You've been assigned to the *Foehn*!"

Davan felt as though someone had thrown a cold fish into her face. The name of the ship propelled her back in her chair—her eyes flared wide, her jaw dropped. She couldn't have spoken if her very life depended upon it. All she could do was stare at her captain as the man chuckled, reaching up to wipe the tears of humor from his eyes.

"I know, I know. I couldn't believe it, either, when the orders came down," the captain told her. "Not exactly what you were hoping for but you will be in the middle of the war zone."

"A pleasure ship?" Davan whispered. "I've been assigned to a flying brothel?"

The captain seemed to be making a supreme effort to control his mirth for his jowly face went through a succession of strained expressions before it finally settled into a smirk.

"They call them R&R vessels," he stated. "Well, actually the troops call them F&F for—"

"I know what they call them, Sir!" Davan said. Unthinking, she shot up from her chair and began pacing, her eyes shifting from side to side as the implication of her assignment weighed her down.

"Actually, it's a rather cushy assignment, Doc," the captain told her. "I know several men who'd give their left nuts to get assigned to the *Foehn* or her sister ship the *Samiel*."

"Aye, well, I'm not a man!" Davan snapped.

Captain Bolivar shrugged. "We all have our crosses to bear, don't we?" he joked.

Davan stopped pacing and faced him. She knew there was no way she could refuse an assignment. Every available warm body was needed to run the war machine. Her home world of Breasal along with its neighboring planets in the Aneas Quadrant had been engaged in fierce battle with the traitors from Aduaidh Quadrant and their Supreme Emperor The Burgon for six long years. Her parents had been aboard a medivac transport when it had been blown apart by a Skyraider warcruiser from Aduaidh Prime, The Burgon's home world. Each of her nine siblings and over thirty of her cousins had been drafted to fight. Two of her brothers had been lost to the fighting, one brother and her only sister were interned on Amerigen in a prison camp, and another was missing in action. Only the gods knew where the rest of her family had scattered.

"Look, Doc," the captain said. "I can only imagine the horrors our boys see every day of their lives out there on the front. Those who aren't maimed beyond their ability to enjoy life need the services provided by the R&R ships. They deserve a little rest and relaxation at the hands of a pretty female. Do you begrudge them that?"

"No, but—"

"It's only going to be for six months. That's the normal rotation for personnel on the pleasure ships."

"I understand, but —"

"And it is our responsibility to make sure those girls don't have something nasty lurking between their legs they can transmit to our boys."

Davan squinted, the thought of that *something nasty* making her look as though a bad smell had entered the office.

"I know I don't want any son of mine to come back from the war with a galloping case of pox or...worse yet...a hemorrhagic disease that might eventually kill him."

"We have cures for all the known hemorrhagic diseases, Sir," Davan mumbled.

"True, but do we know what other vile things those bastard Aduaidh Quadrant scientists may have discovered in their horror labs?" He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his desktop, his fingers threaded together beneath his sagging chin. "Or what they might be brewing up?"

The thought of the strange experiments she'd heard the Aduaidh Quadrant traitors were conducting on Riezell Nine made Davan shiver.

"I know it isn't the assignment you were hoping for and I feel bad you think you're going where you believe your talents will be wasted, but remember our boys, Doc. They are more important than ego, don't you think?"

"Ego?" Davan questioned. "It isn't ego, Sir. I —"

The captain's Vid-Com clicked on and Yeoman Orion informed them the shuttle was fueled and ready to leave for Cengus in the Aduaidh Quadrant.

"Have a pleasant trip, Doc," the captain said, his face schooled into an emotionless mask. "Take good care of our boys out there."

Knowing she was being dismissed and there was nothing she could do from this end, Davan clenched her jaw. "Thank you, Sir. Will that be all?"

"Ain't it enough?" Captain Bolivar chuckled.

Spinning on her heel, Davan marched to the door, barely able to contain the fury, which lashed out at her with barbed thongs. As she passed Yeoman Orion, she snatched her orders from the other woman's hand and continued out the office door, her spine rigidly straight as she stomped down the corridor.

"The shuttle is harnessed in Bay Five!" Orion called after her. "It's the *Toradh*!"

Davan threw up a hand to acknowledge she had heard but did not turn around. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips pursed tightly together and her breathing a harsh rasp dragging into her lungs, exploding as it was expelled. Those who passed her hardly noticed her mussed hair for the expression on her face was lethal.

Once in the elevator that would take her down seven decks to the docking bays, Davan stared at her reflection in the stainless steel doors and saw an image she barely recognized. The woman glaring back at her looked like something out of the history

pages of an old-fashioned textbook. She resembled the illustration of an ancient berserker warrioress of the Ghaoth Province she had once seen.

"A pleasure ship," Davan bit out from tightly clenched teeth. "A damned flying whorehouse!"

The elevator doors shushed open on the lower deck and Davan stepped out, mindless of the frenetic activity going on around her as she turned left and made her way to Bay Five.

"I'm going to a fucking brothel!" she complained loud enough for a technician standing close by to ask, "Is there any other kind?"

Davan turned a fierce scowl to the technician who had the good sense to hurry on about his business.

From the looks she was getting as she passed, her new assignment was common knowledge aboard the *Andraste*. The male crewmembers were grinning broadly and the female crewmembers were looking back at her with sympathy.

To make matters worse, it was Lieutenant Ja'Klyn who was standing outside the doors to the shuttle docked in Bay Five. Obviously, he was to be the pilot who would fly her to her shameful new job.

Davan groaned for Ja'Klyn had a wide smile on his handsome Farisian face.

Ja'Klyn unfolded his arms and placed his hands on his lean hips as Davan drew nearer. "Wanna ride, lady?" he called out.

"Get bent, Veesi," Davan snarled as she pushed past the lieutenant and marched onto the shuttle.

Ja'Klyn entered behind her and moved over to the command chair of the two-seat console. "Don't you want to ride up front with me?"

"I want to scream," Davan plopped down in one of the three jump seats ranged along the starboard hull. "I want to hit somebody," she growled as she hooked her safety harness. Glaring up at a man who had been more than just a friend over the past year, she gave him a baleful look. "I don't think you want to be that close to me right now!"

The lieutenant whistled. "That pissed, huh?"

"Pissed doesn't even begin to describe it, Veesi!"

"Veesi," Ja'Klyn repeated. "When you call me by my surname three times in one day, I know you are not a happy traveler." He worked his way through the engaging controls and the powerful engine roared to life.

"Why me?" Davan whined. "What the hell did I do to deserve this?"

"It might not be so bad, Davie," Ja'Klyn said.

"It's a fucking brothel!"

"I'm like Hurst. I didn't know there was any other kind," Ja'Klyn said, his lips twitching as he recalled the technician's comment.

"Oh, just shut up! I can't deal with your stupid sophomoric humor right now!"

Ja'Klyn shrugged then informed NavCon he was ready to leave and was given permission. With adroit skill, he eased the *Toradh* out of her docking harness and with engines in reverse, moved the shuttle out of Bay Five. Nosing the sleek vessel larboard, he expertly swung her around to face the portal through which he'd glide into the darkness of space beyond the *Andraste's* docking bays.

"Are they sending your stuff on later?" he asked as he lined up well behind a Class Four cruiser exiting the *Andraste* before him.

"And that's another thing," Davan complained. "I don't like having anyone go through my personal possessions. It feels almost like rape, you know?"

"Not really," Ja'Klyn replied. "Never had either thing happen to me."

"Well, I feel like I've been raped, ravaged and pillaged, Veesi, and lemme tell you – I don't like it one Saurian bit!"

"You'd never know it from watching all that steam coming out of your ears and nose," Ja'Klyn joked but when Davan would have cursed at him, he held up a hand. "No more flip remarks, okay? I know you're angry and I'm just trying to help."

"You aren't," Davan said then crossed her arms over her chest and turned her head away.

The Class Four shot out of the portal and Ja'Klyn gave the *Toradh* full throttle, following the much larger ship a little too quickly for the wash of the Class Four caused the shuttle to wobble slightly from left to right a few times before its pilot had it firmly under control.

"Add insult to injury by making me puke while you're at it!" Davan chided. She had never been the best of star travelers and motion sickness burned in her throat as the *Toradh* increased speed.

"Sorry," Ja'Klyn acknowledged. "You need something?"

"Yeah," Davan snapped. "A new set of orders."

"I meant for the nausea," Ja'Klyn said. "Do you need –?"

"No!"

The trip to the Aduaidh Quadrant would take an hour at top speed. They would pass three checkpoints past Defender-class vessels and a fourth ring of Class Two Guard outposts stationed at mile intervals around the planetoid where the *Foehn* was in orbit. The pleasure ships of the Amhantar Fleet were very well protected.

"Do you know who the captain is of that flying bordello?"

"Afraid not. I've never been aboard the *Foehn*," Ja'Klyn replied as Davan gave in and came to sit beside him in the other console chair. "But a fellow countryman of mine, Captain Isma'il Kadar, is in charge of the *Samiel*. I did R&R there a year ago."

"What's he like?" she asked as she buckled herself in. "Kadar, I mean."

"Stern but approachable. His father was one of the pioneers in hydrophysics on Altar Twelve. I imagine having his son on a pleasure ship doesn't thrill him."

"No, I would think not. I hate to consider what my parents would have thought and what my brothers are going to say when they find out."

"What about Eadan?" he asked, referring to her sister.

Davan frowned and grief lodged in her throat. "I imagine she'll think it's funny because she'll know I'm pissed about it."

Ja'Klyn reached out to cover Davan's hand. "Any word on their release yet?"

Davan shook her head. "Neither held a combat position so I can't imagine what the holdup is. We've exchanged hundreds of prisoners over the years, mostly from the same areas in which Eadan and Conaill work."

"At least Amerigen is classified as a minimum-security colony. I've heard it is well-run and the prisoners don't have any complaints."

"Aye," Davan said, rubbing her eyes with her fists. "It's certainly nothing like Utuk Xul. I've heard horror stories about that gods' awful place."

Davan closed her eyes and laid her head on the console chair's headrest. She hadn't slept much the night before and exhaustion was rapidly closing in on her. The warmth of Ja'Klyn's hand atop her own was comforting and she began to relax, letting the softness of the formfitting chair and the relative soundlessness of their flight lull her. Almost immediately, she was asleep.

She woke to a light shake and opened her eyes to find Ja'Klyn standing beside her.

"We're here."

"Here?" she repeated.

"On the *Foehn*."

Davan frowned, sleep having disoriented her momentarily. She sat up and unhooked her safety harness as the fog slowly peeled back from her memory and she remembered her new assignment. "Oh, the flying cathouse," she grumbled.

"I learned the captain is Cair Ghrian," Ja'Klyn said.

Davan looked up at him. "Who?"

"You heard me," Ja'Klyn said. "And no, I didn't get the name wrong. The Black Sun himself is the captain of the *Foehn*."

"What the heck would he be doing captaining a pleasure ship?"

"Like you, he must have pissed somebody off," Ja'Klyn responded.

"But he's a member of the royal family of Amhantar Province."

"Second in line for the throne. His brother Bennick is prince regent."

"Prince Cair was awarded the highest honor given at Fleet Command when he graduated," Davan said.

"Not every graduate is given the designation as a Deathwielder," her friend replied. "As I recall, little is known about that secret, elite group other than they're supposed to be right handy with a scytheblade."

"Aye, he's a Scythelord. I bet his family is really honored to have him on *the Foehn*," she commented.

"And he probably isn't all that happy about it himself," Ja'Klyn said.

"I don't need any more problems than this wretched assignment, Ja'Klyn," she said. "Let's hope Prince Cair will be understanding."

Ja'Klyn hunkered down beside Davan's chair. "I'm going to miss you, sweeting," he said.

Davan sighed. "All of what, ten minutes, Veesi?" she asked. "I know you've been seeing Lieutenant Kenna. I'm sure she'll keep you company when she recovers from her stab wound."

His eyes widening, Ja'Klyn's mouth dropped open. "Davan, I haven't—"

"That's the reason Chid stabbed Lieutenant Kenna, her bunkmate, isn't it? You were seeing Kenna during day shift when Chid was working mids," Davan accused as she unbuckled her harness. She held up her hand when Ja'Klyn would have denied the accusation. "I'm not a jealous woman, Veesi, but three women at once is a bit more than I'm willing to allow any man I'm seeing."

"I'll give the others up," he swore, hand to heart. "I will—"

"I don't want to discuss this any more," Davan said. "I've got enough on my plate right now." She stood. "Six months is a long time and a lot of things can change between now and the next time we see once another."

"What you're really saying is you want to see other men while we're apart," he said, coming to his feet.

"Oh, I'm sure I'll have the opportunity but I'm here to do my job then get the hell off this floating whorehouse," Davan said. "I'm not interested in seeing anyone else."

"Then there's still hope for—?" he began but she was shaking her head.

"Good luck with Kenna, Veesi. She's a lovely girl."

"So it's over between you and me?" he asked.

"Our intimacy was over the minute I found out about Chid," Davan said. She held out her hand. "But I still value your friendship."

Ja'Klyn looked down at her hand and sighed. "If that's the only way I can have you, I guess it'll do." He locked eyes with her. "But I'll always care deeply for you, Davie."

She smiled but made no comment to the philandering pilot's words.

The shuttle's airlock disengaged and Ja'Klyn motioned Davan to precede him from the vessel. Activity on the flight deck of the pleasure ship was minimal with only a handful of crew lounging about.

"Who's in charge here?" Ja'Klyn inquired.

"I am," a tall woman replied, striding forward with a swing of her ample hips. She looked him up and down and grinned saucily. "How long you gonna be here, stud?"

Ja'Klyn stiffened. "It's Lieutenant Stud to you and I regret to say I won't be staying. I've brought your new medic."

The woman shifted her gaze to Davan and frowned sharply. "A woman doctor? You've got to be kidding!"

"We're even allowed to vote in some parts of the Quadrant, you know," Davan quipped. "And I'm no more thrilled to be here than you are to have me."

Shaking her head, the woman crossed her hands several times in front of her. "That's not what I meant. It's just we've never had a woman doc before and I'm not sure the cap'n is going to like it."

"Surely he knows she's coming," Ja'Klyn injected.

"If he knows what day it is it would be a miracle," the woman said with a grunt.

"A bit of a problem with the good old Amhantarean brandy?" Ja'Klyn asked.

"More like a very big problem with it," the woman replied. "And he tied on a real beaut last night. I doubt he'll be up until tomorrow." She ducked her head. "And Doc Rabishu has already left. We had a troop transport leaving this morning and he hitched a ride. Couldn't wait to leave us, I guess."

"Oh, that's just great," Davan snapped. "So who do I need to report to, then?"

"Well," the woman said, scratching her head. "I suppose the cap'n's XO Lt. Dorrick. He's sleeping in, too, but he should be up in about an hour."

Davan glanced down at her watch. "It's past ten already. Did he tie one on as well?"

"No, but the cap'n doesn't like to drink alone. Amethyst was serving him four drinks to every watered-down one she was serving Dorrick."

"Amethyst being...?"

"Our tavern keeper," the woman said. "I'm her sister, Cinnabar Kyle, by the way." She held out her hand. "I'm in charge of the girls on the *Foehn* and also the quartermaster as well as the unofficial greeter."

Davan shook the woman's hand and was surprised at the strength in her slender fingers. "Well, why don't you just show me to my quarters?"

"All right." She looked at Ja'Klyn once more. "Sure you won't stay awhile?"

"Alas, I have to be on my way," Ja'Klyn said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Too bad. We have some very lovely Farisians here this rotation."

"He's not staying," Davan said, stressing the second word firmly.

Ja'Klyn shrugged. "I'll see you in six months, then."

Davan winced. "God, but that seems like an eternity."

"It'll pass off quickly enough," Cinnabar said. "We get transports in on the average of three a week, sometimes more. On any given week, we have fifty to sixty horny men coming on board. They stay a week—two depending on where they are stationed or if



they wind up in the brig while they're here. They raise a little hell then go back to the real hell. Cap'n keeps them in line so you don't have to worry about getting ravaged." She grinned. "Unless you want to, that is."

"Not damned likely," Davan stated.

Ja'Klyn put a hand on Davan's shoulder. "Take care, Davie," he said.

"You, too," she responded, her misery apparent in the green depths of her eyes.

Davan watched until the hatch to the shuttle closed over his handsome features.

"How long have you two been keeping company?" Cinnabar asked.

"Was it that obvious?" Davan asked, horrified that a complete stranger had picked up on the intimacy of her relationship with the pilot.

"When a man looks at a woman like he looked at you, there's a fire simmering there," Cinnabar told her. "Is it serious?"

Davan shrugged and ducked her head. "I'd really rather not discuss it."

"Who's she?"

The nasty tone of the question raised the hackles on Davan's back and she looked up to see a full-figured woman glaring at her.

"Don't start, Amethyst," Cinnabar warned.

Davan stared back at the newcomer and felt almost masculine in comparison with the beauty shooting daggers of dislike her way. From the glorious mane of red hair that fell to just below her creamy white shoulders, to lush, ruby-red lips, large breasts, tiny waist and provocatively flaring hips, the woman looked as though she had stepped out of an advertisement for physical enhancement. The only thing not lovely about her was the narrowed sky blue eyes, which speared Davan with lethal heat.

"I asked who this tart is?" the exquisite creature demanded in a low, throaty voice.

Davan's left eyebrow arched. "Tart?" she echoed.

"This is our new medical officer, Amethyst," Cinnabar explained. "Doc, this is my younger sister Amethyst."

"Doctor my ass!" Amethyst scoffed. She strode forward with a challenging strut. "The Fleet wouldn't dare send us a female doctor. The girls won't stand for it."

"I'd think the girls, as you call them, would be delighted," Davan countered. "After all, a woman doctor would certainly be —"

"Less inclined to take us seriously," Cinnabar said. "The girls can get away with things with a male doctor they can't with one of their own. I hate to say it, but Amethyst is right. They won't like it."

"Who are you really?" Amethyst demanded. "What kind of game are you playing, slut?"

Davan's grandmother had been born in Ghaoth Province and it was said Davan took after her wild side of the family tree where the bark was less rough than the bite.

Possessing an Amhantarean temper was a curse at times and not always an easy thing to get under control once the tether had been slipped.

"I don't know who you are," Davan said, her eyes narrowed. "But I know *what* you are. As long as I am the medical officer onboard this ship, you will show me the respect I am due and I'll attempt to treat you like a lady. How's that, sweetie?"

Amethyst blinked, obviously unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a manner. She drew herself up to her full six feet, her nose in the air. "You don't know who I am, do you?" she grated.

"Don't mess with her, Doc," Cinnabar said. "She's the cap'n's woman and —"

"I don't give a Saurian rat's prick what she is to your captain. While I am in charge of the medical unit, she will respect my position on this ship."

"You won't be here long enough to have a position, bitch," Amethyst snapped and turned on her heel.

"Don't you go waking him up, Amethyst!" Cinnabar called out. "He'll be in a helluva foul mood if you do!"

Watching the shapely woman stomping away, Davan missed the departure of Ja'Klyn's shuttlecraft and looked at the empty docking bay with longing.

"This isn't going to be good," Cinnabar stated. "She may be my sister but that woman can be meaner than a space junkie hopped up on aureolin. You just made a bad enemy, Doc."

"Just keep her out of my way," Davan growled, tossing her head. "I don't go looking for trouble but when it comes my way, I won't back away from it."

Cinnabar rolled her eyes. "Another berserker, eh?" she remarked. "Just what the hell we need."

"You were taking me to my quarters," Davan reminded the woman.

"Yes, Your Ladyship, that I was," Cinnabar said with a grunt.

## Chapter Two

Cair Ghrian came wide awake with a start as something sharp and painful raked down his chest. He sat up, batting aside the hand of the virago who had—once more and without provocation—physically attacked him. He looked down at the five bloody scratches welling with blood.

"What the hell's the matter with you now?" he shouted and wished he hadn't for the hangover that had him firmly in its tight squeeze threatened to crush his head.

"I want that slut off this ship!"

The shrill voice that answered him was enough to send the captain of the *Foehn* reeling. He slapped his hands over his ears and groaned loud enough to wake the dead.

"Do you hear me, Cair? I want that bitch off my ship!" Amethyst yelled, reaching out to punch Ghrian's shoulder.

Struggling not to lash out at the termagant intent on provoking him, the man known at the Aneas Fleet Academy as the most lethal man to ever win his wings, scowled at the woman who shared his bed on occasion. "Don't do that again," he warned.

"Then get her off this ship!"

"Who?" Ghrian pressed. "Who the hell are you talking about?"

"That slutty female doctor who took Rabishu's place. Don't you ever listen to me?"

"Female doctor?" Ghrian repeated. "They sent me a female doctor?"

"I want her out of here. Today!"

Spinning on her heel, Amethyst stormed from the captain's quarters, leaving in her wake the destruction of a very mad Zephyrus Sector woman.

"The gods damn it!" Ghrian swore, throwing the covers from his legs. His head spun for a moment and he groaned again, feeling hot sweat and the acrid taste of bile assaulting him. He barely made it to the bathing chamber before he relieved himself of what little dinner he had eaten the night before. Straining to rid his system of the poisons from the potent Ghaothian brandy, he was bent over the toilet when the Vid-Com clicked on.

"Captain?"

Ignoring the hail, Ghrian slid down the wall beside the toilet and with head in hands braced his elbows on his knees and commenced to shivering.

"I gotta stop this shit," he said aloud.

"Captain? My apologies, Sir, if you are in the relieving room but we have a situation."

It was Dorrick who was intruding and although he liked the boy well enough — hell, even loved him like a kid brother — at the moment all Cair Ghrian wanted to do was run a scytheblade through his innards and pull.

“Captain? Captain?”

Ghrian slowly lifted his head and stared at the Vid-Com screen. The boyish face of Freemohn Dorrick filled the expanse with a worried look and a lock of hair that persisted in falling down over his forehead.

“I’m going to cut off that fucking lock of hair and stuff it up your ass,” the captain growled.

“Sir, are you all right?”

“Right as rain,” Ghrian said through clenched teeth. “What the hell do you want?”

“Sir, we have a new physician on board to take Dr. Rabishu’s place and we’ve already had five complaints from the staff. I’m not sure how you want to handle this but —”

“Get rid of her.”

There was a moment of silence. “Sir, her shuttle has already departed and is out of the Quadrant on its way back to the *Andraste* in Eurys Sector.”

“Then find another shuttle, Dorrick!”

“I’ve tried, Sir, but none are available. There is that big offensive in —”

“Where is she?”

“Dr. Shanahan? She’s in her quarters.”

Ghrian leaned his head against the wall behind him, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Have her in my office in thirty minutes and escort her there yourself.”

“Aye, Sir!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Davan stood in the center of the living area of her new quarters and shook her head. She hadn’t thought things could get any worse but she’d been wrong. The furnishings — if she could call them that — were minimal with a single hard, plastic settee not even long enough for her to stretch out on, one straight-backed wooden chair that looked even more uncomfortable than the settee, a low cocktail table bare of any decoration and a small end table, also bare. The room smelled awful, the stench so overpowering Davan almost gagged.

“What is that smell?” she asked.

“Doc was a Frezican. That is their natural odor,” Cinnabar said. “I’ll have them turn on the air scrubbers. That should help.”

“He must have spent a lot of time in here for it to have such an odor.”

"Doc only used the quarters to sleep," Cinnabar commented. "The girls kept him too busy to do much else."

"Please tell me the bed is at least comfortable," Davan pleaded.

"Now, that I can promise you!" Cinnabar asserted. "I've spent the night there a few times over the years."

Wincing, Davan walked over to the galley and poked her head in. The stainless steel counters were bare and she suspected the few wall cabinets were, too.

"Doc didn't cook or eat in here," Cinnabar confirmed. "If you want me to, I can have supply bring in all the necessary stuff but I doubt you'll have time to use any of it."

"I'll make time," Davan snapped. "I am a very private person and cooking soothes me."

"You won't have much time for relaxation, Lt. Shanahan. You —"

"Doctor Shanahan," Davan corrected.

Pursing her lips, Cinnabar nodded. "Understood."

The sleeping chamber contained nothing more than a full-sized platform covered with a single pale blue blanket. Upon sitting down on the platform, Davan was pleasantly surprised to find the tempered polyfoam very comfortable. She remarked on its comfort.

"The bed has to be because once the docs flop down on it, they want nothing to keep them awake." Cinnabar cocked her head toward the platform. "It's MemFoam, by the way. It will mold to your personal body dimensions and the impression of whoever shares the bed with you."

Davan narrowed her eyes. "There won't be *anyone* to share that bed with me," she growled.

Cinnabar shrugged. "That's up to you, Doctor."

Her shoulders sagging, Davan pushed up from the bed. "You can call me Doc if you like."

"Yes, ma'am," Cinnabar said. "Whatever you prefer."

Sensing the other woman's desire to leave, Davan thanked her for showing her to her quarters and asked when office hours began.

Cinnabar laughed as she walked to the door. "Ma'am, you are on call twenty-four/seven. When you're needed, you come."

Davan sat back down on the bed and groaned. There was no bright light at the end of the tunnel that she could see but at least she knew she'd be kept busy, the time passing as quickly as possible.

"Dr. Shanahan?"

Jumping at the sound of the male voice, Davan shot to her feet. She stared at the boyish-looking warrior standing in the sleeping chamber entryway. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded. "And how did you get in here?"

Freemohn Dorrick smiled and leaned against the doorframe. "Ma'am, I'm Captain Ghrian's XO. I have access to all the quarters and —"

"You will announce yourself when you come to mine from now on," Davan stated. "These quarters are off-limits. Is that understood, mister?"

The smile slipped from Dorrick's young face. "Aye, ma'am. Understood."

"Who are you anyway?"

Dorrick straightened. "I am Lt. Freemohn Dorrick, ma'am."

"Was there something you wanted, Dorrick, or do you just drop in from time to time to infringe on other people's privacy?"

A strange look passed quickly over Dorrick's face. "The captain has ordered you to his quarters. I was sent to escort you there."

Davan sensed hostility slipping into the second-in-command and knew she'd best nip that resentment in the bud if there was to be any peace between them while she was there. She made a mental note to work on her people skills a bit more.

"Is he sober then?" she asked, attempting a smile.

Dorrick's eyes narrowed. "If he wasn't, I'm sure he wouldn't want to be dealing with you," the XO snapped. He added a *ma'am* seemingly as an afterthought.

Davan made another mental note not to refer to the captain's drinking problem—especially not to his XO.

"All right, Mr. Dorrick," she said. "After you."

Turning his back, Dorrick didn't wait for her to follow him. He exited her quarters with military tautness squaring his slender shoulders and marched stiffly down the corridor to the elevator. He called out the deck number to the control panel but said nothing else until the lift arrived.

"You should do something about your hair," he grated.

"I would if I could," Davan snapped in reply and ground her teeth.

Without a side-glance Davan's way, Dorrick entered the cage, spun around and remained silent on the short ride to the captain's quarters.

Feeling the animosity rolling off the young man in waves, Davan wished she could find something to say to smooth over the tension between them but she didn't know what they would be.

"Is there a hair salon onboard?" she asked as the cage settled and the doors shushed open.

"Of course. Level three," Davan replied and preceded her from the lift. He snapped a glance her way. "You certainly need Demeter's services."

"All right, already!" Davan snapped. "Stop belaboring the point!"

A snort was the only comment Dorrick made as he walked up to the captain's door and called out his name.

The sour stench of vomit wafted out of the captain's quarters as soon as the door slid back to admit them. They had to step aside as a cybot carrying cleaning supplies rolled toward them.

"Pardon me," the 'bot apologized. It bobbed its oversized metal head then trundled out into the corridor.

"You don't have synthetics onboard the *Foehn*?" Davan asked.

"Only pleasure 'bots for those soldiers with STDs," Dorrick replied. "The rest of the maintenance 'bots are the traditional kind."

"I don't suppose you—" Davan began but the XO had already departed behind the 'bot and the door was shushing closed.

"By the Goddess, couldn't you even be bothered to comb that frizzy mess before reporting to me, woman?"

Davan clenched her fists and turned around to confront the sneering voice that had insulted her. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open when she got her first look at Cair Ghrian.

He was standing in the doorway to what must be his sleeping chamber. With uniformed legs braced apart, arms tucked over a broad, thickly pelted bare chest rippling with muscles and a look of disdain marring what would otherwise have been an astonishingly beautiful male face, he was the most menacing male Davan had ever seen. She found herself speechless for the first time in her life.

"Well?" he snapped, his eyes boring into her like titanium drill bits.

It wasn't just the thickly muscled arms and chiseled pecs that Davan found so disquieting. Nor was it the imposing height that towered well over her five-foot five-inch stature or the fact he was standing there before her half-naked. It was the inhospitable set of his mouth, the iciness in his glare, which regarded her with contempt that sent shivers of unease down her spine and made it impossible for her to find her voice.

"Oh, for the love of Morrigunia," he spat. "Don't tell me they sent a sniveling coward to treat my women! That's all the fuck I don't need!"

Davan snapped her mouth shut with an audible click. Her nails were digging into the palms of her hand and it was the pain scoring half-moons into her flesh that elevated both her temper and her normally even-modulated voice.

"I am no more a coward than you are, Sir," she spat. "And believe me I don't want to be on this sorry excuse for a ship any more than you want me here!"

Cair blinked, stunned at the venom striking out of the woman's words, as well as amazed she would dare speak to her commanding officer in such a tone. Her glower was raking him from stem to stern and from the look on her face, she found him wanting.

From the look on *his* face, it was decidedly a first for a prince of Amhantar.

"Do you know who you are talking to, wench?" he challenged.

One of Davan's pet peeves was the derogatory terms soldiers used for females and the one she detested most was "wench"—and especially so under the present circumstances for the word *wench* meant to refer to prostitutes.

"It is Dr. Shanahan," she bit out, eyes flashing. "I earned that title just as you earned the rank of captain and I won't allow you to denigrate me or my profession by using a—"

"Denigrate?" he repeated in a low voice.

Davan lifted her chin. "It means to belittle or minimize one's position."

A red flush spread over the captain's dark complexion. "I know damned well what it means," he stated.

"Then please refrain from using that term, Sir, else I will be obliged to file a formal complaint."

Cair slowly lowered his arms and came toward her, his face set and hard, a muscle working in his unshaven jaw.

Davan forced herself not to take a step back when he came to tower above her, a vicious frown drawing his thick black eyebrows slashing downward.

"Let's you and me get something straight, Shanahan," he ground out. "I am the captain of this sorry excuse for a ship as you have labeled it and you are nothing more than a crewmember—an unwanted crewmember at that. I don't give a rat's ass how you feel about the *Foehn* or the women working here or me, for that matter. I don't even care how good a healer you are. All that is immaterial. You were assigned here and, unfortunately, you will have to remain here until I can beg, borrow, steal, coerce or kill to get you reassigned. But as long as you *are* here, you will show me the respect I am due. Did you get that?"

Davan had to crane her neck to look up into that scowling face a good foot above her. Something told her not to back down to Cair Ghrian because if she did, he'd use the weakness against her.

"All I ask is the same consideration, Captain," she said.

"You haven't done anything to deserve consideration," he snapped. "Obviously you fucked up somewhere along the way or you wouldn't have been sent here. What the hell did you do?"

A wicked little imp must have climbed up on Dagan's shoulder for she spoke before she thought.

"What did you do to deserve being assigned here, Captain? How did *you* screw up?"

Primordial rage shot through Cair like the blast of a laser canon. No woman—not even Amethyst—had ever dared speak to him in such a disrespectful tone nor question



why he had been exiled to a pleasure ship. Before he realized what he was doing, he reached out, grabbed the healer by the upper arms and dragged her to him.

"Don't you ever," he said, his voice low and deadly, "ask me something like that again, Shanahan. Is that clear?"

Feeling as helpless as a kitten in the muscular warrior's grip, Davan's feet were barely on the floor. She was pressed to the captain so tightly she could feel the buckle of his uniform trousers digging into her chest. Crushed against him, she found it difficult to breathe but the wild Amhantarean side of her took hold and the light of battle turned her eyes dark with fury.

"Take your hands off me, Captain Ghrian, or I will not only file a formal complaint, I will press sexual harassment charges against you," she warned.

Accustomed to having women fall all over themselves when he so much as looked at them, Cair stared down at her with disbelief. She was glaring back at him so fiercely he couldn't make out the color of her eyes. A white line ringed her tightly compressed lips and in her temple, a pulse beat furiously. Her nostrils flexed like an angry bull and had the situation been any less volatile, he might have laughed at the wild-haired virago. As it was, he thought he understood the true situation.

"Ah," he said, his mouth twisting. "You're one of *those*. No wonder they sent you here." He let go of her and ran his palms down the seams of his trousers as though she was contaminated.

Davan actually hissed at him as he released her. She wanted to jump on his back and pummel him.

"No, I am *not* one of those," she snarled, realizing what he was intimating.

Before Cair could respond, the Vid-Com chimed. He barely glanced at it before barking out a loud "What?"

"Her Majesty, the queen, wishes to speak with you, Captain," the com officer replied.

"Tell her I'll talk to her later," Cair snapped.

"You'll talk to me now," an imperious voice informed him.

Davan turned to look at the massive Vid-Com as a life-sized image of the Amhantarean monarch appeared on the six foot by six foot screen.

"I am busy, Madame," Cair stated.

"Doing what?" his mother demanded. "Getting drunk?"

"We'll finish this later," Cair told Davan.

Relieved to be dismissed, Davan started for the door.

"One minute, wench!" the queen called out.

Cair snorted. "Don't call her that or she'll file a protest, Mother."

Davan flinched at the use of the word but stopped and turned to face the screen, lowering her head to the woman who was a legend on her home world. The queen was staring at her and Davan could feel that stare to the pit of her belly.

"Don't I know you?"

Davan shook her head. "No, Your Majesty. I've never been to Amhantar."

"But you have Amhantarean ties, do you not?"

Davan smiled. "My grandmother was from Domhan, Your Majesty."

"Your hair," the queen said.

Sighing, Davan resisted the urge to touch her unruly tresses. "My apologies, Your Majesty. I just can't seem to do anything with it today."

"Let it down, girl," the queen commanded. "Let me see you with your hair hanging free."

Davan blushed and reached up to pull the pins from her hair. As the wild mass tumbled around her, she heard a slight gasp from the captain.

"What is your name?" the queen asked in a near whisper.

"Dr. Davan Shanahan, Your Majesty."

"And your grandmother? Who is she? What's her name?"

"She's dead, Your Majesty, but her name was Catherine —"

"McGregor?" the queen interrupted.

Davan's eyebrows shot up. "Aye, Your Majesty, but how did you —?"

"It's been so long," the queen said as though she hadn't heard the question. "So long and my eyes aren't what they used to be."

"There's nothing wrong with your eyes, Mother," Cair disagreed. He turned a speculative look to the woman standing a few feet away.

"Cat McGregor. I should have recognized you right off, wench," the queen said softly. "By the Goddess I can see her in you as clearly as though she was standing there talking to me."

"You knew her?" Davan asked.

"She and I ran together, aye. We were on the same adept level, the best of friends. How did she die?"

"In her sleep," Davan said softly. "With a smile on her face."

"A good way to go," the queen said.

"Do we really look that much alike?"

"It's the hair," the queen stated. "Damn me if you aren't the spitting image of that warrioress with your hair all wiry like that and trying to escape your head. Cat could never keep that thick mane of hers slicked back in a bun, either."

Cair had grown up listening to the wild tales his mother had related to him and his siblings about the time before the Great Border Wars and knew the name Cat McGregor

as well as his own. Though it had been ten years since he had been allowed home to Amhantar, he remembered well the full-length portraits of the women of the Sisterhood of Drogheda who had been a part of the resistance during the Wars and in particular, the glorious painting of Cat McGregor.

And he smelled a rat.

"Dr. Shanahan just arrived on board less than an hour ago, Madame," Davan heard the captain say. "I'm sure she needs to rest before she assumes her duties."

"Cat was a healer, too," the queen said. "Did you know that, wench?"

Davan dug her fingernails into her palms. "Aye, Your Majesty. That is one of the reasons I embraced the profession."

The queen made no comment and seemed to be studying Davan. Her dark green eyes ran up and down the young woman then a slow smile creased the aging face.

"Run along, Davie," she said. "They do call you Davie, don't they?"

"You know damned well they do," Cair growled.

Davan cast the captain an inquisitive look. "Aye, Your Majesty, they do."

"Enjoy your assignment, wench," the queen said. "I do believe bigger and better things are in the future for you."

"Not if I can help it," Cair said under his breath.

## Chapter Three

The air quality in Davan's quarters had improved dramatically by the time she returned. A faint scent of oranges filled the air but the sparse furnishings in the living area were gone, leaving the room bare.

"Great," Davan said. "Just great."

Having nowhere to sit, she went into the sleeping area and stood with her hands on her hips, annoyed that the platform had been stripped of the blanket and sheets.

"What the hell is going on here?" she snapped and strode angrily to the Vid-Com. Running her finger down the list of contact points on the screen, she put the tip of her index finger to housekeeping. Almost instantly, the face of a blowsy middle-age woman filled the screen.

"Housekeeping. Whatcha need?" the woman asked in a bored tone.

"Who do I need to talk to about furnishings for my quarters?"

"Supply," the woman answered and the Vid-Com clicked off.

Davan ground her teeth and touched the button marked supply. The same woman appeared on the Vid-Com.

"Supply. Whatcha need?" the woman repeated.

Davan opened her mouth, thought better of it then cleared her throat. When she spoke, she put every ounce of haughtiness she'd ever heard her mother use into her demands.

"I want a comfortable settee, loveseat and chair. I want a cocktail table, two end tables, an oversized hassock, two brass table lamps, a round table with four padded chairs and an entertainment unit."

The woman on the other end of the Vid-Com frowned. "You don't want much, do you, dearie?"

"And as for the sleeping quarters, I want two sets of 280-count Égyptine percale sheets, a very thick quilted comforter, two oversized goose-down pillows, six thick hand towels with two dozen bath cloths to match, and a dozen thick bath sheets. I want those items to match and/or blend in with one another, preferable in celadon green and rose."

"Is that so?"

"For the galley, I want a full compliment of cookware, appliances, utensils, dishes, glassware and flatware. Doesn't have to be expensive but I want it durable."

The woman snorted. "And just how do you plan on paying for all that, Dr. Shanahan?"

"Charge it to medcom and if they have a problem with it, send someone down here and I'll give them a personal credit voucher! And do it ASAP!"

Before the woman could reply, Davan disconnected. She touched the maintenance button, not in the least surprised when the same woman appeared but this time with a leery look on her overly made-up face.

"Maintenance," she said.

"I want the heat turned down ten degrees in here and the humidifier turned up. The lighting is sufficient but I prefer a more pinkish tone to the overheads. I like the orange scent. Increase the concentration on that a tad. When do the cybots make their rounds for cleaning?"

"Ah, whenever you call for 'em. There's no set—"

"Schedule every Monday for fresh linens and to pick up the wash and every Friday for a complete cleaning," Davan interrupted.

"Well—"

"What's your name?"

The woman flinched. "Why do you need to know?"

"Your name!" Davan snapped, her eyes narrowed.

"Darla," the woman replied quickly.

"See that I am comfortable while I am on the *Foehn*, Darla, and there'll be a nice bit of credits for you at the end of each week. Deal?"

Darla nodded slowly. "I think I can handle that, Doc."

Davan smiled. "I am relying on you, dearie. I know you are up to the challenge. Don't let me down."

"No, ma'am, I won't!" Darla agreed, smiling for the first time.

Satisfied her needs would be met, Davan broke the connection then set about familiarizing herself with the small quarters. It didn't take long and the only thing she found left over from the last occupant was a large pair of hip waders, the black water-resistant leather smelling less like fish than manure.

"Ugh," she said and picked the waders up by their tops and took them to the disposal unit. Not sure how to work the unit, she put the offensive footwear inside the stainless steel bin, closed the unit's tambour door and wrote herself a note to ask how to operate the disposal.

Her personal belongings had yet to arrive—or if they had were still sitting on the loading dock—so there was nothing for her to do but sit on the unmade platform bed and fume. She braced her chin in the palm of her hand and studied the floor, making a mental note to ask for new carpeting.

It wasn't going to be a bed of roses on the *Foehn*. She knew that already. The whores were going to test her every chance they got and until she proved to them she was up to the task, life wasn't going to be easy. The soldiers who came onboard for their R&R's

might prove friendlier, but she knew she'd have her hands full with them, as well. She'd already made an enemy of the captain's slut and possibly the slut's sister Cinnabar—that remained to be seen. The captain, himself, would be the biggest pain in the ass with his XO running a close second.

The only blossom among all the prickly thorns had been the surprise of finding the Amhantarean queen had known Davan's granny and apparently had fond memories of the woman.

A soft chime sounded from the Vid-Com, breaking in on Davan's thoughts. She didn't bother to look at the screen as she said, "Aye?"

"Supply," a gravelly voice announced.

Davan got up and went to the door, opening it to find several cybots laden down with linens, boxes and an assortment of crates. She stepped aside for the artificial intelligence 'bots to enter.

The man who accompanied the 'bots seemed none too happy to be there. His scowl was ferocious as he chomped on an unlit cigar and stood with arms folded as the 'bots went about placing the items where Davan wanted them.

"All this fuss and you won't be in these rooms four hours out of a day," the man complained in a thick Astrálach brogue Davan could barely understand. "Seems a waste to me."

Davan shot the man an annoyed glance but said nothing to him.

"Cap'n ain't going to like having all this crap reqeud from main supply, either."

"If Captain Ghrian has a problem with it, you tell him to take it with me," Davan snapped.

The up and down motion of the man's chewing stilled and he stared at Davan as though she'd grown a second head. "I ain't telling him nothing of the sort! You want to piss him off, you can damned well do it yourself!"

Exasperated at the resistance she was getting and she'd been onboard less than two hours, Davan advanced on the pudgy man and jabbed a rigid finger at his chest. She punctuated every sentence with a quick poke.

"I'm sure every one of you is scared to death of Cair Ghrian but I'm not. He's a man—just like you—and I'm sure he puts his britches on one leg at a time. If you want to walk on eggs around him, that's fine, but I have no intention of doing so!"

Seamus Rawls gawked at the wild-haired woman thrusting her finger painfully into his chest and took a step back. There was steel in the woman's look and that look rivaled the captain's in intensity.

"And you can tell everyone who'll listen that Davan Shanahan isn't a pushover and she doesn't take crap from anybody," she snarled. "Do you understand?"

Seamus nodded. "I hear you," he grumbled.

"I control the meds around here and I sign off on whether or not a girl works. No work, no pay. It's as simple as that. Piss me off and that girl might not work the entire time I'm assigned here."

"Yeah, well, who's going to do that girl's work if she's been redlined?" Seamus challenged. "You think about that?"

"The rest of them can pull double, triple or quadruple shifts for all I care," Davan replied. "One girl, five guys. Makes no difference to me."

Rawls eyebrows shot up into the salt-and-pepper thinness of his hair. "You can't do that."

"I can and I will and you'd best tell the girls to walk on eggshells around *me* because I can be just as gods-be-damned mean as Cair Ghrian and when it's that time of the month, I'm even worse!"

Seamus' lips twitched beneath his scruffy mustaches. "Is that right?"

"Damned straight," Davan replied, hands on her hips.

"I imagine the cap'n will have something to say about that, but you just keep right on believing you got some power here, wench."

"Don't call me that!" Davan snarled, her eyes blazing. "Don't you *ever* call me that again, mister, or I'll have you up on sexhass charges so fast your head will spin. You get that?"

A negligent shrug was Seamus' answer. He turned and ambled lazily to the door. "You do what you think you gotta do," he said as the door slid back. An audacious wink was his goodbye comment.

Seething, Davan stood there and watched the 'bots rolling out the door behind Rawls—each one putting a metal hand to its head and tipping an imaginary hat and cheerfully bidding her a "g'day". If Davan could have slammed the door behind their departure, she would have. As it was, she kicked the metal door and mumbled a few vulgar words. When the Vid-Com clicked on, she yelled, "What the hell do you want?"

Cinnabar's face appeared on the screen. "We have a girl complaining about sharp pains in the lower right quad of her belly. Looks like it might be her appendix."

"I'm on my way," Davan said. "Is there a med team in the sickbay?"

"You have six corpsmen who work a twelve-on/twenty-four-off schedule, plus three nurses. I've already alerted the head nurse for this shift to get the op ready just in case it is SaraLyn's appendix."

"Thanks."

"Uh-huh," Cinnabar acknowledged then the Vid-Com screen went black.

Despite the lack of respect the other woman was showing her, Davan was thankful for something to do to take her mind off the miserable situation she was being forced to endure for the next six months. As she left her quarters, she hoped she'd be as busy as predicted so the time would pass quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cair viciously tucked the tail of his uniform shirt into his trousers. As usual after a Vid-Com visit from his mother, he was in a foul mood.

"Interfering old biddy," he muttered.

Checking his appearance in the full-length mirror, he decided he looked presentable enough to take the bridge. There were dark circles under his bloodshot eyes – which his mother had not missing noting – and he was still a bit queasy as he left his quarters. The last person he wanted to encounter outside his door was Seamus Rawls.

"Tied on a pretty good one last night, eh, Cap'n?" Seamus asked.

"Aye and it came unraveled this morning," Cair admitted.

"Day ain't over with yet, either."

"What did she do?" Cair snapped. He had known the moment he saw Seamus something was up with the new arrival.

Seamus scratched his nearly bald pate. "More like what she said than did."

Arriving at the elevator, Cair shot his supply chief an irritated look. "Don't make me pull it out of you, Seamus. I've already had a run-in with that frizzy-haired bitch and spent twenty minutes being lectured by the Wardeness. I don't need any more shit today."

"Her Majesty called, did she?" Seamus asked, chuckling. "No wonder you look like somebody slammed your dangly in the door."

Grinding his teeth, Cair stormed into the lift as soon as the doors opened.

"I spent my morning redecorating the little darling's quarters," Seamus said as he sauntered into the elevator behind his commanding officer. "Has some notion she'll be spending a bit of time in there."

Cair snorted.

"My opinion exactly," Seamus agreed. "Nothing extravagant, mind you, and much of it was things she'll need."

"Like what?"

"Sheets, towels, pots and pans." At the mention of the last two items, Seamus cocked an eye to the man standing beside him.

"Planning on cooking, is she?" Cair growled.

"Well, now, that's brings up what she said that got me to thinking," Seamus said.

As the elevator came to a stop on the command deck, Cair turned to Rawls. When the chief of supply had finished with his report and the captain had given him an additional order, both men leaving the elevator wore nasty grins on their faces.

\* \* \* \* \*



A hot appendix was a piece of cake for Davan and she was pleased to see the med team did their jobs well with a minimum of unnecessary talking. Though the two orderlies and nurse never smiled when they introduced themselves and didn't go out of their way to make Davan feel welcome, neither did they cause her any trouble. They went about their duties like professionals and that was all that mattered in Davan's book. She wasn't there to make friends.

After telling the nurse she'd check on the patient in a few hours, Davan untwisted the cap on a bottle of water and drank greedily. "Any one else I need to see?" she asked.

Lt. Maere Brennan glanced up from the report she was writing. "Not for a few minutes yet. We have an ear infection, a migraine and one girl who says she's got some kind of discharge. They can wait until after lunch."

"Let's get to them now. I'll eat later," Davan said.

"Suit yourself," Maere replied. She laid the report aside. "I suggest you take the time to eat now else you might find you won't the time later on."

"I'll take my chances," Davan stated.

Famous last words, she thought as she trudged wearily to her quarters that evening, her belly grumbling. It was well after midnight and she'd been bombarded by patient after patient after patient all day. Most of the complaints were easily handled but a few had been more complex and had managed to wear Davan out. In between a few apples, a banana, a couple of plums and some crackers, she had seen over thirty patients. She was yawning by the time she stumbled into her quarters, too tired to do anything save take a shower.

The Vid-Com seemed to chime almost as soon as Davan's head hit the pillow but one look at her watch told her it was 0630. Groaning she sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with the base of her palms and swung her legs from the bed. Grateful the sleep platform had been as comfortable as she had hoped, she plodded into the bathing chamber, washed her face, brushed her teeth and stared at her hair for a full minute.

"What in the hell is wrong with my hair?" she asked, irritated the frizzies were still hanging on.

She was of a mind to do a Khadeeja and pull every wayward strand out of her head. Realizing that would hurt, she stood there contemplating whacking it off to chin-length but decided against it. Normally, she loved her waist-length auburn tresses. Why they were determined to annoy her at this particular time she had no idea but knew she had to do something.

Stripping off the tank top and panties she'd worn to bed, she turned the shower on, stepped under the tepid water for a few moments until her hair was wet then ran a comb through the straight hair until it was free of tangles then braided it tightly in one long queue. With every hair in place, she oiled it with a perfumed conditioner then wound the whole thing into an elegant chignon at the back of her head. Satisfied with

the results, she dressed in her white MedSurge uniform and with a smile on her face, opened the door.

Then the smile disappeared with the first step she took into the corridor.

Stopping as still as death, she slowly lowered her head and what she saw on the floor made her temper heat to white-hot rage for lying there were row after row of chicken eggs—filling in at least a ten foot by ten foot area directly in front of her door. Her right foot had crunched three of the eggs and the yolk and albumen oozing up over the toe of her white shoe. There was no way to get out of the door without crushing more eggs or taking the time to stoop down and pick enough of them up to make a pathway.

Lifting her egg-streaked foot, Davan hopped backward on her left foot and leaned against the doorjamb to remove the slick shoe. With her eyes narrowed into thin slits of malevolent intent, she shook as much of the goop from her shoe as she could then hobbled to the galley to wash off the rest. Casting a quick look at her watch, realizing she had to be at sickbay in less than ten minutes, she took off the other shoe and with a violent hiss of breath did the only thing she knew to do.

## Chapter Four

Cair lay in his bed with his hands behind his neck, staring up at the ceiling. The Vid-Com had chimed twice and on the third chime, he would have to get up, shower, and get ready for the day whether he wanted to or not. Until then, he was tolerating the much-practiced mouth of the woman who occasionally shared his quarters and trying not to show the complete boredom he felt.

Amethyst ran the tip of her limber tongue over the head of his cock, laving it as she massaged Cair's balls with one hand while gently twisting his shaft upward and downward with the other. She was a highly sought-after pleasure girl on the *Foehn* and was an expert in most techniques. The one she was using on Cair was among her favorites.

Closing his eyes and drawing in a long breath, Cair tried not to wince as Amethyst stuck her tongue into the slit of his cock. He was still sore from their bout the night before and—if truth was told—feeling far too drained to be engaging in a bout of sex this morning. Though he'd refrained from taking even a sip of his beloved brandy, he found he still had a bit of a hangover and a headache that was starting to make a nuisance of itself.

Amethyst pushed up to her knees then placed herself between Cair's legs, spreading his thighs further apart so she could have better access to that sensitive area at the base of his scrotum. She slid her fingers there—stroking and pressing gently—then eased her middle finger toward his anus. Enveloping his long rod in her mouth, she relaxed her throat until her teeth were grazing the thick hair at his crotch.

The Vic-Com chimed for the last time and Cair let out his breath in a long push, reached down and took Amethyst's head in his hands, pulling her mouth from his flesh. "Enough, Sweeting," he said gently. "We've run out of time."

Amethyst ran her tongue over her full lips, looking up at him through the sweep of her long, artificial eyelashes. "You seemed a bit distracted this morning, my Prince."

Cair clenched his jaw. He wasn't her prince and he was irritated afresh each time she used the term. "I've things to do today," he said.

"But you're still hard," she protested and started to lower her head but Cair twisted, threw a leg over her head and slid from the bed before she could gulp him in again. He padded into the bathing chamber, leaving her kneeling on the bed, an unbecoming pout puckering her lips.

As Cair stood before the urinal, he glared at the erection he hoped was piss-inspired and not Amethyst-induced. Of late, he had begun to tire of her appearances in his quarters and when she was there, her constant manhandling of his privates. Conversation was limited to her telling him what had annoyed her during the day and

what she demanded he do about it. He considered the woman one step above the moronic and longed for someone of intelligence with whom to converse.

"What you need," his mother had told him the day before, "is a woman who will challenge you. One who won't let you bully her. You need a good old-fashioned berserker type to set you back on your heels from time to time. Someone who will tweak your nose and not let you get away with your juvenile browbeating."

"Did you send that spooky-haired woman to my ship?" he had demanded.

His mother had actually smirked at him. "Now, why would you ask that, Cairnan?"

"Don't you think I recognize your hand in this? I'm not stupid, Madame!"

"Well, Cairnan, that remains to be seen and you certainly haven't convinced me over the years that you aren't."

"I want off this ship!" he had yelled, slamming his hand against the wall, and that had been a mistake for his mother—that imperious Queen of Amhantar who ruled his home world with an iron fist gloved in velvet—had broken the Vid-Com connection without so much as a goodbye.

Nor would she accept his return calls during the remainder of the day.

He could hear Amethyst talking to him but he ignored her. She never had anything interesting to say and what she did say always concerned what she thought or what she wanted, or what she needed. The splash of his urine drowned her out and he was relieved to see the hardness of his shaft subsiding. Shaking the drops from his cock, he walked over to the shower and turned it on, grateful for the roar of the hot water as he climbed in.

Scrubbing himself down with the lime-scented soap he had Seamus import from *an Ghréig*, he savored the feel of real water cascading down on his body. Sonic-wave showers would do in a pinch but there was nothing as calming and relaxing as hot water running over his flesh to soothe him.

"Want some company?"

Cair jumped and dropped the soap as Amethyst insinuated herself into the tight stall. Before he could order her out, she pressed up against him and ran her hands behind him to cup his ass.

"We wouldn't want you to start your day tense and —"

"Get out," he said, a muscle working in his cheek. "Now!"

Though his voice had been as low and as soft as his obvious anger could make it, Amethyst understood the warning in it. The man upon whom she was draped might well have been her lover but he was also known throughout the galaxy as a feared Deathwielder, a scythelord of the highest degree. The merciless glower in his eyes was an indication of his growing fury—a fury no sane person wanted to experience. She jumped out of the stall so fast she fell on her shapely ass, staring up at Cair as he slammed the shower door on her.

"Aren't you going to help me up?" she called out and when she received no answer, scrambled up from the floor and cursing a blue streak in her native *an Iodáil* language, stormed into Cair's sleeping chamber and began throwing on her clothes.

"It's that female doctor that has him so fucking out of sorts," Amethyst snarled as she jerked on her long silk skirt. "The stupid bitch has ruined everything!"

Sighing, Cair bent over and retrieved the soap. He hadn't planned on washing his hair but now he had no choice. He lathered the thick black curls quickly then stood with his hands braced on each side of the showerhead, his chin to his chest and let the hot water flow over the suds, his eyes closed. The muscles in his neck and upper back were taut and not even the pulsing of the water could rid his body of the sudden tension that had gripped it.

"You have to do something about that wench," he said aloud and as he spoke the last word, a slow, evil smile stretched his chiseled mouth.

But which wench? He questioned himself as he turned off the shower and sluiced the water from his arms and chest arms with his palms.

That his mother was responsible for having the female healer sent to the *Foehn*, Cair had no doubt whatsoever. He didn't believe in coincidence and upon learning Shanahan was related to the infamous Cat McGregor, he had known immediately who was behind the healer's assignment.

He lifted his legs and pushed the water from them then ran his hands through his wet hair to comb it back from his high forehead.

"Oh, yes," he said as he opened the shower door and hooked the plush body sheet from the hanger. "You had her sent here as surely as snuel peas make me fart," he grumbled.

His mother, he knew, had a way of manipulating assignments and this was surely one of her nastier moments. Perhaps this was not as nasty as her last attempt at arranging his life to her satisfaction, but spiteful all the same.

Five years earlier, he had been stunned to find orders to the *Foehn* awaiting him when he returned from a tour of the front. The shame of it had been almost more than he could bear and when he'd confronted his mother—knowing full well she had been responsible—she had laughed at him.

"Didn't I tell you that if you refused to accept Arlana Byrne to wife you would suffer the consequences, Cairnan Douglas?" his mother had purred. "Running off to the front only prolonged the inevitable."

"Do you know what you've done?" he had dared to yell at his mother. "Once this assignment gets out, I'll be a laughingstock among the other warriors!"

"Ask Arlana to wife and I'll make the assignment to that little whorehouse go away."

It had been on the tip of Cair's tongue to agree but he knew his mother well enough to know that if he gave in now, he'd be forced to give every time she made demands of him.

"No," he said. "I can't stand the sight of that silly twit and I'll not be shackled to her or any woman the rest of my life!"

"Suit yourself," his mother had said sweetly and the Vid-Com screen went black.

And stayed black until he reported to duty onboard the hated pleasure ship. The first familiar face he'd seen aboard the *Foehn* had been his mother's, smirking from the Vid-Com in his quarters.

"Did you enjoy your trip from Aduaidh Quadrant to your new vessel, Cair?" she asked in a smarmy tone that set his teeth on edge.

This time it had been he who broke the connection, refusing to take his mother's uplinks for well over a week until Seamus Rawls had appeared on ship, a scowl on his ugly face.

"Her Majesty sent me to be your new Chief of Supply. Do you ken how much I hate this, boy? Being pulled away from the war to baby sit the likes of you?" Seamus had snarled in his thick Astráil brogue. "You'd best call her else she'll redline your scrawny little ass here for another five years and me alongside you!"

Realizing his mother had drawn out the big guns in sending the warrior who had trained him as a boy, Cair had hung his head in defeat.

"Call your mother," Seamus barked before trundling off to make himself familiar with his new – and despised – posting.

Tossing the towel aside, Cair stood there for a moment with his hands on his hips. He was already late to take the bridge but he really didn't care. The ship practically ran itself anyway, for most of the crew had been marooned there even longer than he.

"You really have to fuck up to get sent here," Freemohn had once observed when he and Cair were deep in their cups. "Some think it's a cushy assignment but it isn't. It's boring as hell and I wish I'd been blown to bits on Sasana instead of just getting wounded. Taking my R&R here was one major, major mistake."

"Stop complaining or I'll engage you to that twit Arlana. You'll learn what boredom is then, boy," Cair had warned him. "Besides, you're the only one I know on this hell-ship who can play chess."

Cair chuckled as he thought of his XO. He had liked the young man as soon as he'd met him and for once his mother had been cooperative in getting Freemohn assigned to the *Foehn*. Since Seamus refused to sit still long enough to play chess—or any other game he considered too tame—Cair finally had someone with whom he could share a few moment's of intelligent dialogue.

When the two of them weren't stinking drunk, that is.

Dressing in the black uniform he had worked so hard to acquire at the Academy, Cair took pride in the collar insignia he pinned to his shirt. The silver crossed war

scythes superimposed upon a grinning skull marked him as one of the elite, a warrior tested by the best of them and chosen from among a field of a thousand hopefuls. Only the man graduating at the top of his class was ever awarded the scythes and only then after passing a stringent hand-to-hand combat test, pitted against five other warriors. The rank of Scythelord was not easily won.

The Vid-Com chimed again, drawing Cair's attention. Frowning, he hoped it wasn't his mother again but when he opened the channel found Seamus grinning at him.

"She found the eggs?"

"Aye, lad, that she did," Seamus said with a chuckle.

"And?"

Seamus' ugly face turned red with his laughter. "Best you come by my office on your way to the bridge and take a look-see. This you don't want to miss!"

Cair left his quarters with the sound of Seamus' hoots of laughter ringing in his ears. It wasn't often the old soldier laughed and when he did it usually boded ill for Cair Ghrian. Seamus took great delight in taking the young man down as many pegs as he felt was necessary to keep the prince grounded. That he had been given permission to do so by the queen didn't sit well with Cair. The two were always in cahoots and that knowledge rankled. What one knew, the other knew, and there seemed to be no secrets between Queen Meg and her burly henchman from Astráil.

Seamus was sitting at his desk with his booted feet propped atop, leaning back in the formfitting chair that had been Cair's gift to his mentor on the older man's sixtieth solar year. In front of Seamus' desk was a large Vid-Com with an image frozen on replay.

"It's from a camera to the right of the wench's door," Seamus said. He thumbed the control in his hand and the image moved backward, pulling out until Cair could see the eggs laid out in front of the healer's door.

"Now watch this," Seamus said with a giggle.

The door opened and the healer took one step into the corridor before freezing. She looked down. The camera moved also and zoomed in on the healer's shoe caked with egg yolk. Quickly, the camera lens shot upward to catch the look on Dr. Shanahan's face.

"Were you controlling the camera?" Cair asked.

"Not me," Seamus denied. "Young Freemohn was."

"Freeze it."

The lens was trained directly on Davan Shanahan's face and the anger just beginning to build.

"Actually, she's a right nice-looking wench this morn," Seamus said. "Got that hair of hers under control, she does."

Cair didn't respond to his mentor's remark although he had to admit the woman staring back at him was more attractive than when he'd first met her.

"She's Cat McGregor's kin," Seamus said. "Did you know that?"

Knowing all too well how Seamus had learned such information, Cair slowly turned his gaze from the Vid-Com to the old man's grinning face. "No," was all he said.

"No you didn't know or are you saying no to something else, lad?" Seamus inquired, his eyes twinkling.

"Not her. Not Arlana. Not any woman," Cair stated.

Seamus shook his head. "Lad, you can be as stubborn as a Meicsiceo mule, you know that?"

"You tell my mother to stop playing matchmaker, Seamus," Cair warned, "or I swear to the Goddess I'll join the monkhood!"

A short of derision spluttered from Seamus' rubbery lips. "Now you're just plain being silly. Take a whiff of that little wench, lad, and if she ain't to your liking, we'll find you another." The humor left his face. "Either way, you'll be wed before you get off this ship or you'll die here a bitter, old man."

"I don't want a wife!" Cair shouted at the top of his lungs. "A Scythelord doesn't need a wife!"

Seamus ignored the outburst. He nodded toward the screen. "Look how she settled the matter and tell me that ain't one resourceful little wench."

Despite the fury roiling in his gut, Cair looked back at the screen as the image began to play again. He saw the healer curse then hop back out of the camera's range.

"I near 'bout split my sides when I saw what the little darling did next," Seamus said and Cair could hear admiration in the old man's gravelly voice.

When next the healer appeared, she was carrying her uniform shoes in her hand and was wearing the hip waders Cair recognized as having belonged to Doc Rabishu. Oversized on the woman's slender legs, she was having difficulty walking in them but had no problem at all stomping the eggs lying outside her door to smithereens.

Every last one of them.

"Ain't that the rat's pecker?" Seamus asked—laughing so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. "She squashed them all then look..."

The healer glanced up at the camera as though seeing it for the first time and saluted it with the universally recognized symbol of defiance as she turned her back and stomped off, hip waders dripping egg all the way down the corridor.

"I'll be damned," Cair whispered, his insides doing a funny little squeeze. He leaned against Seamus' desk. "Where is she now?"

Seamus thumbed the Vid-Com's remote and the next picture that popped on the screen was the healer examining one of her patients.

For half an hour Cair watched the Breasalean healer as she worked. From one patient to another she moved with no breaks in between. She seemed to be handling her job with an ease he hadn't witnessed since the battlefield on Arabach. Certainly Rabishu had never exhibited such professionalism.



"Seems to know her job right well," Seamus commented as though he had read the younger man's mind. "Ain't had no complaints as yet, but I think they're mostly checking her out more'n anything just yet."

"Seeing what she'll allow?" Cair asked.

"And how much of their sass she'll take." He scratched his rough chin. "Heard the girls ain't been showing her all that much respect."

"Aye, well, that's probably Amethyst's doing," Cair complained.

"I heard she told you to get rid of the little darling," Seamus said. "You still gonna try to do that?"

Cair speared his mentor with a narrowed look. "You know gods-be-damned well the wardeness will have made sure that is impossible. Don't sit there and pretend you don't know I have no choice in the matter, Seamus!"

Seamus put his hands behind his head. "Ain't pretending nothing, lad," he responded. "You might as well stop fighting it 'cause I have a feeling this wench is gonna be your undoing."

Cair pushed away from the desk and stormed out of the room, Seamus' laughter once again following him every step of the way. The prince's hands were clenched into fists and when he took the bridge, he ignored everyone there, plopping down in the command chair and bracing his chin in his hand as he glared at the navigational screen.

## Chapter Five

Davan looked around and found the red-haired vixen who she suspected was the reason she'd been having problems with the girls standing in the door. The whore lounged there as though she owned the ship, her arms crossed over her ample chest.

"Cair is trying to find a runabout to get you out of our hair," Amethyst sneered.

"Well, I wish he'd hurry up. I'm in as much of a rush to get off this flying cathouse as you are to see me go," Davan said.

"You don't fool me," Amethyst scoffed. "You think you can entice my man to your bed but you are badly mistaken. A Deathwielder needs a real woman, not one who pretends to be."

Unable to keep the guffaw from erupting, Davan tossed aside the bandages she'd just removed from a soldier's arm. "Sweetie, if you think I'm interested in that hunk of steroid-injected meat you're screwing, you are the one badly mistaken. You are welcome to him. I have a boyfriend on *the Andraste* or didn't you notice him when he brought me to this slop pit?"

Amethyst shook her mane of red hair. "Cinnabar told me about him but he's nothing compared to Cair. Cair is —"

"An oversized chunk of chemically enhanced muscle," Davan said, rolling her eyes.

"He doesn't use drugs!" Amethyst shouted. "He works out and —"

"Save it, wench," Davan interrupted, deliberately using the word she found so offensive for it certainly fit the captain's whore. "I'm not interested in anything about that man other than his ability to get me reassigned."

For a moment, Amethyst stood there as though she was contemplating Davan's words. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth and she was nibbling on it, giving her the look of a petulant child. When at last she spoke, her words were filled with menace.

"Cair Ghrian belongs to me and I intend to be his queen when he takes the throne."

Davan cocked an eyebrow at her unwanted visitor. "The last I heard," she said, "Prince Bennick is next in line."

Amethyst's eyes narrowed hatefully. "Things have a way of changing," she said then spun around and stalked off, the high heels of her boots ringing on the metal floor.

Exhaling heavily, Davan pursed her lips. The last thing she wanted was to get involved in court intrigue and it sounded to her as though that sort of thing was in the making. She wanted more than ever to get off the *Foehn* and as far away from its arrogant captain as the galaxy would allow.

"That's it for this evening," Cinnabar announced as she poked her head in the door. "Things are relatively quiet although there's a party starting in Nine Forward. Hopefully things won't get out of hand but forewarned is forearmed."

"Is the mess still open?" Davan asked, glancing down at her watch.

"For another thirty minutes. Thought you were going to cook your own meals, Doctor."

"I will," Davan stated. "But until I get a few staple goods and some groceries, that isn't happening."

Cinnabar shrugged. "Give me a list and I'll see to it."

Davan didn't trust the flame-haired beauty any more than she trusted Cinnabar's sister. "I'll get around to it tomorrow. I'll just pick up something I can take back to my quarters tonight."

"I hear you had a bit of a mess in front of your door this morning," Cinnabar observed. There was a smile twitching at her lips. "I also heard you handled it in just the right manner so it's not likely to happen again."

Davan nodded. "I know who did it and if he does it again, I just might repay him with a sneaky visit of my own."

"You know," Cinnabar said, coming into the room, "Seamus taught the captain everything he knows."

"What do you mean?"

"Seamus was the Master-at-Arms of Caisleán na Goaithe for nearly thirty years before he retired. He was the captain's trainer, teaching him the art of battle. When the border wars started up again, Cair enlisted before his mother could stop him. She was unable to get him decommissioned so she sent Seamus to watch over him at the frontier. They are as close as father and son and as thick as thieves."

"And you're telling me this because...?"

"Seamus doesn't wipe his ass unless Cair gives him leave to do so, dearie," Cinnabar answered.

Davan's forehead crinkled. "Are you telling me the captain had Seamus lay those eggs in front of my door?"

*"If you want to walk on eggs around him, that's fine, but I have no intention of doing so!"* Cinnabar quoted. "Sound familiar?"

Her lips slowly parting as her eyes blazed green fire, Davan glanced once more at her watch. "If I'm going to eat tonight, I'd best get to the mess." She walked past Cinnabar without another word.

The woman who was more madam than quartermaster walked to the Vid-Com and touched the pad that chimed in the mess hall.

"Whatcha need, Cin?" a friendly voice answered as Cinnabar's image shown on his screen.

"The new healer is on her way down to get something to eat. Think you can close a bit early tonight, Ralf?"

"I'm already closed," the man said with a wink.

"Your cooperation is greatly appreciated."

"You want me to shut down the re-gen kiosk as well?"

Cinnabar thought about it for a moment. "No, we don't want the poor uppity thing to starve. Just limit her choices to whatever doesn't sell all that well."

"Will do."

Closing the connection Cinnabar whistled to herself as she left sickbay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Annoyed that the mess was locked up by the time she arrived—twenty minutes before it should have closed—Davan found a few snacks in the re-gen kiosk and loaded up on them. That they were things she normally would not have purchased didn't matter. As hungry as she was, all of it sounded good.

She barely glanced at the area around her door as she entered her quarters, prepared for something else childish to be amiss in the room, but though she checked all four areas, found nothing out of order.

Stripping off her white uniform and pulling on a loose nightgown, she sat crossed leg on the bed and began eating her eclectic supper as she thumbed the channels on the Vid-Com for something interesting to watch on the ship's entertainment circuit. She had just finished a cup of very unpalatable soup when the Vid-Com chimed.

"Yes?" she said with a sigh.

"We have a couple of combatants on their way to sickbay," Lt. Dorrick announced as soon as his image appeared on screen. "One is hurt pretty badly."

"On my way," Davan said. She looked wistfully at the rest of the food she'd stacked on the bedside table then got up to put on her uniform.

She heard the shouting long before she entered sickbay. The sound of men cursing one another with voices raised in drunken slurs was nothing new. She'd heard it often enough on the *Andraste*. What she hadn't been prepared for was to see two nude men standing in the center of the room. One combatant was brandishing a dagger the size of a small pitchfork, keeping the security officers at bay while the other naked man clutched a forearm spurting dark red blood.

"Give me the damned knife, Polson," one of the security guards snarled and lunged for the weapon. He came up short when the man wielding it slashed at his midsection.

"That's arterial blood," Davan said to no one in particular as she headed for the wounded man.

"Keep the fuck away from that two-timing prick!" the knife wielder shouted. "Let the bastard bleed to death." He threw the dagger from hand to hand, swirling it in a tight circle.

"I'll do no such thing," Davan said. She turned her back on the knife and went to the wounded man, pushing him back and out of the way of harm. Almost as soon as he sat on the chair, he passed out, tilting precariously to the side.

"You bitch!" the knife wielder screamed. "I told you to leave him alone!"

Davan heard the low growl that followed the angry man's demand but she paid no attention to it. She barely glanced around as a piercing shriek pealed across the room. Her full attention was on trying to stop the massive bleeding pouring from the other man's arm. She could tell there was nerve damage that would require extensive surgery if he was to ever use his hand again but at the moment, all she cared about was staunching the flow of blood that had already soaked the leg of her uniform.

She knew the captain had entered the room and from the complete silence after the loud shriek, knew he had things well under control. The shuffling of feet, a whimper, a groan and then heavy breathing behind her told her she was not alone.

"Make yourself useful and hold his flesh together while I get what I need to temporarily close this wound," she instructed.

A hand reached out to take hold of the wounded man's arm and Davan hurried to the supply cabinet.

"Where are your corpsmen?"

Davan stiffened when she recognized the captain's harsh voice and was surprised he was the one helping her. "You tell me. Someone is supposed to be on duty in here twenty-four/seven." When she turned around, she saw a deep frown on Cair Ghrian's face. "I imagine this is part of the lesson they are teaching me."

"You've caused that much animosity already?" he demanded.

"Well, you know how it is when you're not careful on whose eggshells you trod," she snapped, hooking a low stool with her foot and sliding it over in front of the unconscious patient.

"Didn't look to me as though you were careful with them at all," he responded dryly.

"You should see me when I'm angry, Captain," she told him.

Cair watched her efficiently deal with the wounded man's arm. "That's a fairly deep gash."

"He's going to need micro-surgery and the sooner the better if he's to ever have mobility in that hand and arm. When I get him on the table, I'll call for the med team."

"You're going to operate tonight?"

"The longer we wait, the less chance he has," she replied. She scooted the stool back and walked to the Vid-Com. "Will you put him on the table?"

Surprised he was being asked, Cair grunted to himself and stood up. The healer was calling in her surgical team so he pulled the unconscious man up, squatted to get beneath the man and then hefted the dead-weight burden onto his shoulder. Carrying him to the gurney the healer pointed to as she yelled at one of the corpsmen.

"I don't give an Ollannach buzzard's wattle what you're doing, mister. Get your ass in here now or I'll have you on the next shuttle to *an tSualainn*!"

Cair glanced around as he lowered the patient to the gurney. Only an Amhantarean woman would dare speak to a man in that tone of voice and hope to get away with it.

"You sure you're not from Amhantar?" he asked when she came over to the gurney.

"Amhantareans don't have a monopoly on spite, Captain Ghrian," she pointed out. "I was taught to stand up for myself and if it meant getting knocked down, get the hell back up and at least let the other guy know you'd been there."

"Tough as nails, eh?"

"Tougher than eggshells at any rate," she replied. When she glanced at him, she was surprised to see him smiling.

The surgical team came in at that moment and Cair moved out of the way. He stood back observing and saw mulish looks turn blank then respectful as the healer gave orders in a crisp, no-nonsense tone filled with nothing but professionalism. He watched as her talented fingers used instruments whose purpose he couldn't begin to imagine while utilizing no wasted movements and never once hesitating with indecision. He could see the admiration on one corpsman's face and the begrudging approval on the lined face of the lone nurse. By the time the surgery was concluded and the wounded man's arm bandaged, it was nearly two in the morning.

"Give him fifty milligrams of Pledax every four hours and if he has any pain when he wakes, you can give him seventy-five of tenerse every four to six," Davan said as she stifled a yawn. She signed the order, took one last look at her patient and started out of the operatory.

"Your stomach is growling," Cair said as he fell into step beside her.

"Might be because I haven't had a full meal in two days."

"Want something to eat or are you too tired?"

Davan looked up at him. "I'm famished but the mess is closed and—"

"The mess is never closed for me," he said.

She laughed. "I suppose not, but I have enough people angry at me already. I don't think I want to add the cooks to the list."

"Trust me," he said. "After tonight, you won't be having any more trouble with the crew of the *Foehn*."

She cocked her head. "Or her captain?"

"Especially not her captain."

"No more eggshells?"

He stopped, put out hand. "We got off on the wrong foot, Doc. Yesterday wasn't one of my better days."

She looked down at his hand then grasped it firmly in hers. "Mine, either, Captain."

"Now," he said. "What would you like to eat?"

"A hot bowl of soup and half a sandwich would be dreamy," she replied with a sigh.

"Done."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cair leaned back, his chair cocked on its back legs. He was comfortable with his long legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed and arms folded as he listened to the healer talking in between spoonfuls of the hot and sour soup she was eating in between nibbles of a corned beef and *an tSualainn* cheese sandwich.

"I haven't heard from either of them in a long time," Davan said.

"Would you like me to use my connections and check on your brother and sister?" he asked quietly.

Davan looked up with her spoon in mid-ladle. "You would do that?"

"I have a friend who is on the penal inspection team with the United Court of Justice. He's *an tSualainn* so he's neutral in the war. By the way, the chances are good the cheese on your sandwich came from his family's factory."

"I'm sure they are all right but it would make me feel better to know for sure," she said. "If it's not too much trouble."

"I like causing trouble," he said with a grin.

Davan glanced at the sleepy cook who was nodding a few tables away. "I gathered that, Captain."

"Cair," he corrected. When she didn't respond, he cocked an eyebrow.

"Cair," she said.

He liked the sound of his name on her tongue. Her Breasalean accent was soft and more refined than he was accustomed to in the women with whom he had daily contact. He glanced at the clock on the wall and winced.

"I'm going to be worthless tomorrow unless I get some sleep." He lowered his chair and started to get up.

"I need to hit the rack, myself. That 0630 chime is going to come much too soon," she said, ladling up the remaining tofu in her soup. Draining her glass of iced *an tSin* tea, she stood, picking up the last quarter of her sandwich and wrapping it in a napkin.

"If you're free for lunch tomorrow, why don't we meet and you can give me the particulars concerning your siblings on Amerigen," he suggested.

"I'll make the time," she said, falling into step beside him. "I've been bypassing lunch and supper and I think that's been a major mistake."

"And I'll make damned sure the mess stays open until you've eaten," he stated.

"I can't expect the cooks to —"

"That's their job, Doc," he cut in.

They had reached the elevator so he called out her deck level. His quarters were three decks up while hers was four decks down. He stood there as she entered the lift.

"Then it's settled?" he inquired. "Lunch tomorrow?"

"Just let me know when."

Cair walked back to the cook, woke him and told him to get to bed. On his way up in the elevator, the captain of the *Foehn* discovered he was bone-tired. He couldn't stop from yawning but as soon as the elevator door shushed open, he was wide awake.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Amethyst demanded. She was standing in the opened door of his quarters, hand braced on the wall and one foot tapping angrily.

It wasn't just the tone of voice she threw at him or the narrowed eyes flashing with fury that halted Cair in mid-step. She sounded too much like a suspicious wife and that rankled. It also brought out the bastard in him as he continued walking toward her, brushing her aside when she tried to block his entry.

"Answer me, Cair!" she ordered, following him inside. "It's nearly four in the morning. Where have you been all night?"

He didn't bother answering her but walked into the bathing room and went to stand before the urinal, unbuttoning his uniform trousers as she came barging in.

"I'm talking to you," she hissed.

Staring down at the urinal, he continued his stony silence. When he was finished, he stuffed himself back into his trousers then went to the sink to wash his hands, the urinal automatically flushing as he stepped away.

"Don't you dare ignore me!" she yelled and lashed out at him, punching his shoulder hard enough to propel him toward the sink.

Cair spun around and grabbed her by the shoulders, shoving her back against the wall. His teeth clenched, his face a hard plain of anger, he leaned into her.

"Get the hell out of my quarters," he said forcefully, "and don't come back. I'm sick to death of your demands and your jealousy and everything else about you. I'll have Seamus bring your things to you. I never want to see you at that door again!"

Amethyst twisted savagely out of his grip and slapped him as hard as she could. The red imprint of her hand was vivid on his cheek as his head rocked to one side. She would have kned him in the groin but he sidestepped her, reaching out to thrust her



away, the infuriated woman stumbled and hit the shower door hard enough to put a serpentine crack through the polyglass surface.

"You cocksucker!" she screamed and came at him with fingers arched into claws, her long nails going for his face.

He hated to do it but he'd learned over the last four years that the only way to handle Amethyst when she became violent was to become violent in return. With as much care as he could muster, he snaked out his hand and punched her, clipping her jaw with just enough force to drop her like a rock, her eyes rolling up in her head. Before she hit the floor, he grabbed her, swinging her up in his arms, carried her to the door and deposited her outside into the corridor. He laid her down on the floor gently then went back inside and locked the portal, changing the entry code so she couldn't come back in.

Going to the Vid-Com, he called security and told them to come get her. Then without another thought, he stripped, took a shower and by the time he crawled into bed, had forgotten all about the termagant who had made his life miserable for longer than he wanted to remember.

## Chapter Six

Davan yawned and yawned again as she fluffed the covers around her for the tenth time. As tired as she was, she could not seem to get to sleep. Her mind was replaying the last two hours over and over again. Every word he'd said, every facial expression, every gesture, was stamped indelibly on her subconscious.

"My mother had me sent here," he told her. "As a punishment for not doing what she wanted."

Why he was being punished had been left unsaid but Davan thought it might well have been over some woman for his next words had shocked her.

"She wants to choose my mate for me—just as she chose Bennick's and Liam's—but they are afraid of her. I'm not."

"I didn't know Prince Bennick was married," she commented.

"He isn't, yet, but that's because of Mother's insatiable desire to have all of us home on Amhantar for the Joining. She loves all that pomp and circumstance. With me exiled here and our little brother Liam somewhere near the front, the ceremony is pending."

"Is your younger brother a Deathwielder, too?"

"Liam?" he asked with a chuckle. "By the Goddess, no! The boy is a wizard with electronics but wouldn't know one end of a scythe sword from another. If he ever took one in his hands he'd be liable to whop something off."

"He's not married, either?"

Cair shook his head. "Can't. Not until the heir is Joined. That's according to Amhantarean Tribunal Law. Of the two of them, I think Liam is the only one looking forward to getting married, though. He seems to have some affection for Siobhan."

They talked of the two women who would be joining his family and Davan got the notion he thought both were flighty and somewhat timid.

"Mother wouldn't choose a woman who could stand up to her," he grumbled. "Not for Ben and Liam, at any rate."

"She chose a different woman for you?"

He had given her a strange look then shrugged. "One she thinks would be good for me, at any rate."

Though she'd asked a few leading questions, he changed the subject, asking about her instead.

"I understand you have a relationship with the man who flew you here."

She nodded. "Ja'Klyn and I have known each other since the university."

"Is this an intimate relationship?" he inquired.

Davan had blushed, hesitant to discuss her private life with the man sitting at the table with her. "We were seeing one another but not anymore," she told him.

"Ah," was his comment and then the direction of the conversation changed still again.

By the time she felt sleep pulling her down into its warm arms, she had gone over her conversation with the man known throughout the galaxy as The Black Sun several times over. It was no wonder when the dream came, the Scythelord of Amhantar was front and center...

*The skirl of metal clanging against metal was loud across the fog-shrouded moor. Mist rained down upon Davan's bare arms to pebble her flesh with invisible beads of coolness. Her lace shawl had slipped down her back and the moisture was seeping beneath the neckline of her silk gown. The hem was wet and her dainty slippers soaked from the heavy dew that clung to the grass. Smelling of heather and peat, the air seemed to press down on her, underlining the anxiety she felt as she stood watching the two warriors dueling on the crest of the hill.*

*They were fighting over her – The Black Sun and Ja'Klyn – each having declared her as his mate. Words had been thrown, a challenge laid down and now they were parrying and thrusting, hacking away savagely on Cnon na Bás, the Hill of Death, where duels had been fought on Amhantarean soil for centuries.*

*His deadly scythe sword slashing at Ja'Klyn's heavier broadsword, Cair Ghrian was hard to see in the dense fog. The black of his uniform blended with the predawn sky and all Davan could make out were the sparks made by the weapons as they met.*

*She could make out only a little more as she searched for Ja'Klyn in the combat. His white shirt was a blur that flashed now and again as the mist parted.*

*Wringing her hands, she waited nervously for the victor to come to claim her.*

*In the skeletal branches above her head, a raven cawed to her and she looked up, surprised by the raucous cry. The bird was prancing along the twisted limb, peering down at her with beady eyes that seemed to pierce her very soul. It cawed again and it sounded as though the raptor was saying Cair's name, rooting for the Deathwielder to win.*

*There was a choked-off cry and then silence settled upon the valley where Davan stood, shivering in the chill morning mist. The clash of the blades seemed to have been swallowed in the fog that had grown thicker still. Suddenly afraid, her heart pounding, she pulled the shawl over her shoulders and clasped it tightly to her neck. She squinted, trying to make out what was happening on Cnon na Bás, but the wafting fog obscured her vision.*

*"Caw!" the raven squawked. "Caw!"*

*Then it spread its ebon wings and took to the sky, the flutter of its wings echoing through the early morning.*

*As the first finger of dawn's light reached up from the horizon, Davan could see the silhouette of a man striding down the hill, his weapon still clutched in his hand. He was coming slowly toward her with purposeful steps that told her he was the champion, the victor of the death duel fought over her.*

*Davan backed away, her nerves to the breaking point for she was fearful of finding out who would now control her destiny. She cried out as her back pressed against the rough bark of the tree and she was so frightened, she could no longer move.*

*He came toward her with eyes steady and footsteps sure. When he was but a foot away, he tossed aside his bloody weapon.*

*"Come to me, wench," he ordered, holding out his sword hand to her.*

*Davan shook her head, too terrified to move. Her knees were quaking.*

*He took another step toward her and at her whimper, reached out to place his bloodstained palm upon her cheek.*

*"You are mine," he said and his palm moved to the back of her neck to pull her face up to his.*

*His mouth claimed hers in a kiss so heady she nearly swooned. She sagged against him and he snaked a firm, uncompromising arm around her waist to anchor her to him.*

*The kiss went on forever as his tongue slipped possessively into her mouth and one long leg insinuated itself between her legs. He pressed against her, pushing her back to the tree so her crotch rode his hard thigh and she could feel the steel of his shaft thrusting against her belly.*

*"Mine," he repeated and the hand at her neck slid over her shoulder and down her chest to mold itself over her heaving breast, a knowing thumb stroking her erect nipple.*

*The ground was wet and cold as he lay her down but the warmth of his muscled body covering hers heated her blood to the boiling point. She clung to him, her arms around his wide shoulders and when he reached down to peel aside the hem of her gown, to expose her silky flesh to his calloused palm, she groaned in surrender.*

*His hand fumbled between them until he freed his cock from his britches. She could feel the weight of it against her thigh, the drop of moisture from its tip sliding over her flesh. His love weapon was as tempered as steel and just as smooth.*

*He took hold of the lower part of her leg and thrust it over his hip, his hand sliding down her thigh to lift her toward him. He shifted his body until he was paused at the apex of her thighs, the head of his shaft hard and hot.*

*"Mine!" he snarled and as the tip of his cock found the entrance to her cunt, Davan threw back her head and...*

*...whined for the Vid-Com's chime dispelled the mist in which she had been dreaming. It dissolved the face of her conqueror, her passionate captor and thrust her rudely from her spectral lover's arms.*

*"No," Davan protested and clutched her pillow tighter to her chest. That it was a goose-down rectangle instead of the hard, sensual body of a lover frustrated the healer so badly she threw the offending pillow across the room and lay there trembling, so aroused she actually hurt.*

*Try as hard as she might, she could not bring the face of her lover to mind. His dream voice, likewise, would not reveal his identity to her. Had it been Ja'Kyl'n who had been the winner of the duel or had it been Cair—that dark Scythelord—who had won?*

Frustrated and aching all over, she flung herself out of the bed and hurried to the shower, turning the water on full blast and—as cold as she could endure it—stood beneath the onslaught and let the frigid stream pour over her heated body.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She made one hell of a mess on your door, lad," Seamus said, shaking his head. "Whatcha wanna do about it?"

Cair stared at the blood-red letters splashed across his door and over the wall beside it. He knew Amethyst would retaliate but he'd had no idea how evilly until he had started out of his quarters that next morning. Every vile word, every vulgar name in her lexicon of vengeance was streaked there for every passerby to see. She had called him every crude name he'd ever heard and some he guessed that came from her native *an Iodáil* tongue.

"That's one mad little whore," Seamus pointed out.

Sighing heavily, Cair turned to the two maintenance 'bots that stood behind Seamus. "I want this cleaned up as quickly as possible."

The 'bots rolled into position immediately and began scrubbing at the wall with paint remover.

"Is the *Faucon* leaving today?" Cair asked.

"She's scheduled to."

"When are they leaving?"

Seamus fingered his chin. "Around two this afternoon."

"Is she going directly back to the front or can I ask a favor of her captain?"

"I imagine he'll be receptive to a favor since you helped keep two of his men from killing one another last night," Seamus replied. "By the way, the one you sent to the brig got busted down to airman. He's not a happy voyager."

"Too fucking bad. Would you ask Captain LeClerc to meet me in my office before he goes?"

"You gonna send that red-haired demoness with him?"

"I'm going to see if he'll drop her over at the *Samiel* on his way. I wouldn't wish her on Isma'il otherwise, but he'll be immune to her dubious charms."

"It's your title that slut wants," Seamus reminded his captain.

Cair snorted and turned away. The sight of the wall so angered him he wanted to be away from it.

"No one's seen it but the two of us," Seamus called out as Cair entered the elevator.

"And the bitch who did it," Cair growled.

All the way down to the command deck, he was fuming. He wanted nothing more than to go to Amethyst's quarters and beat the hell out of her but that wasn't an honorable thing, a manly thing to do. Men did not beat women, yet, for that one, he thought he could make an exception.

"Captain on deck!" Dorrick called out as Cair took the bridge.

"Carry on, Mr. Dorrick," Cair said as he seated himself in the command chair.

Freemohn came over and took the console seat beside his captain. "There was a very bad skirmish overnight," he informed Cair. "Several hundred casualties."

Cair put a hand to his face and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger. "How many dead?"

"At last count, thirty-seven."

"By the Goddess I wish we could bring this damnable war to a close," Cair said on a long breath.

"Do you have anything you need me to handle this morning?"

Cair started to shake his head then remembered his conversation earlier that morning with the healer. "Aye," he said. "Get hold of Major Quirin Degendesch at the United Court. Tell him I'd like to speak with him as soon as possible." He stood. "I'll be in my office."

Dorrick hopped up. "Aye, Sir!" he said.

Annoyed but somewhat amused by his XO's enthusiasm, Cair left the bridge and went down the corridor to his office. He spent much of his time there—alone and content to be so—unless Seamus saw fit to interrupt.

Or his mother suddenly appeared on the Vid-Com screen as she took that moment to do.

"You look like hell, Cairnan," she pronounced.

"Must be the company," he mumbled. "What's wrong now, Mother?"

"How is that lovely little Davan today?"

"I wouldn't know," he replied.

"Best you be finding out, boy. I have set the Joining date for the two of you for the summer solstice."

"Funny," he said with a snort and sat down on the edge of his desk, his forearm braced on his right thigh.

"Do you think I am joking with you, Cairnan Douglas? The solstice is only a week away."

"How is Bennick?" he countered, in no mood for her teasing.

"Enjoying himself, I suppose," his mother answered. "As much as he is allowed to."

A sliver of ice pressed against Cair's spine. "What does that mean?"

Queen Margaret "Meg" Ghrian shrugged. "Take it to mean whatever you like. He is either enjoying himself or he isn't."

Cair ground his teeth. "That's not what I asked and you know it, Mother."

"What exactly are you asking then, boy? Sometimes you tend to be very vague."

He stared into his mother's light eyes and he saw a spark of mischief floating there. Although her face was expressionless, her lips perfectly still, he had the notion she was laughing at him.

"Where is Bennick, Mother?"

"I haven't clue. He could be inside. He could be outside. He could be underground in the catacombs or he could be sitting in the belfry. I am no longer required to keep tabs on the man."

That sliver of ice became an iceberg settling between his shoulders. His mother was smiling sweetly at him and that was a sure sign hell had just opened up for him.

"Where is my brother?" he whispered.

"Brother," she said. "Fancy you should call him that, Cairnan. Brother." She put a slightly arthritic finger to her lips and looked up at the ceiling as though deep in contemplation. "Brother Brother. I'm not sure you should call him that."

Horror flitted through Cair's golden eyes. "You can't be serious," he said.

"Am I ever anything but when it comes to the men of my family?"

"He joined the priesthood?" Cair asked, his voice higher than usual.

"The Brotherhood of Síocháin," she replied. "I believe their monastery is in the foothills of Mount Ciúin."

"But what about Briana?" he questioned. "They were to be Joined..."

"She ran off with Tommy Roderick's youngest son Patrick," his mother reported. "Said she was tired of waiting for Ben." She shook her head. "Such an impulsive lass. Perhaps I chose wrongly in picking her. Davan may be headstrong but I don't think she's capricious."

The implications of what his mother had just said fell on Cair with the velocity of a meteor and with just as much crushing weight. He jumped up from the desk, shaking his head in denial, wagging a finger at her.

"No. I know what you are trying to do and I won't have it," he stated firmly. "You are *not* going to marry me off on the solstice!"

"You are starting to like the wench. Don't tell me you aren't," his mother chided.

"Liking her is one thing," he snapped. "Taking her to wife is another."

"You will do as I wish, Cairnan!"

"I don't want to marry!" he shouted.

Queen Meg's face became a mask of authority. "Since Bennick Terrence has abdicated the throne and—before the Tribunal—formally renounced and surrendered all sovereign power granted to him as First Born Son of Amhantar, the title of prince regent now falls to you. As prince, you must have a wife at your side. That is Amhantarean law!"

"No," Cair groaned, burying his head in his hands.

"You are a Ghrian, boy. It is your duty to take up your brother's mantle and carry it for the family. A Ghrian must sit on the Council of—"

"Then give it to Liam!" Cair said, pleading making his voice break.

His mother's chin trembled. "Don't be cruel, Cairnan," she said.

Another weight piled upon Cair's back and he stumbled beneath the pressure. "By the Goddess, don't tell me he's a POW!" he whispered.

"You don't remember?" she asked, tears forming in her eyes. "Were you that drunk when I told you that you have forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?"

"Liam died near Azulene. He's been dead for over six months. His body was never recovered."

"And you are just now telling me?" he shouted. He was very fond of his younger brother and the news was devastating.

"I did tell you, Cairnan!" she yelled back at him. "I Vid-Commed you the moment I learned of it!" Her mouth turned bitter. "If I had known you were not sober enough to understand what I was telling you, I would have—"

Cair rushed from the room, pushing Seamus aside as the older man was about to ring for admittance. Seamus lurched into the room and was about to leave when the queen's voice made him turn around. He bowed respectfully.

"Go after him, Seamus," she commanded. "He doesn't remember me telling him about Liam."

Seamus went perfectly still. "What of him, Your Majesty?"

The Amhantarean queen broke down, her shoulders heaving as she plastered a trembling hand to her mouth. "I told Cairnan. I told him what had happened weeks ago. I wondered why he refused to allow the shuttle to land on the *Foehn* when I sent it to fetch him but Bennick assured me it was Cairnan's decision not to come home and that I should leave him to grieve in his own way. I never dreamed he was so drunk he hadn't understood what I said to him that evening."

"Milady?" Seamus asked quietly. "I don't know what you're referring to. Tell me for I am in the dark here."

"He's dead! Liam is dead!" Queen Meg cried. "My baby boy is dead!"

Closing his eyes to the news, Seamus hung his head. "Milady, I am so very sorry to hear such news." He ran a hand over his face. "The lad said nothing to me."

"Go after him. He'll head for the nearest bottle and that has to stop. Bennick has abdicated and Cairnan is now the heir apparent."

"The boy will be king?" Seamus said, his eyes round. "My Cairnan will be king?"

"Go, Seamus!" the queen demanded. "Let nothing happen to him! The future of Amhantar depends on him!"



As fast as his brittle old bones would carry him, Seamus went searching for Cair. For over an hour he searched every nook and cranny in which he'd ever discovered a drunken Scythelord in the past but Cair was nowhere to be found. Growing very concerned, Seamus called out the security forces to help. Well into the late morning, there was no sign of the *Foehn's* captain.

Davan looked up as the security team entered the sickbay. Without a word to her, they searched the premises then left – again without a word of explanation. She went to the door, watching as they entered each of the operatories but hesitated to ask questions for the looks on the faces of the men were forbidding. It wasn't until she made a Vid-Com call to the captain's office that she found he was missing.

"Where is Chief Rawls?" she asked, hoping Seamus would tell her what was happening.

"Is there a message?" the yeoman asked, irritation rampant in his tone.

"Would you ask him to contact me as soon as –" She got no further for the yeoman broke the contact with a curt "aye".

The Francach warrior who had been operated on the night before was awake and in a great deal of pain though he could flex his wounded hand, much to Davan's relief. His captain Pierre LeClerc had come by to see him and had spent a few minutes with Davan before agreeing the warrior should stay a few more days in sickbay.

"I will send a shuttle back for him," LeClerc promised. "I will need his testimony at the court marshal of his assailant."

"Will you be taking his attacker with you, then?" Davan asked. She remembered the rage on the warrior's face and the sharp blade with which he had threatened her.

"He is in our brig even as we speak," LeClerc replied. "Had not Captain Ghrian disarmed him, I am told he would have stabbed you in the back." He clucked his tongue. "For that offense alone he would have been drummed out of our military!"

"I hope you have a safe trip back to the front," she said. "I believe you've had more than your share of excitement while on leave."

LeClerc shrugged. "And more heaped upon that since Captain Ghrian had wanted to ask a boon of me," he said. "One with which I shall most assuredly comply although he has not asked it of me personally." He put an index finger to his right eye and pulled down the lower lid. "Getting rid of a mistress is something I understand all too well. I've been forced to do it myself on occasion."

"A mistress?"

"Aye," LeClerc replied. "The stygian red-haired virago Chief Rawls brought aboard the *Faucon* kicking and screaming like one of those wild Amhantarean banshees of legend. The woman was cursing a blue streak ten fathoms wide until I had her sedated. All that noise gives me a bellyache. I have never cared for Iodálach women. They are too temperamental for me."

"Amethyst?" Davan asked. "Is that who you mean?"

At LeClerc's nod, Davan whistled silently. She wondered what had happened to cause the rift between the two lovers but a part of her felt relief at not having to come into contact with the brazen woman again.

Another part of her whispered joy at the Scythelord's availability.

"Well, I'll be going now, Doctor," LeClerc announced. "I am glad Dubois had so fine a surgeon to see to his wound."

After walking the Francach captain to the door, Davan told the corpsman on duty she was going to get a bite of lunch. As she knew would happen, the man ignored her and that was a situation she was going to have to clarify when she returned.

Walking down the corridor, she passed several security men. They were opening doors that had been locked and were peering inside, shutting the doors and relocking them as they continued on. She wondered where the captain could be hiding but on a ship the size of the *Foehn*, it could be just about anywhere and it would take days to find him unless...

She stopped and called out to the security men. One looked around while the others keep walking.

"Aye, Doctor?" the man snapped.

"Do you have heat search capabilities onboard?" she inquired.

The man frowned. "You mean engine heat signatures?"

Davan took a few steps closer to the security team member. "No, I mean body heat. Can't you just scan the ship for a position on every living thing onboard?"

Rolling his eyes, the man threw up his hands. "I thought you might have a good idea," he snapped. "That's already been done."

"And you didn't find him?"

"If we had, do you think I'd be standing here wasting my time with you?" the man grumbled.

That wild berserker that wasn't very far from the surface at the best of times came shooting up to lash out at the security man. Davan stepped up to him—nose to nose—and when she spoke, her eyes were spitting green fire.

"Not only do I outrank you, Ensign," she said, stressing the man's title, "but I would be willing to bet I can find Captain Ghrian within the hour without your help or anyone else's." Her lips peeled back from her teeth. "How much you want to bet? A day's, a week's, a month's credits?"

Obviously unaccustomed to having a woman get in his face and from his own shocked expression understandably taken aback, the security man nevertheless met her challenge with a smirk.

"I'll bet you two months credits that you'll still be chasing your wide-load tail when we find him and put his ass to bed," the security man sneered.

"Oh, yeah?" she growled.

"Yeah!"

She stuck out her hand. "You got a deal, Morris," she said, glancing down at his nametag. "If he's still on this ship, I'll find him!"

Morris took her hand and shook it. The strength of her grip must have shocked him further for he glanced down at their joined hands with a puzzled look on his beefy face.

Davan jerked her hand from his and spun around, resisting the urge to touch her ass for his wide-load comment had annoyed her no end.

Forgetting all about eating, she went back into the sickbay, ignoring the corpsman that was ignoring her in turn and rummaged around in a box until she found an old-fashioned handheld infrared thermometer among her personal belongings. Thankful her things had been begrudgingly delivered a few hours earlier, she thumbed on the instrument's switch, pointed the laser head toward her patient and when the pale green pulse of his life force registered on the IT's screen dropped the instrument into the pocket of her lab coat.

"Has he eaten?" she asked on her way out.

"Not yet," the corpsman growled.

"Then feed him and be damned quick about it!" she threw over her shoulder. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the corpsman's head pop up like a turtle's from its shell.

Having no idea how many decks encompassed the *Foehn*, her first stop was in engineering where she demanded a schematic of the ship's interior. Though the engineering officer started to question her at the strange request, he stopped when he saw the narrowed, steely look in her eyes. Shrugging, he went to a computer terminal, typed in what he needed and a page printed within a few seconds.

"If you wanted to stay cool," Davan said. "Where would you go?"

The engineering officer cocked one shoulder. "That depends on what you wanted to cool," he said in a bored tone. "Yourself? A side of Bhrasil beef? A computer system? What is it you want to cool, lady?"

"Doctor," she corrected. "And I would like to keep my body cool."

"Try the ice deck," he mumbled.

Davan looked down at the schematic and blinked. "You have an ice lake on the *Foehn*?"

"We have an *Ísiltíris* coming in from the war zone," the engineering officer snapped. "Those cold-blooded bastards like to swim in the frigid waters of their homeland and take walks during blizzards. Go figure."

She started to leave then turned back. "Do you have a desert as well?"

"Of course we do!" he stated. "We have Araibis troops here from time to time!"

She looked down. "How would I find the desert?"

"Ever try looking under hot zone?" he inquired with a smirk.

"Oh, yeah. There it is." She glanced up. "How hard would it be to track a heat signature in the desert?"

"Nigh to impossible," the man answered. "Now if you don't have any other stupid questions, I have work to do!"

Smiling to herself, Davan left engineering. She didn't think she'd need the instrument in her pocket as she followed the schematic to the area marked hot zone. Unless she missed her guess, that would be where she would find the Deathwielder.

## Chapter Seven

Cair was shit-faced drunk. He was so drunk he could no longer sit up and was lying with his back to a large boulder, watching a viper winding its way through the deep sand past his boots. The jug of brandy in his lap was a swallow away from being drained but there were two more lying unopened beside it—more than enough to keep him numb for hours to come unless Seamus finally figured out where he had run off to.

Overhead, the sun beat down mercilessly and the dunes undulated with heat ghosts. His shirt was unbutton to the waist, thrown back to reveal a chest glistening with perspiration, the thick pelt of wiry hairs sparkling with droplets. Arming the sweat from his forehead, he winced as a drop of the salty moisture slid down into his eye, stinging him. Not that it mattered. The pain in his heart was a thousand times greater than any physical pain he could ever imagine experiencing.

He lifted the jug to his lips and finished off that soldier, so inebriated he couldn't throw the empty away but rather letting it slip out of his fingers. He snorted, remembering an old Meiriceánach saying about being too drunk to hit the side of a barn—whatever the hell a barn was!

Idly he watched as a scorpion climbed up his pant leg then scampered across his knee and jumped onto the other knee before climbing down again and going on its way. Frowning, for one of the things he hated most in life were insects, he was so intoxicated, he couldn't have shooed the evil thing away even to have saved his life. He had just enough energy to reach for another jug and struggle to uncork it.

An eagle screamed as it flew above him and he let his head fall back to follow the path of the magnificent bird as it sailed upon the thermals. Squinting against the bright glare of the sun, he wished he could be as free as the eagle and take flight, soaring as far from the *Foehn* and the hurt in his soul as the megaverse would allow.

Mumbling to himself for he knew already his mother was setting into motion the reassignment that would take him back to Amhantar, he pulled at the stubborn cork until he managed to pop it free of the jug, splashing some of the liquor onto the back of his hand. Licking the brew off with his tongue, he thought he saw movement out on the desert floor and tried to focus.

Aye, he thought something—someone—was coming toward him from the shimmering folds of the hot desert waves. Perhaps a mirage, a figment of his imagination or one of the troopers from the Tribunal sent to fetch him home.

"To rule the roost!" he blurted out, his words slurred. He hiccupped. "To rule the fucking roost." He put a finger to his lips. "Shush. Shush!" His voice became a whisper. "To be the pissant king whether I like it or not!"

Rippling like a building wave, the figure came steadily toward him. If it was an enemy, he thought as he took a long swig of the brandy, he was screwed. Weaponless, unable to put up a fight, he could do nothing but lie there and accept his fate.

Whatever that was.

Once more the eagle screamed and Cair turned his sweaty face up to the raptor. The sight of it so free, able to go where it would, when it would, filled him with such sadness, tears filled his eyes. When the shadow of the one who had joined fell over him, he hung his head, expecting the worse.

"Are you having fun yet?"

Cair cocked his head back and looked up but all he could see was the dark outline of the person standing over him. The voice had been remarkably young sounding so the trooper must be but a babe in arms.

"*Ta me are meisce*," he said in his native tongue.

"If that means you're drunk, I can see that."

"I ain't going back," the Scythelord protested.

"You'll have to eventually," his companion replied.

"Nope, don't have to if I don't want to." He thumped his chest. "For I am the king!"

"Are you now?" the youthful voice asked and Cair could hear humor in the question.

"Fucking straight, I am!" He screwed up an eye to try to make out the face but the glare of the sun prevented him for seeing anything save the trooper's shadow.

"Won't Prince Bennick have something to say about that?"

Before Cair could answer, his companion squatted down in front of him and he was pleasantly surprised to see a very pretty – nay, a lovely – woman hunkered before him.

"Who're you?" he inquired, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Davan," she replied. "Your new healer?"

His face screwed up and then relaxed as memories fell into the place. "Aye!" he said, pointing the jug at her. "I know you. You're the wench with the shitty-looking hair!"

She sat down on the sand and crossed her knees. "May I have a sip?"

He pulled the jug to him as though it were the most precious commodity in his world. "No. Get your own!"

Davan spied another jug and reached for it. She uncorked it with ease and lifted the brew to her lips. Wincing as she swallowed the fiery liquor, she sat it between her legs. "Aren't you hot?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Roasting like a pig o'er a spit," he replied.

"It's cooler inside the ship."

"It's safer out here," he mumbled and took another hearty pull on his jug.

"Safe from what?"

He closed his eyes. "Pain."

Davan re-corked the jug in her lap. "Where do you hurt, Captain?"

Cair put his free hand to his chest. "My heart," he whispered. "My heart hurts."

Thinking he was grieving over the loss of his mistress, Davan's lips thinned. "You are a young man. You'll survive."

"Will I?" he asked, opening his eyes to look at her.

She was stunned to see tears streaking down his sweaty cheeks. The sight touched her in a way she hadn't felt in many years.

"Do you know what it is to lose a member of your family?" he asked.

Davan nodded. "Aye, Captain. I do."

He cocked his head to one side. "Truly?"

Looking away from the sorrow etching Cair Ghrian's handsome face, Davan looked out over the desert. "Both my parents were lost while serving on a medivac transport, shot down by an Aduaidh Skyraider. My brother Mason—my twin brother—died off the coast of *an Ghréig* five years ago when the shuttle he was piloting lost power and plunged into the Muir Sea. My oldest brother Roman was killed when his fighter flamed out over *an Ostair*. I have a sister and a brother imprisoned on Amerigen and another brother who has been listed as MIA." She looked back at him. "Yes, Captain. I know all too well what it is to lose your kin."

Cair began counting on the fingers of his left hand when she'd finished speaking. He lifted his head. "Four dead, two in prison and one missing."

"And that's of those whose fates I know," she said. "I've four siblings I've had no word about since the war bled over to Eurus Quadrant."

He lowered his hand. "My pain can not compare to yours," he said.

"But it hurts all the same."

"It hurts so bad I want to lie here and die."

"No woman is worth that, Captain," she snapped.

Cair screwed up his face. "Hell, no. I agree."

"Then why are you sitting her feeling sorry for yourself because you sent Amethyst away?" she challenged.

He blinked. "I sent her away?"

Davan's eyebrows shot up. "You don't remember?"

"Don't give a damn about her but didn't know I'd sent her ass away," he said and swiped at the tears that were dripping from his chin. "Glad I did, though."

"Then why are you crying?"

It was as though that one word released all the turmoil that had been building in Cair Ghrian. His pain and loss, and terrible grief welled up and poured forth like a

lanced wound and the howl of anguish that overtook him pitched him sideways into the sand and he drew up in a fetal position and began to shake with his sobbing.

At a loss to know what had caused such a reaction, Davan uncrossed her legs and crawled over to him to lay a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Whatever it is, it can't be that bad," she said, stroking his arm.

She was not prepared for him to grab at her, wrapping his arms around her hips, and to lay his head in her lap. Like a little boy—hurt and seeking maternal soothing—he held on to her and cried so hard it seemed as though his heart would break.

"Shush," she crooned to him, putting her arms around him. The sound of his crying rent her spirit, pulling it forcefully apart as he sobbed. His quaking shoulders, the tears of a strong, virile man, touched her in a way she could never have explained and made her feel so protective of him her arms tightened their hold.

She was still holding him—though his crying had ceased—when she looked up to see Seamus Rawls and two other men coming toward them through the wavering heat. She was smoothing back Cair's damp hair from a forehead dotted with sweat. His eyes were closed and she thought he had slipped into a drunken sleep.

Seamus' lined face was filled with concern as he walked up to them. He hunkered down to keep Davan from having to squint up at him through the harsh sunlight. "How is he?" the older man asked quietly.

"Grieving," Davan replied. "But it can't be because he sent his whore away. There has to be more to it than that. Did he lose one of his brothers?"

"Aye," Seamus replied. "The baby boy." He motioned one of the men with him to pick up the captain.

Davan nodded. She released her hold on Cair as the man stooped, slid his arms under his captain's back and legs and lifted him easily, shifting the weight against him before he turned and headed back to the entrance to the desert deck.

"He'll be dehydrating," Davan said. "I suggest you take him to sickbay and I'll get some fluids in him."

"Drunk as a pissant, is he?" Seamus inquired, surveying the brandy jugs lying about.

"He's not going to feel all that well when he comes to," she replied and started to get up.

Seamus put out his hand and helped Davan to her feet. "I wouldn't have ever thought of looking for the lad here but after the engineer told me you'd been nosing around asking questions about heat sigs and such, I realized this had to be where he was hiding." He fell into step beside Davan. "I appreciate your help, Doc."

Smiling at the title, Davan wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeve. "How did his brother die?"

"I don't know the particulars of it for I just learned of his death today but he's been gone for weeks now."



"And he just learned of it," Davan said.

Seamus plowed a thick hand through what was left of his balding hair. "Well, actually he was told back when it happened but he was too drunk to grasp what the queen was telling him."

"Or he just blocked it out," Davan suggested. "If he didn't want it to be true, his subconscious would have refused to process the information."

"Aye, that could have been the way of it," Seamus agreed. "That ain't all that set him off today."

Davan glanced at the older man. "You mean him having to send Amethyst away?"

Seamus threw out a dismissive hand. "That was one of his better decisions, Doc, and long overdue although when he hears what's gone and happened, he's not going to be in any better frame of mind."

"What do you mean?"

"The *Faucon* was captured by the Saurians less than two hours after it left here. Everyone on board was taken prisoner and the ship blown to bits."

Davan squeezed her eyes shut. "You're right. He's not going to like hearing that."

"Not that he'll care all that much what happened to Amethyst, but he liked Capt. LeClerc."

"So did I," Davan replied. "Do you suppose they'll be taken to Utuk Xul?"

"The men will, aye, but the women will no doubt wind up on one of the Saurian pleasure ships." He shrugged. "Not all that bad for Amethyst I don't suppose but for the women on the *Faucon*'s crew, it's a pisser."

"You said something else added to the captain's drinking today?"

"The queen Vid-Commed to tell him what I'm willing to bet the lad found nearly as bad as learning his little brother was gone."

A slight ripple of jealousy coursed through Davan's heart as they reached the door that led back into the ship. As it slid open, she asked if another bride had been found for the captain.

Seamus grinned. "Aye, I think one has but it was learning Prince Bennick went and joined a monastery that has him madder than a long-tailed muskrat in a room full of short-circuiting cybots."

"Because he doesn't want the responsibility of being king?"

"Never did want it," Seamus acknowledged. "Now, he don't have no choice in the matter."

"Too much emotional overload today, eh?" Davan said with a sigh. "No wonder he tied one on."

"Gotta stop the lad from giving in to that weakness, though," Seamus remarked. "Ain't a good thing for an Amhantarean king to be too fond of the brew."

"Or to use it as a crutch when things don't go his way," Davan put in.

"Precisely," Seamus agreed.

They took the elevator up to the sickbay and walked in as a couple of the corpsmen were stripping the sweaty clothes from the captain. The nurse had a basin of soapy water and a rag in preparation of bathing him. All three looked up as the healer came into the room.

"You want me to start an IV, Doc?" the nurse inquired softly.

"Please," Davan said, surprised at the tone and the title.

"We can handle it, ma'am," one of the corpsmen said. "You haven't had lunch yet, have you?"

Shocked at the complete turnaround, Davan shook her head. "No, it can wait. I—"

"Chief Rawls, why don't you take Doc to the mess. She hasn't been eating all that well since she's been here," the nurse said. "We'll call her if something we can't handle comes up."

"I doubt there's anything you can't handle," Davan said.

The nurse shrugged. "We have our moments," she said then locked eyes with Davan. "We also know when we've been foolish. Welcome aboard the *Foehn*, Dr. Shanahan."

"Thank you," Davan said, her throat clogging up.

"Okay, so we're off to the mess," Seamus said, taking Davan's arm. He winked. "I hear they're outta eggs but I'm sure we'll find something."

\* \* \* \* \*

Davan was nodding in the chair when a corpsman touched her arm lightly. She flinched and her eyes snapped open.

"Sorry to bother you, Doc, but you have a Vid-Com call from Her Majesty, the captain's mother," the corpsman whispered.

Davan looked over at her patient and saw that he was still sleeping, an IV tube running into one muscled arm. She got up and went into her office then closed the door to keep from waking him.

The Vid-Com screen was filled with the expressionless face of Queen Margaret Ghrian. She was sitting at a desk, her hands folding on the desktop. Every hair was in place on her elegant head and her makeup flawless, but there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

"Your Majesty," Davan said and bowed her head in greeting.

"It is amazing how much you look like Catherine," the queen said and Davan heard weariness in the older woman's voice. "I feel as though I am speaking to her once more."

"I would like to express my condolences at the loss of your son, Your Majesty," Davan said. "If there is anything I can do—"

"There is, actually," the queen said. Her fingers flexed together as she clasped them.

"Please, just ask."

A slight smile tugged at the queen's lips. "You can accompany my son when he comes back to Amhantar."

"Your Majesty, as much as I would like to accommodate you, I have a job here and—"

"A new healer is on his way to the *Foehn* and should arrive later this morning," the queen informed her. "We are not so greedy we would leave the crew of that ship without medical assistance, especially not when the war has escalated so gravely of late."

"I take it you are sending a ship to take him home?"

"His own personal LRC," the queen replied. "We would have sent a shuttle but since both you and Seamus will be accompanying him—along with those personal belongings you wish to bring—we felt a larger ship was required. The Long-Range Cruiser the *Miodóg* will now be the king's flagship when he is crowned."

"He's not happy about that new responsibility," Davan said.

"Cairnan never thought the obligation would fall to him and if Bennick had been of stronger character, it most likely never would have. But my middle son will do what needs to be done whether he finds the situation palatable or not. That is his heritage and his birthright."

"I'm not sure why you wish for me to attend him, Your Majesty," Davan stated. "I will, of course, but surely you don't expect him to leave the *Foehn* until he feels better than he does right now."

"He's passed out right now so I doubt he feels anything," the queen snapped. "That is a condition that will cease once he's back on Amhantar."

"Aye, but—"

"Did he not tell you I had set his Joining for the summer solstice?"

Once more jealousy shot through Davan—much to her surprise—and she realized she was digging her nails into her palms. "No, Your Majesty. We have not—"

"The solstice is almost at hand and there is much to be done before a full Joining can be undertaken."

"I can only imagine but why do you—"

The queen held her hand up, looked away and seemed to be listening to someone speaking to her out of range of the Vid-Com. She nodded then turned back to Davan. "I am happy to report that your brother and sister have been released from Amerigen and are on their way to Amhantar as of ten minutes ago."

Davan's eyes widened. "Eadan and Conaill?" she gasped.

"Your other four brothers are already here. It took a bit of doing but the last one arrived this morning."

"My brothers?" Davan whispered.

"We are trying to locate your remaining brother Lorcan but so far no one has been able to give us any information concerning him." The queen's face softened. "I'm sorry to report his status is still listed as MIA."

"Why is my family being brought to Amhantar?" Davan asked, stunned to learn such news.

The queen smiled. "Why for your Joining to Cairnan, of course!"

## Chapter Eight

"She'll have her way, lass," Seamus said as he watched Davan pacing the small confines of her office.

"And without so much as a by-your-leave!" Davan complained, continuing the harangue she had been throwing at Seamus.

"He's not a bad catch, you know," Seamus defended. "You'll never want for nothing."

"That is not the point!" Davan hissed. "I don't *want* to get married!"

"Neither does he, but I don't think either of you have any say in the matter."

Davan's eyes narrowed. "I am not Amhantarean!" she stated. "She is not my sovereign and has no authority over me!"

"I don't need to remind you we are at war, lass, and as such the normal rules don't apply. There's the matter of your eldest brother."

Davan stopped pacing. "Durbin?" she asked. "What has he got to do with anything?"

Seamus spread his hands. "He is the head of your family."

"So what? I haven't seen him in three years."

"You acknowledge, though, that he is the patriarch of your clan."

"As the oldest, my cousin Jaspar should be by rights but who knows where Jas is. I imagine Durbin claimed the honor for himself. That sounds like something he'd do. What has that got to do with—?"

"He betrothed you to the lad."

"What?" Davan shouted.

Seamus winced. "Lass, you're going to wake him if you don't tone it down a notch or two."

The truth of Seamus' assertion was staring back at Davan and she stumbled to her chair. "He didn't," she said. "He wouldn't."

"Would and did," Seamus disagreed. "Even went so far as to provide a right nice size dowry for you, too."

Davan's lips parted. "Dowry? How the hell did Durbin get his hands on anything remotely worth offering as a dowry?"

A wide grin stretched over Seamus' wrinkled face. "Well, now that is the one thing in all this that gained my admiration, lass," he said. "Your brother Durbin has been working the black market down in Norus Quadrant since the war began and has massed himself quite a fortune in credits. And I suppose he saw the advantage to

having a king for a brother-in-law and jumped at the chance to offer your hand to Queen Meg."

Burying her face in her hands, Davan's shoulders slumped. "I can't believe this is happening!"

"You could have done worse, lass," Seamus pointed out. "The lad might have his faults but he's quite a catch if you think on it."

"But I don't want to get married," Davan whined.

"Neither do I."

Davan looked up to find Cair standing in the doorway. He was pale, his hand trembling as he wiped at his face. The IV had been removed from his arm earlier but he looked as though he still needed it.

Seamus shot to his feet and offered his chair to the younger man.

"When is the ship scheduled to dock?" Cair asked, shaking his head at the offer.

"She's sending the *Miodóg*," Seamus told him.

"I figured as much. When is it due to get here?"

"It passed the first checkpoint twenty minutes ago."

"So I have about half an hour's freedom left."

"We'll talk to your mother," Davan suggested. "We can tell her neither of us want to —"

"Do you really think we are the masters of our fate, wench?" Cair asked. He gave in and sat down in the chair, bracing his elbow on the arm and putting his hand to the bridge of his nose. "We've lost that right."

"Are you sick to your stomach?" Davan asked, coming from around her desk. It was an indication of how concerned she was with his pallor that she let the "wench" slide by unchallenged. "Is your head hurting?"

"Like it's never hurt before," Cair admitted. "And if I don't puke in the next two minutes, it'll be a miracle."

Going to the door, Davan asked the nurse to prepare an injection of tenerse.

"No," Cair stated firmly. "Anything else but that."

"What's wrong with tenerse?" she asked.

"I've got an addiction to liquor," Cair replied. "I don't need an addiction to something as wicked as tenerse."

"I won't let that happen," she told him. "I'll monitor you very carefully."

He looked up at her. "You promise?"

"Aye, Captain," she said. "I promise."

"Cair," he said on a long sigh. "You can't go around calling me Captain once we're joined."

"The Joining hasn't taken place yet," she ground out.

"It will," he said then suddenly bent forward as the contents of his stomach came spewing out.

Davan bent over and held his head, mindless of the mess that was splattering her desk and floor. He was straining so hard to rid himself of the poisons in his system, she could feel the tremors shuddering down his tall frame.

Seamus hurried out of the healer's office to fetch a corpsman, passing the nurse as she came in with a syringe filled with tenerse. Without waiting for Davan's permission, the nurse swabbed Cair's neck and injected the fiery liquid into his neck.

"God!" Cair groaned for the med burned a pathway through his veins, the thick fluid causing great pain.

"You could have given it to him in his arm," Davan complained.

"Works faster in the jugular," the nurse replied.

Almost as soon as the needle was withdrawn, Cair collapsed back in the chair, his eyes glazing over as the potent narcotic took hold.

Davan took a wet cloth from the corpsman and wiped Cair's face and mouth. He was already groggy so she asked the corpsman to carry him back to his bed.

"He'll be out before the *Miodóg* slips into her docking harness," Seamus said. "I'll have them get his quarters ready."

Less than an hour later, the new flagship of the future king of Amhantar backed away from the docking bay and while Cair Ghrian slept, Davan Shanahan sat at the portal and watched the stars beyond the thick glass, and Seamus Rawls settled down for a long-overdue nap, their fates taking a turn for which none of them could have ever prepared.

## Chapter Nine

Amethyst strutted before the Saurian commander, her ample hips swaying. She tossed her mane of thick hair and ran her tongue over her lush red lips as she reached up to cup her bare breasts in invitation.

"So you were Cair Ghrian's whore, eh?" the commander inquired.

"For the last four years," Amethyst said as she massaged her breasts.

"Then he cast you aside."

"His loss is your gain, Commander Avatás," she replied.

B'reith Avatás steepled his fingers and studied the woman posturing before him. It had been a long campaign and he had been without female companionship for close to six months. His appetite was whetted by the buxom beauty he had discovered on the Francach ship, but it was her relationship with The Black Sun that interested him the most.

Despite the shiny scales that covered the Saurian commander's hairless face, he was not an unattractive man although his elliptical eyes bore the unmistakable stamp of brutal cruelty in their depths. Long, powerful fingers ended in sharp claws that curled under at the tip. As with many other reptilian races, his tongue was broad, flat and fleshy. The inside of his mouth was pebbled with warts that scraped against white rows of sharp teeth, causing some of his words to come out with a hissing sound. One long gray braid of interlocking scales fell from the top of his head to swing down over the armored plate of his uniform tunic. He was powerfully built with a wide chest, brawny arms and heavily muscled legs.

"Do you have feelings for the future king of Amhantar?"

Amethyst rolled her nipples between her thumbs and middle fingers. "If I could carve the heart from his chest with one of his beloved scythe daggers, it would give me the greatest of pleasures." She sidled closer. "But you must know he isn't in line to be king. His brother Bennick—"

"Abdicated in favor of his brother and is now safely ensconced in a monastery from whence he shall never leave."

Surprise lifted Amethyst's expertly plucked brows and she knelt at the commander's feet. "Do you want me to help you see that he never attains that throne, milord?"

"On the contrary, Beautiful One. My Emperor wants the Scythelord to take the Amhantarean throne." He grinned nastily. "How else will we gain control of that strategic world?"



"Ah, but first you need control of Cair Ghrian," Amethyst whispered, running her palm up the commander's thigh.

"Indeed we do," Avatás agreed. "So it will be up to you to tell me how best to go about accomplishing that feat."

She slid the palm of her hand beneath his crotch and cupped him, gently squeezing the dual erections that made Saurian men so unique in the megaverse. The hardness that began to form at her touch put a sultry smile on her ripe mouth.

"Is he to remain as the captain of the *Foehn*?" she asked.

"Our sources tell us his personal ship has been sent to bring him back to Amhantar. It is already on its way there."

"So his wicked witch of a mother wants her pretty boy home."

"Accompanied by the woman the queen has chosen to be The Black Sun's mate."

Amethyst blinked. "His mate?" she echoed, her hand stilling on the enormous erections that strained at the commander's uniform trousers.

Avatás had a spy on board the *Foehn* so he was privy to the goings-on aboard the pleasure ship. Always diligent in keeping close tabs on his enemies and closer ones on his friends, he left nothing to chance. Not only did he know about Davan Shanahan, he knew about the animosity between her and the woman kneeling before him.

"The Breasalean healer is to be Joined to him upon the summer solstice."

"I knew it!" Amethyst cried out. "I knew there was more to that slut than just her taking Rabishu's place!" She flung out a few extremely vulgar Iodálach curse words. "She didn't fool me for a minute!"

"Actually," Avatás said as he pushed her hand away then began unzipping his fly. "The healer knew nothing of the queen's plans. She is not happy about the situation—or so she says."

"She's lying! Who wouldn't be thrilled to become the mate of Cair Ghrian?" Amethyst scoffed.

"You wanted that for yourself."

"Aye, but I wasn't good enough for the mighty Deathwielder," Amethyst scoffed.

Freeing his huge staffs and smiling brutally at the gasp of shock that caused the woman between his legs to stiffen, he reached out to take her cheeks between his palms as she started to draw back, cringing away from him.

"I am told there is a growing attraction between Ghrian and the healer, which neither of them has as yet acknowledged. I have seen images of the one called Davan and find her quite lovely. I am sure the Scythelord does, as well."

Amethyst swallowed as she stared down at the enormous cocks covered in thick, shiny gray scales. Thrusting out from the Saurian's hairless privates, the two rods were positioned one atop the other with the lower one longer in length and tipped with a barbed flange.

Avatás increased the pressure on the woman's cheeks, forcing her lips to pucker until she resembled a fish. "Do you—as a woman who knows the man intimately—think he would come after her if she were taken away from him?"

"I, ah, believe he might," she had difficulty answering as perspiration began to form on her upper lip.

"He might or he will?" the commander wanted clarified, easing up on the pressure he was exerting on her cheeks.

"If she was his wife?"

Avatás nodded slowly, his elliptical gaze narrowed.

"Honor would require him to go after her whether he has feelings for her or not," she answered. She whimpered as the commander pushed her head toward his crotch.

"That is what I needed to hear," Avatás said as the woman's lips closed over his primary root and began suckling.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his reptilian eyes as the whore worked her magic on his flesh. The auxiliary root swished back and forth beneath the woman's chin, lightly scratching at her throat, the barb drawing tiny lines of blood across the creamy expanse.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sickened by what she had done and bleeding not only from her anus but her vagina, Amethyst eased herself down on the thin cot that had been allotted to her. The inside of her belly hurt so badly she could barely draw breath and she cupped her abdomen in one hand as she used the other to steady her descent to the mattress. Pain rocketed through her as her rump touched the cot and she groaned, rolling over to her hip. She could not stretch out her legs but rather kept them close to her body to help alleviate the agony that pulsed within her lower body.

A threadbare blanket had been tossed to her as she crept toward the bunk but it had slid to the cold, bare floor well beyond her reach. She eyed it and shivered, wishing she had the strength to retrieve it and cover her nakedness.

Never in all the years she had plied her trade as one of the most sought-after whores on either pleasure ship, had she ever been mistreated as inhumanely as she had that day. Not once had a man lifted a hand to beat her nor had one taken her with the savagery of the Saurian. Thrusting into her with brutal strength, his massive organs ripping and cutting into her tender flesh, his cum had burned her insides so badly she had screamed until she was hoarse.

"In two hours you will bear me at least three litters for this night's work, whore," Avatás had proclaimed, his chest thrusting out.

Damning Cair Ghrian to the far reaches of the vilest of miasmas, Amethyst lay whimpering, feeling the nestlings already beginning to form within her womb. Her last thought as the pain became too great for her to bear was of the agony she hoped the Aduaidh Empire would visit upon the Scythelord and his ill-begotten mate.

## Chapter Ten

When Cair woke, he found himself in his quarters aboard the *Miodóg*. A light sheet covered his body but a heavy blanket of drug fog enclosed his mind. The tenerse had taken full hold of him and he was drifting, as calm and peaceful as he could ever remember being in his twenty-nine years. He twisted beneath the clean, cool sheets, glorying in the way the cotton fabric felt against his legs and chest. The sheets smelled of ozone and it was a scent he found comforting and reassuring.

He didn't remember how he had come to be aboard the *Miodóg*. The last thing he remembered was sitting in the hot zone, swilling down the fiery brandy that was his poison of choice. Why he had felt the need to tie one on, he couldn't remember, either, but he knew he must have had a damned good reason.

Too hot, he kicked aside the sheet and felt some relief.

A lovely face floated into view above him and he smiled, so serene he hated to break the quiet with speech. Instead, he reached out for the cooling hand that touched him gently upon his brow and brought it to his lips, kissing the soft flesh of a smooth palm before pressing it firmly to his chest. He felt the bed dip beneath a slight weight and turned his head to gaze at the woman sitting beside him.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked and tried to slip her hand from his grasp.

Cair held onto her hand, refusing to relinquish it. He had no idea who the beautiful woman was but just looking at her made his arms ache to hold her. "I could," he said in a soft, low voice, "drink from your lips and never be thirsty again, wench."

Sighing at the use of the annoying word, Davan realized his use of it was not likely to stop and the way he had said it this time sounded almost sensual.

"I think water would quench your thirst more efficiently, milord," she said and slid her hand from beneath his.

Cair knew a moment of abject loneliness when he was no longer in contact with the beauty perched beside him. He would have reached out for her but she stood, bent over him, placed one cool hand under his head and when she lifted his head, placed the rim of a goblet to his lips.

He had not known just how thirsty he was until the first drop of moisture slipped into his mouth. Greedily he drank until she pulled the glass away, warning him too much might likely make his belly hurt.

"My heart hurts, wench," he protested as she laid his head back upon the pillow.

"I know," she said softly.

"Why does my heart hurt?"

Davan knew the tenerse was a powerful narcotic that could temporarily erase memory. She suspected such was the case with Cair and with the tenerse combined with an overabundance of liquor, he was bound to be more than a bit confused.

"We are on your ship," she told him. "Bound for Amhantar."

"I'm going home?" he asked, his smile so glorious it brought tears to her eyes.

"Aye, milord. You are going home."

His smile wavered. "Oh, now I remember," he said. "We are going for the Joining."

Before Davan could agree, he asked her if it was for Bennick's or Liam's.

"I can't remember," he said.

Sympathy turned her pale green eyes dark. "It's your Joining, milord," she said softly.

"Mine?"

Davan shrugged. "Yours and mine." She lowered her eyes. "Ours."

"Ours?" he questioned.

She looked up at him. "Aye."

"But Liam..."

"He's gone, milord. Try to remember."

Cair stared at her for a moment then full memory seemed to wash over his face and as it did, terrible sorrow settled in its place.

Davan took his hand. "I'm here if you want to talk about it."

Her grasp upon his hand felt natural and he was surprised to find he was drawing strength from her touch. It felt right to have her there beside him. It was as comforting—if not more so—than the drug, which had invaded his system.

"Do you believe in fate, wench?" he asked.

"I've never considered it."

"I never have either but my mother puts great store in such notions."

"Well, I have heard it said that determined people make their own fate," Davan said. "I think that is what your mother has done in our case."

"Perhaps," he said.

They were silent for a long while. He had turned his face away from her and she was looking at the twin scythe daggers on the wall, their wickedly curved blades crossed. When she looked back at him, she saw tears falling slowly down his cheeks.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked, stroking the back of his hand with her free one.

"No," he choked out.

"Do you want me to leave?"

He turned his face toward her. "No, wench. I never want you to leave."

There had been the slightest bit of desperation in that statement but it was the sincerity in his gaze as it held hers that touched the very core of her being. In his eyes was vast sorrow but there was also a great need that suggested only she could fill. Something vital had changed between them in a space of a few moments and Davan realized there would be no turning back. How it happened, she would never know. Perhaps fate had decided for her.

For both of them.

"Lie with me?" he asked and it was not a demand for a sexual encounter but a desire to not be alone in his grief.

Davan let go of his hand long enough to kick off her shoes and swing her legs onto the bed. She stretched out beside him. He turned toward her, pressing softly against her, and she pillowed his head upon her breast, one arm around his shoulders. She could feel his tears through the fabric of her uniform shirt and they seemed to seep into her very soul. If she had felt protective of this man before that moment, she had become now an armor-plated shield, an aegis, to keep harm at bay.

"It will be all right," he whispered, his voice breaking. "We will make it all right, Davan."

"Aye, milord," she agreed and released the last tiny hold of restraint she had upon her heart.

He fell asleep with his head on her chest. He slept soundly though now and again he would groan and she would soothe him with soft words. When at last weariness claimed her, she laid her head against his and gave in to the fatigue.

\* \* \* \* \*

Davan woke to find she was looking into golden eyes that were soft with sleep but which held a trace of overpowering grief still lingering in the depths.

"I believe my mother has been at it again," he told her.

"Doing what, milord?"

Cair sighed. "She dabbles in magick and I believe the old biddy has cast a spell on me."

"What kind of spell?"

"One I don't believe I will ever be able to break," he replied. "Nor do I think I want to try."

"Perhaps," she said, "it is the same spell she's cast on me."

"It could be. How do you feel about that?"

Davan considered the question for a moment then shrugged. "I'm not sure. I have this feeling that confuses me."

"I imagine it's the same feeling I'm experiencing."

Whether it was sweetness of the moment or the fact the two of them needed the other, they reached out to touch and to caress one another. His finger traced the hollow at the base of her throat—stroking with infinite care. Her palm soothed over his shoulder—squeezing gently now and again. His leg moved against her, their toes touched, arched, ran along the sides of each other's feet—his bare flesh dueling with her sock-clad instep. Her lips briefly touched the top of his head, placing a light kiss on his hair. He shifted closer to her, easing his leg over hers. She ran her fingers along his jaw and smiled at the prickly fabric of his unshaven face.

"I would like you to shave me one day," he said.

"Really?"

"I've always thought that was a sensuous thing."

"You trust me with a razor?" she said, humor in her voice.

"I've seen you operate, Healer. I know your skill."

She hummed her answer. "I have always wanted to have a man wash my hair."

"Aye," he said on a long breath. "That, too, I've always thought very sexual in nature."

She wound a thick curl of his dark hair around her middle finger. It was like a weighty strand of silk and the feel of it was sumptuous against her skin.

"Foot massage," he stated.

"Yours or mine?"

"Yours," he replied. "Women's feet are so delicate and so smooth."

"Not all of them," she said with a grunt. "Sometimes my heels—"

"I will take each toe and tenderly warm it," he said, cutting her off. "I will run my fingers between them slowly then cup them in my palm and gently twist them in a small circle, flexing your foot with one hand while I massage your heel with the other."

"Don't forget the instep," she said with a loud sigh.

"Never. I will take your foot between each of my hands and work my thumbs very slowly but firmly from ball to instep in little circles."

"My toes are curling as you're doing that," she told him.

"Well, we wouldn't want to neglect them, now would we?" he asked. "I'll just slip them into my mouth and suckle them while I stroke your heel."

"My calloused heel," she warned.

"Wench," he warned with a growl.

"Stroke away, warrior," she said. "Stroke away."

"Perhaps I'll move up to your ankle and caress it."

"That would work."

"I will drag the tips of my fingers up your shin and around the sweet softness at the back of your knee then slide them down to your ankle once more."

"You are making me shiver, milord."

"Then I should gently squeeze your calf to calm you."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Tiny, soft little squeezes from your ankle to your knee. Up and down your calf until the muscle is relaxed and pliant."

"What am I doing while you're doing all this?"

"Just lying there and accepting my gift to you," he said in a low, husky voice. His foot ran up and down her calf, his toes bunching up the fabric of her uniform pants to reach bare skin. "Lying still as I worship you in my own special way."

"I can do that," she said with a sigh.

"And when I work my way to your knee—" he reached down to touch her there and even through the obstruction of fabric, his touch was hot, "—I will circle it slowly with the tips of my fingers, sliding them into the crook where the flesh is as soft as a baby's." When she said nothing, he lifted his head and looked up at her. "You still with me, wench?"

"Just lying here and accepting, milord," she mumbled.

Cair laid his head back on her breast.

"Then with just the pads of my fingers I'll stroke along your thigh from knee to the crease of your leg then trail the backs of my fingers down to the knee again."

As he spoke, he demonstrated—his hand moving up and down her trouser-clad thigh with the most delicate of strokes.

"Is it getting warm in here?" she asked.

With the tip of his index finger, he traced a broad semicircle over her pubic mound—once, twice, three times.

"Aye," she answered herself. "It's getting damned warm in here."

"I will move up to this sweet little indention," he said and spiraled a line to her navel, and began to circle it lazily with his short fingernail, "and pay it homage for a while."

"Not too long, I hope," she said, squirming beneath his onslaught.

Cair placed the flat of his hand on her belly and pressed lightly, silently commanding her to lie still. His fingers flexed on her flesh, gently kneading her flat abdomen.

"How many bratlings will we have, wench?" he asked as he massaged her belly.

She felt her heart skip a beat. The question surprised her for children were not something she had ever considered since as far as she had known, marriage had been in her distant future. She ran her tongue along her bottom lip.

"How many do you want, milord?" she countered.



"Two," he stated. "A boy. A girl."

"In that order?"

He didn't hesitate. "Preferably."

"So in your mind, your mother's decree is a done deal?" she asked.

"I learned long ago not to balk that determined old biddy, though I've tried."

"The Joining will take place, then?"

"Aye," he said softly. "Our Joining will take place."

"Even though you don't want to marry?"

"Wench," he said, "I have changed my mind."

She smiled. "There's a lot of that going around, Captain."

He was quiet for a moment then his hand moved up a bit to slide beneath her tunic and touch bare flesh. Then he dipped his middle finger into the well of her navel. Softly he probed the deep indentation. "This," he said, "is what connects mother and child. It is a wondrous piece of flesh."

Davan felt a shiver go through her. His words were soft, low and filled with wonder as he touched her there. The heat of his hand radiated through her abdomen, creating curls of desire. She was disappointed when he pulled his hand from beneath her tunic and streaked a slow finger up the center of her chest, between her breasts, to once more stroke the hollow of her throat.

His heavily muscled arm was crooked around her right breast, his elbow touching her rib cage, the firm weight of his forearm making her feel as though she already belonged to him. They were both clothed—she in her uniform and he in the sickbay pajamas in which the corpsmen had dressed him.

As though that knowledge had suddenly penetrated his thoughts, his fingers slid to the zipper of her tunic and began to lower it.

"What are you about, milord?" she whispered.

"Nine inches at last measure," he replied and pressed against her hips, allowing her to feel the solidity to which he referred.

Davan pulled her head to one side so she could look down into his face. When he lifted his to meet her gaze, he was amused to see her eyebrow raised in what he hoped was appreciation and not disbelief. As he held her intent look, he pulled her zipper all the way down to the retainer box then slipped free the insertion pin so the two halves of the tunic lay open. With precise care, he folded the two sides back so he could view the lacy bra that held her breasts.

"And what are you about, wench?" he asked, lifting a brow in imitation.

"Thirty-eight inches at last measure," she replied and reached out to draw his hand up to her breast, molding the strong fingers around the lace, idly running her palm along the back of his wrist.

He squeezed her gently a few times then nodded. "Aye, I'd say that's about right." Pushing up on his left elbow, he was hovering over her as he curled his fingers under the top edge of her bra and pulled it slowly downward.

Davan held his eyes as his fingernails lightly scraped over her nipple when he lowered the bra cup to expose her.

"It has a front closure, you know," she said and watched him glance down at her bra.

"Well, so it does," he drawled and his fingers trailed to the hook and eye tape and with expertise flicked it open.

Her lush breasts free of restriction, Davan exhaled softly. She was bared to his view and he was taking in the scenery with studied care.

"*Ta tu go halainn*," he whispered in Amhantarean.

"What does that mean?"

"You are beautiful," he told her.

When his hand slid over one full mound, a low groan pushed from her throat. "Like that, do you?" he asked as he gently massaged her heated flesh.

"It's better than a sharp poke in the eye," she agreed.

He actually laughed and for the first time since she had lay down beside him, she felt his body completely relax. The abiding grief had fled his gaze and there was fire in his golden eyes – smoldering heat blazing from beneath half-closed lids.

"I want you," he stated and his thumb fanned across her nipple, hardening it to a throbbing nub.

"Do you now?" she countered and reached up to place the palm of her left hand along his lean jaw.

"With every fiber of my being, wench," he responded.

She smiled. "Hard to do with your PJ bottoms on, though, don't you think?"

He covered her hand with his then moved it down to his crotch.

"They have a front closure, you know," he said in a husky voice.

Davan's fingers slid into the fly and when she encountered the heavy warmth of his flesh, stroked the side slowly.

"Nine inches, eh?" she inquired.

"Give or take," he replied, drawing in his breath as she closed her fingers around him.

"Aye," she said, running her tongue along her upper lip. "I'd say that's about right."

He was stone-hard in her hand, that huge cock throbbing beneath her fingers. His breathing was shallow, coming faster than it had and when he slid his arm under hers, thrust his hand down the top of her trousers, beneath the elastic waistband of her panties and cupped her sex, she could see flames leaping in his amber gaze.

"Let's see if it will fit this," he said and slipped his middle finger into her warmth.

Davan let go of his cock, pulling her hand out of the front of his pajamas to grasp the sheet on which she lay. She arched her hips up, needing the penetration of his finger and Cair obliged, probing as deeply as his hand would allow, his index finger joining the middle one as he pushed into her, slowly withdrew and then went in again.

She grabbed his upper arm and pulled, wanting him over her, in her, all around her. Her fingers plucked at his shirt and he raised up long enough to yank the restrictive material from his broad back and over his head, tossing it away before holding out his hand to help her sit.

She took his hand and he flipped her tunic over her shoulders and dragged the sleeves down her arms when she held them behind her. The bra followed then he moved further down in the bed and took hold of her trousers.

Davan lifted her hips, giving him all the help he needed to pull the uniform trousers off, grunting as he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her panties and peeled them away, taking her socks with them.

He looked up at her then, took one of her feet into his hand and began the ritual he had described to her earlier, beginning with each sensitive little toe and working his way up her leg.

Davan flopped back to the bed, her arms thrown to either side of her—a willing victim to his ministrations. Her flesh was tingling where his fingers touched, his lips traveled. The moistness of his tongue dragging over the flesh of her thigh sent her into spasms of pants as he neared the apex of her thighs and when that wicked, moist muscle touched her clit, she reared up, grabbed his arms and yanked him down atop her.

"I want you inside me, Ghrian!" she growled, fumbling between them to free his cock from the barrier of his pajamas.

Cair brushed her hands aside. "Your wish is my command, wench," he said.

He drove into her with a heat and power that took her breath away. She brought her legs up and hooked them around his hips, lashing them together at the ankles as he rode her hard, thrusting deep and pulling nearly out before slamming into her again. Her fingers were like claws digging into his sweaty back, gripping him to her as though she would never allow him his freedom.

Hot and slick, the muscles of her cunt sliding along his straining shaft, Cair drove his hands under her ass and lifted her to him, capturing her lowering body as he would take a regiment of enemies.

Their eyes were locked on one another, their lips parted, their breath in unison as she rose up to meet his thrusts and he pushed upward into her willing body with all the ferocity from which his reputation as a warrior had sprang.

Mindless of anything save the relief they sought from one another's bodies, they strained, they plunged, they slammed against heated flesh, and when they came, the

release of their union was in perfect synchronization with the other, and mutual cries of achievement rang out in harmony.

Davan went still as her vagina rippled over his cock for the last time and he fell limp atop her—spent, his heart thundering in rhythm with hers. She sagged beneath him—as depleted as he in energy and more satiated than she had ever been. So complete was her satisfaction, so total the pleasure, she knew in her heart of hearts that this man was her fated mate, the possessor of her soul, the master of her being.

For nearly an hour they lay entangled, the tip of his relaxed cock just inside the sweetness of her warmth. Their fingers were threaded around one another and his cheek was between her breasts. They might have slept but neither ever thought they did. They were both at peace and contented, completely at ease with one another, and beginning to realize what they had discovered had been destined long before they met.

“Will she be angry?” Davan asked softly.

“My mother?”

“Aye.”

He shrugged and rolled off her only to gather her in his arms so her head lay on his shoulder. “She may be an interfering old bat but she’s a shrewd one, wench. She knew damned well what she was about.”

“She was responsible for my assignment to the *Foehn*, wasn’t she?”

“Aye, just as she was responsible for mine in her nefarious way.” He braced his arm under his head. “She didn’t want me at the front and so I was found and reassigned.”

Davan fingered a curl of hair on his chest. “You were in the fighting?”

“In the thick of it,” he replied. “We had just taken an outpost near Ezon. I had lost a lot of men but we were mopping up, had everything under control when four men—four, mind you—landed with orders to bring me to the *Foehn*.”

“You had to have been angry.”

“I don’t think anger is the right word, wench. Infuriated was more like it.” He smiled as she ran her foot beneath the hem of his pajama bottom and tickled his ankle. “It was humiliating to be given such an assignment but Mother didn’t care. When I don’t do her bidding, she always makes sure I pay for my rebellion one way or another. This payment was too damned much.”

“Were you afraid your men would think less of you for it?” she asked.

“They knew who I was, what I was and they saw how I fought being taken onboard the runabout that had been sent to fetch me. I lived up to my Deathwielder training, believe me.” He chuckled. “They had to drag me onboard in manacles.”

She lifted her head. “Truly?”

He nodded. “Kicking and cursing the entire way. Things got so bad the healer sedated me and when I woke, I was on the *Foehn*.”

“What happened then?”

"I went on a rampage. I wrecked everything in my quarters because the damned door was locked and I couldn't get out. For three days I beat at the door—until my fists were bloody—but they ignored me just as they had been instructed to do. By the morning of the fourth day, I realized I was truly trapped and that I was simply wasting my time. I'd been imprisoned on that damned ship and no one was going to let me off it." He sighed. "That's when I started drinking."

"And invited Amethyst to your bed," she said quietly.

He thought about that. "You know, I don't ever remember inviting her. She just showed up one night and kept coming." He laughed. "And coming and coming and—"

Davan dug her elbow into his ribs until he flinched away from her.

The Vid-Com chimed and both turned to look at it across the room.

"It'll be her," he said. He reached down and pulled the sheet over them. "Just ignore it."

But that was not to be. The Vid-Com screen pulsed into life and the image of Queen Meg appeared.

"Enjoying the honeymoon before the Joining, eh, Cairnan?" she asked in a pleasant tone.

"Still clipping the wings off butterflies, Mother?" he countered.

"The only wings I've ever clipped were yours, boy, and you should be glad I did," she replied. She smiled. "Hello, Davie. How was he?"

Davan blushed to the roots of her hair and hid her face against Cair's neck.

"That good, eh?" the queen chuckled.

"Is there a reason for your intrusion, Mother, or have you taken up voyeurism in your advanced age?"

The smile left the queen's face. "Davie, did you tell him the *Faucon* was attacked and everyone onboard captured?"

Davan flinched. "No, Your Majesty. We were... I was... Things just..."

"When did this happen?" Cair demanded, pulling his arm from around Davan and sitting up.

"While you were unconscious," the queen answered. "We received their distress call but by the time our LRC reached their last known position, there was nothing left of the *Faucon* but space dust. We have since learned there were no casualties but the crew has been taken to Utuk Xul."

"Including the women?" Cair asked.

"All but one. I am told the woman you asked Captain LeClerc to transport to the *Samiel* was kept aboard the Saurian ship."

Cair cursed. He knew all too well what that could mean for Amethyst. "Which Saurian ship attacked them?"

"The *Kady*," his mother answered.

"B'reith Avatás!" Cair spat as though the name was a vile taste in his mouth.

"I am told he is a very dangerous man."

"He's a religious fanatic," Cair told his mother. "Men like that are always dangerous because you never know what they will do next in the name of their gods."

"Although you are unaware of it, there are six fully armed battle cruisers accompanying the *Miodóg* home to Amhantar, one on each flank, one above, one below, one behind and one in front. We are not taking any chances with your life, Cairnan. The Net will be activated as soon as you land."

"You think they would try to take him prisoner?" Davan asked, drawing the sheet to her chin as she sat up.

"They tried before at Ezon and they failed," Cair stated. "Taking me won't be as easy as they think."

"It would be a feather in Avatás' cap to kill a Deathwielder," the queen replied. "But to capture a Scythelord? And the future king of Amhantar in the bargain? To have you caged at Utuk Xul would weaken our position. Don't take this so lightly, boy."

Davan looked at her husband-to-be and he patted her knee. "The Saurian would be stupid to attack with that much firepower facing them. Even their Aduaidh masters wouldn't be that foolish."

"You are quite the prize, Cairnan," his mother snapped. "Do not downplay the seriousness of this!"

"I'm not, but I know Avatás. He won't attack unless he's damned sure he can slither away free and clear."

Davan listened to her lover and his mother arguing over his safety. Staring at his profile, she knew she was falling in love with Cair Ghrian and the thought of something happening to him, him being taken from her, made her blood run cold. Even when he reached for her hand and held it possessively in his, she felt fear forming in her heart.

## Chapter Eleven

The salt tang of the sea wafted over the Cliffs of Dúshláin and settled with a fine sheen on the fortress castle of Finscéalta. Forming a giant natural rampart against the violent waves of the North Domhan Ocean, the cliffs stood sentinel to the turbulent weather, which swept in from *an tSualainn* at that time of year. The crashing waves far below and the howl of the wind passing through the crenulations of the fortress underscored the loneliness of the wild Amhantarean landscape.

It was just after dawn and the sky was lighting in soft degrees though it was overcast and a heavy fog was drifting in to shore.

Cair had been sitting on one of the parapets for nearly an hour, observing the wild terrain that was his home. It had been many years since he had been able to and the sweet solitude was a balm to his senses. He drew the scent of the sea deep into his lungs. Since the first burst of human life had come to the headlands of Eirrean Bay, Amhantareans had worshiped the sea and the lush green land nourished by its mists and windswept storms. Cair was as much a part of the waters that surrounded his island home as he was of the stars through which he soared.

His hands were braced to either side of his hips on the stone platform on which he sat, legs dangling over the parapet, his ankles crossed. Leaning forward a bit, the wild wind had tousled his dark hair, blowing it into his face, making him look far younger than his true age.

Soft hands touched his shoulders and he knew without looking who had joined him there at the start of a new day.

*"Dia duit ar maidin, bean mo chroi,"* he greeted her, reaching up to cover one of her hands with his.

"You are going to have to teach me to speak Amhantarean," she said as she threw a leg over the wall and sat down beside him. "What did you just say?"

"I said good morning, woman of my heart," he said quietly.

"Do you mean that?"

"Aye, Davan, I do."

Davan leaned her head on his shoulder. "It is lovely here."

"You like it?"

"I love it. I've never seen anything so wondrous and the people are so friendly."

*"Níl aon tintéan mar do thintéan féin."*

She glanced up at him.

"There is no place like home," he translated. He crooked his finger under her chin and lifted her mouth to his, placing the softest of kisses upon her mouth. "And this is now your home."

"I am still in the military, Cair," she reminded him. "They can reassign me any time they like."

"And have," he said. "Queen Meg made sure of that before we ever docked here yesterday."

Davan frowned. "I wanted to go to the front," she said. "I wanted to be of help to our troops."

"In less than a week, you will be joined to me as the future queen of Amhantar. You'll have your hands full in that capacity, believe me."

"But will I be able to help anyone?" she asked. "Will I be able to use the skills I trained so hard to learn?"

Cair put his arm around her. "Why wouldn't you? Gaoithe will have its share of wounded and the ill. Our healers will be happy to have you join them."

There was a part of Davan that had grave reservations about her future. Her job meant more to her than just an assignment. It was her life.

"Did the interview with my mother bother you that much, wench?"

Davan snorted. "It was only marginally less frightening than when I had to defend my doctoral thesis," she reported. "She grilled me worse than any academician ever could have."

He grinned. "To see if you were good enough for her little boy?"

"Oh, that, apparently, had been a foregone conclusion before she ever met me," Davan replied. "She knew more about my life and my family history than I did." She turned to Cair. "Did you know Cat McGregor was pregnant with my mother before her joining?"

Cair gasped. "How shameful!"

She punched his arm. "You should know, milord," she accused.

"Did you learn anything else interesting about the legendary Cat Mc?"

"I knew most of what your mother told me but I knew nothing of their relationship, of course. The queen said she was eighteen when she joined Cat's squadron. They hit it off and I gather your mother was in awe of my grandmother."

"Oh, I know she was. According to Mother, the sun rose and set in Catherine McGregor. She was a warrioress without equal."

"My grandmother saved your mother's life."

"And introduced her to my father," Cair added. "The Goddess rest his soul."

"How long has it been since he died?"



"Ten years," Cair answered. "The aneurysm that took his life so unexpectedly would have been discovered in time had he not ignored the symptoms. Every time I get a headache, I worry the same thing will happen to me."

"Not on my watch it won't, milord," she said. "I plan on giving you a complete physical every month."

"My mother's idea?" he questioned, bracing his chin on the top of her head.

"Our mutual decision," she stated.

"Isn't once a month a bit excessive, wench?"

"My hands in and on every inch of you—probing, palpating, prying, peeking in, weighing?" she asked, slipping a hand to his crotch. "Gathering scientific data?"

"Well, if it's all in the name of science..."

They sat in silence for a few moments then Davan looked up at the sky. "What is that strange green glow up there?"

He didn't have to look. "The Net."

"What is The Net?"

"It's a block to keep me from being snatched off Amhantar by an Aduaidh Skyraider. Did you notice the guards lurking about?"

She looked behind her and searched the grounds. "I don't see any."

"I'd be surprised if you did," he told her. "They are Seamus' men and he personally trained them. He calls them specters."

Lightning stitched across the heavens and the wind turned cooler.

"One of your infamous North Domhan storms brewing, milord?"

"Aye," he said with a sigh. "We'd best head back unless..." He glanced at the fortress.

Davan knew there would be privacy in the abandoned fortress. There would be no prying eyes. As thunder rolled across the sea toward them, she felt a light drop of rain fall on her arm.

"Do you think there might be snakes in there?" she asked, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she eyed the ancient building.

"There are no snakes in Amhantar," he told her and turned his back to swing his leg over the wall. He helped her climb over and as the wind buffeted them and droplets of rain fell with increasing force, took her hand and headed for the interior of the fortress. The rain began in earnest as they ducked beneath the low doorway.

\* \* \* \* \*

B'reith Avatás stared down at the dead woman with detachment. Her body had been used for his purpose so her usefulness was at an end. She had provided him with

nine litters of forty-eight robust nestlings and that was the only reason he didn't have his men jettison her broken body into space. Some respect needed to be shown to his children's mother if for only for the sake of show.

A means to an end was all she had been to him, but he stood straight and tall beside her funeral pyre, and watched as the Holy Man spoke his words over the one called Amethyst. He waited until the flames surrounded the body then turned away. There was no need to watch while the fire cleansed the *Kady* of the infidel woman's presence.

But he grudgingly admitted she had been vital to his mission, so when he reached his quarters, raised a glass of honeyed apple juice to toast her journey into the Afterlife.

She had provided him with vital information his mole on the *Foehn* had no way of knowing. Secrets shared under the influence of potent potables and sizzling sex had a way of leaking out when least expected.

Removing his uniform, he eased himself into the sand bath and burrowed deep into the healing silica of its warm grains, the coarseness sensual against his nude body.

Though it was forbidden by The Law of J'aibeel to touch his roots, he thrust his hand to the juncture of his thighs and massaged first his primary root until it was hard as steel. His auxiliary root took longer to rouse but when it, too, was as stiff and sharp as a Saurian blade, he caressed himself into climax. Settling back in the sand bath, he closed his eyes and plotted the brutal things he would do to Cair Ghrian when that warrior was taken.

And The Black Sun's capture was but a few weeks away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How many women have you brought to this love nest, milord?" Davan asked as she surveyed the rolled-up mattress lying beside the trunk through which Cair was rummaging.

"I've never brought any woman here but Liam was—" He stopped and a muscle worked in his jaw as he stared down at the blanket in his hand. He did not finish the sentence but rather turned and tossed the blanket to Davan then stepped over to the mattress and began unrolling it.

Outside the elements were lashing against the old fortress. Thunder rolled as the wind howled, bringing with it a squall that pelted the ancient stones.

"They say Finscéalta is haunted," he told her. "That's where it gets its name."

"What does Finscéalta mean?"

"The full name of the fortress is Finscéalta na Amhantar. It means Legends of the Wind."

Davan looked up at the ceiling timbers that creaked with the force of the elements battering the fortress. She could well imagine the eerie sounds the wind made might have put its early inhabitants of a mind there were ghosts about.

"It was at Finscéalta where King Tristan Ghrian and his wife were murdered right after the birth of their first child Rory. Legend says neither of them ever got a look at the babe for Tristan was ambushed on his way up to be with Queen Gwendolyn as she gave birth. The queen was smothered by one of her ladies-in-waiting before the child was clear of her womb."

"How awful!" Davan said, wrapping her arms around her. "Were the murderers ever punished?"

"King Tristan's High Chancellor Lord Jarold Fitzhugh was behind the murders. He had great ambition and intended to run Amhantar through Rory Ghrian. He raised Rory to be the king he wanted him to be but when the young man took the throne at age sixteen, he had the high chancellor and his cronies beheaded. He'd been waiting all that time to mete out the punishments he knew they deserved."

"He knew they had killed his parents?"

Cair took the blanket from her and spread it over the mattress. "The legend goes Tristan and Gwendolyn walked the halls of Finscéalta every night, searching for the son they never got to hold in life. They say you could hear Tristan moaning and Gwendolyn crying for her child. Their footsteps up and down the staircase were a common thing. On many a night, the boy's servants would hear him talking quietly to someone but when they'd go into his chamber, there would be no one there. The talespinners say it was his parents who visited him late at night and who advised him to wait until the time was right to avenge them." He held his hand out to her.

Davan placed her hand in his and they sat down on the mattress. She was surprised to find it was more comfortable than it looked. "What kind of king did Rory make?" she asked.

"He was perhaps the best of them all," Cair answered. "His people loved him and he ruled them wisely and with a fair hand. I can only hope to be a tenth as good a king as he."

"I don't think your people have anything to worry about," she assured him. "The legend of The Black Sun is known far and wide."

Cair frowned. "Aye, well, legends and reality don't always mesh."

"You have made a name for yourself in the Aduaidh Quadrant, Cair. Your ability as a warrior has never been questioned. What concerns you?"

"I know I'm a good fighter, wench," he said, rubbing his thumb along the top of her hand. "I am confident of my combat skills."

"But?"

He exhaled forcefully. "I never wanted to be king of Amhantar. That was always Bennick's destiny, not mine. Never in my vilest nightmares did I think I'd be placed in a

position to have to take the throne." He shook his head. "Fight for it? Aye. I would fight to the death for my homeland, but rule it? That is something I fear more than losing you."

Davan's heart skipped a beat. "You fear losing me?" she asked.

He reached out to cup her cheek. "I never wanted a full-time woman, either," he said. "Marriage was definitely not something in the plans I'd made for my life, but you turned my world upside down in a short span of time. Now, I can't imagine life without you."

"Even though we got off on the wrong foot," she teased.

"You caught me at a bad time," he admitted. "Coming off a roaring drunk is not a good time for a man to meet the woman his mother chose as his lifemate." He grinned. "Especially when he doesn't *know* she's the woman he's going to marry."

"The woman he was going to be forced to marry," she said quietly.

"Wench," he said, exasperation making the word drop from his lips like a heavy rock. "If I did not want to Join with you, nothing my mother could say or do would make me. I might not have wanted to get married but I knew I wanted to be with you."

"What changed your mind?"

"You came to the hot zone and you held me when I was at the lowest point of my life," he answered. "You wanted nothing in return. You asked nothing in return. No woman had ever done that. Not even my own mother."

"Well, if you can change your mind about having a wife, can you not change your mind about ruling Amhantar?"

"For the sake of my people, I hope so," he replied. He hung his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "I *pray* so."

Davan's heart went out to this proud, strong man. Through no desire of his own, great responsibilities had been thrust upon him. She knew he would not run from those responsibilities now that he had accepted them. She also knew she would make sure there would never be a need for him to hide from the world again as he had in the hot zone. She hoped he would accept her to lean on and never again need the crutch of liquor to prop him up.

A sharp crack of lightning rent the air and Davan jumped. She hated bad weather. Grateful for the strong arms that automatically enfolded her, she lay down with Cair, and he held her to him, humming an old Amhantarean lullaby. The bodies were pressed closed together—she at his side and her face buried in the crook of his shoulder.

His hands smoothed over her arm, her hair, stroked her face and when she lifted her head to gaze up at him, cupped her chin and lowered his mouth to hers.

It was the sweetest of kisses. His lips plied hers with gentle insistence—tasting and drawing upon their nectar—then with deepening passion.

She gave herself up to this powerful man. She felt small and fragile beside his honed warrior's body and like putty in his knowing hands.

Cair eased her to her back and slid his hand beneath the pullover she wore. His eyes widened a bit and his generous lips twitched when he realized she wore no bra to impede his touch.

"Brazen little witch," he accused while the tips of his fingers explored the soft mound of her breast.

"Just thinking ahead, milord," she corrected him.

His thumb slid over the peak of her breast and she arched up against his hand, purring like a kitten as he lightly tweaked the little nub until it became an erect bud beneath his tender ministrations.

As the storm raged beyond the portals of Finscéalta, they slowly undressed one another until they lay naked upon the rough, old blanket. He slid his hands over every inch of her body there in the dim light cast from the gray morning until he would have known her blindfolded. Likewise, she stroked his chest and back, thighs and calves and the sensuous rise of his hard, high ass. She straddled him and deeply massaged the tense muscles in his upper back.

When he could take no more of her gentleness, he flipped her over, covering her soft body with his and nudged her legs apart with his knees. He lay with his lower body rubbing against the heat between her thighs and drew upon her breasts with lips and a tongue that drove her mad with desire.

Her fingers thrust through his sleek hair and held his head as he suckled her. It was a delight she knew she would never tire of. His mouth was sending shockwaves of heat rippling through her lower belly and she squirmed beneath him, wanting the hardness of him connected to her softness.

He took her there as rain lashed against the old fortress and thunder boomed across the headlands of Amhantar. Their lovemaking was no less intense, no less powerful than the raging storm. The passion, which fed them, was no less potent than the lightning striking close by.

Cair shuddered as he came, his juices spurting over and over into her sweet body. So copious was his cum, he knew down to the marrow of his being he had seated a child of their blending inside Davan.

## **Chapter Twelve**

A royal wedding at Amhantar Keep was a glorious affair with statesmen from as many worlds as could safely make their way there during the violent war that shook their universe in attendance. The Grand Hall was decorated with flowers too numerous to name and all the golden accessories, lustrous china and fine Amhantarean crystal acquired by generations of the Ghrian clan had been brought out for the festive event. The kitchen was abuzz and the great repast being prepared for the feast after midnight filled the old castle with mouthwatering smells. Everywhere one looked, there were servants bustling about, and all the rooms in the sleeping chambers were being prepared for the dignitaries.

Standing in a beautiful white silk gown that had been worn by every Ghrian bride since the dynasty had been founded, Davan felt like a fairytale princess. The lovely creation being form-fitted to her measurements had triple rows of diamonds along the hem, neckline and at the tapers of the long, pointed sleeves. Her veil—reaching to the floor—was a gossamer-thin net of intricately knotted lace onto which diamonds had been lavishly sprinkled. With each movement of her head, fiery brilliance reflected from that stunning veil.

Eadan Shanahan, Davan's sister, looked very pale in the light green dress, which marked her as Davan's maid of honor. She still had a long way to go in recovering from her stay in the prison on Amerigen but though she looked tired and drawn, her smile was happy as she watched her sister. "Your husband is going to swell like a peacock when he sees you, Davie," she said.

"Isn't she lovely, though?" the queen asked.

"Mama would have been so proud," Eadan said.

"Please lift your foot, milady," the cobbler instructed and when Davan did as he asked, felt the softness of a silk slipper sliding upon her foot. When she glanced down, she saw more diamonds adorning the toes of the white footwear.

"Something old," Queen Meg said as she fingered the precious gown.

"Something new," the cobbler said as he placed the other slipper on Davan's foot.

"Something borrowed," Lady Anastasia Ghrian—the queen's sister and Cair's aunt—said as she clipped a diamond brooch to the bodice of the bridal gown. "This belonged to our great-great-grandmother and it has been worn on this very same bridal gown every since. Each of my five daughters has worn it at her Joining."

"It is lovely." Tears filled Davan's eyes. "It is all so lovely." She reached for Eadan's hand—her sister gripped hers back and placed a light kiss on Davan's cold fingers.

"And something blue," Queen Meg added in a soft voice as she stepped behind Davan, slid her hands under the veil, and then hooked a gorgeous sapphire pendant upon her soon-to-be daughter-in-law's neck. She smoothed the veil down. "Cairnan picked it out himself."

"Rode all the way to the mines at Dalreath Bay," the cobbler put in. "Said nothing but the very best would do for his lady."

Staring at her reflection in the mirror across the room, Davan reached up to touch the heart-shaped jewel. She caressed the stone and vowed she would never remove the pendant from her neck.

"We're missing something," Lady Anastasia said, frowning.

"A gilding for her shoe," the cobbler said as he slipped a golden coin into the slipper beside Davan's instep.

They all stepped back to view the bride.

"Stunning," the cobbler said.

"Absolutely beautiful," Lady Anastasia pronounced.

"A woman worthy of The Black Sun," the queen proclaimed.

"Worthy of any man," Eadan corrected.

Satisfied with her future daughter-in-law's appearance, Cair's mother shooed everyone but Eadan from the room. She sat down upon the settee and gazed up at Davan with a gentle smile.

"I knew you were right for him the moment I watched your mother delivering you," she said.

Davan blinked. "Delivering me?" she gasped.

"I was visiting Breasal when your mother went into premature labor. She delivered you two months early."

"I know but—"

"I took one look at you and I knew," the queen stated. "I felt the connection the moment I touched your little hand. I would have stayed for your baptism but Evan wanted me home—the man was getting tired of having two little boys running under foot, I imagine." She laughed. "I must admit Bennick and Cairnan were a handful."

A slight chill ran down Davan's spine. "You chose me for Cair's wife that long ago?"

"Since that day," the queen said, "I have been keeping tabs on you, Davan. As Catherine McGregor's granddaughter, I knew you would grow up to be a strong and intelligent woman. How could you not with such powerful DNA within you? I watched you grow up and become the wonderful woman you are. You had all the attributes I wanted for my son. Why would I not want you as part of our family?"

"So pretending not to recognize me that first day I was on the *Foehn* was a ruse," Davan said.

"I didn't want to get Cairnan too suspicious right out of the block but I might as well have saved my effort for he knew something was up. Sometimes he is far too intuitive."

"What if he had chosen another woman?" Davan countered.

Waving aside the suggestion, the queen clucked her tongue. "Men rarely know what is best for them when it comes to a mate. Many choose the prettiest or the most sensual but few ever look for that true lifemate." She shrugged. "I put a gal before him—knowing damned well he wouldn't have her. Just as I knew he would, he balked and I had them put him somewhere where I could keep an eye on him until it was time to get serious with his future. Men don't know what they want. You have to hit them in the face with it. I suppose that one little eye on their pecker isn't looking for anything important and is just keeping watch for the next lay."

Eadan laughed but Davan blushed all the way to the tops of her breasts. She stepped off the stool upon which she'd been standing and smoothed down the voluminous skirt of her gown.

Eadan adjusted her sister's veil. "I am sure they will be happy, Your Majesty."

"I had wanted a virgin for him," her future mother-in-law went on, causing Davan's blush to deepen, "but that's a commodity hard to come by in this day and age. At least she's only slept with one man and he gave her no illness."

"Your Majesty, please!" Davan protested. "I wish—"

A gong sounded somewhere close by and the queen got to her feet.

"That's the signal for Cairnan to enter the sanctuary," she informed Davan. "When the next bell sounds, it will be your turn to join him."

"I...I..." Davan was wringing her hands. She was more nervous than she could ever remember being. Standing before the pompous academics at the university and defending her dissertation was a walk in the park compared to how she was feeling at that moment.

The queen walked over to her and took Davan by the shoulders. "You listen to me, wench. Your brother will be waiting outside those doors to escort you to a man the entire universe both admires and fears. You are a woman who is his equal. Never forget that!"

The second gong sounded and Davan whimpered.

Eadan went to door, opened it and peeked into the hall. She motioned someone to her.

Major Durbin Shanahan of the Royal Breasal Guard marched up to his youngest sister, looked her over and nodded. Glancing past her, he caught sight of Davan and his mouth dropped open.

"No," Eadan said, "she won't be keeping the gown so shut your mouth, Dur."

Davan's brother was gawking at the diamonds adorning the gown and his eyes were filled with greed.



"If you're wondering at the worth," the queen said, "the value is close to a million gildings."

"Gawh," Durbin breathed. Snapping to attention as his sister joined him in the corridor, he extended his arm. "Well done, Davie," he whispered. "Very well done, indeed."

Rolling her eyes at her sister, Davan took her brother's arm. She knew he was contemplating anew the political and monetary advantages to having a sister married to a king.

With her hand resting on Durbin's arm, the queen preceding them down the corridor and her only sister bringing up the rear, Davan was growing more nervous by the moment. In a way, she felt trapped.

"It's happening," she said to herself. "It's really happening."

"I visited His Grace before coming to fetch you," Durbin said, leaning down so he could speak privately to his sister. "He's as jittery as you seem to be."

Davan wasn't reassured knowing Cair was nervous like her. Perhaps he had changed his mind and the wedding would be cancelled.

"The only difference in his demeanor and yours is that he's anxious to get the ceremony over and done with so the two of you can be alone." Durbin swept his eyes over his sister. "I can see why. You are lovely, Davie."

Breathing a sigh of relief that things would go on without a hitch, Davan tried to relax. As they walked, she saw other people lining the hall, bowing or curtsying to them as they passed. Falling in line behind Eadan, servants and aristocrats alike seemed to be in a festive mood. There didn't appear to be a frown among the group.

All the way down the stairs, as servants took up her veil and the weighty train of her gown, Davan could feel her heart hammering in her chest. Her palms were sweating and her mouth was as dry as a desert. Her knees felt like rubber, threatening to give out on her at any moment. Her grip on her brother's arm was so fierce Durbin winced now and again but he seemed genially happy for her.

The little procession made its way to the chapel beyond the Great Hall. Dozens of tall three-armed candelabras holding plump white candles were lined up to either side of a deep red carpet, which marked the pathway. The plush carpet was sprinkled lavishly with rose petals and the scent of the flower hung in the air.

It was ten minutes to midnight when Davan was escorted to her lover's side. She barely noticed the chapel filled to overflowing or the luxurious decorations that lined the walls and enhanced the altar. Her eyes were on Cair as he stood there in his formal black dress uniform with a ceremonial sword sheathed in a solid gold scabbard at his side. The waist-length fitted jacket was adored with gold buttons and the high collar carried the golden insignia of the Scythlords on each tab. Crimson red shoulder boards announced his rank as a Captain of the Royal Amhantarean Fleet. When he turned to look at her, she thought her heart would stop so handsome was he that evening.

Everyone rose as Davan was escorted to the altar by her brother. Haunting flute music played softly in the background and with every step closer to the man she was about to marry, Davan felt the worry and fear shedding off her. Cair was smiling at her, his eyes filled with pride and happiness.

Cair shook hands with Durbin then accepted the precious gift of Shanahan's sister into Cair's keeping. The Amhantarean prince extended his arm then covered Davan's hand with his as her palm rested lightly upon his sleeve.

Davan would never remember the words of the ceremony spoken over them by the High Priest. She was looking into Cair's eyes and no one else seemed to exist. There was no crowd of illustrious politicians or royal personages sitting in the pews to witness their troth. Though Eadan was the Maid of Honor and Davan's brother Connail, Cair's Best Man—since Bennick could never leave the monastery to which he had pledged himself—they were not standing beside her and Cair. Only she and Cair were standing before the High Priest, gazing intently into one another's eyes as the Holy Words were spoken.

At the stroke of midnight when their vows had been said and their status as man and wife declared by the High Priest, they kissed to seal the bargain between them and it was such a sweet kiss—so filled with the promise of new lives beginning—there were sighs from those gathered.

Cair broke the contact first, his lips pulling reluctantly from hers. He held her gaze for a beat or two then turned with her to face those gathered.

"Your Majesty," the High Priest called out. "Ladies and Gentlemen. I am pleased to introduce to you His Majesty Prince Cairnan, and Her Majesty Princess Davan, the Duke and Duchess of Luath!"

Everyone stood and applause rang out through the chapel. The queen wiped away a tear as the newly Joined couple came down the aisle as man and wife. She reached out to her son and he stopped to kiss her on the cheek. Davan saw Seamus grinning at them and when she returned his smile, the old man winked at her.

The feast in the Great Hall would be spoken of for years to come. Music and laughter filled the large room. Emissaries from far and wide came individually to congratulate the newlyweds and to offer gifts from their home worlds or extend invitations for the duke and duchess to visit.

Cair beamed with pride as the male dignitaries seemed unable to hide their admiration for his bride. They fawned over her and several flirted outrageously with her while casting a surreptitious look toward their host to gauge his reaction. Upon seeing Ambassador Giles D'Eange approaching the head table, the Scythelord leaned over at one point and remarked to his wife that the Ambassador from *an Fhrainch* had quite the reputation with the female sex and to be careful how she spoke with him.

"The least innocuous remark is often misconstrued by D'Eange. If he thinks you are encouraging him, he will pester you until I intervene."

"I will be circumspect, milord. I wouldn't want you to call the ambassador out on my account," Davan whispered back.

Cair sat back and watched his lady greet each official and representative with equal parts of grace and humility. He couldn't take his eyes from her and itched to get her alone. His hand held hers throughout the evening and neither ate more than a few bites of the elegant repast that was set before them. When he could stand it no longer, he asked if she was ready to end the evening.

"More than ready, milord," she replied. "If I smile one more time, my face will be permanently frozen in that position."

Cair stood and helped Davan to her feet. He looked out over those gathered, meeting the steady gazes of his wife's brothers and only sister. When the Great Hall grew silent—the guests becoming aware of the bride and groom's imminent departure, the prince regent of Amhantar lifted his wife's hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss upon it.

"I am," he said, "the happiest man in the universe tonight. At my side is a lady whom I treasure and who has pledged to be my helpmate and partner from this night forward. What more could a man ask?"

Those gathered applauded, jostling one another for an unimpeded look at their host and hostess.

Bending down Cair took up his and Davan's goblets, handed hers to her, and then raised his own to the assemblage. She looked up at him as he spoke and though she did not understand the Amhantarean language recognized the emotion in his words.

*"Go n-éirí an bóthar leat*

*"Go raibh an Ghaoth go brách ag do chúl*

*"Go lonraí an ghrian go te ar d'aghaidh*

*"Go dtite an bháisteach go mín ar do pháirceanna*

*"Agus go mbuailimid le chéile arís,*

*"Go gcoinní Bandia i mbos A láimhe thú."*

The wedding guests repeated the second part of the blessing then toasted the couple in return.

Making their way through the crowd that was once more applauding them with vigor, Cair leaned down to translate the toast to his bride.

*"May the road rise to meet you*

*"May the Wind be always at your back*

*"May the sun shine warm upon your face*

*"The rains fall soft upon your fields*

*"And until we meet again*

*"May the Goddess hold you in the hollow of Her hand."*

*"How lovely," Davan said.*

"Not as lovely as my lady," he told her.

At the entry to the Great Hall, they turned and waved goodbye to their guests then like two rambunctious children ran for the wide sweeping stairway that led to their chamber—a chamber Davan had yet to see—with Davan's long train and veil gathered up in her arm in a silken bunch.

Davan's hand in his, Cair led her up the staircase and down the long corridor until they reached his door. Opening it, he swung his bride into his arms, carried her—laughing and squealing with delight—over the threshold and then kicked the door shut behind them.

Striding to the center of the room, he lowered her to her feet then reached out to cup her face between his hands. He searched her lovely face, memorizing every freckle, every mole and every feature. His thumbs stroked across her full lips.

*"Tá grá agam duit,"* he said, his voice husky.

Davan did not need him to translate the phrase for the meaning was there in his gaze. "I love you, too," she responded.

He lifted her face to his and kissed her gently then pulled her against him and into the protection of his strong arms. "I never imagined I would say that to a woman and mean it," he confessed. "At least not sober."

"I can't believe we've known one another so short a time yet have such strong feelings toward one another. How can that be, Cair?"

"Perhaps we knew each other in a past life," he suggested. "Fated loves are destined to find one another time and time again even against great odds."

"Or despite broken eggshells," she teased.

He laughed. "I swear the moment I saw you trampling on those eggs I felt something twist inside me. I didn't recognize it for what it was at the time but now I can't help but wonder if it didn't trigger some ancient memory in my soul."

"If someone had told me a month ago I would be standing in the bedroom of The Black Sun, I'd have had them committed for observation," she said, running her palms over the front of his dress uniform jacket.

Cair's arms were hooked around her waist, his forehead against the top of her head. "My rep preceded me, eh?"

"The entire universe knows of you, milord. Your reputation is as widespread as The Burgon of the Aduaidh," she replied. "I was a first-year student at the Fleet Medical Academy when you were graduating with honors and being awarded Deathwielder status across the quad. I even came to see you accept that sword you are wearing right now."

Cair lifted his head. "You were at my graduation?"

"I couldn't see much because of so many people on hand, but aye, I was there."

"And the large Vid-Cast screen was acting up as I recall."

"Solar interference, I think."

"Aye," he said. "I remember."

She put her hands on the top button of his jacket and unbuttoned it. "I wanted to get a look at you because I'd heard you were an exceptionally handsome man." She moved to the next button.

"And you wanted to see if that was true," he said.

"That I did."

She worked her way through the remaining buttons then slid her hands over the silk of his collarless pristine white shirt. "Aren't you overly warm, milord?"

He stepped back from her and reached for the buckle of his sword-belt, slipping the intricately tooled leather strap from his lean waist and wrapped it around the scabbard to set it aside.

Davan stayed his hand, and reached out to touch the elaborate cage at the hilt and fingered the thick braid of emerald green silk hanging from the pommel. She traced the engraving and asked him to translate it for she saw the phrase ended with a question mark.

*"An gnu pears anta no oifigiuil e?"* Cair replied. "Is it personal or official?"

Her quizzical look led him to explain the reason for the inscription.

"A Deathwielder never draws his sword unless he intends to slay his opponent. There is no wounding of your enemy, only death. So when he pulls the sword free of its scabbard, he must ask himself if it is for personal or official reasons. If it is official, there is no question. You do what is expected of you and take your opponent down. But if it for personal reasons, you must decide if the taking of a life warrants the offense you are avenging. The inscription is a reminder to think before you act for once drawn, a Deathwielder's blade must mete out death."

Davan watched him place the ceremonial broadsword on the table. "Have you ever drawn that blade?"

He shook his head. "Not this one, but the one I carry into battle has been blooded many times over."

Shivering at his words, at the cavalier way he discussed dealing death as though dealing cards, she knew there would always be a part of this man she could never fully know and truly did not wish to be intimate with that element of his persona.

He shrugged out of his jacket and flicked the buttons of his silk shirt open, drew it from the waistband of his uniform trousers then walked to her. "Turn around and let me see how long it will take me to unhook all those damned little buttons."

Davan grinned for it had taken her sister Eadan a good long while to work her way through the tiny pearl buttons. She hoped her husband would have as much patience for should the dress be torn, she feared they'd have his mother on them but good.

As Cair began to fumble his way through the buttons, he sighed constantly, barely able to hang onto his temper. "What in the name of the Goddess do you women need all these buttons for anyway?" he snapped, his lips peeled back from clenched teeth.

"To annoy our husbands?" she countered.

"I believe it!"

The last button came free of the fabric and Cair reached up to gently push the bodice from her shoulders, helping her free her arms from the tight sleeves.

"I think this dress was designed to test the mettle of the bridegroom," he grumbled.

Her arms bare, Davan gently wriggled the heirloom gown over her hips and stepped carefully out of it. She would have stooped down to pick it up but Cair beat her to it, snagging it with his hand, and tossing it as carelessly to the settee as she had cautiously removed it.

"Cair!" she complained.

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. Dipping one knee on the mattress, he straddled her hips before she could move over to give him room.

"This you don't need, either," he said and took hold of the front of her dainty lace corset and ran his fingers down the hook and eye closures, popping them open efficiently.

"You're too good at that by far, milord," she complained.

"Practice has made perfect," he chuckled, laying aside the white lace panels to gaze down at her breasts. He slid his hand down to the matching lace panties but she grabbed his wrist.

"Take off your clothes and then we'll discuss going further," she challenged him before tossing off her veil.

Cair's left eyebrow crooked upward but he was accustomed to taking orders. He got off the bed and began unbuttoning the jet studs of his fly. When he was finished, he sat down heavily on the bed to pull off his boots and socks and toss them aside.

Davan had propped herself up her elbows and was watching his every move. As he stripped the trousers from his long legs, she lay back and stretched.

Cair froze as his lady's body writhed on the bed while she stretched like an agile little kitten removing her lace panties. His eyes grew hot, smoldering with passion, and he longed to throw himself on her and ravage her. The peaks of her breasts thrust upward—beckoning his mouth to claim them—and her shapely legs parted just enough for him to get a glimpse of the dewy moisture gathering at her thighs.

"Oh, wench," he said. "You shouldn't tempt a man like that!"

He was over her and in her before she could make a sound. His cock slid into her so deliciously he worried he would shame himself and come before her. He could feel her throbbing around him—the heat of her, the scent of her—making him desperate to begin the thrusting that would relieve them both.

Davan held onto his back with greedy hands and gripped his waist with imprisoning legs wrapped around him. His mouth was covering hers, their tongues dueling, their lips nipping gently as he began to drive into her with hard, purposeful strokes.

Cair thought it was the buzzing in his head, the singing of his blood, he heard as she climaxed around his rigid length. His eyes were squeezed tightly together but the flash of light that rippled through the room was blinding even behind closed eyelids and he jerked, flinching at the pain that rocketed through his brain. He was thrown from the bed so violently he hit the far wall and put a good-sized dent in the plaster. A piercing shriek made him clap his hands over his ears as he lay there—half-stunned and blinded by the bright light, writhing beneath the onslaught of the agonizing sound. The floor beneath him trembled for a long moment then there was no sound at all. The overpowering stench of ozone made him nauseous and it was all he could do to open his eyes and try to push himself up from the floor. The afterimage of the intense light made it impossible for him to see anything save the zigzag bolt of wavering luminosity seemingly burned on his retina.

“Davan?” he called out, trying to crawl on all fours to the bed but he was disoriented and his stomach roiled with every movement. “Davan?”

He could hear nothing and feared his eardrums had been ruptured by the powerful screech that had enveloped his chamber for something warm dripped down by sides of his face. If his lady was calling to him, if she was hurt, he could not hear her, could not see her and his heart was thudding painfully in his chest as he felt his way toward the bed.

Fighting hands that were suddenly on his arms, he struggled against his captors, shouting as loudly as he could though he could not hear his own cries. He fought like a madman—kicking and trying to bite—twisting within the strong hold that kept him from breaking free. How long he struggled to get loose he would never know but it seemed like an eternity as he yelled Davan’s name over and over again and wildly tried to get away from the fierce hands gripping him. He could see nothing, hear nothing, and when a sharp sting drove deep into his arm, he threw back his head and howled.

## Chapter Thirteen

"Temporarily blind," Seamus told Prince Bennick. "They don't know for how long."

"And he can't hear, either?" Bennick inquired, his face worried.

"They say the hearing will return, too, but they don't know when."

The two men were speaking to one another through the barrier of the high wrought iron gate that separated the Brotherhood of Síocháin from those of the outside world. Only males were allowed on Mount Ciúin and special dispensation had been granted the prince to speak to his family's emissary.

"But he will be all right?"

"As all right as the present circumstances will allow," Seamus answered. "He keeps calling for his lady and we have no way to let him know she's been taken."

"There's a way to get around that. Who took his wife? The Aduaidh?"

"We presume as much. Possibly their High Commander B'reith Avatás. We know his ship was in the sector a few days before."

Bennick winced. "By the Goddess that isn't good news, Seamus." He wrapped his work-roughened hands around the bars of the gate. "Has there been a ransom demand?"

Seamus shook his head. "No, Your Grace. There hasn't. The fact that we have received no ransom demand from The Burgon or his High Council concerns us. If it was just Avatás behind this and he didn't have The Burgon's permission, I hope to the Goddess the Aduaidh fries his ass."

"What reason would Avatás have to snatch Cair's woman? If he was right there in the room with her, why didn't that lizard bastard take him?"

"My guess is either they miscalculated with the transporter beam or it was never their intention of taking him in the first place."

"The Net wasn't working?"

Seamus' face turned hard. "It was working just fine but they managed to override the program and in that second or two before the auxiliary lock kicked in, they managed to get past security and fasten onto her."

"Who knew how to shut it down other than you?" Bennick asked.

"Your brother," Seamus replied. "My guess is he did some talking out of school, if you will, and if that was the way of it, I'll give you one guess who it was he told."

"That whore from the *Foehn*," Bennick said with a sigh.



"I'll lay you odds he told her during one of those times he was deep in his cups and she was taking notes," Seamus complained. "Hell, she could have been working with the Aduaidh all along!"

"Where is she now?"

"That's why I think it was her," Seamus replied. "She was with Avatás."

Bennick lowered his head to the bars. "What is it Mother thinks I can do from here, Seamus?" he asked. "I will never be allowed to leave the monastery."

"You said there was a way of getting around us not being able to communicate with Prince Cair."

"Remember the code he and I used to tap out to one another through the walls when Mother was punishing one or the other of us? The one you taught us when we were boys?"

"The one I found in that old textbook from *na Stáit*?"

"That's the one."

Seamus' eyes lit up. "Do you think he will remember that after all these years?"

"I would bet on it if I were still a betting man."

The light dimmed in the old man's gaze. "But he can't hear, Your Grace. How can we—"

"Give me your hand," Bennick said.

Seamus extended his hand and the prince began tapping out a rhythm in the aged warrior's palm. He tapped out the dots and dashes that said, "This is the way you talk to him."

"It might work!" Seamus said. "It just might work!"

The Prior was calling to Bennick and the prince glanced around. He sighed deeply then looked back at the old warrior. "My time is up, Seamus. I doubt they will allow you to come again so give everyone my love and tell Cair I will be praying for his lady's safe return."

"Blessings on you, Your Grace," Seamus said, tears gathering in his rheumy eyes. "We'll be saying a prayer every morning and night for you, too."

As he walked back down the path to where he had tethered his horse, Seamus felt more lighthearted than when he had arrived on Mount Ciúin. Climbing painfully onto his mount—for his aged bones were beginning to feel the long ride from Amhantar Keep—he went over and over in his mind the code he had taught the young princes. Some of it he couldn't seem to remember for time was slowly eroding his memories, but he knew right where the *na Stáit* book was that held the code alphabet.

He prayed young Cair had not forgotten what he had learned so long ago. In the prince's present state, he wasn't so sure he would.

\* \* \* \* \*

Locked in a silent world of darkness, Cair Ghrian lay immobile in his bed, straps across his wrists and ankles to keep him still and the powerful narcotic tenerse rampaging through his body to keep him manageable. Though he cursed viciously from time to time—mumbling to himself much of the rest of the time—what he said made little sense for the tenerse had effectively befuddled his mind and warped his perceptions.

His mother sat at his bedside, stroking his hand though she could tell it irritated him. She needed the contact, the reassurance that her child was still safe. Every half hour she had the computer programmers checking The Net to make sure the security force was engaged. The room in which Cair lay was doubly protected with a special apparatus that would make it impossible for him to be snatched up as Davan had been.

The healers made hourly visits but they never had anything encouraging to tell their queen.

“It will take time for him to heal, Your Majesty,” became a phrase she hated to hear while at the same time finding comfort in those ten little words.

She was impatient for Seamus’ return and would pace the distance from her son’s bed to the window many times over the three-day period he was gone. That they had had no word from those who had taken Davan was not a good sign and the longer the silence, the deeper the grief was driven into Margaret Ghrian’s heart.

“The Sualannach ambassador has sent word to Aduaidh asking after the Princess, Your Majesty, but the sons of bitches are ignoring him,” her court chancellor informed her. “We are trying every avenue at our disposal to make contact with the enemy. You must hold to the faith, Madame. Hold to the faith.”

Listening to her son babbling once again—his words garbled as though he was retarded—fear reached up to squeeze the queen’s heart in a brutal grip. She was terrified that Cair had been mentally unhinged by what had happened and would never recover. The longer he lay unresponsive, the deeper his own demons might carry him.

“He’s back, Your Majesty!” one of the healers came in to say. “Lord Seamus is on his way up.”

Her hand trembling, the queen closed her eyes and said a quick prayer to the Goddess that Seamus had been able to learn something from Bennick that would help his brother. Why else, she thought, had the vision come to her bidding her send Seamus to Mount Ciúin?

“You hold on, Cairnan,” she said, patting her son’s hand. That strong hand flexed, trying to escape the touch.

Seamus was bone-tired as he climbed the stairs to the prince’s chamber. He was in a great deal of pain and his joints protested the long climb. By the time he arrived at the chamber door, his face was white with strain, his bloodshot eyes moister than usual, and he was wheezing for breath. Brushing aside the healer’s steadying arm, he limped

to the prince's bedside and dropped to the floor, unable to stop the cry that escaped his lips as his knee hit the floor.

"He doesn't like you to touch him," the queen said, hurrying over as Seamus reached for Cair's hand.

Seeing what the old man was doing, the healer rushed forward, as well. "Lord Seamus, you mustn't undo the strap. He gets more violent and is liable to smash his fist into your face."

"He won't," Seamus snapped as he unbuckled the strap and used all of his waning strength to keep the prince from jerking his hand away.

Growling and grunting as he tried to throw off the hand that had gripped his own, Cair let out a series of vulgar words when he was unable to break the hold around his wrist. He fought having his hand turned over and pressed to the bed, striving to keep his fingers clenched but the painful pressure on his wrist increased until his fingers splayed open.

"What are you doing?" the queen demanded as Seamus used his index finger to tap Cair's palm.

"Meg, shut the hell up!" Seamus snarled.

The healer gasped and stepped back. No one dared speak to the queen in such a manner and he feared the woman would physically attack the old warrior. He was surprised to see her clamp her mouth shut, though her narrowed eyes spoke volumes.

Seamus tapped the same five letters over and over, fighting the hand that tried to close him out, the angry pull that jerked on the old man's strength. He ignored the vile cursing that came from the prince and kept repeating the same five letters –

Dash, dot, dot

Dot, dash

Dot, dot, dot, dash

Dot, dash

Dash, dot

D

A

V

A

N

Cair hissed and spat. He howled his frustration, his entire body jerking as he strove to snatch his hand from its imprisonment. His head whipped to and fro on the pillow and he cursed a blue streak – so vulgar his mother hid her face in her hands.

"Whatever you are doing isn't working," the queen complained and tried to push Seamus out of the way for Cair was becoming more agitated.

Infuriated that the young man wasn't responding, Seamus pushed himself from the floor with the agility of a man half his age and with a curse of his own slapped Cair Ghrian as hard as he could, rocking Cair's head to one side and bloodying his nose.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" the queen shrieked and would have pushed Seamus away but the old man had a death grip on her son's hand and was stabbing him once more in the center of his palm, over and over again.

"Pay attention, boy!" Seamus shouted and the pressure he pushed into the young man's hand was brutal.

Cair went completely still, blood dripping from his right nostril. Though he could see nothing, he was staring at the far wall, his forehead crinkled.

"That's it, son. Listen to what I'm telling you," Seamus said and decreased the force with which he was stabbing the prince's hand.

"You aren't saying anything, you old coot. You've lost what little mind you had," the healer complained. "Come away, Seamus. You are making matters worse!" He started to reach out for the old warrior's arm but the queen held up her hand.

"Cairnan is aware of what you're doing, Seamus," she said.

One final time Seamus went through the sequence of letters that spelled out the one word he hoped would gain the prince's attention. So exhausted he could barely draw breath, he tapped out the final letter, his index finger still in the center of Cair's palm, and hung his head.

The queen held her breath for her son's fingers were curling over Seamus'.

"Davan?" Cair asked, his voice strained.

Seamus gradually raised his head. Cair's face was turned toward him, the blind stare and hopeful look hurt the old man to the pit of his soul. When the prince called his lady's name once more and squeezed Seamus' fingers, the aged warrior groaned.

"No, son," he said and took Cair's hand and brought it to his face so the prince could see who it was.

Cair's fingers traced the deep lines on the old man's face and the hopeful look vanished from his face. "Seamus," he stated in a flat, dead voice.

Seamus brought Cair's hand down to the bed once more and tapped aye into Cair's palm.

"Where is she?" the prince asked. "Where is my lady?"

"Don't tell him," the queen warned.

Seamus looked around at her. "You want me to lie to the boy?"

"If you tell him she was taken by the Aduaidh, he'll go berserk again," the healer said. He was drawing up another dosage of tenerse.

"You keep that shit away from this boy!" Seamus snarled. "You've got him so drugged now he doesn't know which end is up!"

Cair flinched for a dim shaft of light zipped from right to left across his darkened vision and for the first time in days he heard sound—rumblings he couldn't make out—and held as still as he could, hoping both sight and sound were returning to him.

"Tell him we've sent a team after Davan," the queen suggested.

"You want me to lie to him," Seamus accused. "We ain't sent no team."

"Seamus," the queen said, coming to stand at the old man's side. "Cairnan is in no condition to know the truth right now. He..."

The rumblings were becoming clearer and Cair could make out words—can't, doesn't, won't, couldn't—and the negative connotations of those words terrified him.

"Where is my lady?" he repeated.

Seamus locked glares with his queen. "If you want to lie to that boy, you tell him. I won't!"

"Tell him how?" Cair's mother demanded. "I don't even know what it is you are doing!"

As the sound became crisper in Cair's ears, the darkness before his eyes began to lift. Ebony waves shifting across his line of vision became candescent swirls that lightened to a dark gray ash then finally to a pale silver as colors began to seep beneath the cinereous shadows. He held very still, barely breathing, and as full sound returned, had to force himself not to shout with elation. The first clear words he heard came from Seamus.

"Healer, get the hell out of here until I call you."

Schooling himself not to show any emotion at all and to keep his eyes steady, Cair was amazed Seamus would speak so to the doctor and stunned when his mother ordered the healer from the room.

At the sound of the door closing, the queen reached out and shoved Seamus. "Don't you dare give orders like that again, Seamus Rawls!"

Seamus still had hold of Cair's hand and his fingers tightened around the prince's. "For once will you just trust me to know what is best for our son, Meg?"

"Seamus!" the queen admonished. "Be careful what you say!"

"No one can hear us, Meg. We need to let him know what he's up against."

Absolute astonishment rippled through Cair and he stared at his mother's face. It was all he could do not to let his mouth sag open and give away the fact that he could both hear and see—not clearly but well enough. There was still some distortion of sound and blurriness to his vision and now his heart was pounding.

"What can he do, Seamus?" he heard his mother ask. "He can't see or hear. Knowing his wife is in the hands of the enemy can only hurt him."

The truth was a wicked barbed arrow piercing his heart and he barely noticed Seamus letting go of his hand.

"We'll get her back for him, Meggie," Seamus said softly, reaching out to touch the queen's cheek with his weathered palm. "The Aduaidh can't risk allowing her to be hurt. The Burgon wants the lad, not her."

The queen covered the old man's hand with hers. "And if he knows that, he'll offer himself in her stead, Seamus. We can't let him do that!"

"Of course, we can't, but how do you plan on stopping him? As soon as the Aduaidh sends its demands, the boy will do all he can to get the wench back. If you ain't noticed, he loves that gal."

"Why don't you let the *boy* make his own decisions?" Cair snapped, jerking on the arm that was still lashed to the bed. "Undo this damned strap, Seamus!"

Both the queen and Seamus jumped at the demand and stared wide-eyed, guilt written plainly on their faces.

"How long have you been able to see?" Seamus asked.

"How long have you been able to *hear*?" the queen put in.

"Long enough to learn things you two obviously never had any intention of me ever finding out," Cair answered. He jerked viciously on the strap. "Get this off me! Now!"

Seamus hesitated for a moment then hurried around to the other side of the bed. He quickly unbuckled the strap that had been anchored to the bed frame. As soon as his wrist was free, Cair ordered his ankles untied and when that was done pushed himself up in the bed – too rapidly and with much force for the world spun around and around him and his vision darkened a bit. He put a hand to his head and closed his eyes to combat the vertigo.

"Cairnan, don't fly off the handle," his mother pleaded. "You were –"

"What happened to me?" the prince asked, directing his question to Seamus.

"The Net was compromised," Seamus replied. "You were in the room with the lady when the Aduaidh shot a pick-up beam in there. We found you lying on the floor unconscious and the lady was gone."

"How the hell did the Aduaidh get past The Net?" The question was spat out nastily.

"Since only two of us know how the thing works and I know the information on how to disable it didn't come from me, I suspect you blabbed it to that Iodálach whore at some point when you were foxed," Seamus snapped back in an equally spiteful tone.

Pain moved over Cair's face and he sat there – his eyes shifting from side to side as clarity of his vision returned – trying to think if he had, indeed, ever boasted of knowing how to disengage the protection arc that covered his home world.

"I've changed all the codes and added different directionals to both the high-level and low-level force fields so Amhantar is safe from having its citizens extracted," Seamus stated. "I suspect your lady was snatched up by a Wyvern marauder."

"B'reith Avatás'. The *Kady*," Cair whispered. "The ship that attacked LeClerc's."

"Most likely."

"There have been no demands," the queen said but her son was ignoring her. He didn't even look her way. "I have sent several messages to The Burgon but he has yet to reply."

"As soon as you're able, I'll put together a team and we'll go after her, lad," Seamus said.

Cair narrowed his eyes. "How long have I been lying here drugged to the gills?"

"Three days," Seamus replied.

"Why haven't you sent a team before now?"

"I sent Seamus to Mount Ciúin. I had hoped the Brotherhood would allow Bennick to return," his mother explained. "They wouldn't but—"

"Your brother didn't want to return," Seamus said. "He was a big help, though. I had forgotten about that code until he reminded me. At least we had a way to communicate with you."

"And bring you out of your hysterical blindness," the queen put in. "We knew it was only a matter of time before—"

"Why," Cair said, his lips skinned back from his teeth and his angry glare locked on Seamus, "didn't you send a rescue team after my lady as soon as she was taken?"

"That was my decision," his mother said and Cair's head snapped around and he impaled her with a look that turned her face white. She raised her chin. "You were incapacitated—unable to see or hear—and we needed a man to rule Amhantar. If you weren't going to be capable of doing that, I wanted Bennick here to do it for you. Securing Amhantar was more important than running after Avatás when we knew damned well we wouldn't be able to find him."

"He has chameleon cloaking on the *Kady*, lad," Seamus said. "That's how he was able to sneak up on the *Faucon* as he did. Hell, we didn't pick him up, either, until the moment he de-cloaked and grabbed your woman. By then, it was too late. He shot out of here like a bat outta torment."

Fury turned Cair's amber eyes to molten gold. "Get out," he said, glaring at Seamus once more.

"Now, listen here, Cairnan—" his mother began but her son actually hissed at her, throwing her a damning look that would have chilled any man facing him in combat and she stammered to a halt. Despite the rage being thrown at her, she straightened her shoulders. "I think you forget I am not only your mother but your queen. You will show me the respect I am due, young man, or I will—"

"What?" Cair barked. "Take the scepter from a hand that didn't want it in the first place? Disown me? Throw me in the dungeon?" He spat out a vicious vulgarity. "Do it. I don't give a rat's ass. Just get the hell out of my room!"

Seamus reached out and took hold of the queen's arm, pulling her toward the door despite her protests. "Leave him be, Your Majesty," Seamus said and winced at the hoot of derision that came from the younger man.

"I'll not have a son of mine—" the queen started to say but Seamus yanked the door open and pushed her out before she could finish what she had been about to say. He glanced back at Cair then closed the door behind them.

The tenerse had dried Cair's mouth out and he shot out a trembling hand to take up the carafe of water that had been placed on his night table. Distaining the use of the goblet sitting beside it, he lifted the carafe and drained nearly half of it, splashing some down the front of his naked chest. When he had drank his fill, he threw the carafe across the room, annoyed that it didn't shatter as it hit the wall but rather clunked against it and bounced on the thick carpet.

Swinging his legs from the bed, he sat on the edge and waited until the vertigo passed once more and he was able to stand. Weak from the saturation of tenerse in his system, he felt as though he was walking under water as he made his way to the armoire and jerked the doors open. Without looking to see what he'd snagged, he yanked a pair of britches from a shelf, snatched up a shirt then peeled off the sickbay pajamas they'd no doubt put on him as he lay unconscious. He dressed quickly—ignoring the nausea and the way his head continued to spin—stuffing his shirt into his britches but not bothering to put on a belt. Thrusting his feet into a pair of worn but comfortable boots, he stalked to another armoire and took out a wicked-looking serpentine blade dagger, gathered up his scythesword and the shoulder scabbard that would hold the blade diagonally across his back. Shoving the dagger into the waistband of his britches, he trod heavily to the door, slinging the scabbard over his shoulder as he went and put his ear to the panel.

There would be guards on duty outside his chamber door, Cair knew. He could not hear them for his hearing was still slightly dulled but he had no doubt they were there. In order to get past them, he had to use a portion of the powers given to him as a Deathwielder and he knew that would sap a great deal of what little energy he had. But there was no way around it. He had to get out of Amhantar Keep and make his way to the docking bay.

Drawing in a deep breath, he willed his body to his command. It was imperative for him to be completely relaxed, emotionless and to allow nothing to break his concentration. He reduced the rate of his breathing, lowered his heart rate and then with his eyes closed began to charge his physical body with dark energy. Concentrating, he visualized his natural aura changing to indigo black for black is the invisible light. As his body became infused with the black aura photonic created clouds began to flow around him, enveloping his entire body with the indigo black color. He began to see his body dematerializing, his visual aura becoming invisible until he could no longer see himself. Gradually, he envisioned the clouds blocking out all light, hiding him completely from sight, concealing his energy in the indigo depths of the black aura.



He touched the door, and the door disappeared within the secret ebony folds of his aura, he opened it, walked through, closed it quietly behind him and walked past guards who neither saw nor heard him.

A grim smile stretched across Cair Ghrian's face as he walked purposefully down the winding staircase of Amhantar Keep and took the corridor that led to the spaceports and the docking bays where his own dragon-class fighter waited in its harness. He paid no attention to the people he passed who were unaware of his presence among them for he had but one thing on his mind and that was to board *the Saoirse*.

Though he had not stepped foot inside his personal craft since he had designed it at the Academy in an engineering class he had hated from first day to last, he knew the ship as well as he knew the back of his hand. He had incorporated speed and stealth into the dragon-winged black ship, sensor jammers and added enough firepower with twin pulse cannons to scatter a Skyraider into the Abyss in micro-pieces. Saoirse meant "freedom" in Amhantarean and the sleek vessel had always been a source of independence for the young prince. This day, it would also be his liberation.

Standing on the catwalk, he stared at the *Saoirse* for a moment, looked past it to make sure the external shield doors were open. He observed a ship taking off, another backing out of its harness in preparation for departure and a muscle worked in his jaw.

"You can send merchant ships out any time you feel like it but not one ship to go after my lady," he said quietly.

With his hands clenched into fists, he stood there a moment longer and spread the black aura over the *Saoirse*, effectively hiding it from view. Concentrating as hard as he could, he caused the forward hatch door to swing up and the entry ladder slide out. Only a minute passed before he was in the craft and buckling himself into the formfitting pilot chair.

A quick run-through of the instruments and gauges told him the *Saoirse* was in top-flight condition. The fuel cells were fully charged and all systems were a go. He engaged the engines and kept a close eye on the ship jockeying into position to leave port.

Looking up from his position on the lower docking bay where freighters, transports, and LRCs were harnessed, a maintenance worker heard the roar of a fighter engine but could not see from whence it had come. He counted five star fighters and two runabouts on the upper level but none showed heat from their exhausts. The sound of an engine going on line had lasted but a second before it became silent, but the maintenance worker felt the hair on the back of his neck move.

"Kullen, how many ships are docked up on the upper level?" he called out to a fellow worker.

"There were nine there this morning but one of the runabouts left just after daybreak. Why?"

The maintenance counted the ships again. "I see only seven. You sure there should be eight?"

"Reasonably sure," Kullen said. He leaned over the rail of the catwalk and looked up. "I don't see but seven, either. Maybe one went to —"

The maintenance men were buffeted by a strong wind, staggering back as the heat washed over them.

Cair waited until the lumbering freighter was ready to depart through the external shield doors. He gave the *Saoirse* full power and slipped under the belly of the freighter and hung there as it got ready to pierce The Net.

"What the hell was that?" Kullen asked. "Was that a ship rocketing down from the upper level?"

The maintenance men stared at the freighter as it shot out into space and would later tell their supervisor they didn't see another ship leave port but knew one had and had done so in full stealth mode, undetected by the controllers.

"That was the only way Prince Cairnan knew he'd be able to break free of the force field without being discovered," the supervisor told Seamus. "He let the larger ship hide his heat signature until they were beyond The Net then shot past them. The captain of the freighter said all he saw was a black blur."

## Chapter Fourteen

Davan had regained her sight quicker than her husband had but her hearing was still muted. A sharp pain plagued her left auditory canal from time to time, causing brief spurts of pain and brutal vertigo, for which she refused to allow the Saurians to treat her. She suffered the discomfort in silence and ignored all attempts made by the captain of the vessel to engage her in conversation. At the moment Cair escaped the gravity of his home world, his wife was sitting in Captain B'reith Avatás' office and staring at him with all the hatred she could muster.

Avatás leaned back in his chair, his elbows on the chair arms, and folded his hands together over his flat belly. His plans for The Black Sun's woman had been thwarted and he was enraged that it was so but until things changed—as he suspected they were about to—he could at least take a small portion of his revenge on Cair Ghrian's bitch.

"I am told there have never been any women on Riezell Nine," the Saurian commander said. "You will be the first."

Terror shifted through Davan's body but she kept still, not allowing one flicker of her eyelashes to give her away. She simply stared back at the ugly bastard across from her.

Avatás smiled and he flicked out his forked tongue to moisten his upper lip. "You are a brave woman, no?"

The sight of that long, slender tongue with the dual-tips sickened Davan. It was all she could do not to flinch.

"A woman befitting The Black Sun," Avatás commented. "The Burgon enjoys brave women. They are more entertaining than frightened ones when he crushes their spirits."

Davan knew little about The Burgon—the leader of the Aduaidh—but she had heard he was a powerful warrior who had risen brutally through the ranks. His enemies feared him for it was said he gave no quarter and took no prisoners who did not end up in the experimental labs on Riezell Nine.

The Vid-Com behind Avatás chimed twice and the Saurian sat forward. His elliptical pupils glowed with a forbidding light.

"We are arriving on Riezell Nine. I will have the guards escort you back to your cell in preparation for landing."

Davan stood up and turned her back on the Saurian, smiling grimly to herself at his hiss of annoyance at her rudeness as she walked to the door and waited for the portal to open.

"If I had my way," Avatás told her, "you would crawl from my presence on your belly!"

A spiteful little imp did a hop on Davan's shoulder and she turned to look at the Saurian, speaking to him for the first time since she'd awakened on his ship. "I'll leave the belly-crawling to reptiles like you. Everyone knows you're better at it than any other race in the universe."

Avatás came to his feet in a bound, his face a mask of rage. It was a sore point with him that the Saurians were considered the lowest echelon of the Aduaidh Alliance ranks.

"You will pay for that insult, bitch!" he threw at her.

Davan laughed at his threat and would have said something else to him but the guard on her left grabbed her arm and dug his nails into it. He'd dragged her from Avatás' office and halfway down the hall before he stopped, jerked her around to face him.

"The Burgon gave orders you were not to be touched but if you aren't careful, the captain will disregard that order and you'll be squirting skinks out of your cunt from now until you die like Ghrian's whore did!" the guard told her.

Davan's face lost all color. "Amethyst is dead?"

"Dead and burned to a cinder," the guard spat. "After delivering her third slither of nestlings she bled to death. Is that what you want?"

A hard shudder ran through Davan. The thought of the Saurian thrusting into her was nauseating. Just the thought of him putting his slimy, scaly hands on her made her gag.

"Aye," the guard sneered. "I think you understand now, don't you?"

Hurried down the corridor and into her cell, Davan could not stop thinking about the woman who had been her husband's mistress. She hadn't liked Amethyst—perhaps even hated her—but knowing she'd died such a horrible death made Davan tremble, wondering what was in store for her as a captive.

And as the wife of the future King of Amhantar.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emperor Ryden Bakari had won his position as Burgon of the Aduaidh Alliance through a savage combat to the death with an opponent who once had been his friend and still wore the scars of that vicious contest. Though advances in cosmetic surgery could have erased the wicked disfigurement that ran from his right temple to the corner of his mouth, Ryden preferred to keep the mark. Because his opponent had been a friend and that man had fought gallantly—if dirtily—Ryden considered the scar a badge of honor.

Fingering the swath of dense fibrous tissue on his lean jaw as he watched his flagship, the *Sekkeen*, moving into position on the pallet that would take it along a rail

system to its docking bay, the ruler of the Aduaidh was uneasy. This was his second visit to Riezell Nine since the border wars began thirty years earlier and he knew all too well what had gone on behind the gray steel and granite walls of the research center. He hoped never to set foot again on the planet known throughout the galaxy as a charnel house of torture and death and he especially had never wanted to see again the prisoner being kept in the farthest reaches of the center's cells.

Ryden Bakari was a newly commissioned ensign the year war had broken out between the Aduaidh and the Coalition of Federated Worlds. The dispute had begun at the borderland of small planetoids between the Aduaidh Quadrant and Amhantar, that green world from which had come greedy warriors intent on grabbing Aduaidh land at all costs. The hostilities had begun with a violent skirmish or two then had escalated rapidly to all-out warfare, bringing other worlds into the fray. No sane voices arguing for a settlement could be heard for the conflict had become a brutal contest for supremacy waged by both sides. The Burgon before Ryden had been a savage man intent on winning no matter how many casualties or how vast the destruction of lands it would take a hundred years or more to bring back to use. By the time Ryden took the throne, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children had died on both sides of the war. Thousands of acres of land would never be fertile again and plant and animal life had long since disappeared from those war-ravaged regions.

Tired in spirit and weary of body, Ryden had long since given up all hope of there being a decisive victory on either side of the coin. He had lost ten of his brothers and three times that many sisters. Numerous friends and even more numerous acquaintances had lost their lives to a war that had ceased to have meaning for those planetoids that had been the cause of the war had been destroyed—blasted into so much space dust—long ago. The reason for the war was no more, yet the hostilities continued—in part—because of men like B'reith Avatás.

As that hated name passed across Ryden's mind, The Burgon cursed. It was because of the Saurian that he had been forced to leave Aduaidh Prime and make the hated journey to Riezell Nine once more.

"Have you lost your mind?" The Burgon had shouted at the Saurian when B'reith had Vid-Commed to boast of his taking of Cair Ghrian's bride.

Avatás had looked genuinely surprised that his act did not please The Burgon. "It is a way to bring The Black Sun to his knees, Your Excellency. He will—"

"Move heavens and planets to get the woman back, you fool!" Ryden bellowed. "Do you have any idea of what you have done?"

Avatás had tried to explain his actions and as he spoke, Ryden saw anger building in the elliptical pupils of the Saurian. His blood ran as cold as that flowing through B'reith Avatás' veins.

"If you harm one hair on that woman's head, I will take yours from your body!" Ryden said through clenched teeth. "Touch her and I will lop off your hands one inch at a time. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Fear had entered those reptilian eyes and Avatás had bowed. "I will make sure she is placed in no danger."

"Take her to Riezell Nine," Ryden ordered. "She will be safer there than on your ship or anywhere else in the Quadrant. Make damned sure our enemies know you have her for they will not dare attack a ship carrying The Black Sun's mate."

As his ship settled into its docking harness Ryden stood, his fists clenched at his sides. His spies onboard the *Kady* kept him well-informed and he knew Avatás had not followed the orders he'd been given. Twice he had engaged his ship with Coalition forces—destroying both ships—but not before taking fire and receiving minor damage to the *Kady*. During neither skirmish did he announce the fact he was carrying Cair Ghrian's wife onboard.

For that—alone—Ryden would have stripped all rank from B'reith Avatás—but for putting The Black Sun's woman in danger of being hurt, maimed or killed, The Burgon would accept nothing less than the Saurian's worthless life.

A delegation of scientists was waiting beyond the docking bay catwalk as The Burgon's personal guards escorted the Aduaidh Emperor from his ship. Bowing and scraping, the scientists knew better than to speak unless spoken to and could not move back fast enough as Ryden Bakari came striding toward them. They nearly bowled one another over in their attempt to make room for their Emperor. Falling in line behind him and his escort, they were an excited horde of gnats buzzing along in his wake. After all, it was not every day the most powerful man in the universe came to visit.

Ryden stopped and turned, motioning the head scientist to come forward.

The man nearly tripped in his eagerness to do as he was bid. Grinning like a hyena, he stopped a good five feet away and stood there wringing his hands.

"Has the Princess Davan arrived?" Ryden asked.

"Aye, Your Excellency," the scientist acknowledged, daring to say no more unless asked.

"She is well?"

"Aye, Your Excellency."

"Where is she now?"

"She was given VIP quarters, Your Excellency."

"Her needs are being met?"

"Aye, Your Excellency," the man said. "I made sure of it."

"Where is Avatás?"

The scientist's grin wavered. "He is visiting the djinn, Your Excellency."

Fury turned The Burgon's face to stone. "Who authorized him to do that?"

Wavering grin gone, to be replaced with a look of stark terror, a stream of piss began to puddle around the head scientist's shoes. "I did, Your Excellency," the man whined and his eyes filled with tears.

Ryden growled low in his throat, turned his back and – totally unaware of the head scientist collapsing like a child's broken toy – strode angrily toward the elevator that would take him to the lowest levels of the research center.

"Your pardon, Excellency," one of Ryden's personal guards interrupted, "but the scientist fainted. I believe he thinks his life is forfeit for allowing the skink to have access to the djinn."

Ryden flung out a hand. "He should be skinned alive for his recklessness but make sure he understands I won't ask his life in return for his stupidity."

The guard nodded and dropped back.

"Make damned sure he knows I am not pleased with him!" Ryden called out as the guard headed back to the unconscious scientist.

Only two of the seven guards flanking The Burgon entered the elevator with him. Both men had been his personal guards since he had risen to the powerful position he now held. They had also been his friends since long before that.

"If you don't stop making people pass out, Ry," the guard on his left said as the elevator began to descend, "we're going to have to start carrying smelling salts around with us."

"I don't like idiocy, Drae," The Burgon complained. "Especially in men who are supposed to be intelligent!"

"He most likely thought nothing of allowing the Saurian to see Riezell Nine's infamous prisoner," Drae Abyad commented. "I'd like to see him, too."

"You say that now but once you do, you'll wish you hadn't," Ryden told him.

Drae scratched his jaw. "Is he that hideous?"

"The sight of him is the only thing that has ever caused me nightmares. Does that answer your question?"

"How long has he been locked up here?" Mazon Be-Rashamon, the other guard, inquired. He was The Burgon's cousin and as such enjoyed the same accessibility to the Emperor as did Abyad.

"Fifty years?" Ryden questioned. "Sixty? I don't remember but I know he was captured long before I was ever born."

The elevator settled on the third floor of the fifteen-story building, the first ten floors of which were buried beneath the red earth of Riezell Nine. As the doors opened, the first thing The Burgon saw was B'reith Avatás' pale face, slick with a sheen of sweat.

His hands trembling, the Saurian went to one knee, his head bowed before his Emperor, his doubled fist over his heart.

"Get the hell up, skink!" Ryden ordered.

Avatás flinched as he gained his feet. He swallowed loudly and as his eyes met The Burgon's, he read his fate in the dark blue stare.

"Did you enjoy visiting the prisoner in Cell Two?" Ryden asked so quietly the Saurian had to strain to hear.

"No, Your Excellency," Avatás admitted. Not only his hands but the rest of him was trembling now.

"Should I have them open his cell and throw you in there so you can get to know him up close and personal?"

Horror filled the Saurian's narrow face and he dropped to both knees, his forehead pressed to the toes of The Burgon's boots. "Please, Your Excellency, no!"

"But you had to see for yourself, eh?" Ryden growled.

"Your Excellency, please forgive me," Avatás pleaded. "I only wanted to take a look at the djinn. I—"

"Get this bastard out of my sight," Ryden sneered, pulling his boots from the Saurian's contact. "Place him under house arrest until I decide when and how he will atone for the trouble he has caused me."

Drae and Mazon took hold of Avatás and dragged him to his feet, pulling him away from the elevator. Before the doors closed, The Burgon grabbed the panel and looked Drae in the eye.

"If you truly want to see hell, then you have my permission to visit Cell Two, but my advice to you is to stay clear of it," Ryden told him. He let go of the door and stepped back.

As he exited the elevator on the twelfth floor, the head scientist, Dr. Gruber, was standing there. The overweight man looked as though he was about to faint again. His lips twitched in a smile then quivered to a pout and back again. Once more he was nervously wringing his hands and waiting to be spoken to before imparting whatever news or information he had.

"Walk with me, Gruber," The Burgon ordered as he stepped out into the corridor and turned toward what he remembered being the meeting room.

Dr. Gruber dropped in behind his emperor and had trouble keeping pace with the long-legged stride of the younger man. For every step The Burgon took, Gruber made two.

"I trust the prisoner in Cell Two is being fed properly."

"Aye, Your Excellency. We are very careful to see to it."

"What of the other prisoners?"

"They are in excellent condition, Your Excellency."

Ryden had reached the meeting room. He went to the long sweep of windows that looked out over the red planet. Dust storms were swirling over the broad expanse of rolling dunes and in the distance lightning stitched across the sky.

"Fetch me the Princess Davan then check with my communications officer. I want to know about it as soon as they make contact with Amhantar."



"Aye, Your Excellency," Gruber said, bowing himself out of the room.

"I hate this planet," Ryden snarled to himself.

He had been stationed here fresh out of military training on Aduaidh Prime. His two-year stay had been the lowest point in his long career and he had marked off each day with relief. Having to return to the dismal place did not set well and it brought back memories he had hoped never to dredge up.

Plowing a hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair, The Burgon imagined he could still hear the hideous screaming coming from Cell Block Four as prisoners received their introduction to the horror that resided in Cell Two. Along with the screaming had come brutal, unnatural sounds that had made Ryden Bakari lean against the wall and puke. From the very first night his sleep had been interrupted time and time again by those aberrant sounds that had remained in his subconscious.

The nightmares began the day he had been taken to see the djinn and those nightmares had remained through the years.

Shuddering, Ryden turned from the window and took a seat at the head of the long table that sat in the middle of the meeting room. He folded his hands on the smooth glass surface and tried to relax as much as his uneasiness would allow. Much was riding on the coming confrontation between him and the husband of the woman who at that very moment was being ushered into the room.

Davan had been warned by Dr. Gruber not to speak until spoken to. She had been instructed to bow deeply before The Burgon and to keep her eyes cast down, as was proper for a woman in the presence of the most powerful man in the universe. Neither of which she did.

"Have you contacted Amhantar?" she asked, fusing her gaze with that of the man sitting at the table.

"Woman!" Dr. Gruber hissed and plucked at her sleeve but Davan was striding angrily to the table.

"Does my husband know where you have brought me?"

Ryden was amazed the woman would show such disrespect. His own wives did not presume to question him as this one was doing and none dared look him in the eye unless he ordered it. Sitting back in his chair, he simply stared at the beautiful woman who was now close enough for him to reach out and touch.

Dr. Gruber shuffled forward, bobbing up and down. He was back to wringing his hands—washing one over the other as though they would never get clean—and staring at the floor.

"Leave us, Gruber," The Burgon ordered and the head scientist couldn't scramble from the room quick enough.

"If you expect me to kowtow to you like that prissy little toad—" Davan began but the imposing man staring back at her actually smiled.

"I think of him more as a warty toad, Your Grace," Ryden chuckled. He swept his hand out to indicate the chair to his left. "Please, sit down."

Davan shook her head. "All I want to know is if you have sent word to my husband."

"It is Davan, is it not?" he asked, folding his arms over his broad chest. "May I call you Davan?"

"You can call me whatever you like," she snapped. "I resent being manhandled by your men and —"

Thunderclouds passed instantly over The Burgon's face. "Who manhandled you?" he demanded.

"The Saurian," Davan answered and felt a tremor of fright wriggle down her spine. "He —"

"His life is forfeit for daring to kidnap you in the first place!" Ryden stated, his eyes dark as sin. "If he put a hand to you, if he hurt you in any way, I will burn him alive!"

Davan's forehead crinkled. "You did not order him to abduct me?"

"I did not. That was something the skink did on his own and without permission."

"He said you wanted to capture my husband," she said, lifting her chin. "That you wanted Cair to stand trial before —"

"I wanted to meet with Cair Ghrian," The Burgon stated. "That much is true, but not as my captive, my prisoner. I wanted to meet with him to discuss peace between the Alliance and the Coalition."

"I don't believe you," Davan said. "The Saurian —"

"What will it take to convince you I have no intention of allowing any harm to come to you or your mate?" he interrupted her.

She lifted her chin. "Send me home," she said.

"I will when your husband comes to claim you."

"He doesn't know where I am!" she snapped.

Ryden looked past her and frowned for Drae was standing in the doorway with a look on his face that said he had given in to his curiosity and had gone to take a look at the prisoner in Cell Two despite his Burgon's advice.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Ryden said. "What do you want?"

Drae cleared his throat. "He is asking to see the woman."

Ryden blinked. "He knows she's here?"

Drae told him the prisoner had become violent upon being told the Amhantarean princess would not be allowed anywhere near him. "He says she needs to know her brother is here."

Davan twisted around in her chair. "My brother? Lorcan? Lorcan Shanahan is here?"

Ryden's frown deepened. "Are you missing a brother?"

"Three of them," she said, her heart thudding in her chest. "Two are dead but my middle brother was listed as Missing In Action."

"Check and see if that man is here," Ryden ordered. He looked hard at her. "What are the names of those who died?"

"Mason and Roman," she replied. "Why do you want to know?"

The Burgon waved his hand at Drae and his personal guard left the room hurriedly.

"Why did you ask about Mason and Roman?" she repeated.

"Because," he said, standing up and going to the window where the dust storm still swirled beyond the thick panes, "sometimes men thought dead wind up here—half-alive."

"To be experimented on!" she accused. "By all that is holy if one of my kin is in this despicable place—"

"You will be reunited with them and if they choose to leave, can do so when you go back to Amhantar," he told her.

"If they choose to leave?" she gasped.

Ryden turned to face her. "Up until a few years ago I had not interfered with what went on in this research facility, Princess Davan," he explained. "It has been in existence since before I was a gleam in my father's eye and is run by the Department of Biophysics. Although I am aware it has a vile reputation—most of it wild speculation, by the way—things did occur here in the past to which I put a stop."

"Men are tortured here," she said. "Is that wild speculation?"

He shook his head. "There are many degrees of torture. Amputating an arm or leg that is beyond saving might be considered torture if done without anesthetic on the battlefield but it was necessary to save the warrior's life. Torture for the sake of simply causing pain has never—or at least never to my knowledge—been done here and it would never have been condoned."

Drae came hurriedly into the room and went to his emperor. He bent over and whispered something into Ryden's ear then glanced quickly at Davan.

"You are sure about this?" Ryden asked.

"Very sure."

Davan stood, her legs threatening to buckle. "My brother?" she whispered.

"We have two of your brothers here," The Burgon informed her. "Lorcan and Roman."

"But Roman is dead," she said, tears filling her eyes.

"Presumed dead but he is here," Ryden said. "As is your husband's brother Liam Ghrian." He shot Drae an angry look. "And for that, heads will roll, believe me! Find out why they did not inform me of the prince being here!"

Davan came around the table, reaching out to the emperor though daring not to touch him. "Please," she said, moisture clinging to her lashes. "Please let me see them."

Ryden's face relaxed. "I have no intention of keeping you from them, milady, but you must understand they may not wish to see you."

"Why not?" she demanded. "I know my brothers will want to see me!"

The Burgon and Drae exchanged a look and Drae nodded, exiting as quickly as he had entered.

"Where is he going?" Davan asked. "What are you up to?"

"Drae will go to the men in question and will speak to them. He will let them know you are here. It will be their decision as to whether or not they want—"

"Let me see my brothers!" Davan shouted.

The Burgon studied her for a moment—taking in the set look on her face and the fire in her light green eyes—and could not help but admire the fierceness of her expression. She was ready to do battle with him for her kin no matter the consequences and he envied Cair Ghrian such a loyal and stalwart mate. Although he could sense fear in her heart, she had pushed the emotion aside and it made no difference to her that he was a powerful warrior. She would fight for what she wanted.

"Well?" she snapped.

"Let me explain something to you," he said and stopped for she was shaking her head. "Then I'll show you something that might make it easier for you to understand why your brothers might not wish to see you."

"They sure as hell won't if you threaten them, now, will they?" She narrowed her eyes. "Or never let them know I'm here to begin with!"

Though he had never wanted to venture to the lower level and come in contact once more with the prisoner in Cell Two, he knew unless she saw the evidence herself, she would never understand the seriousness of the situation.

"All I ask is that you allow me to show you what is at stake here. It pains me that he is aware of your presence here and is demanding to see you. I cannot guess the reason for this since he has never asked to see anyone before. As far as I know, he has not spoken in over fifty years. Perhaps fate has made this decision for the both of us."

"Who are you talking about?" she asked.

"His name is Tariq but I doubt that has meaning to you," Ryden replied. "He has been a prisoner on Riezell Nine for decades."

Knowing she would not gain access to her brothers until she appeased The Burgon, Davan agreed to accompany him. She half-listened to him explaining that what she was going to see would frighten her. She began to steel herself against whatever horrifying condition she would view the prisoner. No doubt driven to madness from his lengthy internment and most likely still being tortured despite The Burgon's assurance that no such thing happened on Riezell Nine, the poor man would need to be handled carefully. Digging her nails into her palms, she made a vow she would not let her horror show and would listen carefully to whatever the unfortunate wretch had to say.

"How could he know I'm here?" she asked as they took the elevator to the lower level. "How does he even know who I am?"

A muscle worked in Ryden's jaw. "That much I can answer. The skink went to see him," he growled. "I have no doubt he plucked from that jackass' mind everything the Saurian knows. Since the djinn is in constant communication with the other prisoners, he would have readily made the connection between you and the men incarcerated here."

"You call him the djinn," she said. "What does that mean?"

"We call him djinn for lack of a better description. No one truly knows what he is. When he was captured, the ones who found him had no other words to describe him. In Aduaidh culture, a djinn is a being cast from the smoke of a fiery wind. He is able to disappear, making himself invisible, and to change his natural shape into that of any object—animate or inanimate—at will. Most often a djinn is pictured as half-man, half-goat but there are paintings in the Temples on Aduaidh Prime of such spirits in wolf form."

"You expect me to believe he can make himself invisible?" she scoffed.

"Why not?" he countered. "I am told Deathwielders can, so therefore, your own husband has the ability."

Davan pursed her lips. "Legend isn't reality as Cair once pointed out to me."

"That may be true. All I can tell you is what I, myself, witnessed. Before I went down to take a look at him for myself, I had read all the information regarding him—at least all the data the scientists had been able to learn from him before he stopped cooperating with them. I knew his name was Tariq and that he was descended from a vanished ancient people. I viewed vid-tapes of him changing into animal form but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw in Cell Two that afternoon."

"You saw him change into what? A goat?" she snorted.

"A wolf," Ryden answered. "But that was many years before when they were testing him. By the time I saw him, he had ceased changing and was as you will see him today."

"Tortured into lunacy, no doubt," Davan said.

The Burgon held his tongue for the elevator had stopped and the doors opening. He indicated Davan was to precede him.

"He is the only prisoner on this tier," he explained. "The scientists thought they if they isolated him, he could not communicate with the others but they miscalculated. He converses with them whenever the mood strikes him I'm told, though that is less and less as the years pass."

Davan stared down a long, dimly lit corridor. Closed doors to either side of the corridor looked thick and impregnable. The atmosphere was forbidding, claustrophobic.

"There has never been an escape from the facility although Tariq once managed to get to the surface before being retaken. That was the only time he was ever allowed to break free."

"So you've kept him in solitary confinement for years," she said, glaring up at him. "And you don't consider that torture?"

Ryden's face turned red beneath her angry scrutiny but he did not answer. He turned to his left and started down the shadowy corridor.

"Must you keep him in the dark as well as alone?" she challenged.

"He doesn't like the light," The Burgon said. "We keep it this way for his comfort. He has the ability to raise the light level if he desires. He reads a book a day, I'm told."

"What else is there for him *to* do?" she snapped.

A muscle worked in Ryden's jaw. He was unaccustomed to a woman questioning him and in so insulting a tone. Disrespect was not something he had ever experienced – even as a newly commissioned ensign – for he came from a powerful, influential family.

"If you were one of my wives," he said through clenched teeth, "I'd take you over my knee for speaking to me in such a discourteous manner."

"Well, that's the difference between a woman who knows her worth and a woman who is willing to share her man with a dozen other females," Davan stated.

"I have only two wives!" he told her, his eyes narrowed.

"And how many concubines?" she asked.

There was a brighter shaft of light pouring from beyond the last doorway on the left. They were within a yard or so from what must be the djinn's cell.

"We'll continue this discussion later," Ryden mumbled.

"You don't keep the door to his cell closed?"

Ryden stopped and snaked out a hand to grab Davan's upper arm. "We do not torture the man, wench. Neither do we keep him enclosed any more than is necessary. Even though the outer door is open, the bars were removed and a fifteen-inch thick plexigon shield installed to seal the doorway. His cell was extended to encompass four cells so he has more than ample room to walk about, exercise and do whatever else he likes."

She shrugged off his hold. "Except see the sun and interact with those around him," she complained.

Grinding his teeth, The Burgon growled under his breath and did an about-face, marching to where the light spilled out into the dim corridor.

Davan saw her escort falter as he faced whatever was in the cell. He stood there with his hands thrust into the pockets of his uniform trousers, his shoulder hunched and his posture defensive. Whatever he was looking at was taking its toll on the warrior for she saw a shudder ripple through his tall frame. Girding herself for what she would see, she walked slowly toward the light.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I am Captain Cairnan Ghrian!" Cair shouted at the expressionless face of the commander of the ship that had slid into position in front of the *Saoirse*, the warcruiser's pulse cannons locked on the smaller ship. "I—"

"We know who you are, Your Grace," the Aduaidh commander of the *Clepsydra* announced. "We were told to watch for you and to escort you safely to Riezell Nine."

Dread traveled down Cair's spine but he refused to allow the man staring back at him to see it. "Why not Utuk Xul? Or Aduaidh Prime?"

The commander smiled nastily. "Because your lady is on Riezell Nine but if you would prefer we take you to Utuk Xul, I will seek The Burgon's permission. It is he who awaits you at the research facility."

Dread became fear at learning Davan was at the infamous facility on Riezell Nine. Fear became something more upon hearing The Burgon was there, as well.

"Is my lady safe?" Cair blurted out, wanting to kick himself for his weakness.

"I assure you she is," the commander said. "Captain Avatás did not have permission to abduct your lady and The Burgon is most displeased with him. The Saurian did not touch Her Grace."

"Is Avatás on Riezell Nine?"

"I am told he is under house arrest. I am sure The Burgon will allow you to handle the Saurian as you see fit."

"I want his scaly head adorning the wall of my outhouse!" Cair snarled.

"Well, then, what's it to be, Your Grace?" There was a begrudgingly note of respect in the voice of the *Clepsydra's* commander.

"I'll relinquish control of my ship if—"

"There is no need. His Excellency prefers you come to him of your own free will and not as our prisoner. We will follow you to the planet to make sure you are well-protected. I am having my navigational officer send you the coordinates to the facility as we speak. You may proceed at your discretion, Your Grace."

The *Clepsydra* reversed its engines so Cair could move past the deadly warcruiser.

Feeling unease settling on his shoulders, the Amhantarean prince glanced down at the readout of coordinates flashing across the computer screen. Although he knew where Riezell Nine was in the Aduaidh Quadrant, he would never have gotten within its gravitational pull without the proper coordinates leading him to the planet's entry lanes. Heat-seeking mines disguised as asteroids ringed the high-security planet to keep away unwanted visitors. Typing in the coordinates, he was aware of a bead of sweat trickling down the side of his face. With the huge warcruiser right behind him—pulse cannons still primed—he was as uneasy as he could ever remember being.

"I'm coming, Davan," he whispered. "At least Bakari doesn't make war on women. He'll let you go once I turn myself over to him."

It was the fear of the unknown after Davan was freed that dried the moisture from Cair's mouth and sent it to his palms. That he could take B'reith Avatás was a foregone conclusion. No other warrior – save another Deathwielder like himself – could take Cair in combat. The upcoming battle between them held no concern for the Amhantarean prince. What made his balls tighten was being locked up in the facility on Riezell Nine for the remainder of his life and being experimented on in the vile ways about which he had heard whispered.



## Chapter Fifteen

Davan slowed approached The Burgon, never taking her eyes from the expression on his face. He was staring into the cell—his forehead creased, his lips slightly parted. As she came up beside him, he tore his eyes from the prisoner and looked down at her.

"I wish you didn't have to see this," he said so quietly she had to strain to make out what he was saying.

She held The Burgon's gaze for a long moment then slowly turned her head toward the cell, blinking in slow motion as she did.

Ryden watched the woman's eyes flare as she took in the sight that awaited her. Her mouth dropped open and she wavered, causing him to reach out to take hold of her arm lest she collapse. He heard a slight groan of horror or pity or pure shock. He didn't know which. He could feel her trembling beneath his hand and slipped his arm around her shoulders in an effort to reassure her.

The prisoner in the cell had not moved from his bunk. He sat on the edge with his clasped hands hanging between his spread knees, his head lowered so his face was hidden from view. His massive shoulders were hunched forward, straining the fabric of the black jumpsuit he wore. When he lifted his head and looked at Davan, the young woman whimpered.

"I knew I shouldn't have allowed this," Ryden said and would have drawn her back down the hall but she jerked away from him. Though she was trembling violently, she took a step toward the plexiglass shield.

*"Leave us, Bakari."*

The silent command shot through Ryden's head so loudly and so painfully, he slammed his hands against his ears and staggered back. He nearly passed out from the pain and sagged against the far wall, horror washing over his face.

*"Do it now!"*

There was no denying the imperious order and The Burgon moved as though in a trance, unable to keep from doing so. He stumbled back down the long corridor and stopped at the elevator as though an unseen hand had reached out to block him. He slid down the wall and sat beside the elevator, fear turning his insides to jelly.

Davan felt tears stinging her eyes as she looked at the prisoner. Her heart was aching yet she was terrified at what she was seeing. Though she tried to tear her gaze from him, she could not. It felt as though he were keeping her right where she was and not allowing her turn away.

*I have not always been as you see me now,* he said to her and the softness of his voice in her mind surprised her. She had not heard his commands to The Burgon and was stunned she could hear him speaking even though his lips did not move.

*I was once a man like he who brought you to me.*

Davan tried twice before she could find her voice. "Can't you change the way you look?" she asked.

There was a faint undulation of laughter through Davan's mind. *Not without the proper medications I cannot,* he told her. *Get me what the Aduaidh call tenerse and I will revert to the man I once was.*

"Tenerse?" Davan questioned and took another step closer to the shield. "Were you addicted to that drug?"

He shook his head, tossing the wild mane that covered him from jowl to shoulders away from the black leather of his muzzle. *Not addicted as you know the term, Pretty One,* he said.

His hands were huge—tipped with thick, yellowed claws—and covered with a dense matting of dark brown fur. Likewise, his bare feet were misshapen, ending with sharp claws that clicked on the stone floor as he stood.

Davan drew in a breath for he had to be at least seven feet tall as he straightened to his full height. His shoulders were broad, his hips lean and his legs shorter than his trunk. As he walked slowly toward the plexigon shield, he kept his paw-like hands at his sides but when he reached the shield, he placed one leathery palm upon the panel.

*Help me, Pretty One,* he asked and in his voice was the pleading of a man who had suffered greatly and still was.

Staring into eyes that glowed with deep crimson color, into a face that was nightmarish and filled with danger, Davan could not keep from laying her palm over his on her side of the shield. Her hand was dwarfed by the immensity of his.

"What can I do?" she asked as warmth flowed through the shield from his palm to hers.

"Once, I had a lady as pretty as you," he said and his voice was no longer in her mind. His voice was even softer, more sensuous than it had been as it wound its way through her subconscious. "Her name was Bahiya. In my language that means beautiful and she was my mate." He hung his great shaggy head. "When they took me from her, they took my life."

"The Aduaidh took you?" she asked.

He nodded and his fingers flexed on the shield over hers. "They landed on my world, thinking it to make it theirs," he said. "They did not expect to find beings such as I."

"What are you?" she asked.

He smiled at the great leathery lips pulled back from sharp fangs that glistened. "That I will not tell you, Pretty One. That is my secret and I will take it to my grave."

Remembering The Burgon had told her the prisoner had been there over fifty years, she asked him how old he was.

He shrugged. "Time means nothing to my race. For every year you age, Pretty One, I will age less than an hour. Fifty years in your time is only a couple of days in mine as far as age goes."

"But you feel our time," she said gently.

"All too well," he whispered.

Davan glanced down the corridor and saw The Burgon sitting on the floor, his back to the wall. "Did you make him leave us?"

"I have some persuasive powers now and again," the prisoner answered.

"Could you not make them set you free?"

"Where would I go? I was unconscious when they brought me to this vile place. I do not even know how to return to my home world."

Davan's heart went out to him. She was trying to remember the name The Burgon had called him but could not.

"Tariq," he said. "I am called Tariq."

"I am Davan," she said.

"So your brothers have told me," he said. "They speak often of you and your little sister Eadan."

"Are they all right?" she asked, her fingers flexing over his.

"Lorcan is in Transition and will not see you until his cycle is ended. Roman just completed his and is most anxious to see you."

Davan frowned. "Transition? I don't understand."

Tariq placed his other hand on the shield and pressed his forehead against it as well. "They have made your brothers like me, Davan," he said and she could hear the apology in his voice.

Davan backed away from the shield, horror turning her green eyes dark and her face pale. "No," she said, shaking her head. "That can't be. That can't be!"

"That is what they did on Riezell Nine," Tariq said softly. "They turned prisoners into warriors like me until Ryden Bakari ordered them to stop."

Tears were flowing down Davan's cheeks. "But why?" she whimpered. "Why would they do that?"

He straightened up and looked down at her with what she thought might be pride. "I am a warrior invincible," he boasted. "They tried but they could not kill me." He held up his arm. "They cut me and in the blink of an eye, the wound healed. They burned me and my flesh souged away and grew again before their very eyes. No matter what they did to me, I healed. Though they tried to kill me, they found they could not."

"And in the doing they tortured you," she said. "As they tortured my brothers?"

Tariq shook his head. "No, Davan. There was no need for them to torture your kin. All they needed to do was give them a part of me. Now, they are more like my race than yours. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"The Aduaidh were making warriors like you," she sobbed. "To use against the Coalition."

"Aye, but making and controlling are two different matters, are they not?" he said with a bitter laugh that made his leathery nose crinkle and his lips pull away from wicked fangs.

"They could not control them?" she asked.

Tariq slapped his hand against his chest. "I control them, Davan. When the Aduaidh attempted to take them from their cells and load them onto transports readying for the war, I ordered my men to revolt. They did much damage before the Aduaidh realized they had created monsters instead of obedient, indestructible warriors for the Alliance!"

"And could not kill them as they could not kill you," she whispered.

"Oh, they tried, but did not succeed. Riezell Nine became a warehouse for beings like me and seeing no good would come of making more intractable warriors The Burgon ordered all such experiments stopped. For that, I will give Ryden Bakari his due."

"My brothers are immortal?" she asked.

"Well, nearly so," Tariq agreed. "When it is their time—and only they can make the decision when they will wish to leave this life—they have the means at hand to end it."

"The Aduaidh doesn't know?"

"Nor will they," Tariq said. "I gave my men that knowledge and it is buried deep within their subconscious mind. Only when they have tired of living will it come to the surface. Nothing—not even the most brutal torture—will set that knowledge free before its time."

"Though they tried to get at that information with you?" she asked.

"Brutally and with great determination, Pretty One," he said then shrugged. "But my race is stubborn if nothing else. They learned nothing could make me reveal what I did not wish to reveal."

"If we can find a way to return you—" she began but he was shaking his head. "You don't want to return to your world?"

"With every fiber of my being I wish to return to Theristes but the ship that brought me to this hellish place crashed as it attempted to land. All record of where they had gone, what they found there, was destroyed. Only I survived the fiery crash, walking away from it with sixty percent of my flesh seared from my bones. As far as the scientists here believed, I was part of the crew. They gave me copious amounts of tenses to still the agony burning my nerve endings—never knowing the drug they gave to lessen my pain helped my parasite to heal me."

Davan flinched. "Parasite?"

Tariq put his hand to the area over his right kidney. "Here, within me, is a nest of creatures to which I am the host. They make me what I am in exchange for living off the blood that I must consume in order to thrive."

"Blood?" Davan gasped, her eyes wide.

"It is a tradeoff my race thought nothing of. It is no worse than mistletoe growing on an oak, but unlike mistletoe that damages the oak, our parasite enhances its host."

"I don't understand."

"The male members of my race are born with a single parasite imbedded in the kidneys of their hosts. The parasite extracts nourishment from the blood we consume. The parasite is called an obligate and can only thrive in living tissue. It is also asexual. The mother cell—or the Queen as we call her—gives birth to numerous daughter cells or nestlings and the hive will live off the host body for as long as that host body lives."

"The females don't have the parasite?"

"There are no females of my race ever born. The parasite will not allow it. When we seek mates, we go to other races on our world who are willing to join with us. Females of those other races can be given a parasite but she cannot be born with one inside her nor will she ever give birth to a female child, only males. Females are considered unimportant to the parasite and I've often thought the parasite is jealous of the female a warrior takes as his mate."

"Oh," Davan said on a long breath. "I think I see where this is going. The parasite enhances you as a warrior by giving you the ability to heal quickly, live long lives and be powerful warriors but it would not give that ability to a female that it must think is inferior."

Tariq smiled. "Precisely."

"And this is what the Aduaidh did to my brothers?" she asked. "They gave them a parasite from you?"

"I will not lie to you, Davan," he said. "It was a painful process they underwent but neither of them has regretted it. The first time Roman Transitioned, I experienced it through his mind and he reveled in the shape shifting. Lorcan?" He shrugged. "Lorcan still has a bit of a problem with it but I have told him it can be controlled better if we were given the chance and were free to live as we want."

"And drinking the blood?" she said, swallowing convulsively at the thought.

"They don't seem to mind. At least they have never complained to me of it."

"What can I do, Tariq?" she asked. "How can I help to set you free?"

The man who looked more wolf than human came very close to the shield. "The Aduaidh learned long ago that if they withheld the tenses or only gave it to us sparingly, they could control how often we Transition. The tenses regulates our cycles and if we are given daily doses of it, we will only Transition during that cycle—roughly once every four months unless we make ourselves shift."

"You can do that at will?"

"I can and so can your brothers. Anger will bring on Transition very quickly so I have taught them all to be very careful of their tempers."

"But if you aren't given the tenerse—"

Tariq swept a hand down his tall frame. "This happens. I am frozen in Transition and have been for over forty years."

"If I could get you tenerse, how much would you need to revert to human form?"

"No less than five hundred milligrams," he replied. "More if you can lay hands to. The more I can take, the faster it will work."

Davan glanced back at The Burgon. "Why haven't you used your powers to make one of the men here get you what you need?"

"What good would it have done me, Davan?" he asked. "I ask you again—where would I have gone? Simply being free on this world is not the answer. My men and I need to be free beyond these prison walls. They need their families. They need mates."

"And you need a mate," she said.

"There will never be another for me. My race mates only once and Bahiya was mine."

Deep sorrow filled Davan and she watched as tears formed in Tariq's red eyes. She saw his muzzle quiver before he looked down at the floor.

"I am sorry, Tariq, but our family will become yours."

He looked up, locked his mournful gaze with her pitying one and nodded. "I will hold you to that, Pretty One," he said softly.

"Tell me what I need to do," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Burgon was strangely quiet as he rode beside Davan in the elevator. He was withdrawn and kept plowing his hand through his hair. When the cage settled at the floor on which the meeting room sat, he said nothing to Davan, seemingly expecting her to follow him.

Once they were in the room, he shut the door then pointed at the table. "Sit down, wench," he ordered.

Davan bristled but she made no comment to the word she so hateful. She dutifully took a seat then waited for him to join her. Instead, he strode to the window and began to pace back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back.

"I am sick of this damnable war," he said. "We have lost millions over the last thirty years and a whole generation of our young is being slaughtered at this very moment. I am weary of the fighting and I am more than ready to put an end to it."

Davan remained quiet. She simply watched him traversing back and forth.

"I loathed what the skink did in abducting you but I can see an advantage in having you here. It has brought Cair Ghrian to Riezell Nine and—the gods willing—to this very table where we can begin discussing peace."

"Cair is here?" she asked, her heart jumping.

"His ship docked while you were deep in conversation with the djinn," The Burgon snapped. "Did you not notice Drae speaking to me or were you too deeply involved in making plans to free that monster?"

"He is not a monster," she said.

Ryden waved a hand. "I know that!"

"Then don't call him one!" she threw back at him.

The Burgon turned and stalked to the table. He leaned over her. "Woman, stop irritating me like that or I swear, I will turn your shapely ass over my knee and wallop you until your ass is as red as Tariq's eyes!"

"You try it if you think you can," she warned, "but I'll fight you every inch of the way!"

They glared at one another—pale green eyes snapping fire and blue eyes blazing with fury.

"One condition to peace I will demand of Cair Ghrian is that he chastise you for your lack of respect for those above you, wench," Ryden growled. "And I will demand he allow me to be there when he punishes you!"

Before Davan could respond to The Burgon's heated words, there was a knock at the door.

"What?" Ryden yelled.

Drae opened the door. "His Grace Prince Cair, Your Excellency," he announced and stepped aside.

Davan shot up from the table, her chair crashing to the floor as she spun around. She broke into a wide grin as soon as she saw her husband coming through the door and ran to him, pressing tightly into his arms.

Cair enclosed his lady in a strong embrace then pushed her away from him, sweeping his eyes over her quickly. "Are you all right?" he asked, his face worried.

"One more minute of delay on your part in getting here and she wouldn't have been," The Burgon complained.

"Don't listen to him," Davan said. "He's all bark and no bite."

Cair's eyes snapped to The Burgon. Such talk was dangerous and the insult was one that could cost Davan a lifetime spent in prison at the very least.

"Forgive her, Your Excellency," he said. "It is only her fear that makes her forget herself."

The Burgon snorted. "Fear my rosy red ass," he complained. "If that woman knows fear, it is only for your safety, Ghrian. You'd do well to get her in hand before she causes you real trouble one day."

Cair looked down at Davan. "What did you do?" he whispered.

"Drae!" The Burgon called out. "Take the Princess Davan back to her room while the prince and I talk. And don't let her anywhere near a med-tray!"

Davan pulled out of Cair's arms, content he was all in one piece, and stomped over to The Burgon. "You are not going to leave that man in that condition! I demand you —"

"Davan!" Cair gasped.

"You go to your room and your husband and I will discuss the prisoner," Ryden growled, his hands clenching and unclenching at his side. "Leave the negotiations to the men!"

"And I want to see my brothers!" she threw at him. "You said I could and I am holding you to it!" She took a step closer to him and lowered her voice so her husband could not hear. "And I want to see Liam Ghrian, as well!"

"Get out!" The Burgon ordered, pointing a finger at the door.

"Davan, please," Cair said, terrified his wife would suffer for her temper. "Let me handle this." He took her by the shoulders and pushed her toward the door and the laughing man who stood there.

"She's a handful, Your Grace," Drae said, snagging her arm and pulling her out into the corridor.

"Make him let you see Tariq!" Davan yelled as the door began to close. "Don't agree to anything until you do!"

"Tariq?" Cair questioned. He craned his neck to see around the edge of the door as it closed. "Who is Tariq?"

"You'd best get that woman under control," Ryden grumbled. "You'll not have a peaceful day ever again if you don't lay the law down to her at the start."

Cair turned to face The Burgon. "That is assuming I will have a future with her," he said.

"You are not a prisoner here, Ghrian, and neither is your woman. When you leave —" He stopped. "What kind of ship did you arrive in?"

Cair blinked. "My personal craft. A dragon-class —"

"Won't do," Ryden stated. "I'll have to send your ass home in one of my ships. I want the lot of you gone before I leave for Aduaidh Prime."

"The lot of us?" Cair questioned. "How many are you talking about?"

The Burgon sighed. "There are fifty-nine prisoners here along with you and your lady. I want all of you gone. Where you take them is your affair." He pointed to the chair Davan had overturned. "Sit down and we'll discuss it."

Cair righted the chair and sat down. "You are closing the facilities here?"



"If you and I can come to an understanding regarding the peace negotiations," Ryden replied.

Stunned, Cair flopped back in the chair. "I wasn't aware that was why I was brought here."

Sighing heavily, The Burgon dragged his hand through his hair. "I had no hand in the abduction of your lady," he said. "The skink did that and he will pay for it either by my sword or yours. Take your choice."

"I demand the satisfaction," Cair said through clenched teeth.

Ryden waved a hand. "Be my guest. He's been nothing but trouble since the day my uncle commissioned his scaly prick." He took a seat at the head of the table. "He is the reason your mistress has crossed over to the Other Side."

Cair winced but he had suspected Amethyst would die at the hands of the Saurian. He had feared Davan would meet the same fate but reason had told him The Burgon would have a hand in seeing that did not happen.

"Thank you for keeping her safe for me," Cair said.

"Not sure I did you a good turn," Ryden said then laughed. "She's a handful I'm glad it isn't my responsibility to handle."

A wavering smile pulled at Cair's lips. "Never put raw eggs in front of her door," he said.

The Burgon gave his guest an odd look. "I was going to ask what that meant but I don't think I want to know," he said.

"Who is this Tariq?" Cair said.

"Perhaps you should see for yourself and then we'll get down to the business of trying to put an end to this hellish war," Ryden suggested.

## Chapter Sixteen

B'reith Avatás pulled the dagger from the back of the guard and let the dead man slip quietly to the floor. He took his hand from the man's mouth then dragged him into a closet to hide his body. Swiping his forked tongue over his lips, he took the handheld Vid-Com from the dead man and entered a private code that would open a channel to his second-in-command on board the *Kady*.

Lieutenant Abdul-Aziz answered right away. "You are free, my Captain?"

Avatás hissed at the ridiculous question. "Where is the woman?"

"She has been escorted to her room," the lieutenant replied. "The prince has arrived and is in with The Burgon."

"Must I drag every iota of information from your feeble brain?" Avatás sneered. "Where is her room?"

"Two levels up from where you were being held, my Captain. Hers is the third door to your left."

"Guards?"

"She is alone though locked in. Do you wish for me to override the locking mechanism?"

"If that isn't too much trouble for you," Avatás ground out.

"No trouble, my Captain. Once you are inside, I will lock on to the two of you and—"

"Only I will be leaving this disgusting place," the Saurian snapped then ended the communication and pocketed the handheld. He was cautious as he made his way down the corridor, the dagger clutched tightly in his hand.

Taking the elevator to Davan's floor, he stared at the floor for he did not want the security cameras to record his face. The dagger, he kept hidden behind his back, refusing to relinquish his grip on the weapon. When the cage settled and the doors opened, he stepped out, carefully observing the corridor in both directions before turning and heading toward Davan's door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cair stared into the eyes of the prisoner in Cell Two and felt as though he was falling beneath layer upon layer of unreality. Although Deathwielders could work

magic, shape shifting was not one of their abilities. To actually see a man who could change his shape at will made him uneasy.

"Those who brought him back had no idea just what they had," The Burgon explained. "All they knew was that they had hammered him with a pulse rifle and he got back up and charged them again. They thought our scientists would want to study a specimen such as this one."

"In order to make indestructible warriors," Cair said, grasping the implications immediately. "How many like him did they capture?"

"Just him. He was with his mate when they took him. She managed to escape else they would have taken her, as well."

The red eyes fused with his lost a bit of their steadiness at the mention of a female. Cair watched deep sorrow enter the crimson globes.

Within the space of a few seconds, images flowed swiftly through Cair's mind and he stood mesmerized – time stilled. He knew he was watching the scene unfold through the eyes of the man behind the plexigon shield...

She was lovely with long silvery gray hair that swept the ground as she ran. She was laughing, looking back at Tariq, her bright red lips slick and shiny, and her stark white teeth gleaming behind those blood-red lips. Completely naked, her lush breasts jiggled as she ran. Long, shapely legs bunched with sleek muscles as she moved and her bare feet looked strong as she carefully picked her way over rock and fallen tree limbs.

"Can you not run any faster, Tariq?" she challenged the one chasing her.

A huge tree loomed ahead and she darted around it, her hands pressed against the bark as she kept it between her and the one intent on capturing her. She scurried from side to side around the wide trunk, bending away from the hand thrusting out to grab her and laughing harder with each attempt that failed. The sound of leaves crunching beneath their feet seemed to add to the playfulness of the scene.

"Some warrior you are, Tariq!" she taunted then took off running again, her long hair streaming behind her, giggles floating in her wake.

She ran on ahead, disappearing down a slight embankment, her arms lifted high as she tried to keep her balance, and the viewer turned, skirting the trees ahead of him in what must be a shortcut.

A powerfully muscled arm snaked out and caught the woman around her small waist as she darted by. Her laughter was infectious as she squirmed in an attempt to break free. She was turned around and brought up solidly against a chest thickly pelted with hair, her glorious breasts flattening as her captor held her closed.

"For shame, Tariq," she complained.

There was a low, throaty growl but the woman remained close to the viewer.

One moment the beautiful woman was standing and the next she was stretched out on the leaf-laden ground, her arms pinned beside her head, her lustrous hair billowing around her.

She had a remarkably lovely face with high cheekbones and a pert little nose that was too sassy by far. Obsidian eyes, pearly teeth, a complexion like sun-kissed ivory, lips stained with a bright red glossiness, which drew the eye and the mouth of the viewer.

Looking through the eyes of the man whose hands moved down slender arms to mold themselves around sweet, high breasts that completely filled the palms to overflowing, the woman's complexion was flawless, her beauty breathtaking. Her hair smelled of lemons and her flesh of jasmine as her captor nuzzled her neck and moved down to catch one dark nipple in his teeth.

"You should be attending the council, you pervert," she whispered, her hands free to bury them in thick dark hair.

Her body was a paradise of warmth and tight velvety sheathing as she was taken there on the ground. Long legs wrapped around her captor's hips and she arched up into his thrusts with force of her own.

The sound of their lovemaking was sensuality in its own right for her moans of pleasure matched his grunts of possession and harmonized finally into groans of satiation that silenced the forest creatures around them.

"I love you," her captor vowed. "With all my being."

"You are my life," she replied. "There will never be another."

Abruptly the scene changed and the sound of curses and scuffling and wild howls of desperation rent the air. The scene shifted back and forth, back and forth as the viewer struggled to break free of those who held him.

Then there was darkness. A darkness so complete, so cold and devoid of hope it felt as though a million tons of granite had been piled upon the viewer's shoulder. The agonized howl that came from his throat was inhuman.

Cair felt the sorrow that dwelled in the prisoner and though the scenes he'd been shown had lasted only a few seconds, he could sense the lifetime of grief that had built up to scar the man in Cell Two.

"We need to take this man back to his world," Cair stated.

"What world is that?" The Burgon asked. "And exactly where is it located? The ship crashed and the flight recorder was never found. We have no idea where the *Hespra* went. All we are certain of is that the ship came from the Green Sector of the Aduaidh Quadrant but that covers a lot of territory. If he knows where his home world is—and how to get there—he hasn't said."

"He may think you would send men to capture more of his race," Cair suggested. "He believes he is protecting his kind."

"One of his kind is one too many," The Burgon mumbled. "From him, from what is inside him, we have made nearly sixty warriors. Sixty such warriors are akin to having six hundred warriors like you and I."

Cair reached out to press his palm against the shield as his lady had. He was not surprised with the prisoner placed his hand to the plexigon, as well.

"I will do all I can to reunite you with your lady," the Amhantarean prince vowed. "This I swear, Tariq."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," The Burgon advised.

"After you and I have done what we can to start the peace process, I'll take him and my lady and we will go looking for Tariq's world," Cair stated.

"Your people might have something to say about that." Ryden arched a brow. "From what I know of her, your mother will have something to say about it. She will not allow the King of Amhantar to risk his life on such an adventure as you intend."

"Until she dies, she is still Queen of Amhantar. I won't be forced to take the scepter until then."

"Do you think that will make a difference to her?" The Burgon demanded. "Does she not rule your life?"

"She tries," Cair snapped.

"She does more than try, my friend," Ryden Bakari disagreed. "She pulls the strings and you dance her merry tune, do you not?"

"I never asked to be king," Cair told him. "I don't want the damned title or the responsibility!"

"One of you has to take the position," the Burgon reminded him. "Your people will demand it."

*Ask him about your little brother, warrior.*

Cair flinched, hearing the strangely accented voice in his head. Though Tariq's lips had not moved, Cair had heard him clearly. *Liam?* he questioned silently. *He's alive?*

*He is,* Tariq replied.

Astonishment flashed across Cair's face and he spun around then reached out to grab The Burgon by the front of his shirt. "Is my brother in this evil place?"

Ryden pulled free of Cair's grip and with his eyes sparking dark fire warned the other man to never lay hands on him again. "I could have you beheaded!"

"Where is he?" Cair snarled. "Where is my brother?"

"He is safe, warrior, and at this moment awaiting your visit, but we have other things that need to—" The Burgon began but Cair cut him off.

"I want to see my brother!"

Ryden touched the Vid-Com link on the shoulder of his uniform and when Drae answered, he ordered his personal guard to bring Liam Ghrian to the meeting room.

"Satisfied?" he barked at Cair.

"When Liam is standing before me and I'm assured you haven't turned him into—" He stopped, his eyes wide. Fury shot across his face.

"He likes being one of my kind," Tariq said, forgetting to send the words mentally in his hurry to reassure Cair.

The Burgon stepped back, hearing the voice of the prisoner. His hand went to the dagger at his side in case the Amhantarean prince decided to engage him in battle.

"Liam believes the changes in him will be of benefit to your people," Tariq stated.

Cair's lips peeled back from his teeth and he would have leapt at Ryden Bakari but at that moment a piercing klaxon began to sound, making all three warriors cover their ears against the deafening sound. "What's happening?" Cair yelled.

"Security has been breached," the Burgon replied. "One of the prisoners has gotten outside!"

Tariq heard the reply and began shaking his head. "Not one of mine."

"Avatás!" The Burgon snarled and almost immediately the Vid-Com pinned to his shoulder trilled. He reached up to tap it. "Where is he?"

"Scurrying across the dunes, Your Excellency. We cut off his escape to his ship and his crew is under arrest. We were already suspicious of them for the *Kady's* 2-I-C had the ship on line and ready to depart," Drae reported.

"Where are you now?"

"On my way to you with the Amhantar prince."

"We'll never find the skink out in all that sand," The Burgon said. "He'll burrow under it until hell freezes over. Don't even bother sending a search party during the storm."

Tariq let out a roar that made Cair and the Burgon jump. When they turned to look at him, they found him pressed against the plexigon, his balled fists slamming at the shield, his eyes wild. "Bring her to me!" he yelled and the shield shook beneath his fury. "Now! Before it is too late!"

"Davan?" Cair whispered.

"The bastard stabbed her!" Tariq shouted. "She's dying!"

## Chapter Seventeen

Cair's hands were trembling as he reached out to touch his lady. She was as pale as parchment and the front of her gown was soaked with blood. Barely breathing, her eyes were closed and dark circles were already forming beneath the sweep of her lashes.

"Please," Cair said, his voice breaking. "Don't let my lady die."

Dr. Gruber said nothing as he tried desperately to staunch the flow of blood from the gaping wound in Davan's abdomen. Though he was a skilled surgeon as well as a top-notch research scientist, he feared he was beyond his depth and there was but one procedure that could conceivably save the young woman's life. He looked up at The Burgon.

"Your Excellency, I see no way past this. We must let him help us," Dr. Gruber said.

"No," Cair stated, shaking his head. "I'll not let you turn her over to that *thing*!"

Prince Liam Ghrian laid a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder. "Then say goodbye to her, Cair, for that is the only way you will save her."

His eyes wild, his face strained and nearly as pale as his wife's, Cair stubbornly shook his head again. "I'll not let them turn her into a monster!"

Liam hunkered down beside his brother. "Look at me, Cair," he pressed. "Do I look any different than when last you saw me?"

"Your Grace, we have little time," Dr. Gruber insisted. "She will bleed out while you sit there and watch."

"He said you change into a being like him!" Cair countered.

"Aye, that I do, but that is the only difference between the dying man I was when my ship went down and the man you see before you right now," Liam said. "It was a small price to pay to have survived the crash."

From deep within the confines of the research facility on Riezell Nine, the bellow of Tariq reverberated through the corridors. The pounding of his fists against the plexigon was a savage sound as he bellowed his appeal to be allowed to save Davan's life.

"Let him help, Cair, before it's too late," Liam begged.

The Burgon turned to Drae and nodded, granting his personal guard permission to fetch the prisoner in Cell Two. Whether or not the Amhantarean prince gave his permission or not, Ryden had no intention of allowing the young woman to die. Turning to his other personal guard and cousin Mazon Be-Rashamon, The Burgon ordered him to bring Roman Shanahan to his sister's side. "Gruber, do what needs to be done," he ordered.

Dr. Gruber exchanged a glance with his emperor then hurried to a locked cabinet from which he withdrew several vials of a lavender-colored liquid and began filling one syringe after another.

Cair looked around at the men gathered over his wife—his youngest brother, The Burgon, two of Gruber’s fellow scientists—and his shoulders slumped. He hung his head, giving in to something he hoped neither he nor Davan would regret.

A thunder of feet came rushing down the corridor toward Davan’s room. The click of thick nails on the stone floor was an eerie sound that made the hair on Cair’s arms stand up. It was one thing to see the prisoner behind the protection of a strong plexigon wall and quite another to see him hurrying into the room, leathery lips pulled back from sharp incisors as he ripped at the upper part of his jumpsuit, shredding it as carelessly as though it was a thin sheet of paper.

“Where is the Siegle?” Tariq asked.

Dr. Gruber hurried forward with the syringes he had filled. He injected first one then the others into the thick neck muscles of the prisoner from the unknown world.

Cair could tell the injections were painful for the agony shifted across Tariq’s face and the tall man shuddered visibly. He called out to Liam. “What did they give him?” he asked.

Liam joined his brother. “Siegle is his word for tenerse,” he said.

“He’s addicted to the drug, then,” Cair stated.

“As am I,” Liam said and at his brother’s look of horror, smiled wanly. “Not in the way you think but without it, I would Transition out of cycle and that I don’t want. The tenerse helps to stabilize the shape shifting. Tariq has been denied it for decades and that is why you see him in the form he is now. In a few moments, you will see a very wondrous sight.”

Tariq asked for a beaker and Gruber hastened to provide one. He also gave Tariq a scalpel, which the warrior used to slice across the palm of his left hand. Closing his hand, he held it over the beaker, which Gruber held then squeezed until a measure of black blood dripped into the receptacle.

“I have never seen black blood,” Cair said in awe. He frowned. “What is he going to do with it?”

Liam didn’t answer for Gruber took the beaker, leaned over Davan and placed the rim of the glass container to the unconscious woman’s lips.

Cair started to protest but Liam tightened his grip on his brother’s shoulders.

“If you can’t watch this, go out into the corridor,” Liam said quietly. “She must have the Sustenance, Cair, and his is pure therefore the most powerful.”

With his teeth clenched, Cair got up and moved away from the gurney on which Davan lay. He gagged as Gruber tilted Davan’s head back, opened her mouth and then poured the Sustenance down her throat, quickly bracing her chin to close her mouth so the liquid would not escape.



Davan coughed, choked, but she swallowed convulsively then lay still again.

"Turn her over," Tariq commanded and the two scientists hastened to do as he bid.

Cair leaned against the far wall—his attention locked on Tariq as that one reached down and tore Davan's gown from neck to waist and pushed it aside.

"Do what you need to," Tariq snarled at Gruber. He was shivering uncontrollably and leaned heavily against the wall, his arms wrapped around his body. His fangs were clicking together and a heavy scent of musk rose in the air as sweat glistened on his hairy face.

Dr. Gruber took a scalpel from one of his assistants and laid it down on Davan's back, over her right kidney, and prepared to make an incision.

Cair started forward, but Liam grabbed him. "It's necessary for the Transference, Cair."

So intent was Cair's gaze on Davan he almost missed the fantastical transformation that was beginning near her. If it had not been for the popping and snapping sounds, he would not have seen Tariq metamorphosing from wolf-like creature to a human male so imposing, so daunting and commanding, he felt weak in comparison.

The thick pelt of dark hair seemed to be drawn down into Tariq's heavily muscled arms—the wiry strands like tentacles retracting into the flesh. The leathery muzzle shortened, the jowls became high cheekbones, the red eyes faded to a strange mixture of gold and crimson—almost orange in color—then settled to a dark honey gold. Hands that once resembled paws reduced and where once the trunk of his body was longer than the legs now broadened and widened and became a powerful torso with hardened pectorals and a deeply striated abdominal without an ounce of fat upon them. From prominent pap to prominent pap, thick chest hair rippled down the lean, muscled frame and dipped below the torn waistband of the jumpsuit.

But it was Tariq's face that held Cair absolutely spellbound. He stared at the striking visage and could not tear his eyes away. Even when Tariq came to stand beside Davan's gurney and offered his smooth bare back to Gruber's blade, Cair could not stop staring at the man's imposing profile.

Dr. Gruber had opened a two-inch incision in Davan's back and now reached out to make a similar incision in Tariq's.

Cair winced for the pain had to be immense yet Tariq made no sound nor did he flinch at the cut. He was staring down at Davan's still face. It wasn't until Gruber thrust two fingers into his wound that Tariq showed any sign of discomfort. His shoulders rolled and he bent forward a bit with a slight grunt as the scientist poked around in the incision.

"What is he doing?" Cair asked his brother.

"Retrieving that," Liam answered quietly.

The thing Gruber removed from Tariq's back was an abomination. It was about six inches in length, its electric green flesh covered in hard, iridescent scales that looked

like warts. The head was triangular in shape and the tip of its tail was forked and covered with sharp crimson spines. Fierce red eyes, elliptical in shape like a viper's, glared at the scientist as it whipped its body back and forth in Gruber's grip, trying to break free. Something thick and milky white dripped from its fangs and Gruber was careful not to let the fluid touch him.

"It's a very caustic acid," Liam explained. "It can burn a whole through titanium."

"What is that thing?" Cair whispered.

"Tariq calls it a Revenant worm. He has a whole hive of the parasites growing inside him in a honeycombed sac attached to his kidney."

Cair's knees gave way beneath him when Gruber dropped the parasite on Davan's back and Liam had to hold him up. He stared in horror as the thing lay there for a moment—whipping to and fro—then its pointed head lifted and its forked tongue shot out to taste the air. Before the Amhantar warrior could scream his denial, the thing wriggled over to the incision on Davan's back and slithered into the opening. Almost immediately, the incision closed, sealing the vile creature inside the young woman's body.

"No," Cair cried, covering his face with his hands. "What have I allowed? What have I *allowed*?"

Davan's eyes popped open and she screamed as the creature began gnawing its way into her kidney, the acid oozing onto the tender flesh inside her, spiny barbs piercing her. She began to writhe on the gurney.

"Leave," Tariq commanded as he went to the gurney.

"I'll not leave my lady!" Cair shouted. He tried to get to his mate but Liam grabbed one of his arms and The Burgon grabbed the other. Between them, they began to manhandle him to the door through which Gruber and the other scientists had already exited.

Struggling fiercely, Cair's head was twisted around as he tried to see what Tariq was doing. He bellowed like a man possessed as he watched the warrior from the unknown world ripping the clothes from Davan.

"She's going to Transition, Cair," Liam said, grunting from the effort of pulling his brother from the room. "Tariq is only making it easier for her by removing the clothing."

Tariq lifted Davan's nude body into his arms then carried her across the room. He knelt down on the floor and cradled her against him, his eyes locked on Cair as the warrior was pulled out into the corridor.

The last thing Cair saw was Tariq holding Davan against his bare chest as the door closed and The Burgon himself bolted it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Liam handed Cair a glass of water to rinse out his mouth. He patted his brother's back, stroked it gently, for Cair had retched so hard, strained so violently, he had torn the blood vessels in his esophagus and streaks of blood showed in the vomitus.

Another prolonged, reverberating scream came from the room in which Davan lay, and Cair shuddered again, bending forward to expel the water from his mouth.

"How much longer?" he asked Liam.

"I think perhaps she's reverting, Cair," his brother told him. "It isn't as painful as the first Transition but it hurts. She'll grow accustomed to it."

Tears filled Cair's eyes. "What have I done, Liam? I should have stopped this!"

"And let her die?" Liam asked quietly.

Cair covered his face with his hands and hung his head, his shoulders shuddering with the force of his weeping. Liam drew his brother against him and smoothed his hand up and down Cair's back, absorbing the wretched sobs that came from the depths of Cair Ghrian.

There were two men standing apart from the others and they, too, were crying. Neither had been introduced to Cair for there hadn't been time. Almost as soon as the door had closed and Ryden had locked it, the god-awful sounds of Transition had silenced and stilled everyone in the corridor. One of the men reached out to touch the other.

"Do you think it will ask the same thing of Davie that it asked of us?" Lorcan asked Roman.

Roman thought back to the words the Revenant worm had whispered to him in the low, sultry croon that had washed through his tortured body –

*"Accept Me, Warrior. Protect Me and I will protect you."*

"I don't know, Lor," Roman replied.

Lorcan wiped at the tears on his cheek then pushed away from the wall upon which he'd been slumped. He walked over to Cair and laid a hand on the warrior's shoulder. When Cair looked up, Lorcan smiled.

"I am Lorcan Shanahan," he introduced himself. "Davie's brother." He put out his hand.

Cair gripped Lorcan's forearm in the time-honored greeting of warriors. "I wish we had met under happier circumstances."

Lorcan shrugged. "I, too." He turned and motioned Roman over. "This is Roman," he said.

Roman greeted Cair in the same way then squatted down in front of him. "You did what you had to in order to save our sister's life. I would have done the same. I am honored to be a..."

"Hush!" Lorcan hissed. "You know you are never to speak the name!"

Roman blushed. "I forgot for a moment."

"Why doesn't he want us to know what he is?" The Burgon asked, eavesdropping on the conversation. "What difference could it possibly make?"

"He has his reasons," Liam answered for them. "Perhaps one day he'll let us tell the worlds what we've become."

Cair ran the sleeve of his shirt under his chin to wipe away his tears. "Do any of you know where it is he came from? Has he ever given you a name of his home world?"

The three warriors looked at one another. "No," Lorcan replied. "All I know is that his world is beyond our universe."

Ryden Bakari, The Burgon of the Aduaidh, was sitting to the other side of Cair. He ran a hand over his face, weariness beginning to set in. "We know the *Hespra*, the ship carrying him, came in from the Green Sector. That is the last spiral band in our galaxy so the *Hespra* might have journeyed to either Réalta Madra or Seabhac. We have no way of knowing which one."

"If we took him back to Seabhac or Réalta Madra, what are the chances he might recognize the starmarks?" Cair questioned.

"Since he was unconscious from the moment they captured him until the ship crashed, I'd say there is no chance whatsoever," Ryden answered. "They kept him in an E.S.U. the entire time."

"Aye, but even in an Extended Sleep Unit, my thought is he would be able to describe what his home galaxy looks like," Cair suggested.

"Not necessarily. I don't think he'd ever been onboard a spacecraft until he was snatched off his planet," Roman observed. "If he wasn't familiar with space travel, I don't expect he would know much about the stars and especially not starmarks."

"You're probably right," Cair said.

Becoming aware of the silence from the room beyond, everyone looked at the locked door. Not a sound was coming from the room and the eerie quiet wore on the nerves of the waiting men.

Inside that room, Davan opened her eyes to find she was wrapped tightly in strong arms that held her cradled gently against a naked chest. Though the side of her face was pressed against the hairy expanse, she knew it was not her husband who held her for the smell was different—the aura surrounding him was not the same. Cautiously, she looked up and her eyes flared wide.

"Welcome back, Pretty One," he said.

The face of the man holding her was so beautifully male, Davan could do nothing more than stare at him with mouth ajar and eyes absorbing the sheer magnificence of the chiseled features and mesmerizing gaze. From the high cheekbones to the absolutely perfect masculine nose to full lips that begged to be kissed to thick, wavy dark brown tresses that haloed his head, the one who held her so protectively in his embrace was almost too handsome to be real. When the slow, lazy smile parted his lips to reveal very

white, even teeth, she thought she might well have died and gone to a very blessed reward.

"You," she said and had to clear her throat and start again. "You clean up real nice, Tariq."

His grin was infectious and he gave her a light squeeze. "After decades of looking like a mangy wolf, I guess that's about as good a compliment as I'm likely to get," he said.

She could not take her eyes from him and wanted nothing more than to reach up to feel the soft waves of his shoulder-length hair. Her palm itched to do just that.

His smile faded. "Is your back hurting still?"

Davan had to think about his question, so taken with his looks that nothing else seemed to matter.

Not even the fact she was lying naked in his arms.

"Back?" she repeated.

"I tried to make the Transition as easy for you as I could, but I know how bad that gnawing, tearing misery can be when the creature sinks its fangs into your kidney."

The pain slithered across her mind and she winced, shifting in his arms. There was a bit of residual pain in her lower back but she felt better than had in years. She felt strong, physically powerful and thirsty beyond measure.

"You will need to take Sustenance once a day," he told her. "And the tenerse. You must never be without the tenerse."

At the mention of the powerful narcotic, a portion of the euphoria she had been experiencing began to evaporate. Memory of what she had undergone came back to hit her squarely between the eyes and she pushed away from him, blushing to the roots of her hair when she remembered she was entirely nude. Her arm went over her breasts and one hand to the juncture of her thighs.

"I haven't been looking," he said but the mischievous glint in his eyes gave lie to his words.

"Pervert," she said and scrambled to her feet, looking around for something with which to cover herself.

Tariq laughed. "My lady used to insult me with that same word."

"Aye, well, you deserve it," she mumbled. Her arm hiding her breasts and her hand covering her crotch, she minced her way over to a tall cabinet, opened it and was relieved to see sickbay pajamas and shirts stacked on a shelf.

Lying on the floor on his hip, his head propped upon his doubled fist, he watched Davan getting dressed. There was a gentle, whimsical smile on his full lips and he sighed when her shapely rear was hidden beneath the cotton of the pajama bottoms.

"I've never understood why you wear clothing on your world," he said. "On Theristes we never wore clothing. We did not need it."

"It's called modesty," she said, her back to him. She could feel his eyes on her and her face was burning as she made quick work of the pajama top. She licked her lips, feeling the thirst growing.

"My woman was modest," he said. "She was also very beautiful and it pleased me to see other men look at her with longing, wishing she belonged to them."

Davan turned around. "Wasn't that too much of a temptation to the other men? Didn't you worry about one getting out of line with her?"

Tariq cocked his head to one side. "And have my fangs buried in his throat before I twisted his head from his body and stuffed it up his ass?" he asked in a conversational tone. "Temptation was not a problem on Theristes, Pretty One."

"I guess not," she muttered. She wiped her hand over her parched lips. "Is this going to be a constant thing?"

"The thirst?" he asked, getting to his feet. As he stood, the remnants of the jumpsuit slid off his hips and down to the midpoint of his thickly muscled thighs.

Davan swallowed hard for the staff hanging between his legs was not only immense in breadth, it dangled halfway down his thigh and ended in a bulbous head that made her knees weak just looking at it.

"Bahiya called it my love knob," he said with a wicked smile. "It barely fit the first time around but practice made it easier." He winked. "We practiced a lot, Bahiya and me."

Blushing to the tips of her breasts, Davan tore her eyes from the enormous cock, but scientific curiosity got the better of her and she asked if all the men of his race were so well-endowed.

"Only what you outworlders call the alpha males," he replied with a touch of braggadocio. "The rest are no different than the men of your world."

"That's the biggest tool..." Davan stopped, her face feeling as though she were leaning close over a fire pit.

"Was I not mated with my beloved Bahiya and you not mated to that puny little warrior man Cairnan, I would show you just how big it can get," he boasted.

The thought of his huge cock getting any bigger made Davan lift the front of the pajama top and fan her sweating chest. "Theristes," she said, wanting desperately to change the subject. "Is that the name of your world?"

"Aye," he said and padded over to her.

Davan turned her back on him. "For the love of the Goddess! Will you please put something on?"

Tariq sighed and reached past her to pluck a set of pajamas from the cabinet. "What if they don't fit, Pretty One?" he asked.

"Make them," she said, moving as far away from him as the room would allow.

The warrior stepped into the pajama bottoms. "I might have to let something hang out."

Grinding her teeth, Davan walked to the door and tried to open it. She grimaced when she found it locked.

"When you Transition," Tariq told her as he came up behind her, "you will need a secure room into which you can be locked. They call it a containment cell here."

Davan flinched. "Why would I need them to lock me in?"

"Because," he said, "you would be a danger to your loved ones otherwise."

Remembering the transformation of her body—the strength, the wildness, the unbelievable conversion from human to she-wolf—Davan leaned her head against the door. "Oh," was all she said.

Tariq took her into his arms and rested his chin atop her head. "You will live a long, fulfilling life, Pretty One. Think of all the things you will learn in that long lifetime. Think of all the people you will be able to help with your healer skills."

Davan turned in his arms and pressed her cheek against his chest. He had left the pajama top unbuttoned and the wiry hairs tickled her skin. She felt protected with this man. The strength of his arms was reassuring.

"I want to find that Saurian bastard who stabbed me," she said.

"He's somewhere out there in the dust storm," Tariq told her. "Finding him will be like looking for a needle in a mound of hay. There is something else to consider."

"And what is that?"

He put his crooked finger under her chin and raised her head so he could look into her eyes. "You need to be careful of your child."

"I don't have a child," she said.

His voice was infinitely soft as he said, "Aye, but you do."

"I think I'd know if I'd had a child, Tariq," she said with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm sure you will once he is born," the warrior replied.

Davan's face paled. "I'm pregnant?" She put a hand to her belly, surprised the brutal pain that had nearly taken her life was completely gone.

"The babe is still seated in your womb," Tariq informed her. "Had it been a female, the parasite might have allowed you to miscarry, but since it is a boy, it healed your torn womb and kept the child safe. Sometimes it amazes me the things the parasite can do."

Davan stepped back and lifted her pajama top. There wasn't a mark on her abdomen even when she pulled the waistband down almost to the spiky curls of her mound. She smoothed her hand over the unblemished area of her belly.

Thirst was making her lightheaded and she staggered, grateful for the support of Tariq's hands. She flinched when he lifted his hand and pounded on the door then pulled her back as the door opened.

Cair was the first into the room. He snatched Davan away from Tariq and held her with trembling arms. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice wavering.

"I'll be fine, warrior, unless you don't stop crushing me," Davan said, barely getting the words past her lips before Cair's mouth was covering hers and kissing her so hard she thought she would smother. She had to gasp when he released her and held her against him as though he'd never let go.

"She'll need Sustenance," Tariq told Dr. Gruber. "And the Siegle."

The head scientist nodded and sent one of his assistants after what was needed.

"I can't go after the Saurian," she said to Cair.

"You let me worry about the skink," Cair stated and looked Tariq in the eye. "Thank you. A thousand times, thank you."

Tariq shrugged. "Before you venture out after the Saurian, I need to have a long talk with you, warrior," he told Cair.

Cair nodded then turned to introduce Davan to his brother Liam.

The Burgon walked over to Tariq. "I have given orders to release those men who have been given the Transference. There are three going through Transition at the moment and another four almost at cycle. Those seven will have to wait to be transported to Amhantar."

"Davan's mate has agreed to take them in?" Tariq asked.

"He understands the dangers involved and will have adequate facilities constructed on one of Amhantar's satellite planets. It has been used mainly as a game preserve but he tells me he was going to stop that practice. It should be a good place for your men."

"They will need mates," Tariq said. "A Re..." He stopped. "Warriors such as we need companionship."

Ryden Bakari coughed. "Well, I'll leave that sort of thing up to you although..." He glanced at Cair and Davan. "I have a few hundred concubines who might be willing to make the journey to Amhantar."

"What of the facility here on Riezell Nine?" Tariq asked.

"R-9 is a complex that should not be wasted. We will keep it open as a medical facility but there is no need for making warriors if there is no war to fight," The Burgon replied. "I was furious they had given Prince Liam the parasite. I had ordered that practice stopped but someone dropped the ball apparently. We need no more such warriors."

Tariq's handsome face became sad. "Unfortunately, there will always be warriors, Your Excellency."

Cair smiled as Davan told him the news of her pregnancy. "I knew I had seeded you with our child," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Thank the Goddess it survived the attack."

"He survived the attack," Davan said. "And all the thanks go to Tariq and the parasite." She grasped her husband's arm. "We have to find a way to get him home to his Bahiya."



"His mate?" Cair asked. At Davan's nod, he assured her they would leave as soon as a ship could be readied for a long space journey.

"But what of your duties?" she asked. "Your mother will –"

"Have Liam to bully around," Cair said. "All my life that woman has pulled my strings and I have danced to her tune whether I was willing to or not. I don't like being a puppet, Davan, and I refuse to be one. Liam is quite content to be the King of Amhantar and I am more than willing to abdicate to him. I asked The Burgon to have his chancellors draw up the papers and I will sign them before we leave for the Green Sector."

Worry shifted over Davan's face. "Cair, your mother will have a fit over this. She won't let you rest until she's orchestrating your life again."

"I have never gotten along with my mother," Cair admitted. "I never really knew why. I always thought it was because I was dark like her and not fair like my father. Well, now I know why and she knows I know why I never looked like Bennick and Liam. I don't think she'll open her mouth about what I do from now on."

Davan gave her husband a strange look and with the newfound powers growing in her read his mind as easily as though his thoughts were written on his forehead. She saw the truth of his parentage.

Dr. Gruber's assistant was back with a large beaker of Sustenance and a wicked-looking hypo filled with tenerse.

Wincing at the dark red liquid in the beaker, Cair turned away, having to press his lips tightly together to keep from gagging as he heard his wife greedily swallowing the vile stuff. Hearing her smack her lips as though she had enjoyed the very best of repasts brought bile to his throat.

"Warrior," Tariq called out. "We need to have that talk now."

Cair was happy to step away from Davan and the sight of her swilling down blood. Liam had warned him such would happen but hearing of it and seeing it were two different things.

Tariq indicated Cair was to precede him into the room in which Davan had gone through her Transition then nodded at Gruber. The head scientist hurried over.

"Close the door behind you, Healer," Tariq ordered.

Cair felt uneasy as he looked at his wife's torn clothing – stained with blood.

"What has your brother told you about all this?" Tariq asked.

Cair tore his eyes from the bloody clothing. "Only that he believes I should accept what you are about to offer me."

Tariq folded his arms over his massive chest. "And what are your feelings about that, warrior?"

"Liam tells me Davan will live hundreds of years," Cair said. "And I want to live those years beside her."

## Chapter Eighteen

Tariq was overseeing each of the two ships that would be leaving Riezell Nine within the next two days. The largest ship—an Empire-class troop transport—was being retrofitted with six containment cells and stocked with large refrigerated vats of Sustenance brought in by a cargo carrier from Aduaidh Prime. The smaller ship had one containment cell and was also being provisioned with Sustenance and things necessary for a long journey in space. Gallons of tenerse were being stocked in the sickbays of both ships as well as the equipment necessary to turn the wheat fungus *Claviceps purpurea* into tenerse.

“Staring at the dust won’t make him return any sooner, Pretty One,” Tariq commented to Davan.

Davan glanced around. “He’s been gone over a day and I’m worried.”

“There’s no need to be,” Liam said as he and Davan’s brother Roman carried some of the provisions into the *Turas*, the ship that would carry Tariq, Cair and Davan into the unknown depths of new galaxies. “The skink doesn’t stand a chance out there no matter where he hides. That one drop of his blood is all my brother needs to track him to his slimy hole and pull him out.”

“Thank the Goddess every warrior of the Aduaidh Empire had to have his DNA coded,” Roman said. “Even skinks.”

“Your mate will be safe, Davan,” Tariq told her. “He is now a warrior among warriors. The Saurian does not have a breath of a chance against The Black Sun and his scytheblade.”

“But what if Avatás sneaks up on him and stabs him in the back?” she fretted.

“The cut will heal in a matter of moments and make Cair madder than hell,” Liam answered.

“And if the skink worms his way down into the sand, Cair will simply shape shift into the biggest, meanest mother-fucking anteater this side of Réalta Madra and suck that bugger up in his snout and chomp him into space dust,” Roman chuckled.

“Don’t be silly, Roman! He can’t do that,” Davan said with a snort.

“If he can imagine it, he can shift into it, though the human and wolf forms are considered our natural forms,” Tariq disagreed. “I have heard of anteaters. Is that where they breed? On Réalta Madra?”

“Among other places,” Roman replied. “Why?”

“I thought perhaps that might be from whence I came if I had heard of such beasts,” Tariq said with a sigh.

"We'll find your home, warrior," Davan said. "Don't worry. Perhaps Réalta Madra is where we will find your Bahiya."

"I trust you, Pretty One," Tariq said.

Davan smiled then returned to her vigil of the violent storm blowing past the docking bay observation window. She squinted, believing she saw a man walking across the shifting dunes. Placing her palms on the window, she stared at the spot where she thought she'd seen him but there was nothing there—only the undulating red sand blowing across the inhospitable landscape of Riezell Nine.

Tariq joined her at the window. "He's out there," he said. "I can sense him and so can you if you try."

"How?"

"Close your eyes and meld your mind to his."

Davan shut her eyes and concentrated. There was a faint touch along her nerve endings—as though an unseen hand had stroked her cheek—and she opened her eyes to search the swirling sands beyond the window.

"There!" she said. "On the crest of that largest dune!"

Liam and Roman came to the window, as well, and tried to look past the sand pelting the thick glass, but the dust obscured their view.

"I can't see him but I can sense him," Liam said.

"That is because he is blood of your blood," Tariq said. "And Davan can sense him because she has his blood within her in the form of their unborn child."

"And the reason I can't sense him," Roman commented.

"Aye," Tariq said, "but when he returns, you should take a sip of his blood for you are now family. You never know when such a thing might come in handy."

"I see him!" Liam said.

A lone figure was walking down the tall dune, his cape whipping around him as he struggled to maintain his footing. His right hand rested on a long stick he used as a walking cane. As the sands swirled around him, the pommel of the weapon strapped on his back glinted in a ray of sunlight, sending up reflected colors to dance around the hooded cowl of his cape.

"Is that what I think it is in his left hand?" Roman asked.

There was a brutal smile on Tariq's handsome face. "Aye, it is the head of his enemy."

Davan shuddered. "What, pray tell, did he want to bring that thing back for?" she demanded.

"Such is the Reaper way," Tariq said and as Davan, Liam and Roman looked at him, the warrior cocked a careless shoulder. "Such is what we are, my people, but that is something I prefer you keep to yourselves."

"Reapers," Liam said, trying the word out. "Grim reapers, eh?"

"Prime Reaper," Tariq said, "is what I am. You're just a chip off the old scythe."

Cair was only a few hundred feet from the window and had already seen those who were watching him. He stopped, lifted his walking stick in greeting and then continued on.

"Well, I won't have that ugly thing sitting on a shelf somewhere deteriorating," Davan said. "He can keep it in a jar somewhere where I don't have to look at it."

Tariq put an arm around her shoulder. "Exclaim over it, Pretty One, when he presents it to you then politely suggest he throw the thing away lest you want to dust it upon your mantel from now until doomsday."

"Ugh," Davan exclaimed.

Cair Ghrian had seen Tariq put his arm around Davan's shoulder and he stopped walking again, his eyes locked on the other warrior. He stood there with his cape fluttering around him, his face nearly hidden in the folds of the cowl but the angry glint in his stare turned crimson.

Tariq laughed and removed his arm, holding both of them up as if in surrender. *Friends, warrior, he sent to the man outside. Nothing more than friends.*

*Keep your hands to yourself,* Cair warned.

"Touchy, touchy," Liam said with a laugh.

"I would expect nothing less from a man who will one day be a Prime," Tariq said.

Cair resumed his struggle across the savagely blowing sands and disappeared beneath the jutting level of the docking station's outside catwalks.

Davan hurried to the airlocks through which her husband would pass. She was fairly dancing from foot to foot as she waited for Cair to join her. She could hear the dull thunk of the airlocks opening, closing and sealing, and could barely contain herself. Although she knew her husband was well, until she actually put hands on him and checked for herself, she was as nervous as a long-tailed Meicisceo rat in a roomful of berserk cybots. When the airlock leading onto the docking bay catwalk shushed open, she almost threw herself at Cair.

"Easy, wench," Cair laughed as he dropped his walking stick and snaked his arm around her.

Avoiding looking at the grizzly trophy clutched in her mate's hand, she threw her arms around his neck and brought his mouth to hers. She tried not to flinch when she heard a thud at her feet as Cair dropped his prize and enveloped her in both his arms, grinding his lower body to hers as their mouths dueled with one another.

"Take that to your chambers, Ghrian," The Burgon ordered. "There are some of us here who have no women upon whom to pounce."

Cair broke away from Davan's excited kiss and glanced over at Ryden Bakari. The emperor was standing with Davan's brother Lorcan who would be accompanying The Burgon home to Aduaidh Prime – the only internee from Riezell Nine to do so.

"I hear you are giving your concubines a choice of staying hermetically sealed in your seraglio or else going back with Lorcan to Amhantar as potential mates for Tariq's men," Cair said.

Both The Burgon and Davan looked surprised. "How do you know that?" Ryden asked.

"Tariq and I kept up a conversation while I was searching for the skink," Cair replied. "He told me what was going on."

"I don't know that I like having warriors capable of communing on such a level," The Burgon complained.

"That can easily be remedied," Cair said.

Ryden's face paled. "No," he said, shaking his head and crossing his hands back and forth in front of him in denial. "I don't wish to become one such as you."

"Your wives could be with you for hundreds of years," Davan suggested.

"No!" The horror in The Burgon's voice was almost humorous.

"I'm told the sex is ten times greater," Cair said. He looked down at his lady and grinned mercilessly. "I intend to find out before the sun sets on this day."

Davan threw her head back. "I intend to find out before the hour is over!" she countered and took his arm to pull him with her down the catwalk.

Cair would have bent down to retrieve the Saurian's head but Davan would have none of that. "It's a nice present, warrior," she said, "but I'm not into dusting." She pushed him in front of her and away from his gruesome trophy.

Staring down at the head of the man who had nearly killed his sister, Lorcan pulled back his foot and kicked the gory thing into the airlock. He turned and strode off, his hands thrust into the pocket of his new uniform trousers.

The Burgon gazed at Avatás' sightless eyes—open wide and glazed—and a mouth that would gape forever open in stunned surprise and wondered about the confrontation between the two warriors on the red dust hell of Riezell Nine. He swept his attention over the clean cut at the base of the Saurian's neck and marveled at the sharpness of Ghrian's scytheblade for the cut was almost surgical in its precision. Though he had never held one of the deadly weapons, he hoped one day to possess one for the collection he had in the Great Hall on Aduaidh Prime.

Turning away Ryden called out to one of the workers on the catwalk and when that man looked his way, ordered the mess in the airlock cleaned up. "Throw that vile thing into the nearest incinerator," he commanded.

Liam smiled as he saw his new sister and her mate ducking into the room where she had spent the night while Cair was outside on the planet looking for the Saurian. He heard one piercing giggle, a thunderous laugh and then silence as he passed the room on his way back to the transport that would carry him and the rest of the former prisoners of Riezell Nine home to Amhantar. The ship would be leaving within the next few hours.

"It is a great responsibility to which you go, Prince Liam," The Burgon had told him earlier. "When next we meet, it will be across a peace table and the decisions you and I make will be recorded in history."

"Let's hope it will be the last time the Alliance and the Coalition need to sit down to such negotiations," Liam had replied. "I, too, am as weary of this ill-begotten war as are you."

His fellow former internees were boarding the *Iompar*, the Empire-class transport, when Liam arrived back at the docking bay. With the exception of the three who were going through Transition at that moment, they would all know freedom—the first time in over a decade for some of them. The four nearing their cycle would be taken to the containment cells and locked in during the journey for they would be in Transition before reaching Amhantar.

"We're almost set to leave," Roman reported as he walked up to Liam. "I'd like to stay and see my sister off if you don't mind."

"What a grand adventure they'll be undertaking," Liam said. "I have no doubt they'll find Tariq's home world."

"I have a feeling when your brother sets his mind to something, he's a hard man to turn," Roman said. "The same holds true with my sister. She's a hardheaded lass."

"They make quite the pair, don't they?" Liam laughed.

"A match made in the heavens," Roman agreed.

Tariq sauntered over to them. The ship he and the lovers would be taking was all fitted out and having its main fuel tanks recharged as well as extra cells loaded on board. He leaned against a metal stanchion and crossed his ankles.

"You two will have a long wait," Tariq advised. "Once one of our kind begins to mate, that mating can last for hours."

Roman's eyebrows shot up. "Hours?"

"Once Bahiya and I mated for nearly an entire day," Tariq confessed. "I was so sore I could barely walk and I'm fairly sure I got her with child that time." He stared at the *Turas*. "He would be a man grown by now."

"Was that on the day you were captured?" Liam asked softly.

Tariq nodded.

"I didn't want to bring this up until I was fairly sure of it, but there is a way to track where the *Hespra* might have gone," Roman said.

"How?" Tariq demanded.

"Well, I asked The Burgon to check with his security forces to see if they had the ship's flight plan recorded anywhere. True to Aduaidh form, they didn't, but when we contacted the Coalition Forces, we found out the Spánnis did. The *Hespra* passed right by them on the way out of the Green Sector. The Spánnis had been tracking them for days, waiting for them to cross their paths."

"Why was that?" Tariq asked.

"To shoot them down," Liam answered for Roman.

"That's why the ship crashed?"

"Presumably so, although the Spánnis say their shot went wide of its target."

"The Spánnis rarely ever admit making a mistake so for them to do so means they hit the ship and won't own up to it until they find out what's in it for them to make the admission," Liam said with a snort.

"Where does the Spánnis say the *Hespra* entered from?" Tariq questioned.

"Réalta Madra," Roman reported. "Most likely the third planet in that galaxy from all indications."

"The Spánnis know that much about the galaxy?" Liam asked.

"More than they are telling us, I'm afraid. All they would say is the planet they believe the *Hespra* left was called Theris."

"Theristes," Tariq corrected. "My world is called Theristes!"

Liam frowned. "Does that mean the Spánnis might have ventured to your world, Tariq? Could they know about warriors such as you?"

"There are stories of flying men who visited our world many years before I was taken. We thought it was legend for they left nothing behind nor did they take anything from Theristes."

"Just the knowledge of your world," Roman said.

"One of our Old Ones swore he had conversed at length with the flying men but no one paid much attention to him for he was *mainomai*, insane," Tariq shrugged. "He was well over a thousand years old and had long before lost his mate so his word was discounted."

"Would the Spánnis have thought him crazed?" Liam asked.

"Anyone who talked to Iphis would have known he was a few rocks shy a ton," Tariq replied.

"So if he told them about Reapers, he wouldn't have been believed," Roman said in a low voice.

"Hopefully that was the case," Tariq agreed.

"Well, at least you have a good idea where to look for your home," Liam said. "I know you're anxious to get started."

"Aye," Tariq said on a long breath, "but that won't happen until Cair Ghrian and Davan have satisfied their lust."

\* \* \* \* \*

His hands wove like lightning over her body, sending spirals of tantalizing heat into her very core. Passion filled his touch and the ardor that had turned his amber eyes

to molten gold blazed back at her so unwaveringly Davan felt weak in the knees. Strong fingers were everywhere on her, in her, and she writhed beneath those sure strokes, purring like a kitten. One thrust that twisted gently inside her cunt brought her hips up in fervent beseeching.

"Do you like that, wench?" Cair asked with a growl and swiveled his strong finger inside her.

"Aye, warrior!" she agreed. She fanned her fingers through his dark hair to anchor his head and bring his mouth to slant possessively across hers.

His tongue invaded the sweetness of her mouth and volleyed with her own. The taste of her filled his senses and strained harder, wanting to devour the honey of her lips as he gently pulled at them with his teeth, nipping along their full length.

Davan slid one hand down his back, over his hip and wedged it between them until she could grip the rock-hard erection that was probing at her thigh. She enclosed the stiff cock within her hand and stroked it, feeling warmth oozing from him and spreading along her palm, lubricating him.

"Sweet woman, be careful," he mouthed against her lips. "I am near to bursting now!"

Her grunt should have warned him but Cair was too drawn up into the fabric of his desire so that when she flipped him over as though he weighed no more than a feather, he lay there stunned, his eyes wide as she threw a leg over his hip and slid along his weighty arousal.

"Lay there, warrior," she said, "and let your wench pleasure you."

She leaned down, took his wrists, and spread his hands wide, patting him to let him know she wanted his arms to remain in that position. Likewise, she wiggled her feet between his legs to let him know she wanted him spread-eagled for her.

Cair obliged his lady, but it was all he could do not to move as she ran the tips of her fingernails over his chest, up and down the insides of his arms and along his sides. He bit down on his lower lips to keep from squirming for his flesh was pebbled with goose bumps and his cock harder—if that was possible—than when they had begun.

"These," she said, plucking his paps between her thumbs and middle fingers, "are like little rocks." She lightly twisted the swollen flesh and scored the hard little nubs with her nails.

"Wench!" Cair protested. He was on fire with need for her and his heart was thundering against his rib cage. Sweat had broken out on his forehead and in the center of his breastbone.

"Lie still or you won't be allowed satiation, warrior," she warned.

"The hell I won't," he said between clenched teeth. "Try to keep it from me, wench!"



Davan smiled wickedly and leaned over to draw one firm little pap into her mouth to suckle it. As her lips and teeth tortured the warm nubbin, she worked the other with her fingers as her husband's body shuddered. She ground her hips over his.

Cair grabbed handfuls of the sheet beneath him to keep from grabbing her. He ached to throw her down and ram himself to the hilt inside her soft, hot body so it was sheer agony for him to allow her to run her velvety tongue down his chest and into the deep indentation of his belly.

"Ah, wench," he groaned.

She laved him around and around the pucker of his navel, dipped her tongue into the center, and then trailed little kisses through the spikes of his nether hair.

Cair's cock was trapped between the top of his thigh and the bottom of Davan's. It was like steel and throbbing so fiercely, he feared he would come before he could be sheathed in her dampness.

"Poor baby," Davan said, moving off him so she could stretch her legs out between his. Her hot breath was against his belly as she took his staff in her hand and blew across its wet tip. "He wants some attention, too."

Cair jerked as her lips slid over his tool and he found himself seated in the hot warmth of her mouth. She was drawing on his flesh, suckling him with strong pulls from base to tip and back again, her hand cradling his balls gently as she worked.

"Davan, I'm going to come!" he warned her.

Once more she stunned him by moving so fast he barely saw her until he was seated in the hot warmth of her cunt and her mouth was fastened on his, her tongue halfway down his throat as she ground her lower body against his.

She rode him as though he was a wild stallion and needed to be broken to saddle. Her hips rotated over his, rocking against his pelvis. Her cunt slid up and down his cock, lubricating him. Her tongue swirled within his mouth, her teeth drawing at his full lower lip.

Cair could stand it no more and snatched his hands down to clamp onto her hips, guiding her movements, lifting her and seating her on him in savage jerks that had them both gasping with pleasure and pain mixed. He was at the very mouth of her womb, asking for entry.

"The babe," Davan gasped.

"No harm would come to the child," Cair grunted. "The parasite won't allow him to be hurt."

That knowledge gave them both free rein and their lovemaking was almost violent as it strained toward completion. When that completion came, Cair roared his possession and Davan screamed her release. Such devastating passion claimed the two of them that she collapsed atop him and he lay completely motionless, their hearts hammering, and their breaths drawing in harshly.

"I can't take much more of that," Cair whispered as sweat trickled down his underarms.

"That was just round one, warrior," she said, pushing up so she could look at him. "I'll give you a minute and we'll step it up a notch."

Cair stared at her. "You're joking," he said in a weak voice.

"Well, unless you're content to walk on eggshells around me..."

The Burgon raised his hand to knock on Davan's room door but he heard a wild squeal that made him think better of his decision. He wanted to say goodbye to Cair and his lady but it didn't seem like the right time. There would be other occasions, perhaps, in which to speak to them. Another peal of laughter convinced Ryden Bakari to continue on his way, his lips twitching with laughter of their own.

## Epilogue

Tariq was sweating so fiercely, he kept wiping his face on the sleeves of his jumpsuit. Though it was obvious he hated the clothing covering his body, it appeared he had found a use for a portion of it. The travelers had been speeding toward Theristes for three weeks now. The closer they came to Tariq's home world, the more nervous Tariq became.

"It's a lovely world," Davan said as she studied the pale green and white globe toward which they were speeding.

"It is a beautiful world," Tariq said, chewing on a fingernail. "But is it mine?"

"Are there any landmarks you would recognize?" Cair asked as he began slowly the ship. "Some place we can shoot for?"

Tariq was silent for a moment. "It's been a long time," he replied. "But I know every mountain, every stream and every tree on Theristes. Fly me over Mount Korak and I will know immediately where I am."

The closer they came to the planet, the more Tariq paced, despite being told he needed to buckle into his seat before they reached the planet's gravity ring.

"I'll sit when I can no longer walk," he said.

"Sit down, warrior," Davan warned, "else you might go flying out through one of the ports. I've no desire to try snagging you out of deep space."

Tariq flopped down into the chair and fumbled with the belt, his fingers shaking. Davan rolled her eyes, unbuckled her safety harness and went over to buckle his.

"Stop being such a baby," she told him as she securely strapped him in.

It was a measure of just how nervous the Reaper was that he didn't reply to her insult. He sat bolt upright in the seat, his hands clasped on the arms and stared avidly at the Vid-Com screen.

Davan took her seat and buckled in just as Cair nosed the ship into Theristes' gravitational field.

"You should stay with us through your next Transitions," Tariq said, trying to calm down.

Cair and Davan exchanged a look.

"We have to return to Riezell Nine and pick up our kinsmen," Davan reminded the warrior.

"Birthing a Reaper child carries some danger for the mother," Tariq told them. "I would feel better if you would stay on my world until the babe is born. Your Healers know nothing of what it takes to bear one of our sons."

Davan smiled. "That's several months away, Tariq. Are you sure your people won't mind putting up with us that long?"

Tariq's head came up. "I am a Prime Reaper. My word is law!" He stabbed a thumb against his chest. "I have invited you and that is all that is needed!"

"What do you think?" Davan asked her husband. "Would you like to stay?"

Cair shrugged. "It's up to you, wench."

"Then it's settled," Tariq decreed, not giving Davan a chance to speak. "You will stay."

"I guess we'll stay," Davan said with a sigh. Truth be told, she wanted to learn more about Tariq's people and the thought of traveling during the second trimester of her pregnancy was a bit daunting.

Ahead of them was a sweeping vista of multi shades of green and blue interspersed with serpentine bands of dark brown.

"Theristes is an agriculturalist's paradise," Tariq said absently to no one in particular. "You can grow anything in its soil and my people are mostly vegetarian. I have not had juro in so long that my mouth is watering just saying the word. And gesiv! How I long for a big platter of cold gesiv! Oh, and drinoy! How could I have forgotten about drinoy?"

Cair grinned to himself. The warrior was so edgy he was talking to hear himself talk.

The ship was skimming along over a carpet of lush green trees, so thick in number and so close together, you could not see the land beneath their sweeping boughs.

"That might be the rainforest," Tariq suggested. "I've never been inside it but I am told it is a dense canopy of trees."

"What about that mountain range over there?" Cair asked, pointing toward a jagged line of peaks that they were fast approaching on the leeward side.

"Doesn't look familiar," Tariq replied, shaking his head.

"How about the one to the north of that?"

Again Tariq shook his head. He was plucking at the arm of the chair, his breathing erratic.

"If you don't calm down, you're going to hyperventilate," Davan warned.

"There!" Tariq suddenly yelled. "That's Mount Korak!"

Davan whistled for the mountain range looming directly ahead of them spread out in the shape of a flying bird, its wings arched gracefully from a tall central peak that resembled a bird's beak in profile. The striations down the two mountains that formed the winds looked like feathers carved in rock. It was a very imposing sight.

"The Raven," Tariq said, fumbling with the safety harness. "That's what korak means."

"Is your village close by?" Cair inquired, nudging his chin toward Tariq in a silent command for Davan to help the warrior with the harness.

"At the base of the mount," Tariq said between clenched teeth. He was snatching at the buckle then before Davan could get up and assist him, ripped the entire thing from its mounting and tossed it aside.

"Well, that's one way to do it," Davan muttered.

Tariq was pressed against the port window, his nose to the thick glass. He was trembling from head to toe like a little boy hankering after candy.

"You'd best find a place to put us down, warrior, else he'll shape shift and flow down there like smoke."

Tariq's head snapped around. "I can do that!" he said. "I can do that!"

"Don't you dare!" Cair warned. "Act your age and wait until I've landed before you make a fool of yourself!"

His eyes narrowed, Tariq opened his mouth to say something, apparently thought better of it, and snapped his mouth shut, though his eyes remained thin slits of anger that promised revenge.

"Don't annoy him, warrior," Davan said in a low voice. "Remember how you felt when you were trying to find me?"

Cair turned to look at her. "Aye, wench. I remember it well."

"Let's find a place to set her down," Davan said.

Banking away from the raven-shaped mountain range, Cair circled leeward then came in lower, scanning the land for a spot to land the craft. They passed over a serpentine river and could see a cataract to the south.

"My village is right beside the waterfall!" Tariq called out.

"How about there?" Davan asked, pointing to a flat area of land.

Cair nodded and throttled back on the engines until the ship was hovering over the wide expanse of grassland. He did a quick readout to make sure their makeshift landing site was capable of holding the weight of the ship then began to lower her to the ground.

Tariq was pacing again, running his hands over and over each other in his agitation. His breathing was loud and quick as he waited for Cair to open the hatchway.

"We have company," Cair said quietly.

There were ten to fifteen naked people standing just inside a copse of trees. They were carrying primitive weapons—spears and daggers from the looks of it—and they didn't look welcoming.

"Did Bahiya see you captured, Tariq?" Davan asked.

"Aye," he answered. "Will you open the damned door, Ghrian?"

"I think perhaps you should greet them first," Cair suggested. "In your own language." He flipped on the Vid-Com's outside speaker.

Tariq nodded and began speaking, his words beautifully rich, though neither Cair nor Davan understood what he was saying. The low sensuality of his voice brought one of the group forward, gently pushing aside those around her until she was at the forefront.

"I believe that's his lady," Davan whispered.

"Bahiya," Tariq groaned.

Those on the ship watched the woman's face pucker with confusion then clear to a beaming smile, which lit her features with an inner light that turned her beautiful face to exquisiteness. She started running toward the ship, her long hair billowing behind her.

"Open the door!" Tariq yelled. "Open the damned door!"

Cair reached out to type in the command to open the hatchway and had barely turned around before Tariq was leaping through the opening and running toward the woman, ripping his clothes apart as he ran.

"Reminds me of myself when I was a child," Cair laughed. "My nanny could never keep my clothes on me."

Davan reached out and took her husband's hand as Tariq and Bahiya met on the grassy plain—he lifting her high, twirling her around and she with her hands braced on his naked shoulders, her head thrown back as she trilled with laughter.

Tariq's people came forward and formed a ring around the couple. They were slamming the ends of their spears against the ground and cheering. More people ventured from the forest, some of them ambling shyly toward the ship.

"Their Prime Reaper is home," Davan said softly.

"Do you notice something about them?" Cair asked, obviously fascinated by what he was seeing.

"Aye," Davan said. "They're all naked."

"And not an ugly one among them," he said. "They are absolutely beautiful."

"Not the kind of place where you'd find a girl having a bad hair day, I wouldn't imagine," his wife said with a sigh.

Cair turned to his wife. "Bad hair day or not, I'm more than satisfied with my lifemate."

"You'd better be, warrior," Davan snorted. "She's the only one you're ever going to have."

Cair pulled her to him and she sat down in his lap. "I'll be a very good boy," he told her. "If I need to, I'll walk on eggshells around her just to prove it."

Their lips met and the kiss was as sweet as summer wine.

## **About the Author**

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 39 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

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