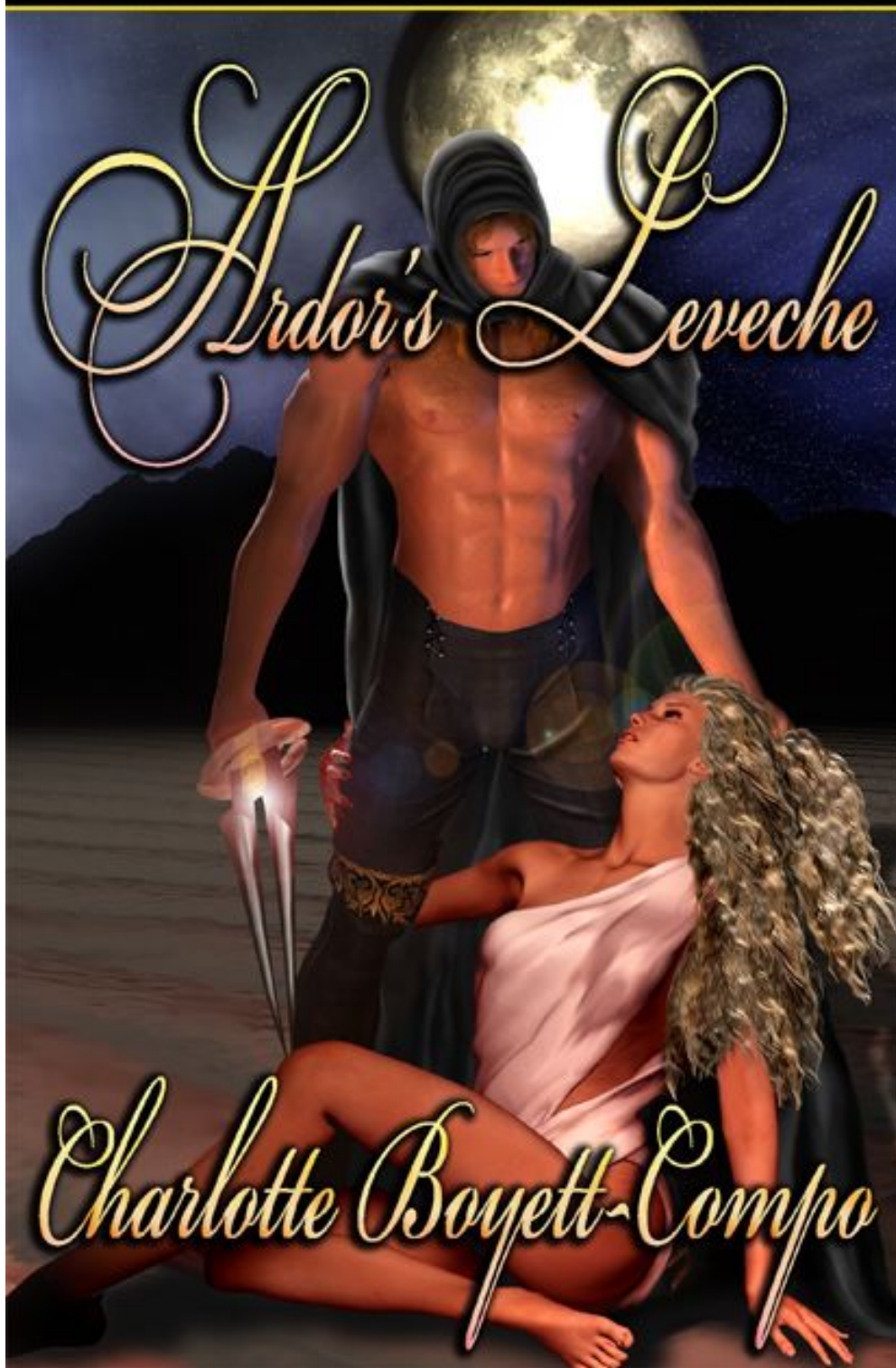


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Ardor's Leveche

Charlotte Boyett-Compo



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Ardor's Leveche

ISBN # 1-4199-0245-8

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Ardor's Leveche Copyright© 2005 Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Edited by: Mary Moran.

Cover art by Niki Browning

Electronic book Publication: October 2005

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Warning:

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. *Ardor's Leveche* has been rated S-ensuous by a minimum of three independent reviewers.

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. In addition, some E-rated titles might contain fantasy material that some readers find objectionable, such as bondage, submission, same sex encounters, forced seductions, and so forth. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry; it is common, for instance, for an author to use words such as "fucking", "cock", "pussy", and such within their work of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Unlike E-rated titles, stories designated with the letter X tend to contain controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

ARDOR'S LEVECHE

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Prologue

He was the most accomplished lover she had discovered to date, Ardor thought as she lay there enjoying the skilled mouth of her Iodálach partner. His tongue was downright wicked as it traveled the peaks and valleys of her cunt. Sweet, little sucking sounds accompanied a pair of lips that were electrifying and tantalizing, their dual abilities wreaking havoc on her ability to remain still beneath his ardent ministrations.

She wriggled her hips and his fingers immediately tightened on the lush expanse of her rump to hold her immobile. His face was buried between her legs, that marvelous tongue darting here and there—lapping, slurping, weaving magic that had her sighing with contentment. Feeling weightless, boneless, she lay there unable to prevent him from torturing her tender privates in the most expert of ways.

Idly, she threaded her fingers through the thick, pale blond hair that flowed down his shoulders nearly to his waist. That mane fell over her hips and along her thighs like a battle cape, marking him as a High Warrior among the WindWarrior Society. An expert with sword and shield and dagger, he was a master with his rapier-like tongue and stiff upper lip.

And, oh, could that lip work wonders on her genitals, she thought as he anchored the hood of her clitoris with its fullness, peeling that petal of skin back from her pearly flower so he could run his tongue along the dewy center.

“Sweet Merciful Alel, Kurt,” she whispered. “You are killing me!”

Laughter rumbled low in his throat and he pulled one hand from beneath her and slid it between her legs where one strong, rigid finger slithering into her moist cavern like a ghoret viper into its snake pit.

Ardor arched her back for he was gently twisting his finger inside her, withdrawing it an inch or two, then thrusting it deeply with each entry, still symbolically screwing her as he went. She heard herself panting as he worked his sumptuous enchantment within her moistness.

“You evil man,” she accused.

He pulled his finger out of her, lifted his head and with his eyes holding hers, put the wet digit into his mouth and sucked upon it as though it was a piece of candy. Swallowing, he ran his tongue along his lips and grinned before lowering his head to her hot box once more.

“You’re killing me!” she said again as tiny waves of pleasure began to wash upon the shores of her passion.

She gasped as her lover slid his body over hers, nudged her knees aside and placed the heat of his cock against her entrance.

"Shall I finish the kill, my love?" he asked, pressing the tip of his fleshy weapon just inside her love channel.

Ardor lifted her legs and captured his lean hips, pulling him further into her cunt. The size of him, the weight of his brawny body and the silk of his long hair dragging over her breasts caused a tidal wave of desire to break over her. Her fingers dug into the rippling muscles of his back, trapping him, and she arched up to meet his extended length.

"Do your worst, warrior," she said through clenched teeth.

Her lover chuckled and began pistoning into and out of her with powerful strokes that rocked them against the soft mattress. Their bodies were slick with sweat and the combined ooze of their juices, and as lust curled over them, he stilled, pushing into her as far as his cock would go so she could feel the jerk of his shaft inside her.

Ardor gripped her warrior tightly, her own contractions squeezing around him as the last spurt of his cum shot deeply within her. She gloried in the feel of his weighty body slumping against her and withdrew her legs from around him, stretching out beneath him so she could feel every wondrous ounce of his powerful frame atop her. He lay cradled in her arms, his cheek on her breast and the warmth of his labored breathing fanning across her nipple.

"I love you, Ardor," he said, flicking out his tongue to taste a turgid nipple.

Ardor frowned, for love words were not what she wanted to hear from the man lying atop her. He was not only her superior officer, he was recently divorced from his wife of twenty-six years—married almost as long as Ardor had been alive. A powerful man, a man only one step away from the highest position in Command. She knew her fellow officers would believe she was sleeping with him to further her career—nothing being farther from the truth.

As though he did not notice she had not returned his words of affection, he sighed, reaching up to twirl a lock of her chestnut hair around his index finger. "I'm going to miss you while you're on leave." He sighed again. "If only I could take some time off myself to go with you."

Alarm spread through Ardor, for she realized things were getting out of hand with Kurt. She would need to address the situation when she returned at the end of month. Although he was a more than adequate lover, she had no desire for anything permanent and her gut told her that was where this was heading in her lover's mind.

"Have you heard anything about my transfer?" she asked.

"Not a thing," he said, too quickly.

Frowning, Ardor stared into the dim lighting. She had put in for a transfer six months earlier—when things began heating up with Kurt. Instinct had warned her to cool the situation down, but it seemed to her it was now to the point of boiling.

"Would you check into it with the general while I'm gone?" she asked.

There was a moment's hesitation and Ardor realized a lie was about to be handed her.

"Will do," he said, then lifted his head to look into her eyes. "But for now, let's make the most of the time we've got before you head off to that much-deserved R&R."

Before she could decline his offer, he had ducked his head and claimed her nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth as his teeth and tongue began torturing the pebbly flesh.

Chapter One

Captain Ardor Kahn checked her appearance in the mirror, straightened her gray uniform tunic, smoothed down a few stray wisps of chestnut hair, pinched her thumb and forefinger at the corners of her mouth to make sure her lipstick hadn't caked there, and then leaned over to make sure her boots held an appropriate shine. All in all, she was as squeaky clean and razor-sharp as she could be. After one final once-over, she took a deep breath and left her quarters.

No one was waiting at the elevator and the cage was empty when the pneumatic doors snicked open. Relieved to ride up to the eighteenth floor alone, Ardor used the solitude to try to imagine why General Morrison had pulled her off R&R only two days into her thirty-day leave.

"Captain, I'm so sorry to interrupt your leave," Miriam Quillan, the general's secretary had apologized, "but he wants you to return to Command Center ASAP."

Ardor had groaned inwardly while trying to gauge the level of grief in Miriam's pleasant voice. Although she had expressed her sympathies to Miriam at the loss of her husband over a year earlier, she wondered if it would be appropriate to extend those feelings again. She never knew exactly what to do in situations such as that.

"Can you tell me what's up?" Ardor asked, deciding Miriam's tone did not warrant another reminder of what the young woman had lost.

"He would rather tell you himself," Miriam replied.

"Okay," Ardor said on a long breath. "I'll head back to Central right away."

"Thank you, Captain," Miriam said, "and thank you again for the condolence card."

Before Ardor could reply, the secretary had ended the Vid-Com transmission, leaving the Riezell Guardian breathing a sigh of relief that she hadn't repeated her words of sympathy.

Getting off the elevator, Ardor headed for the two phospho lance-wielding guards who snapped to attention as she came toward them.

"At ease, men," she ordered and smiled at the two guards who reverted to parade rest. "Busy week?"

"Ma'am, no, Ma'am," the senior of the two guards replied. "It's nice to have a few down days."

"Aye, well, I was about to have twenty-eight of those when I got the call back. What's the scuttlebutt? Anything happening I should know about?"

The guards exchanged a look and both shrugged in unison. "Nothing that's gotten outside the general's doors, Captain."

"You two aren't any help," she said with a laugh and waited for them to open the door into the general's outer office.

Miriam glanced up and half-smiled as the door opened then continued with what she was doing. "Good morning, Captain," she said, returning her attention to the computer screen. "The general is on a conference call. He shouldn't be much longer. Please have a seat."

Ardor nodded and sat down. The secretary's body language and the rather curt way she had greeted Ardor made it clear there was to be no mention of Miriam's deceased husband. That suited the captain well enough as she felt uneasy in the presence of such a devastating loss and had no idea what—if anything—could be said this long after the fact.

"Did you hear Major Neff is expecting?" Miriam asked without looking up.

"No!" Ardor exclaimed. "How far along?"

Miriam leaned toward the computer screen, studied the long column of input she'd just entered before answering. "Two months. She and Prince Ruan announced it just yesterday. A rather happy fifth-month anniversary present for them, wouldn't you say?"

"So the little Cosaint should arrive just in time for their first year as old married folk, huh?" Ardor inquired.

"That would be sweet, wouldn't it?" Miriam said on a long sigh. "I am so happy for her."

Ardor tucked her lower lip between her teeth. "Does that mean Chastain won't be returning to duty?"

"Kahn?" the general bellowed from his office. "Get in here!"

Miriam rolled her eyes. "He's not in the best of moods, Captain, so tread softly."

Ardor had shot up from the chair as soon as she'd heard General Morrison calling her name. She hurried over to his door and was about to knock when the portal slid open.

"Didn't I tell you to get the hell in here?" the general snapped. Standing in the doorway, he spun on his heel and stomped back to his desk.

"Yes, Sir, you did!!" Ardor agreed. She knew better than to make an excuse for her lack of alacrity. "Do you want me to close the—"

"I want you to shut up and let me talk!" the general cut her off.

Snapping to attention in front of the general's desk, Ardor locked her eyes on a point somewhere above his shock of thick white hair.

"Are you a virgin, Kahn?" General Alphon Morrison demanded.

Ardor flinched and her gaze slid down to the narrowed eyes of her commanding officer. "Sir, no, Sir," she said, stunned by his question.

"You are—" the general looked down at a file on his desk "—twenty-five?"

"Twenty-eight, Sir!" she answered, hearing the blood rushing through her ears.

"Do you have a steady lover?"

"Sir, not exactly, Sir!" Ardor answered, swallowing to keep the bile from speeding up her throat.

The general's eyes narrowed even more. "Why the hell not?"

Opening and closing her mouth as though she was a fish out of water, Ardor had no idea how to answer such a question. Dumbfounded by the direction the questions had taken, she stood there unable to speak.

"You're not one of those females who screw their own kind are you?"

A deep blush spread over Ardor's face and it was all she could do to shake her head.

"You're not a man-hater, are you?"

"Sir!" Ardor protested, wishing the floor would open up and let her drop through. "No, Sir!"

"Neff won't be returning to the Service," the general said, changing the subject in such a whiplash way Ardor let out a harsh explosion of breath. "I'm not happy about that—damned pissed if you want the truth of it—but that was her decision. She's got a bun in the oven so she's of little use to me right now anyway."

Miriam appeared in the doorway, drawing the general's attention away from Ardor.

"Yes, Miriam?" General Morrison said in a soft, gentle voice.

"Colonel Bowen is here, Sir," the secretary informed him.

Ardor groaned inwardly. Her day just seemed to be getting worse.

"Send him in and then why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

Miriam lifted her chin. "I'd rather not if you don't mind, Sir. I have quite a bit of work left."

Ardor watched the old man striving to keep his face expressionless, his eyes calm.

"Whatever you want is fine with me," the general responded.

"Thank you for understanding, Sir," Miriam said and then stepped aside to usher in the Head of Fleet Command."

General Morrison exhaled slowly as Colonel Bowen entered the office and firmly shut the door behind him. He ran a hand over his face and leaned back in the chair.

"She seems to be a bit better today," Bowen said.

"Still working far too hard," the general complained.

"We each handle our sorrow in our own way," Bowen declared.

"I suppose so," the general said. "You know Captain Kahn?"

Bowen nodded at his subordinate. "I pinned on her silver and gold anchors, didn't I, Kahn?" he inquired.

"Yes, Sir, you did," Ardor answered, keeping her gaze straight ahead.

"Now I get to pin on the pretty copper ones," Bowen announced.

Ardor's eyes widened and her head snapped around as though jerked by a tether. "Sir?" she asked, staring at the colonel.

"Eyes front and center, Kahn!" the general shouted.

Ardor hastened to do as she was ordered, her back ramrod straight and her arms rigidly at her sides.

The general motioned Bowen to take a seat. "We'll get around to promoting the insolent little chit later. Have you received any news on those rebel forces this morning?"

Bowen smiled then turned his full attention to the general. "We know they are somewhere near Dasiter but we haven't been able to find out how many or what the hell they're doing there. They aren't attacking any of our ships and that's a damned puzzle."

"What about who's leading them?" General Morrison inquired.

"Apparently there are two commanders. One leads the rebel forces and the other seems to be doing his own thing. Our sources say that man is called Lord Savidos." Bowen scratched his jaw. "We can't find out anything about him but rumor has it that at one time he might have been King Alejandro's right-hand man, perhaps even a family member."

"May have been?"

"Intel we've gathered seems to suggest this Lord Savidos is acting outside the king's authority. There has even been a bounty placed on his head by the Storian High Council."

"He's a rogue?"

"It would appear that way."

"You'd think the damned Storians we captured near *an Fhraine* would have given us more information than they did," the general complained.

"Those were just foot soldiers, General. So far, we've only seen one Primary and, unfortunately, he wasn't able to say anything due to him being stiff as a pine tree," Bowen quipped.

"Neff had no choice but to kill the bugger," the general said with a sigh. "It was either him or Councilman Jost. Chas did the right thing, although Jost is proving to be a major pain in the ass."

"Still, I wish we could take a Primary alive," Bowen said. "I'd like to know a hell of a lot more about those damned rebel assassins."

"Have you made arrangements for Kahn to be in the next shipment of prisoners?"

Ardor blinked but remained quiet, still standing at attention. Her mind was working so quickly she was getting a bitch of a headache.

"A penal transport will be leaving Riezell at 0600 tomorrow morning," Bowen replied. "The papers for her will be ready later today."

"Curious about your new assignment, Kahn?" the general queried.

"Yes, Sir," Ardor said with a hesitant tone.

"Next to Neff, you are the best we have among the Guardians," the general stated. "Your kills are almost equal to hers."

Ardor frowned. Killing was not something she did either easily or without a great deal of thought. If she could take a target prisoner, she much preferred to do it rather than take the target's life. To her, killing was always a last resort.

"Of course, we would prefer you bring in your objective alive and reasonably well so we can question him at length, but that will not be an option," Bowen said.

"Permission to speak, Sir?" Ardor asked.

"You want to know the how and wherefore, eh?" the general questioned.

"Yes, Sir."

The general waved a hand at Bowen, granting him the honor of explaining Ardor's mission.

"As part of your assignment you will be given papers identifying you as a Storian sympathizer taken into custody on Ollainnis. You will be put into a common cell aboard one of the penal transports along with other Command prisoners destined for the Geimhreadh Páirc work camp on *an Rúis*."

Ardor winced. Having been born and raised in the balmy climes of Riezell, she hated cold weather and the barren plains of that frozen country would be quite a trial for her.

"I'm sure you would prefer the Samhradh Páirc work camp on Sasana but such is life," the general said with a twinkle in his light green eyes.

Bowen chuckled. "Don't worry, Kahn. If history repeats, I doubt you'll ever make it to *an Rúis* airspace before a Storian interceptor overtakes the penal transport and liberates you." He cocked an eyebrow. "You have a question, Kahn?"

"Sir, I'm sure you aren't suggesting I pretend to be a Storian."

"Of course not," the general snapped. "Where is she to be from, Colonel?"

"Cengus, Sir," Bowen replied. "It is under Coalition control." He shrugged. "Unfortunately, it's the only planet in the Idimmu Galaxy part of the quadrant we've been able to take. We now control every planet and country in the Cairghrian Galaxy, thank the gods!" He frowned. "Well, except for Stori and by rights we should have been able to infiltrate that godforsaken planet. And we could have if the Storians hadn't stolen the Amhantarean technology making it impossible to get a ship into their airspace. That shield of the Amhantareans makes it impossible to get anything into or out of their airspace without their consent. Great invention except it fell into the wrong hands."

"What is it the Amhantareans call it?" the general asked.

"The Net," Bowen provided. "The Storians call it the Web because they somehow managed to enhance the Amhantarean schematics so that an enemy ship is caught in the web and then is destroyed from the inside out."

"Like a spider sucking the essence from its prey," the general commented.

"A gruesome way to meet your end," Bowen said softly.

"The damned Storians were always loyal to Aduaidh Prime even though the damned Storians are part of *our* galaxy!" the general said with a snort.

"I don't think the Burgon realized there would be those who would ignore his peace treaty with us," Bowen said. "I really think he was unprepared for opposition, especially when he learned only Aduaidh Prime and the three planets in the Green Sector would be the only ones to join with the Coalition. It never occurred to him there would be those among his allies who would refuse peace."

"Thanks be to Alel there are only a few like the Storian king who are kill-hungry, although I've heard it said Alejandro's son is inclined to barter for peace and may when he ascends the throne."

"I've heard that, too, but I won't hold my breath. You know of Riezell Nine, do you not, Kahn?" Bowen asked.

"I've heard of it, Sir," Ardor answered, flicking her eyes toward Bowen. "It is a dust planet that was used as a medical research center by the Aduaidh forces during the war. It was so named for it was a Riezellian mining ship that discovered it over sixty years ago."

"Aye," Bowen agreed. "It was the ninth planetoid mapped during that trip but just like the other eight, it proved to be devoid of any ores or metals worth anything to us so Command abandoned it."

"Don't know why those bastards on Aduaidh Prime kept the name and I wish to Alel's toes they hadn't, for it's rumored they carry on vile experiments in their laboratories there," the general grumbled.

"They used to. All that stopped when the Burgon sued for peace with the Coalition," Bowen sniffed. "For what good that did him."

"Supposedly stopped," the general grumbled.

"The Storian rebel forces have a base on Riezell Nine that not even King Alejandro knows about," Bowen explained.

"How did that happen, Sir?" Ardor asked.

Bowen shrugged. "I believe the Burgon had a hand in that little enterprise. Most likely because he can't tolerate the Storian King and thinks to aid the rebels. Either way, the base is hidden somewhere out in the desert, most likely in one of the myriad cave systems. If we could find out which one, we could eliminate a good portion of the resistance without blowing the entire planet to shreds." He eyed Ardor. "You have a question?"

"Sir, I know next to nothing about Cengus," Kahn admitted. "I don't even know what the inhabitants there are called. What if...?"

"Cenguvian," the general provided. He held up a hand. "No, it's Cengusivians." He frowned. "Or something like that."

"I've arranged for you to enter the sublims lab this evening, Kahn," Bowen said. "They'll hook you up, put you under and by the time you're ready to be put on the transport tomorrow morning, there won't be anything you won't know about Cengus, their king or their part in the war for that matter." He grinned. "You'll even be able to speak their language like a native."

"Sissy-sounding language that it is!" the general scoffed.

"We'll also include sublims on Stori so you'll be up to speed on that situation as well," Bowen added.

"I know you're pissed that you were brought back from R&R so soon but once you complete this assignment, I'll see to it—I *promise* you—you will get two months uninterrupted leave on Astráil," the general told her. He beamed. "Make that three months, all expenses paid by Command."

Ardor felt her heart thudding in her chest. Whatever her assignment, it must be both vital and dangerous for General Morrison to make such a promise. She looked at Colonel Bowen.

"You want to know the wherefore," Bowen said with a grin.

"Yes, Sir."

"We want you to use your highly developed skills to take out the Storian king. If it's true his son is inclined to offer for peace, we want to give the young man a chance."

"Without his father to interfere," the general put in. "Perhaps we can at least have this planet free of Aduaidh Prime influence."

Ardor was stunned. "You want me to assassinate King Alejandro?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"With extreme prejudice," the general stated.

"And how am I to do that, Sir?" she asked.

"I'm sure you'll find a way to infiltrate the royal palace at Vespertine. All you need do is make yourself useful to that rebel leader of theirs—what's his name again, Bowen?"

"We don't know, sir," Bowen replied, casting Ardor a look that suggested he thought the old man was getting senile.

"Well, find out!" the general snapped. "What of the other one?"

"If Intel is correct, Sir, it wouldn't do us any good for his troops to take Major Kahn into custody."

"Where is he, do you know?"

"At last report near Sauria," Bowen replied. "The rebel leader will be the one to intercept the prison transport. As lovely as the major is, he will take her to Vespertine."

Ardor furrowed her brow. "May I ask why you think that will be the case, Sir?"

"From what we have been able to find out about the rebel leader, he is of a different bent than the rest of us. Women don't interest him. He has made it a point to deliver any women warriors captured directly to King Alejandro," Bowen replied.

"A known womanizer of the highest order," the general said with a sniff.

"King Alejandro will certainly take note of you," Bowen added.

"And if he doesn't?" she asked.

"The Storianians appreciate women warriors," the general assured her. "Most of them are assigned to the palace." He cocked one thick shoulder. "Cushy assignment I would imagine."

"Alejandro has an insatiable appetite for beautiful women and surrounds himself with them at every turn. Having one as lovely as you in his personal guard will ensure you close contact with the man," Bowen explained.

A spark of irritation flitted through Ardor's green eyes. "You want me to seduce King Alejandro?"

"If you have to," the general answered. "Don't spread 'em unless you have to, Kahn, and even if it comes to that, make damned sure no Storian spore comes home with you. One knocked-up Riezell Guardian is more than enough!"

A bright flush infused Ardor's face and she had to dig her fingernails into her palms to keep from asking the men if they thought she had such lax morals that she would take on the assignment eagerly.

"And in case you are concerned about being found out, there isn't much chance of that. The worst case scenario would be if the prison ship is intercepted by Lord Savidos, but the chances of that happening are almost nil," Bowen said, getting up from his chair. He waved away Ardor's attempt to come to attention. "We know you'll do what you have to for Command. You're the best agent we've got now and I have all the confidence in Domhan that you'll do what needs to be done."

"But, Sir..." she began, but Bowen reached out, took her forearm in his strong grip and turned her toward the door, walking with her to the portal.

"Save any further questions you might have until you've gone through the sublims lab this evening," Bowen suggested. "I'm sure most—if not all—of your concerns will be addressed. If they aren't, we'll discuss it tomorrow before you board the penal transport." He reached for her hand and shook it. "Congratulations on your promotion, Major Kahn. That rank is effective immediately but I'll wait to pin those copper anchors on when you return from Stori." He pumped her hand then released her, stepping back. "I imagine I'll be pinning on a heroic medal or two along with them!"

Ardor was gently pushed from the general's office and as the door shut firmly behind her, she felt a trickle of unease wriggle down her spine. Walking past Miriam's

empty desk, she wondered if they'd still pin the insignia and medals on her if she was killed in the line of duty.

Or if there'd be a body *to* pin them on!

* * * * *

General Morrison and Colonel Bowen had moved over to the sitting area of the General's opulent office and were relaxing in comfort—full snifters of rare Chrystallusian cherry brandy and fat, very expensive Spáinneach cigars in hand.

Bowen took a long pull on his cigar then laid his head along the back of his chair, holding the smoke in his lungs for quite some time before puckering his lips and blowing wispy rings into the air.

"What are you thinking, Kurt?" the general asked as he took a sip of brandy.

The colonel swirled his brandy around inside the snifter. "I have never liked or trusted medical interference with my people," he said. "Kahn is a very capable agent. I would hate to lose her if something went wrong tonight."

"What could go wrong?" the general asked, tapping the ash from his cigar into a crystal dish. "The med techs know what they are doing, Kurt."

"I'm sure they do, Alphon, but I'm rather fond of Kahn and having them screw with her brain concerns me."

The general sighed loudly. "Kurt, the implant is so small it is barely visible with the human eye. It will be placed carefully into Kahn's brain with a minimum of invasion and when activated will send out—painlessly, I am assured—tiny responder wires into the lateral geniculate nucleus. I'm sure you remember your basic anatomy, don't you? The LGN picks up information from Kahn's retina and processes it so whatever she sees, we will see through the implant's transmission back to us."

"All that is fine in theory, Alphon, but she could be blinded permanently by such an invasion of her thalamus should something go wrong," Bowen said. "She could have a stroke or—the gods forbid—develop an aneurism that will kill her before we can intervene."

"Nothing is going to go wrong," the general stated.

"I understand why we couldn't tell her what we are going to do, but I don't have to like it. Now that Neff is no longer with us, Ardor is our Primary. I can't afford to lose her."

"We never inform our agents when we are forced to implant tracking or transponder devices secretly. They don't need to know," the general snapped. "It is a matter of security, Bowen. You know that!"

"But I don't have to like it," Bowen repeated. "It's underhanded and damned invasive no matter how you cut it." He frowned then drained the brandy in his snifter. "Or insert it," he said, placing the snifter on the end table.

"Kahn will be a national hero when she returns from Stori," the general reminded him. "She'll not only receive those coveted copper anchors but she'll be awarded the Meritorious Cross of Gallantry from Command, the Galaxian Defense Star and the Amethyst Prism for Courage." He stabbed the air with his cigar. "What more could a warrioress ask for?"

Bowen's jaw tightened before he spoke. "To not have those awards given to her posthumously."

Chapter Two

The man the Storian fighters called Lord Savidos strode briskly through the corridors of the penal transport *Borstal*, barely noticing the ragged line of prisoners being ushered past him. The stench of dried blood, unwashed bodies and suppurating wounds wafted under his nostrils and it was all he could do to ignore the smells. Framed within the pointed cowl of his flowing robe, behind the lightweight, matte silver mask hiding his true face, his dark amber gaze carried a red spark of fury. Intel given to him by his second-in-command had caused the anger radiating from his glare and with Death hovering over his shoulder, Lord Savidos was on his way to mete out punishment to the spy.

In his wake, the swirl of the black robe covering his tall six-foot-two-inch frame snapped as though the garment was a living thing. His hands were clenched into fists beneath black gloves—the fingers of which had been drawn to resemble a skeleton's bony hand, the fleshless metacarpals and phalanges standing out in bold silver paint against the ebon leather. Where Lord Savidos walked, those around him stepped aside, pressing against the corridor walls, their faces turned to the titanium plating so the warrior would not see their fear and they could not see the horrible visage that glowered back at them from the robe's hood.

Keeping pace a step back from his overlord, Major Raoul Brevia swung his black gaze among the prisoners—searching for trouble, looking for something out of place, keenly attuned to everything around him. He had Lord Savidos' back and Brevia's hand rested on the pommel of his lethal sword. Should trouble lash out at his overlord, Brevia would step in to put down that trouble quickly and efficiently.

"There is no mistaking who she is?" Lord Savidos queried.

"Neff's replacement," Brevia responded. "Without doubt."

"You've cut her apart from the others?"

"Need you ask?" Brevia drawled. His longtime association with the man walking ahead of him gave Raoul a measure of protection against the savage anger that such a question would normally elicit in his overlord.

"Did they insert an implant in her?"

"A retinal targeting device," Brevia replied. "It's deep in the thalamus so we'll have to wait until we get to Riezell Nine before we deactivate the damned thing."

Lord Savidos stopped, putting out a hand to prevent Brevia from walking into him. "You think they might want a look at me?"

Brevia smiled nastily. "Gonna give them one?"

Beneath the mask, Lord Savidos' voice was a dry husk of sound. "In all my gory glory," he replied, then continued on down the corridor.

"I'd say they are more than likely just as interested in what the woman would have seen at Vespertine," Breva commented. "They'd want to get King Alejandro's assassination on vid-tape to replay it to the masses."

"You are assuming I will allow her to live long enough to make it to Vespertine, Raoul."

"Would it matter if she managed to carry out her assignment against the king?"

Once more Lord Savidos stopped. He turned around, facing his second-in-command. For a long moment, he stared into eyes that held no trace of fear or trepidation, only a mild curiosity.

"As much as I loathe the king, Raoul, it is my duty to preserve his corrupt life—even if it would be better for our people if I allowed the Riezell Guardian to take that life."

Breva grinned. "Just asking, *chanto*."

"Besides," Lord Savidos said as he commenced walking, "we have to protect the little prince, now don't we?"

"You are assuming the silly fool doesn't trip over his own big feet and break his neck before he can ascend the throne," Breva said with a snort. He indicated the last cell on the left.

"You'd better hope he doesn't, Raoul," Lord Savidos returned with a snort, "unless you want to take that throne yourself."

Horror flitted over Breva's finely chiseled features. His black eyes opened wide, his mouth dropped open and he shook his head slowly from side to side. "Don't even joke about such a thing," he said in a low voice. "The gods have a way of punishing us for our irreverence."

Lord Savidos grunted as he stopped at the locked cell door then cocked his chin for Breva to unlock it.

Ardor had been sitting alone in the pitch-black cell for over an hour. There were no amenities—not even a solid-plank bunk—upon which she could rest. Beneath her, the iron grating of the floor panels was as cold as a Sualannach whore's tit and she had been shivering for much of the time. When she heard the scrape of boots outside the door, she tensed.

The cell opened with a clunk as the heavy door slid into its pneumatic rails. Light from the corridor speared into the cell causing Ardor to put an arm up to block the painful intrusion. She blinked, squinting against the brightness and could see nothing save the dark silhouettes of two figures outlined against the light.

"Major Ardor Kahn," Breva growled, "get to your feet!"

The unease Ardor had been feeling escalated quickly to apprehension as her name was called out in a harsh, angry tone. She had been found out and now her life would

be forfeit at the hands of the traitors. All she could do was to accept her end as bravely as she had been trained to do, with honor and courage. Slowly, she pushed up from the floor, her face half-turned from the intrusion of the light.

Breva stepped up to their prisoner and took her chin in his hand, jerking her face around. He anchored her head as his overlord came to stand beside him. Despite the squint of the woman's eyes, the major was surprised at her unexpected beauty.

"Not half-bad for a Riezellian, eh?" Breva inquired.

Ardor's back stiffened and she lifted her chin as high as she could in the taut grip of her captor. Although she could not see his face, she could make out a gleam in his eyes from the light reflecting off the titanium walls behind her and that put a chill down her spine.

"Not as lovely as I've heard it said Chastain Neff is, but it isn't the face that counts, is it, Milord?" Breva asked.

There was a whisper of speech in a tongue Ardor did not understand from the other man who had entered the cell. He was nothing more than a black, bulky shape but he was—by far—the more menacing of the two. It was in the steely vibrations he was giving off, the essence of power and authority that radiated from him, and it set the hair to stirring on Ardor's arms.

"My overlord says you might be moderately attractive if you weren't a treacherous fox placed in his henhouse. He wishes a better look at you."

Able to pull her chin from the first man's grip, Ardor watched him slide like a will-o'-the-wisp from in front of her only to have the second man step up close, crowding her, his towering height and breadth of body intimidating and menacing. There was a warm fragrance of cinnamon and musk coming from the tall one. That scent was almost intoxicating in a sultry, sly way. She could feel the heat of his body and the roughness of whatever garment he wore rasping against the bare arms she had instinctively crossed over her chest.

Staring into what she thought was his face, she was struck with dread when his eyes glowed crimson red, closed and then opened again to gaze fixedly at her. Once more the strange whisper of speech in that unknown tongue came from the deep depths of stygian blackness looking down at her.

"My overlord asks if you fear him, wench," the first man translated the strange words.

Although her knees were threatening to buckle, Ardor knew the worst thing she could do was show fright to her enemies. That they would make good use of such an admission was a given. She was no coward and refused to behave as one.

"Tell your overlord I never fear what I cannot see," she said, forcing her voice to be as strong and unwavering as she could make it.

She flinched for the man standing in front of her raised his hand, and for the first time she realized he was wearing a flowing robe of some sort for she could just make out the voluminous sleeve of the garment. Slowly, the lights came up in the cell from

near-total darkness, lit only from the spill of light from the corridor to dark gray then to duskiess. As the volume of light continued increasing, Ardor could see the man—nay, the *being*—who stood in front of her and for the first time in her life knew the true meaning of terror.

His face glowed an eerie silver-white in the wash from the lights brightening overhead. Deep, dark caverns rimmed eyes the color of spilled blood. His cheekbones were prominent, fleshless, and where his lips should have been, bare bone was peeled back to reveal two rows of sharp fangs gnashed together like threads on a zipper. There was no skin on that cinerary facelessness and when he lifted a hand, the stark contrast of his skeletal fingers against the black fabric of his robe brought a groan of horror to Ardor's throat. So shocked was she at his appearance that Ardor did not realize it was a mask she had been staring at.

At once the lights went out and she was plunged into near-darkness once more. When his low, throaty whispers came this time, Ardor felt herself begin to tremble. She was terrified he would put his fleshless fingers upon her face.

"My overlord asks," the first man said in a soft voice, "if you fear him now."

She knew his fingers were coming toward her face. She could feel the displacement of the air, hear a slight rustle she thought sounded like skin peeling back from bone. Biting her lip, embracing the pain to keep herself from groaning again, she pressed against the wall of her cell and waited for the touch she knew might well unnerve her altogether.

But when it came, the touch was soft and warm. There was no frigid scraping of bone along her cheek, but rather a slight scratchiness as though the palm of the hand touching her might be rough with calluses. It was a strong hand—a sword hand she guessed—and it was sliding gently down her face.

He moved closer, pressing against her. One hand was on her face and the other came up to mold itself around her breast where it kneaded the full mass as though he had every right to do so. Shocked by such liberties, Ardor opened her mouth to berate him, but the fleshy pad of his thumb slid over her lips to silence her—a warning she had no choice but to heed.

That raspy, throaty whisper fanned across her face and she flinched—expecting the stench of the grave to issue from the man's mouth—but instead there was the sweet scent of lemon, which surprised her.

"My overlord asks if you want him to allow you to live."

Ardor felt those words to the pit of her stomach for she thought she knew at what price that stay of execution would come. To be the plaything of a cadaver—at the very least a man whose flesh had been drawn from his bones in some terrible, exacting way—would be a horror unto itself. The mere thought of that skeletal face looking down upon her as his twisted, mangled body drove into hers made Ardor gag.

"Kill me," she said, turning her head away, pulling back from his soft thumb. "I would die than have you touch me again."

A low chuckle came from the man whose body was pressed so intimately against hers. His hand tightened upon her breast then released her as he stepped back, pivoting on his heel as he strode from the room, one last low series of whispers – bitten out in a hard tone – left in his wake.

Ardor couldn't stop the moan of relief that swept through her when her tormentor fled the room. She stood there quivering like a leaf in the storm, slumped against the wall of her cell, aware of the man left standing off to one side and hoping he had in his possession the means to end her life. "W-what did he say?" she asked, squeezing her eyes shut since the lights were coming up slowly once again.

When her companion did not answer, Ardor opened her eyes and slowly turned her head to look at the man standing in the cell with her. She blinked, unable to believe what she was seeing.

He was strikingly handsome with a dark olive complexion that looked flawless and was complimented by the pale tan of his uniform tunic and trousers. Long, thick eyelashes arched over ebon eyes that were sparkling with what could not be mistaken for anything save humor. His full lips were twitching and when he reached up a hand to sweep a lock of curly black hair from his forehead, he smiled – his teeth very white set against the swarthiness of his skin coloring.

"He said a fitting punishment for a spy sent to kill our king would be to make her his plaything in *La Caverna de la Muerte*," the man told her.

Ardor's eyes widened. "The Cavern of Death," she translated, unaware she'd spoken aloud. That he had read her thoughts didn't escape her, either.

"Where else would you find the grim reaper, wench?" the man asked.

"Grim reaper," she repeated, realizing one of Bowen's worst possibilities had happened. She'd fallen into the wrong hands.

"Aye," the man said. "After all, that is what Lord Savidos means in the old language of the Storian people." He grinned. "He's never even taken me to *La Caverna de la Muerte* so you can consider it quite an honor, wench."

"I would rather die than have him on me," she said and winced at the pleading in her tone.

"I'm not so sure you would," the man disagreed, "but if you insult him like that again, he just might accommodate you."

Sinking to her haunches, Ardor squatted on the floor, her head bent and her arms so tight around her chest she was finding it hard to breathe. She pretended she was beginning to hyperventilate.

"Ah, wench," the man said, hunkering down beside her and putting his hand on the back of her neck. "Spread your knees, put your head between them and breathe slowly."

Ardor's mind was working at a rapid pace, her complex Guardian training coming back at her in leaps and bounds. She knew if she didn't want to find herself stretched

out beneath the bony contours of the reaper, she'd best make friends—very good friends—with the man beside her.

Allowing her hand to tremble, she pulled one arm from around her and rested that quivering hand on the man's thigh. Beneath her palm, she could feel his thigh muscle bunch at the touch and the hand he had clapped to her neck tightened just a fraction.

"How did you find me out?" she asked.

"We have spies at Command Central, wench," he boasted. "There isn't much we don't learn about soon after it happens. We knew you were coming, even had a description of you."

"I was only doing my job," she said in a soft, feminine voice.

"Aye, well, Lord Savidos doesn't care about that," the man stated.

Her hand began caressing his thigh in such a way as to make him think it was a nervous twitch of her fingers but her fingertips were precariously close to a prominence beneath the fabric of his uniform trousers and that prominence moved. Hiding the smile that tried to tug at her lips, Ardor kept her face tilted to one side.

"Breathe," he said as she continued pretending she was having trouble drawing air into her lungs.

Ardor sagged against him, putting her head on his hard chest and had to bite the inner flesh of her lower lip to keep from laughing as his arm went around her shoulder to hold her to him.

"I am Major Raoul Breva," he said in a husky voice, though she had not asked his name.

"You are being very kind, Raoul," she said, putting them on an intimate level from the start. "Thank you."

Breva frowned, lifting his head as hissing words only he could hear stabbed through his brain. For a moment, his face took on an annoyed look then the lines smoothed out and the man's natural good nature replaced the irritation.

"He reads minds, wench," Breva told her.

Ardor lifted her head and looked up into the amused eyes of the man squatting beside her. "What?" she asked.

"Every thought that enters that pretty little head of yours is intercepted by him." He grinned. "Wanna know what he just told me?"

"I didn't hear—"

"Oh, you wouldn't hear him, Ardor," he said, stressing her name. "And you won't unless you exchange blood with him."

Her eyes widening into saucers, Ardor leapt up from the floor, putting distance between them. The man who slowly got to his feet was laughing at her, his eyes filled with mirth. He was standing there with his hands on his hips, his handsome face cocked to one side, one thick black brow lifted.

"Do you want to know what he said?"

Ardor shook her head. "No, I don't—"

"He said you were trying to play me," Breva interrupted. "You were attempting to become—how did he put it?—good friends with me."

A muscle clenched in Ardor's jaw for she knew Lord Savidos had read her mind. "Get out," she said, backing up until she was wedged in the corner of her cell.

Breva sighed deeply. "It wouldn't have worked anyway, wench," he said as though disappointed. "Lord Savidos has claimed you as his own and he'd have pulled out my heart—or torn off my cock—before he'd allow me to touch you."

"Get out!" Ardor shouted.

Breva shrugged. "I'm going," he said, sauntering lazily to the cell door. He stopped and stood there for a moment as though listening then turned to face her, a strange look on his face.

"I'm not as intimidated by him as I pretend to be, though, wench," he said, wincing at the words.

"Shouldn't you hide your thoughts from him?" she threw at him. "Aren't you worried he'll tear off your pecker?"

A look of hurt flitted over Breva's handsome features. "You think me a coward, wench?" He lifted his head. "I'm not. If I want something, I will stand up and fight for it."

"Just get out!" she said, sliding down to sit with her back against the wall.

"Since you don't enjoy my company, I'll have an escort come to take you onto the *Sangunar*, our ship." He paused. "Correction. Since you are a Riezell Guardian, I'll make that a quartet of escorts, but I'll see that you get more comfortable quarters."

"Don't bother," she said.

"It's a long trip to Riezell Nine, wench. I don't think you want to sleep on the cold floor when a warm bunk would be easier on your bones," Breva said.

His last word triggered a question in Ardor's feverishly working mind and she looked up from the floor. "What happened to his face? That is a mask he's wearing to hide whatever is underneath, isn't it?"

Breva was already out in the corridor but turned back. "Masks—even those as savage as the one he wears—are designed to hide deeper scars, wench. To him, those scars are much worse than the mask that covers them."

Ardor winced, her active imagination supplying a hideously formed countenance beneath the skeletal mask.

"Don't worry, Ardor," Breva said in a low voice. "I won't let him hurt you."

With that said, Breva left, the cell door swishing shut behind him.

* * * * *

“Don’t worry, Ardor, I won’t let him hurt you?” Lord Savidos asked in a mincing tone.

“You think I don’t know what you’re planning?” Brevia countered as he poured himself a glass of plum wine.

“You think I won’t slap your scrawny ass in the brig if you don’t stop baiting me?”

Brevia made a rude sound. He pushed the skeleton mask lying on the table aside to place his glass on the top between them. “Use me, refuse me or even confuse me, *chanto*, but never accuse me of being dense.” He wagged his eyebrows. “I know you all too well.”

“How ‘bout abusing, bruising or even contusing you, you conceited prick?” Lord Savidos growled.

“Oooh,” Brevia said, pretending to shiver. “I’m quaking here!”

“You should be,” his overlord retorted. He leaned back in his chair, the two front legs off the floor. “It’s been awhile since I personally tortured a prisoner.”

Brevia took a sip of his wine then put the glass down, rolling it on its round base as he glanced at his companion from under his lashes. “Which of us are you planning on laying hands to – me or her?”

A slow, savage grin stretched Lord Savidos’ lips. “What do you think, Raoul?”

“I think you might be starting a fire by playing with that one, *chanto*,” Brevia said, all humor gone from his eyes. “She’s now their Primary.”

“As I am *our* Primary,” Lord Savidos countered.

“She’s dangerous.”

Lord Savidos cocked a brow. “And I’m not?”

Brevia sighed. “Why do I bother trying to lecture you?” he asked. “You’ll do whatever it is you wish to.”

“You’ll do whatever it is you wish to’,” Lord Savidos repeated, his tone, voice and speech pattern identical to the man sitting across from him.

Grinding his teeth, Brevia got up to pour himself another glass of wine. “I wish,” he said, “I had a silver marc for every time you’ve impersonated me and one for every whipping I got when we were boys. Your unnatural gift has stung my backside many a time!”

The Reaper drained his glass then set it aside. Crossing his arms over his wide chest, he studied the man across from him. “And how many times has that unnatural gift gotten your uptight ass out of a sling, *chanto*?”

“Not nearly enough times to warrant all the pain visited on my uptight ass over the years!” Brevia declared.

Lord Savidos’ cocky grin remained in place as he lowered the chair legs and stood. “I’ll try to remember to send you a few mental pictures of how your borrowed ass will be pleasuring our little Riezell Guardian tonight,” he quipped.

"Oh, please don't!" Breva insisted with a whine. "I don't want to know what vulgar things you'll be doing to that defenseless woman."

"Me?" the Reaper asked. "I won't be doing anything to her, Raoul." He held up his hands and wagged his fingers. "It will be all you."

"Don't I wish," Breva mumbled under his breath. When the man standing beside him did not move, the Storian major glanced up to find steely eyes glittering at him. Without the benefit of the mask, Lord Savidos' face was flint-hard.

"When I'm through with her, you can have her, *chanto*."

"Will you be able to?" Breva asked. "Wasn't there some restriction about Reapers never mating with a woman they had no intention of staying with?"

"You fuck 'em and you forget 'em," his overlord replied.

"But from what the Mage told you —"

"The Mage had his perverted eyes on me," Lord Savidos said with narrowed eyes. "He didn't want me touching women at all. Believe me, *chanto*, I'll screw her, and when I've had my fill, I'll turn her shapely ass over to you."

Breva shrugged carelessly although the hair was stirring on the back of his neck. "You'd better hope you'll be able to give her up to me that easily when you're finished with her," he said.

Lord Savidos laughed. "That's something you don't have to worry about."

Sitting alone at the table after his overlord was gone, Breva stared across the room, his bottom lip tucked between his teeth. Worry had settled on his handsome face and concern sparked from his black eyes.

It had been a long time since the Reaper had indulged himself with a pleasure 'bot and perhaps that was why he desired this one woman. Rarely did the man seem to need sexual gratification, and when he did, he handled it efficiently and as clinically as possible by calling for one of the synthetics that serviced the troops.

But Breva worried nonetheless for something told him once his overlord lay with Ardor Kahn, nothing between heaven or hell could take her from him.

Chapter Three

Smirking at the four heavily armed guards who had escorted her to a cell onboard the *Sangunar*, Ardor waited while one wary man unchained the shackles on her wrists and a second got quickly to his feet after freeing her ankles from the chains that had made it hard for her to walk. She feigned an attack move at them and the two jumped as though spurred, fleeing back to the safety of their fellow guards who were standing just outside the door to the cell, stun wands pointed at her.

The contemptuous laugh that peeled from her grinning lips as she turned her back on the men should have made it clear she did not consider them a threat. Walking over to the bunk lashed to the wall on a platform jutting out from the titanium panel, she sat down, stretched out, crossed her ankles and stuck her laced fingers beneath her head. Completely ignoring the guards, she gave her attention to the soundproof panels on the ceiling, beginning to count the holes in the first panel.

"Are you one of those strange Riezellians who don't eat meat?" the head guard inquired around a tight jaw.

Not bothering to turn her face to her interrogator, Ardor replied, "Nope."

"Do you have any special dietary needs?"

Surprised by the question, she ceased her counting and looked over at the guard. "Why do you ask?"

"Major Breva wishes to know in case there is something you need provided for you."

Her mind calculating at an incredible speed, she shrugged. "Is that something you ask all your prisoners, Lieutenant?"

The guard rolled his eyes. "Only those who interest the overlord or his 2-I-C," he replied as though the answer had to be dragged from him.

"I see," she said then returned her gaze to the ceiling. "No, I have no special need save the one to escape."

"Huh," the guard said with a grunt. "Don't hold your breath."

"We'll see," she whispered as the cell door shushed to a close.

Almost immediately, the bright light overhead began to dim. At first Ardor thought it was out of courtesy, but as the light continued to lower, she felt a stirring of uneasiness. Uncrossing her ankles, she drew her knees up, lifted herself on her elbows and turned to watch the door. She could feel the beat of her heart increasing with each dimming of the lights and when the cell was cast into complete darkness, she scooted up on the bunk, her knees encircled into the perimeter of her arms.

She would never know how long she sat that way—her head turned toward the door—before she felt the presence beyond the closed portal. Though she had heard no sound, been given no indication that there was someone lurking outside her cell, she could feel the strange emanations flowing forth, seemingly radiating through the thick panel. When the door slowly slid open and light poured in from the corridor, she was momentarily blinded and once more put an arm up to block the piercing pain.

"My apologies, wench," she heard someone say and recognized the voice of Major Breva. "I didn't think."

The door shushed to behind him and as it did, darkness settled upon the cell. Ardor became aware of him moving toward her through the gloom. She tensed, ready to spring at him if he made a threatening move.

"I am not afraid of him, you know," he stated.

She felt the lower end of the bunk's pad compress and knew he had taken a seat there, although he made no attempt to touch her.

"I have learned to block my thoughts from him and I can teach you to do the same."

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

"I can help you," he replied.

"Help me how?"

There was a slight pause then he said, "To escape."

Ardor knew the answer before she asked the question but wanted the situation clarified. "In exchange for what?"

"You." He said it boldly, almost smugly, and the one word was deafening in the still room.

"What makes you think I am negotiable?" she asked, and nearly screamed when she felt his hand on her ankle.

For a long moment, his hand spanned her flesh then she heard a low growl that widened her eyes and took away her breath.

"You were not to be shackled," he said.

She exhaled the air from her lungs. "I think they fear me, warrior," she told him.

"They should, but no orders were given to restrain you in that manner."

His fingers touched a sore spot on the inside of her ankle where the shackle band had rubbed as she walked. He caressed it, massaging away the pain until she could no longer feel the discomfort.

"My ancestors were healers, *médicacios*," he said. "The power to cure is in our blood."

His hand moved up her leg, his fingers stroking beneath the loose pants leg of her prison jumpsuit, his thumb making tiny circles on the side of her.

Ardor had lost her virginity at the ripe old age of sixteen and had never looked back. Not having regretted the supposed loss of her innocence to the blue-eyed Serenian

who had professed undying devotion to her, but who had run off the very next week with a sloe-eyed Oceanian girl, the Riezell Guardian took her gratification where she found it. Uninhibited, she thoroughly enjoyed the sexual act. Nevertheless, she was careful with whom she indulged her pleasures and was not given to acting either rashly or imprudently. Though a lover of the sensuous, she maintained a strict moral code that had served her well over the last twelve years since being separated from her maidenhead.

Then again, she thought as she made a conscious effort to allow her leg muscles to relax, she'd never been one to overlook any opportunity that might work to her advantage. Prudery had no place in her life when her life – and freedom – were at stake.

"If I give myself to you," she said, striving to see his face through the darkness, "will he still force himself on me?"

The hand caressing her calf stilled and he said nothing for a moment, then when he spoke, his voice was low and gravelly. "Do you fear him that much?"

"I don't fear him at all," she was quick to answer. "I just don't want his cadaverous hands on me."

She thought she heard a soft chuckle a fraction of a second before his hand resumed its gentle rubbing.

"Wench, his hands are no different from mine."

"Those are gloves he wears?" she asked. "Is that why I felt flesh touch my face?"

"It's all part of the illusion," he said, moving his hand up her leg until it could go no further, stopping at the back of her knee where he eased his fingers back and forth across the very soft skin there.

"And that hellish red glow in his eyes?"

"Ah, well, that, I'm afraid, happens when he's upset. He doesn't have any control over the sanguinity of his gaze. Some say it reflects the flames that consumed him long ago."

Ardor could not suppress the shudder that ran from her shoulders down her back. She envisioned the hulk of the reaper standing amidst burning faggots, the flesh from his face melting into the leaping conflagration as his cape went up in fiery sparks.

"Imagination can be a troublesome thing," the man sitting at the foot of her bunk said softly. "What we see in our mind's eye isn't necessarily the true reflection of what really happened."

"Are you saying he wasn't burned?"

"He was, but time and destiny healed him. Why does that concern you?"

"I was burned a long time ago," Ardor said. "I remember all too well what it felt like."

He eased his hand from beneath her pants leg. "Burned how, wench? Where?"

Ardor shook her head. "It is something I do not discuss nor do I like to think on it."

The bunk mattress shifted beneath her rump and she realized he had moved closer to her. She could feel the touch of his hip against the side of her foot.

"Then you should have a measure of compassion for those who have known the kiss of fire," he reminded her.

Although she could not see him—not even his outline—she knew when he braced his hand on the wall beside her, effectively pinning her in, his arm spanned over her waist. He was so close she could feel the heat of his body and smell the crispness of his khaki uniform.

"Do you?" he asked.

She dragged her mind away from the picture of him she had stored in her mind. "Do I what?"

"Have a measure of compassion for the Reaper?"

"Why should I?" she asked.

He sighed deeply, then she felt his free hand on her upper arm, slowly running from elbow to shoulder to elbow and back again beneath the wide short sleeve of the jumpsuit. His palm was callused like his overlord's and she sensed strength in that gentle touch from which she knew it would be hard to break away.

"Perhaps," he said, "because he suffered greatly from the kiss of the flames that touched him?"

"Is that what made him a monster or was he one before the fire claimed his hateful face?" she inquired.

His fingers slid around her biceps, shackling her, the pressure giving her a gauge of his power. "If you are asking if he was a beast before he knew the inferno into which he was pushed, I can honestly say he was more creature than man. When he came out of that pit, he was something far less than human and filled with a vengeance that made him what he is today."

"His enemies tried to kill him?"

"Aye," he said and she could hear dark bitterness in his tone. "They attempted to burn him alive but they didn't count on his parasite saving him."

"Parasite?" she repeated.

"It is what lives inside him and makes him what he is."

"By the gods!" she exclaimed. "You're talking about a Reaper!"

"Isn't that what I've been calling him?" he asked in an amused tone.

"I thought you were trying to frighten me. I read a portion of the Intel report and couldn't believe such beings really exist. Was he one of the research subjects at the med facility?" she asked, fear shifting through her like hot magma.

"He didn't know there were Reapers there until just recently. If he'd known sooner, believe me, he would have freed them."

"Then where did he come from if not the med facility?" she asked. "Are there more Reapers other than those that were on R-9?"

"I have been told there are many of them scattered across the megaverse."

"You mean other than the ones who were liberated from the med facility?" she asked with a gasp. "How many are you talking about?"

She felt him shrug. "Who knows?"

Ardor realized she was shivering uncontrollably. Something that had been said before was coming back to push at her mind — *unless you exchange blood with him*. That thought filled her with horror. The red glow of his demonic stare, the powerful vibrations he gave off, his ability to read her mind and to send his thoughts to Brevia — it all added up, the sum of which brought dismay to the stalwart Riezell Guardian.

"He's going to turn me," she said, her voice quivering.

"Not if you don't wish it," her companion replied.

"I don't want to be a bloodsucker!" she said and slammed her hands over her face.

"Nor will you be unless it is what you desire," he said, amusement in his tone, and slipped his arms around her. He pulled her into his embrace, resting his chin on the top of her head. "I will make sure of it, wench."

"Please keep him away from me," she pleaded, hating the begging in her voice, but the thought of becoming one of the undead filled her with such terror she would do anything to avoid it.

"Give yourself to me and I will see the beast stays away from you," he swore.

"You swear it?"

"On my honor, I swear it."

His hands were gentle on her back, soothing away her fears, calming her. Her arms were trapped between them but she wriggled them free until she could wrap them around his waist. Laying her head on his chest, she could hear the steady beat of his heart beneath the uniform tunic and was reassured by the sound.

"I thought it was nothing more than a tale told to frighten children before I read the Intel report," she said. "I had no idea there really were such atrocities."

Strong, powerful arms tightened around her almost painfully at those words but Ardor was lost in her own misery — too unnerved to notice. She clung to him — sensing his willingness to help her. She could feel his warm breath fanning her hair, smell the clean scent of him, the potency of his rugged maleness pressing against her.

He was a handsome man, she thought. His dark good looks and brawny body would have garnered her notice if she was out trolling in a bar for an evening's entertainment. His hands were gentle, his voice low and sensuous. There was nothing about him that was repulsive or that generated unease within her.

Not like his vile overlord.

He tucked his finger under her chin and lifted her face. The moment his lips closed over hers, Ardor felt a deep clenching in her belly. She groaned at the pleasurable feeling.

"You like that?" he asked.

Ardor knew she needed this man and the best way she knew to ensure his loyalty to her was to get intimate. She'd used sex before on an assignment and had had no qualms about it. It was something that had to be done and it rarely turned personal.

"Aye," she said running the palm of her hand up his chest. "I like it very much."

His kisses were slow but held a vast volume of heat within them that set Ardor's blood to boiling. The tongue he thrust into her mouth tasted of lemons.

She plucked at the buttons of his tunic, opening the khaki garment halfway down his chest so she could insinuate her hand into the crisp hairs adorning his chest. She slid her fingers over one taut male nipple and smiled as he drew in a sharp breath.

"Easy, wench," he said, his voice gruff.

"You are so hard," she said, referring to his nipple.

"And nigh to bursting if you don't stop that," he threatened.

She ran her tongue over the V-shaped hollow at the base of his throat. "What," she asked, "is this called? Do you know?"

"The suprasternal notch," he answered. "Why?"

"It is such a mysterious part of our bodies," she said. "So sensuous."

"There's nothing sensuous about it. It is simply where the collarbones come together."

"You don't want me to do this, then?" she asked, licking the discussed area and pressing her lips to it.

"For the sake of argument, let's say I don't mind," he said, threading his fingers through her hair and holding her head as she continued to lave his throat.

She moved her lips up until she was kissing him beneath the chin. She could feel the hard, steady pounding of his blood rushing through facial artery. Over his chin she slid her lips until she took his mouth in a soft, fleeting kiss before moving on to the tip of his nose.

"You are a very handsome man," she said.

"You should see my brother," he said in a husky tone.

"Is he more handsome than you?" she asked, trailing her kisses up the bridge of his nose and onto one closed eyelid.

"Some say he is, aye," he answered gruffly.

"Not possible," she denied as she moved to kiss the other eyelid.

"Don't knock what you haven't seen, wench," he told her.

Ardor laughed softly and laid her head against his shoulder. "What do you want from me, Major?"

"Let me show you," he said.

He pushed her down upon the bunk and took hold of the zipper of her jumpsuit. He paused—expecting her to protest—but when she didn't, he eased the zipper down to her waist.

Gently he ran his hands inside the opening of the jumpsuit and caressed the soft flesh. He touched the lace of her bra and grunted. "Is this a regulation garment, wench?" he asked.

"Standard issue," she reported with a slight snort.

He eased his palm over one lace-clad breast and kneaded it tenderly. "Works for me," he said.

Ardor drew in her breath as he tugged the bra down with his thumb and touched the satiny smoothness of her areola. He was paused just above her nipple and she ached to have him touch it, to draw it into his mouth.

"Umm," he said and leaned in to nuzzle her neck.

He smelled so good to her—a trace of cinnamon oil, a bit of lemon, a whiff of male muskiness that set her juices to flowing.

Almost as though he knew how his touch was affecting her, he lowered his hand from her breast—eliciting a mild protest from Ardor's lips—but when he slid his palm down her side then over her belly and past the elastic waistband of the jumpsuit, she could not stop the groan that pushed from her throat.

Before she could object, he stood up and reached down to lift her to a sitting position. Without saying a word, he peeled the short sleeves of the jumpsuit from her shoulders and pushed it down her back. Again, without so much as an audible breath, he eased the garment from under her hips and drew them down her legs, slipping off her prison-issue canvas shoes before removing the jumpsuit completely.

Wishing she could see his face, all she could sense was his dark outline as he hovered over her. The coolness of the air flowing over her brought goose bumps to her flesh and she felt naked—even with the bra and panties she was wearing—and totally vulnerable to the man in the cell with her.

"Your skin is like warm velvet," she heard him say as he trailed his fingers along her thigh.

Tensing only a little as he unhooked the front closure of her bra and spread it back, she sighed deeply as his calloused hands covered her breasts. The heat from his palm sent spirals of desire racing along her nerve endings as he lightly caressed her, hefting the heavy globes in his hands as though weighing them.

"You are all woman, Ardor Kahn," he said in a throaty voice.

His fingertips slipped over her nipple then began circling it, hardening the little bud with each slow circuit. When he pinched it lightly between his thumb and middle finger, she could not stop herself from arching up on the bunk, pressing against his questing hand.

"Raoul, please," she said and felt his hand still.

"Shush," he said and moved his attention to her other demanding breast.

He was playing with her, she thought, but it was a game she, too, was good at it. His body was close enough for her touch and she reached out to put her hand between his legs, at the apex of his thighs.

His hastily indrawn breath pleased her and she massaged him through the stiff khaki of his uniform pants. He was hard—his tool like a stone as it leapt beneath her hand.

She was expecting him to strip and join her on the bunk. What she was not expecting was him to step back, away from her touch and take the waistband of her panties in his hands and drag them down and off her long legs.

Feeling even more exposed, Ardor felt her heart trip-hammering in her ears. As his hands spanned her waist—gripping her—her eyes flared wide.

"Aren't you going to take your clothes off?" she asked.

He said nothing, just increased his hold on her hips.

The bunk upon which she lay protruded out from the titanium walls like a shelf. Her head almost touched the adjoining wall but the bunk ended a good three feet from the opposite wall—just enough space for him to slide onto and go to his knees, dragging her down to the end of the bunk, scooting his arms under her knees and hefting her legs over his broad shoulders.

Realizing what he was about to do, Ardor reached down to grab his hair but before she could, his mouth was between her, and her world was being rocked in a way she had never experienced.

Kurt Bowen had been good at oral sex—professionally so—and his mouth was a trained weapon. He could do things with his lips and tongue she had never imagined, but the expertise with which the man holding her thighs spread apart was a master of the act.

Her captor was using his thumb and forefinger to knead her outer labia, squeezing the lips together in a rhythmic cadence that sent quivers through Ardor's lower belly. He raked his short nails down the interior pathway from clitoral hood to her vaginal opening. It was a sweet sensation that made her inner lips itch—craving more of his delicate stroke.

As though sensing her need, he dwelt on one particularly itchy area just beside her clitoral hood until she sighed. Moving on, he very slowly and with great care inserted one long finger into her cunt and arched it up and down, stroking the vaginal floor.

Ardor could feel her love juices flowing and she was ready for the hard cock she had felt between his thighs, but when she started to speak, he hushed her, and before she could bat an eye, his lips were plying over her heated flesh.

His tongue was a wicked thing, she thought, as he plied it first along the inside of her upper thighs then swooping it across her aroused clitoris only to thrust it devilishly

into the inner folds—lapping from top to bottom as though he was a man dying of thirst. He pressed it into her opening then dragged it upward until she cried out, the tip of that deadly muscle touching her enflamed clitoris. He swirled his wet, mobile mass of tissue around and around her outer lips, lapping at her until she was writhing beneath him.

“Inside me,” she pleaded, panting.

“Like this?” he countered, and inserted his middle finger deep within her.

Ardor groaned, grabbing his hair and holding on as though she was afraid she’d slip off into the vast reaches of the megaverse.

His finger was inside her—twisting, going deep. He pulled it out and she could hear him sucking the wetness from his finger, and she nearly came.

“Raoul, please!” she begged him.

The finger that stabbed into her cunt was only a tad less gentle than it had been, but the lips and teeth that latched onto her clitoral hood did so with a proprietary suction that made her cry out.

He was working her clitoris with the tip of his tongue—poking and swirling—until she could stand the friction no longer. She pulled his hair roughly but he paid no heed to her. His finger turned within her and she felt him touch something that made her tighten her legs around his neck.

Between the swirling attack on her clit and the pressing on whatever it was he was pressing on sent Ardor over the edge with a shriek, her neck arching back. Ripple after ripple moved through her with a ferocity she could never have imagined. Nothing—no one—had ever given her such a climax and she quivered from head to toe and back again. For the first time in her life, her toes curled and then the unthinkable happened—the ripples started again and with even more force.

“Raoul!” she screamed, jerking her fingers in his hair.

He pulled his finger from her, tossed his head to break her hold on him, pushed her legs down and scooted over her, stretching his brawny body atop hers, pressing her down upon the bunk.

A voice tight with what could only be annoyance hissed from his lips. “*Creo la vez próxima que usted llamará mi nombre más bien que el suyo.*”

Ardor blinked. She had learned enough Storian to translate what he had said—“I believe next time you will call my name rather than his”.

“Who?” she asked and felt him stiffen, no doubt surprised she had understood him.

Before she could question him further, he pushed himself off her and strode toward the cell door.

“We will be nearing Riezell Nine in about six hours,” he said. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep? Who knows how long it will take to remove that damned implant in your brain.”

Ardor sat up as though she'd been pulled by strings. "Implant?" she echoed. "What implant?"

He hesitated then let out a long breath. "So they didn't tell you what they had done?"

"What implant?" she demanded, reaching up to touch the side of her head.

"Your masters at Command had their techs in the sublims lab insert a retinal tracker in your thalamus. It sends back whatever you see to them, although we're fairly sure it doesn't have auditory probes as well. We won't know for sure until it is removed."

Fury rippled through Ardor and she clenched her teeth together so tightly her jaw began to throb with the pressure. That she hadn't been asked, her permission granted, sent waves of hurt through her entire body. Would they have done such a thing to Chastain Neff? Would they have dared?

"Damn him," she said, tears filling her eyes.

"What him?" he asked. "Who do you mean?"

"I want that thing out of me!" she said.

"Until we reach that cave you have two choices as I see it."

Ardor raised her head, wishing she could see his face for his tone was sharper than she felt was warranted. "What choices?"

"You can either be unconscious or securely blindfolded. There is no way you will be allowed to transmit the location of the cave to your masters."

The thought of being drugged into oblivion worried Ardor. Who knew what the Storians might do to her in such a state?

"Blindfold me," she said, scrambling off the bunk to recover her jumpsuit. Not even bothering to put on her underwear, she dragged the prison garb on as soon as she found it.

"Sleep," he ordered. "Don't worry about the implant. I doubt it will cause you any discomfort. If it was going to, it would have before now."

Rubbing at the side of her head, Ardor had to agree with him, although she could swear she felt something wriggling around inside her skull.

"Rest, wench," he said, his tone filled with laughter. "I'll keep the bogeymen away."

"Just keep the cadaver away," she asked.

The door to her cell snicked open and she caught just a glimpse of his back as he exited. He seemed taller than she remembered.

Striding briskly down the corridor, the Reaper's smile would have frightened anyone who saw it as he shifted from Breva's form into his own. It was a talent not many like him had the ability to do, but he had perfected human-changing and along

with his ability to shape shift into the form of a wolf or a raven, that talent had kept him out of his enemies' hands.

He was acutely uncomfortable in the khaki material of his 2-I-C's uniform, much preferring the black silk shirt and black leather britches that marked him as a Reaper. He itched to rid himself of the scratchy cotton, and wished he could tear Breva's unspeakable garment from him and walk naked through the corridors.

"That would scare the hell out of my men," he said with a snort.

Not that he cared. He was enjoying himself, for whenever he could impersonate Breva, he did. Such shenanigans never failed to amuse him and irritate the hell out of Breva. Waiting at the elevator that would take him up to his quarters, he rearranged the molecular structure of his face to that of Raoul Breva's once more. It wouldn't do for anyone—not even his own crew—to see him without his mask. There would be repercussions that would ripple from the *Sangunar* to Stori and back again.

Reapercussions, he corrected in his mind as the elevator door opened and laughed at his play on the word.

His enemies thought they had killed him in the fire pit. It was not yet time for them to find out they hadn't.

Chapter Four

Despite thinking she would not, Ardor had slept soundly, unaware of the odorless, invisible gas that had wafted into her cell to make sure she did. Had she known she'd been handled in that way, she would have been furious, but awaking refreshed, as calm as her present circumstances allowed, she sat up and ran her fingers through the thick cascade of her dark hair.

And became aware of a fledgling headache that ordinarily would not have bothered her but now—cognizant of the implant Brevia had told her had been inserted into her brain—even the most minute of twinges concerned her. Putting a hand to her temple, she cursed Kurt Bowen and his team of treacherous lab techs.

“‘I love you,’” she mimicked him, thinking of the wild night they'd spent before she'd taken leave. “You love me, all right, you two-faced bastard!”

Entertaining thoughts of how she planned on breaking off relations with the Colonel made her head hurt even more. When the door to her cell slid back, the lights came up and a guard walked in carrying a tray of food, the smell made her sick to her stomach.

“I was told to tell you we're thirty minutes from R-9,” the guard said, his upper lip twisted as he marched over to her bunk and bent over to place the food tray at the bottom of her bunk. The dishes rattled as he dropped the tray and turned to leave. He stopped, looking at her discarded bra and made a hateful sound with his lips.

Eyeing the unusual assortment of food on the tray, Ardor found herself asking the guard if such was the normal fare for prisoners.

The guard turned and his eyes raked over her. “Only for one of Major Brevia's whores,” he snapped and turned his back on her.

Despite the nausea lurking in her throat, Ardor cursed vehemently, trying to push aside the pain in her head. To be thought of as *any* man's whore was an affront, and to be called one to her face angered her to the point of wanting to slit the guard's throat.

The smells coming from the food were not only making her nausea worse, they were adding to the pain gathering in her temples. She rubbed at the discomfort, swallowed the bile pushing up her esophagus, and—holding her breath—got up from the bunk, picked up the food and carried it to the far corner of the cell where she placed it on the floor.

Straightening up, the pain seemed to get worse so she stumbled back to the bunk and laid down, drawing her knees up to lie there in a fetal position, the side of her face pressed into the soft pillow. She had not moved when Brevia entered her cell.

The Storian major cast a look at the uneaten food and frowned. "It isn't poisoned, wench," he said.

"Did you mean what you said last night?" she muttered, recognizing his voice though she had not opened her eyes.

Breva flinched. Having no idea what his overlord had said, he simply stated that he never said anything he didn't mean. "What particular thing are you referring to, wench?"

"That you will protect me from the Reaper. You won't let him rape me."

Scrunching his face up, Breva nodded. "Aye, I meant it." He took a step closer to the bunk. "Did you, ah, enjoy last evening?"

"You are very good with your tongue, Major," she replied.

Breva felt the heat wash up his face and had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from groaning.

"I slept well, but now I hurt."

Concern entered Breva's eyes and he hurried to the bunk, squatting down beside it. "He..." He cleared his throat and when he spoke, he sounded apologetic. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Ardor forced her eyes open but the pain was so intense, she quickly closed them again. "It's the implant," she said. "I felt fine when I woke but as soon as I sat up, my head started hurting."

Breva felt rather than heard movement behind him and looked around to see the Reaper standing in the doorway. "Her head is —"

"I know," Lord Savidos cut him off. "I sent a guard to procure something to ease her pain until we can gain the caverns."

"No drugs," Ardor said with more force than had been prudent for she gagged, twisting over the side of the bunk as agony stabbed into her temples.

Breva jumped out of the way but when nothing but ungodly retching came from the woman's throat, he knew she had nothing in her belly to bring up. He sat down beside her and held his hand against her forehead, bracing her as she continued to dry-heave.

"You are being foolish, wench," the Reaper grumbled then spoke to Breva in the old language.

"No drugs!" Ardor repeated.

"Lord Savidos understands your concern but he doesn't believe you will be able to make the trek to the caverns in your condition. Please let us —"

"No drugs," she said, her voice weak, her throat strained from the gagging.

Breva looked up as his overlord bid him leave. "*Chanto*," he said, "she is..."

The Reaper's eyes glowed ruby red behind his mask and he jerked a gloved thumb behind him, ordering his 2-I-C from the cell.

Removing his hand from Ardor's forehead, Breva stood up and stalked to the door, a muscle working in his jaw. *"What are you about?"* he demanded in the old language as he passed.

"She is in agony," his overlord replied in the same language. *"I will have her out before we venture into the dust. Tell the techs to fill the room with olvido then arrange for a litter to carry her to the base camp."*

"No drugs," Ardor said once more, somehow understanding that was what the conversation was about, though she could not make out the words.

Breva stared into the Reaper's crimson eyes for a moment then nodded curtly. *"You'd best clear out if you don't want us carrying you to the caverns, chanto!"*

Ardor was aware of Breva leaving but even more aware of the man standing over her, staring down at her. She wedged one eye open long enough to take in the skeletal mask covering his face and the sweep of the black wool robe encasing his tall frame, then closed it.

"Go away," she ordered.

Images of her lying naked in a field of daisies flitted unbidden through Ardor's mind. She could feel warm air wafting over her flesh and smell the sweet scent of gardenia and honeysuckle.

"Stop it," she said, knowing he was sending her the unwanted image.

He took a step closer to the bunk.

"If you rape me, I damned well might stroke out on you as bad as I hurt," she warned him and was stunned when he laughed at her comment. Gritting her teeth she forced both eyes open and glared up at him. "I," she said, punctuating each word as she spoke. "Am. Not. Afraid. Of. You."

He snorted rudely then turned, his robe swirling behind him as he exited the cell, the door closing quickly behind him.

Unaware she was casting the Reaper to the Abyss, Ardor began mumbling to herself. The pain in her head had dramatically decreased with his departure and in her rapidly advancing state of lassitude, she reasoned it had to have been his appearance that had brought about the pain in the first place.

Turning to her back, she drew her knees up and lay there with her hands folded together at her waist. She felt as though she was floating but it didn't occur to her that she'd been drugged. Unbeknownst to her, she was inhaling the same narcotic that had put her to sleep the evening before.

"Damned ugly son of a bitch," she called Lord Savidos then thought about what she'd said. His face might be as ugly as an overcooked egg but his voice had been sultry and mesmerizing as he had told her she was being foolish. That and when he had told Breva he had ordered something for her pain had been the first words she'd heard him speak in anything other than the grating, throaty whisper in a language she could not understand.

"I'd know that sexy voice anywhere," she crooned as she watched spirals of multicolored lights dancing above her.

Gone entirely was the pain in her temples and try as hard as she could, she didn't seem able to keep her eyes from closing. Her lips thrust out in a pout for the pretty lights were fascinating as they swirled across the ceiling. In some distant part of her brain she knew she'd been drugged against her will but, somehow, it just didn't seem to matter.

Would he, she wondered as she lay there struggling to keep her eyes open and traced the spiraling lights with a limp hand, be as sensuous as his voice? Would his cock be long and slender, or longer yet with a circumference that would take her breath away? Did those skeletal gloves hide strong, powerful fingers with just the right amount of dark hair on the backs of his hand to pluck at after a long bout of sex?

"Beauty and the beast," she whispered, remembering the old Terran fairy tale she'd read as a child. "That is what we are. Beauty and the beast."

He was tall. That much she knew. She suspected he was slender beneath the billowing robe. If he'd been overweight with a potbelly, she'd have known, she reasoned. He couldn't be so tall if his legs were bowed or he was knock-kneed.

"So what if he has a face like boiled mulch?" she asked, watching two spirals of colored light—pink and blue—converging on one another as though doing a mating dance along the ceiling. "He has his mask."

But, she thought—and her lips thrust out in a sullen pout—how would he kiss her if he was nothing but charred and oozing flesh beneath that dreadful mask? What would his tongue feel like darting between her lips? Would she be able to stand having his rubbery lips and slippery, puckered flesh pressed against her breasts, his teeth nibbling at her nipples? Would he be as masterful as Raoul had been?

She thought about that for a moment then smiled happily.

"He has fingernails, I'm sure," Ardor decided as she lay there. "Better to pluck with than teeth anyway."

Lassitude had settled a warm blanket over her and her thoughts. She knew she was entertaining views she would not have had had she been totally aware. *Funny, she thought, how you always seemed to see things so clearly when you were in a semi-cognizant state.*

Ardor laughed and sucked in her breath as the two colors collided, meshed, pulling against one another then became one shade of pale violet.

"We can do it once," she finally decided. "If I don't like it, we won't do it again."

And if he proved to be too much of a burden, there was always Raoul Brevia.

One way or another, she determined, she'd escape the Storians. It was just a matter of which man she'd use to do it.

* * * * *

Four guards carried the litter with the Riezell Guardian's unconscious body tucked beneath a thick gauze canopy, which protected her from the whirlwinds of dust that could choke her. Trudging through the thick red sand, Lord Savidos and his men wore breathing masks to filter out the deadly dust spiraling around them in vortexes—some as wide as a mile across at the apex. Stinging shards of sand ripped at the troops but each wore a heavy robe to shield them. Only the sound of the grains hitting the padded wool garments and the howl of the ferocious winds could be heard.

From where the *Sangunar* had landed to the entrance of the hidden caverns deep within Riezell Nine where the Storian base camp was located was a good mile of steady uphill climbing in shifting sands that pulled at the men's boots and threatened to bog them down. It was a tedious trek—tiring and dangerous—for the dunes had been known to completely cover a man in the blink of an eye, suffocating him beneath tons of red sand.

Beyond the unstable rim of the dune upon which the troops trod, sandblasted crags penciled up from the planet's surface in torturously twisted spires. Streaking upward like serpents turned to stone, the jagged formations bristled with strangely shaped pinnacles and slender crags resembling needles, their tops thin and sharply pointed. A low escarpment fanned out along the foundation of the bizarre formations and in the exact center of its squat base, an arched slab into the sandstone façade was slowly opening, revealing the cave's interior. The sooty depths of the entrance were obscured from time to time by the driving sand washing across it and spilling into the opening.

Scout ships streaked by overhead, but the sound of their engine throbs was obliterated by the fierce skirl of the winds. Those guard ships—their dull metallic hulls blending in with the sandstorm eddying up from the planet's floor—were on the prowl above The Web, keeping safe the secret passageway that led to the Storian base camp, holding at bay any Command vessel of their enemies who might be lurking nearby. Fully armed with particle beam cannons powerful enough to disintegrate even a battle cruiser, the ships patrolled R-9 airspace twenty-four/seven.

Drawing nearer to the dark entrance into the underground complex, Lord Savidos stopped, motioning the others to go on. He was scanning the surface of the sand-blown world, his psychic abilities roaming as far south as the medical research center where Ardor Kahn would perhaps need to be taken to rid her of the implant in her brain. His hands clenching and unclenching, the Reaper could feel his wrath building with every breath the Riezell Guardian took in her enforced slumber. He knew as soon as she woke, the debilitating pain from the retinal transponder would begin causing her pain. Why he should feel such fury concerning the situation baffled him. He could not understand why her feelings and sensations should bother him so keenly.

He didn't understand it and he didn't like it.

Breva looked back before entering the cavern's entrance. His overlord was at least five hundred feet back, turned away from him, facing the west where lightning forked viciously across the coppery sky. Violently, the wind was whipping the black robe around the Reaper's long legs and billowing it away from his muscular body. Since the

hood of the robe was securely attached to the skeletal mask Lord Savidos wore on his face, not one feature of the man's human appearance could be seen. At this distance, he appeared to be a statue—feet planted securely in the wavy sand—but Breva could feel the turmoil swirling inside his overlord's head.

"Do you want me to wait for you?"

The Reaper turned and looked at Breva, intercepting the mental question sent his way. He lifted a hand, waving his 2-I-C inside. *"Make her comfortable,"* he ordered though his lips never moved. *"But do not wake her. Send word to see if there is any way one of the Healers can come to her instead of us taking her to them."*

"And if they can't?"

"Do not wake her," Lord Savidos repeated. *"Keep her under until the storm passes and we can transfer her to the facility."*

"She won't like it."

"Nor would she like the pain that implant will give her. Keep her under."

Breva nodded though he doubted his overlord could see the action. He ducked into the cavern opening and followed the dimly lit rushes that lined the pathway into the belly of the mountain.

Standing on the barren world of R-9, the Reaper watched the storm gaining momentum, coming straight toward him. Such savage displays of nature tended to last three days, sometimes as long as a week. The lightning would strike all around the escarpment, shearing off sections of the tall spires, whittling them down. Anyone foolish enough to get caught out in the advancing storm deserved the fate waiting for them.

After taking one last look at the fiery stitches of destruction heading his way, he spun around and headed for the cave's entrance. One question was buzzing around in his head like an angry bee and he could not seem to mentally bat it away. It hunched his shoulders as he walked, tightened his gut and sent icy rivulets of rage down his spine.

"Damn him," she had cursed. *"He didn't trust me."*

Who, the Reaper wondered, was this man and what had he meant to Ardor Kahn to bring tears to her eyes?

Whoever he was, Lord Savidos thought, as he ducked under the stony archway and entered the mouth of the cave, his life was forfeit for having hurt her.

Chapter Five

"Why the hell aren't we receiving any Intel from Kahn?" Bowen demanded of the tech. He was standing beside the younger man, glaring at the Vid-Com screen where only blackness showed.

"I don't know, Sir. All we've gotten so far has been on the *Borstal*. There were guards going into and out of the communal cell, taking prisoners out but Captain Kahn was —"

"Major Kahn," Bowen corrected with a hiss.

"— Major Kahn," the man continued without missing a beat, "was left on her own with the lights turned out in the cell."

"Somehow they've made her," Bowen snarled, punching the palm of his left hand with the fist of his right. "What were you able to get after that?"

"The cell door was opened and bright light intruded to effectively blind her. After that, there were disjointed images of a man we believe is Major Raoul Breva, Lord Savidos' second-in-command, and what appears to be a masked figure lurking in the background."

"The Reaper," Bowen snapped. "That's what Savidos means in their language. I'd like to get a good look at the son-of-a-parasitic dog!"

The tech's fingers flew over his computer keyboard and when the image of Lord Savidos' skeletal camouflage filled the vid-screen, the colonel stepped back, drawing in a gasping breath. Even from across time and space, the menace in that gruesome disguise was palpable.

"There are other images of who we believe is Major Breva visiting Kahn's cell but since we did not include auditory pickup in the transponder, we don't have an idea what was being said."

"What about reading the lips of those talking to her?"

Letting out a long breath, the tech nodded. "That we can most likely do. I'll see who we have who might have that ability."

"They aren't torturing her, are they?" Bowen asked, chewing on a thumbnail as he stared at the image of the Reaper glaring back at him, crimson eyes glowing.

"I don't think so, Sir, but we can't be sure. Something is interfering with the broadcast of the Intel."

"Did you increase the signal as I ordered?"

A frown marred the youthful face of the tech. "I did exactly as you requested, Sir, although I am sure the increase in the signal had to have been felt by Major Kahn." He glanced up at the colonel. "That could be why we've received no further data from her."

"What do you mean?" Bowen challenged.

"The pain could have been so intense it either knocked her out or the Storians took it upon themselves to help relieve her discomfort and she's unconscious."

"Well, which is it?" Bowen snapped.

"Best guess?" the tech asked, grinding his teeth. "She's unconscious and I imagine the Storians have drugged her."

"Why would they treat her with any degree of consideration? She is a prisoner of war."

A slight smile hovered on the tech's lips. "From what I can gather from studying the interaction between Major Kahn and her captors, I would guess she's garnered the interest of both Major Breva and Lord Savidos. You know how Storians are with their women. Perhaps one of them intends to keep her as a harem woman."

"Not as long as I have breath in my body, they won't!" Bowen shouted. He slapped his hands behind his back and began pacing, his eyes shifting back and forth as he went over the situation. "Increase the signal a bit more. If there is still no data coming back to us—say within an hour—back it off to the level it was before. After that, try increasing the signal again later in the day."

"Aye, Sir," the tech acknowledged, his lips twisted.

"They'd better not hurt her is all I can say," Bowen growled. "I'll wipe their paltry world out of the galaxy if they do!"

* * * * *

Breva met his overlord as soon as the Reaper had passed the last security checkpoint into the underground base.

"Healer Talil says it would be best to bring the Guardian to him at the facility, but if that is not possible, he himself will gather what is needed and bring it with him when the storms subside," Breva said.

Lord Savidos cursed. "We can't keep her under that long," he complained. "Where is she?"

"I figured you'd want her as comfortable as possible so we put her in the queen's chambers."

"Well, it's not as though those quarters are being used, is it?" the Reaper asked, sensing the disapproval in Breva's tone.

"I hope you don't plan on—"

"Have the healers here had a look at her?" Lord Savidos put him off.

"Healer Idpa did a cursory exam," Breva replied.

"And?" his overlord prompted.

"He seems concerned that they won't be able to remove the implant without doing her serious damage." Brevia ran a hand over his face. "There was some blood that had oozed from her right ear and he said that wasn't a good sign."

"The bastards must have increased the signal strength when they couldn't get the visual feedback they expected."

"Idpa seemed to think that was the case, too."

"And they say we are barbarians," Lord Savidos snapped. He looked about them. "I feel like I have a ton of sand pressing down my spine. I think the vacuum system at the first airlock needs its filters cleaned. While I take a shower, see to it, Raoul."

"I live to serve," Brevia said with a sigh. "Now I can add janitorial service to my résumé."

"You'll need all the references you can get when I demote your ass to plebe," the Reaper said with a grunt.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Brevia said, rolling his eyes.

Lord Savidos feigned a punch at his 2-I-C's midsection then strolled off, surprising those at the checkpoint by whistling as he walked.

"Why is he in such a good mood?" one of the guards asked the major.

"Hell if I know," Brevia replied although there was a look of worry in his dark eyes.

"I don't think I've ever heard him whistle."

"I didn't know he knew how," Brevia returned.

"And it makes me uneasy," the guard admitted.

"It makes *you* uneasy?" Brevia quipped. "It scares the hell outta me!"

Listening in on the conversation between his second-in-command and the guard, the Reaper was actually grinning behind his grisly mask although the breathing apparatus that had been attached to his mask had given him a wicked headache. Prone to brutal migraines, he hoped a cluster wasn't announcing its imminent appearance. That fledgling headache was another reason he believed he felt so keenly for Ardor Kahn's condition.

Stopping at the corridor intersection that led to his own quarters, he looked the opposite way and his attention zeroed in on the queen's chambers. For a moment he stood there debating whether or not he should check on the Riezell Guardian or leave well enough alone. That he *wanted* to check in on her did not escape his notice and as he stood there, he tried to examine just why he felt the need to assure himself she was all right. Rarely indecisive about anything in his life or career, his inability to make a decision regarding her also concerned him.

"What are you doing to me, woman?" he whispered.

One more moment he stood there then realized there was about him a slight smell that—although not offensive—wasn't all that pleasant, either. Sniffing, he recognized

the smell as the cloying scent of dust mixed with a bit of perspiration caused from the heavy robe he wore. He realized a shower would not only help the gritty feel that was clinging to him but rid him of any potential stench. He wasn't so sure his breath was all that great, either, and the thought of brushing his teeth to rid his mouth of minute sand particles he had breathed in at the airlock would not be amiss. Besides, he thought, as he turned away from the queen's chamber, he was sorely in need of the only other thing in his life to which he was addicted. Along with the highly potent narcotic drug tenerse that every Reaper had to inject every day of his life, his passion would be waiting for him in a large glass jar and already his mouth was beginning to water.

And it was right where he'd left it.

"Hello, gorgeous," he said, opening the lid. "Miss me?"

He scooped up a handful of the yellow spheres inside the jar and carried them with him to the shower, munching contentedly as he turned the hot water on full blast until steam filled the bathing chamber. Bringing the water temperature up a few notches, he stripped, pulled the thong from his hair and climbed inside the oversized stall.

Bracing his palms against the wall under the shower nozzle, the Reaper closed his eyes, bent his head and let the hot water beat on his naked shoulders. The massaging effect lulled him as streams of the soothing liquid dripped from his nose and chin and plastered his hair to his neck and shoulders. The steam swirled around him, warming him as he sighed with the pleasure.

Straightening up at last, he plucked the cinnamon-scented bar of soap from its wall niche and began lathering his chest and arms. The scent of the soap never failed to relax him more and he lingered with the bar running up and down his arms and upper chest. It wasn't until he lowered the soapy glob to his midsection that thoughts of Ardor Kahn intruded.

Slowly, his hands moved around his belly as he let his memory of her travel from the soft gleam of her thick chestnut hair to the pale green of her long-lashed almond-shaped eyes to the coral tint of her lush lips. Despite the bagginess of her prison-issue jumpsuit, her womanly curves that accentuated a small waist, more than adequate bustline and shapely hips flanging out from legs that were longer than the average female's.

The soap dipped into the spiky curls of hair at the apex of his thighs and the swirling motion of his hand slowed even more.

He had derived a modicum of pleasure from pleasuring her, he reasoned. He had given her his full attention—having learned all he could from ancient sex manuals. She had tasted slightly like one of his favorite dishes—boiled potatoes—and he had enjoyed slipping his tongue in and out of her. The memory of her orgasm around his finger sent a shiver of excitement through him. He could not wait for them to mate as the gods intended male and female to mate.

He wondered what it was going to feel like lying stretched atop that curvaceous body with his cock buried inside her. He couldn't wait to experience the act again, for

all his recent sexual encounters had been with faceless, voiceless, emotionless cybots designed to use their moisture-encased mouths and single, anal torso openings to accommodate the Reaper's needs. Bent over a desk with a boxy, unhuman-looking rump perched in the air for his penetration, the creatures were not inductive to enjoying the act—simply providing a means to an end. Oral openings that sucked on his shaft gave no pleasure, simply relief.

What, he wondered as his soapy fingers slid over his cock, would it be like to have Ardor's sweet little mouth clamped around him? What wondrous pleasures could those full, lush, moist lips give him as she suckled him? Would those slender hands knead his balls until he was ready to burst? Would her slender hips be as heavenly in reality as they were in his imagination? Would she swallow his cum? he wondered, as he pulled at his shaft.

A stabbing pain lanced through his head and he jerked his hand from his cock, his eyes snapping open as he realized what he had been about to do. His heart was hammering in his rib cage and he looked down at the stony erection that was waving at him, begging him to complete what he had nearly done without thinking.

Groaning, he firmly pushed his mind from thoughts of the luscious woman who had begun plaguing his every waking moment and those few stolen ones when he was able to sleep. With his blood pounding through his veins, he quickly finished washing his legs—keeping his hands well away from his privates—and feet then cranked the water down until it was a frigid blast slashing against his hot cock.

He stood there for as long as his chattering teeth could stand it and until he was damned sure his rebellious tool would cease its clamoring to be drained.

* * * * *

Bringing with him a jug of Sustenance, Breva entered his overlord's quarters and had the beaker prepared for when Lord Savidos exited his shower. Such was their relationship that no permission to enter had been necessary for Breva—it was simply a given. He set the beaker on the table beside an overstuffed conform-chair and took a seat on a low divan nearby, trying not to stare at the dark garnet color of the Sustenance and swallowing convulsively to keep the bile from creeping up his throat.

It had been over two hours since the Reaper had gone to his quarters. Breva heard the shower go off and smiled. Not for the first time did he wonder what the fascination with extremely long showers held for the Reaper. A full hour standing beneath the hot spray was not uncommon for the man he could hear rummaging about in his bedchamber.

"Did you bring me something to drink?"

"Aye," Breva replied. He didn't need to ask Lord Savidos how he knew he was not alone in his quarters. He knew the Reaper would have been aware of the exact moment his 2-I-C had come into the room.

"I need my injection."

Sighing heavily, Breva got up from the divan and went into the galley of the quarters. Opening the refrigerated section of a cabinet, he pulled out a tray with a syringe and a vial of purple-colored liquid and drew up three hundred milligrams of the tenses.

"Any particular reason you held off on taking this?" Breva asked as he thumped the barrel of the old-fashioned syringe his overlord preferred to the vac-syringe the healers used.

"I needed a shower."

"And you've been in there for two hours?" Breva asked, pushing the plunger on the syringe until a small spray of liquid squirting from the tip of the needle.

"Your point being?"

Breva shook his head. "Just get over here," he said in an exasperated tone. "All I need is for you to go into Transition and rip off my head."

"Like I would," the Reaper replied with a snort.

"I wouldn't put it past you."

"I might one day if you don't stop irritating me, Raoul."

Taller than his 2-I-C, Lord Savidos sat down in the only chair in the galley and pulled his hair from the side of his neck, tensing as the needle neared his flesh.

"How many times have you been told not to tense like that?" Breva asked as he swabbed the side of his overlord's neck with an alcohol pad. "It will only make it hurt worse."

"The shit is going to hurt anyway," the Reaper complained and couldn't prevent himself from squeezing his eyes shut as the needle went into his neck and the syringe's payload spread through his jugular vein.

"You are such a baby," Breva said softly and dabbed at the stinging pain with the alcohol swab, spreading the fiery liquid as he did.

"How 'bout letting me inject you with three hundred mils of that crap and see if you'll flinch," Lord Savidos suggested.

"Fifty mils of it would kill me and you damned well know it, you evil prick," Breva said sweetly. "Three hundred would fry my brain."

"What brain?"

Breva returned the vial to the refrigerated unit and laid the syringe in the sink to be autoclaved later. He went back to the divan and sat down. He had to look away as the Reaper came in, took up the beaker of Sustenance and drained it. The sounds of greedy swallowing never failed to make him ill but he hid his discomfort as best he could.

"How's the weather?" Lord Savidos took off the top of a large container sitting on the table and dug his hands inside, popping small, bright yellow spheres into his mouth.

Looking around cautiously, the major was relieved to see the empty beaker on the table. "Nowhere near its peak. The storm is still about five miles out, but the lightning is right over us."

Lord Savidos frowned as he chewed. "That's not a good sign. Usually that means the storm will last several days."

"The weather guys are predicting a week."

"She won't be able to wait that long."

Breva was watching his overlord. The man was lounging in his comfortable chair—long legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed, bare toes flexing. His shoulder-length hair flowed over his naked shoulders and there were still water droplets clinging to the thick mat of hair on his chest. The black silk britches clinging to his hips and legs fit him like a glove and the thick bulge at the apex of his muscular thighs made Breva shake his head.

"What?" He harvested more spheres from the jar and munched on them.

"You've been too long without a woman, *chanto*," Breva replied. "Just saying the word *she* gave you a hard-on."

Lord Savidos glanced down at his crotch. "No, the shower did that."

"What is it with you and the shower?" Breva had to ask. "Do you jack off in there?"

His overlord blinked, surprised at the question. He stopped chewing long enough to reply. "You know I don't do that. My wardress would know and she'd set the damned pain off in my head and..."

"Then what is it you do in there? What can you possibly be doing for two fucking hours if you aren't pulling your pud?"

The Reaper's lips twitched. He got up and padded into the galley, tossing his words over his shoulder. "Remember when we were boys and we used to sneak down to Li Cabiza to go swimming?"

"I remember getting my arse whipped for going there," Breva said, craning his neck to look behind him for the divan was between the sitting area and the galley.

"We'd stay down there all day until Manuel came looking for us."

"Manuel," Breva said with a grunt. "What a nuisance he was as a boy."

"And still is as a man," Lord Savidos agreed as he came back and handed Breva a glass of plum wine. Taking his own glass to his chair, he sprawled into it and took a sip of the heady wine.

"Can't argue with you there."

"I can still remember running and grabbing the rope we'd strung from that old oak and swinging out over the water, dropping down in the center, trying to see who could make the biggest splash."

"That's how you broke your arm as I recall."

Lord Savidos shrugged. "It was worth it because I was doing something I loved." He took another sip of wine then ran the index finger of his free hand around the rim of the glass, creating a clear ringing tone as he circled the circumference. "Now, the closest I can come to enjoying something like that is by standing under the water and remembering."

"Ah," Breva said, understanding turning his face dark. "I hadn't thought about the parasite's aversion to water."

"Let me come within three feet of running water or a pond and that damned thing will ripple like a mother-fucker up and down my spine."

The two men were silent for a moment then Breva hung his head. "I'm sorry to have brought up a painful memory, *chanto*."

"What are brothers for if not to torment one another?"

Breva smiled and lifted his head. "I'm good at it, aren't I, Gabriel?"

The Reaper sat forward in his chair, his right hand cupped in his left, elbows on his spread knees and asked what was really bothering his brother.

"Other than our father's insanity?" Breva countered.

"Or our young brother's stupidity?"

Breva shrugged. "Actually, as much as I hate to admit it, Manuel isn't really stupid. Naïve, perhaps, but not stupid."

"True and he'll make a good king one day when the old man meets his deserving end."

"Better him than me," Breva said with a shudder.

"Or me," Lord Savidos agreed.

"As the eldest, the throne is rightfully yours," Breva said quietly.

Lord Savidos drained his glass before he spoke. "I don't want it." He got up and went back to the galley, bringing the wine bottle with him this time. He poured himself and Breva another glass. "No more than you want it as middle son."

"Middle, illegitimate son," Breva reminded his brother, toasting him with his glass. "One not even entitled to carry the Leveche surname thus not entitled to that damned sapphire throne."

"It's the woman who is plaguing your thoughts," the Reaper accused, changing what had always been a sore subject between them.

Breva nodded. "I don't want you to hurt her."

"Who said I was going to?" Lord Savidos asked as he brushed lint from the leg of his britches.

"Give her to me."

The Reaper looked up slowly, locking eyes with the one person in the entire galaxy outside his mother he had ever loved. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because you have a woman of your own already?" was the question.

Breva waved a negligent hand. "Mary is a dozen light years away and so heavy with child —"

"Your child." It was said in a soft, proud voice that made Breva swell up like a peacock. "My first niece or nephew."

"I can have a harem," the Storian major said, his chin raised. "*That* I am entitled to as a royal son."

"Try having one and see what Mary Morana does to your flabby ass," his brother admonished.

Breva's shoulders slumped. "Gabriel, you just can't —"

"I can't get her out of my mind," the Reaper admitted and when Breva turned shocked eyes to him. "And, no, I haven't taken her, but by the gods this day won't end without me having done so."

The eyes of the 2-I-C of the Storian rebel forces became like saucers in his swarthy face. "By Alel, do you think she is your destined mate, *chanto*?"

"If I believed in such silliness, but I don't," Lord Savidos replied. "If I had to explain it, I'd say it's a hormonal thing. As you reminded me, it's been awhile since the eel has been swimming."

Blushing at the crude expression, Breva finished off his glass of wine and got to his feet. "I need to check on her and —"

"Take the evening off, Raoul," the Reaper said, making it sound like an order. "I'll check on her."

Breva narrowed his eyes. "As me?"

"For now." He fished into the jar and extracted more spheres.

"You're addicted to those damned things," Breva commented as he headed for the door.

"There are worse things than lemon drops I could be addicted to, bro," he replied.

"Your breath always smells like a lemon tree."

"Better than it smelling like an abattoir," Lord Savidos pointed out. "Every Reaper I've ever known has a thing for sweets." He smiled nastily. "Must be to counteract the saltiness of the Sustenance."

"Ugh," Breva said, and left without another word.

The Reaper sat there for a little while longer, chomping lemon drops until the jar was nearly empty. It was a treat he had discovered on his one journey through the Carbondale Gate and into the galaxy known as the Milky Way. The confection was an expensive habit that cost him at least a week's wages—two weeks if luck was against him—to obtain from scout ships sent to Terra. But to him, it was worth it for not only did the pale yellow spheres soothe him, feed his sweet tooth, they had the added

benefit of tempering what he knew had to be a foul smell coming from his breath when he fed.

Finally denying himself any more treats, he got up and padded into his sleeping chambers. Standing in front of the full-length mirror on the armoire, he envisioned his brother's stiff khaki uniform tunic and trousers. As he watched, the molecules shifted around him until he was clothed in the detestable garments.

Chapter Six

There was a gentle hand on her brow and Ardor opened her eyes to look up into one of the handsomest faces she could ever remember seeing. The dark complexion was a warm honey gold. The lips were full and as they stretched into a gentle smile, the teeth behind those lips were white and straight, the central incisors a tad longer than the laterals—perfect in every way. Warm black eyes gazed down in such a way she could see the heat building in them. Soon, she knew those black depths would be hot as pitch bubbling in a cauldron.

"How do you feel, wench?" he asked in his soft Storian accent that sent tremors of expectation down her spine.

Ardor put a hand to her head and was relieved she no longer felt the pain that had been slamming against the inside of her skull. "Better," she said and became aware she was no longer on the ship. "Where are we?"

"Inside the base camp," he told her and helped her sit up.

"How did I...?" She looked up at him with accusing eyes. "He had me drugged."

A soothing hand was slipping up and down her back in a comforting way. "It was for your own good. You would never have been able to make the journey from the ship to the mountain."

"Why not just land us in the mountain? Don't you have the technology?"

"The Web is designed so such a thing is impossible without us shutting it down. Can you imagine the problems we'd have if our enemies could simply rearrange their molecules and appear in the heart of our defenses?"

Ardor agreed it would present a dilemma.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starved," she said. Looking around her at the sumptuous surroundings, she had a million questions to ask but her belly was rumbling and the mere thought of food made her mouth water. She thought of all the dishes she would love to dive into at that moment.

He went to the Vid-Com and ordered a tray sent to the quarters immediately, naming off menu items that were her particular favorites. When he was finished and returned to sit beside her on the bed, she sent him a mutinous look.

"How did you know what I like?" she asked in a suspicious tone.

There was a pause then he shrugged. "He reads minds, wench," her companion said.

"Do you?" she questioned.

"Raoul Breva has no such abilities, I fear," he said, putting a hand to his heart. "Most of the time I'm glad he doesn't."

Annoyed by people who talked about themselves in the third person, Ardor ignored his remark. "Was he in communication with you just then? Did he tell you what to order?"

A blush spread over his face and he looked away. "I am never free of the Reaper, wench. He is in me every moment of the day."

"Well, tell him to stop slipping into my thoughts! I don't like it and it is hateful."

He frowned. "I'll try to remember to have a talk with him about it," he mumbled.

The floor beneath them shook for a moment and Ardor hopped off the bunk. She was in his arms before the vibrations ended.

"What was that?" she asked, her face as white as parchment.

He could feel her heart thudding in her chest and gathered her closer. "A mild tremor, wench, nothing more," he explained.

"An earthquake?" she asked and the fear in her voice was evident.

"No, just a reverberation from the storm outside." He could feel her fingers digging into his back. "Are you frightened of storms?"

"We're underground," she said as though she had just realized it.

"Aye," he said, drawing the word out as he delved lightly into her mind, seeking the cause of the shivering that had suddenly claimed her. When he realized she was claustrophobic, he assured her the mountain was safe, that earthquakes didn't occur on Riezell Nine. "The base camp is reenforced with titanium girders. You have nothing to worry about."

"Storm?" she said, finally picking up on the word. "What kind of storm?"

"Would you like to see?" he asked. "Sometimes it's best to see what disturbs us than to imagine it."

She nodded, still clutching him.

Before he could escort her from the cell, a guard arrived with her food and with the message that Major Breva was needed immediately in the command room.

"The mountain is caving in!" Ardor said with a gasp.

"No, wench," the man holding her replied and firmly disengaged her arms from around him. He stood there—holding her wrists in his hands—and looked down at her, staring into her terrified eyes. "You will go with this man after you've eaten your meal and—"

"I can't—"

His look intensified until he was firmly in control of her mind. "Eat your meal and then he will bring you to the command room. Do you understand?"

Ardor smiled. "Yes, Raoul, I understand."

Her captor cleared his throat then released her wrists. He turned to the guard. "She'll accompany you once she's eaten. Take care of her, Juan."

Realizing it wasn't Major Breva speaking to him for the voice was now that of his overlord and no longer the higher tones of the major, the guard snapped to attention. "Aye-aye," he responded. He couldn't look away from the man who could have passed for Breva's twin.

"No need to restrain her in any way," the Reaper said. "She'll walk calmly beside you. Answer any questions she might have without saying too much, eh?"

"Aye, Sir!"

Breva looked up as his overlord strode into the command room, no longer clothed in the flowing robe but dressed in the black silk shirt and black leather pants of his position, the skeletal mask in place though it was the half-mask that left the Reaper's shoulder-length, dark brown hair showing.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted, but I thought you'd like to see this," Breva said and stepped away from the Vid-Com screen behind him. "We knew something was up as soon as we saw the two pleasure ships moving out of the area."

Lord Savidos bent down, his knuckles pressed against the table beneath the Vid-Com and stared at the fleet of ships soaring through the midnight dark sky. He didn't need to ask whose ships they were for the vessel in front bore the insignia of the Coalition. "What is their position?" he asked.

"Nine clicks out from Amerigen."

"Who is in the area?"

"No one," Breva replied. "There's a big offensive going on near Sauria and most of the Storian fleet is there."

"The gods damn it! The sons of bitches must have realized we're sitting here under a fucking solar storm," the Reaper snarled, "and can't come to Amerigen's aid."

"Our troops on Amerigen are prepared but without our help and with a force the size of that fleet, they don't stand a chance." Breva ran a hand through his hair. "We will lose it like we did Cengus."

"Aye and Rabushu will be next on their list," Lord Savidos said. He pounded his right fist on the table. "By Alel, I hate to feel so damned helpless! Where the hell did you say Diego was?"

"Somewhere near Sauria. I've tried hailing him but you know how he is. Since the Tribunal made you an outlaw, he won't answer our hails."

"He was always a cautious warrior and —"

Breva cleared his throat, gaining his overlord's attention. He cocked his head to the left and when the Reaper turned, he saw Ardor standing off to one side with her guard. Her face looked strained, her forehead crinkled, her complexion pale. She was twisting her hands at her waist, running the fingers over and over one another.

Lord Savidos groaned. "I should have told her not to be afraid of the tremors." Even as he spoke, the floor rumbled beneath their feet and he saw his captive reach out to grip the arm of her guard.

"Go to her and reassure her that she's safe. I told her you would show her the storm. Open one of the view grids and let her see it. Don't show any landmarks that might be identified. She's concerned the mountain might cave in. She's very claustrophobic."

"Will do," Breva agreed and started toward Ardor.

Ardor was trembling as Breva reached her. She was unaware of the Reaper's presence in the room but when the Storian major reached her, she looked up at him and when she did, saw Lord Savidos across the room behind him.

"Let's take a look at what's going on outside," Breva said, taking her arm and leading her toward a large section of tambour panels that were slowly lifting as they drew near. "This should help, wench."

Ardor wrinkled her nose for Breva's breath was a bit on the foul side. He smelled as though he'd eaten a few cloves of garlic since he left her and the smell offended her.

"This is what's happening out there. We are in the midst of a particularly bad solar storm and..."

Ardor wasn't listening. Her attention was locked on the Reaper. She had never seen him without the flowing robe and the cowl that hid his dark hair. She realized his hair was as long as Breva's—just as thick and curly—and tied back with a leather thong from the mask that looked as though it was glued to his flesh. The gruesome black, white and matte silver skeletal mask fit him as though it actually was his face. Only his eyes could be seen through the bony-like orbits and from that distance, they looked dark as sin.

Realizing he was being ignored, Breva turned to see where she was looking. He groaned, realizing that whatever Ardor was seeing, her masters at Command were seeing as well.

Lord Savidos was staring back at his captive, his hands hanging loosely at his sides, minus the grisly gloves that made his hands look like bony claws. His legs were apart and to those who glanced his way, the stance carried with it the supreme power of his authority.

Putting a hand up to her temple where a slight pain had suddenly intruded, Ardor could feel herself drawn to the man across the room. There was a pulling that made her want to close the distance between them, look into his eyes in the hopes of finding some modicum of humanity there so the mask would not disturb her so.

"Don't stare at him, wench," Breva suggested. "No one has ever won a staring contest with the Reaper."

Ardor took that as a challenge and continued staring at Lord Savidos. The pain was escalating in her head and she realized the implant signal must be increasing.

The Reaper could not take his eyes off the woman. She was pale, her chestnut hair pulled back in a tight braid that fell across one shoulder to drape seductively down her left breast. The feathered tip of the braid just touched where he knew her nipple would be and the thought made him hard as a rock beneath the sleek fabric of his britches and he had to turn away before anyone could see his erection.

"No one has ever won a staring contest with him, eh?" Ardor asked, feeling a moment of triumphant interspersed with disappointment that he had turned his back on her.

"Not until now," Breva said, his voice filled with awe.

"He's not as all-powerful as you and he think he is, then, is he?" Ardor asked, then gasped as the pain in her head throbbed with such a horrific agony her knees buckled.

The Reaper not only heard the woman's gasp, he had felt her pain all the way across the room. With lightning speed, he spun around and caught her before she could hit the floor, sweeping her up into his arms.

"Get that damned healer on the horn!" he shouted at Breva. "Tell him I'm on my way over there."

Breva—along with everyone in the room who had witnessed the blur of the Reaper racing across the room—could do nothing but gape at their overlord as Lord Savidos stalked off, carrying the limp body of his captive. When his brother's words finally penetrated, the Storian major hurried after him, running to catch up with the Reaper's long-legged stride.

"Gabriel," he said, forgetting himself and using a name he'd been ordered never to speak unless they were alone, "you can't go out there. The storm is at its zenith. Not even The Web can prevent the strikes from hitting us. Your ship would be pulverized!"

"Don't tell me what to do!" Lord Savidos snapped. They were nearing the queen's chambers and although the woman lying unconscious in his arms weighed little more than a feather to him, the drip of her blood oozing from her right ear onto his arm felt like a ton. "Have the healer standing by and do it now!"

As Breva watched, he saw the woman's eyes fluttering open and warned his brother. Within a matter of seconds he was seeing Ardor Kahn in the arms of his double and he staggered back, never having seen the Reaper shape change into a mirror image of the man he looked at as he shaved each morning.

"By the gods," Breva said, awed by the sight. It was *like* looking at himself in the mirror!

"Get the hell out of here and do what I ordered you to, mister!"

Ardor was staring up at the underside of a strong jaw as she was laid down on the bunk. The face of the man holding her was only a few inches from hers and as he spoke, she held her breath, expecting that telltale garlicky smell to wash over her.

"Lay still, wench," she heard him say.

The floor shuddered again and Ardor gasped, clutching at the arms that had released her.

"Easy, Sweeting," he told her. "You're safe."

His hands were roaming over her face, brushing back wisps of hair from her forehead and cheeks even as her fingers dug into his biceps. His breath was fanning across her face and Ardor stared up at him as realization began to set in.

"You're not Breva," she accused, unmindful that she had increased the pressure of her fingers into the khaki crispness of the tunic he wore.

"Who else would I be?" he asked, smiling at her.

"It's your breath," she said.

He frowned. "Is it that bad?"

"You smell like lemons," she accused.

The man leaning over her stiffened. "Well, I had garlic on my omelet this morning and—"

"Breva might have but you didn't," she said, snatching her hands away from him. "Your breath smells like lemons."

"I popped a few lemon drops, aye," he acknowledged.

"When?" she asked, her eyes narrowed. "Right before you scooped me up and brought me here? I didn't see you do it."

The Reaper realized she had found him out and straightened up. He stood there staring down at her as Breva. For a full sweep of the old-fashioned analog clock on the wall behind him, he looked at her then shrugged and the khaki trousers and uniform tunic shifted to black silk and leather.

Ardor drew in her breath as the garments changed but the face of the man, the build of him was still the stockier, shorter Raoul Breva.

"In for a copper, in for a silver," she admonished. "Let's see the rest of you, Reaper."

She was amazed as his body lengthened, slimmed down a bit and the black curls that mimicked Breva's lightened to a shade of dark brown. Black eyes shifted into a shade of amber that caught the light and looked back at her as though stars had been caught in their warm depths.

Yet still the facial features of Raoul Breva remained.

"Are you so hideous that you don't want me to see your face?" she asked. "Do you think I'll faint at the sight?"

Her challenge stiffened his backbone and for one wild moment, he was tempted to show her what she thought was beneath the mask she'd seen him wear. The invisible demon that rode his shoulder thumped a horny fist at the side of his cheek, egging him into scaring the hell out of her, sending her screaming headlong into unconsciousness. But the male part of him that was still reacting in ways he could not understand forbade

him from playing such a vicious trick, and when his face changed into the true way he looked, he saw her eyes widen and her lips part in stunned surprise.

Ardor could not believe what she was seeing and had it not been for the brutal pain gouging into her brain and increasing in strength again, she would have shouted at him. As it was, her words were spoken from between clenched teeth.

"Very funny, you evil bastard," she said. "Now show me the real you!"

Realizing in his egotistical stupidity he had committed a grievous mistake, Lord Savidos' face shifted to the skeletal mask in the blink of an eye. Never, *never* had he intended her to see him as he really looked. *Never* had he intended for her masters to get a look at his face for they were bound to recognize him—as the woman had—as King Alejandro's son, a man thought to have died in the fire pit on *an Égipt*, and the rightful heir to the Storian throne.

Ardor instinctively moved away from him now that he once more sported the god-awful mask. It was on the tip of her tongue to demand he peel the thing off when she began to understand that what she had seen before he made the mask materialize to cover his features had been his valid appearance.

"Or would you prefer this face?" he asked and from her memories dredged up Kurt Bowen's beefy face to replace his own.

Knowing he had taken her lover's image from her thoughts angered her but she knew it would also confuse the man who would see that image on Riezell. Instantly, she pictured General Morrison and almost as quickly, that face appeared on the Reaper.

"Ugly old bugger, isn't he?" Lord Savidos asked.

Ardor would have laughed but the pain exploded in her head and she began convulsing, her limbs stiff, her back arched, her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Wench, no!" the Reaper shouted and reached down to pry her jaws open with one hand while he jerked at his belt with the other, stripping it from his waist, doubling a section of it and forcing it between her teeth for her to clamp down on to keep from swallowing her tongue.

He slapped his hands against her temples, squeezing his eyes shut as he absorbed much of her pain into his own body. Though he couldn't stop her agony, at least he could diminish it to some extent.

That was the way Breva found them as he came to tell his overlord they could not open a com channel to the medical center to the south.

"Order a heavy doze of *olvido*. Put her out, now!"

Breva ran to the Vid-Com and did as he was ordered. Almost instantly a hissing sound came from the vents overhead and he grabbed his brother's arms, pulling him away from the woman.

Stumbling out into the corridor as the door slid shut behind them, sealing in the gas that would render the Riezell Guardian unconscious, Lord Savidos sagged against the wall, breathing heavily.

"Gods-damned fool!" he named himself, slamming his fist into his thigh as he bent forward.

"What did you do?" Breva asked, because he was looking into a face he didn't recognize.

The wrinkled, puffy face of General Alphon Morrison shifted until Breva was looking at his brother's unmasked face.

"She wanted to see me and fool that I am, I showed her!" the Reaper growled.

"Well, you aren't such a bad-looking man, Gabe," Breva said.

"*They* saw me, too, you idiot!"

Breva groaned. "I thought you wanted to wait."

"I did!"

Pushing away from the wall, the Reaper started down the hall, his fists doubled at his sides.

Running to catch up, Breva reached out to stop him. "You can't go out there, *chanto*. It's too dangerous."

Shaking off his brother's restraining hand, Lord Savidos continued on. He took the corridor leading to the underground hangers where several Fiach model runabouts were docked.

"Gabriel, please. Don't do this!"

Neither man was aware of the stillness among the workers in the hangar as they saw their overlord stalking toward a jet-black Fiach, Lord Savidos' personal craft. Neither realized that the ever-present skeletal mask was not in place and that the workers were staring wide-eyed at the face of a man they thought long dead.

There was fear in Breva's eyes for he knew there would be no way he could stop his brother from going after the healer. The lightning outside had increased in its destructive power and had weakened sections of The Web so that the deadly spears were slamming into the planet's surface.

The Reaper pushed Breva aside and slammed his palm against the security pad on the outside of the Fiach. Instantly, the gull-wing hatch slid up.

"All right, then I'm going with you," Breva snapped.

Stopping in the craft's opening, Prince Gabriel Leveche spun around and shoved his brother backward. "No, hell, you aren't! You take care of my woman!"

The workers gasped in unison.

Breva landed on his tailbone on the floor, staring up as the gull-wing doors slid down and the engine of the runabout engaged. He scrambled up—fearing the hot exhaust—and walked backward, still unable to believe what was happening.

"Where is he going, Major?" one of the braver workers asked.

"To the Med Cen," Breva said as the Fiach lifted out of its docking harness.

"In this storm?" the worker inquired. "Why?"

"To bring back one of the healers," Breva replied listlessly.

"What if the healer won't go with him?"

Breva snorted. "Trust me – that won't be an option."

Chapter Seven

Healer Talil sat as far away from the Reaper as the interior of the Fiach would allow. He had a black eye, a broken nose, a swollen lip and a chipped tooth that would need dental care, but he had learned a very valuable lesson—never—under any circumstances—do you argue with a Reaper.

At first Talil had simply gawked at the man striding resolutely toward him. He could not believe anyone would have had the balls to venture out in this weather. Having been informed that the overlord himself had taken a runabout out in the savage storm snapping overhead, no one—least of all Talil—would have laid bets on the craft getting to the Med Cen in one piece.

As soon as word spread that it was Prince Gabriel who had jockeyed the runabout into the docking bay, every available guard, healer, orderly and recuperating trooper had found his or her way to the docking station. No one believed it could possibly be the heir to the Storian throne, but one look at the determined visage of the man who had exited the Fiach and all doubts were removed.

Men moved aside, plastering themselves against the wall as he passed. Women curtsied deeply, their heads lowered but quickly raised as he moved on so they could get a good look at his broad shoulders and long, powerfully striding legs. His name was on every tongue.

“Your Grace,” Talil—bowing as gracefully as his bulk and thundering heart would allow—had time to say as the Reaper advanced on him.

“Where is your equipment?” that imperious voice demanded. At the sound of that deep, authoritative voice, any listener who had doubted the true identity of their overlord no longer questioned how he had survived the death sentence imposed upon him fifteen years earlier.

“Your Grace, I cannot—”

Those were the only words Talil got out before a wicked right cross slammed into his face, knocking him a good five feet back across the loading dock.

“Where is his equipment?”

It was a bellow of rage that set feet to running in all directions and in less time than it took to resuscitate Talil, the things needed to remove the Riezell Guardian’s implant were stowed on the runabout and Talil was strapped into the jump seat, barely conscious and babbling apologies left and right to the stone-faced man who was now seated in the pilot’s chair and turning the craft around to venture out into the lashing strikes of lightning.

"Are you a religious man, Healer?" the Reaper asked as he readied the ship to run the gantlet of deadly bolts.

"No, Your Grace," Talil whimpered.

"Well, I suggest you fake it."

Talil's head snapped back as the Fiach shot out of the docking station. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut as the powerful machine cleared the barely opened iris, banking sharply to starboard as soon as the first wave of coppery dust splayed across the windshield.

From a Vid-Com screen deep in the bowels of Mount Anthus, Breva watched his brother expertly dodging the bolts of lightning streaking toward the runabout he piloted. It was almost as though Noruego, the ancient god of bad weather, was hurling missiles at the Reaper's ship.

Skimming along the horizon, the Fiach seemed to dip and bob like a cork on the heaving waves of an ocean during a gale. The X-shaped wings rolled from side to side as the craft swept up then rapidly down to avoid the lances of fire thrown at it from the heavens then the ship did a three-sixty roll, another one-eighty until it was flying upside down, its belly exposed to the wrath of the skies.

"Damn it, Gabriel!" Breva swore and arched away the sweat, which had gathered on his forehead.

If anyone at the base camp doubted the identity of the man flying the Fiach runabout, those three words dispelled the uncertainty.

"It is Prince Gabriel," one of the techs whispered to the man sitting beside him.

"But he was executed," said the other man.

"Stow that talk!" Breva shouted and every eye jerked from the Vid-Com screens on which they were watching the spectacular display of precision flying to the angry eyes of the 2-I-C. "It's him, all right? He's alive and you'd damned well better not repeat it to another living soul if you all want to keep your hearts inside your chests and out of his hands!"

Eyes snapped back to Vid-Com screens and lips were compressed tightly. No one would dare report what they all now knew, and if anyone on Med Cen was foolish enough to do so, that one would get what he or she deserved.

So engrossed with watching the bobbing and weaving of the Fiach, the tech who should have been supervising the vital stats on the Riezell Guardian was not looking at the monitor. As a result, he had allowed the woman to regain consciousness and was completely unaware of her leaving the queen's chambers.

A lethal streak of lightning glanced off the tail of the Fiach and sent the powerful runabout into a skipping dive over the dunes, the belly of the craft bumping along like a stone across still water. The ship was headed straight for a tall monolith that squatted on the desert floor.

"Pull it up," Breva shouted. "Pull it up, Gabriel. Pull it up!"

Everyone held their breaths as the ship continued weaving its way from side to side toward the bulk of the ginger-colored monolith.

Having wandered into the command center, Ardor wasn't surprised no one was paying attention to her. Everyone was staring at the Vid-Com screens lined against the walls. The one closest to her showed a runabout careening at a high speed toward a stone wall. She didn't need to guess who was piloting the craft for no one other than a man like Lord Savidos would dare to be out in such violent weather, daring the gods to strike him down.

"Pull it up," Ardor whispered. "Reaper, pull it up."

Almost at the last moment, the nose of the Fiach jerked upward and the craft sailed over the monolith with a scant few inches to spare. Breaths exhaled loudly in the room then cheers went up until everyone realized the ship was off the screen.

"Where'd he go?" someone asked.

Before Breva could answer, the Fiach streaked back over the monolith—barely higher than it had crossed it before—and came straight toward whatever Vid-Com was tracking its progress.

"He doesn't have any control of the braking pods," Ardor said. When no one paid her any notice, she repeated her words.

Turning toward the woman, Breva stared at her. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The strike hit his control array and he doesn't have the ability to power it down," she said, picking up thoughts that were coming at her like lead weights. "He's going to make three more passes over Mount Anthus so you'll have time to get his coordinates. Lock in on him, his passenger and a crate of instruments in the cargo hatch as he flies by. When he starts his last pass then he wants you to shut down The Web just long enough to beam them and the instruments inside."

"What about the ship?" one of the techs asked.

"It's toast," Ardor said, wincing at her own description.

Breva pointed at one of the techs. "Lock in on him and do as she says."

"But, Sir, if we shut down The Web—"

"Do it!"

Ardor's head was throbbing so painfully she could barely walk but she made her way over to Breva, reaching out a hand for him. He could see the strain on her face and knew she was in agony. Without a second thought, he pulled her to his side, put his hand on her head and held her to his shoulder.

"He's hell on wings, isn't he?" she asked.

"He's hell on his younger brother, I know that," Breva answered.

Somehow she'd known they were kin, but finding out they were that close made Ardor feel more comfortable in Breva's arms.

As soon as the Fiach climbed out of range of the Vid-Com tracking it, the entire mountain shook over their heads so neither one let go of the other.

"I've got Lord Savidos locked in," the tech told Breva. "I'll get the passenger on his way back over. Don't think I can get the crate, though."

"Don't think I'd like to be you if you can't," Breva replied.

"Understood," the tech said, swallowing so loudly everyone in the room heard him.

Roaring past the Vid-Com camera, the exhaust of the Fiach sent shockwaves through the instrument but it tracked the runabout as its wings dipped from side to side to avoid the lightning bolts then banked around for another run over Mount Anthus.

Ardor kept her eyes on the ship although she knew everything she saw was being transmitted back to Command. She was careful not to look at anyone's mouth for fear those watching on Riezell could read the moving lips. Why she felt compelled to protect the Storian traitors didn't equate with her but nevertheless she acted on her impulse. When she was court-martialed would be the time to explain her own treasonous acts.

As the Fiach roared past overhead, the tech very quietly informed everyone he had the coordinates on the two crates in the cargo hatch.

"Bring them in on the next pass," Breva instructed, his arms tightening around Ardor who could barely hear him although she knew he had shouted.

It seemed an eternity before the runabout shot into view again, smoke roiling from the larboard engine. The entire craft was shuddering as though it was sitting atop a giant agitator.

"He's breaking apart!" Ardor cried out. "Bring him in. Bring him in now!"

Parts of the precision-made Gearmánach machine began flying off, spiraling away in chunks, smoke pouring from the lost pieces. One X-wing sheared off and went cartwheeling across the desert, coming apart as it spun.

"Bring him in!" Breva screamed.

"We're locked on, Sir," the tech said in a conversational tone. "They're safe."

The Fiach nosed down into the red dust of Riezell Nine and came apart in an explosion that sent heat waves folding back toward the Vid-Com screen. Instinctively, everyone in the room threw a hand up to block out the bright burst as the ship disintegrated in a wash of fire.

"Where is he?" Breva demanded, turning toward the docking station nearly a quarter of a mile from where they were standing.

"They are safe, Sir," the tech repeated. He was gasping for breath, sweat drenching his pale blue uniform tunic under the arms and along the chest. The expression in his eyes said he'd live to see another day.

Ardor was being pulled along in Breva's wake and she doubted he was even aware her wrist was shackled in his powerful grip. She could barely keep up with him for the

debilitating pain in her head had become a screaming nightmare that now had deafened her hearing completely.

Hurrying down the serpentine corridors to the cavern where the ships were docked, Brevia was mumbling under his breath. The seat of his pants was no longer khaki but a dark brown that not only caused him acute embarrassment, the cause of the color change was oozing down his legs and pooling in his boots. Following in his wake was a stench that made him want to cry.

Stumbling into the docking station behind Brevia, Ardor could see a middle-aged man crouched on his knees, throwing up so violently his entire body shook. Beside him was a crate upon which he braced one trembling arm. She realized the back end of the man's white medical slacks were as dark as Brevia's and couldn't help but grin although doing so caused her acute pain.

One moment she was being dragged along behind Brevia, the next she was being swung up into strong arms that held her so tightly she thought her ribs would break. Her captor was saying something to her but she could no longer hear. The last thing she remembered before she lost even her sight was smiling into his worried face.

Chapter Eight

"That is Prince Gabriel, all right," the general said, looking at the face that was frozen on the Vid-Com screen. "I remember well that smug face!"

"But he's dead," Bowen stated. "I should know. I was the one who threw him in the fire pit!"

"He is *supposed* to be dead," General Morrison corrected. "Obviously, he survived. Reapers have a way of doing that."

"How the hell was the Coalition to know he was a Reaper?" Bowen demanded.

"Ah, well, none of us knew, now did we? If we had, we'd have sent him to the guillotine before throwing his carcass into the fire pit." He threw up a hand. "Hell, we didn't even know there *were* such things as Reapers until the Burgon signed the peace treaty and Prince Cair Ghrian carted those on Riezell Nine off to Amhantar."

"I can't believe Leveche is alive. They've managed to keep his rebirth a close secret," Bowen said, glaring at the screen. "I wonder if even the king knows his son is still alive."

"Doubtful," the general declared. "There was never any love lost between father and son as I recall."

"Why was that, Sir?" Miriam asked as she tidied up the general's desk. The great man's secretary had more privilege in his office than many higher-echelon warriors. Most of the time, the general didn't even notice her pattering about his desk so accustomed was he to having her nearby.

"Oh, it was the man's mother Queen Isabella that was the cause of it," the general replied. "Prince Gabriel accused his father of having murdered his mother and knowing Alejandro, it wouldn't surprise me to learn he had. If he didn't actually carry out the nefarious deed, he ordered it done."

Miriam looked over at him. "How did she die?"

"It was supposed to have been an accident," Morrison told her. "She drowned in her own bathing pool."

"How does one drown in their own bathing pool?" Miriam inquired.

"She could have slipped and hit her head but there was no indication of that," the general reported. "Or she could have fallen asleep, yet unless she'd been drugged, I'm sure the water would have awoken her. According to all reports, she had no narcotics in her system."

"Then how could it have happened?"

"Rather easily if someone holds you under the water," the general said. "There were bruises on the queen's upper chest and neck to suggest someone did exactly that."

"And there was dried blood under her fingernails," Bowen added. "She apparently fought her assailant."

"Also," the general amended, pouring himself a glass of water from the icy carafe Miriam had provided for him, "the king had scores of scratches on his arms which he said he'd gotten when his horse threw him into a patch of brambles the day his wife drowned."

"I don't think anyone bought that story—especially not Prince Gabriel—but the poor woman was sent to her funeral pyre without benefit of a DNA test to see whose blood she'd drawn in her attempt to save her life," Bowen said.

Picking up some papers she found scattered on the floor, Miriam asked why the king would have slain his wife.

"He had his eye on a new queen, I heard," the general answered. "One of the younger members of his harem."

"From an *Iodáil*, wasn't she?"

"Aye," the general agreed. "Iodálach women are true goddesses when they are young." He shrugged. "Not so as they grow older, I'm afraid."

"Isn't your wife from an *Iodáil*, Sir?" Bowen asked, smiling at General Morrison's arched eyebrow.

Miriam shook her head. "Court intrigue never fails to surprise me. I'm glad we have a democracy."

"Aren't we all?" the general asked with a chuckle.

"Wasn't it King Alejandro who turned his son over to the Coalition for trial?" she asked.

"Trial, hell," the general scoffed. "Alejandro turned him over to us for us to execute him." He frowned. "We thought we had."

"I wonder whose bones we found in the fire pit that day?" Bowen inquired.

"Who the hell knows? It only means we're going to have to catch that little bastard and kill him all over again!" Morrison stated. "At least we won't need a mock trial this time around."

Bowen shushed him. "Don't say such a thing, Sir." He eyed Miriam as she headed for the door. "You know he was joking, don't you, Miri?"

"Of course, Sir," Miriam replied.

Miriam quietly left the general's office, dumping the papers she'd picked up from the floor into the trash can beside her desk. With a pass of her hand, she closed the door between her office and the general's then sat down at her desk.

For a long time she sat there staring at the piles of work that needed to be done before she went home to her quarters that afternoon, her hands folded on top of her desk.

Turning her head, she gazed at the picture of her lost husband. "I miss you, Jamie," she said and reached out to draw her fingertips across Jamie Quillan's smiling lips.

On her desk were disks she had been reading for several days now. All but one pertained to her current work. That disk was hidden beneath several others for it wouldn't do for the general to discover she had been delving into a case that was fifteen years old.

Slipping her fingers under the pile, she unerringly brought out the disk that had provided her with an insight into just how corrupt and dishonorable both Morrison and Bowen truly were. Though she had worked for the men half her life, she had discovered more about them from that one file than she had in all the time she'd had contact with Command Central.

Cupping the disk in her left palm Miriam ran the fingers of her right hand over the two-inch-by-two-inch square. The name on the file read G. Leveche and it contained a profile of the man from birth to the day after his twenty-fourth birthday, copies of his military school records, intel on his activities since graduation from the Aduaidh Space Academy, clandestine communications between his father the king and General Morrison, in which the king offered his son as a sacrificial lamb to the Coalition, a transcript of the prince's arrest and subsequent interrogation, his speedy trial for treason and finally, a vivid, detailed description of the sentence that had been carried out against him.

"Thank Alluvial you didn't find out he was a Reaper before you cast him into that fiery pit," Miriam mumbled to herself.

She dropped the disk into her skirt pocket. It was the only copy and the evil thing needed to be destroyed—or accidentally misplaced.

* * * * *

Breva watched his brother pacing back and forth before the lab door. Twice he'd suggested his overlord sit down but both times his proposal had been ignored.

"What the hell is taking him so long?" Lord Savidos snarled.

"I would imagine he's trying to be very careful, *chanto*," Breva replied. "Implants—as you know all too well—can be tricky things to remove."

Absently, the Reaper fingered the base of his skull where there was an implant that could not be removed—lest it detonate itself during the removal and scramble his brain to mush—lay hidden.

"She couldn't hear me, Raoul," he said.

"She heard you plain enough if you're referring to your flybys," Breva reminded him.

The Reaper shook his head. "No, after that. When I was carrying her here. She didn't hear a word I said." He glanced at his brother. "That can't be good."

Breva shook his head. "No, I wouldn't think it would be."

"She was bleeding from both ears when I laid her down." Lord Savidos pressed his fingertips against his closed eyes, massaging them. He hung his head for a moment, cupping it in his hands and then looked up, his fingers sliding down his lips.

"You were speaking to her during the flybys," Breva said quietly. "I couldn't hear you but she did. You were telling her what you wanted us to do."

"So?"

"Who else can hear your silent thoughts other than me, *chanto*?"

A look of annoyance passed over the Reaper's tired face. "Can we not have this discussion right now?"

"Why?" Breva countered. "Because you are worried about her?"

"Aye," Lord Savidos acknowledged. "I am—"

The door to the lab slid open and Healer Talil came out hesitantly. He flinched as his overlord came toward him, putting up an arm as though about to be physically attacked. "Please don't hit me," he asked.

The Reaper came up short, a muscle working in his taut jaw. "Are you going to give me reason to?" he barked.

Despite the irritated tone and the narrowed eyes glaring at him, Talil lowered his arm and stood there with his head up. "I am afraid I don't have news that will please you, Lord Savidos."

His gut wrenching, the Reaper took another step toward the healer. "You can't remove the device?"

Talil shook his head. "Not without doing irreparable harm to the lady, I'm afraid not."

Wanting to know the worst of it, he asked if Ardor Kahn had lost her hearing.

"I believe she has," Talil replied, flinching a bit as he added, "Her sight, as well."

Breva groaned and hung his head, closing his eyes to the devastating news.

"Is she awake?"

"I thought it best to keep her under a while longer. From the readings we were getting from the implant, the Riezellians were attempting to increase the transponder's strength. I thought the pain would be too much for her."

Breva looked up. "Can't you turn the damned thing off?"

"We will attempt to do so, Major Breva," Talil replied. "But I didn't want to try until Lord Savidos gave his permission." He lifted his gaze to the Reaper.

"Will shutting it down cause any further problems for her?" the major inquired.

"Not that we can tell, but no matter whether we are able to short-circuit the implant or not, I am afraid she will continue to have debilitating headaches for the rest of her life."

The Reaper was the one to flinch this time. "Such as I have," he said.

"Similar, though I would imagine more severe since you are able to tolerate yours due to the influence of the tenerse," came the reply.

"Tolerate," Lord Savidos repeated on a long exhalation of breath. "What an innocuous word for being able to endure agonizing bouts of pain."

Breva and Talil watched their overlord walk to the door leading into the lab and Talil was quick to move out of his way as he approached. The Reaper stood there a moment—staring at Ardor—then with his hands on his hips, turned partially around to look at Talil. "Shut the implant down but keep her under for at least an hour longer. There is something my brother and I have to do before you wake her."

"As you wish, Milord," Talil said.

"Come with me, Raoul," Lord Savidos requested, his voice sounded as tired as his haggard face looked.

Walking beside his brother, Breva respected the silence that had sprung up between them from the moment his overlord took a phospho light from a niche and handed it to him with the instruction to shine the light on the path ahead of them. The Reaper jammed his hands into the pockets of his leather pants and his shoulders hunched—a good sign the man did not want to carry on a conversation as they walked.

Venturing ever deeper into the cave complex—past corridors the major did not know existed—the air became uncomfortably warm. Sweat dripped from Breva's eyes to sting his eyes. The longer they walked, the harder it was for him to breathe for not only was it overly warm, there was a cloying stench of sulfur permeating the air.

"How much further?" Breva asked, arming sweat from his brow.

"Not far."

All around them were strange rock formations that twisted down from the ceiling and speared up from the cave floor. The stink of sulfur became almost unbearable, choking Breva and bringing tears to his already stinging eyes.

"Through here."

There seemed to be no opening in the wall that suddenly sprang up out of nowhere to block their passage. They were on a narrow rocky ledge beyond which was nothing but unrelieved darkness.

Before Breva could ask where there was an opening, a section of the wall slid up as though heaved by unseen hands and a wash of cooler air drifted over them, and with it, the salt tang of ocean waters.

Ducking under the portal that was still in the process of being drawn up, the Reaper moved ahead of Breva, cautioning him to watch his step.

"There are steps cut into the stone," Lord Savidos stated.

Breva could hear a roar coming from down below them and he pointed the phospho light toward the steps, marveling at how steep the rocky stairway was. It seemed to go forever—curving into darkness—between rugged formations that looked more like thin needles than stalagmites.

“If you fall, you’ll be skewered so watch where you put your big feet, *chanto*.”

Breva opened his mouth to deny his feet were any larger than his brother’s but the Reaper was tripping down the stairs as though it was something he did every day—which he most likely did, for his brother realized it was to La Caverna de la Muerte, the Cavern of Death, to which he had been invited.

“How did you find this place?” he asked.

“She brought me here.”

Breva stopped for he knew all too well whom his brother meant. The hair shifted on the back of his neck and he looked around him fearfully, half-expecting to see the demoness who had turned his brother from mortal to Reaper.

An eerie green glow began to shimmer along the walls further down the stone steps. It washed over the craggy rock walls—shifting and wavering like ghostlings at the Autumn Equinox.

“Is s-she here?” Breva asked, holding his breath for the answer.

“I doubt it.”

Breva swung the phospho light all along the remaining steps but could see nothing save the strange free glow that had now spread up the walls of the cavern to illuminate the ceiling from where wicked-looking stalactites dipped their mineral fingers. His brother had obviously left the rocky stairway and entered some as yet unseen cavern.

The roar grew in volume as Breva approached the bottom of the steps. No longer was he overly warm for a steady wind was blowing over him, carrying with it the unmistakable aroma of the sea. Yet even knowing he would find water when he cleared the last step and turned the corner into the soft green glow, he was unprepared for the sight which greeted him.

“Sweet Merciful Alel,” Breva whispered as he took in the magnificent view. His mouth was agape, his eyes like saucers and his heart thundering.

Extending out for two hundred feet or more was a silvery-blue expanse of still water—the surface so still it looked like a sheet of polished glass. Above it were jabbed clumps of aureate, helianthus and russet formations mushrooming along the low ceiling. Stalactites of pale brown and deep henna spread downward toward the water.

But it was the spiraling, twisting rays of light coming down from the ceiling that held Breva in thrall. The origins of the greenish glow came from sunlight pouring down in saffron rays that—when mixed with the pale blue of the water—turned the cavern walls to that delicate shade of celadon green. Dust motes in the rays flitting about like tiny butterflies. The hole soared hundreds of feet upward to let in sunlight unmarred by the violence of the storm lashing the planet.

"How does it do that?" Breva breathed. "The solar storm —"

"Doesn't seem to affect anything in this grotto or the chimney of rock that leads up to the surface," the Reaper said quietly. "Each time I come here, it is the same, peaceful *cenoté*, devoid of the cares of the outside world."

"But is that sea water I smell?"

"The lake seems to feed from salt water, aye. For the life of me, I have searched the planet over and cannot find any body of water from which it could have sprung. There are no oceans on R-9."

"Then how...?"

"She created it, is my guess," his brother answered. "If I had to explain it, I'd say she copied it from some other world and brought it here. It's as likely an explanation as I can come up with."

The startling beauty of the place, the wondrous waves of sweet ocean breeze that flowed gently over him made Breva perch upon a flat hunk of rock and stare at the pristine plane of the underground lake. Nothing moved either within or atop the sleek surface but the mirror-like finish echoed the blazing autumnal colors lying above it.

"Truly beautiful," Breva said. "No wonder you come here so often."

A wistful look entered the Reaper's eyes. "If only I could dive into that sweet water," he said. "I think I might find peace."

"Do you..." Breva shook his head. "No, I couldn't." He looked wistfully at the water. "Do you think it is safe?"

"I believe so. Perhaps some other time, *chanto*," Lord Savidos said. "For now, I've something I need you to do for me."

"Name it and it will be done," Breva assured him.

"First, I need to tell you things I have too-long avoided telling."

Sensing no comment was necessary Breva sat still, his eyes glued to his brother.

"Do you remember when the old woman found me?"

Nodding warily, Breva replied, "It was on the battlefield on Idimmu Prime. I wasn't there that day but I should have been."

"No, you shouldn't have. It was good that you weren't," the Reaper denied. "Hell opened up that day and seventy percent of our force was slaughtered by the Coalition. Those who weren't taken prisoner, who were too mangled to survive, were left to bleed to death on that overgrown world."

Lord Savidos was staring up at the hole down which sunlight rained in wavering shafts of honey-colored beams. The sunbeams played along the water, seemingly to circle like a carousel.

"Mother had been dead less than a week when I went into that battle. I was still grieving for her, so angry with my father I had thoughts of slitting his throat as he slept. My head wasn't in the fighting and I was reckless that day. I did stupid, foolish things

knowing full well I might not walk off the battlefield – or even be carried off it alive. I just didn't care."

He looked down at the still water, his face lit by the glow of the sunlight.

"I had taken a sword to the belly and was lying on my back in a shallow stream that cut through the killing field. Rain was falling on my face and I remember thinking how cool it was, how peaceful despite the burning agony spreading in my gut."

He hunkered down beside the placid underground lake and dug his hands into the fine sand that rimmed the water's edge.

"I knew I was dying. Ravens were circling overhead, cawing to one another, no doubt pointing out the warriors who were unable to fend them off. One landed not far from me and I turned my head to look at it. Just that small effort nearly cost me my life for it took the last bit of my fading strength to accomplish it."

He picked up a handful of sand and let it drift down through his fingers, studying the crystal grains as it flowed.

"I remember asking the raven to wait until I'd breathed my last before he went for my eyes. All around me scavengers were coming out of the veldt, drawn by the scent of blood. I could hear men screaming in agony, pleading to be allowed to die, begging for their mothers." He glanced over at Breva. "When men are dying or in great pain, they become little boys again, needing the comfort of their mothers' arms."

Dusting his hands together, he sat down with his knees drawn up into the perimeter of his arms, his fingers laced and stared out across the water.

"I don't know when I became conscious of the three women walking amongst the dead. It seemed such a strange sight—one very old, one my mother's age and another who was but a young girl. The old one was Morrigunia."

Never having heard the name of the old one who had rescued his brother from certain death, Breva rolled the name over his tongue, trying it out. He didn't like it for it left a bad taste in his mouth.

"She came over to me and stood there staring down at me. Her face was so wrinkled I could barely make out her features, but it was her dark green eyes that held me spellbound as she knelt down beside me. She asked if I wanted to live."

The Reaper laid his head on his knees. "I said yes." His voice went deeper, the words coming from the very soul of him. "*'Will ye give yourself to me, lad?'* she asked. *'To do with as I please? To become One with me? Your body to mine?'*"

Through the cross of Gabriel's arms, Breva thought he saw a tear fall from his brother's face.

"The gods help me but I answered *aye* for I wanted nothing more than to live. When she pressed, making me swear it, I pledged to her my word, never knowing what it was I was agreeing to until it was too late. I have often cursed that day and the evil bargain I made with the crone."

For nearly a year Gabriel Leveche had been among the missing from the battlefield on Idimmu Prime. Long after prayers for his soul had been chanted from the Tower of Memory, his grandmother had ceased her daily tears and his brothers had stopped speaking his name in sorrowful tones, he simply showed up one day at his grandfather's keep at Stori—an unsmiling, non-talkative loner who gave only a cursory explanation of how he had survived and where he had been. His grandparents had hidden him away, careful that no mention of Gabriel being alive leaked out to his father. All Breva knew about his brother's miraculous return to the land of the living was that an old woman had found him on the battlefield, taken him to her home and there nursed him back to health.

"I was astounded at her strength that day," Lord Savidos recounted. "She picked me up in her arms as though I was a mere babe in swaddling. The wind was whipping around us and for a moment I thought a storm had descended upon the valley, but then I realized we were flying through the air, streaking through the clouds as if they were smoke from a campfire."

"She brought you here," Breva said. "All the way from Idimmu Prime."

"I thought I was dead," the Reaper said. "How else could I be flying through the air in the arms of a frail-looking old woman? I reasoned she was The Gatherer sent to bring me to paradise so I relaxed and even slept, thinking I'd soon see my beloved mother."

Lord Savidos said nothing for a moment and when he resumed his tale, his voice was devoid of expression.

"When I woke, my clothes were gone and she was sitting beside me—as naked as the century she was born. Her too-white flesh was wrinkled like a prune, her wispy white hair fanning out from her head like tentacles on a jellyfish. Her breasts were two sagging cones that dragged against her chest and lay upon her potbelly, and when she smiled at me, all I saw were rotten teeth, yellow and cratered, her hot breath like the gas from an open sewer. How, I wondered, as bile wriggled its way up my throat, could I ever let something like that touch me?"

Breva shuddered at the image his brother was painting and glanced around them. He seemed to be searching every nook and cranny, his eyes full of fear.

"She took me while I was still so weak I could not lift a hand to deny her. She gripped my cock and—curse that damned treacherous thing—it hardened to steel in her withered hand. The feel of that moist, ice-cold flesh circling me was nearly my undoing and I had to swallow back the puke threatening to spew forth at any moment. My heart was trip-hammering against my rib cage. The blood was pounding in my ears. I was trembling from head to toe, yet my cock was as rigid as the first time I'd ever poked it into a willing serving maid."

Swallowing at the description, Breva looked as though he felt his own gorge rising.

"She swung her leg over my hips and straddled me, shoving me up into her foul-smelling cunt as she settled down upon me, her bony knees sticking into my rib cage. Her breasts were bouncing up and down, swinging side to side as she rode me. She

grabbed my hands and forced them to her chest, upon those limp pieces of cold flesh. Of their own accord my hands latched on and I began kneading those loathsome, elongated mounds as though they were the sweet breasts of a winsome young woman."

"She had mesmerized you," Breva said.

"It never occurred to me to wonder why my belly no longer hurt," the Reaper explained. "She was bouncing on my stomach as she fucked me—twisting from side to side, raising and lowering her cunt on me in a frenzy of lust. I just lay there squeezing her disgusting tits for all I was worth, wringing them, twisting them as viciously as I could but she didn't seem to notice. Her head was thrown back, those dry strands of wispy hair tickling my bare thighs as she bucked upon me. I felt my cock being squeezed as though it was in a vise and remember howling with the pain as she came, then I was watching her lowering her face to mine, squeezing my eyes shut to blot out her ugliness, opening my lips as she slanted her foul mouth across mine and feeling her hateful tongue thrusting inside."

Lord Savidos brought his hands up to his face and covered it, shielding himself from his brother.

"I came while her tongue was impaling me. I came so hard I thought cum would shoot out the top of her head. Somehow my hands had found their way to her hips, anchoring her to me, and I thrust into her like a madman—over and over and over again—until I had emptied myself in her in a bright burst of the most god-awful pain I'd ever known. I felt as though my cock was being burned off at the root but as quickly as the heat enveloped it, it became ice-cold, and I thought it would break off if I so much as blinked."

"Merciful Alel," Breva said.

"I was sickened by what had happened. I lay there quivering, my arms fallen to my sides, my legs boneless. I was striving to get my racing heart under control. I was so disgusted at myself, at what I had let myself do, I couldn't open my eyes. I couldn't look up into that craggy face and see myself mirrored in her rheumy eyes."

"I don't blame you, *chanto*."

"She was still sitting astride me, her warm cunt holding my cock hostage. Her hands were smoothing over my bare chest and belly and it was then I felt the pain in my gut. My eyes flew open and I lifted my head to see the bloody gash that pumped out my life's blood even as I watched."

"How long did she fuck you?" Breva asked.

The Reaper lowered his hands and glanced over at his brother as though he could not believe Breva had asked such a thing.

"I mean, if you were bleeding the entire time she was riding you..." Breva said, putting his hands up in question.

"I don't know what she did to me, Raoul, and I doubt I ever will. All I know is that the woman atop me, whose body was impaled on mine, was the most beautiful, sensuous being I'd ever seen."

"Beautiful?" Breva echoed, his eyebrows lifted.

"Morrigunia," the Reaper said. "The Triune Goddess of Life, Death and War. It was War who found me, Death who took me and Life who sat there then, and the most stunning smile on lush red lips that looked like crushed cherries."

"She gave you life," Breva said with a sigh. Ever the romantic, he enjoyed tales of fated lovers.

"A facsimile of it, at any rate," Lord Savidos said and got up from the ground.

"Then what?"

"Then she made me what I am."

"The old hag or the beautiful one or..."

"Does it matter, Raoul?" his brother snapped. "It is how she did, you should be worried about."

Breva blinked. "Why?"

"Just let me finish my tale and you'll know why!"

Chastened, Breva watched the Reaper as he began to pace.

"For a moment there, I actually felt good about the situation. I was satiated to the point of being senseless and as I lay there—realizing my wound had finally stopped bleeding—I thought I was well on my way to flying away with The Gatherer. There was no way I could survive after all that blood loss and the bouncing she had done on my gut."

"But you did, didn't you?"

Lord Savidos gave his brother an astounded look. "Of course I did, you moron!"

Breva had the grace to blush. "You know what I meant," he mumbled.

"It was while I was lying there waiting for The Gatherer that she flipped me over to my belly and knelt beside me. I don't remember what I thought at the moment but whatever it was didn't stay in my memory for I felt a terrible pain along my lower back and knew she'd cut me open."

Breva's eyes widened. "Cut you open?"

"Before I could react, I felt something fall onto my skin—something cold and slimy—then the most horrendous agony invaded my back. It was unlike any pain I'd ever experienced and I writhed on the ground like a serpent without its head. I screamed as something seemed to be gnawing through my vital organs, burning them, biting through them. I twisted and turned, flipping to my back to try to dislodge whatever had crawled inside me."

"Something had crawled into you?" Breva asked breathlessly.

"I could feel it slithering around in there," the Reaper said. "The pain was horrible but the feel of that thing wriggling inside me nearly drove me mad. I tried to reach behind me to pull it out but there was no opening there. The flesh had sealed over whatever it was and when I scrambled to my feet—trying desperately to claw at the

burning pain—I realized that the cut on my abdomen had also sealed shut.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Whatever had invaded my body was now locked inside me.”

Breva shuddered. “By the gods, Gabriel. What was it?”

“A revenant worm,” the Storian prince replied. “A vile piece of filth that had snagged its teeth into my kidney and even then was sucking on my blood and producing hundreds of offspring.”

Breva swallowed convulsively. “Offspring?” he repeated, his face green. “You mean the...”

“Aye, the parasite,” the Reaper replied. “And now I need you to take one of them from me and put it in Ardor.”

Chapter Nine

"No!" Breva said, shaking his head. "I'll not—"

"It is the only thing we can do for her, Raoul," his brother pointed out. "The parasite will heal her."

"Heal her?" Breva repeated.

"You see this scar?" his brother asked, pointing to a tiny V-shaped white mark above his left eye. "Do you remember when I got this?"

"Aye, Gabriel, but..."

The Reaper pulled his shirt from his britches and exposed his belly. "Do you see where I was stabbed that day on the battlefield?"

"No, but—"

"I had the scar over my eye before I was made a Reaper. The parasite left the scar alone because it was unimportant. It didn't affect me in any debilitating way. The stab wound would have, so the parasite healed it. It will heal Ardor's hearing and vision."

"I don't understand—"

"Because just as I did not need a gaping wound in my gut to fester and grow morbid, she doesn't need to be left unable to see or hear!" his brother explained. "Those are two things a warrior—or in her case, a warrior—needs to survive. The parasite will give those things back to her." He threw out a negligent hand. "A shaving cut on her legs, healed scars from whatever source, the parasite will ignore."

Breva started back toward the curving staircase leading up through the cavern. He crossed his hands back and forth in front of him in negation. "I don't care. I won't do it!"

The Reaper grabbed his brother by the shoulder and spun him around. "Would you want to be left blind and deaf, Raoul?" he demanded. "I know I wouldn't. Can you imagine the horror of being unable to communicate with those around you? At the mercy of those around you?" He shook Breva. "Think, *chanto*! She is a warrior. What kind of life would she have as an invalid?"

"No, Gabriel! I told you no! I won't be a part of this."

"Then who should I ask?" the Reaper asked.

"This is just wrong," Breva stated.

"Right or wrong has nothing to do with it, *chanto*. It is a matter of doing what we can to help her. Will you leave her as she is now?"

Breva's eyes filled with tears. "Don't make me do this."

"I have no one else I trust, Raoul," Lord Savidos said.

"Don't you have enough trouble already without doing this?" Breva asked. "You let the Coalition see you. How are you going to fix that?"

"I don't think that matters now," the Reaper said. "I would have preferred to wait a while longer for my identity to be revealed but they say everything happens for the best."

"Who says that?" Breva snarled. "Those with nothing to lose?"

Gabriel Leveche tightened his grip on his brother's shoulders. "Help me, *chanto*," he asked, his heart in his eyes. "Help me do this. I can't do it alone."

"Don't you realize what you are asking me?" Breva protested. A tear slid down his cheek. "I can't do it."

"Aye, you can," the Reaper said. "When I said there was something I needed you to do for me, you said name it and it will be done."

"That's not fair," Breva said. "I had no idea you'd ask for such an evil thing!"

Lord Savidos held his brother's stare. "Am I evil?"

Breva shook his head. "No, Gabriel, but —"

"Is she?"

"No, but that thing inside you is!" Breva replied. "Do you really think she would want it curled up within her? I don't want her hating me for having done such a wicked thing."

"It is my decision to do this so if she blames anyone, it will be me. Please help me."

Breva's shoulders slumped and his eyes told the tale—he had lost the discussion. Never had he denied his brother anything and he knew he wouldn't start then, despite his loathing of what was about to happen.

Hanging his head, the Storian major put up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. "What is it you want me to do?"

The Reaper breathed a sigh of relief. "You'll need to make an incision over my right kidney, reach inside and —"

"Reach inside?" Breva shouted. He began shaking his head.

"Reach inside and pull out one of the fledgling worms."

"No, no, no, no, no," Breva was saying, each word punctuated by the shaking of his head.

"You can't hurt the devilish thing and it won't attempt to bite you," the Reaper said. "At least I don't think it will."

Breva's head snapped up. "You don't know?"

"Just be careful with it. It has teeth, *chanto*."

Breva sat down abruptly on the stone step behind him and buried his face in his hands. "This is too much to ask, Gabriel. You aren't being fair."

"Once you pull the thing out, the wound will close automatically. We'll then have to take it up to the laboratory, make an incision in Ardor's back and drop the thing on. The parasite will handle the rest of it."

"And just what," Breva asked as he snapped his head up, "am I suppose to carry that demonic thing in? Just hold it as it wriggles around in my fingers?"

"No," the Reaper said and turned away. He went over to ledge where several bottles lay scattered about the sand, picked up a brandy bottle and brought it back. "I doubt there is any liquor left in here. I pretty much drained them all dry a long time ago." He thrust the bottle out to Breva. "Do you have a blade with you?"

Breva flinched. "No," he said. He stared up at his brother. "You speak so damned casually of this as though you were asking if I had a kerchief for you to blow snot into!"

"Here," Lord Savidos said and lifted the black obsidian blade he carried strapped to his thigh in a leather sheath, flipped it over in his palm and handed the wicked-looking weapon to his brother, blade first.

Not giving his brother time to rethink the situation, the Reaper walked over to the loose white sand near the water, tugged the tail of his silk shirt out of his britches and then lay down, stretching out on his belly.

Breva stared at the Reaper's blade—never having held the deadly weapon before—and shuddered at the sharp cutting edge. It was an implement of death that gave off emanations Breva wished he'd never felt.

"Raoul, don't think about it," Lord Savidos said. "Just do it."

It took Breva a long moment before he gained his feet. He was pale, his gait somewhat unsteady as he made his way over to his brother. His harsh breathing was loud in the cavern—even over the rush of the wind careening through the grotto—and the sour smell of his sweat was making itself known.

The Reaper had pulled his shirt out of the way, baring his lower back and lay there as still as death, his fingers splayed upon the fine white sand. His legs were spread apart as though he was bracing himself for the pain he knew he would experience.

"You're sure about this?" Breva questioned as he dropped to his knees beside his brother.

"Just do it," was the order.

With jaw set, Breva put the tip of the blade to his brother's back and made a quick three-inch lateral incision, hoping that was wide enough. He said nothing but drove two, then three fingers into the bloody wound. Almost immediately, something slithered past his fingertips and it was all he could do not to jerk his hand from the cut.

Lord Savidos was sweating, too, and his teeth were clenched against the pain. When he spoke, it was through that obstruction.

"Hook your fingers into the wound and drive them down further. Never mind about hurting me. It can't be helped and I can take it."

"Aye, but can I?" Breva quipped.

"One of the worms will slide across them. Just pull it out between your thumb and fingers. The queen knows what's happening and She'll make sure one of Her offspring volunteers itself."

"Oh, yeah?" Breva queried. "That's damned nice of Her."

"Drop it into the bottle as quickly as you can."

"Don't worry. I don't want to hold that thing any longer than I have to."

Breva took a deep breath, pulled his index and middle fingers into a hook, and thrust them down deeper into the Reaper's wound. Blood bubbled out of the gaping cut and he could feel his brother trembling from the agony, but he pushed deeper until something hard and scaly writhed across his fingers and he jerked it up, clamping onto it tightly with his thumb.

It was the most sickening thing Breva could ever remember seeing. A diseased-looking green color with sharp red spines ranging along the segmented back, it looked like something he'd once seen on one of his aunt's tomato plants. The tip of its tail was forked and the thing had red eyes, elliptical in shape like a viper's. Row after row of teeth showed in the mouth as it tried to snag into his fingers. With a groan of disgust, he dropped the vile thing into the bottle and held it at arm's length. Through the murky amber glint of the bottle, the creature glared at him, a milky substance falling in a long threat from the gaping maw to sizzle against the glass as it shot out its forked tongue. If he hadn't torn his stare from the abomination, he would not have seen the cut on his brother's back sealing itself shut. He stared down at that miracle, unable to look away, for in the blink of an eye, no sign of the wound was visible on Gabriel's back.

"By the gods that hurt like hell" the Reaper said, turning over. His hands were tight around clumps of sand and he let go of the silicate to run trembling fingers over his sweaty face. "It was all I could do not to moan."

"The cut healed," Breva said, his voice filled with awe.

"Aye, I know it did. Any wound I get, any wound *She* gets, will heal just that fast."

"Although I can see the advantage of it, Gabe, I'm damned glad I don't have one of those beastlets inside me."

"Accept Me, warrior. Protect Me and I will protect you!"

Breva jumped as though he'd been spurred and he almost dropped the bottle from his nerveless fingers. He stared at the bottle—eyes as wide as saucers.

"Not this one," the Reaper said. "He isn't the one to whom you're destined."

"It spoke to me," Breva said, shuddering as though with the ague. "The *thing* spoke to me!"

"Take Me unto you, warrior, and I will make you invincible!"

"Shut it up!" Breva shouted.

The Reaper could hear the sensual, seductive voice of the parasite and found it as sickening as did his brother. He wondered how Raoul could be hearing the thing for the parasite only spoke to those whose body hosted the vile thing.

"Stay here," Lord Savidos ordered. "I'll take the worm to the lab. Don't go into the water, don't even touch it, until I return."

Breva turned pale. "Why?" He glanced fearfully at the still water. "What's in there?"

"Nothing that I know of, but just don't go near it."

Breva moved back, putting distance between him and the tranquil blue-green water. "I don't want to stay here, *chanto*. This place is evil!"

The Reaper shook his head. "It is only as evil as the men who visit it and there is nothing evil in you, *chanto*."

Long after his brother had left him alone in the beautiful cavern, Raoul kept his eyes open, staring at the mirror-like sheen of the water as though he expected some hideous sea serpent to rear its scaly head and devour him. He kept well back from the unmoving surface, ready to flee up the stairs at the slightest provocation. After twenty minutes of jumping at every sound, he could take it no longer and fled the cavern, hoping nothing would jump at him as he ran.

* * * * *

"You are sure you want me to do this," Healer Talil wanted clarified. He held the bottle up to the light and frowned at the creature inside.

"It is the only chance she has to lead a normal life," Lord Savidos said and winced at his own description. There would be nothing normal about the life Ardor Kahn would live after the revenant worm had been inserted into her.

"All right," Talil said. It was obvious he wasn't going to try to either change the Reaper's mind or argue against the warrior's plan. He told his assistants to prepare the woman for the surgical procedure then asked what else needed to be done.

"You will need to leave as soon as you insert the parasite," the Reaper said. "Lock the lab doors behind you for she will Transition within a matter of minutes."

Talil winced but he nodded his agreement. "Am I to assume you will need Sustenance for her right away as well as *tenerse*?"

"Aye. If she was awake, I'd give her some of my blood, but that will have to wait."

"She doesn't have to be awake for the procedure?" Talil asked for the Riezell Guardian had yet to open her eyes.

Lord Savidos cocked his head to one side. "I don't think so. I believe it would be easier on her if she was unconscious, but I think the pain of the transference will wake her anyway. It is hard to sleep through something so agonizing."

"Well, we can at least try," Talil suggested. "If she wakes, she wakes. If not, it will spare her some of the pain."

"Can you put her under even deeper?"

"Aye, we can."

The Reaper thought it over for a moment—remembering the horrendous pain he had suffered as the parasite gnawed into his kidney—and he agreed it was worth a shot to keep Ardor from having to experience the agony.

“Three milligrams of tenerse, if you will, Healer Idpa,” Talil asked the man who was the regular healer assigned to the Reaper.

Standing with his arms crossed over his chest, his legs braced apart, Lord Savidos watched the healers as they worked. He was close enough to Ardor to spring to her aid if she needed it. His eyes were locked on the unconscious woman and as soon as the tenerse was injected into the muscles of her neck, he watched her flinch then seemingly sink down into the gurney, completely under the powerful narcotic’s influence.

“Okay, here we go,” Talil said.

They turned Ardor over to her stomach and pulled the lightweight medical gown up to the midway point of her back. Both physicians smiled at the lacy underwear she wore beneath the utilitarian gown and exchanged a knowing look.

“Get on with it!” the Reaper snapped, furious at the men seeing his woman’s private wear.

Idpa swabbed the area over Ardor’s kidney with a disinfectant then Talil did the actual incision as Idpa stood by holding the bottle with the revenant worm inside.

“How do we insert it?” Idpa asked and he turned to the Reaper.

“Just shake the thing out on her back. It will do the rest.”

Idpa turned the bottle upside down and shook it.

The beastlet slid out of the bottle and onto the smooth flesh of the Riezell Guardian’s back. It wriggled from side to side for a brief moment then lifted its ugly little head as though it was sniffing the air. As Idpa and Talil watched in stunned silence, the creature darted toward the wound and dropped into it, disappearing beneath the young woman’s skin.

“Sweet Merciful Alel,” Idpa said and made the Sign of the Slain One. He backed away from the table for the creature was burrowing under the first layer of skin and the sight made him ill.

“Get out,” the Reaper said. “Now!”

He had seen what the two fascinated healers had not—Ardor’s eyes flying open and staring in undisguised horror.

Not needing to be told twice, the healers scrambled for the lab door, shooing assistants ahead of them. The door shushed to and the sound of the pneumatic lock snicking closed was loud in the laboratory.

The Reaper moved with lightning speed, gathering Ardor up as she began to buck with the pain rippling through her body. She was screaming in his ear, her fingernails raking down his silk shirt sleeves, gouging into his flesh. He was intent on making her first Transition as easy as he could, therefore, he paid no heed to his own discomfort. Her body was shape shifting in his arms—fur sprouting where once only fine, pale

brown hair grew, bones cracking, sinews stretching, organs making squishing sounds as they changed.

Her screams went on and on as the gnawing, tearing misery the creature was exacting on her body grew in volume. Her verdant eyes became scarlet red and she hissed at him, leathery lips skinned back from sharp, glistening fangs. The medical gown and panties came apart from her body and fell to the floor.

Soon her screams became howls then vicious growls, and at last she lay limp in his arms, her lupine body quivering from wet nose to drooping tail.

"Never again will it hurt so badly," the Reaper crooned to her, sitting down on the floor to cradle her against him. "Never again, Sweeting."

The animal in his arms whimpered then seemed to fall asleep for it didn't move for a long, long time.

Rationalizing the tenerse had taken effect, Lord Savidos kept hold of his lady until the fur began to recede back into skin that was no longer leathery but soft and flawless. He stroked her head, running his fingers down the long mane of chestnut hair, feeling the texture change from wiry fur to silky strands. She snuggled against him, her face on his chest and slept on, gently breathing, completely trusting of the man who held her.

It was Talil who braved the Reaper's ire by unlocking the door and sticking his head in about an hour later. His smile wavered as the dark amber eyes of his overlord fell on him.

"Do you wish the injection now, Lord Savidos?"

"Prince Gabriel," the Reaper corrected. "There is no need for subterfuge now." He covered Ardor's nakedness with a sheet.

"As you wish, Your Grace," Talil agreed. He came into the room. "I have the lady's Sustenance and tenerse."

Ardor stirred in his arms and turned so she was looking up at his face. "What happened?" she asked, her eyes fearful.

"I did what I thought best for you, wench," Gabriel said softly.

"You turned me," she stated, tears gathering in her eyes.

"You would have been left blind and deaf," he told her. "Would you have wanted that?"

She shook her head. "No, but I would rather you had given me the choice."

He stroked her hair back from her face. "I did what I could so we would be together."

"Aye, well, I guess I can't complain under the circumstances," she said then locked her eyes with his. "But next time, Reaper, you ask before you go making life-altering decisions for me."

He smiled. "I swear it."

She glanced at the beaker in the healer's hand. "Do I have to drink it, now?" she asked.

"Aye, wench, you do," he replied.

Grimacing, Ardor sat up with his help and looked across at the healer. She made a face as he came toward her with the beaker. Tucking the sheet around the upper part of her body, she tucked one end into the V at her bustline.

"What does it taste like?" she asked.

"It's hard to describe," he answered. "You won't find it unpalatable since the parasite requires it. You will need to take a bit of my blood, but we can hold off on that."

She nodded and accepted the beaker from the healer. Drawing in a long breath, she put the glass rim to her lips and drained the contents, gagging only a little as she swallowed the thick liquid. When she was finished, she handed the beaker back and thanked the man before settling down once more into the Reaper's strong arms.

"Leave us," she ordered and her voice held great authority.

One thick brown brow cocked upward but Gabriel Leveche did not countermand her order. He simply increased his hold on his lady and waited until the healer had once more retreated, leaving behind the syringe of tenses.

"Do you want the drug?"

"Not yet," she answered. Her fingers were on the buttons of his shirt. "I want you."

The Reaper looked down at her. "You want what?" he managed to ask before she pushed him down and began ripping at his clothing.

It was not the gentle lovemaking he had envisioned. It was a wild, thrilling frenzy of ripping clothing and questing hands. This was no virgin lying atop him, her mouth fastened to his. This was a woman who had known many men—more than he wanted to know how many—and she knew what it was she wanted.

Buttons flew from his black silk shirt and he lay there as she ripped it open and ducked her head down to claim his right nipple with a strong suction that made his cock leap with attention.

She had him pinned down, her strong legs straddling his hips, her feet arched over his lower thighs to hold him still. Her hands were on his shoulders, her fingers kneading his muscles as her teeth grazed over his nipple and bit just hard enough to draw blood.

"Damn woman!" he yelled.

She lapped at the pinpricks of blood that welled up around his nipple then latched her lips onto it and sucked hard.

Gabriel was becoming so aroused he thought his cock would rip right through his leather britches. She was like someone starving, her hands roaming over him at will. Her mouth moved against his nipple—drawing, suckling, lapping at the rigid flesh—and she took what she wanted from the contact.

It had been a long time since Gabriel had known a woman's hot caress. Many years earlier he had lost himself in the fevered bucking of Morrigunia's wild hips, but before that, he'd known only willing servants and horny ladies-in-waiting—none of whom were as eager as the beautiful woman sitting astride him. Though he had been no stranger to the ways of men and women, he had not known such frenzied sex until that moment. Since becoming a Reaper, he'd known only oral relief from faceless pleasure 'bots and wasn't prepared for what he was experiencing.

Ardor was like an out-of-control machine. Her—well, *ardor*—stunned him and he felt a bit uneasy at her passionate response to him. He tried to remember if he had felt such zeal when he had become a Reaper then remembered he had not, for once a Reaper mated, he did so for life. He'd not been inside a woman in fifteen years.

"Hold on!" he said, trying to bat her hands out of the way gently. They were all over him and his flesh where she touched was on fire. "Wait a minute!"

But Ardor was not to be deterred. She slid up him and leaned over, slanting her mouth across his and probing his surprised mouth with a hot, wet tongue that caused a clenching spasm in his lower abdomen. Her breasts pressed into his naked chest and he squirmed beneath her, feeling those delicious little points even under the sheet that covered her...

"Lady, no," he breathed as he tore his mouth free but she was raining kisses on his cheeks, his eyelids, to the cleft of his chin, along his forehead.

There was strength in those slender little hands, he thought, as she grabbed his wrists in tight fingers and pressed his hands to the floor. She was writhing on him, her sex just over his so that he could smell her excitement and the treasonous old cock was bucking to get in on the action.

"Damn it, woman, stop!" he pleaded but she was not to be deterred. Before he could stop her, she released his left wrist, wedged her arm down between them and slid her hand beneath the waistband of his britches.

Gabriel's eyes widened as her seeking hand closed around his meaty weapon. She was pulling him—not ungently—and manipulating his flesh in such a way his shaft was singing hosannas to the heavens, its head oozing with delight. Her fingers slid to his balls and he thought he'd levitate from the floor.

"Nice," she said, kneading him. "Nice and full."

He tried to protest again but her mouth closed over his, her tongue went down his throat and he trembled. With her wriggling atop him, her hand on his cock, her tongue in his mouth, he cursed and with waning strength jerked his right wrist free of her taut grip, pulled her other hand from his cock and then flipped her over, pinning her wrists to the floor now, him straddling her.

"No!" he said, dodging her demanding mouth. He glared at her, staring down into lust-filled eyes that were gazing at him as though he was a banquet waiting devouring. He watched her run a pink little tongue over her parted lips and that was the last straw for him. "You want me?" he asked, glaring at her, his heart thundering in his chest.

"Aye, warrior," she said in a breathless voice. "I want you."

"Okay, then," he said, nodding. "Let's do this the right way."

He let go of her wrists and she would have made a grab for him but he tilted his head slightly to one side, a warning in his glowing amber eyes and she laid the backs of her hands back on the floor.

"Lay still, wench."

"Will you hurry it up a bit, warrior?" she prodded.

A sinister smile dragged across Gabriel Leveche's full lips and he hooked his hands into the sheet, his knuckles grazing her bare skin.

"You know," he said, "that when a Reaper mates, it's for life."

"Whatever," she said, her hands clenching and unclenching as though she itched to put her hands on him.

"No 'whatever', wench," he said in a stern voice. "When we mate, we mate for life. That means one man, one woman for each of us."

She smiled slyly. "I don't like women but if I must have only one —"

"You know what I mean!" he said, his tone thick with warning. Playtime was over — at least for the moment — and it was time for serious intent.

"You don't like men?" she teased, her eyes twinkling.

Very slowly, he ripped the sheet from her breasts. The sound of the material tearing goaded them both.

"You want me to prefer a man to you, wench?" he drawled.

She lifted her chin. "You think there's a man out there who can give you what I can, Reaper?"

He shrugged. "Maybe." The fabric tore a little more. "There are some pretty boys roaming around amongst my troops."

Ardor's mouth was open, her blood boiling where the backs of his fingers touched her bare flesh. She was breathing hard, her breasts rising and falling, and when he wrested the sheet from her, she grinned at him.

He was sitting astride her hips, his hard cock pressing against her belly, his bare chest a delight for the hard pecs flexed when he moved. His weight was delicious and it was sending spirals of heat through her lower body, putting pressure on her clitoris and making it ultra-sensitive.

Gabriel was breathing as hard as she was and even as his hand closed around the globe of her left breast, he itched to ravage her like a warrior of old.

"What's stopping you?" she asked, easily reading his thoughts.

He had read the reports Prince Cair Ghrian had filed at Command Central on the men who had been made Reapers on R-9. He had flown to Seabhac to meet with others like him so he knew the way the laws had been laid down for his kind. Once he took

this lovely wanton lying sprawled beneath him, he would never dip his shaft into another. They would be bound together for life and the prospect sobered him.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Didn't you not want me before this, warrior?" she asked. "Weren't you the one who said he'd fuck me and forget me?"

Gabriel winced. "Aye, but I hadn't thought it through," he admitted.

"Have you now?"

He was on fire with wanting her. His damned cock was nigh to bursting and causing him untold anguish as he sat atop her. He not only passionately desired the woman, he needed her, feared he'd burst into flame if he didn't have her.

"Have you?" he countered.

"Get your cock in me before I change my mind and go looking for another mate," she chided him.

"Like I'd let you do that," he said.

He stretched out atop her and claimed her mouth, working his tongue past her lips in a gentler, more thorough way than she had taken his. The thick hair covering his chest tickled her nipples and she gloried in the delicious feel. His kiss was heady and it sent Ardor's senses to reeling for this man was a potent son of a bitch and he was showing her he was in control.

And that wasn't to be tolerated – at least not yet!

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around him until he could barely move. Her strength had tripled, quadrupled, with the transference and she was showing him just what a handful she was going to be. Her fingernails clawed into the fabric of his silk shirt, ripping it down the back and discarding it as easily as though it was tissue paper.

"Scratch me and I'll spank your ass until it's as red as a cranberry," he warned, feeling her hands on his shoulders.

"We'll save that for some other time," she said with a grin.

"I'll remember you said that."

Ardor laughed and put her palms to his cheeks. "Take me, warrior?" she asked, her need pulsing at him from her eyes. "I want to feel you inside me."

This was no simpering miss beneath him, he knew. There was no modesty between them, no pretending. He wanted her, she wanted him. There was nothing more to say about it.

He knew there was taking a woman hard and taking a woman *hard*. The first way was rape. The second was lustful thrusting. He knew if he took her in the frenzy he wanted to take her, they'd both end up sore and bruised, if not seriously hurt. He didn't want their first time to be a wild mating of bodies but a mating of souls. He wanted to make sure she was bonded to him for eternity.

"Lie still," he said and pushed her arms down to the floor again.

"I don't want to—"

"Shush!" he insisted.

Moaning at his command, Ardor ran her hands down his chest and flexed her palms over his taut pecs. "You just gotta be difficult, huh?" she questioned.

Gabriel had never known a woman's teasing during the sexual act. Most of the young girls he'd played hide the eel with before that fated day on the battlefield on Idimmu Prime wanted a quick tumble—a few squeezes of the pert melons, the skirts thrown up, eel slid in into the snatch, a few thrusts of the hips and it was all over except stuffing himself back into his britches. With Morrigunia, he'd had no control of the situation from beginning to end and felt more like a dildo than a lover. Pleasure 'bots did nothing to make his blood run hot and all he'd wanted was quick relief—pull down the pants, attach the eel to the 'bot's moist, super-suctioning mouth, experience a few unconscious thrusts and it was all over except for feeling rotten once the 'bot went away.

But he wanted far more this time than any of the previous situations he'd experienced. He wanted it right. He wriggled against her until she unhooked her legs from his hips and put her feet on the floor.

"That was you and not Raoul who pleased me in the cell, wasn't it?" she asked, her hands plucking at the floor as though she was striving to remain calm.

"What do you think?" he asked, reaching down to stroke a wisp of her hair from her cheek with a crooked finger.

"I don't think you're willing to share me with anyone and that includes gorgeous Major Brevia," she responded.

He arched a thick brown brow. "I've labeled Raoul many things over the years, wench, but gorgeous wasn't one of them."

"It was you," she said. "I thought it was him, but it was you."

"You belong to me," he said simply.

Ardor sighed. "I'm sure you think so."

His slow smile was predatory. Holding her eyes with his, he lowered his head and claimed the nipple of her left breast between his teeth, laving the stiff little peak with the tip of his tongue.

Ardor lifted her hands and threaded them through his thick curls. "You have a devilish mouth, Gabriel Leveche," she said. Her flesh was rippling with goose bumps and heat was curling low in her belly.

He suckled her nipple gently—then a bit rougher—before moving to the right breast, not wanting it to feel neglected. From the reaction he received from the lovely woman reclining beneath him, he knew this breast was the more sensitive of the two. Locking that information away, he moved up to claim her lips once more, delving into her sweet mouth to taste her.

Her hands were massaging his scalp and she was wriggling her hips beneath him. He could smell the heat of her passion oozing from between her legs and it made his pulse quicken. Shifting his body so he was lying beside her and not directly atop her, he slid one hand down her body to run his fingers through the crisp curls at the apex of her thighs.

Ardor pulled her mouth from his. "Take those damned britches off now, Reaper, or I swear I'll rip them off you myself!"

"They're leather, wench," he said. "They don't rip so easily." He wagged his brows and it was the wrong action to do.

It was the wrong thing to have said if he'd wanted to keep his clothing intact. She bucked him off and though he tried to push her hands away, she hooked her fingers in the waistband of his uniform pants and tore them away from him in two quick rents. Without batting an eye, she attacked his feet and pulled off his boots in two quick little drags.

Gabriel's eyes flared. Not only was she stronger than he expected, she was quicker and she had a red glare in her eyes that told him she was through playing.

Ardor fell on him, wedging herself between his legs, spreading his thighs apart with her knees and before he could gainsay her had her cunt paused over the tip of his steely hard cock. He could feel the moistness of her upon that sensitive bulb.

"Let's do this *my* way," she said and impaled herself on the fleshy delight.

Drawing in a quick breath, the Reaper felt his tool sliding into a hot, velvet sheath that clenched around him with purpose. He felt as though he was being sucked up into her flaming body and the sensation sent spirals of lust undulating through his groin.

"No," he said, jaw clenched. "You are *not* going to ride me, wench!"

Ardor laughed as he flipped her over and pressed as deeply as he could into her heat. "Got a problem with control, do you?" she trilled.

Her arms were around his neck. Her legs were draped possessively around his hips once more and she was binding him to her. Even though he was lying atop her, she thought she was in control and that irritated the man in him.

Without another word, he pulled out of her, watching her face shift into a mask of surprise.

"You want me, wench?" he asked, dragging his stiff cock along the folds of her cunt.

She still had hold of his neck and hips. "You know I do," she said gruffly.

"Then we do it *my* way," he said.

Once more she released his lean hips but arched her pelvis up in invitation. "Then get on with it before I lose interest," she said, pretending to yawn.

Gabriel grinned at her and shoved his cock as far as it would go into her hot box, chuckling at the hastily indrawn breath that brought those long, sensuous legs back around his hips to squeeze him so hard he knew she'd not let him pull out again.

The rhythm he set was sure and unhurried—out a little ways, in as far as he could push inside, out a little bit more, then in again until she loosened her tight grip of his hips. She was breathing hard and each in and out motion brought a deeper scarlet glow to her pretty eyes.

Ardor found herself filled as she'd never been before. This man taking her was more than amply endowed and his cock was as hard as she could ever remember feeling one be. He was grinding into her with each thrust—swirling his tool inside her and eliciting such an overwhelming desire in her loins it was all she could do not to grunt with each of his lunges. She was staring into his eyes and as the scarlet spark began flickering in those amber depths, she grinned broadly, clenching her fingers in his hair to bring his mouth to hers.

The kiss was a heady delight that sent them both into a spasm of escalating motion—he thrusting harder and fast into her, she lifting her hips as far from the floor as possible to meet his every push. As their tongues dueled, teeth nipped at full lower lips, the sensitive peaks of her breasts abraded by the wiry hairs on his chest, sweat slicked their straining bodies and the scent of their lovemaking became an aphrodisiac that sent shockwaves of passion rippling through them both.

Their climaxes came at the exact same moment, both harder and longer, and more delicious than either of them had ever experienced. Gabriel dragged his lips from hers and threw his head back to howl his release as he heard her trill of pleasure exploding from her parted lips. The pleasurable little squeezes, the intense little pulses wrapped around and flinched around one another until Gabriel thought his heart would burst. The pleasure seemed to go on forever until he finally collapsed atop her, spent and drained of energy.

Ardor wrapped her arms around him and held him to her, wanting nothing more than to lie there and cushion his hard body to hers. She relaxed her legs but her hold on him never lessened. His head was upon her breast, his gasping breath blowing little fingers of delight over her sweaty flesh. Their hearts were thundering in unison and within a matter of moments, both were sound asleep.

* * * * *

It was the coldness of the floor that finally woke Ardor—that and the discomfort nagging at her spine she thought from the heavy weight still lying atop her.

“Reaper?” she questioned softly and smiled at him as he lifted his head.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” he said, smiling down at her.

“I’m a bit uncomfortable here, lover,” she told him.

He was up in a bound that told her he’d been awake a long time. He held out his hand to help her up. “Your back hurts?”

“With a vengeance,” she replied, wincing.

"You need the tenerse," he said, and retrieved the syringe. "I will warn you, it stings."

Ardor flinched only a little as the fiery liquid spread through her neck. "It's not so bad."

"Huh," was his comment.

She looked up at that glorious warrior's body – all hard planes and crisp wiry curls and rippling muscles. Unaware her gaze had stopped at his crotch, she put out her tongue to lick at her dry lips.

"Stop ogling my eel, wench, or he'll decide to go swimming again," he warned.

She slowly slid her gaze up to his handsome face. "And that would be bad because...?"

"Get your lazy ass up, woman," he said.

She grinned and lifted her hand to slap her palm into his, impressed with his strength as he drew her up to stand beside him.

"Is there something I can wear to keep you from ogling me?" she asked, looking around the lab.

"I prefer you naked but there are some Med Cen pajamas over in the cupboard," he said, folding his arms over his naked chest. He was standing there with his legs spread, his cock jutting slightly from between his legs.

She padded over to the cupboard and opened it, taking out two pair of the baggy garments. When she turned around, she was stunned to see him already dressed, a black silk uniform shirt tucked properly into a pair of black leather pants. Even his bare feet were covered in shiny leather boots.

"How did you do that?" she asked, her voice filled with awe.

"It takes a lot of concentration to rearrange the molecules and I don't do it very often – not from scratch, especially, since it drains you. It's easier if you're already wearing clothing but there again, it takes a lot out of you. I'll try to teach you but Morrigunia says not every Reaper is capable of learning how to do it."

Ardor's eyes narrowed. "Who the hell is Morrigunia?" she asked, suspicion rife through her voice.

"The Morrigunia," he said and watched her lips part in shock.

"The Morrigunia?" she asked. "The Triune Goddess?"

"It was She who made me," he told her.

A long breath came from Ardor's constricting chest and she shuddered. "Am I going to have to fight her for you?"

"I hardly think so," he said with a laugh. "I haven't seen her in years. She's no doubt moved on to some other poor warrior."

"That's a relief," Ardor said. "Not that I believe in gods and goddesses."

"Of course, not," he agreed.

Ardor stepped into the baggy pajama bottoms, wincing at the feel of it encasing her legs. "I hate these things."

"We do what we must," he said smugly and leaned a hip against the wall. "I'll find something better than Med Cen pajamas and prison-issue jumpsuits for you to wear."

"I hope so," she said, buttoning the PJ top.

"What would you like?"

"I kind of like what you're wearing," she said.

He lifted one brow. "Aye, well, I have no idea what women Reapers wear, but if this uniform is to your liking, I see no reason not to accommodate you."

Ardor started toward him and stopped, slowly lowering her head to find herself clad in an exact replica of his uniform—from silk uniform shirt to sleek black leather britches. The only thing different was the collar insignia. His was a silver raven and hers was copper. Her eyes widened.

"I outrank you?"

He shook his head. "No."

She reached up to touch the copper raven. "This is the rank of a major, isn't it?" she asked, glancing over at him. "Silver would be a captain."

"Aye, wench, but there is a disparity between Storian fleet officer grades and Riezell Guardian ranks. Your major status would be equivalent to a lieutenant commander in fleet grades," he reminded her.

"Oh, yeah. Right," she said, a bit crestfallen. "You're two ranks ahead of me."

"Aye, I am."

"What colors are lieutenant commander and commander?"

"Brass for the LC and gold for commander," he replied.

"I don't think I'll ever reach LC at Command," she said. "Not even Neff went that far up the glass ladder."

"Don't you consider yourself as good as Chastain Neff?"

"I never thought about it. Chas was the epitome of a primary. She had a lot more discipline than I do."

Gabriel held her gaze. "How much discipline *do* you have, Major Kahn?" he asked.

"After this, I'll be court-martialed so I doubt my warrioress abilities still apply."

"You'll not be going back to Riezell so that court-martial is a moot point," he told her.

"I was given an assignment," she said. "One I fully intended to carry out. I might not have counted on being caught so early on but it is still my duty to escape my enemies and—"

"I am not your enemy," he said in a soft voice.

"No, but your people and mine are at war," she reminded him.

The Reaper shook his head. "No, that's not the way it is with my men and me. I am doing everything I can to end this ridiculous war my father is supporting. My main goal is to keep our people out of Coalition prisons and safely away from the Storian war machine."

Ardor furrowed her brow. "Is that true?"

"I swear to you on my honor as a Reaper that it is," he replied.

"You haven't been fighting Coalition forces?"

He shook his head. "I've been too busy trying to keep us all alive until my brother can take the throne. Hell, my father—my king—put a bounty on my head for not fighting Coalition forces when I was ordered."

"Does he know you're alive?"

"My guess is he has a spy at Command Central, someone high up the echelon. If that man—or woman—now knows that I showed my face, I'm sure my father knows."

There was a discreet knock on the laboratory door.

"That would be Breva," the Reaper said with a sigh. "Enter!"

The moment Gabriel Leveche saw his brother's face he knew something bad had happened and the reprimand for leaving the cavern never left his lips.

Chapter Ten

"I wish I didn't have to give you this news," Breva said, his face pale and his eyes red. He nodded at Ardor, acknowledging her.

"What's happened?" Gabriel could feel a tightening in his groin.

Tears suddenly sprang up in Breva's eyes. "It's Manuel," he said. "Our brother is dead."

The Reaper staggered, devastated by the news. "How?" he managed to ask.

"Our father has struck once more, *chanto*," Breva said, swiping at the treacherous tear that fell down his cheek. "Manuel was executed this morning for seditious acts against the Royal Throne." His voice broke. "He was bound to a stake in the central courtyard and beheaded before his body was burned."

Gabriel's face paled. "They thought he was a Reaper?" he asked in a whisper.

Breva nodded, unable to go on.

Ardor reached out for her lover but his stiff posture told her he did not want comforting at that moment. His face was a mask of sorrow but his hands were clenched tightly at his side, his eyes hot with fury. "Did I not tell you, wench, they had a cohort at Command Central?"

"You have said that before," Breva said. "Tell me who he is and I will go after the bastard and flay the flesh from his bones!"

"You leave that up to me," Ardor said and both men turned to face her. "It is my right for whoever it was who revealed my identity to you is bound to be the same one who told King Alejandro you are alive."

"She would not do such a thing," Breva said.

Ardor blinked. "She?"

"I have my suspicions who the traitor is at Command and believe me I will be the one to end his miserable life. It was he who pushed me into the fire pit on *an Égipt*," the Reaper snarled.

"Who are you talking about?" Ardor asked, but Gabriel ignored her.

"There is no one to oppose our father now, *chanto*," Breva said. "When he picks a successor, you can bet it will be someone just like himself."

"He'd best not pick a successor any time soon if he wants to live," the Reaper said. "His days in this galaxy are numbered as it is."

"Let me do my job. I'll take the bastard out as Command planned," Ardor said, but still the men acted as though they hadn't heard her.

"If there is a spy among the Coalition Forces," Breva said, "do you think he knew about Ardor's assignment to assassinate the king?"

"I'd stake my life on it," the Reaper replied. "I can't believe Bowen would want to have our father dogging his heels."

"Bowen?" Ardor gasped. "You don't mean Colonel Kurt Bowen, do you?"

Still the men paid no attention to her. They were talking between them of retaliation for their younger brother's death so she had to shout to gain their notice.

"Do you mean Kurt Bowen, Reaper?" she yelled, interrupting them.

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "You say his name with too much familiarity, wench. Is he the one you think betrayed you with the implant?"

"Only he could have," she answered. "As for being familiar with him..." She shrugged. "I've intimate knowledge of him but it meant nothing to me, although it seemed to mean something to him."

The Reaper reached out casually and took her arm, but his grip was anything but casual. "Meaning?" he demanded.

She shrugged again. "He told me he loved me, but if that were true, he'd not have had them put an implant in my head without telling me."

"Would you have agreed?" Breva asked.

"Hell, no, I wouldn't have agreed to have my brains scrambled!" she snapped.

"Well, there you go," Breva said, his smile wavering.

Gabriel stared into her eyes for a few moments then spoke to his brother, never taking his gaze from Ardor. "Get the Burgon on the horn. Tell him it's urgent and use a highly secure channel."

"The Burgon?" Breva questioned. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I'm positive."

Breva turned on his heel, strode over to the Vid-Com, and called the on-duty com officer. "Open a channel to Aduaidh Prime, Barrera. Our prince wishes to speak personally to the Burgon!"

"What are you planning?" Ardor asked the Reaper.

He pulled her to him, holding her against his hard length, his hands tightly on her upper arms. "Do you think you can do what Command ordered you to?"

She nodded slowly. "I can take the king out and, given the chance, I will."

Breva glanced over at them. "She's been with us long enough for them to be suspicious of her, *chanto*," he said.

"Not if I escape," Ardor said, "and I planned on doing that anyway."

"As though I'd allow it," Gabriel said with a snort.

"You'll have to look the other way, Reaper," she said. "That's the only way I know to make this work. I have to escape."

"She's right," Breva said then looked back around at the Vid-Com screen where the Burgon's image was glaring at him.

"Who the hell are you?" the Burgon demanded, his eyes flashing. "I was told Prince Gabriel Leveche had miraculously sprung up from the dead to speak to me."

Breva bowed his head slightly. "I am Major Raoul Breva, Prince Gabriel's half-brother. He—"

"Why are you wasting my time?" the Burgon snapped. "I don't care if you are half-brother to Alel Himself!"

Gabriel let go of Ardor and stepped up to his brother, gently pushing Breva aside. "My apologies, Your Excellency. I am here now."

The Burgon's eyes widened. "Gabriel? Is that really you?"

"In the flesh, Ryden."

"Maybe, then again, maybe not." Bristling at the use of his given name, the Burgon stood up from behind his ornate desk, put his fists on the top and leaned on them. "Where did you get that nasty little scar over your eyebrow?"

Breva glanced at his brother. "One too many women and not enough men to go around on Ionary, Ry," Gabriel stated. "An academy side trip gone awry for you and me. It was the redhead who got me with her dagger then she poked you in your ass, left cheek if I remember correctly." He grinned. "You bled like the stuck pig she labeled you."

There was a faint twitch of the Burgon's lips. "And her name was..."

"Starinda, if memory serves. At least that's the name she gave the guards who arrested her."

"And just what did the guards do after they arrested her?"

"Screwed her out behind the bar. We caught them with their pants down as we were leaving."

Emperor Ryden Bakari, the Burgon of Aduaidh Prime, straightened up. "Well, I'll be a Diabolusian warthog's pecker," he said. "It is you, Gabe!"

"The Coalition found it harder to kill me than they expected," the Reaper said with a malicious grin.

"Am I correct in assuming you are the infamous Lord Savidos?"

"That's me."

"Huh," the Burgon said then sat down, fingering a wicked scar that ran from his right temple to the corner of his mouth. "You're one of Tariq's changelings?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No, but I know of the warrior you're talking about."

A thick brow lifted. "Really?" he asked. "And just how did you find out about him?"

The Storian prince grinned. "An intercepted diplomatic pouch that took a detour from Cair Ghrian's hands to mine," Gabriel replied.

"Such is war, eh?" the Burgon inquired with a sigh. His face lost its jovial expression. "You have heard about your brother?"

A harsh grimace passed over the Reaper's handsome face. "Aye."

"I lost all ten of my brothers to this wretched war and many a good friend. I hated to hear such devastating news," the Burgon said quietly.

"Manuel's death is why I have come knocking on your door."

"The idea of a man ordering his own child's death sickens me. Alejandro has stood in the way of peace all along. We should have known he would never allow Manny to take the throne and thwart him." He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, there was despair in the dark depths. "We should have done more to protect Manny."

"There was nothing you could do, Ry," the Reaper said. "Not then, at least, but there is now."

"Name it."

"Alejandro Leveche has outlived three wives and countless concubines, but the man is still as randy as a teenage plebe," Gabriel said. "His time of ruling the Storian people with a bloody hand is rapidly nearing its end."

"I'd give him one of my wives and all of my concubines if he's just go away to some far galaxy and let us get on with the peace process," the Burgon said.

"I have the means at hand to take my father out of the equation," Gabriel said.

"And how will you do that?"

Gabriel motioned Ardor to come to him. He took her hand as she walked to his side. "This lovely lady is Ardor Kahn, my betrothed."

Ardor glanced up at him, her lips parting.

"My sincerest congratulations, Gabe. She is, indeed, quite lovely," the Burgon commented.

"She is also a Riezell Guardian," the Reaper reported. "Their primary now that Major Neff has retired."

Respect gleamed from the Burgon's eyes. "How did she come to be with you and does Command know?"

"We took her from the prison ship *Borstal*. She had been put there by General Morrison to infiltrate the palace at Vespertine. Her job was to assassinate the king."

The Burgon's eyes widened. "They're resorting to Aduaidh tactics now, are they?"

"You have met Colonel Kurt Bowen?"

A nasty frown slid over the Burgon's face. "Unfortunately, I have had the dubious pleasure of making his acquaintance. There was something not quite right about the man. I have never trusted him."

"Your instincts were correct, Ry. I believe him to be a double agent, working both for and against my people."

"To what advantage?"

"His own. If he keeps the Storians and the Coalition at each other's throats until he can find the right man to sit the throne at Vespertine, he will have accomplished his goal. He would want a puppet he can control. Even as flighty as Manuel was, he would have made a good king. He would not have been so easily manipulated."

"I believe you are correct."

"My lady is more than willing to see her assignment to its conclusion. Now, more than ever."

The Burgon whistled. "Well, that answers my question on how Alejandro can be eliminated, but if she was mine, I'd be worried sick about her safety, Gabe."

Gabriel squared his shoulders—puffing up with pride. "She, too, is a Reaper. She'll be hard to take out."

It was the Burgon's time to drop his jaw. "Another female Reaper?"

"There is another?" Ardor asked eagerly.

"Princess Davan of Amhantar," the Burgon replied. "She was Dr. Davan Shanahan before Joining with Prince Cair Ghrian."

"I've heard of her! Who turned her and why?"

"Tariq," Gabriel said. "He did so to keep her from dying."

"So your plan is to allow your lady to do the job Command assigned her. What can I do to help?"

"I know you have patrol ships in the vicinity."

"Little good they did either Rabushu or Amerigen," the Burgon stated. "We were lured to Sauria, trying to keep that Storian hothead Sanchez from setting up a base camp there among the skinks."

"He tried that on R-9 but we have our own version of the Amhantarean net here. No one lands unless I approve it. Getting off this world is far easier than getting on it."

"That Amhantarean invention has certainly been a help and a hindrance. Aduaidh Prime now has a version of it, as well." The Burgon sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach.

"I just need you to make sure your patrols look the other way when Ardor escapes. She'll be flying a Fiach-class runabout. The ship will be the *Guerrero*."

The Burgon rubbed the pad of his thumb over his lower lip. "I can arrange that, Gabe. Am I to understand one of your ships will be close on her tail?"

"Aye," the Reaper replied. "The *Rebelde* will be the one dogging her and I'll be flying it."

Ardor frowned. "Is that necessary? I've seen the chances you take when you fly, warrior."

"It's necessary for Diego Sanchez's crew to believe I'm trying to get you back," Gabriel said. "If I know him, he'll get between me and you to give you time to outrun

me. He'll intercept you further out and upon seeing who you are will take you to my father."

"Will Sanchez try to bring you down?"

"He was a good friend of Manuel's. I can't believe he sanctioned what my father did," Gabriel replied. "I can't guarantee he won't fire on me, though. I've a price on my head."

"We'll run interference for you if Sanchez decides to take you out," the Burgon suggested. "A well-placed shot across the bow should bring him up short."

"It might be a good idea to fire a shot across my bow as well, Ry, for appearance's sake."

"I'll instruct them accordingly," the Burgon assured him. "You have no qualms that her cover has been blown?"

"It's a chance we'll have to take," Ardor said. "This war has gone on long enough. It needs to end."

"I truly admire brave women," the Burgon complimented her.

"So we can count on you?" Gabriel asked.

"Of course! If there is anything you need my help with, just ask."

"Pray to Alel my lady returns safely to me," the Reaper asked.

"That goes without saying, old friend," came the vow.

Chapter Eleven

"You'll watch your back," Ardor said as she climbed aboard the *Guerrero*. She was wearing a ripped prison jumpsuit instead of the black Reaper uniform Gabriel had fashioned for her.

"I'll be too busy watching yours, wench," Gabriel replied. He was on the docking bay catwalk, looking up at his woman who was paused in the hatchway of the Fiach runabout.

Ardor threw herself at him, never doubting he would catch her. Though he staggered a bit, he clasped her to him—their mouths locked together in a fiery kiss—his arms wrapped tightly around her.

Breva stood nearby, turning his attention from the embracing couple to glare at any of the workers who might have halted their labors to stare at the prince and his Coalition lover.

Breaking the contact first, Ardor laid her head on his shoulder and shivered. She feared for his life even though she knew he was a master flyer. He took chances she'd rather he not, but it would be useless to make him promise to be careful. He would do as he pleased.

"When the job is done, get out of the palace as quickly as you can. Only the royal family knows of the hidden passageway in the throne room. Make sure no one sees you enter it. Stay there until I come for you," Gabriel said. "I won't be any longer than I have to. Once my people know I am still alive, I doubt I'll have any problems assuming the throne."

"Provided our father's enemies don't take exception to you ruling them," Breva reminded him.

"Our people are tired of war," the Reaper said. "Those who would continue on with this lunacy need to be weeded out and destroyed. Only a madman would want to keep on."

"Agreed, but we need to be very careful who we trust."

Ardor's arms were tight around Gabriel's neck. She never wanted to break the connection for she was afraid one or both of them would die during this mission. Having found what she knew was her true help-meet, she did not want to lose him.

"I'll be all right, Ardie," he said, using her nickname for the first time. "Just take care of yourself."

She lifted her head and looked up at him. There was a gentle smile on his chiseled lips and she ached to kiss him one last time. She knew if she did, she would only be prolonging their departure.

Reading her thoughts, Gabriel put her from him, reaching up to take her wrists in his hands and draw her arms down. "Be safe, Milady," he asked, bringing her hands together and kissing her fingertips. He stepped back, letting go of her. "I'll be right behind you."

Without another word, he turned and headed for the *Rebelde*, the Reaper didn't look back. He boarded the Fiach-class runabout and the door closed behind him immediately.

"Be careful, Ardor," Breva said, his throat closing. "I don't want to lose a sister-in-law before I get to have my first Joining dance with her."

Ardor's smile was tremulous as she reached out her hand to shake Breva's. "If something happens to me..." she began but the Storian major was shaking his head.

"Nothing is going to happen, wench. The gods speed you on your way." That said, he stepped back, snapped to attention and saluted her.

Feeling a lump rising in her throat, Ardor returned his salute and turned to climb into the *Guerrero*. She could feel moisture gathering on her cheeks and knew it wasn't from the heat.

Moving the *Guerrero* into position, pointing it down the long upward slanted rampway whose entrance was a good mile from the rebel's command base deep in the heart of Mount Anthus, she began taxiing to the takeoff platform that would launch her into the sky.

Breva watched from the command room as first the *Guerrero* then the *Rebelde* shot out of the tunnel hidden deep underground. The protective membrane that covered access to the tunnel was blown to pieces as Ardor flew from the subterranean passageway—giving anyone monitoring Riezell Nine's surface a good look at her escape attempt. Half a minute behind her was the *Rebelde*, engines screaming as the pilot tore after their escaping prisoner.

The plan had been simple enough once Ardor took to the skies. She would begin transmitting on the closed channel Bowen had instructed her to use once her mission was completed. There was to be no communication from her to Gabriel's ship.

"Command Central, this is Kahn. Do you read?" she yelled as though out of breath.

At first there was no answer and she was too preoccupied with trying to evade the ship close on her tail to repeat the hail. The Reaper's imperious voice came over the Vid-Com with a lethal tone of malice hardening his deep voice.

"Stand to, *Guerrero*!" the Reaper demanded. "You don't stand a chance of outrunning me."

Ardor smiled and banked the Fiach-class runabout hard to starboard. She'd show Gabriel Leveche he wasn't the only master flyer in the galaxy.

"Command Central, this is Major Ardor Kahn. Do you read?" she repeated, taking great delight in leading the *Rebelde* through a meteorite field. "Come in Command Central!"

It was Bowen's voice that broke the silence inside Ardor's ship. "Kahn, are you all right?" he barked.

"I've got a bitch of a headache, Sir, but other than that, I'm fine. Can you get that bastard behind me off my tail?"

"*Bastard?*" the Reaper sent her telepathically. "*That's no way to talk about your future husband, wench.*"

"We haven't received any intel from you in days," Bowen said, a hint of suspicion in his voice. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Ardor put irritation in her tone. "If you're asking about the implant you didn't tell me about, the rebels deactivated it."

There was a long pause then Bowen spoke calmly, soothingly. "We don't have any ships in the immediate area and we're picking up a Storian vessel headed your way. Can you make it to Rabushu? It's in Coalition hands now."

"Negative," Ardor told him. "I don't have enough fuel for that."

She heard Bowen swear. "Hang tight, Kahn. Let me see what I can do."

"*Let him get in touch with Sanchez,*" the Reaper transmitted to her.

"You'd best hurry, Sir," Ardor said, pretending to pant. "That damned Savidos is close on my heels!"

"Savidos is the one following you?" Bowen asked, excitement rife in his voice.

"He swore he'd never let me go."

"*Damned straight,*" the Reaper said with a chuckle.

"We'll blow his ass out of the sky!" Bowen swore.

"*He can try.*"

Ardor's attention was caught by a warcruiser speeding toward her on the starboard side.

"*That's Sanchez,*" the Reaper told her.

Amazed at how careless Bowen had become, Ardor heard him hailing the Storian ship, ordering them to blow up the Fiach following her ship.

"It's Prince Gabriel!" Bowen crowed. "Shoot him down. Shoot him down!"

The hairs on the back of Ardor's neck lifted as a shot passed between her and Gabriel. It came nowhere close to the Reaper's ship but it turned the Riezell Guardian's bowels watery with fear.

"Shoot him down!" she heard Bowen screaming. "Shoot him down!"

A very calm voice came over the Vid-Com. "I will not do that, Colonel. He is still my prince."

"*Atta boy, Sanchez!*" Ardor sent to Gabriel.

"Your prince has a bounty on him or do you not know this?" Bowen sneered.

"Prince Gabriel and I attended the academy together, Colonel. I have never believed him guilty of treason and until I can look him in the eye and have him tell me he was justly accused of that crime, I will give him the benefit of the doubt," Sanchez stated.

"Thank you, Sanchez." The Reaper's voice cut over Bowen's sputter of anger.

"The woman is a Cenguvian prisoner of the Coalition, Sanchez. She is not to slip into Leveche's hands again. Is that clear?" Bowen snarled.

"The woman belongs to me, Diego," the Reaper said.

"In your dreams, Savidos!" Ardor yelled. "Get me out of here, Colonel! Please! I'd rather die than have him touch me again!"

"If you have hurt my woman, Leveche..." Bowen yelled.

"Your woman?" the Storian prince questioned. "She was never your woman and when I get her back, I intend to put the wench in my harem!"

"Like hell you will," Ardor said sweetly.

"Turn back, Your Grace," Sanchez said in a firm voice. "The woman will be taken into custody."

"I think not!" the Reaper said.

Another shot was fired over the bow of the *Rebelde*. The shockwave hit Ardor's ship and it was all she could do to hold the runabout steady.

"Break off, Your Grace," Sanchez said. "The next shot will not miss."

"Just shoot the son of a bitch out of the sky," Bowen demanded.

There was a long moment of silence then the Reaper spoke in a deadly, level voice. "This isn't over, Bowen. One day you and I will have a long talk about the day you forced me into that fire pit on *an Égypt*."

Ardor saw the *Rebelde* veering off to larboard and she breathed a sigh of relief. She continued on course until a shot was fired across her own bow.

"Stand to, wench," Sanchez ordered. "And prepare to be boarded."

"I won't go back to that prison!" she shouted. "I will not be at the beck and call of Coalition cocks ever again!"

Ardor heard Bowen's guffaw.

"Keep her there for me, Captain Sanchez," Bowen said. "I'll send a runabout to—"

"I will be taking the wench with me to Vespertine, Colonel," Sanchez cut him off. "It will be up to King Alejandro to decide her fate."

"By all means," Bowen was too quick to say. "Just let him know I will be more than happy to ransom the lady. She pleased me greatly."

"Against my will!" Ardor sneered. "I'd rather die than have you put hands to me again!"

"I'd watch my mouth if I were you," Bowen suggested and she could hear a trace of annoyance in his smooth tones.

"I am a Storian sympathizer, Captain Sanchez. You can't turn me back over to the Coalition! I am asking for political asylum!"

"That will be up to my king, wench," Sanchez said. "Do as I have instructed and no harm will come to you."

After a brief moment or two Ardor cut her engines, letting the Fiach stand idle. Within the scope of a few seconds two guards materialized at the rear of the runabout, their laser pistols pointed at her heart.

"I am asking for sanctuary," she said, unbuckling her safety harness and getting up from the command chair. She raised her hands. "I am unarmed."

She could hear the muted voice of Captain Sanchez as he ordered one of the men to fly the Fiach to Storian airspace, bidding him be very careful of Prince Gabriel's property.

"Me or the ship?" Ardor sent to Gabriel.

"Both are mine, wench," came the amused reply.

"Are you safe?"

"I'm on my way back to R-9."

Ardor allowed one of the guards to take hold of her arm and in the blink of an eye she was standing on the bridge of the *Banderola*, Sanchez's warcruiser, and facing a rather nice-looking Storian male with a small goatee and a stern look in his black eyes.

"What is your name, wench?" the captain asked.

"Lucia Gaspar," she replied, giving him the name Bowen had chosen for her.

Sanchez came up to her and took her chin in his hand. He seemed to be studying her face and when his dark eyes locked with hers, he smiled slightly. "I can see why His Grace was anxious to reclaim you, wench."

Ardor jerked her chin from the man's grasp. "Aye, well, I had no desire to stay with that beast."

Sanchez tilted his head to one side. "Beast?" he questioned, then nodded slowly. "So it is true. Lord Savidos is a Reaper. This explains how he survived the fire pit, glory to Alel that he did."

"I demand asylum," she said. His unwavering stare was unnerving and he seemed to be sniffing her, and that made her very uneasy.

"I will take you to His Majesty," Sanchez said. "I am sure he will grant you sanctuary." He snapped his fingers and a young man came quickly. "Take the wench to one of the cabins set aside for visiting diplomats. See that she has something prettier to wear than this prison jumpsuit. She will want to look her best for King Alejandro."

There was something in the way the captain was staring at her that set off alarm bells in Ardor's head. His midnight eyes seemed to be peering into her very soul and there was a slight smirk on his thin lips.

Before she could say anything further to him, he turned his back on her, dismissing her and walked back to the command chair. The young man took her arm and led her away.

Locked in a somewhat utilitarian stateroom that contained few furnishings and fewer distractions, Ardor began pacing. She knew herself to be in top physical shape but the inactivity of the past few days—not to mention the transference of the parasite—had lowered her energy. She would need all her abilities to take out the king and keep herself long enough for Gabriel to come to her rescue.

"My guess is as soon as the king's assassination becomes public knowledge, there will be controlled pandemonium for a bit," Breva had suggested. "No matter who steps up to claim the throne, he will demand the assailant be found and executed. It is imperative Ardor keeps hidden until my men and I can come for her."

"Until *I* can come for her," Gabriel had corrected.

"There is still the matter of the bounty placed on you, *chanto*," Breva had reminded him.

"Do you honestly believe the people were behind that, Raoul?" the Reaper challenged. "As I remember hearing it, there was a hue and cry when it was announced. The people look to Lord Savidos as the only sane voice among the howls of the war-jackals."

"That is true, Gabe, but we have no way of knowing who is loyal to us and who is not. All I am suggesting is caution."

"I'll not allow my lady to come to harm," Gabriel had told him. "Neither will I allow myself to walk into a trap. Have no fear on that account."

"Are you sure only the royal family knows of the hidden chamber beyond the throne room?" Ardor had asked.

"It is a safeguard our father would guard zealously," Breva answered. "It is his bolt-hole and he would never have its whereabouts become common knowledge."

Pacing the nearly bare room aboard Sanchez's warcruiser, Ardor could feel the sweat gathering in the palms of her hands. She still had a headache—had had it all day—and her stomach felt a bit queasy. Unconsciously, she reached up to rub where the implant had been inserted, soothing the flesh there.

She was worried about Gabriel more than she was her own safety. If his father's people caught him, he would be summarily executed and she wasn't sure she could survive without him.

Stopping in mid-stride, Ardor examined that feeling. It was completely unlike her to consider any one man as a lifelong mate but she was already beginning to think of the Reaper in that way. Such uncustomary thoughts surprised her yet there she was concerned more for him than herself. Going against all her training, her honor, her beliefs, she was contemplating throwing aside all she had stood for with the Riezell Guardians. She would complete this last assignment and never return to Riezell. That

much she was sure. She, too, would have a bounty on her head for there had never been a Guardian to side with the enemy, much less go to live with him.

"What are you doing to me, Reaper?" she questioned softly.

"Loving you?" came the immediate answer.

Ardor drew in a breath. Perhaps she had heard him wrong.

"Search your heart, wench, he said. 'You'll find the answer there.'"

And it was there, she realized – in the way he looked at her, touched her, made love to her. It was there in his voice, in his body.

"When I have you safely in my arms once more, we will set a date for the Joining," he sent her.

Married? she mentally asked herself. Was she ready for that?

"You'd best get ready for it," he whispered and she could almost feel his warm breath in her ear.

Sitting down on a very uncomfortable settee, Ardor drew her knees up into the perimeter of her arms and sat staring at the far wall. Her nervousness was still there but slowly it was dissolving and she knew her lover was sending her reassuring sublims. As long as she could hear his voice, she was all right.

* * * * *

King Alejandro looked at the lovely woman walking toward him and felt an immediate tightening in his crotch. Sanchez had informed him the Cenguvian woman was beautiful but the good captain had not done her justice with his description.

Shapely with a tiny waist and buxom, the wench had thick chestnut-colored hair that gleamed with vitality. There were roses in her cheeks, her lips looked soft and he was sure must taste of cherries. With a flawless complexion that hinted of a bit of time spent out in the sun, she carried herself well and walked with the grace of a lady rather than the peasant Sanchez suggested she was. Her green eyes were almond-shaped with long, thick spiky dark lashes. She had elegant hands with short, well-cared-for nails that gleamed with health.

"Come," the king ordered, *"and sit by me."*

Ardor nodded demurely, casting her eyes down for a moment as she curtsied deeply before the Storian monarch. She was quick to do as he bade.

Alejandro Leveche had quite the reputation as a ladies' man and although he was an older, slightly taller version of his eldest son, he did not possess the same striking handsomeness Gabriel had. Good-looking in a sneering, jaded sort of way, the king took it as his due that any woman upon whom he bestowed his slightly off-kilter grin would fall willingly at his feet, turning over on her back like an eager puppy, her legs in the air, thighs spread.

"You are Lucia, is that correct?" he asked as she seated herself in the chair that sat one level below the throne. "You may be free to answer as you will."

"It is my great pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty," she said in a throaty voice she knew he would find sensual.

"Cenguvian by birth?" he asked.

"Aye, Your Majesty."

"Married?"

"No, Your Majesty," she replied. "I was training at the shivabot near J'baen when I was captured by Coalition Forces."

"Ah," the king said, drawing out the exclamation. "Training to be a swordswoman." He leaned forward. "Which is your favorite weapon, pretty one?"

"The saber, Your Majesty," she said softly.

"The saber," the king repeated. "A quick and proficient weapon." He sat forward and reached out to take up a lock of her hair. "Were you any good with that devilish little weapon, wench?"

Knowing he would have seen her forged papers by now – taken from the pouch she had hidden in a pocket of the prison jumpsuit—she suspected he already had the answer to his question, but she tilted her chin upwards a bit and admitted to being the first in her class and champion of her squadron two years running.

"And are you loyal to our person, sweet one?" he asked, lifting the lock to inhale its fragrance.

"I am your most loyal subject, Your Majesty," she said, putting a breathlessness and innocence in her words and expression that caught his eye immediately.

He let go of the heavy lock of hair and ran the tips of his fingers down her smooth cheek. "You are a very beautiful woman," he said then leaned back in his chair. "I enjoy having beautiful women about me."

"I am sure you have many such, Your Majesty," she acknowledged.

The king smiled. "One can never have too many beautiful women about him."

Ardor dipped her head and looked down at her hands, which were crossed casually in her lap.

"Sanchez says you were a prisoner of Lord Savidos," he said and Ardor could hear the anger in the older man's tone.

"He took me from the Coalition penal ship *Borstal*, Your Majesty."

The king's eyes narrowed. "Did he lay with you, wench?"

Ardor forced her eyes wide. "No, Your Majesty, but he tried to. I fought him as hard as I could. All he got was..." She stopped and bit her lip.

"All he got was what?" the king pressed.

Ardor made her lips tremble. "He laid hands to me, Your Majesty, but he did not compromise me, Alel be praised."

"Are you aware Lord Savidos is my disinherited son Gabriel?" he asked, locking his eyes on hers.

Ardor allowed her lips to part as though in shock. "No, Your Majesty!" she said. "I thought he had been executed!"

"So did I," the king snapped and his jaw clenched. "It seems he is now of the Undead, a Reaper."

Ardor frowned. "A Reaper, Your Majesty? I am not familiar with the term."

The king waved a dismissive hand. "It matters not. I have sent a fleet of ships after that treacherous offspring of mine and when I have him, I will make sure my torturers turn him inside out before they are through with his worthless hide!"

Shuddering, Ardor could think of nothing to say to such an evil statement. She was staring at the king in what he thought was respect, when in actuality it was disgust. She knew this for he preened as he spoke to her again.

"What would you say if I were to offer you a position with my household guard?" he asked.

Ardor slipped from her chair and bent forward, placing her head on the king's boot as a Cenguvian would at such an honor. "I am unworthy, Your Majesty!" she exclaimed through clenched teeth.

She felt hands on her shoulders and flinched inwardly. Forcing herself to look up, she found her face only inches from the Storian king's.

"I am," he said, his eyes roaming over her face, "in need of protection at all times." He licked his lips. "Even in my bedchamber." He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "Even in my very bed."

Swallowing the bile that was creeping up her throat, Ardor forced a smile to her lips. "It would be my honor to watch over your safety, Your Majesty."

He leaned closer still, his lips only a hairsbreadth from her own. "Even beneath my sheets am I in need of protection."

Steeling herself for the lips that settled over hers in a wet, repulsive kiss, Ardor squeezed her eyes shut, blotting out the florid face so close to her own. In the next moment, his fingers clasped her breast and it was all she could do to hold still. The moment his mouth left hers, she felt like wiping the back of her hand across her lips.

"Perfect," he said, molding her breast, squeezing it a bit too hard for comfort. He switched to the other and manhandled it in a like manner before sighing loudly. "Alas, diplomatic matters await my attention, my dear." He released her. "I will have my trusted servant escort you to your room where you may rest and refresh yourself for my visit later this afternoon." He leered at her.

"I will eagerly await you, Your Majesty," she said, her eyes downcast.

Someone took her upper arm to help her up, and when Ardor turned to thank the person, she was surprised to see Captain Sanchez. His knowing look gave her a sinking feeling in her gut.

"See to her for me, Diego," the king said as he stood. "This one garnered Gabriel's lustful eye so she is to be treated with all due respect."

"Your wish is my command, Your Majesty," Sanchez acknowledged. He pulled Ardor back from the dais and bowed deeply as the king walked off.

The Storian captain's hand was tight on her arm so that when she curtsied to the king, Ardor could feel the strength in that calloused palm restricting her.

Alone with the powerfully built man, Ardor felt vulnerable and she didn't like the feeling at all. Trying to ease her arm from his grip only made him tighten it more.

"I will keep my hold on you until we reach your room, wench," Sanchez told her in a dry voice. "Do not attempt to break free else I will be forced to hurt you."

Clamping her jaws together, Ardor made no reply to his threat. She allowed him to usher her from the throne room and down a long corridor at the end of which was a curving stairway leading upward.

The captain said nothing to her as they walked, keeping a straight military stanch as he walked. There was a ceremonial sword on his left hip and an obsidian dagger strapped to his right thigh. In the dark navy blue dress uniform of a Storian officer, his appearance would have impressed Ardor under different circumstances.

The room to which he led her was to the left of a large set of double doors—richly carved and shining lustrously. Two guards stood to either side of the elaborate portals, their laser pikes pointed toward the high ceiling.

"The queen's bedchamber," Sanchez informed her as he reached down to open the door to her room.

Breathtakingly beautiful, the room was done in shades of mauve and pale green with deep burgundy and emerald green accents. A long emerald green- and ochre-stripped settee perched in front of a beautiful beige marble fireplace veined with pale green striations. To either side of the fireplace were two overstuffed club chairs done in a moiré pattern in dark burgundy. Overhead a magnificent chandelier with at least a hundred fat white candles hung in the center of the room. The bed looked sumptuous in a multicolored coverlet with plush, fat pillows propped against the gleaming brass headboard. An enormous oak armoire inset with tortoiseshell panels and brass pulls set against one wall, flanked by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves to either side of it, and in front of a large bay window was a chaise lounge and small marble table upon which sat a crystal oil lamp with a fluted shade.

"Quite lovely, isn't it?" Sanchez asked as he closed the door behind them and let go of her arm.

"Exquisite," Ardor agreed, looking at the astonishingly lovely accoutrements scattered about the room.

"It belonged to Queen Isabella," Sanchez said in a soft voice. "She chose every piece of furniture, every bolt of cloth and had it made to her specifications."

Ardor glanced at him and was stunned to see tears in the man's dark eyes. She watched him walk over to the settee and run his hand along the carved back.

"She spent nearly every moment of her life in these rooms." He walked over to the chaise lounge. "She would sit here for hours on end either looking out over the waves of the Storian Sea or daydreaming or with her nose in one of her precious books." He sat down on the edge of the chaise. "This was her only joy in life other than her two sons."

"Gabriel and Manuel," Ardor said and saw him wipe at a tear that eased down his cheek.

"I spent many a wondrous afternoon sitting on the floor beside this chaise when I was a boy," he said, looking down at the floor. "Gabe and Manny and I."

"You are a part of the royal family?" she asked.

He looked up, a frown creasing his handsome face. "Family?" He shook his head. "No. Gabriel and I were best friends."

That news shocked Ardor for neither the Reaper nor his brother had hinted at such an acquaintance with the man who led the king's forces.

"He didn't tell you, did he?"

Ardor shrugged. "We rarely had any discussion, Captain. He was too concerned with—"

"Making love to you," Sanchez finished the sentence and smiled. "You have his scent all over you, wench."

So that was why he had been sniffing her, Ardor thought. She had to be careful around this man. He was dangerous.

"I know you were sent here by Bowen to assassinate the king and I have every intention of making sure you carry out that assignment," Sanchez said. He reached inside his uniform tunic and pulled out a gleaming silver dagger. He laid it on the chaise. "Did Gabe or Raoul tell you where the hidden room is located in the king's chamber?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ardor said. She didn't trust this man. If Gabriel did, he would have told her about his childhood association with him.

"It is to the left of the standing mirror. The second panel from the wall. Push on the panel twice and it will open. You can pull the panel shut with a handle in the middle. There is a hallway that will lead you down to the throne room. The floor is thickly carpeted but I suggest you make as little noise as possible."

"Why are you telling me this, Captain?" she asked, making herself tremble. "Aren't you afraid I—"

"I am the man," he said, cutting her off, "whom Bowen contacts when he needs to get word to the king. I knew you were coming here and I had been instructed to make damned sure you carried out your assignment. I was to give you any help you needed and then make sure you were spirited away to safety so Manuel could take the throne."

When the prison ship you were on was intercepted by Lord Savidos, those plans were put on hold. No one knew who he was. No one even suspected."

"I'm sure the king was very annoyed to learn his son was alive," Ardor said.

"Annoyed?" Sanchez repeated. "He was furious. I've never seen him so insane with anger. He feared Gabriel would come after him and so to draw him out, he had Manuel accused of treason." Sanchez clasped his hands together and drew in a long breath. "After Manuel was murdered, I was the man Bowen and his puppet master Morrison planned to place upon the Storian throne. I would have taken that throne until I learned Gabriel Leveche was alive."

"So now, you'll just turn it over to Prince Gabriel," she said. "How generous of you."

He looked up at her. "I've never wanted the crown, wench," he said, his eyes narrowed. "All I have wanted was what was right and just for my people. In that regard, Gabriel and I think alike. He may not want to rule our people but he is the only one who I feel can."

"None of that matters to me," she said. "I just want to get back to Cengus."

Sanchez's slow smile warmed the coldness of his dark eyes. He stood up and walked toward the door. "You are good, wench," he said. "I had heard you were." He put his hand on the door pull then turned his head to give her a warning look. "When you carry out your assignment, make sure you leave the dagger on the floor beside the body. I know I don't have to remind you to wipe the fingerprints from it first, though. Since the king is known to enjoy the charms of a new woman long into the night of their first time together, no one will think much of his absence until the last dinner bell is rung. He's never been one to deny himself a good meal. As soon as his body is found, there will be chaos. I'm sure Gabe gave you instructions on what to do and not to do until he can come for you."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about. Are you suggesting I murder the king?" she asked, opening her eyes wide.

Sanchez grinned. "All I'm suggesting is that you be careful, wench."

With that said, he opened the door and left.

Ardor stood where she was, her lower lip clamped between her teeth, looking at the dagger lying on the chaise lounge. It was a wicked-looking weapon—curved blade extending from a thick leather-wrapped hilt, the blade guard formed in the shape of an elongated S. Even from a distance of ten feet or so, she could tell the cutting edge was finely honed and she knew it would be as sharp as any blade she had ever wielded. The dagger had been created to kill and it called out to her a siren's song that bade she pick it up and caress it.

Pulling her mind from the blade, tearing her gaze from it, she looked about the room. This had been Gabriel's mother's room and it bore the stamp of a loving hand in the choice of knickknacks and paintings. Each item said it had been chosen with infinite care—the colors blending in with the green and dark pink motif. It was a lovely room

that made her feel calm while at the same time eliciting a deep sadness that the original occupant had met such a horrible end.

Without knocking, four maids entered the room with arms full of satin and velvet gowns. One carried several pairs of delicate-looking slippers on a silver tray while another carried a fancy carved chest Ardor suspected was filled with jewelry.

"His Majesty bids you pick out the gown you wish to wear this day," the shortest of the four women said in a snide voice. "Your bath is being prepared. If you need help, you have but to ask."

"Bath?" Ardor questioned.

The woman pointed at a door in the corner of the room. "The bathing pool is through yonder door." She clapped her hands and the other three women hastily put down what they were carrying and scurried from the room, none of them making eye contact with Ardor.

"I have been assigned as your personal maid," the woman said and it was obvious from her tone she found the task distasteful. "When you have bathed, I will help you dress and attend to your hair."

Ardor lifted her chin. "I've been bathing all by myself since I was five years of age. I have been dressing myself since then, as well. I need no help."

One fine golden brow lifted and the maid's lips pursed before she said, "And I suppose you have been attending to your own hair."

"I can braid with the best of them," Ardor snapped.

Shaking her head at the remark, the woman turned to go. "If you need me, ring. If not..." She shrugged, opened the door and left.

"Bitch," Ardor said under her breath. She looked toward the door and knew she'd never set foot in the room where Gabriel's mother had been drowned. Though the Reaper had made no mention of his mother to her, she well remembered the sublims on Storian history that Bowen had insisted she undergo before starting on her mission. Out of respect for the woman who had given her lover life, Ardor said a quick prayer for Queen Isabella's soul.

"*Thank you, wench,*" came the immediate words.

Relieved to hear Gabriel's voice even in her mind, Ardor asked if he was close.

"*Close enough,*" he sent to her.

"*Sanchez knows who I am,*" she sent back.

"*You can trust him, Ardor.*"

"*Are you sure?*"

"*I read his thoughts as he was speaking to you. He can be trusted.*"

Ardor wasn't so sure. There had been something sneaky in the way the man had looked at her.

"*He told you where the hidden room is within my father's chamber,*" Gabriel said.

"Aye."

"I don't know how long it will be before I can come for you. Just know I will be there, wench."

She could feel him pulling back, his last words merely a whisper. Wherever he was, he aware of her every movement and for that she was grateful. Glancing at the luxurious clothing lying on the bed, she took in a long breath, held it for a moment and then let it out as she walked toward the borrowed finery.

Chapter Twelve

Sanchez came for her two hours later. Once more the door opened without a knock to ask permission. The warrior strode in with a grim look upon his features but as soon as he saw her, he stopped, his gaze traveling down her from head to toe.

"By the gods but you are a lovely woman," he said as though the words had to be drawn forcibly from him.

"I will take that as a compliment although I don't believe you mean it," Ardor said.

The Storian captain closed the door behind him and came a few feet closer. "I've never meant anything more, Milady. You will make a beautiful queen for our handsome Prince Gabriel. I envy you."

Ardor blinked. "Envy me?"

Sanchez cocked one shoulder. "Had I been asked, I would have preferred to be born as one such as you but that was not the will of the gods. I am what I am whether it is to my liking or not."

In that one telling sentence, Ardor understood all there was to know about Diego Sanchez. Not only did he desire to be a female, he was very much in love with his childhood friend. "Does he know?" she asked.

"By the gods I hope not!" Sanchez exclaimed, shock passing over his handsome features. He put a hand to his chest. "I would rather be hanged, drawn and quartered than have him know!"

She could feel the astonishment of her lover wafting through her mind and clamped down on her thoughts.

"Please, Milady, do not—"

"I will never say a word to him of your feelings, Captain," she assured him, coming toward him, her hands outstretched. When he took her hands, she smiled up at him. "I know, now, though, that I can trust you with his life."

"Always," he said and brought her right hand to his lips. "I would give my life for his."

"You know his father was the one who turned him over to the Coalition to be executed?" she asked.

Sanchez was staggered at the news and his expression said as much. His hands tightened on hers. "Nay, Milady. I did not!" he said and fury sparked in his midnight eyes. "I know Bowen ordered it and I was looking forward to the day I could ram my dagger into his gut and twist it."

"That honor must be reserved for Gabriel," she said.

"One way or another, Bowen's days are numbered," Sanchez swore. He walked over to the chaise and leaned over to pick up the dagger. He brought it over to her. "I have come to collect you for the king."

She took the dagger from him and felt the hefty weight of it in her palm. It was a killing blade and its song would be deadly.

"You are wearing stockings?" he asked.

Ardor nodded and lifted her skirt to place the weapon between her silk-clad thigh and the satin garter. She smoothed her skirt down. "Although I will gain a great deal of satisfaction from seeing my assignment completed, the thought of that pervert touching me sends chills down my spine."

"I have had wine provided for His Majesty as is always his request," Sanchez said. "This time it is a highly potent wine. I beseech you not to partake of it."

"You poisoned him?" she gasped.

"Not poison," he replied. "There is a strong measure of tenerse within the wine. He will be only marginally conscious after the first few sips. When you go to him, call him *mi águila*. That was the name his lady-wife called him. He will be in such a state he will think you are she."

"Why do you want me to pretend to...?"

"When you take him out of this world, say this to him — *Ahora me vengo*. He will go to the Abyss thinking it was Queen Isabella who took his life."

Ardor could see vengeance in Sanchez's dark gaze. It was obvious to her he had held Gabriel's mother in high esteem and it was the only way the poor woman would receive revenge for her untimely death.

"Consider it done, Captain," she said.

"Diego," he corrected and lifted her hand to kiss her fingers once more before letting go of her. He offered her his arm.

Ardor linked her arm through his and walked with him to the door. She barely glanced at the guards standing outside the king's chamber but she thought she detected a gleam of satisfaction in the eyes of one of them. From what she had so far observed at Vespertine, King Alejandro's death would not be mourned.

The great man himself was sitting stretched out upon his luxurious bed, a crystal goblet of wine clutched in his meaty hand. He was clad in a silk bathrobe and his hair looked wet, slicked back from his forehead. When he spoke, his words were slurred.

"Ah, there she is! What a beautiful little filly!" He toasted her and took another sip of the dark red wine.

Sanchez disengaged his arm from hers. "Go with the gods, Milady," he blessed her then left.

"Come here, little filly!" the king commanded, draining his goblet. He tossed the empty vessel across the room where it hit the fireplace and shattered.

"¿Es usted listo para su señora, mi águila?" she asked in the Storian language.

The king blinked then shook his head as though to rid himself of whatever image had sprung into his mind. He stared across the room at her, his face puckered in a frown. "Am I ready for you?" he asked.

"*Sí, mi querido, para mí soy listo para usted,*" she purred, coming closer.

"You are ready for me?" he questioned. He held up a hand. "But I killed you, 'Bella."

"*Usted hizo lo que usted se sentía que usted tuvo que,*" she said.

"Yes," he stated. "Yes, I only did what I had to."

Ardor walked to the side of the bed and sat down beside the king's left hand. She slipped her fingers through his as she edged the skirt of her gown up with her right hand.

"*¿Tiene usted faltado me, mi águila?*" she asked as she wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the dagger.

"Yes," he said, tears gathering in his dazed eyes. "I have missed you, 'Bella. I should never have drowned you that night. You were a good wife."

With the dagger firmly in her hand, blade braced expertly with her thumb, she leaned over the king, hating the feel of his right arm coming around her waist to pull her to him. Bending closer to him so he could feel the warmth of her breath on his lips, she brought her right hand up between them.

"*Esto está para Gabriel y Manuel,*" she said and jerked the blade across his throat from right ear to left, nearly severing his head from his body so sharp was the weapon's honed edge. Then she repeated the words in Riezellian— "This is for Gabriel and Manuel!"

Bright arterial blood splashed over the bodice of her lovely pale green gown as the king grabbed at his neck. He opened his mouth to scream but only a gasping, bubbling sound came out. His legs began thrashing and the last sight he saw in his world was the satin of a pillowcase being pressed firmly over his face.

Ardor leaned her weight against the pillow until the feeble struggles of the man she had been sent to assassinate ceased. Even then, she held her position until she was sure he no longer posed a threat to Gabriel or peace. Her bodice sticking to her where his tainted blood had soaked into the material, she scrambled from the bed, dragging the skirt of her gown up to wipe her fingerprints from the hilt. She tossed the weapon on the bed then hurried to the tall standing mirror near the fireplace. Quickly pressing twice on the second panel she was relieved when the portal opened and she climbed through, closing it hastily behind her.

Leaning against the wall, Ardor was surprised to find she was trembling violently. Though she'd killed men before in battle, she'd never taken the life of one unless her own was being threatened. She found she didn't like the feeling the act gave her and wasn't surprised that hot bile shot up her throat. Moving away from the panel as fast as she could, she clamped a hand over her lips to keep herself from vomiting. Deeper she went along the narrow hallway, putting distance between her and her kill.

"I am with you," she heard Gabriel whisper.

When she reached the little room hidden behind the wall of the throne room, she sank down to her knees—her back against the wall—and hunkered there shivering.

"Be calm, wench. I will be there soon."

"Hurry," she pleaded with him.

* * * * *

Gabriel ran his hand through his hair and drew in a ragged breath. He could feel Ardor's discomfort and it tugged at his heart. He had no feelings one way or the other concerning what she had done in his father's bedchamber except that it bothered him she was upset. Truth be told, he was grateful she had saved him from having to kill his own father.

"The Web is down, *chanto*," Breva said softly. "I'm taking us in."

The Reaper nodded. He had no doubt that Diego Sanchez would see to their safety. It had been by his order the Web had been shut down so the *Sangunar* could land.

"Diego has cleared the docking bay of all but essential personnel," Breva reported. "There will only be a handful of men who will see you disembark."

"All right," Gabriel said. He was picking up such devastating mind turmoil from Ardor and though he mentally tried to soothe her, he knew she wouldn't quiet down until she could see him in person.

Breva cast his brother a glance and could tell he was preoccupied. There was nothing Gabriel could do until they landed so the Storian major went about the task of preparing for their descent on his own.

"Have they found the body yet?"

"A few minutes ago. Diego has had the room sealed off and all communication into and out of Stori has been terminated until further notice."

"What about the guards who saw her go into his room?"

"They were Diego's men and he trusts them. No one will be able to identify your lady as the one who was with the king when he left this world."

Gabriel looked up. "What about the maids? She tells me there were four of them."

Breva frowned. "I'll see to it." There was no need for him to ask his brother how he and Ardor were communicating.

Sitting tensely in the command chair, the Reaper knew he would be as nervous as Ardor was until he could take her in his arms and comfort her. He was worried men loyal to his father might find and hurt her before he could get there.

"Before he cut off communications Diego sent a message to all fleet ships to return to Stori immediately," Breva stated.

"Who has he told about the assassination?"

"Only the High Council. He'll leave the official announcement to the people up to you, *chanto*."

The Reaper's ship began its descent to the surface of Stori, traveling through thick cloudbanks to the docking station just beyond the palace at Vespertine. The strobe lights of the runway pulsed brightly through the dense fog as the ship sailed in low and entered the high archway leading into the station.

"Web's back up," the chief engineer told them as soon as they'd cleared the archway.

"Remind Captain Sanchez's men to monitor the incoming vessels very carefully. We don't want a spy ship to sneak past them," Breva ordered.

"Aye, aye, Sir!"

The interior of the docking station was bright, the wide expanse of the landing area looking strange without the usual compliment of workers going industriously about their business. Moving past a line of runabouts on the left and warcruisers on the right, the *Sangunar* slowly made her way to the harness that lay waiting for her.

"Com Corps is getting a repeat hail from a Coalition ship cruising near Amerigen," Breva said. "Whatcha wanna bet it's our old nemesis Bowen making the call?"

"Is the signal being ignored?" the Reaper asked.

"They're getting a canned reply of all com links down at this time."

"He'll know she's carried out her mission," the Storian prince said. "He and Morrison are probably toasting one another right now."

Nosing the mighty cruiser onto the docking platform, the flight engineer settled the *Sangunar* down gently and began shutting down the ship's engine. The rest of the crew went about their work efficiently without having to be told. For most of them, it was the first time they had been home to Stori in over ten years and they were anxious to seek out family and loved ones.

"There's a reception committee waiting for you, *chanto*," Breva told him. "Diego is in his dress blues." He grinned. "All seven members of the High Council are in attendance, as well."

"Aye, well, the High Council has come to see Lord Savidos surrender," Gabriel said. "I'm sure they are all gloating right about now. With the king dead, his treasonous warrior has come home to make amends and ask forgiveness."

"Sanchez has handled his end of this admirably," Breva agreed. "The councilmen look downright smug."

"None of them will have a job by the end of this day," Gabriel replied. "One or two may not have a head by the time this is finished."

Gabriel knew at least one of the seven councilmen had been an ally, an accomplice of his father and he intended to see that man had no power by the time he was through with him. The others were merely puppets, doing as they were told without complaint

or dissension. He picked up the skeletal mask for the last time and slipped it onto his face.

The Reaper was dressed formally also. A black leather tie had been added to the black silk uniform shirt. His black leather britches gleamed above highly polished black boots. The silver collar insignia caught the light—shining like twin beacons along his collarbones. In his left ear was a small white gold hoop and strapped to his right thigh was a wicked-looking silver dagger similar to the one Ardor had used to slay the king.

"I've counted twenty-two men on the docking catwalk, *chanto*," Breva said. "That's with Diego and the members of the High Council. There are six guards armed with laser pikes ready to take Lord Savidos into custody."

"I'm sure the councilmen can hardly wait."

"You look impressive, *chanto*," Breva said as he fell into step beside his brother. "When they get a look at you, they'll shit their robes."

"Before we disembark," Gabriel said as he got up from the command chair, "make sure the crew is paid. I'm sure they'll want to do some celebrating this eve."

"I'll see to it."

When the hatchway door was all the way back, the two brothers stepped out onto the docking platform amidst a concerted gasp by the assembled High Council. Though only one of them had ever seen a Vid-Com image of the Reaper and knew he was looking at a mask, the others stepped back, the sight of the man coming toward them unsettling.

Diego called his guards to attention and snapped into that posture himself, his doubled fist pressed to his chest in salute.

The councilmen looked to Diego—expecting him to order the Reaper's arrest—but when Diego and his men dropped to one knee, their heads bowed in respect, the members of the High Council looked at one another with stunned surprise.

"What is the meaning of this, Captain Sanchez?" High Commissioner Louis Valdez demanded. "Arrest that man!" He pointed at the Reaper.

The few workers who had been left in the docking station were also kneeling, having been ordered to follow the lead of the guards though none knew why. The only ones standing were the Reaper, his 2-I-C and the councilmen.

"Sanchez!" the High Commissioner shouted. "Do as I say!"

"Your days of giving orders are over, Valdez," the Reaper said, coming closer.

"I am High Commissioner Louis Valdez, appointed by the king as—"

"Yesterday you were somebody, Valdez," the Reaper interrupted. "Today you are nobody and it is you who are under arrest."

Sputtering with outrage, Valdez lost what little sense he had and attempted to strike the man standing before him. Before he could, two guards sprang up and grabbed his arms, dragging him back roughly.

"How dare you!" Valdez shouted. "Sanchez, as acting king you must—"

"There is only one king of Stori," the Reaper said, lifting his hands to the mask covering his face, "and I am he."

The councilmen were not prepared for the face that emerged from behind the ghastly mask. Eyes widened, mouths dropped open and bodies began to tremble. The only member of the High Council who did not drop automatically to his knees was Louis Valdez.

"So," the high commissioner sneered, "the prodigal son returns to pay his respects at the funeral pyre of the man he betrayed!"

"No, there will be no funeral byre for Alejandro Leveche," Gabriel said. "Since you signed both my brother's death warrant as well as mine, the only traitor here is you."

"No funeral byre?" one of the councilmen said, his voice squeaking. "Your Grace, you can not deny the king his rightful—"

"He murdered my mother," Gabriel cut him off. "With his own hands he drowned her! He betrayed me to the Coalition and had me turned over to them to be executed. He had my brother—his youngest son—beheaded because he feared Manuel would take the throne from him and do right by the Storian people." He shook his head. "No, Alejandro Leveche does not deserve the honor of a funeral byre and he will not receive one!"

"It was at your command he was assassinated!" Valdez shouted. "You ordered his death and—"

"The order," the Reaper said, his eyes narrowed with hatred, "came from your puppet master Colonel Kurt Bowen of the Coalition. It was he who sent the Riezell Guardian to Stori, but it was not she who carried out General Morrison's order!"

The other councilmen swung their heads in unison toward Valdez, shock turning their faces pale. Gabriel was not surprised the others knew nothing of what was actually happening on their home world. His father and Valdez apparently had them all bamboozled.

"Your Grace," the councilman who had protested the king's lack of funerary protocol spoke up. "We knew nothing of this. Nothing!"

"As members of the High Council, you should have made it your business to know!" the Reaper snarled. "Because you sat on the Council and grew fat and lazy from the corruption, you are now relieved of your duties. I do not want you at Vespertine. You have two hours to vacate your residences."

"But where are we to go, Your Grace?" another councilman asked, tears streaking down his wrinkled cheeks.

"I don't give a damn where you go, but if you are still here at sundown, your lives will be forfeit along with Valdez's." He waved a hand at Diego Sanchez who got immediately to his feet and gave orders to his men.

There were whimpers among the councilmen and they were still whimpering—some openly crying—as Diego's guards led them away.

Valdez was cursing as he was dragged away to prison. He kept craning his neck, glaring back at Gabriel until the former high commissioner could no longer see his enemy.

"As soon as the last ship is docked, we will transmit your coronation on every Vid-Com in Stori," Diego suggested. He took the hand Gabriel extended to him, gripping his new king's forearm in the age-old salute of warrior to warrior.

"I don't want any ridiculous ceremony to invest me with what is lawfully mine," Gabriel stated.

Diego grinned. "I doubted you would, but we'll still have to crown you. It is the symbolism our people will be looking for, my liege."

The Reaper rolled his eyes. "Give me time to speak to my lady before you lay that ugly crown on my head," he asked.

"By the way, Bowen is chomping at the bit trying to contact us. What do you want me to tell him when I open the channel to his ship?" Diego asked.

"He'll ask about the king first, his operative second," Gabriel replied. "Tell him one is dead and the other in custody. He'll demand you turn her over to him. Agree to do so but make sure he understands it will be at a time and place of your choosing."

"You aren't really going to turn her over to him, are you?" Brea asked.

Gabriel gave his brother a droll look then turned back to Diego. "Contact the Burgon on a secure channel and ask him if he will allow you to land your personal runabout on Aduaidh Prime. If he agrees, ask him if he will also allow Bowen to land there, as well."

"I take it that is where I will supposedly take Major Kahn to turn her over to Bowen," Diego said.

"The Burgon should agree, but if he doesn't, Bowen will have to come to Stori. As far as he's concerned, you are now the king and he will want to make damned sure he has you in his pocket. Make sure he comes to the meeting alone otherwise he's liable to have guards there to arrest you."

"Should he try that, he'll have me up his ass is more like it," Diego said then grinned nastily. "And not in a way he would enjoy."

"You're going to Aduaidh Prime to meet Bowen?" Brea asked his brother.

"No, I'm going to Aduaidh Prime to kill him," the Reaper corrected.

Chapter Thirteen

Realizing she had no weapon to protect herself, Ardor edged away from the hidden door that swung open at the end of the hall. Light spilled into the dark corridor for a moment, revealing the silhouette of a man.

“Milady?”

Relief flooded Ardor’s soul and she sprang up from the floor, grabbing handfuls of her gown into her fists as she ran, rushing forward to fling herself into Gabriel’s arms. He stumbled beneath her onward rush, throwing his arms around her, lifting her up along his powerful length. His mouth slanted possessively across hers—claiming her, branding her with his agile tongue—as her legs wrapped around his hips.

There in the dark corridor he backed her up against the stone wall, bracing her as he reached one hand down to fumble with the closure of his uniform pants. She was riding his hips, her ankles locked behind him, her heels digging into the high curve of his rump. When his shaft was free of the britches, he pushed its velvety tip past the leg hole of her flimsy panties and thrust upward, impaling her upon his rigid cock, once more bracing her ass with fingers digging into soft flesh.

Like wild animals they tore at one another—bucking, thrusting and wriggling—until they were both covered in a fine sheen of sweat. His lips left her mouth to travel to the sweet perfection of her breast. He tore the bloodstained material of her bodice apart, barely aware of the telltale blotch and suckled her, drawing the taut nipple into his mouth and nibbling at it as he pushed hard into her velvety sheath. The scent of his father’s blood was upon her but he pushed it from his mind. Nothing mattered to him but the woman in his arms.

Her fingers were arched in his hair, gripping his head to her, pushing him closer to her breast. The wetness of his mouth sent shivers of pleasure racing down her spine.

The force of their climaxes came at the same moment for both of them. His was so violent he thought he would spontaneously combust so hot did his cock feel. Hers was a strong clenching that milked him of every last drop of cum until his knees sagged beneath him and he fell to the floor, panting, his body quivering as he clutched her tightly to him.

They knelt like that for a long time until their breathing returned to normal. Her legs were still wrapped around his hips, her back pressed to the cold stone wall.

The sex had been a relief valve for both of them—his at finding her alive and well and hers at seeing him again. Both had feared for the other, though neither had let the other know.

“I missed you every moment you were out of my sight,” he said.

Her head had fallen to his shoulder and she was pressing little kisses on the column of his neck. "That's good to know, Reaper," she said softly.

"Never again will I allow you to put yourself in danger."

There had been a time when Ardor would have balked at such a machismo comment but she knew in her heart of hearts those days were long ago. She wanted nothing more than to be loved and protected and cosseted by the magnificent man holding her.

"You'll go after Bowen," she said.

"I have to, wench," he replied.

"Bowen won't be hard to take but the general is another matter," she said.

Gabriel sighed, straining to push himself up to a standing position. His legs felt rubbery and he knew if had to fight a duel at that moment, he'd damned well lose.

"I'll leave Morrison where he is for now," he said. "Without his primary henchman, he will be hard-pressed to do much damage before we can take him out."

"Don't kid yourself," Ardor said, releasing her hold on his hips and lowering her legs to the floor. "The general will have trained another warrior in anticipation of losing Bowen."

"Oh, I know about that man and he's no threat to us right now."

Ardor thought of the female spy at Command Central and figured she knew who it was.

"Was the general responsible for her husband's death?"

"We can't prove it but we suspect as much."

Ardor smoothed down the skirts of her gown, hating the female frippery and wanting her Reaper garb back.

"Just picture it, wench," he told her.

Ardor frowned. "I tried that but it didn't work."

Gabriel shrugged. "Be still."

She did and in the twinkling of an eye her gown was gone and she was standing there naked, the cold draft from the open secret panel playing over her heated flesh.

"I rather like you like that," he said, but at her growl, used his uncanny ability to fashion the molecules from out of nowhere and the coolness of leather clung to her legs a fraction or two before the sleekness of the silk uniform shirt settled lovingly over her chest.

"Ah, what about a bra and panties?" she asked.

"Reapers don't wear underwear," he replied. "Get used to it." He took her hand. "I've got an onerous chore to attend to but when that's finished, we'll leave for Aduaidh Prime."

"What's on Aduaidh Prime?" she asked, walking beside him to the open portal.

"Bowen, I'm hoping," he replied. He motioned her ahead of him.

Ardor exited the secret door and came up short. The throne room was filled with people, all of them staring at her. She looked around at Gabriel.

"They're here to see me crowned King of Stori," he said then shrugged. "Even if I never wanted the damned position."

"Do you think they know what we were doing?" she asked, blushing to the roots of her hair.

"Why do you think you didn't hear them out here?" he asked, grinning.

Ducking her head, she felt her cheeks burning as he walked past her. So embarrassed was she, she barely made note of what he was saying, so distressed she couldn't look at those gathered.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the court, may I introduce my betrothed Major Ardor Kahn," he introduced her.

Ardor winced, forcing herself to look up to meet what she feared would be either humor or disapproval. Instead, she was surprised to see men bowing and ladies curtsying to her, not a snicker showing on the pleasant faces looking her way.

"General Morrison of the Coalition Forces sent Major Kahn here to assassinate my father King Alejandro."

Shocked whispering ran rampant through those gathered and stunned faces turned to Ardor. She looked up at her lover with stricken eyes, but Gabriel took her hand in his and brought it to his lips then turned to the crowd and told the first lie she had heard him tell.

"Before my lady could carry out her mission a traitor among you did the deed." He motioned to Diego who produced a silver dagger, held by its lethal tip. "High Commissioner Valdez's fingerprints are on the weapon that was left at the scene."

Again the whispering grew—this time in volume—and there were a few cries of outrage mixed in with the rumblings.

"Finding out I was alive and on my way to Stori to rescue my intended, Valdez thought he saw a way to make himself very useful to me, no doubt believing I would be pleased to learn of my father's death," the Reaper said. "I must confess to you that the king's demise neither surprised nor saddened me for it was my father who murdered my mother with his bare hands. It was also my father who falsely accused me of treason. It was Valdez who signed my death warrant and saw to it I was turned over to the Coalition Forces on *an Égipt*."

Once more there was a loud outcry from those gathered but it was anger instead of shock that filtered through the throne room this time. From the looks on some of the faces, such perfidy had been long suspected and was now confirmed.

"Had I not become a Reaper before I was arrested, my life would have been forfeit, my people, for I would have succumbed to the fire pit into which I was thrust. As it was, I endured that hellish fate and stand before you today ready to accept the rightful mantle of Stori."

Cheers rang out over the crowd and only a handful of men looked displeased with the notion. Both Diego and Breva made note of those men's expressions and would follow up on their loyalty to Prince Gabriel later.

The Reaper held his hand up for silence. "I will convey to you the story of how it came about that I am a Reaper at a later time. For now, I—"

A guard had come rushing up to Diego as Gabriel spoke and the look on Sanchez's face as he turned to Gabriel halted the prince's speech. He motioned Diego over and the warrior hurried to his side, speaking so quietly no one save Gabriel could hear.

Gabriel's mouth tightened and he let out a long sigh. So silent had the room become, everyone assembled heard the harsh exaltation and waited with bated breath for the bad news they sensed coming. The prince looked around at the faces of his people then shook his head.

"I knew Valdez to be a dishonorable man but I did not know just how dishonorable. It seems he chose not to stand trial for his crime and has hanged himself in his cell. The high commissioner is dead."

Thunderous applause rang out from most of those gathered, although one or two men looked put out, no doubt disappointed they would not get to see Valdez punished for his crime.

During the time Gabriel had been speaking, Breva had made his way over to Ardor. He smiled at her. "All's well, eh, wench?" he joked.

"What is the punishment for regicide on Stori, Raoul?" she asked softly.

"Hanging, drawing and quartering, wench," he said. "For men, at least."

"And for women?" she asked, searching his eyes as the applause died down.

Breva shrugged. "There's never been a woman accused of such a crime."

"But if there ever was?"

"Strangulation then burning at the stake," he answered.

Ardor swallowed hard. She had a particular aversion to fire...

Gabriel was holding up his hand, waiting for the clamor to cease and when it did, he told his people he had relieved all seven members of the High Council of their positions.

"I know it is customary for the king to appoint the councilmen but it is my wish they be elected—fairly and squarely—by you, the people. I never want there to be corruption within these hallowed halls ever again!" Gabriel pronounced.

Still again applause echoed through the throne room and the stomp of feet crashed against the floor in agreement. There were whistles and shouts then the people began chanting.

"El Granizo, Rey Gabriel. ¡Vive de largo el rey!"

A wizened old gentleman came shuffling forward carrying a plush velvet pillow upon which rested a golden crown. His sliding gait looked painful and from the vast

amount of wrinkles on his aged face, he was but a hairsbreadth from meeting The Gatherer.

"The Lord High Steward, His Grace Duke Jorge Dias, Lord of Limosa!" Diego called out as the elderly gentleman came to stand in front of Gabriel.

The prince looked into rheumy eyes that seemed only marginally aware, but when he did not immediately take the proffered crown, the lord high steward snapped at him.

"Take the bloody thing, boy. I don't have all that many years left to me!"

It was a hideously ugly crown that was shoved at the Reaper. Though it was thousands of years old, the golden crown gleamed with a fresh polishing and the gaudy jewels that adorned it sparkled with a high brilliance. The garish colors were enough to make a man wince if he gazed at it long enough and Gabriel was determined to have a new one—perhaps a simple circlet with a dignified seal—minted for state affairs.

"I hear you do not want pomp and circumstance, young man. Is that true?" the lord high steward demanded, his rubbery lips sputtering spittle.

"Aye, Your Grace, I—"

"Then put the damned hideous thing on your ratty noggin and let's be done with it!"

The Archbishop of Vespertine was not pleased his authority had been usurped by the old man. He stood by with a jaundiced look that suggested he had eaten something that had not digested well, but he made no comment as the young prince reached out and took the crown.

Gabriel turned to Ardor and held the crown out to her. "Would you do me the honor, milady?" he asked.

Her hands trembling, Ardor took the crown from him and when he knelt at her feet, his head bowed, heard sighs from among the women in the gathering. She exchanged a look with Breva then slipped the heavy crown upon her lover's dark brown curls.

Gabriel blessed himself with the Sign of the Slain One then got to his feet. He took his lady's hand in his and looked to the archbishop. "Would you bless us with the words of Joining, Your Excellency?" he asked.

Rolling his eyes to the heavens for protocol—richly observed over the years—was being tossed out the window, the archbishop came forward reluctantly. He bestowed a disapproving look upon his new monarch. "I suppose you want to dispense with all the flowery words and such, Your Majesty?" he asked, letting his annoyance make his words brittle. "I imagine there is no need for banns to be read since we all know the two of you already have carnal knowledge of one another."

"That is my desire, aye," Gabriel answered, a light blush staining his cheeks.

He went to his knees once more, Ardor at his side, her face a decidedly darker shade of red than his.

"And do you desire such plainness for your Joining day, Your Grace?" the archbishop asked Ardor.

Ardor looked up. "I do," she answered meekly.

The archbishop leaned down, speaking directly to Gabriel in a low tone. "I baptized you, young man. I gave you religious instructions until you went off to the Academy where obviously you embraced the radicalism of that suspect assemblage," he reminded the Reaper. "I tried to instill in you the correct moral and ideological concepts of your mother's forefathers and not the pettiness of your father's. I see I failed in my role as teacher."

"No, Your Excellency," Gabriel disagreed. "If you had failed, I'd have simply kept the lady as my concubine, slapped the crown on my head, propriety be damned." He looked the man in the eye. "I am asking for the appropriate blessing for our Joining for I wish to do right by the woman I love."

Sighing as though the weight of the world had descended upon his shoulders, the archbishop raised his hands over the couple's heads. "By the power invested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. May the gods bless you with children who will strive to carry on the rich traditions of their Storian ancestors and listen to the reason of their elders!"

Ardor couldn't help but giggle for the pompous man's words had no doubt been meant to chastise. She glanced at her Reaper and found his lips twitching with amusement, too.

"Well, get up," the archbishop snapped. "I'm not getting any younger here than Dias is!"

There was a hardy cheer as the archbishop introduced the newlywed couple to the assemblage. He waddled away shaking his head. Later he was heard to comment that their new king would certainly shake things up.

Chapter Fourteen

"The king is dead?" Bowen demanded of Sanchez.

"Aye, King Alejandro has gone on to his just reward."

"And my operative?"

"I have her safely on my runabout, Colonel," Sanchez replied. "I was sure you would want me to see to her wellbeing."

"Aye, that I do," Bowen said and relief seemed to flow over his florid features. "I am grateful for your forethought. If you will provide her with a runabout, she can—"

"In order for Major Kahn to leave Stori she must exit The Web, as I am sure you know. For her to do that she must be accompanied by a high-ranking officer of the Storian Fleet. I am the highest ranking officer at this time."

Bowen frowned. "I see. Yes, of course. That makes sense. You will bring her to me?"

Sanchez shook his head. "Colonel, must I remind you that it was your intent that I assume the crown of my homeland once the king was eliminated. As such, the new king must look to his own safety and venturing to Riezell would not be the wisest thing to do under the circumstances."

"You dare to suggest I would renege on our deal?" Bowen snarled.

"I am suggesting no such thing, Colonel. I am merely suggesting an alternative venue in which to turn the major over to your safekeeping."

A haughty look lifted Bowen's square chin. "In other words you want to meet on neutral ground."

Diego Sanchez smiled. "Aye, Colonel. That is precisely what this new king wishes to do."

"All right," Bowen said, waving his hand. "Where do you suggest? Amerigen? Cengus? Rabushu?"

"All worlds currently held in Coalition hands?" Sanchez questioned. He shook his head. "No, I would prefer Aduaidh Prime."

"Out of the question," Bowen disagreed.

Sanchez's smile turned nasty. "Then Major Kahn will stay on Stori to become the queen of our illustrious land."

"No!" Bowen shouted, coming to his feet. The sound of his chair crashing behind him could be heard on the Vid-Com link. "You will bring my lady to me!"

"Your lady?" Sanchez queried in a silky tone.

"My operative!" Bowen corrected himself.

An ebony brow arched. "I think I begin to understand the situation, Colonel, and again I state my choice of meeting places. It will either be Aduaidh Prime or nothing at all."

Bowen lifted his hand and chewed on his thumbnail, his eyes ranging back and forth as he contemplated the demand. When at last he looked up, fusing his gaze with Sanchez's, his features were devoid of expression.

"The Burgon must be consulted," Bowen said. "He might not give his permission to..."

"I took the liberty of contacting His Excellency and he has granted his consent for the new king of Stori to conduct a short course of business on the Plains of Geschäft. He has assured us of complete privacy and protection while we accomplish the task at hand."

"The Plains of Geschäft," Bowen repeated. "Is that not a rather isolated area?"

"Indeed it is and only three humanoid life forms are allowed access to that region at any one given time. Non-humanoid forms such as cybots and the like are expressly forbidden as are weapons of any kind."

"No weapons?"

"That is Aduaidh law, Colonel." Sanchez frowned. "Why should that concern you?"

"It doesn't," Bowen was quick to say.

"Then it is agreed? Major Kahn will meet you on Aduaidh Prime?"

Bowen's sigh was loud. "Aye, I agree."

"Good," Sanchez said. "We will meet at 0900 tomorrow on the Plains of Geschäft." That said he broke the Vid-Com connection.

* * * * *

Gabriel and Ardor walked hand in hand up the stairway that led to the royal apartments. They had left behind them a large assemblage of well-wishers who were still partaking of free-flowing wine and mead along with a luxurious repast hastily prepared for the new king and queen. It was almost midnight and both of them were tired and more than a little anxious to take to their bed. As they neared the king's chamber, Ardor's footsteps slowed.

"I can't," she said as she stared at the two guards who were stationed beside the double portals.

The thought of sleeping in the same bed where his lady had taken the life of his father—no matter how much he had hated the man—did not sit well with Gabriel, either. They were paused beside his mother's old room and he also knew he could not sleep there.

"The other chambers, my old one in particular, are much too small for a man and wife, wench," he said.

Ardor tucked her bottom lip between her teeth—a habit of hers he found very endearing.

"How many other rooms are on this floor?" she asked.

"Five," he answered. He pointed down the corridor. "Two on the left and three on the right."

"What if, just for tonight, we sleep in your old room then while we are on Aduaidh Prime having the walls between those three rooms on the right removed and turn it into one large room?"

Gabriel nodded slowly. "Aye, that would work. The rooms only have copper tubs but we could have one large bathing pool..." He stopped, his face clouding.

"What if," she said as though she hadn't heard the grief in his voice, "we have the copper-wrights fashion us one very large tub in which we could both bathe?"

His eyes lit. "An oversized tub in which we could do other things as well?"

Ardor sighed. "Naturally you would come up with that notion."

"I'll come up with a lot more than that if we share a tub, wench," he said, wagging his brows.

"Where's your room?" she asked.

"Down there," he answered. "The first room of the three." He pointed to the room beside his mother's old room. "That is the nursery and the one beside it is for the nanny."

"Um," she said, pulling it toward his room. "We'll most likely have need of them both before all is said and done."

Gabriel slipped his arm around her waist. "What will we do with the two other chambers?"

"Divide them into smaller bedrooms, naturally," she replied. "We'll have the bathing pool removed and in its place, what do you think of a sandbox?"

"A sandbox?" He narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Are you planning on having cats up here?"

"For our children to play in, silly!" she told him, swatting at his arm. "An indoor sandbox for when the weather turns foul—as I've heard it does quite a bit of the time on Stori."

The Reaper threw back his head and laughed. "You think of everything, wench." He reached down and swept her into his arms, kicking the door to his room open as they came to it. "I've got a few notions of my own!"

Ardor winced at the scuffmark his boot left on the door and she made a mental note to discuss his wantonness with him. All that flew out of her mind as he whirled her around and dropped her on his boyhood bed amidst a plush coverlet of silky fur.

"Oooh!" she said, running her palms over the smoothness.

"You like that?" he asked as he kicked off his boots.

"I love it!" she replied while he tugged off her boots.

"A gift from my maternal grandfather," he said, flopping down beside her on his stomach.

She gave him a heated look. "I am willing to bet you took matters in hand quite a bit on this coverlet when you reached puberty."

He shrugged. "I must admit it does feel wondrously good on a naked cock, wench."

"On a naked anything else, I'm thinking," she said, sitting up to work the buttons of her black shirt.

He turned so he was lying on his side, his head propped in the cup of his hand, one knee crooked. "Are you trying to entice me?" he asked, his attention locked on the creamy expanse of flesh revealed when she undid the buttons at her wrists then peeled the shirt from her body.

"I merely want to experience firsthand the feel of this delightful fur on my naked flesh," she said, her chin in the air.

Ardor lay down, sighing contentedly as her back touched the soft pelt, but even as the sigh ended, she was unbuttoning her leather britches and wriggling out of them. She closed her eyes as her bare bottom came into contact with the fur and crooked her knees to finish removing the britches.

"See why I say Reapers have no need of underwear?" he asked.

"A definite advantage for males, aye," she replied, "but not always so advantageous for females."

"Why not?" he queried. "Is not the feel of nothing between you and the leather or the silk not a glorious sensation, wench?"

"It is, but you forget one thing, Reaper."

"What?"

"That time of the month when a female needs a bit of protection."

"Ah," he said. "And how close are you to that time?"

"A couple of weeks."

"I am that close to Transition," he said, reaching out to take a lock of her chestnut hair between his fingers. "That is something else we will need to have the carpenters build us before we return from Aduaidh Prime."

Ardor turned over to face him, completely at ease in her nudity though his gaze was wandering over her as though he was a starving man before whom a banquet had been laid.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"A containment cell," he replied. "A place where we will both need to go when Transition is upon us so we do not harm anyone."

"Oh," she said. Her face mirrored her concern and he reached out to cup her face.

"If it would please you, Milady, we can synchronize our Transitions so they occur at the same time." He smoothed the pad of his thumb over her lower lip. "I will not lie to you. It will hurt but I will be there to comfort you, to care for you."

"That would please me," she whispered. She put her hand on his and took his thumb into her mouth, sucking on it and running her tongue over its tip. Her gaze had fused with his as her fingers caressed the back of his hand.

"Have you no shame, woman?" he asked, his groin tightening beneath her ministrations.

She withdrew his thumb. "None whatsoever, warrior," she answered and slid his hand to her breast, molding his palm over the lush globe. "Aren't you overdressed?"

He laughed as he lightly squeezed her breast then ran his fingers over her nipple before releasing her. "I suppose I am," he replied. He made slow work of undoing his buttons, flicking the two sides of the shirt aside to reveal his chiseled chest.

Ardor reached over to undo the button on his right wrist as that hand braced his head. She took care of the button on the left cuff then arched an inquisitive brow. "Your britches?" she queried.

"Oh, yes," he drawled and used his thumb to pop the closure open. Before he could work free the other buttons, his lady pushed him to his back.

"Allow me," she offered in a husky voice.

Gabriel lay with his hands to either side of his head and looked down at the glossy texture of his wife's dark hair while her fingers made an exquisitely slow operation of undoing his britches. Her warm breath on his bare abdomen was a velvet torture that turned his rod as hard as stone. When she tugged aside the two sections of leather at his waist, his stony protrusion sprang forth with a mind of its own.

"My, my, my, my, *my*," Ardor said, looking up at him. "What have we here, Milord?"

"Taste it and see," he said brazenly, holding her look.

"Is it sweet?" she asked, tugging the britches over his hips.

He lifted his rump from the bed. "Nay, wench. There's no sweetness to that treat."

She peeled the britches down his legs. "Is it tart?"

"Nay, but it was certainly made for one," he said with a leer.

"Is it bitter?" she asked as she tugged the britches from his feet.

"It can be but only when deprived of what it wants."

Tossing aside the sleek leather uniform pants, she moved over her lover, nudged his thighs apart and then perched on her knees.

"I see it is a bit creamy," she said, circling the fingers of her left hand around the base of his jutting weapon. She gripped him firmly as she watched the tip oozing.

"Oh, it is cream-filled, wench. I'll warrant you that," he said, his voice deep and husky.

Ardor cupped the fingers of her right hand together then slid them slowly over the head of his penis, fitting him like a warm, living cap. Very gently she swiveled her fingers along that swollen bulb, working the pre-cum over and around it.

The Reaper's breathing was becoming shallower and the veins in his neck were pulsing so hard he could feel them.

Stretching out, Ardor positioned herself between her lover's legs, bracing her forearms on his rigid thighs. Still holding his cock captive in her hands, she blew her breath across the rosy slit of the head.

Gabriel jumped and ground his hips into the fur, writhing beneath her firm touch. He reached up to grab hold of the horizontal bar beneath the ornate scroll on the brass headboard and gripped it as though his life depended upon it. He began to pant as she worked the head of his penis.

"So velvety soft," she said, blowing once more on the sensitive little slit.

"Wench, please!" he begged and was barely able to stop himself from whimpering as her lips slid slowly and hotly over his shaft.

She laved him with her tongue—drawing more moisture—while she held him tightly in the grip of her hand. His heels were digging into the mattress, his knees flexed, thighs quivering as she suckled him.

The Reaper was lost in the sweet heat of her moist mouth. She was plying his fevered flesh as though he was a delicacy. Her lips were drawing upon him, swiveling over him in one direction as the fingers of her left hand began gently twisting his shaft in another, running firmly up and down at the same time. The pressure was exquisite and it set his blood to boiling, his heart to pumping so hard he thought he might die from the pleasure she was giving him. He could hear the pounding in his ears and increased his grip on the bedrail.

A devilish light lit Ardor's eyes and she slid her right hand under his taut ass, her middle finger scraping across the tight little pucker of his anus. She nearly laughed when he yelped at the delicate touch and arched his hips higher off the bed. Without missing a beat, she slipped her finger inside him—going in until it could thrust no higher.

"Oh, god!" Gabriel exclaimed. "Wench, I—"

He came like a gusher in her mouth, hot cum pulsing thickly. Lifting his head from the bed in shock that he had befouled her in such a way, he was astonished to see her eyes on him, those pretty green orbs smiling with wickedness as she calmly swallowed his love juice. His eyes wide, he watched her lave his swollen head until every drop of slickness was removed.

"W-where did you learn such a thing, wench?" he asked weakly.

She shrugged, taking his limp member between her palms and gently massaging him with a soft, sawing motion. "It seemed a natural thing, Reaper," she said. "Turnabout is fair play, wouldn't you say?"

He was vividly reminded of the evening he had orally pleased her and his cheeks burned. "What other man have you...?"

"No other man has known my lips on his shaft, Reaper," she said, holding his stare. "And no other man ever will."

Though he felt as though every bone in his body—especially the one she held so loosely between her silken palms—had no strength in them, he managed to lower his arms and wrap his hands around her upper arms. He dragged her up and over him and brutally slanted his mouth over hers.

Ardor felt the force of his kiss to the tips of her toes. Such heat, such lust, such delicious sweetness filled her until she felt her womb contract with need. She writhed against him, her hands sliding under his hips until she was pressing her fingers into his rump. Needing him, she flipped them over until he was above her, his cock lying along her thigh.

Gabriel pulled his mouth from hers and looked down at her hot eyes. He could taste himself, and his senses were burning with passion. The moment she ran her tongue over her lips, he felt the limpness in his cock lessen a bit. He knew it would be a while before he could thrust himself into her sweet moistness but pleasuring her as she had pleased him was but a slippery slide away down her damp body.

He trailed his fingers down her arms to her elbows then across to the rise of her luscious globes. With the base of his palms cupping her breasts, his thumbs and index fingers squeezing liquid fire through her nipples, he trailed kisses down her neck, her chest, past her belly button—where he paused to flick a wet tongue—to the crisp triangle of dark auburn curls that beckoned.

Ardor reveled in the weight of his forearms on her waist, his elbows pressing into her abdomen as his lips found and claimed her clitoris. As he had, she reached up to take hold of the brass headboard—lifting her breasts upward so her sensitive nipples were made even more so. She spread her thighs for him and arched her hips up to the fierce hunger that drove his wicked tongue into the very core of her. The fur beneath her ass was heavenly and the heat from his mouth was driving her insane. She ground her sex against him—riding his hot tongue—so that when she climaxed, her moistness flooded his mouth.

Limp and exhausted she collapsed on the bed only to hear the satisfied smacking of his lips as he completed the meal he had made of her cunt.

"So sweet," he said, lapping his tongue at her wetness.

Her limbs were quivering when he pulled himself up to lay beside her, taking her into his arms, his chin braced against the top of her head.

"Well?" he asked, smoothing his hand down her naked back.

"Well, what?" she mumbled, sleep rapidly overtaking her exhausted body.

"What was he, wench? If not tart or sweet or bitter?"

"Delicious, you evil man," she said and fell asleep against his shoulder.

Chapter Fifteen

The Plains of Geschäft ranged in a vast semicircle along a cold desert north of the capitol city of Führen on Aduaidh Prime. There was no vegetation amidst the bright rose sands of the barren land for it never warmed enough for plants to grow. Star dunes lined the plain—indicating the fierce winds that created them had blown from many directions across the sand seas. As devoid of water as it was plant life, no animal made its habitat in the shifting, desolate land—the only break in the bleak vastness were large boulder-size meteorites scattered about the landscape.

Bowen's runabout had already landed by the time the sleek new Fiach vessel soared in from the west. The shiny black craft hovered forty feet above the sinuous sand ridges as its heat-seeking array scanned Bowen's ship from nose to exhaust.

"Go on and land, you sniveling Storian greaser," Bowen snarled as he looked up through the sweep of his windshield. "I'm alone."

Seemingly satisfied the Riezellian had not broken Aduaidh law by secreting an accomplice aboard his vessel, the Storian runabout descended to the surface and cut its engines.

It was high summer on the Plains of Geschäft but the temperature was twenty-five degrees. Factoring in the twenty-mile-per-hour wind sweeping over the sand, it felt more like five.

"He's bundled up like a Chalean ice fisherman," Ardor said as she unbuckled her safety harness. She looked down at the Riezell Guardian uniform Gabriel had fashioned for her and for the first time in her life hated what she was wearing.

The Reaper was watching Kurt Bowen stepping down from his vessel but he couldn't make out the older man's face for it was hidden behind a face covering framed in thick fur that was rippling violently in the strong wind.

"Are you sure that's him?" she asked, standing up.

"The Burgon would have made damned sure it was him before he was ever allowed to land," Gabriel replied. "Just as he made sure it was us as soon as we entered Aduaidh airspace."

"I'm not all that cold, are you?" she wanted to know, for her husband had just finished opening the hatchway, which was letting in cold air from the dunes.

"You won't be, but put on your coat and gloves anyway," he said. "Reapers have a higher body temperature than humans or haven't you noticed?"

She shrugged into the heavy coat, slipped on the gloves. "I thought it was just my proximity to you, lover boy."

He snorted at her answer. "You go out first but keep him well away from our ship. I don't trust that mangy dog."

Ardor stepped in front of him then turned to look at him, her eyebrows arched. "You think he'd dare to bring a weapon? A bomb or the like?"

"I wouldn't put anything past him. Just walk off to one side, leaving me room."

Not knowing what her mate had in mind, Ardor felt a tremor of unease wriggle down her spine. His eyes were deadly daggers and if looks really could kill, one stab of those lethal orbs on Bowen would pierce the man through and through.

"Ardor!" came Bowen's shout.

"Go on," the Reaper said. He smiled at her but there was no warmth in his gaze.

She knew Gabriel Leveche was in killer mode. He had more than ample reason to hate the man he was about to meet, for it had been Kurt Bowen who had pushed him into the flames of the fire pit on *an Égipt*. She reached out to him but he shook his head, stepping away from her.

"When this is over, wench," he told her.

As much as she wanted to throw her arms around him, she denied herself. There was no need for words, for she understood well that he was aware of her love for him. She turned away and walked to the open hatchway, wisps of her hair flying free in the hard wind from the tight braid that hung down her back. She tugged up the collar of her coat to protect her cheeks from the cutting cold.

"It's freezing out here!" she heard Bowen yell. "Where is your winter gear?"

Ardor stepped down from the Fiach and started toward Bowen but at an angle away from her ship. She could not see his face and whatever he said next was caught by the wind, the words hurled into the void.

Bowen was hurrying toward her, staggering beneath the violent buffeting of the wind. Through the eye slits of his mask, she could see him blinking wildly, trying to rid his sight of the intrusive sting of sand. The wind was pressing against his heavy coat and his pants legs were ballooning out behind him as he trudged forward.

Her newfound Reaper abilities made it possible for her to smell Bowen as the wind suddenly shifted, surging him closer toward her. It was a sour smell she had not noticed before clinging to him and idly she wondered if her heightened senses were the cause or if Bowen's evil now had a stench to it. They were twenty feet apart, yet she could smell the heat of his sweat in the cumbersome winter protective clothing. She could also hear him ordering to come to him.

"Stand where you are, wench," the Reaper whispered in her mind and Ardor stopped.

Bowen was lifting his hand, motioning her toward him, calling out to her as the wind shifted again, this time slamming into him from his left side, nearly toppling him. He staggered, his arms cartwheeling and she heard him yelling for her. She saw him go down to one knee, his hand out to her but she shook her head.

It was at the moment Bowen was regaining his feet that Gabriel Leveche stepped down from the Fiach. The Iodálach must have seen him from the corner of his eye for he glanced that way briefly before returning his attention to Ardor. Something had caught Bowen's attention peripherally in that one brief look for his head jerked back around and he stumbled to a stop, his head turned toward the black-clad warrior whose booted feet were planted far apart on the sandy seas.

"Leveche," Ardor heard Bowen whisper as clearly as though his lips were close to her ear. In that one word she could hear shock and hatred and fear.

Though a bitterly cold wind was howling around them, buffeting them from all sides, its wintry tendrils dragging down exposed flesh to sting and burn, the Reaper walked out onto the Plains of Geschäft in only his silk uniform shirt opened at the collar and his black leather britches and boots.

"Ardor!" Bowen screamed, furiously motioning for her to run to him as he backed up, stumbling through the shifting sands. "Ardor, hurry!"

Feeling the cold blasting her, Ardor's teeth were chattering and her feet felt numb through the thin leather of her boots. She tugged the coat collar around the lower part of her face and stood there shivering, amazed as she watched her husband rip the silk shirt from his chest.

Bowen shrieked as the half-naked warrior came toward him. He spun around and ran toward his ship, his feet digging into the sand. Casting fearful glances over his shoulder, he had almost gained the stairs leading up to the runabout's hatchway when the door slammed to with a resounding clank that echoed over the barrenness.

"Holy shit of the ancients," Ardor whispered. There was no doubt in her mind her lover had caused the door to close. She swung her gaze to him and was stunned to see him removing his belt. Her eyes widened as he dropped the belt and ripped his britches off so easily they might have been made of tissue paper.

Bowen was pounding on the door to his craft with both hands raised high above his head. He was yelling, his words snatched away by the breath of the harsh wind. When he looked around and saw a naked Gabriel Leveche walking steadily toward him, he screamed and took off running toward the tallest of the star dunes.

Ardor knew what was about to happen. She could feel it in the very marrow of her bones. It was a singing, humming sensation that made her joints ache and sent tremors of fiery singes down her spine. There was no need for her to watch Kurt Bowen's execution for she knew her mate would not want her to. So she turned away from the running, screaming man and the sleek black wolf that was loping after him and walked back to the warmth of the Fiach, closing the door behind her to await her lover's return.

"Queen Ardor?"

The Vid-Com came on without the customary chime to announce its caller.

"Aye, Your Excellency," Ardor said, looking into the slightly amused eyes of the Burgon.

"I am most pleased to see no weapons were brought to the Plains of Geschäft."

"No weapons were needed, Your Excellency," Ardor replied.

"Only a very sharp set of talons and even sharper incisors, I'd think," the Burgon said with a laugh.

Ardor simply smiled.

"I do hope there won't be any cleanup necessary."

"My instincts tell me there will be nothing left when all is said and done, Sir," she told him.

"Damned cold out there, though, isn't it?"

"Damned cold, Your Excellency."

"Well, when all is said and done, please drop by my humble palace and I shall see what I can do to warm up the two of you."

"I will convey your invitation to my husband, Your Excellency. Thank you for the offer."

The Burgon saluted her and the connection was broken.

Ardor sat there for a few moments then began taking off her clothes.

Epilogue

The sleek black wolf raced over the rippling dunes behind the pretty little gray beastess whose switching tail and musky scent had caught his attention. He got close enough to nip at her haunches before she darted away to the left, her elegant legs digging furrows in the sand as she turned toward the setting sun. Grinning, the black wolf changed his direction just as easily and was soon running by her side, his sharp fangs gleaming in the fading light from the dual moons overhead. Matching her shorter stride, he playfully bumped her from time to time, swatting her with his lush tail.

Running over the dunes nearly the entire day, playing tag among the fallen meteorites, neither animal minded the bone-chilling cold wind that swept over them. Their fur was thick and covered them well. Mating many times over the course of the day, they had enjoyed the freedom of the barren land where no prying eyes and no forbidding tongues could deny them their pleasures.

It was the wildness they needed, the time alone without worry and responsibilities, but it was animal exhaustion that finally slowed their strides.

Having come back to the gleaming black ship that sat perched on the rosy sand, the two animals padded toward it, their sides heaving from the exhilarating run. The male shook himself vigorously then looked up at the hatchway door, it opened silently to emit a steady stream of warm air on the waiting wolf and his mate.

The she-wolf climbed up through the opening, padded lightly over to the copilot's chair and hopped up into the seat. Behind her, the hatchway door slid shut as her mate once more shook himself.

Ardor stretched her naked body—her arms over her head—and yawned tiredly. She found herself ravenously hungry and said as much to Gabriel.

"I couldn't eat another thing," the Reaper said with a wry grin. "But I am thirsty." He opened a refrigerated unit and took out two large bottles of water. He handed one to her and they quickly consumed the cold liquid, wiping away any spilled water with the backs of their hands.

Ardor watched him walk to the pilot's chair and sit down to adjust the heat wafting through the cabin. She admired the flexing of the muscles in his thighs and chest and when he leaned back, closing his eyes, she knew he was about to clothe himself. She reached out to touch his arm.

Gabriel opened his eyes and looked curiously at her. When he saw the glimmer in her pretty green gaze he laughed. "Not yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," she agreed and got up to sit in his lap, her shapely rump fitting across his lap snugly. She swung her legs around until her back was to his chest.

The new Storian king reached up to capture his lady's plump breasts, running his thumbs over her stiffening nipples, stroking her softly. Between her slightly parted thighs, his cock strained to see what was going on.

"We've been invited to the Burgon's palace," Ardor said as she reached between her legs to lightly stroke his rod.

"That was most cordial of him," Gabriel said, playfully nipping her along the column of her neck and along her velvety shoulder.

"I would imagine he'd prepare an adequate feast for us, wouldn't you?" she asked as she ran her index finger along the slit of his penis.

"I would think so," he agreed and flicked his tongue to the sensitive spiral of her ear.

Ardor cocked her head to one side to give him better access to her ear. She liked the tingly feeling his wet tongue was causing in her belly.

The Reaper slid his hand back up her chest and shoulders then wedged them between his chest and her back to insinuate them under her ass. With no effort at all, he lifted her up until his erect cock was poised above the warmth of her moist entrance.

"I know you're not hungry," she began but stopped as he lowered her upon him, impaling her on his rigid shaft. "But I am starving."

"So am I," he said as he settled himself to the hilt within her, "but not for food."

She lay her head back on his shoulder as his hands returned to her breasts and began a soothing, erotic massage making her nipples as hard as little stones. She wriggled in his lap, squeezing her thighs tightly closed around his shaft.

"A nice bowl of soup would be fantastic," she said with a sigh as her breathing began to increase.

"A nice furburger would be even better," Gabriel stated and chuckled at his pun.

She pulled her head back and looked at him, her eyes dewy from the internal heat that was melting her bones. Her cunt was a mass of intense itching that needed him to scratch it harder. "Shut up, Reaper," she ordered.

He slanted his mouth over hers—his tongue slipping between her lips to taste that moist, sweet cavern—and claimed her from stem to stern in one breathless moment that surged up from the pilot's chair in a powerful thrust.

Ardor cried out—her pleasurable sounds trapped in his mouth—and plastered her hands over his, pressing his palms against her breasts as she rode his stiff rod. The ripples that were traveling through her velvety sheath were gripping him in tight, little squeezes that brought his climax from him with a powerful grunt.

Passion shook them both and she slumped against him, the back of her head once more on his shoulder, her hands falling away to lay limply at her sides. He sagged in the chair, breathing hard, and let his head rest on the tall back of the chair. Neither felt like moving. The cabin was warm, the leather on which he was sitting comfortable, his

naked lap comforting to her, so he wrapped his arms around her as sleep closed their tired eyelids.

Safe in their gleaming black cocoon as darkness fell, the might of Aduaidh Prime's Burgon protecting them, the cold winds of the Plains of Geschäft skirling gently outside the porthole windows the two Reapers slept the sleep of lovers. Tomorrow would be time aplenty for worldly concerns.

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.

Charlotte welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron OH 44310-3502.

Also by Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Desire's Sirocco

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails I anthology

Fated Mates anthology

Longing's Levant

Lucien's Khamsin

Passion's Mistral

Pleasure's Foehn

Rapture's Etesian



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com