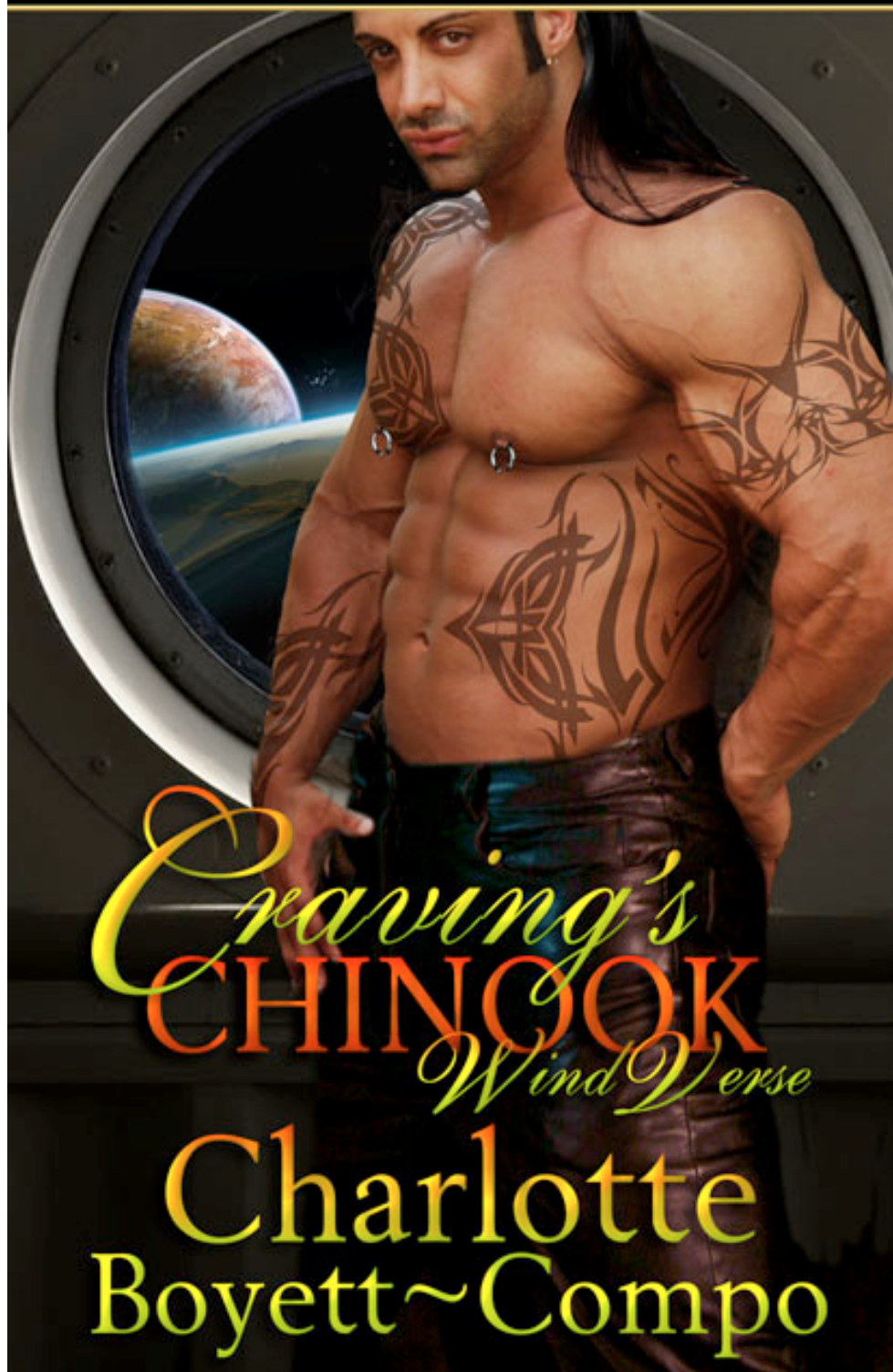


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Craving's Chinook

ISBN 9781419916670

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Craving's Chinook Copyright © 2008 Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Edited by Mary Moran.

Cover art by Les Byerley & Syneca.

Electronic book Publication October 2008

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, 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.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

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.

WINDVERSE:

CRAVING'S CHINOOK

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Chapter One

Long ago someone told him war was hell. Peace was for old men, not warriors. Captain Rynlyn Rede agreed with that assessment for as he walked away from the death bed of his XO, he was fairly sure hell was exactly where Kirkby Aughton was residing at that very moment—leading the demons on a merry chase, laughing as he ran.

Passing nurses gave him a wide berth. Healers pretended not to see him. And ambling patients shuddered from being too close to him. The Chalean warrior ignored them all. His shoulders were hunched—tight as a drum—as he walked briskly out of the Fleet Hospital. A muscle worked furiously in his chest and his eyes were windows into the hell he was imagining for Kirkby.

For hours he walked from one end of Fleet Command to the other. Paying no attention to the guards watching him, he flipped the collar of his heavy black wool pea coat up around his ears, thrust his hands into the pockets and kept walking. He was sweating like the proverbial stuck Diabolusian warthog inside the heavy coat, but for the moment it was a security blanket he couldn't seem to discard. Though he was roasting, he was chilled to the bone.

Three times he walked past the chapel—stopped, stared at the double bronze doors—then cursed, resuming his walking until he finally found himself at the corridor that led down to the docking station. He stopped to stare long and hard at the titanium doors at the end of the corridor.

Taking a hand from his pocket, he raked it through his hair—not in the least surprised to see it shook uncontrollably. He was straining, struggling to hold in his emotions, yet they were getting the best of him. What he needed was a runabout—preferably a Fiach X-9—flying at top speed, taking him beyond the pain that was eating at him like hot acid.

Or a wall through which he could plant his doubled fist.

“Damn it, Kirk, why?” he mumbled. “Why did it have to be you?”

There was no acceptable reason for Kirk to have died, he thought. The responsibility for his death was Rynlyn's. He should never have allowed his friend to take the helm. If he had been sitting in the command chair instead of Kirk, the young Serenian would still be alive—his rakish smile pleasing everyone who viewed it. Instead, Kirk was lying beneath a stained sheet on his way to the crematorium, and crushing guilt was weighing heavy on the captain's shoulders, dragging them down even more.

Two airmen edged past him—briefly glancing back as they headed down the corridor to the docking station. He watched them with narrowed eyes, homing in on

their conversation, using the powers with which he'd been born to listen in on their hushed words.

"Did you see his ship?" one whispered.

"Aye." The speaker twisted his head around to take one last look at Rynlyn before he and his companion put a hand to the ID screen beside the closed doors leading into the docking station.

"I heard his XO bought it."

"Fried as crisp as a fritter where he sat," the other airman said as the doors began to close behind them.

"There's the *Chinook*. Man, I need some relief tonight!"

The *Chinook*, Rynlyn thought as he continued to stand there at the head of the corridor. One of three Class R starcruisers, the *Chinook* had been put online a few months back while one of its sister ships—the *Samiel*—was put in dry dock for overhaul. The third ship, the *Foehn*, was in the Aduaidh Quadrant, orbiting one of the planetoids out there. The Amhantar Fleet would be protecting the *Foehn* as it would the *Chinook*. The ships were where the fighting men went to find a few moments of peace.

The more he thought about the ship, the peace it promised, the more convinced he became he was being drawn to it.

"Maybe that's exactly what I need," he said aloud. In his mind he thought he heard Kirk laugh and whisper, "*Go for it! Have one on me! Or two or three!*"

He took one step then two down the corridor until he came to the sealed doors. With only a moment's hesitation he slapped his palm to the red ID screen, watched the white bar scan from the top of the screen to the bottom as it read his palm print then lowered his hand when the screen turned green and the doors slid open.

There was hustle and bustle in the docking station where over two dozen ships lay cradled in the massive semicircular headworks of the docking bays. The hum of mighty engines coming online filled the air. The whirl of high-powered solar turbines turning ruffled his tousled hair.

His own ship wouldn't be here. It was at the shipyard where it had been red-lined until repairs could be made to the hull and bridge. How long that would take was anyone's guess. The destruction had been massive. His baby was crippled. She needed a new pair of shoes.

"For now you and your crew are off-duty," Admiral Granger had told him. "Take some R & R, Rede. You look like hell."

He felt like hell, Rynlyn thought as he moved along the catwalk that circled the station. Every three minutes the hydraulic flooring beneath the individual headframes would slide aside and a ship would release from its coupling harness to drift slowly downward through the opening with a low thrum. He stopped to watch as a long-range cruiser dropped out of sight then waited until he heard the roar of its powerful engines engage—signaling the vessel was moving away from the space station.

He sighed deeply. It would be a while before he heard the engines of the *Coadagh* thrusting him and its crew into hyperspace.

Grinding his teeth to the anger and resentment building within him, he picked up his pace as he walked toward the starcruiser at the very point of the starboard side of the crescent. It was sitting there like a saucy wench with her legs open wide for customers. Men—and some women—were smiling and laughing as they walked up the gangplank and into the vessel.

“Flying brothels,” he’d once heard the ships called. He personally knew the captain of the *Foehn*, had a nodding acquaintance with the captain of the *Samiel*, but he’d never been onboard either vessel, never thought he’d want to. He didn’t truck with the working women who plied their trade on the three pleasure ships. His occasional rare bouts of needing something to pour his loneliness into was more often than not soothed by the pleasure ‘bots kept onboard his ship for just that purpose.

But tonight was different. Tonight he needed the booze and the broads and the bliss the crew of the *Chinook* had to offer. He needed real arms to hold him, a real breast upon which to lie his aching head.

“Good evening, Captain,” the gorgeous red-haired director of the cruise greeted him with a broad smile as he came up the gangplank. Her green eyes missed nothing as she took in his name badge, the collar insignia on his pea coat denoting his rank then she glanced down at the handheld she was using to check off the names of those boarding. Obviously not seeing his name, she looked up, her smile faltering. “I’m afraid I don’t see your name, Captain Rede.”

“That’s because I’m not on your gods-be-damned list,” he grumbled.

“Oh,” she said, rapidly blinking. “Well, we will be departing soon, Sir, and —”

“Acknowledged,” he said, moving past her.

“But Sir!” she called out.

He ignored her, continuing on into the clamor of humanity milling about the reception area. He headed for the bar. He needed something strong and intoxicating to warp his mind.

* * * * *

The director of the cruise signaled for her assistant to take over the duties of greeting the passengers. After being relieved, she made her way to a relatively quiet place, reached up to touch the earpiece of her miniscule headset.

“Britta, we’ve got a situation here. Let me speak to the captain ASAP,” she told the woman who answered her call.

“What the hell’s wrong now, Sheila?” Captain Ulrich Dahl barked when he came on the line.

“Captain Rede is aboard, Sir,” she stated. “I believe it was his ship that —”

“I know who the hell he is!” Dahl snapped. “What of him?”

"He's not on the list, Sir."

There was a few seconds of silence then an explosion of cursing followed by the curt command to hold on.

"Captain Dahl for the admiral," Dahl said curtly to the secretary who answered his call. Since he was looking at the woman face-to-face on the vid-com screen, he tried to maintain a civil look.

"He is unavailable at the moment, Captain," the secretary reported. "May I take a message?"

Dahl's mouth tightened. "You can find him and tell him I've got Ryn Rede onboard the *Chinook* and we're scheduled to depart in ten minutes! I need to know what to do with him!"

"One moment, Sir!" the secretary stated, and the vid-com screen morphed into the insignia of Fleet Command.

For what seemed like an hour but was in actuality only five minutes, Dahl tapped his fingers on his desk while he waited. When the secretary came back online, he held his breath, hoping he wasn't going to be required to call the shore police to have the *Coadagh's* captain removed.

"The admiral sends his regards, Captain, and wishes me to tell you to please add Captain Rede to your ship's passenger list. He also asked that I tell you to remit all expenses the captain might incur while onboard directly to the Fleet's purser. Additionally, Sir, the admiral bid me tell you that he would consider it a personal favor if you would see to Captain Rede's well-being while he is under your care."

A long, hard release of breath was accompanied by a relieved nod.

"Acknowledged. Please inform the admiral I will see Captain Rede is made comfortable," Dahl said, ending the transmission. He sat there for a moment—calming his racing heart—then contacted his DC to tell her to make sure Rede was taken care of.

"Of course, Sir," Sheila Bennett replied, relief sounding in her voice.

"Give him our best quarters even if it means moving whoever is in them at the moment. Go tell him where he will be then see what else he might need. Don't argue with the man and, for the love of the gods, show him the respect he's due!"

"Aye Sir," the DC replied as the connection was broken.

* * * * *

Ryn felt those gathered covertly watching him, but he was accustomed to the surreptitious inspection. His standing at Fleet, his war-hero status placed him directly in the public eye whether he wanted to be there or not. Though it made him uncomfortable to be studied as though he were a bug on a board it also kept the curious and the bootlickers from bothering him much of the time.

The barman hurried over to him as soon as Ryn came up to the bar.

"What can I get you, Captain?" he queried.

"Chalean whiskey," Ryn growled.

"Aye Sir," the barman agreed, and hurried to pluck a green bottle from the shelf. After he poured a shot glass of the potent brew then turned to put the bottle back on the shelf, the captain of the *Coadagh* scowled. "Leave the gods-be-damned bottle." He knocked back the shot.

"Aye Sir!"

With the bottle in one hand and the shot glass in the other, Ryn turned from the bar and headed for a table at the far end of the room. A couple of lieutenants were also headed that way, but upon realizing the infamous scythelord's destination, decided to find somewhere else to sit.

Sprawling on the chair, Ryn poured another shot, drank it, poured a third, downed it then poured a fourth that he set on the table as he swept his hawklike gaze about the room.

There were more people in the bar than he liked being near, but they were keeping well away from him. A few of the prostitutes stationed aboard the ship gave him come-hither looks, which he disregarded. He wasn't ready for company yet. Besides, none of those watching had any appeal for him.

He wiped a hand across his sweaty face and decided he should peel himself out of the thick coat before he managed to catch a virus of some kind. The coat smelled of charred flesh anyway, and when he began unbuttoning it, flinched when he saw what he knew was pieces of skin clinging to the fabric. Shrugging out of the black wool garment, he flung it on the chair beside his and thrust one long leg out as he swooped up the fourth shot of whiskey.

"Captain Rede?"

He didn't look up as the DC came to stand at his side, nor did he answer her even when she cleared her throat and tried to gain his attention again. After a moment, he heard her sigh and almost smiled at her discomfort. He wondered how long it would be before she got up the courage to say what she had to. When she finally spoke, he could hear the fear trembling in her voice.

"I took the liberty of procuring you our best quarters, Sir. You are on deck five, room one, Sir. It is our best accommodations." When he made no comment to her announcement, she cleared her throat again. "Is there anything else I can get you, Sir?"

Once more he shifted his gaze about the room. There was one very lovely woman now sitting with the whores and she would do as well as any.

"The one in the green gown," he mumbled.

"That's Tessa Gervasee," the DC said. "She's our most popular escort."

"Whoop-de-doo," he said with a snort, and poured himself another glass.

"I'll send her over, Sir."

He snaked out a hand to catch hers, startling her into a harsh gasp as his fingers closed tight around her wrist. "Tell her," he said, annoyed that his words were beginning to slur. "You tell her to keep her pretty little mouth shut until I tell her she can speak."

Sheila nodded. "Of course, Sir. I will!"

"Tell her to just sit her ass down and leave me be." He released her and tipped the shot glass to his lips.

"Aye Sir!"

He didn't acknowledge the woman who came over to his table. He frowned when she pulled the chair out for its scrape across the floor irritated him, yet he did not berate her. He glanced at her as he poured another drink, made note she sat ramrod straight in the chair with her hands folded primly together on the table.

"What are you drinking?" he asked.

"I don't drink, Sir," the woman replied.

He narrowed his eyes at her, giving her a look that had quelled many an enemy. "Why the fuck not?"

She tipped her chin up just a fraction. "I am a Seabhachuan, Sir. Alcohol—"

"I know what the hell it does to your race," he snapped. He dragged his gaze over her, from the elegant arrangement of artfully mounded sable curls, past startling lavender eyes, a pert little nose, luscious-looking cupid's-bow lips, a determined chin and graceful neck to the deep cleavage straining at the V-neckline of her dark green gown. He was unaware his upper lip quirked as he stared at her.

"If you would prefer a lady who will drink with you—" she began only to have him slam the glass down on the table as hard as he could. She jumped, her eyes flaring.

"Did I give you permission to speak?" he demanded.

Tessa Gervasee pushed her chair back, rose to her feet, but before she could leave his gruff voice stopped her in mid-turn.

"Sit your gods-be-damned ass down," he ordered, and when she looked as though she would argue with him, he smiled brutally. "You really don't want me to get up from this chair to make you do it, lady."

She looked to the barman and the two security guards who flanked the main door. The guards were watching her. Both were burly men with rippling muscles beneath their gray pullovers, yet neither looked anxious to come to her aid and she didn't blame them. The man glaring up at her was not one with whom most men cared to tussle. She sat down again slowly, her bottom lip tucked between her pearly white teeth.

"Wise choice," he muttered.

For over an hour she watched him silently down one glass after another until the bottle was empty. When he signaled for another, her eyebrows shot up with surprise. An ordinary man would have succumbed already to the highly intoxicating liquor—almost as powerful as the fiery Chalean brandy of his homeland. By rights, he should

have passed out after only a half-dozen hits. But other than mumbling to himself and slopping booze over the table when he poured, he showed no signs of yielding to the brew.

"I let him take the bridge," she heard him say. "Shouldn't have done that. Should have told him no. Shouldn't have lain down." He pounded the base of his palm against his forehead three times as though trying to knock sense into his brain. "Gods-be-damned migraines. Always the gods-be-damned migraines!"

It was common knowledge at Fleet Command what had happened near Sauria two days earlier. The New Coalition had attacked Captain Rede's skyraider the *Coadagh* and nearly destroyed it, mortally injuring his second-in-command as well as nine others who were on the bridge at the time. His XO had been severely burned. Refusing to allow the corpsmen to carry his dying XO to the hospital on a stretcher, the captain had taken the young man into his own arms and had brought him there, staying beside him until his second-in-command had taken his last breath.

"Should have been me," he mumbled.

The barman brought over the second bottle, cast Tessa a worried look, shrugged helplessly then left.

Captain Rede looked up with bloodshot eyes that searched Tessa's. There was terrible grief and guilt in his gaze. "Why wasn't it me?" he asked.

"Because it wasn't your time," she said softly.

Her answer seemed to hurt him. He winced then looked down at the drink in his hand.

"It's never my time. I can't seem to die," he muttered. "No matter what they do to me, I just fucking can't seem to die."

She watched him throw the drink back. When he reached out to pour another shot, she extended her hand across the table to place it lightly over his.

"Don't you think you've had enough, Captain?" she asked gently.

A muscle tightened in his cheek. "Get your hand off me," he ordered. "I didn't give you leave to touch me!"

Tessa pulled her hand back as though the contact had burned her. Without a word she rose from the chair and started away.

No normal man who had downed as much liquor as Captain Rede had would have been able to move as quickly or surely as he did as he shot up from the table. Surely had it not been bolted to the floor, it would have overturned. He took two steps, lashed out an arm to wrap around her waist. He jerked her against him with such force it staggered him but he kept his feet as he spun her around.

"Don't you *ever* walk away from me, woman!" he yelled.

He would never know what made him do it. He thrust his hand into the pile of sable curls atop her head then slammed his mouth over hers, forcing his tongue between her surprised lips. The kiss was savage, hot as lava. He ground shamelessly

against her as he pressed her body to his with a hand to her shapely ass. Her hands were doubled into fists—pressing against his broad chest—but they had little effect against his superior strength. He crushed her to him, breathing hard as he deepened the kiss.

Tessa moaned low in her throat—more because he was hurting her with his fierceness than from any desire his kiss might have elicited. But the small sound had an immediate effect on him and he tore his mouth from hers, staring down into her surprised face with a look that said he had no idea what he'd done. His gaze dropped to her lips.

"I..." He released her, stepping back with a stagger that almost toppled him. He had to scramble to grab a table to keep from falling.

Tessa saw something other than anger and grief and guilt in his eyes at that moment. She saw a man struggling to hold onto what sanity he had left. She saw immense pain, debilitating loneliness. She reached for him, taking his arm firmly between her two hands to steady him.

"I think you've had enough. You need to lie down," she said in a tone that brooked no disagreement from him.

It was as though all the fight had gone out of him. He nodded, lowered his head like a little boy having been chastised by his mother. He was wobbly on his feet, however, and the nod made him stagger again.

"Easy does it," she said with a grunt, for his weight leaning on her wasn't insignificant.

Slipping an arm around his waist, she led him out of the bar and toward the bank of elevators. The eyes of every person in the bar were locked on them. She remained silent, though he was back to mumbling to himself again—words she surmised were being spoken in Chalean since she did not understand them.

Thankfully they were alone in the elevator as it took them up to the deck reserved for visiting dignitaries and high-ranking officers. He slumped against the wall, hanging onto the rail, still muttering to himself. When the doors opened, the captain of a starfreighter stepped back, astonishment flickering across his face.

"My compliments, Captain Rede!" he said. When he realized the man he'd greeted was three sheets to the wind and unaware he'd spoken, he looked to Tessa. "Do you need help, lass?"

"No thank you, Captain Bartlett," she replied. "I can manage."

"You're sure? He looks to be a handful."

"I don't think he'd like anyone to know he's a bit under the weather," she said with a fleeting smile.

"Aye, I imagine not," Bartlett said.

"I'll take good care of him, Sir."

"I'm sure you will, dearling."

She guided Rede from the elevator and down the corridor, stopping at the room Sheila told her had been assigned to him. Pressing her hand to the security panel by his quarters' door, she steadied him for he was weaving worse now, the liquor finally having taken its toll.

"*Ta me are meisce,*" she heard him complain.

"What?"

"I'm shitfaced," he translated.

"Yes you are," she agreed as the automatic lights came on in the quarters.

She maneuvered him through the sitting room and into the bedroom. Managing to turn him around, she pressed him to sit on the mattress. His muscular body hit the bed with a resounding thud and he flopped backward with an *oomph*, his hands to either side of his head as he stared up at the ceiling.

Tessa groaned for he was half on, half off the bed—his long legs splayed open. Because he was a dead weight, it took some effort on her part to swing those legs onto the bed, turn him so he was lying the length of the mattress instead of across it. Urging him up so he could lay his head on the pillow, she tugged off his boots and socks.

"I shouldn't have let him have the bridge," he muttered again, flinging an arm over his eyes.

"Can I get you anything before I go, Captain?" she asked quietly.

"My coat," he said, letting his arm fall behind his head. He glared at her. "Where the hell is my gods-be-damned coat, woman?"

She sighed. "I'll fetch it for you. Do you want anything else?"

"I want my coat," he said like a petulant little boy. His lower lip was actually thrust out in a pout.

"I'll be right back with it," she said, starting away again.

"No!" he snapped. "Have them bring it to me. You stay!"

Tessa almost groaned, caught herself before she did. She had no choice but to do as he ordered and went to the vid-com to call down to the bar.

"Is he out yet?" the barman inquired.

"No," Tessa.

"Chaleans can hold their liquor better than most," the barman said. "He'll pay for it tomorrow."

"I haven't had supper yet, Ismael," she told the barman. "Would you send up a sandwich and a glass of lemonade too?"

"Sure thing. I don't suppose he wants anything, does he?"

"No, he doesn't!" came the denial from the bedroom. "He just wants his gods-be-damned coat!"

"I heard him," the barman said with a laugh, terminating the call.

Tessa kicked off her shoes, headed for the couch, but the captain ordered her back into his bedroom.

"Yes Sir?" she said as she stood in the doorway.

He had pushed himself up on the bed and was pulling his shirttail from his trousers. He growled as he fumbled with the buttons on his uniform shirt.

"Don't work," he said. "Wretched things won't come undone." His head wobbled on his neck as he looked at her. "Think they're broken."

She hid a smile as she went to the bed. Brushing aside his fingers, she made quick work of the buttons, undid his cuffs and helped him remove his uniform shirt. Surprised to find numerous large tattoos up and down both arms and one on his right pectoral, she was shocked to also discover both his nipples were pierced, sporting small gold rings that matched the one in his left ear. She tried not to stare at them.

"Quit looking at my chest," he mumbled. "Gods-be-damned women are always looking at my fucking chest." He looked down at himself. "What the fuck do they find so gods-be-damned interesting about my hairy chest?"

His hands were on the buckle of his belt but he wasn't having any more luck with it than he'd had with the buttons.

"Here, let me," she said.

He looked up at her with a smirk on his chiseled lips. "Can't wait to get 'em off, huh?" he said, eyeing her lewdly.

Not responding to the goad, she unbuckled his belt, worked the buttons of his fly open then put a hand to the center of his chest to push him down so she could pull the pants from his legs.

"You women are all alike," he said, crashing back to the mattress with a grunt. "Always in a hurry to get my pants off."

If she was shocked he wasn't wearing the regulation white underwear, she didn't allow it to show. She was sure he was watching to see her reaction as his manhood sprang free of the pants. He was not a small man in that department and was fully erect.

"Now look whatcha went and done," he muttered, lifting his head to stare at the erection that was standing at full mast.

Accustomed to men behaving like randy adolescent boys, she ignored him, taking his clothing over to the closet where she pushed them down a chute to be cleaned before morning.

"You can't leave him like this," he told her.

It was her job to please men, to pleasure them. She was a highly sought-after courtesan who earned a very respectable amount of money for what she did aboard the three R & R vessels—working thirty days on one, taking thirty off then moving to the next ship. She was skilled at what she did, having been trained to be one of the very best at her craft. Nothing surprised her, nothing offended her. Whatever her client

wanted, she would provide, although she drew the line at allowing the men—and occasional woman—to hurt her.

“What would you like me to do, Sir?” she asked.

He made a raspberry sound as though he shouldn’t have to tell her, waving a dismissive hand at the question. “I want you to fuck me, woman,” he said. “Hard and long and rough. Make me forget.”

The vid-com chimed.

“Don’t answer it.”

“It’s probably your coat,” she reminded him. “Don’t you want it?”

He snorted and she took that to mean she could answer after all. Going into the sitting area, she opened the door, took the coat, the tray containing her sandwich and lemonade, thanked the steward then placed the tray on an end table. She went back into the bedroom.

He was sound asleep, snoring lightly, his cock lying crooked and flaccid on his thigh. Breathing a sigh of relief, for she truly didn’t want him fumbling over her in his inebriated state, she touched the panel on the wall by the door and the lights went out in the room. For a moment she stood there watching him sleep before going back into the sitting area to claim her supper.

Half an hour later she was watching a movie on the vid-com with the sound turned down low, nibbling on the pickled shova root the barman had added to her tray, when she heard him moaning. She looked toward the bedroom, listening.

“No,” she heard him say, and the one word sounded wretched.

Getting up from the sofa, she went to the bedroom door and looked in. He was moving restlessly, his head thrashing slowly back and forth as though he were caught in some fierce dream. The coverlet beneath him was twisted in a bunch, his hands grasping it with a death grip. The soft moans, the whimpers that came from him tore at her heart. Quietly she approached the bed, put a hand to his forehead. He was sweating profusely. At her touch, he whimpered as though he’d been hit.

“Shush,” she said gently, stroking his hair back.

He flinched, cringing away from her touch, and at that moment—in a beam of light coming in from the sitting area—saw the tears slicking his face.

She didn’t think about what she was doing. She simply pulled the formfitting gown over her head and went around to the other side of the bed to slide in beside him, naked except for the pale green silk chemise that fell to just below her hips. Pulling him into her arms, she rested his head on her shoulder and cradled him, continuing to make little shushing sounds to calm him. He draped an arm over her waist.

“Stay with me,” he whispered. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she replied, and ran her hand down his back, feeling puckered flesh beneath her palm. She frowned as she traced the crisscrossing lines.

“I grew up with the Pannys Sheshaght,” he told her.

Tessa's face crinkled with compassion. The religious cult was known throughout the galaxy for its fanaticism and cruelty. It had been raided twenty years earlier, shut down by the Burgon himself when the extent of the horrors that were practiced there came to light.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Aye, me too."

He snuggled against her and within a matter of moments was asleep again.

Tessa knew she would not sleep. She'd never been able to fall asleep while in bed with a client.

Now and again he would moan, jerk against her. His dreams were without doubt very unsettling to cause such reactions. He continued to sweat, making her uncomfortable as she lay against him, but she remained where she was with her arms around him. To occupy her mind and take it off the heat radiating from his body, she began cataloguing what she knew of Rynlyn Rede.

His appointment to the Aduaidh Fleet Academy had been personally arranged by the Burgon Ryden Bakari at a time when the Border Wars were at their zenith. Graduating at the top of his class, the newly commissioned lieutenant had been given Deathwielder status, a scythelord of the highest degree.

She searched her memory for what that meant. A snippet of conversation with a Riezell Guardian came back to her –

"They take the cadets who show a strong degree of psychic ability and put them through a strenuous course that teaches them how to wield their powers to advantage. They learn misdirection on a grand scale. Only the very best get to go on to scythelord class and only the cream of the crop are given Deathwielder status and are awarded the Crossed Scythes of a Scythelord..."

The Guardian had been interrupted before she could explain what misdirection meant.

Tessa returned to what else she knew about Captain Rede.

From his first assignment aboard a warcruiser, the Chalean warrior had earned war decoration after war decoration from the Meritorious Cross of Gallantry to the Galaxian Defense Star. When upon the Plains of Geschäft a ceasefire between the Alliance and the Coalition had been signed, Rynlyn Rede swore an oath of allegiance to the newly formed confederation between the Alliance and the Coalition. When the New Coalition began the conflict all over again by massacring the Burgon's family, the scythelord found himself once more at war. This time around he was given his own command – the *Coadagh*, a skyraider fresh off the assembly line. He had been given the honor of naming the vessel. In his native Chalean High Speech, the word meant protector and that was precisely what Rynlyn Rede and his ship became.

The year before, the Burgon had sponsored Rede as a candidate to the Order of Taibhse, an honor few men ever received. Passing the initiation with flying colors, the young captain had earned the respect and friendship and joined the ranks of such

powerful warriors as Prince Cair Ghrian, Prince Gabriel Leveche and Duke Ailyn Harmattan.

Military accomplishments aside, not much in the way of personal information was known about the man. He was single – that much she knew – but as to family?

Tessa couldn't stop the shudder that rippled through her. Because he'd been raised with the Pannys Sheshaght, she knew his parents would have been very strict, very severe, harsh beyond the rational. The myriad scars she'd felt on his back had been caused by the ritual caning that lasted until the one being punished lost consciousness. The punishment would be followed by a week of fasting with only a cup of water a day allowed as nourishment. What such torture was meant to instill in the way of teaching was beyond her.

She wondered if his parents were still alive, if he had siblings. If his parents had been among the Council of Apostles, chances were good they were in prison on Amerigen serving a life sentence for their many transgressions. If they had been cult members only, there was no telling where they might be if still living.

She glanced down at the man lying beside her.

There was no denying he was a handsome son of a bitch, she thought—one tall drink of Chalean water with a brogue that could make a woman's toes curl. Thick reddish brown hair covered his head in loose curls that were silky-soft to the touch. A deep cleft in his chin, perfect male lips, green eyes, a killer body with a chest full of hair – and those tats!

She lowered her eyes to the tattoo that covered his left shoulder, wrapped completely around his upper arm and dipped all the way to his elbow. Below it on his forearm was a blue Chalean tribal band tat with intricate knotwork.

Beautiful, she thought. Absolutely beautiful.

And painful she knew from the one she had had applied to her lower back. Tats as large as the ones on his arms took time to ink.

"You like them?"

Her gaze snapped from the band to his eyes. He was watching her with an expression she knew was guarded.

"Very much."

He shifted away from her so he could lift his head and brace it on a fist, his elbow pressed into his pillow. His eyes were unfocused, the words as he spoke still slurred but at least the demanding tone had left his voice.

"One of the tenets of the Sheshaght was that it was sacrilegious to adorn your body in any way," he said. "That meant no makeup for women and no wearing of jewelry, not even a wedding band. For a man to even consider such things was blasphemy. You were never allowed to cut your hair. Men wore beards and *shemaghs*—a type of fringed scarf—to hide their hair and all but their eyes. Women wore long black shapeless gowns with head and face coverings like the devout Rysalians. They were required to wear

long gloves under the gowns and boots that fit to the thigh so not even an inch of their flesh could be seen. All you ever saw were their eyes behind a heavy mesh covering."

"So when you broke free of them, you expressed that freedom with decorating your body as you liked," she said.

He shrugged. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it." He reached out his free hand to tug at a lock of her hair, running the tress through his fingers. Lifting the strands to his face, he took a deep breath. "Honeysuckle?"

"You have a discerning sense of smell, Captain," she said.

"Ryn," he corrected. His hand slid around her neck and he pulled her toward him. Gently he touched his lips to hers. "I can be a gentleman when I make the effort. I just don't do it very often."

Over the years since she'd been installed in her profession she'd known many men, slept with more than she dared to count, but not once had she been tempted by any of them. They were business arrangements, nothing more. Though a few had offered her wealth and position, home and security, she had turned down each proposal without a moment's qualm. She didn't want a home. She didn't want a family, and she certainly had no desire to be tied down to one man, but...

There was something pulling her to Rynlyn Rede. It wasn't just his pure male beauty or his well-honed body or that reckless, shiver-inducing brogue. It was something far more insidious and dangerous. It called to her like a siren song. It beckoned. It summoned.

"I need to lose myself in you, Tessa," he said huskily.

Tessa felt her heart miss a beat, a shiver go down her spine. She stared into the sad green depths of his long-lashed eyes and couldn't look away. It was as though he were holding her with the sheer force of his personality.

"Will you let me?" he whispered. Once more he pressed a fleeting kiss to her mouth. His breath was warm and sweet against her chin.

"Of course," she said on a long sigh.

His full lips twisted slightly. "Sure you will. Screwing men is what you do, isn't it?"

For some reason that hurt although it was the simple, unadorned truth. She'd never been sensitive about her profession before, never embarrassed by it. Why she suddenly should now made no sense.

"It's my job," she defended, lifting her chin. "It's how I make my living, Captain."

He reached for her hand, placed it on his hardening cock, molded her fingers around it.

"Then show me how good you are at that job, Tessa," he said. "Make me forget everything but your body." His voice was gruff though not as disdainful as the fleeting look that had passed quickly over his face.

She wanted nothing more than to feel this glorious hero slide his flesh against hers, stretch out atop her, his heavy body pressing her into the mattress. She wanted to know the heat of him, the scent of him and the feel of him inside her.

"I am not a whore, Captain," she stated, looking him in the eye. "I am a courtesan."

He said nothing for a long moment then he released her hand, reaching up to shove his hands under his head.

"Call yourself whatever makes you comfortable, lady. All I want is a moment's respite from the grief that's eating me alive."

Over the years she'd been plying her trade aboard the pleasure ships, she'd had many a man ask for the very thing the captain sought. War weighed heavy upon most men. Their souls were violated, their bodies plundered. Most of those who came to her were damaged goods. Some were burdened by such deep guilt they were changed forever. A few were so far beyond redemption no amount of counseling would ever help. They'd seen too much, done too much, endured far too much to go back to being the innocent young men they had once been—if indeed they had been innocent to begin with.

The man lying beside her was no innocent. She doubted the word had ever applied to him. His skills were legendary, his powers vast. He commanded a vessel that flew first into the firefight and was the last to leave.

Yet there he was, looking at the world akin to a lost child—and in a way she supposed like all men caught up in the horrors of war that was precisely what he was. He didn't inspire pity in her heart, but he did inspire sympathy.

She sat up and tugged the chemise over her head, her breasts bouncing slightly as they settled against her chest. She watched his eyes widen just a fraction as he looked at her.

"No undies, huh?" he remarked, staring unabashedly at the perfectly manicured curls above the V of her legs.

"No," she said, and swung a leg over him, sitting down upon his slightly spread thighs. She reached up to pull the pins from hair then shook her head so the thick sable hair fell past her shoulders to fan across his legs.

"Makes things easier, I suppose," he commented. His gaze was wandering over the dusky nipples, the slender waist and the flare of her hips. He drew his hands from behind his head to run them along her silken thighs.

His touch was electric on her flesh and she slowly closed her eyes to savor the feel.

"So soft," he complimented. His palms slid along the inner planes of her thigh, the tips of his middle fingers just grazing the crease at the juncture of her legs.

Her eyes popped open, her gaze went to his. There was smoldering fire in the green orbs. She sucked in a breath as he turned his right hand to insinuate its palm between her body and his, rubbing her folds gently.

Once. Twice. Three times he stroked her then withdrew his hand.

"It's been a long time," he whispered. "All I've been touching in the last few years is cybot skin."

She could feel his erection—thick and rigid—pressing against the cleavage of her ass. Pushing up to her knees, she reached behind her to guide him into her, easing down carefully to impale her heat upon his stiff shaft.

"Ah." The single word was drawn out as she watched him close his eyes, take a deep breath. A slight shudder rippled through him then he opened his eyes, brought his arms up to enclose her within them then rolled over with her.

She straightened her legs then looped them around his waist as he hovered above her.

"You've no idea how sweet the feel of a real woman's flesh around you can be," he told her in a low, gravelly voice. He thrust slowly into her, holding her gaze. "Especially when you haven't known that pleasure for a while."

She tightened her hold on his waist. "Take me however you want, Captain."

"Ryn," he corrected her again.

A gentle smile stretched her lips. "Ryn." His almost lazy thrusts were doing delectable things to her—things she hadn't felt in many years.

He braced himself on his palms as he twisted his lower body just a little with each slow, measured thrust. Instinctively she realized he was trying to prolong the ecstasy to come. She could see sweat on his upper lip, knew he was concentrating to keep the release at bay for as long as he could. She watched the pulse point at the hollow of his throat thundering away, could almost feel the pounding of blood rushing through his cock.

"Tessa Gervasee," he said. "That is an *an Iodáilian* name, isn't it?"

Her smile became a careless grin. She was amused at his attempt to keep his climax at arm's length. "It is."

"How did you wind up on Seabhac?"

A single drop of his sweat fell from the corner of his mouth, down his chin and onto her chest. Where it touched her, it burned like the soft glow of a candle.

"My father came from *an Iodáil*," she answered. "He was with the Roma Troopers."

"Ah," he said and smiled for the first time. "One of the conquering hoard."

Tessa was mesmerized by that smile. It crooked the left side of his mouth higher than the right, lit his green eyes and wrinkled his nose. It was an endearing sight that melted the ice that had encased her heart for as long as she could remember.

"That is a devastating smile," she heard herself say, and thought her entire body would liquefy to seep through the mattress when he cocked his left eyebrow.

"You think so?" he queried, his nose wrinkling again.

"I know so," she replied breathlessly just a fraction of a moment before he lowered his head to claim her lips.

If his first kiss had pleased her, this one did things to her soul no man should ever be allowed to do. It wreaked havoc with her senses, tore through her like a speeding asteroid and burned all the way to her painted toenails. She clamped her arms around him, pulled him to her with every ounce of strength she had.

Perhaps that had been the wrong thing to do to him since he was striving to keep from coming because he shoved his hands under her rump, hefted her to him with a powerful lift that stunned her. His hips began to piston like a runaway steam engine. He ground against her, pivoted his hips, swirled them, rotated them—all the while slamming into her with such force he grunted with each forward thrust. His grunts were lost within the sweet heat of her mouth as his tongue danced with hers. He was like a man possessed, grinding into her with fierce abandon.

Not that she minded, Tessa thought. He was filling her, driving against her womb with every furious pump. The slight pain was exquisitely erotic—demanding, staking claim. He had taken complete control of her, pushing her closer and closer to something she both feared and for which she ached. No man had ever come close to rocking her world off its axis. She'd had many orgasms that were very intense, but instinct told her this one was going to blow all the others out of the water for her.

She clung to him as he ground savagely against her. His cock was ramming into her with such force she was fairly sure she'd be sore come the morrow, but she didn't care. Her fingernails dug into the scars on his back. Her heel drummed against the groove of his ass. She gave back as good as she was receiving with the kiss. At the moment the first ripple of her orgasm took her, she squealed deep in her throat.

Undulation after undulation of absolute bliss washed over her so powerfully she saw stars behind her tightly closed eyes. She could feel the blood pounding in her head, in her cunt—throughout her entire body. The hard little squeezes took her far beyond anything she'd ever felt and left her there basking in the sweetness.

When he came, he came hard—so brutally strong her head hit the headboard. With his head flung back—the cords of his neck standing out—he stopped gasping and went still as he poured into her. His hips twitched once more then he collapsed atop her, tearing his mouth from hers.

He gasped then with a suddenness that shocked her, gut-wrenching sobs poured out of him. He shook from the depths of his anguish and she cradled him to her, smoothing her hand over his back.

"Let it out, warrior," she whispered to him as she felt his hot tears scalding down the side of her neck. "Let it out."

He cried until there was nothing left except shivers, and when it was over, he rolled off her to lie staring up at the ceiling. For a long time neither spoke then he scrubbed a hand over his face. He said, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I haven't cried since I was three years old."

She turned her face toward him. "Maybe you needed to."

He shook his head. "Scythelords don't cry."

She laid her hand on his chest, rubbed him soothingly. "Perhaps they should," she said softly.

"No. Crying is a sign of weakness."

"Crying is a sign that something has touched our souls so deeply we need to deal with whatever caused it," she told him.

"Aye, well, I've dealt with it now," he declared.

He reached up to cover her hand with his, pressing her palm to his flesh. He held it there. She could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath her fingers.

"My head's spinning," he said, closing his eyes.

She knew he had dismissed the issue of his breakdown.

"If I'd consumed even one-fourth of what you drank, I'd be comatose," she said.

"If you'd consumed even one ounce of what I drank, you'd most likely be dead," he countered.

She laughed quietly. "That's true. My race gives new meaning to alcohol poisoning."

She didn't think he was aware he was caressing her fingers. His breathing grew deeper, slower and the caressing stopped. From the even cadence of the rise and fall of his chest, she knew he had slipped into sleep once more. Very gently she eased her hand from under his. As quietly as possible, she left the bed, going into the bathroom to clean the sticky residue of his cum from her thighs.

Chapter Two

Ryn turned over, shoved his hand under the pillow and sighed. His head was splitting, his eyes felt grainy as he wedged them open, his tongue felt swollen, his mouth tasted like something had relieved itself in there, and his stomach was protesting the fact he'd had nothing to eat for over a day.

He groaned and turned over again.

He sniffed, his eyes coming all the way open. The scent was one he recognized. He lay there for a moment with his brow furrowed until the events of the night finally came back to him. He'd had sex with someone—he knew gods-be-damned well it had been a female—but her face and name eluded him.

He struggled to sit up. Nausea was bubbling in his throat. The headache from hell was pounding between his temples. A sour taste invaded his mouth and that was all the impetus he needed to swing his legs from the bed. He barely made it into the bathroom before the ravages of the Chalean whiskey left him in a rush.

How long he sat slumped beside the stainless steel receptacle he had no idea. Vaguely he heard someone moving around in the living area, presumed it was the female with whom he'd engaged in intimacy, but he didn't call out. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to see him puking his guts up. When he was finally able to get unsteadily to his feet, he relieved himself then went to stand at the sink, staring at bloodshot eyes, a pale face and hair that looked as though it had gone through a wind tunnel.

"Well, now ain't you a real prize, Rede?" he asked his reflection sourly.

Pushing his hands under the no-touch sensor faucet, he scooped water in his palms then splashed his face several times, knowing he needed a bath but incapable of performing that intricate task at the moment. Somewhat refreshed, he plodded into the living area to face the nameless woman, but the room was empty. Instead, he saw his freshly laundered uniform lying across the back of the couch. A vivid memory of a woman's hands removing his clothing came to him but he couldn't recall a face that went with those hands.

"Maybe she was a fembot," he thought then shuddered with distaste. He and his crew used the faceless, sexless receptacles provided for warriors unable to get to the pleasure ships, but he'd always hated the impersonal feel of the things. No, the woman he couldn't get out of his mind had real flesh, real hair, she was—

Full memory came up to slap him between his aching eyes.

"Shite! I'm on one of the flying whorehouses," he mumbled. "It was one of the whores I fucked."

But that didn't seem right, he thought as he stumbled over to the sofa and plopped down. He leaned forward with his elbows on his spread knees to plow both hands through his tousled hair. Searching the floor as though he could find the answers there, he tried to recall the woman's face, name—anything—but all he could do was draw a blank.

Leaning back, he reclined there with his arms hanging limply at his sides. He felt drained, totally sapped of energy. His stomach was rumbling loudly and the headache was growing worse. He knew he needed something in his belly. He had to get rid of the bitching headache.

"Computer," he ordered.

The vid-com came on with a very pleasant little chime.

"Good morning, Captain. How may I be of service?"

"Food and something for this headache from hell," he replied.

"Right away, Sir. Anything else, Sir?"

"Who was she?" he asked.

"Beg pardon?"

"The woman with me last evening. Who was she?"

"That would have been Tessa, Sir," the vid-com replied.

"Where is she now?"

There was a moment of silence then, "She is in her quarters sleeping, Sir."

For some reason that pleased him and he almost smiled.

"I want to book her for the day."

"Oh I'm sorry, Captain, but she is booked through the end of the week. Perhaps another..."

That news did *not* please him.

"Then *unbook* her!" he snapped.

"Sir, I don't believe that would be possible. We have many lovely..."

"Don't piss me off! The way I feel right now, you really don't want to piss me off, you piece of terminal wiring. I'll reach in there and pull your gods-be-damned wiring out! I want *her*!" he thundered. "Vid-com off!"

The screen went black.

Yelling had done nothing to help the brutal headache. He put his hands to his head and groaned.

Why her? he wondered. Hell, he couldn't even remember what she looked like. Why did he want her in particular? Wouldn't any hot, wet cunt do for what he needed?

Flopping over on his side, bringing his bare legs up, groaning at the agony rippling between his ears, he thought that one over.

No, not just any female would do. He wanted the one he'd had the night before. Once more the memory of her hands roaming down him as she removed his clothing came back to torment him.

He didn't know why that was—didn't have a clue. He'd never given any other woman a passing thought. All he knew was that it was important he have what's-her-name.

"Tessa," he said aloud. He said it again, and with it again came a memory of gentle hands, a tender smile, a soft voice—all the things a woman should possess.

The vid-com came on. He opened his eyes to stare into the face of an unsmiling man he was pretty sure was the captain of the flying brothel.

"Good morning, Captain Rede," the man said. "My compliments, Sir. I am Captain Dahl of the NAS *Chinook*."

Ryn held his hand up to forestall any argument. "I want her. Don't tell me I can't have her. I don't want to hear that."

"You can but not today, Sir," Captain Dahl said firmly. "Today, she is to be the companion of a very important man."

"Yeah, and just who the hell is that?" Ryn demanded.

"The Burgon."

That news took the starch out of Ryn's sails. He blinked. "The Burgon is here? Which Burgon?"

"As far as I am concerned, there is only one—Emperor Ryden Bakari. His excellency will be arriving at 1100 hours. When he visits us, Miss Gervasee is the escort with whom he prefers to keep company. The only escort, Sir." Captain Dahl spread his hands. "You see why I can not allow you access to her today. When the Burgon leaves tomorrow, there won't be a problem."

"Aye," Ryn muttered. Though disappointed, there was no way he could compete with the most powerful man in the megaverse. Whatever the Burgon wanted, he always got.

"Then shall I book Miss Gervasee for you for tomorrow?"

"For every day I'm onboard," Ryn surprised himself by saying.

"Aye Sir," Captain Dahl acknowledged. Relief seemed to wash over his face. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Ryn didn't need to think about it. "Do you know how I got onboard?"

Captain Dahl's lips twitched. "I believe you walked onboard, Sir, of your own accord."

He was afraid of that. "Does anyone know where the hell I am? And by the way, where the hell am I?"

"The admiral knows where you are, Sir. Your stay with us is compliments of the Fleet. As to the actual physical location of the *Chinook*, we are orbiting Ennead at the moment, but we'll be heading out to the Iddimu Galaxy as soon as the Burgon departs."

Ryn nodded. "Would you patch me through to the Fleet Hospital?"

"Of course, Sir."

The vid-com changed instantly—as though the captain had been expecting that request—and the smiling visage of a young woman filled the screen.

"How may I help you, Captain?" she inquired, averting her eyes from his nakedness.

"I want to check on my crew," he told her.

Her smile wavered but still she kept her eyes elsewhere. "I am sorry to report two more of your men left us last evening, but the other seven are holding their own. A full recovery is expected for them."

The news made Ryn heartsick. "Who died?"

"Ensigns Watkins and Uhundi, Sir."

"Have their families been notified?"

"Ensign Uhundi was an orphan, Sir, but Ensign Watkins' father has been apprised of his passing."

"Have someone from the Bereavement Center get the addresses for the families of the dead men. I would like to contact their families personally."

"I will see to it, Sir. Do you want me to have them send the data to you in care of the *Chinook*?"

Ryn winced because the young woman knew where he was but he had no control over that. Everyone would know within a matter of hours that he was aboard the star-skipping cathouse.

"Aye, thank you."

"My honor, Sir," she said, glancing back at him. "And my condolences on your losses."

"Aye," he said. "Vid-com out."

For a long time he lay there thinking of the crewmembers he'd lost. They'd been good men, loyal men. They would be missed. He dreaded having to contact their families, but that was part and parcel of the oath he'd sworn as the captain of a Fleet vessel. It was only right and fitting that he extend his sympathies and any help he might be required to give to the surviving family members.

From there his thoughts went to the Burgon.

It had been two years since he'd seen the emperor of Aduaidh Prime and then only in passing. The Burgon had resigned his position temporarily as he hunted for the craven coward who had been responsible for the deaths of the Burgon's family. For three years now Ryden Bakari had been trailing Riordan O'Shay, but the bastard always

managed to stay one step ahead of the Burgon. While the search went on, so too did the war between the New Alliance and the New Coalition. There didn't seem to be an end in sight. Like the Border Wars before them, these new battles were proving to be costly in price and manpower. The death toll was rising daily.

Sitting up, he ran a weary hand over his unshaven face. He wanted to be there when the Burgon arrived on the *Chinook*. He owed the man more than just his appointment to the Fleet Academy and inclusion in the Order of Taibhse. He owed his life to Ryden Bakari. Getting to his feet, he headed for the bathroom as the door chime rang.

"Enter!" he called out, not bothering to turn around since he figured it would be the food he had requested. He ignored the gasp of shock as whoever brought in the tray got a good look at Ryn's naked backside.

Tempted to turn around to give the looker a full frontal view, for the gasp had been decidedly feminine, he nixed the notion to continue on into the bathroom, calling over his shoulder for the tray to be put on the table. He waited until the door closed then walked to the table, picked up the small glass of lavender-colored liquid that would erase his hangover, drank it then grabbed the plate of food, wolfing it down standing up. Finished, he drained the hot *an Tuirc* coffee—wincing at its potent bitterness—then went back into the bathroom. After shaving and brushing his teeth, he climbed into the shower.

The hot water felt good as he stood under it, glad the *Chinook* had the old-fashioned kind of showers instead of the sonic monstrosities that failed to refresh. What he'd really like was a big, deep tub to soak in.

As he lathered his arms and chest, he tried once again to bring up the image of the woman he'd lain with the evening before. Nothing came to mind. Not the color of her hair, her eyes, the shape of her body. It annoyed him for he'd never been known to forget even the smallest details of those he met. He prided himself on his recall, but for a reason that completely escaped him, he could not picture the woman at all.

Yet he could remember exactly how her hands upon him had felt. Her touch had given him peace, release and hope—things he hadn't felt in many a year.

Pushing aside thoughts of her with difficulty, he concentrated on the Burgon. In the years since his beloved Anastasia's death, perhaps the emperor had found pleasure in the arms of a skilled courtesan. He hoped that was the case. He refused to entertain any notion the most powerful man in the megaverse would "fuck and truck" as his crewmen called visiting the pleasure ships. Surely a man such as the Burgon would not have allowed himself to become enamored of a woman who plied her trade in a brothel—government sanctioned or not!

Waving a hand over the no-hands sensor to turn off the shower, he sluiced water from his arms and legs as he mulled over the Burgon's actions. The emperor was—first and foremost—a man. He had the same wants and needs and desires as any normal man.

But, Ryn thought as he stepped out of the shower, Ryden Bakari was no longer a normal man. He had willingly allowed himself to be turned into a Reaper—a nearly immortal killing machine—in order to find Riordan O'Shay, the man who had murdered the emperor's family. Reapers, he knew, were allowed only one mate in their lifetimes after the Transference. Had the Burgon found that woman here onboard the *Chinook*?

"No," Ryn stated, emphatically shaking his head. "He might be here to have his cock sucked, but he isn't here to fuck. If and when he finds a new empress, she won't be a whore!"

Satisfied with his assumptions, he finished drying and went out to the living room to retrieve his clean uniform. Slipping into the gunmetal gray shirt and pants of a Fleet officer, he found his boots and socks near the bed.

A vague memory of gentle hands removing the footwear made him pause as he drew on his sock. A heavy crease formed between his eyes. What *had* she looked like? he pondered. And why could he not remember? Surely he hadn't been *that* drunk.

"You were pretty drunk, lad," he mumbled to himself. The *an Tuirc* coffee hadn't set well on his weak stomach and he kept burping the acrid, oily brew. As he knew it would, the tenses mixture had sobered him, but he still had a residual headache. What that told him was he'd been more than pretty drunk. He'd been three sheets or more to the wind.

Realizing he didn't have a tie, he cursed. There was no way he could greet the Burgon in less than precise military dress. He hoped he could find a shop on the *Chinook* where he could purchase a gray leather tie. Looking in the full-length mirror, he was fairly content with the way he looked. He'd brushed his teeth again, his hair, shaved—he was as good as he was going to be.

Leaving the quarters, he stood outside the door for a moment as another memory assailed him.

"Do you need help, lass?"

"No thank you, Captain Bartlett," she'd answered. "I can manage."

"You're sure? He looks to be a handful."

"I don't think he'd like anyone to know he's a bit under the weather."

"Aye, I imagine not," Bartlett said.

"I'll take good care of him, Sir," she'd vowed.

And she had, he thought. Of that he was sure. But what the demon had she looked like?

He had a fleeting impression of long dark hair and extraordinary eyes, but no matter how hard he concentrated, he could not bring her features into play.

"You are slipping, Rede," he accused.

Taking the elevator down to the main deck, he found a shop where he was able to purchase a tie. It wasn't quite the right shade of gray, but it would have to do. Allowing

the shop girl to tie it for him had been a pleasant experience. She smelled of some exotic perfume that made his cock leap and the saucy look she'd given him made it clear she was available for something other than the selling of ties.

"Do you know Tessa?" he surprised himself by asking.

The girl smiled. "Everyone knows Tessa, Captain."

Instead of pleasing him, that annoyed him, though he couldn't exactly say why. He felt a momentary pang of jealousy, which also surprised him. As he walked out of the shop with a heavy scowl tugging at his features, passersby moved cautiously out of his way, though he was unaware of their reluctance to greet or come into contact with him.

"Do you know when the Burgon's vessel is scheduled to dock?" he asked the DC, who was standing at the concierge desk.

"He's ahead of schedule, Captain, and should be arriving any moment now," the woman replied.

"Where's the docking station?"

"Deck One-Aft, Sir."

He nodded, pushed away from the desk and headed back to the elevator. Around him he saw men walking with their arms around beautiful women—laughing, talking, flirting. It depressed the hell out of him, and that irritated him too. Why should he be aggravated by the sight of deserving men getting a bit of a respite from the ravages of war? The men needed such pleasures.

"*So do you,*" an inner voice that sounded suspiciously like Kirkby's whispered to him.

"Leave me be, Kirk," he mumbled, and was rewarded by ghostly laughter that made him grind his teeth.

He saw her out of the corner of his eye and turned to look her way. It wasn't the luscious shape that had been poured into the soft lavender silk gown that swept from neck to toe but the long sable hair that shone like a raven's wing. Hanging loose, parted down the middle, it glistened as it swung to her worlds-class ass in undulating waves. Two thin braids—the tresses intertwined with crystal lavender beads—had been pulled back from the side of the woman's face and joined at the nape of her neck to keep the hair from her eyes.

And, by the gods, those eyes!

They flicked his way—held for a moment—then leapt away again, but the se color caught his attention as completely as did her curvaceous body. He stopped dead still in his tracks as he watched her continue on down the corridor, the long black cape of her hair swinging seductively, rippling with blue-black light.

"Sweet Merciful Alel," he whispered. His heart was thudding like a jackhammer in his chest and he could actually feel the blood rushing through his veins. He felt as though someone had poleaxed him.

"When you meet the one," he remembered the Burgon saying, "the one, Rynlyn, you'll know. She'll come at your very soul like a marauder and there will be no escaping her hold over you."

Was that her? he asked himself. Was that the woman who had come to his bed the evening before to release him from his self-enforced celibacy? Had it been her slender arms that held him? Whose long legs had wrapped around him? Whose sweet cunt had drained his seed?

By the gods he hoped so! He might have been too drunk to appreciate her beauty the evening before, but if she was the one—and in his soul he knew she was—this morning that beauty had hit him squarely between the eyes.

Mentally shaking himself, he hurried on, walking fast to catch up to her. He lost sight of her among the throng of people in the corridor and hissed, rudely pushing a couple of ensigns out of his way as he rushed forward, winding his way through the crush. The hem of her gown flashed just ahead—calming his ragged breath and pounding heart.

"Tessa?" he called out.

She swung her head around, smiled. Her teeth were perfectly straight and white, her lips a beautiful shade of coral made for kissing. "Aye, Captain Rede?" she queried.

It *was* her! he thought as he increased his speed, bumping into a couple of more men who weren't fast enough to move out of his way. As he reached her, he felt his soul expand for she was a good foot shorter than him, looking up at him with a gentle, heavenly gaze.

"You left early this morn," he said, wanting to kick himself as the words sounded petulant and stupid.

"I told you I would stay 'til morning," she said softly. "I needed to sleep."

He ached to reach out, touch her, take her into his arms. Instead, he folded his arms defensively across his chest to keep from grabbing her.

"You didn't sleep when you were lying beside me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I never sleep when I am with a client."

Being put into that category did nothing for his ego. Truth be told, he thought, the description hurt like hell. He wanted to be much more than a customer to her. He had the wild notion he wanted to be everything to her.

"Was there something you wanted, Captain?" she inquired.

"I hear you'll be spending the day with the Burgon."

She nodded politely. "He and I are old friends," she replied.

"I know him," he said, and winced. What a perfectly idiotic statement to make, he thought. Everybody knew the Burgon.

"I'm sure you do," she agreed. "Are you on your way to greet him?"

He nodded, unable to answer for his eyes were locked on her velvety-looking lips. His own tingled with wanting to taste them, to know what they were like when he was completely sober – if more than a little hung-over. His hands itched to reach out to drag her to him for his body was one throbbing pulse of heated need.

“Then let’s greet him together,” she said, looping her arm through his. She leaned against him slightly. “Shall we?”

“Aye,” he sighed, and put a hand over hers where it gripped his arm. He glanced sideways at her. “I reserved your time for tomorrow.”

“And for every day you’re here, I understand,” she said, amusement lining her sultry voice.

“Do you have a problem with that?” he demanded, although it wouldn’t have mattered to him if she had.

Well, he thought, it would but it wouldn’t!

“No, Captain. I look forward to it.”

A shiver of anticipation rippled through him. He was unaware he straightened his shoulders, walked a bit taller, a bit more rakishly as they moved down the corridor.

“You are feeling better this morning?” she asked.

“I do now,” he admitted. He was unconsciously caressing her hand.

“You surprised me last evening.”

He looked down at her. “In what way?”

Her smile was playful. “Any other warrior who had consumed as much Chalean whiskey as you did would not have been able to perform his manly duties.” She arched a brow. “But you did so with devastating results.”

He scowled. “Did I hurt you?”

“You destroyed me altogether,” she replied, “but in a very pleasurable way, Captain.”

“Ryn.”

“Ryn,” she said, and his name on her tongue made him feel ten feet tall.

“I did, huh?” He grinned. “Destroyed you?”

“You did,” she acknowledged.

They had reached the docking bays. The giant airlock was peeling back as a ship awaited entry.

“The last time I saw him, he had just purchased a new Fiach X-9 straight off the assembly line,” he told her.

“Why am I not surprised? He has always liked speedy gadgets,” she said with a laugh.

“You know how his family died.”

Her laughter ended. “Aye, I do.”

"It surprised me that he bought something made by Tappas Industries, but when I questioned him about it, he said he wanted only the best and the Fiach had no equal. The money he gave TI went to charity—at his urging—and not into any coffer the contents from which might eventually find its way to O'Shay's pockets."

"Didn't the New Alliance confiscate the company?" she inquired.

"Aye, it did, but O'Shay still has allies there. He's getting financing from somewhere to keep running from the Burgon. That money has to be coming from the company he once owned."

Tessa allowed that was most likely the case.

"There she is," he said, awe in his voice. "Ain't she a beauty?"

The runabout was a marvel of engineering as it drifted through the docking station iris. A sharply pointed nose was graced with one single dark window that swept back along the titanium hull to midway the ship. Black matte paint on the x-wing vessel had only one symbol breaking the ebon plain—a red scythe gripped by skeletal fingers.

"The Reaper Insignia," Ryn explained. "The Burgon had it commissioned and I understand it is being used on the crafts of Prince Gabriel Leveche, Prince Cair Ghrian and Duke Ailyn Harmattan as well as their lady-wives."

"Very striking," she said with a slight shudder, "if rather macabre."

"One thing's for sure. If you see that emblem, you won't mess with the man or woman flying the ship if you know what's good for you."

Tessa laughed. "No, I would think not."

They watched the sleek vessel settle quietly and effortlessly into the docking sling, and though they could not see through the dark gray opaque windows into the ship, both knew the pilot was watching them.

"You feel it, don't you?" Ryn asked. "His perusal."

She nodded.

"That is true power," he stated.

She looked up at him. "Do you wish you had such power?"

"By the gods, no!" he said, eyebrows shooting up. "I wouldn't last a week as the Burgon!"

All around them people were stopping what they were doing for word had spread like wildfire that the famed emperor of Aduaidh Prime had arrived on the *Chinook*. Complete silence fell as the hatch of the Fiach lifted. Those gathered began to drop to one knee out of respect, the rustling of clothes the only sound in the cavernous room that was bare of any other vessels. Ryn helped Tessa ease to the floor then followed her, his head lowered, his right fist doubled over his heart as a sign of fealty to the great man.

The Burgon stepped off his runabout, said a few words to the dockmaster, who had come to greet him, then slapped the man on the back. He came along the corrugated

catwalk at a leisurely pace, speaking to those he recognized, nodding to those he did not. When he came within a few feet of Ryn and Tessa, he laughed.

"Well now. Look what the weretiger dragged in!" he joked. "I never expected to see you here, little warrior boy."

Ryn looked up. "It's good to see you too, your excellency."

Ryden Bakari snorted. "Aye, I just bet it is." He held his arms open wide as Ryn helped Tessa to her feet. "Come here, wench, and give me a proper welcome!"

Tessa went into his arms without hesitation, lifting her face for him to place a solid kiss on her mouth. When his lips went to her ear, she grinned when he whispered something only she heard then gasped as he swatted her playfully on the rump.

The Burgon thrust out his hand to Ryn. "All kidding aside, Ryn. It's good to see you."

The two men shook hands warrior fashion—wrist clasping wrist—then Ryden drew the younger man into a hearty embrace.

"My deepest regrets on the loss of your XO. Kirk was a good man," he said, patting Ryn firmly on the back.

"Thank you, your excellency," Ryn said. "He will be sorely missed."

"Aye, I know he will." He draped a comradely arm over Ryn's shoulder. "But tell me—have you entered the final stages of the old-timers' disease?"

"Pardon?" Ryn asked, brows furrowed.

The Burgon drew his arm over to pinion Ryn's neck, putting their heads close together. "As I recall the last time you and I were together, I gave you my express permission to call me Ry." He squeezed Ryn's neck roughly. "Did I not do that, young Rynlyn?"

"Aye, Ry, you did," Ryn acknowledged, a blush darkening his face.

"Then pray don't forget again. For now, I'm not the Burgon, remember?" One more playful squeeze and he returned his arm to Ryn's shoulder then held a hand out to Tessa. "Come, wench. I've a thirst you wouldn't believe!"

Together, the three of them walked out of the docking station and took the corridor that led to the elevator that would take them to the concierge deck.

"So how long are you going to be goofing off, young Ryn?" the Burgon inquired.

"I thought a week should recharge my batteries," Ryn answered.

"Not if you keep Tessa in your bed every night it won't!" He swung her arm like a schoolboy. "But she's all mine tonight, aren't you, dearling?"

"I am," Tessa replied.

"Shall we allow the squirt to join us for lunch?"

Tessa leaned forward to look past the Burgon to Ryn. "Only if he promises not to drink as much as he did last eve."

"Oh ho!" the Burgon chuckled. "And just how much was that?"

"He was on his second bottle of Chalean whiskey by the time it was necessary for him to go to his quarters."

Ryn winced. "Second bottle? No wonder I felt like I'd been kicked by a Diabolusian mule."

"If I drank that much, I'd sleep for a gods-be-damned week!" the Burgon declared with a shake of his handsome head. He lifted his free hand to scratch the brutal scar that ran at an angle from his right temple to the corner of his mouth. "Hell, I might even be asleep for two weeks! Reapers, I've discovered, don't hold their liquor well."

They went into the elevator, the only passengers, and Tessa reached out to push the button for the dining room.

"I think I must have the quarters they reserve for dignitaries like you," Ryn said. "If you want me to move..."

"I'll sleep elsewhere tonight," the Burgon said, turning his eyes to Tessa.

Anger, hurt, jealousy all combined to turn Ryn's face hard but he kept his mouth shut even though he wanted to lash out at the Burgon.

"I sleep with her, aye," Ryden Bakari said, "but that's all we do, Rynlyn. I have never entered this lovely woman's body and never have any intention of doing so."

"Besides, if he did, I know a certain lady on Riezell who would make it her life's work to hunt me down to cut my throat," Tessa said.

"She's not quite that bloodthirsty," the Burgon said. "Yet."

Ryn looked at the Burgon. "You've found a mate?"

"I've had a mate for a long time now, young warrior," was the answer. "I just can't claim her until my business with O'Shay is completed."

"Not can't, dearling, but won't," Tessa clarified.

"Same thing," the Burgon stated.

"Do I know her?" Ryn inquired.

The Burgon's lips twitched. He squeezed Tessa's hand as though warning her not to name names. "I would venture to say you do."

Thoughts of the only woman it could be crossed Ryn's mind. If it was who he thought it was she would make him a good mate. "Then congratulations are in order," he said.

"Congratulate me when the deed is accomplished," the Burgon suggested.

The elevator doors opened to soft music being played by a string quartet. A hushed atmosphere of clinking china and crystal, the soft murmur of voices washed over them as the maitre d' hurried forward to show the Burgon to a table.

"Welcome, your excellency! I hope you had a pleasant trip!" the little man gushed.

"Hit an asteroid belt, got rocked by a solar flare, but aye, it was a nice enough trip, Leaneau."

The people at the tables stood, bowing respectfully to the Burgon.

"Sit!" he ordered. "Your food is getting cold!"

Escorting the trio to a table set apart from the others beside a large expanse of window that showed the passing stars glittering on a black velvet backdrop, the maitre d' left them in the very capable hands of a pretty wine stewardess with startling turquoise eyes. She took their drink orders then motioned for the server, a diminutive Chrystallusian woman with a broad smile.

Lunch ordered, the Burgon leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

"So, Rynlyn. Tell me about the attack on your ship. Do you know what NC ship was responsible?"

As Ryn and the Burgon carried on a somewhat boring conversation about the attack, Tessa quietly studied both men. She looked from one handsome chiseled face to the other. Though the emperor wore his salt-and-pepper hair in a ponytail at the nape of his neck, it had the same curl to it as did Ryn's—which was worn cut short in military fashion. Though once his eyes had been a vivid blue, now Ryden Bakari's eyes were Reaper-turned—dark brown with amber striations running through the irises. Rynlyn's were a striking green shade but they had the same shape, the same long lashes and the same directness as the Burgon's. Beautiful eyes on both men, she thought with an inward sigh.

Each man's nose had a slight hook at the end and both had deep clefts in their chins. Their faces were rather longish. Such slight imperfections gave manly credence to what would otherwise be beautiful faces. While Ryden was in his late forties, early fifties, she knew Rynlyn had only recently turned thirty, but both were stunning representations of their generations. They made very handsome bookends sitting to either side of her and she was hard-pressed to tell which of them attracted her more.

"Be careful around her, Ryn," she heard the Burgon say, and realized both men were looking at her.

"Why is that?" Ryn asked.

"She's fae," the emperor told him. "She knows things."

"Things she doesn't tell," Tessa put in.

"Things I wish she would," the older man insisted.

"No, you don't," she said softly.

"Perhaps not," he agreed with a heavy sigh.

"Has there been any news of O'Shay?" Ryn asked, and once more the men began discussing a subject in which Tessa was not interested. She went back to studying her dining partners, making note of mannerisms she found endearing.

The Burgon often reached up to finger the dense scar on his face. Rynlyn had a habit of playing with the gold hoop—similar to the one worn by the Burgon—in his left ear. Both men snorted when they were amused and both found it impossible not to

speak without making emphasis with their eyebrows. Each had a tendency to wrinkle his nose when he found something funny or irritating, arch a brow when questioning.

Then there were the moles.

Three of them, to be precise, and each in the same place on both faces—one about two inches to the right side of their mouth and two to the left side with one of those moles about two inches below the other.

As each of them turned to smile at her with sensual full bow-shaped lips, Tessa felt a ghostly finger curl down her spine and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Their smiles were identical—the left side of their mouths crooking higher than the right, both showing white, straight teeth, the rakish smiles lighting their faces with boyish charm.

She wondered if either man knew he was related to the other—as close as two men could be related without being brothers. She didn't believe Ryn knew, but what of the Burgon? Did he have any idea the man sitting across from him was his son?

"A copper for your thoughts, pretty one?" Ryden Bakari said.

Tessa shook herself. At some point they had all finished their meal, but she couldn't remember a single bite of the sandwich she'd eaten.

"My thoughts are worth at least a silver quoon," she responded with a gaiety she did not feel. She searched his eyes and decided he did not know of his connection to a young man about whom he felt so highly.

"While you were gathering your silver quoons in whatever mystical realm through which you were skipping," the emperor said with a grin, "I asked young Rynlyn if he would keep you company while I saw to a few business matters." He reached out to take her hand in his to bring it to his lips. "If that's all right with you."

She arched a brow. "Are you playing matchmaker, Ryden?"

"Trying to," he said, kissing her hand again then releasing it. "The gods know the boy needs a little of what you have in abundance."

"Which is?" she countered.

"Compassion and understanding."

"I would be grateful for your companionship, milady," Ryn said. "Otherwise, I'll just sit about pouting for the remainder of the day."

"And I really need to take care of a few things before settling down to enjoy your company," the Burgon said.

"You work too hard," Tessa accused.

"The sooner I find that bastard O'Shay and rid the megaverse of his slimy evil, the sooner I can get on with my life with Mir..." He caught himself in time, his handsome face turning a dull red. He flung out a dismissive hand. "You know."

Ryn took up his linen napkin more to hide his smile than to wipe his mouth. He blotted his lips then folded the square neatly to lay it beside his plate. His smile slipped a notch when the Burgon asked Tessa to accompany Ryn back to his quarters and make him sweat.

"Beg pardon?" Ryn said, two deep creases forming above his nose.

"I told her to screw your brains out, son," the emperor said, getting to his feet. "Now be a good little warrior and do as your Burgon commands. I give you leave to spread your seed."

Tessa arched her cheek toward the older man as he leaned down to give her a light kiss. She said nothing as he walked away—only turned her inquisitive gaze to Ryn.

"You don't have to do what he suggested," Ryn said uncomfortably.

"It wasn't a suggestion, Ryn," she said. "It was, indeed, a command."

"Aye, well, nevertheless, if you don't want to..."

"But I do," she said, scooting her chair back, giving him no choice but to hop up to hold it for her to rise. She turned her head to look him in the eye. "I very much want to gather that seed."

A stab of hot desire drove straight through Ryn—robbing him of the ability to speak. All he could do was quiver. The thought of taking this lovely vision to bed did things to his body he hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Pushing her chair up to the table, he offered her his arm in a courtly manner and when she took it, he couldn't help feeling a certain amount of pride that the most beautiful, most sought-after courtesan on the ship was his to enjoy.

"Smugness does not become you, warrior," she said in a quiet voice.

He grinned.

It was all he could do not to ravage her in the elevator despite the fact they weren't alone in the cage. Two warriors had moved aside as they entered but both were staring hotly at Tessa.

"She's mine," he declared then reinforced his claim. "All week."

"You're a lucky man, Captain," the braver of the two warriors complimented.

"Luck had nothing to do with it, Sir," Tessa said, leaning against Ryn. "It was his skill as a lover." She looked up at him, batting her long lashes. "It rivals his skill as a warrior."

Ryn's ego inflated dangerously at such a statement and his cock leapt, thickening so quickly he was forced to push his clasped hands down to hide the evidence of his arousal.

Tessa smiled knowingly, her lips pursed to refrain from laughing. It was a good thing the elevator stopped on Ryn's floor before the two young warriors exited the cage. Had that not been the case, she might well have found herself with her skirts hiked up and her bare bottom pressed to the elevator floor as he drove into her—audience be damned.

"You are wicked," he said as he dragged her out of the elevator and toward his door.

"Are you complaining or bragging, warrior?" she countered.

He stopped, jerked her to him then pushed her against the wall, slanting his mouth over hers in one primal moment of sheer lust. He pressed between her legs, felt her hook a calf over his as he deepened the kiss. Her hands were caught between them—digging into the fabric of his uniform shirt. He reached down to tug up her skirt.

"Inside," she mumbled against his invading mouth.

"That's where I'm trying to be," he said, twisting his face the other way to grind his mouth against hers.

"Bedroom," she said breathlessly.

"Aye," he said, his face going the other way again, his tongue invading.

Tessa pulled her mouth from his. "Now, warrior. I'll not be taken in the hall like a common whore!"

Frustration nipped at him but he released her, slapping his hand to the ID panel, barely waiting for the door to slide back before he dragged her through the opening, swooping her up in his arms to carry her into the bedroom.

"Door close!" he called out.

The lights in the bedroom came on too harsh and he hissed, barking out an order as though speaking to a recalcitrant crewman.

"Lower lights!"

He swung her onto the bed, following her down to roll with her so she was atop him, straddling his legs.

"How fond are you of this gown?" he growled low in his throat.

"It's just a gown," she said, running her tongue over her lips.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

He snagged his hands in the high neckline and ripped out and downward, rending the garment. The material tore easily, exposing her lush breasts to his view as he pushed the torn bodice over her slender shoulders, off her arms. He sat up, lowering his head to the offering of her soft flesh, drawing her to him in a savage embrace.

Tessa threw her head back as his mouth closed over her nipple and his teeth clamped firmly on the hardening little bud. She raked her hands through his thick dark hair to hold his head to her while he suckled. His tongue was sending shivers down her spine, causing her womb to clinch. Such things never happened to her while in the business of pleasuring men. To have them happen with this warrior scared her to the depths of her soul.

"Ah, Rynlyn," she whispered. "What are you doing to me?"

He released her nipple and looked up at her. His endearing smile was so boyish, so filled with abandon, it made her heart ache.

"Anything you want me to, *a chuisle mo chróí*," he replied.

"What does that mean?" she inquired, smoothing the hair back from his high forehead.

"My darling treasure in Chalean High Speech," he told her.

Staring down into his face, she felt something break loose inside her. She knew what it was—it was the block of ice that had encased her heart and it was melting.

"You are going to hurt me badly, Rynlyn Rede," she said, tears prickling her eyes.

His forehead creased. "Never," he swore.

She nodded sagely. "Aye, you will. I've no control over it. If I had any sense, I'd get up and leave you be, but I think it may already be too late for that."

His arms tightened around her. "Do you want to be rid of me?" he asked, holding his breath for her answer. "Do you want to leave?"

She considered the situation for so long he thought she was going to do as she said and leave him, but she slowly shook her head.

"No, warrior. I don't."

He took a deep breath, released it slowly. His hands were caressing her bare back.

"I am not an impetuous man so don't think I am. I've been considering this all morning. When I make up my mind about something, I act." He drew another breath and his words came out in a rush. "If I asked you to leave this ship with me, would you?" When she didn't answer, he pressed deeper. "Would you allow me to be your only man, your protector?"

She'd never considered such a thing. Each month she put almost all her money aside in a special fund that would see her through old age comfortably—a time when she could no longer entice men to her body. She would not be forced to rely on charity or the assistance of former lovers and friends. She would not put herself at the mercy of a man who would toss her aside for a newer model when the masculine whim struck. What Ryn was proposing was a matter of placing herself entirely into the hands of one man, one lover. To become the mistress of any man—no matter that he was as well-respected and honored as this one—had never been something she thought of doing. She wasn't sure she could do it.

"Or if that is not binding enough for you, will you consent to become my mate?" When she still didn't answer, he did the one thing he swore he'd never do. He asked her to become his legal wife.

Tessa's eyes flew wide. "You don't know what you're asking!"

"Aye, I do," he stated. "I never say anything I don't mean."

"But I'm...I'm..." She looked around her as though looking for an escape route. "I'm a..."

"Don't you say it!" he warned, his head tilted to one side. "Don't even think it!"

"I am a prostitute," she said. There, she thought. She'd said it. She'd gotten it out there, laid it bare for him to see. If he had forgotten, she wanted to remind him. She wasn't the kind of woman a warrior took home with him and he certainly didn't take her to wife.

His face took on an aggressive look she imagined instilled fear in his crew. His beautiful lips tightened. His eyes narrowed.

"That's how you see yourself?" he asked in a grating tone.

"That is what I am," she said. "I make my living pleasuring men. That makes me —"

"A courtesan," he stated.

"Call it what you will, I —"

"Just so you know," he interrupted. "It doesn't matter to me." A muscle tensed in his cheek. "I am a rich man. I can keep you as well as the Burgon could."

"Money doesn't matter," she said. "I have my own."

"Good, then you can keep me instead," he declared.

"Ryn —"

"Tessa, if you're willing, I'll be the last man whose bed you will lie in." He locked eyes with her. "Do you want that or not?"

She lifted her head. "You want me now, but if in a few days or weeks, a few months or years you realize you made a grave mistake in asking a woman like me to share your life with you, will you hold what I am against me?"

"Will you hold the fact I kill men for a living against me?"

"Of course not," she said. "You are a warrior. That is what men like you do."

"And you're a courtesan. You pleasure me. That is what women in your profession do."

"But, Rynlyn..." she said, wincing at the whine in her voice.

"I will never bring it up to you," he said. "Never. Not as long as I draw breath. Nor will I allow anyone else to. What you did here or on the *Foehn* or the *Samiel* stays here or on those ships when you leave. The gods help anyone who dares say one word against you!"

Her heart did a funny little flip as the rest of the ice melted away. She pressed him down upon the mattress, splaying her legs alongside his, staring down into his face.

"Just so you know," she said before placing a light kiss on the point of his chin. "You may have bitten off more than you can chew, warrior."

"Aye?" he questioned, that lopsided grin returning.

"I intend to wear your ass out every chance I get," she said. "I'll show you things, teach you things I've learned that will make you one very happy traveler. I intend to see you never look at another woman, much less want one."

"I'll lay odds I can teach you a trick or two," he said, right eyebrow arching.

A slow, tantalizing, taunting smile pulled at her sultry lips.

"Then show me, warrior. Let's see what you're made of when you aren't three sheets to the wind!"

A slow, wicked grin spread over Rynlyn Rede's perfect mouth. He slid his palms to her breasts, the thumbs grazing gently over the straining tips.

"First say aye to my proposal," he told her.

She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth, searching his eyes. "You're sure?"

"Aye, I'm sure."

"You won't regret it?"

"Never."

Once more she hesitated then exhaled slowly. "All right, Rynlyn Rede. I would be honored to become your bride."

"Aye?" he questioned, eyebrows lifting.

She covered his hands with her own. "Aye."

A whoop came from the warrior. His hands tightened on her breasts. "I'll see that you never regret it."

She leaned forward to kiss him. The kiss was slow, gentle, but filled with promise. Then she hiked her leg from over him and rose to her feet.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Wiggling out of the torn dress and the remains of the filmy chemise he'd also torn when he'd savaged the outer garment, she kicked the ruined articles of clothing aside.

"I am going to take a shower," she said as she started away, turning to give him a look that would have peeled the chrome off a door handle.

Ryn scrambled off the bed and ran after her as she squealed. He cornered her beside the shower, rubbed his body against her then stepped back to shuck out of his uniform. He jerked the knot of the tie downward then snapped it over his head. With a growl he unbuttoned his shirt.

"Don't you dare drop that shirt on the floor," she warned as he was about to do just that. "Give it here."

He had a woman to take care of him now, he thought, and tendered the shirt into her keeping. As he plopped down on the toilet to tug off his boots, he watched her fold the shirt and lay it aside. He stuffed his socks into the boots—flinching at the smell of them—then stood to unbuckle his belt. His fingers ran the buttons of his pants—laying the fly aside as he shoved them down his taut thighs. The moment the garment left his hips, his cock sprang up like a jack-in-the-box.

"Now that's what I like to see," Tessa said, holding her hand out for his pants.

"It's something *to* see," he said proudly, grinning broadly when she rolled her eyes at his bragging. He pressed her against the bathroom wall, insinuating his hard thigh between her legs. "And it's all yours."

Tessa felt again the instant desire that sprang up each time he touched her intimately. She could actually feel the rough hairs on his thigh abrading her vaginal lips

and that sent a shiver of anticipation racing through her. She looped her arms around his neck.

"You were not a particularly nice man last night," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I was a man angry at the entire world last night," he said. "But at least I had sense enough to recognize Grace when it was being extended toward me."

"Grace?" she asked.

He wiggled against her, laying his forehead to hers. "In the colony, one of the things they used to drum into us was the concept of Grace. As the Apostles defined it, Grace is the free and unmerited favor of the Great God. In order to have it offered to you, you must be found worthy of it."

"And you think I am that Grace?"

"I know you are," he said. "When I woke this morning, I couldn't remember what you looked like, but I could remember the feel of your hand. That has never happened to me before."

She lowered her hands to press her palms against his chest, smoothing them over the thatch of light brown hair growing there. She pushed him gently away.

"I want you to take me in the shower," she said. "I want to feel the water falling around us, on us, blessing us."

Ryn knew the people of her race revered water. On her homeworld of Seabhaic, Joinings were performed with the couples standing thigh-deep in a stream. Women gave birth to their children in tubs of warm water. During both the male and female initiation ceremonies marking their coming of age, the candidates took their vows signifying the beginning of religious responsibility in the sacred lake at Cullasovh. Water was to the Seabhachuan people what Alel was to the Chalean race. For her to want to consummate their union beneath the flow of water was telling and something he doubted she'd ever done before with another man.

He opened the curved shower door, fanned his hand across the sensor to begin the flow then swept her up his arms and carried her beneath the soft stream of the water. Easing her feet to the tile floor, he backed her against the wall beneath the shower head. Putting his hands to either side of her face, he tenderly brought her mouth to his. He plied his lips over hers—turning his head first one way then the other as he took her mouth, slipping his tongue gently between her lips. With his lower body resting along hers, one leg staking possession between her silken thighs, he deepened the kiss, reveling in the feel of her hands clutching his waist.

Tessa raised her right leg to hook it over his thigh, rubbing the instep of her foot along the calf of his left leg. Her arms snaked around him to hold him closer as he spread his kiss from her mouth to her cheek then her forehead. He cradled her head to his chest, smoothing the long wet strands.

"I have never known such peace, *lhiannan*," he told her. "I never thought I would."

The steady, stalwart beat of his heart was comforting beneath her ear. She closed her eyes to savor the feel of him, the calm he offered. Here was a mighty warrior whose reputation for being brutal and exacting in battle was belied by the gentle way in which he held her, the tender way his lips moved along her hair.

"Make me yours," she whispered. "Make me truly yours."

His hand moved downward to cup her between their bodies. He stroked her, loving the warm, wet feel of her womanly parts sliding along his palm. Carefully he inserted one finger into her heat, his cock swelling at the low moan of pleasure that escaped her lips, her warm breath fanning across his chest.

He probed deeper. Eased a second then a third finger inside her. Sliding his fingers in and out of her until they were slick with her juices, he pulled them out to suck the sweet fluid from his flesh. His eyes were on hers as he tasted her.

She moaned again, thrust her hands between them, circled his neck and pulled up so her legs were wrapped around his waist. Her channel was poised directly over his erection, making it easy for him to slide her down, to impale her on his thick shaft. He cupped her buttocks to support her, nibbling on the sensitive flesh between her neck and shoulder.

Slowly he rocked into her then with increasing speed. The water cascading over them spiked his long lashes with droplets so he was forced to keep his eyes partly closed. He lifted his head, slanted his mouth over hers, took the sweetness she offered and further increased the speed of his push.

She was straining against him, her arms tight around his neck. He could feel the inner muscles of her cunt squeezing him with each forward drive. She was sliding along his cock, her folds gripping him so sweetly. It was such a heavenly feel he never wanted it to end despite the force of his blood pounding in his veins, rushing through his ears.

"Come for me, baby," he whispered against her mouth. "Come for your man."

Chill bumps spread down Tessa's back at his words. She had never felt a part of the men whom she serviced. They had been a means to an end and nothing more. Though she had her favorites among her clientele, none had ever interested her enough to have second thoughts about them once they were gone. A few—like the Burgon—were friends who wanted nothing more from her but conversation and gentle arms to keep the hideous war at bay for a little while. Those men she gave fleeting thought to but still they had never claimed her heart. She had never expected one to come close to doing that. Yet the man in her arms, the man in her body, had swept away all the old notions she'd held so dear for so long. He had ingrained himself not only in her heart and mind but in her soul. She doubted she would ever be able to do without him now.

"*Gráim thú,*" she heard him whisper as the first flicker of pleasure began to build deep within her.

When it came full-blown the climax was even more intense than the first time he'd taken her. She thought the top of her head would burst so forceful, so strong was the

release. His came within seconds of hers. The rippling of her inner folds, the pulsing of his thick cock was so incredibly powerful she felt the shower stall spin around her.

"Great gods!" Ryn gasped as he pounded his flesh into hers until the last drop of cum seeped from his aching, burning rod. He shuddered hard, his hands under her rump digging into the soft flesh. His legs were shaking from the force of his ejaculation.

Tessa sagged in his arms, groaning when his depleted cock slid from her channel. She tightened her legs around him – unwilling to release him. Dimly she heard the vid-com chiming, but she hoped he didn't. She wasn't ready to give him up to the world quite yet.

"It's probably the Burgon," he said as though he'd read her mind.

"Let him wait," she said. "Let the whole galaxy, the entire megaverse wait."

"He'll come looking for us," he warned. His curly hair was plastered to his head, but to her he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. The wet hair only added to his sensual allure.

Reluctantly she unhooked her legs and slid down his body, bringing him closer to her for a moment as the water continued to fall upon them.

"We're wasting precious resources," she mumbled. "Best turn it off."

"We're not wasting anything. It's recycled," he reminded her.

"I know. Just turn it off. It's done what it was meant to." She lifted her head to forge her gaze with his. "It blessed our union as it needed to be."

He smiled that lazy, endearing grin she was fast coming to adore. "Nagging wench," he said, but he fanned his hand over the sensor to cease the water's flow.

She unclasped her arms from his neck. He moved away, surprise flitting across his face when he realized he had left the shower door open and the floor was slick with water.

"Oops," he said, and like a mischievous boy lifted his shoulders playfully.

"Messy man," she labeled him. She pushed him back firmly to step out of the shower, taking up a towel. She surprised him by setting to work drying him off, rubbing the soft material briskly over his flesh.

"I could get used to this," he said with a sigh.

"I intend to see that you do." She worked her way down his torso, bid him lift each foot. "Just part of the overall package for which you signed up."

"Give me that," he said, taking it from her so he could blot her hair. He returned the favor then wrapped them both in the towel as the vid-com began to chime again.

"He's a persistent pest, isn't he?" she asked with a laugh.

"That's how he became Burgon," Ryn said. "Vid-com on!"

The small screen in the bathing area did not have video capabilities for obvious reasons, but the voice that came out of it gave no doubt the speaker knew what had just transpired.

"I hate to bother you, Ryn, but I am in need of your assistance," the Burgon said. "Would you meet me on the promenade deck by the emporium as soon as you can get dressed?"

"Aye, your excellency," Ryn said. "I'm on my way."

"Just a reminder. We dine at eight sharp, Tessa," the emperor said. "Without your present company."

"She has agreed to be my wife," Ryn said defensively, more than a bit jealous.

"That's terrific news. Congratulations. But you're still not invited to have supper with us."

The vid-com went off.

Chapter Three

"You're sure he's in the Brúidúil Quadrant?" Ryn questioned. "You can trust your informant?"

The Burgon nodded. "I would trust him with my life."

"Seems to me that's what you'd be doing."

"I've known Rune Degendesch since before I became Burgon. His father is Colonel Quirin Degendesch, the attorney general of the United Court of Justice. Rune is the owner of the iron mine on Staillin Major. He's in the Order of Taibhse and he's also a Faolchú."

"A werewolf?" Ryn queried. "I've never encountered one."

"They're not much different from a Reaper except they can't fly or shift into anything except a wolf." He shrugged as they looked out over the promenade deck railing to the people moving below on the concierge deck. "And he Transitions every bloody month. That has to be a nuisance. Give me my quarterly Trans."

"How did he find out where O'Shay was hiding?"

"Saw him. Recognized him from the wanted posters I plastered all over the fucking galaxy," the emperor of Aduaidh Prime answered. "O'Shay has a job as a technician in the processing plant."

Ryn leaned on the railing. "All right. So what's your plan?"

"There is a mining frigate from Staillin Major scheduled to deliver a cargo of iron ore to the smeltery on Crionna in three days' time. From there it will make the return trip to the Brúidúil Quadrant with a load of compressed iron plates. I want to be on that frigate, but I don't want anyone knowing who the hell I am."

"Makes sense. Word would spread like wildfire if anyone were to learn the Burgon was onboard."

"Precisely," the Burgon agreed. "So here's the deal. I want you to go with me to Crionna—I'll clear it with Granger, have him assign you to me. When we get to Crionna, we'll hire on as crewmen for the incoming frigate. They are always losing men every time they dock so getting hired won't be a problem. Once we arrive on Staillin Major, I find O'Shay, drain the life from him, and that will be that."

"What about your ship? When we fly into Crionna, everyone is gonna see that Reaper insignia and know—"

"We're going to rendezvous with a friend of mine before we get there, exchange my ship for his."

"You make it sound easy, Ry. Hiding your identity is going to be the tough part." He thought about it. "Mine too. My face isn't exactly unknown in Crionna."

"Ah, but that's not a problem." The Burgon crooked his finger, his lips creased into a wicked grin. "Come with me, little warrior boy."

It was to one of the workers' quarters that the emperor led Ryn. The great man refused to answer any questions as they walked, keeping his secret grin in place. At the door to the women's quarters, he reached out to grip Ryn's arm.

"When Emmaline answers the door, try not to allow your reaction to show. She's very sensitive about the way she looks."

Ryn nodded, but when the door slid back it was all he could do not to recoil.

"Emm, this is Captain Rynlyn Rede," the Burgon introduced.

"Come," she said, stepping back to allow them to enter her quarters.

Ryn cast the Burgon a pitying look before following the emperor inside.

Emmaline's face was twisted in a frozen rictus that pulled both sides of her thin mouth downward. The ravages of a bad case of some herpes-type virus had pockmarked her face with deep pits. Below her chin, twin wattles of wrinkled flesh swung as she motioned the men to sit.

"I've known Emm for many years," the Burgon said. "Our mothers were close friends." He smiled at the woman. "There had even been talk of the two of us joining one day."

"That was before I became ill," the woman said in a garbled voice that made her twisted mouth move.

"Emm is going to help us get those jobs on Crionna," the Burgon stated.

"I see," Ryn said, although he didn't.

"My face disturbs you," Emmaline said.

"No, milady," Ryn denied. "I apologize if I—"

"Come over here, Captain," she asked.

He glanced at the Burgon, who nodded, then Ryn rose to his feet and with reluctance went to stand before the woman who was a few inches shorter than him.

"When people see this face they do one of two things, Captain Rede," she said. "They look away or else they stare, fascinated with such ugliness."

"Milady, please. I—"

"Look closely at my skin, Captain," she ordered. "The illness that caused the scarring was long ago. It is not contagious."

Ryn felt very uncomfortable but directed his attention to the pitted flesh.

"Do you see any suppuration, Captain?" she inquired. "Any abscesses?"

"No, milady," he replied, shaking his head.

She turned her head to present her cheek to him. "Do you see anything that might rub off on you to infect you?"

Ryn could feel the heated blush that crept over his face. "Of course not, milady."

She lifted her chin. "Is there anything hiding in these excess folds of flesh that might jump out at you?"

He swallowed. "No."

"Touch my face, my neck, Captain."

He had to force himself not to shudder but he did as she demanded, putting his fingertips to the pocked flesh. He trailed his fingers down the wattles then removed his hand.

"Did you feel anything out of the ordinary?"

"No."

"Nothing at all?" the Burgon pressed.

Ryn turned to look at the emperor. "No."

The Burgon smiled. "Good, then Emm's done another fabulous job." He nodded.

Emmaline reached under her chin, took hold of the wattle and pulled upward, tearing the skin from her face.

Horried, Ryn stumbled back with his eyes wide, his mouth ajar. He had put one hand up in denial of her actions, but as soon as he saw the lovely face behind what he realized had been a very lifelike mask, he blinked, lowered his hand.

"Emmaline has always been a very crafty woman," the Burgon said. "She has worked her trade for years and not once in the thirty years I've known her has she ever been found out. No one has ever suspected whatever disguise it is she was using at the time."

"By the gods, it looked so real!" Ryn said.

"I should hope so," she said. "My very life depends on no one knowing what I look like."

"Emm was a top agent with the Alliance and now she's a top agent with the New Alliance. You've met her before—many times—but we won't tell you when or where or who she was at the time."

"My masks are so lifelike, your own mother wouldn't recognize you," she said as she took a seat, the pockmarked mask dangling from one finger. She tossed it on the table beside her chair. "So tell me, Captain Rede—how would you like me to make *your* mask look?"

* * * * *

Tessa frowned at the man standing at her door. "May I help you?"

"You could fuck me 'til my balls are no longer blue," he said in a low, gruff voice.

The brutal slap that hit the man's face snapped his head to the side, but when he laughed, Tessa lifted her knee with every intention of planting it in his groin.

"Hold, wench!" He stepped aside and looped an arm around her, pushing her against the door. "It's me. It's Ryn!"

She fought him like a weretigress, twisting in his grip, his words not sinking in until he shackled her wrists together behind her with one powerful hand and grasped her chin with the other.

"Tess, stop," he said. "It's me. It's your mate."

She stopped struggling as she stared into his dark green eyes. A crease formed along her forehead. "Ryn?"

"Aye, 'tis me in the ugly plastiform flesh." He released her wrists, standing still as she brought her arms in front of her then reached up to tentatively touch his face.

"Plastiform?" she repeated, moving her fingers over his brow, down his scarred cheek, over his chin.

"Wait until you see the Burgon's mask," he said with a laugh.

"Mission," she said then searched his gaze. "You're going on a mission with him."

He nodded, pleased his lady was so perceptive. "Aye, and we need to talk about it."

She craned her head this way and that as she studied the mask. "It looks so real!" she said again. "I didn't recognize you at all."

"Good. That's what we want." He went into her quarters, whistling at the luxury he beheld.

"When do you leave?" she asked, and he heard the disappointment in her voice.

"First thing in the morning," he said. "I can't tell you where we're going or why, but I think you can guess. I don't know when we'll be back."

"Where in Alel's name did you get that horrid mask?" she asked, taking a seat beside him. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off his face.

"I can't tell you that either. Suffice it to say it came from someone who knows what he's about."

"Obviously." She ran her fingers along his neck. "How far down does it go?"

"Just to the base of my neck. I'll need to keep my shirt buttoned."

She leaned forward. "I can see the pulse at the hollow of your throat." She put a finger there. "I can't tell where it ends! Ryn, it is perfection!"

"It's hot as hell though," he told her. "But it's also easy to put on and take off. More than I would have thought. Of course, we've been told to take care with it. It's fairly indestructible but like flesh it can tear. Obviously we'll need to keep close shaven else it will prick the hell out of us."

"Hmm," she said, shaking her head. "So real, but so ugly, Ryn." She touched the plastiform mask again and shuddered.

It wasn't just the crooked nose and sparse eyebrows, pointy chin and oversized ears that disturbed her. It was the wart with the lifelike hair sprouting from it on his upper right cheek and a savage-looking scar that slanted from his nose to his jawbone. It bisected that section of his face and was a deep, livid red color that was hard to take.

"Really ugly, my love," she declared.

He shrugged. "Look at it this way—no woman will be flirting with us, but then again, where we're going I wouldn't imagine there'll be many women there to begin with."

"I don't want to know where you're going," she said. "I'll be worried enough as it is."

"We'll be safe," he said. "There's no reason for you to worry."

She snuggled against him. "Just hold me," she said. "We've awhile before my date with Ryden."

"It's not a date," he said as he enfolded her into his arms. "It's a social engagement. Nothing more."

She was barefoot and brought her feet up on the sofa as she sat wrapped in his arms. "I guess I won't be leaving with you."

"Not right now, but even as we speak Ry is making arrangements for you to go to Aduaidh Prime while we're away. Neither of us wants you on the *Chinook* now that you and I are together."

"What kind of arrangements?"

"He found out Prince Cair Ghrian isn't that far away so he's sending a message asking him to pick you up and take you to Aduaidh Prime. You'll be safe there."

It was on the tip of Tessa's tongue to say the empress and her children hadn't been safe but she kept her thoughts to herself. Things had changed with the building of the new imperial palace and the Storian's Net defense system had been put into place around the entire planet. It would be impossible for another sneak attack to occur.

Ryn smoothed his palm over her hand and she winced, reaching down to take up his wrist to turn his hand over.

"You're wearing some kind of plastiform gloves as well?"

"We didn't want our own handprints to be read so the covers would be blown. The Burgon thought of everything. The handprints are not only scarred and ridged as befits the covers we'll be assuming, but if we need to enter some place where a palm print is required, it will read Dax Nym."

"Is that a real man?"

"He is, but he's in a cell on Amerigen," he said. "This mask looks just like him."

"Amerigen. That's where your mother is, isn't it?" she asked.

"I don't want to talk about her." He threaded his fingers through hers. "That's a subject I never want to talk about." He brought her hand up to kiss the back of it.

"All right then answer me a question."

He frowned. "What kind of question?"

She pivoted her head on his shoulder. "Explain to me what misdirection is."

His frown turned into a slight smile. "Curious about my scythelord abilities, huh?"

"I've heard you're a master when it comes to that power. I'd like to know what it is."

"You know the meaning of the word?"

She shook her head. "No."

He pulled his fingers from hers, moved away from her so their bodies were no longer touching. He laid his arm on the back of the sofa. "Close your eyes," he told her.

Tessa's brows drew together but she obeyed the strange command.

"Now keep them closed. Don't be tempted to peek."

She laughed. "I won't."

He was silent for a moment then she thought she heard him whisper to open her eyes, but the voice seemed to be coming from inside her head. She wedged open her eyes and was surprised he was no longer sitting beside her. She turned her head—searching for him—but he was nowhere in the room. She got up, went to the bedroom door, the bathroom, peeked into the galley but he was nowhere to be found.

"Ryn?" she called out but there was no answer.

She hadn't felt him move from the sofa. There had been no telltale shifting of wind around her, no sound of the door opening for his departure.

"I know you're in here."

"I am."

Once more that soft voice undulated through her head.

"Then where are you?"

He suddenly materialized sitting right where he'd been when she'd closed her eyes. His arm was still draped casually over the back of the sofa and he was grinning at her.

"Were you there all along?" she asked, coming back to the sofa.

"Haven't moved a muscle."

She sat down beside him. "How did you do it?"

"That is misdirection, wench," he said. "It's the act of distracting, drawing someone's attention away from something they are not meant to see. Magicians use misdirection in their performances."

"But how do you do it?" she asked.

"It's a talent you learn," he said. "Like Reapers being able to rearrange molecules in order to shapeshift or to fashion clothing out of thin air. Scythelords learn how to redirect what a person perceives so they don't see what they shouldn't. You looked right at me but didn't see me because I entered your mind and told you that you

weren't seeing me. That's how a scythelord can move from one place to another without being detected."

"I heard you speaking inside my head," she said, her voice filled with awe.

"Did it disturb you?"

"Not in the least," she said. "It was exciting."

"That's good to know."

"I feel more at ease with this mission you're about to undertake," she said, and he could hear the relief in her voice. "You could escape if you were cornered. Right?"

"Unless I was restrained with iron I could," he said. "Iron negates both mental and magical powers."

"Then don't go getting your wrists or ankles shackled with iron," she ordered. "All right?"

"I'll do my best not to." He didn't think telling her an iron collar would do the same thing to his powers would ease her mind.

She settled into his arms once more with her feet drawn up on the sofa. He sat with his long legs thrust out and crossed at the ankle. The tips of his fingers on his right hand danced along the curve of her shoulder, the fingers of his left hand entwined with hers.

"Where would you like the Joining to be?" he asked.

"For a Joining to be considered legal in my culture, it must be done on my homeworld," she replied.

He leaned in to put a kiss on the top of her head. "What would you say about having the captain perform the Joining tonight?"

Tessa sprang out of his arms, dragging her hand from his. Her face had turned pale. "You're not serious!"

"Aye, I am. It would give me pleasure to have the Burgon stand in as my best man and to have you mine legally in my culture before he and I leave tomorrow morn. When my mission is over, we can go to Seabhac and have it performed again. Ry said he would be honored to give you away."

"But I thought I would have time!" she said, tucking her bottom lip between her lip.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "You thought you would give me time to back out of the asking, but I have no intention of doing that."

"It's been too quick, Ryn," she argued. "We don't know one another yet."

"I know all I need to," he said.

"But—"

"Do you want to spend your life with me?" he interrupted.

"Aye, but—"

"Do you believe I will make you a good mate? A good husband?"

"I do, but—"

"Vid-com on!" he called out.

"Aye, Captain? How may I serve you?" The smiling face on the screen looked very, very young.

"Patch me through to the captain, would you?"

"Aye Sir!"

The captain's unsmiling face appeared next. "Is there a problem, Captain Rede?"

"No problem," Ryn said. "I would like to request a Joining be performed this evening."

The captain blinked. "This evening? You mean at midnight?"

"That is the traditional time of Joining, isn't it?"

Captain Ulrich Dahl's face took on a look of concern. "Tessa, are you copacetic with this?"

Tessa was still chewing on her lip. She nodded, unable to speak.

Thunder clouds appeared on the *Chinook* captain's beefy face. "What of your religious beliefs? What of your people?" The captain's stare hardened. "Is he coercing you?"

"No Sir," she was quick to say. "I want to Join with him but —"

"But what?" both men snapped in unison.

She looked from the vid-com screen to Ryn then back again. "I don't think he understands what he's doing!"

"He knows perfectly well what he's doing," Ryn stated. "He's marrying the woman he wants to care for for the rest of his bloody life." He looked hard at the captain. "What part of that do you reckon she has trouble understanding?"

A look of confusion then of dismay then finally of resolve settled over the captain. He shrugged. "Tessa, I believe he's thought this through and is content with his choice. The man wants you. The question is — do you want him?"

Tessa turned to face Ryn. "With all my heart it seems."

"What of your customs? What of a Joining on Seabhac?" the captain pressed.

"We will have one ceremony here and another on my homeworld," she said, her eyes misting as she gazed at Ryn.

"Then get your witnesses, people, and I'll do the ceremony!" the captain said.

The vid-com went black but not before the couple heard the captain's loud explosion of laughter.

"I'm glad he finds this amusing," Ryn mumbled.

"He always told me I'd find a man who would not let me get away. He's been proven right."

He reached out to cup her chin, to hold her face so he could look her in the eye. "Do you want to get away, *lhiannan*?"

"No," she said.

He kissed her gently then released her. "Get your person while I get mine," he said. "We—"

The door chimed, cutting him off.

"That would be the Burgon," she said, jumping up from the sofa. "He's here to pick me up for supper and I'm not even dressed!" She ran into her bedroom.

An evil look passed over Ryn's handsome face. "I'll answer the door."

If the Burgon was surprised when Ryn opened the door for him, he didn't show it. He strolled in—minus the mask Emmaline had made for him.

"I take it the little darling isn't dressed yet," he said.

"We were...ah...otherwise occupied," Ryn answered.

"Oh, I'm sure you were," the emperor of Aduaidh Prime quipped. He took a seat, braced his elbows on the chair arms, steeped his fingers under his chin and regarded Ryn with a wry look. "So when is the first Joining?"

"Tonight."

The Burgon smiled. "And your witness?"

"I would be honored if you would consent to be my best man."

"I *am* the best man, but since I'm taken she'll have to make do with you."

Ryn grinned. "Then you'll stand up with me?"

"Aye, it would be my pleasure, but, Ryn?"

"Aye, your excellency?"

The Burgon's slow, merciless grin was sinister, his Reaper's eyes glowing a faint red.

"You're still not invited to supper and I am still sleeping with her this night after the Joining. If you have a problem with that, too bad."

* * * * *

"What did he say to that?" Tessa asked as she took a sip of the lobster chowder in her bowl.

"What could he say?" Ryden Bakari asked. "His Burgon had spoken. The boy was shivering in his boots."

"I doubt that," she said, her eyes sparkling.

"Well, he did look as if he wanted to take my head off, but he acquiesced easily enough." He scored his Diabolusian steak. "I will grant him time to consummate the Joining before I expect you in my bed."

She shook her head. "You are an evil, evil man, Ry."

"It will be the last time I lie in your arms," he said. "Do you begrudge me that small window of peace?"

Her eyes took on the sympathy she felt for this powerful, lonely man. "You should go to Riezell and claim her, Ry. Don't waste time with O'Shay. Go to your lady."

"I will when this is done," he said. "I swear."

She took another sip of the chowder, worried about the emperor. He had never been anything but a gentleman when in bed with her. All he wanted to do was hold her, talk to her long into the night and fall asleep in her arms. Their conversations sometimes lasted until dawn was rising somewhere in the megaverse and she would leave him sleeping fitfully. Often she had held him as he cried for his lost Anastasia and the children upon whom he had doted. She knew he would grieve for them as long as he drew breath. She knew he suffered behind the smart quips and taunting laughter. Beneath it all, despite his power and authority, he was a scared little boy seeking comfort.

"What are your thoughts on Rynlyn?" he asked as he took a sip of his Chrystallusian plum wine.

"I rather like him," she said with a grin.

"No shit," he countered, wagging his brows. "But what of him as a man, Tessa?" He stabbed his fork at her. "And not from your professional or love-struck view."

"I believe him to be an honorable and stalwart warrior. What is your opinion of him?"

He took up his napkin to blot his lips. "Have I ever told you about the first time I saw him?"

"No, I don't believe you have."

He tucked the napkin beside his plate, finished with his meal, and leaned back in the chair.

"I'm sure you know by now he was raised at the Pannys Sheshaght." At her nod, he continued. "Bad business that. When I was first told of the cult's existence, I couldn't believe my ears. I insisted on being there when it was raided. Once at the colony, seeing what those perverted bastards had done to their own children, it was all I could do not to order a mass execution of those in charge. As it was, I hanged the male leaders—including Ryn's father—and sent the women to prison. His mother spat on me as she went by then laughed."

"She's in prison."

"Aye, where she will be 'til the day she dies," he said through clenched teeth.

"What happened to the children?"

"The older boys were sent to military academies and the girls to boarding schools. The younger ones were put into foster care and the babies into orphanages. When last I heard, every one of those in foster care and from the orphanages had been taken in by good Alliance families. The boys became warriors and many have climbed the ranks admirably well. The young girls graduated the boarding schools and most went on to institutes of higher learning. Those who did married well. I saw to that."

"A blessing to each of them I'm sure," she said.

"I like to think so. I've had their cases followed closely by a special staff I created for just that. I wanted to make sure they were all taken good care of. They deserved it after the hell their parents put them through."

"Ryn was one of those sent to military school," she prompted.

"Aye." He looked down at the table for a long moment, seemed to be steeling himself not to shudder. When he raised his gaze to her there was pain in his amber eyes. He smiled. "He was near death the first time I saw his pointed little head."

She waited, knowing he would continue in his own time. The waitress came to take away their plates, brought dessert and a strong Viragonian coffee of which Tessa was fond.

"My men had taken aside several of the older children and were taking a census of those we found. I heard a little girl telling them there was a boy missing. She begged my men to find him. 'Before it's too late,' she said. We started searching, having accounted for every child save him. We looked in every nook and cranny, threatened his mother with the vilest kind of torture—his father already swinging from a tree alongside the other male leaders—but we couldn't find him. The woman refused to give any information about him, sneering at us to let him die and be done with it."

"The crazed bitch," Tessa said, all thought of the rich dessert sitting before her gone.

"I was determined we would not leave the place until we'd found him—dead or alive. We literally took the place apart and were about to start taking the buildings down board by board when one of my men heard a faint cry beneath the ground where he was standing in the forest."

"He was underground?" Tessa asked.

"They had buried him alive," the Burgon said.

"Merciful Alel!" Tessa said, tears filling her eyes.

"He was all of fifteen years of age," he went on. "So thin you could count each of his ribs. He had a mop of greasy hair that looked as though it hadn't been washed in months, a body as filthy as his hair, covered in scabs." He gave her a quick look. "You've seen his back."

"Aye, I have," she said as she wiped away a tear that was falling down her cheek.

"My men reached into the wooden box where he'd been thrown—thankfully with a pipe venting out of it so the little bugger could breathe—and when I saw the carnage on that boy's back..."

Ryden Bakari's eyes glowed scarlet red for a brief moment, the rage he was feeling exhibiting itself in Reaper form. He clenched his teeth, his fists, and turned his head from her.

"If I hadn't already hanged that bastard of a father of his, I would have torn that son of a bitch apart with my bare hands!"

Tessa reached out to put a hand on his balled fist. She could feel the tension running through him. Not knowing what to say to ease him, she remained silent.

The Burgon swallowed, seemed to be struggling to get his temper under control.

"He was lying still—his eyes wide—but I knew he wasn't dead. I had them lay him down on the ground. You can not imagine the stench coming off his battered little body but that didn't matter. All I could think was I had to save him. I had to bring him out of his stupor. I had to make sure he lived."

She knew why he felt that strongly, but she also knew he didn't. That it was his own child he was saving.

"His eyelids fluttered open and I remember thinking how like Jaxson's his eyes looked. They were as deep a green as my son's, looking back at me with such pleading. I pictured Jax lying there and—by the gods—I felt so helpless."

He swiped a hand over his face, seemed surprised when his palm came away wet with moisture. He rubbed his palm on his pant leg.

"He whispered something to me and I had to put my ear to his mouth to hear him. His lips were cracked and dry, rough against my flesh." He put his fingers up to his ear as though he were feeling the sensation once again.

"What did he say?" she asked in a small voice.

"Thank you," he replied. "Just those two words—thank you."

The most powerful man in the megaverse let out a long, shuddery breath.

"I picked him up in my arms and carried him to my ship. I made a vow that I would replace the father he lost. I would be the father he deserved."

Tessa's heart did a funny little squeeze.

"I made sure he was placed in the very best academy, given the best instructors who wrung every last ounce of promise from him. I sent him to Fleet Academy. I was there when he graduated with honors at the top of his class and I pledged him for the Order of Taibhse. There was never any question of his worthiness to become a member. He has accomplished everything I had always hoped Jaxson would one day had he lived." He gave her a lopsided grin. "He became all the sons I lost. The boy is very dear to me."

"I can see that," she said. She ached to tell him what she knew in her heart but something held her back. Now was not the right time to tell him the boy he loved like a son was in truth his very own.

"I want you to know I am well-pleased with this union, Tessa," he said. "I could not ask for a better mate for Rynlyn than you." He covered her hand with his. "I know you two will be very happy together."

"I will do everything within my power to be a good wife to him," she said.

He patted her hand. "I know you will."

"It's almost ten," she said, glancing at the clock. "If the Joining is to begin on time, I need to find Helmar to ask her to be my maid of honor. Would you be too upset with me if I were to leave you now?"

"No, go ahead," he said. "Since you didn't eat your plum pudding, I'll eat it for you. Waste not, want not, dearling." He reached for her dessert.

Tessa laughed, pushing her chair back. Normally he would have risen to hold it for her, but she could see the pain of what had happened long ago with the Pannys Sheshaght still troubling him. She touched his shoulder as she walked away.

"Aye, you will make him a gods-be-damned fine wife, Tessa," he said, digging into the pudding. "Just as I've always wanted you to."

The Burgon closed his eyes as he enjoyed the tart taste of the pudding. It was cooked to perfection—they would never serve anything to him that wasn't—and rolled around on his tongue as sweetly as he chewed.

Things, he thought as he swallowed that first bite of deliciousness, could not have worked out better if he had planned them. Rynlyn had finally found his way to Tessa without the nudging the emperor had decided long ago was going to be needed. The sweet woman he loved as a substitute for his dead wife and the young man he loved as though he were a son were to be united.

Things, he decided as he took another bite of the pudding, just didn't get any better than that.

Chapter Four

The Joining was performed by Captain Dahl at the stroke of midnight—the traditional time. In attendance along with the celebrant, the bride and groom, the best man and maid of honor were several courtesans who were free for the evening. Each had a tear in her eye for Tessa was well-liked and would be missed even though the women were happy for her.

“You’ve found your prince,” one of the women said. “May the gods ever smile on you, Tessa.”

Standing beside her handsome warrior, Tessa glanced up at him and her heart swelled. He was tall and strong and—thankfully—had removed the gods-ugly mask he’d worn a few hours earlier. His chiseled features, smoldering eyes and the firm grip he had on her hand brought it home to her that she had indeed found her prince. She knew this man would protect her with his life, and she knew without doubt she would give her own for him.

“Man and wife,” she heard the captain proclaim. Her womb clenched as her new husband turned to her, slid his palm along her jaw and brought her lips to his.

“*Gra anois agug go deo,*” he whispered. “Love now and forever.” Then he kissed her.

To the sound of applause, she returned his kiss. When they parted, she spoke the words she had asked Helmar to teach her—Chalean words of love she had practiced at least a hundred times as she dressed for her Joining.

“*Le mo ghrása mise, agus liomsa mo ghrá,*” she said, and smiled when her husband’s eyebrows arched upward.

“What did she say?” Captain Dahl asked the Burgon.

“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,” the emperor translated, smiling. He slapped a hand on Ryn’s back. “I’ll give you ’til 0200 with your bride before I want her back. Now get, little warrior boy!”

Hand-in-hand they ran from the chapel, laughing like giddy teenagers. In the elevator they kissed passionately, straining against one another in a fever of desire that surprised them both.

“Do you think it will always be this way?” she asked after one breathless kiss.

“I intend to see that it is,” he assured her as the doors of the elevator opened on his deck.

He tugged her playfully from the elevator and to his door, pressed his hand on the ID panel, then when the door slid back, swept her up in his arms to carry her over the threshold.

"You realize," he said as he carried her through the living area and into his bedroom, "I will be dying every moment you're lying in his bed."

"We talk, Rynlyn," she said as he took her to the bed. "We talk and we laugh and I hold him until he falls asleep. That is all there will be."

"I know, but it doesn't make it any easier to know my bride will be in bed with another man on our Joining night." He set her on her feet beside the bed. "I think just this once he could find another woman." He cupped her face between his hands. "And this will be the last night you go to his bed."

"He has already said as much," she told him.

"That's good because I would hate to have to call him out."

She laughed. "He wouldn't fight you. He'd just throw you in prison until you got over your anger."

"Aye, you're right," he said with a sigh.

She moved back and turned away from him. "Would you unbutton me please?"

His hands shook as he put them to the collar of her soft pink silk gown and began to unclasp the tiny pearl buttons that ran the back of the garment. She smelled heavenly and he inhaled deep the sweet perfume he knew was gardenia.

"I know where you two are going and why," she said.

His fingers stilled midway the gown. "And just how do you know that, wench?"

"I'm fae, remember?" she reminded him. "I sense these things, Ryn. I also sense he will find O'Shay this time, but I don't have a sense of the villain dying as Ry plans."

He continued undoing the buttons. "Do you sense problems?"

"I sense darkness but not death. I sense pain but not injury. I can't explain it better than that."

"As long as you're safe on Aduaidh Prime, I won't worry about anything else," he said as he finished with his chore. He thrust his hands through the opening of the gown and pulled her against him, putting his chin on her shoulder. "I intend to come back and live with you until we are an old, old couple."

"I sense that will be the way of it," she said.

His hands moved to the mounds of her breasts and he caressed her. His fingers plucked at her nipples through the lacy fabric of her chemise. He rubbed against her ass, giving her an idea of how hard his cock had grown at touching her.

"He needs you," he whispered against her neck.

She pressed her rump against his erection. "She wants him to take her."

Withdrawing his hands from inside her gown, he pushed it down her shoulders, past her hips and let it fall to the floor. She stepped out of the garment and like the good husband he wanted to be, he picked it up to hand to her.

"I can be trained," he said with a cocky twist of his lips.

She laid the gown over a chair beside the bed then shrugged out of her chemise. That too he retrieved for her, placing it over the gown as she took a seat on the bed.

Naked except for her slippers, she had the most beautiful body he'd ever beheld. Her breasts were full and plump. Her waist was tiny – he thought he might well be able to circle it with his two hands. Her hips flared to give her a classic hourglass figure. Her legs were long and slender and as he knelt beside her to remove her slippers, he was not surprised to find she had lovely, elegant feet. Setting the footwear aside, he rose to his feet and began tugging the uniform shirt from his pants.

"Lie down," he said in a husky voice as he unbuttoned his cuffs.

She scooted back on the bed and stretched out, her arms to either side of her head. She watched him run the buttons of his shirt then peel it from his muscular chest.

"I want to touch every inch of you," she said. "I want all of you imbedded in my mind."

"I want to taste every inch of you," he countered.

She writhed on the coverlet as a tightening gripped her belly at his words. Unconsciously she ran her tongue over her top lip, eyes flaring as his hands paused on the buckle of his belt. He gave her such a heated look she thought he was going to throw himself on her, but he took a deep breath then continued removing his belt, drawing it slowly from its loops.

"You are teasing me," she accused.

"How 'bout that?" he drawled, that devilish grin pulling at his lips. With infinite slowness, he unbuttoned his fly, peeling it aside inch by tantalizing inch. Hooking his thumb in the waistband, he pushed the pants down a little—just enough to reveal the upper plateau of the triangle that nested at the base of his abdomen. He stopped and said, "Oh," with a frown.

"What?" she said, itching to get her hands on him.

"I forgot my boots," he said. He sat down on the bed to tug them off.

Tessa sat up to move behind him. Up close the scars of his childhood tore at her heart. She ran her fingertips over them, hating the person who had dared to mar such a beautiful male back.

"Why would they do this?" she asked.

"The caning had a threefold purpose. First and foremost it was meant as discipline. If you sinned, you were punished. The worse the sin, the harsher the caning. It was a deterrent against sinning. Being late to a service or a meal would gain you five passes of the cane. Speaking without being spoken to would get you ten. Daring to question a leader's authority would get you fifty or more."

Tessa laid her cheek against his back, unable to say what was in her mind over that statement.

"The second thing it was meant to do was to control you. Once every month the males who had come of age—thirteen and beyond—were ritualistically tortured." He tugged off the second boot. "There is no other way to describe what they did to us."

"Tortured how?" she asked, pressing her lips to one particularly deep scar.

He hesitated then straightened, sitting there staring across the room. "By something called figging prior to the caning," he said. "You would be turned over to the women for preparation then to the Master for the rest of the punishment."

She was almost afraid to ask. "What did the women do to you?" She didn't think he was going to answer, but when he did, his voice was low, full of shame.

"Two of them would give you an enema and it was always a brutal thing with them. I believe they enjoyed inflicting pain on boys so that was why they were chosen for the task. It was humiliating but it served two purposes. First, the caning would be severe and you didn't want to soil yourself during it because if you did, it would be repeated the next day and the next until it was done cleanly."

"Oh Ryn," she said, feeling tears stinging her eyes.

"Once that was done, you reported to the Master who would then insert a finger of peeled ginger root into your anus." He ran a hand over his face. "That was the second reason for the enema."

"I don't understand."

"Ginger root causes an intense internal burning sensation. Having a clean passage allows the oils from the root to absorb much quicker, to spread the heat so when you clench your muscles during the caning, there is pain both inside and out. The gods help you if you ejaculated during the session and you almost always did. You couldn't help it. When you did, you were beaten on the back and shoulders as well as the buttocks until the blood ran."

"Merciful Alel," she whispered.

"There was nothing merciful about it, *lhiannan*," he said. "You learned to control the pain because if you cried out, so much as whimpered, the session would be extended until you made no sound. That was the third reason for the canings—to develop strength of will."

"That was nothing more than sick, perverted cruelty," she said.

"Aye, I know," he said. He stood, shucked off his pants.

Tessa moved back so he could lie down beside her. She lay on her side facing him, her hand on his chest. He turned his head toward her, started to speak, but she put her fingers across his lips.

"Shush," she said. "Let me love you."

She began with a gentle kiss to his forehead, his nose, his chin then moved lower to nibble on his nipples, flick her tongue into the sharp concavity of his bellybutton. She positioned her body between his legs—pushing them apart so she could kneel there.

The moment her mouth engulfed him she heard him heave a long, ragged sigh of contentment.

Pleasuring a man orally had never bothered her. She had trained herself to deep throat even the largest of cocks, to swallow the cum, but she'd never felt the first moment of arousal with those other men. She was an expert at the art of oral sex but had never enjoyed performing the act upon the men she serviced. It was something she was paid to do and she did it well. But with Ryn there was a marked difference. Suckling his shaft, licking it, nibbling upon the engorged head, flicking her tongue across his balls excited her. There was power in what she was doing and her man was enjoying every moment of it.

His hand came down to spike the fingers through her hair. He caressed her head as she drew upon him. Looking up past his flat belly and striated abs, she saw his eyes were closed and there was a slight smile on his full lips. She drew upon him hard, pursing her lips tight around the head, rolling her tongue along his frenulum until she could hear him panting and his hand tightened in her hair.

She swirled her tongue around and around the cock's head. His hips jerked. He was ready. Gliding like a hawk through the air, she slid up beside him. He moved over her, wedging her legs apart.

"Turnaround is fair play," he said then slithered down her body to take her in his mouth.

Tessa gasped. This was something no man with whom she'd had sex had ever done well. Most seemed to think slurping upon her, thrusting a tongue into her, licking her was all that was necessary to turn her into a quivering mound of anticipation for his cock. That had never been the case. She'd endured the fumbling because the men seemed to enjoy it. Now and then she'd find one who thought to use his fingers in the mix to stimulate her but even then she'd never derived any real pleasure from the act.

Ryn was different.

His tongue was like a lightning rod drawing crackling energy into her clit.

She squirmed beneath him as he dragged his tongue along the folds of her cunt then made quick little forays into her channel before taking the most sensitive part of her between his teeth.

"Oh gods, Ryn!" she cried out. Her hands drove into his hair to hold his head against her, her knees closing on his ears. She quivered then felt the rush of climax spiraling up like liquid heat.

She came on one long wave of ripples. Whimpering as the pleasure went on and on. Ryn refused to take his mouth from her even though she pushed against his forehead. She was forced to ride out the sensation until it had drained her. Her long legs shot down to lie trembling to either side of his body.

"Liked that, did you?" he quipped. He sat up but wasn't finished with her. He eased first one finger then two inside her cunt, twisting them as she writhed beneath his

exquisite torment. He turned them, crooking the middle finger upward, then put his free hand on her belly and pressed down.

"Oh!" she said. He was touching her G-spot, rubbing it, and that was causing a wild itch inside. She clamped the muscles of her vagina tight around his fingers.

"Relax," he whispered. "Trust me."

He rubbed the sweet spot as she writhed beneath him, clutching handfuls of coverlet, dragging them toward her as she thrashed her head from side to side on the pillow. She was fighting the sheer intensity of the pleasure he was giving her, wanting it to last forever.

"Let go, *lhiannan*," he said. "Let go and let it take you."

It washed over her with such force she screamed, the inner folds of her cunt vibrating around his fingers. She dug her heels into the mattress, arched her hips toward him and cried out again as another flourish of pulses raced through her vagina.

"That's it, baby," he said, easing his fingers in and out of her. "That's what your man likes to see."

She lifted her arms. "You!" she said. "I want you!"

He smiled and covered her with his powerfully honed body. Pushing her left leg wide, he reached down to guide his erection into her slick heat. He wasn't in all the way before she ensnared him with her legs, wrapping them around his hips, imprisoning his upper body with her arms. He managed to shove his hands under her to lift her rump from the mattress to better impale her on his rigid shaft.

With wild abandon he took her, filling her so completely, so thoroughly she knew she'd be sore for days after, but it didn't matter. He was driving into her with the force and strength she wanted, needed, and he was doing it with his eyes locked on hers.

Tessa looked right into his soul at that moment. She saw the loneliness she was determined to banish. She saw the years of brutal war that had nearly crippled him. She watched love for her growing in those verdant depths and she saw something else—the beginnings of contentment for a man long denied its promise.

As he pumped into her, oozing his seed into her willing body, she clutched him to her. No matter what happened, she would long remember their Joining night as the time when she made peace with who and what she was, and the man she was growing to love so desperately let go of the past that had kept him prisoner for so long.

* * * * *

"Did you wear him out?" the Burgon asked as they lay side by side in her bed two hours later.

"I gave it my best shot," she replied, and smiled when he laughed.

"So long as you gave him something to come home for," he said.

"I want you both to come home," she told him. "You'll watch over him and he'll watch over you."

"And you'll behave while we're gone," he stated.

"I'll certainly try," she agreed.

The Burgon's hand was linked with hers. He lay with his other arm under his head, one powerful leg crooked at the knee, the sheet thrown over his nakedness. It didn't bother her that he preferred to sleep in the nude. She was used to his body and he never took advantage of his nudity to seduce her—although with a body such as his, most women would have been panting to have him fling himself over them.

"Are you happy, Tessa?" he asked.

"Very," she replied.

"I'm glad. From the first moment I met you, I knew you were just what Rynlyn needed. I've been trying to get you two together ever since."

She twisted her head on the pillow to look over at him with surprise. "We met twelve years ago," she said.

"Aye," he said, nodding. "But he wasn't inclined to visit the pleasure ships and I couldn't find a way to force him to do it." He sighed. "The boy has more self-discipline than any I've ever known."

"You have the Pannys Sheshaght to thank for that," she said. "Do you know what they did to the boys of age there?"

"I was told," he answered. "Made me want to take the women out of the prison at Amerigen and burn them at the stake. The whole idea of using ginger root..." He shuddered. "It makes me ill thinking of that being done to Ryn."

They were silent for a moment then Tessa sat up, turning so she was facing the Burgon.

"I have a request and I don't want you to say no to it."

He eyed her with suspicion. "When you get that look in your eye, missy, it doesn't bode well for someone. What is it you've got in that calculating mind of yours?"

"First I want you to agree to the request."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'll not agree to anything that might get your ass into mischief."

"It won't."

"I've only your word for it."

"It won't."

"What is it?"

"A request."

He released an annoyed breath. "A request to do what?"

She waved a dismissive hand. "Call it a mission instead."

"Now I *know* I won't be agreeing to whatever it is you are trying not to tell me!" he snapped. "Missions are for warriors, wench, and..."

"I want to go to Amerigen and speak with his mother."

His mouth dropped open then snapped shut with an audible clicking of his teeth. "Absolutely not!"

"Ryden, please! I want to find out why she abused him as she did."

"I said no," he declared. "End of discussion."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Hell yes I am curious! I was curious seventeen years ago and had that woman in an interrogation room for five solid hours trying to get her to tell me why anyone would do that to a child! She told me nothing!"

"Aye, but you weren't a Reaper then. If you were to visit her now, you'd be able to read her mind just as I will be able to," she countered. "I am not just fae, Ryden. I have other..."

"Forget it," he said, his bottom lip thrust out in a belligerent pout.

"There is more to this than you know, Ry," she insisted. "Will you trust me? I wouldn't ask this of you if it wasn't important."

"Important to who?"

"To whom," she corrected.

He snarled at her, showing his fangs.

Tessa rolled her eyes. "Stop that. I'm not impressed. It's important to all of us – you, me and Rynlyn."

"Tessa, this is madness. The woman is insane. She was then and she's probably even more so now. She kept asking me if I remembered her, insinuating we had had some dealings together." He snorted. "As though I would have ever had business with that fat pig."

"You didn't remember her?"

"She looked vaguely familiar, but if I'd ever met her before she certainly didn't make any impression on me."

"Let me speak to her, Ryden. I beg you."

He stared into her earnest face, tried to slip into her mind to see what all this was about, but she was good at shielding her thoughts from him. The harder he tried to slip past her guard, the darker and denser her mind became—forming an impenetrable barrier he could not breach. He finally gave up with a snort of irritation.

"No good will come of this," he said. "I gods-be-damned shouldn't allow it."

"Prince Cair can escort me to the prison. He can be with me every step of the way until I meet with Sgian Rede."

He narrowed his eyes. "You even know her name?" As she tucked her lip between her teeth a muscle ground in his cheek. "I know Ryn didn't give you that information, Tessa. He never speaks of the bitch."

"I did some research," she admitted.

"Well, of course you did!" The words were spoken with exasperation then a rush of angry breath pushed from his lungs. "You'll regret it," he prophesied. "As most likely will I."

"Thank you!" she said, leaning down to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, thank you, *thank* you!"

"Oh, don't thank me," he said. "This is going to backfire on you, Tessa. Mark my words. Ryn won't like you going to visit that old crone."

"Then we just won't tell him," she said, sliding down to lie beside him, putting her head on his shoulder.

"How do I get my ass into these things?" she heard him mumble.

The object of both their thoughts was at that moment pacing his quarters like a caged tiger. He growled low in his throat with every pivot. Antsy, on edge, filled with jealousy and envy and resentment, he had plowed his hand through his hair so often it was standing in spikes. Barefoot, shirtless, he thought he could smell Tessa's scent all over him and that only made matters worse. That scent drove straight to his cock to give him one hell of an erection.

"Fucking gods-be-damned shite!" he exploded, kicking out at a table. The moment his bare toes connected with the stainless steel leg he yelped and began hopping on his good foot to a chair, holding the other off the floor. He flopped down with a savage hiss, massaging his battered foot.

He wasn't sure he was going to last the night with his lady-wife sleeping beside the most powerful—and arguably the most handsome—man in the megaverse. Despite Tessa's protests and the Burgon's insistence that nothing ever happened between them, just having her in bed with another man was eating Rynlyn alive. It had scoured his nerves raw and by the clock it was only 0350. What would it be like at 0450? 0550?

"Stop it!" he snarled aloud. "Just stop it!"

They were scheduled to fly out at 0600, but Ryn wasn't sure he'd be entirely sane by the time their departure point came round. He was slowly losing his mind and still had hours to go before he could see her again.

"Do *not* come knocking on her door!" the Burgon had warned him. "Do not hang around outside it like a love-struck puppy! I'll have you thrown in the brig if you do!"

He knew the emperor meant business and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done to stay in his quarters. Ten times he'd gone to the door with his hand out and ten times he'd snatched it back, snapped around to begin pacing all over again, shoving his hand through his hair in frustration.

"Call the Fleet Hospital," he said. "Check on your men."

He'd done that three times now and when he made the fourth call both the woman handling the call on the *Chinook* and the one taking it at Fleet scowled at him.

"There has been no change since last you called, Captain," the head nurse snapped at him.

"Then patch me through to —"

"Go to bed, Sir," the nurse ordered. "You are making a nuisance of yourself. *Oiche mhaith, codladh samh!*"

He'd been surprised by the Chalean High Speech as the nurse bid him good night, sleep well. He'd had no idea there was anyone from his world stationed at Fleet Hospital. He thought about it, made the decision to call her back just to talk about their homeworld then decided against it. She didn't seem all that anxious to talk to him to begin with. Her pudgy face and porcine eyes had revealed as much.

Slumping in the chair, he glared up at the ceiling with a hiss.

He narrowed his eyes. There was a stain of some sort up there and that offended him beyond measure.

He called the concierge desk to report it.

They weren't happy to hear from him at 0359 in the morning but promised to have someone come check on the stain at a decent hour the next day.

Three glasses of warm Ionarian milk later he was still wide awake and back to pacing, though now there was a decided limp since he'd managed to break a toenail into the quick with his thoughtless attack on the table leg. He started glaring at the table with each pass as though it had deliberately jumped in front of him. Angry sod that he was, he shook his finger at it and called it a few choice names in his native tongue.

He went to the bathroom at 0447 to get rid of the milk. Picked up a book, glanced at it then tossed it aside, preferring to wear himself out with pacing. By the time his toe was bothering him it was 0523 and he was yawning.

At 0542 he was lying crossways on his bed sleeping soundly when the vid-com chimed on louder than it should have.

"Wake up, little warrior boy!" came the booming voice of the Burgon whose cheerful face filled the screen.

Ryn jumped as though he'd been spurred with barbed wire, flinging himself around and up, staring bleary-eyed at the vid-com, a bit dazed and trying to come awake.

"Rough night?" the Burgon asked with a twinkle in his amber eyes.

Ryn mumbled something that — had it been heard by the emperor — might well have gotten him clapped into the brig indefinitely.

"Sorry you didn't sleep well, Rynny. I slept like a baby in the arms of your lady-wife."

Ryn raised his head, his eyes narrowed into slits, and glared at the Burgon. "Glad to hear it."

"So up and at 'em, son. Take a shower. Wash the stink off your dangly and meet me at the *Dilseacht* within half an hour."

"Where's Tessa?" Ryn asked as he left the bed.

"Sleeping," the Burgon replied. "And you are *not* going to wake her to say goodbye so hop to. We don't have all day!"

The vid-com went dark.

"Son of a bitch," Ryn grumbled as he trudged into the shower.

By the time he came out, he was in no better frame of mind. The water hadn't revived him. His toe was throbbing and he was now sure he'd broken it. He had a wicked headache from not having had a good night's sleep. His belly was rumbling.

He thought about that then snorted as he remembered he'd had no supper the evening before. He started to order breakfast, glanced at the clock, wincing as he realized he didn't have time to eat.

Grumbling, he slammed out of his quarters, stalking to the elevator like an enraged bull.

"You are not going to wake her to say goodbye," he muttered to himself.

She was—he considered—his wife and he had every right to go to her quarters to kiss her goodbye. That he wasn't being allowed to rankled like a sandspur stuck to his sock.

As he strode down the catwalk toward the Burgon's expensive Fiach runabout, Rynlyn Rede was in a foul, foul mood. Seeing the emperor standing beside the harness with his arms folded and a scowl on his face didn't even faze the young warrior. At that point, he didn't care if he had inconvenienced the mighty man.

"Are you trying to piss me off, Rynlyn?" the Burgon asked as Ryn came up to him.

"No, your excellency," Ryn said, but there wasn't the usual respect and deference in his tone.

One dark brow flexed upward on the Burgon's face. "Aye, well you could have fooled me. Get your scrawny ass onboard and run the preflight check before I make you regret you were ever a gleam in your daddy's jaundiced eye."

"I've regretted that all my life," Ryn snapped. He started past the Burgon only to have the emperor lash out a hand to grab his arm in a punishing grip.

"Don't you *ever* let me hear you say that again, boy!" Ryden Bakari ordered. "Do you hear me?"

The grip on his arm was excruciating. "Aye, your excellency," he agreed, trying not to wince.

The Burgon held eye contact with him for a few seconds more then released him. He looked past Ryn. His facial expression changed instantly from irritated pique to

pleasure. "Kiss your lady-wife goodbye then do the preflight," he said. "I've got a matter to see to with the dockmaster."

Ryn turned to see Tessa running toward him. Her long hair was flying behind her, her arms out as she sprinted down the catwalk, throwing herself into his waiting arms.

"I couldn't let you go without a proper farewell," she said.

The emperor of Aduaidh Prime had no pressing business with the dockmaster. He had wanted to give the newlyweds a moment or two alone. He strolled a few yards away but watched them. To his very soul he wished it was his Miriam bidding him a comforting goodbye. He watched the young lovers kiss, embrace one last time then smiled when Ryn cupped Tessa's cheek before going onboard the *Dilseacht*.

Tessa moved away from the harnessed runabout, placing herself behind the safety point where visitors watched the ships depart. He walked up to her to slip an arm around her shoulder.

"You'll watch out for him?" she asked, putting a hand to her cheek.

The Burgon bent down to kiss her on the temple. "Aye, wench. I'll keep him as safe as though he were one of mine."

He squeezed her then removed his arm, leaving her standing behind the safety rail. He glanced at her as he went into the ship, waved then disappeared inside the Fiach.

"He *is* one of yours, Ryden," she said. "He may well be your only surviving son."

Instinct told her that was the case. There might be other sons born to the Burgon but Rynlyn was now the firstborn. It didn't matter that he was a bastard son. Once Ryden found out Ryn's true identity, there would be great happiness in the powerful man's life.

Chapter Five

"What is that?" Ryn asked.

They were onboard the *Meaineyder*, the mining frigate from Staillin Major, having put in a long, brutal sixteen-hour day stacking iron sheets in the cargo hold. Though they'd had machines to do the lifting, it was still hot, dirty work and both had been covered with sweat. After a quick shower, they'd gone to the four-man berth to call it a night. They were alone in the berth since the other two men were on the nightshift.

The Burgon looked up from what he was doing. "It's Maiden's Briar."

Ryn's face paled. "And you're rubbing it into your palms?" he gasped, eyes bulging from the sockets. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

"I'm a Reaper, Ryn," came the amused reply. "It's not going to kill me. I've been building up my resistance to this shite since I was in my early twenties. And by the way, that's no way to speak to your Burgon."

"But why?" Ryn swallowed as he stared at the jar of white paste as though it would leap at him.

"Maiden's Briar is the deadliest poison in the universe," the Burgon answered. "The only thing more deadly is ghoret venom but that's not something you can harvest as easily as you can the Briar. A single dab of the Briar will make you sick as the proverbial dog but it won't kill you. In order to build up immunity to it, you must keep increasing the dosage. I've done that until now I can put as much as a teaspoon of it in my palms and rub it in with no ill effects except for a pounding headache and a bad taste in my mouth. If you can live through a heavy dose of the Briar, you can live through any poison given to you."

"But why would you want to do it in the first place?" Ryn pressed. He was horrified at what the emperor was doing.

"Because," Ryden said as though talking to a slow child, "there has always been the chance of an assassination attempt. Most such attempts on the life of a Burgon have been with this very substance. It's undetectable and very effective. I figured if someone was going to try to off me, it would be with the Briar, so I began building a tolerance to it before I took over the mantle of Burgon." He shot Ryn a steady look. "And there's another reason, but that one I'll keep to myself for now."

Ryn took his kerchief from the pocket of the dark blue coveralls he was required to wear and passed it over his face. Beneath the mask, his skin was itching and sweating, droplets of it passing under the edge of the mask to run down his chest. He cursed.

"I forgot too," the Burgon said with a laugh. "Masks don't sweat, but I swear my face will be ten pounds thinner when this is all done."

"I'm burning up under this ugly thing," Ryn said.

"Try to get some sleep. You didn't have that much last evening thanks to me."

Ryn mumbled something as he climbed into the top bunk assigned to him. It was much too warm that close to the ceiling, but there wasn't anything he could do about it and he was more tired than he could remember being in quite some time.

"Dream about your lady," the Burgon suggested. "That'll take your mind off the heat."

"Hell it will," Ryn said with a sigh. "I'm liable to flame out if I do that." He heard the Burgon chuckle and glanced his way. "You think I'm joking?"

"No," he said, putting the cream away. Ryn was sure if he could see the emperor's true face, he would be pale. There was pain in his amber eyes.

"I hope putting yourself through the discomfort will prove not to have been in vain."

"Everything I do has been thought out very carefully, little warrior boy. Doing this to myself will serve its purpose, believe me." The Burgon lay down on his bunk with an arm over his eyes then ordered the lights out.

* * * * *

The man known across the megaverse as The Black Sun stepped off his ship. The Amhantarian smiled when he saw her waiting for him at the safety rail.

"Tessa?" he asked, putting out a hand.

"Aye, your grace," she answered, bobbing a graceful curtsy. "Welcome to the *Chinook*." She placed her hand in his, felt a tingle—as most women did—as he brought it to his lips for a chaste kiss.

He straightened, looking her in the eye. "Ry said you were lovely and for once the man knows what he's talking about." He cocked his head to one side. "How did I miss you when you were on the *Foehn*?"

Blushing at the compliment, Tessa was surprised when he tucked her hand into the curve of his arm and began walking.

"Begging your pardon, your grace, but you rarely looked at anyone other than Amethyst."

At the mention of his ex-mistress, Cair Ghrian frowned. "Aye." He seemed to be pushing the memory of the woman aside. "Are your belongings packed?" he asked, covering her hand with his other palm.

"Aye, your—"

"Just Cair," he said. "I don't hold with all that gobbledygook when I'm with friends." He ushered her through the door and toward the elevator leading to the upper decks.

"I don't have many belongings onboard," she said. "I have an apartment I keep on Seabhac, but even there I don't have that many possessions."

"Been traveling light, huh?" he asked. "I'm sure Ryn will buy you whatever your heart desires."

She smiled up at him. "All I desire is him."

"Good because the boy needs a woman who'll take him in hand and shave off some of those gods-be-damned rough edges of his."

"I imagine those edges were a necessity when he was growing up," she said.

"Aye, you may be right." He was still holding her arm as they moved toward the elevator. Once inside he released it. "And you're going to Amerigen to find out why those edges were put there."

"I have to know," she said. "He *needs* to know."

Cair Ghrian was a scythelord. His intuitive powers had been honed at the Academy. He was also a member of the Order of Taibhse so his psi powers had been just as equally sharpened. He studied her profile.

"This is a very important mission you've set for yourself, isn't it?" he asked.

She knew he couldn't get past the mind shields she had so carefully erected to hide her motives, but she could feel him trying.

"Trust me when I say it is important," she replied, turning her face up to him.

"If you need my help, it is there," he said, and withdrew his mind probe.

"I appreciate that, milord."

An hour later—after Cair consumed a quick meal and his men had loaded Tessa's meager belongings onboard the *Davan*, the prince's personal starcruiser, they were winging their way toward the maximum security penal colony on Amerigen.

"We'll be there by morning," Cair told her when she'd refreshed herself in her quarters then came to join him on the bridge. "I hear you're quite the *ficheall* player. Would you care for a game or two?"

"Who told you that?" she asked with a laugh.

"Ry said he's never been able to defeat you," Cair said. "Even with his psi powers."

"I believe he learned long ago they don't work on me," she said.

He studied her for a moment. "You're a *cailleach*," he stated.

"I am," she said, admitting to being a witch. There were few people who realized that about her, but a scythelord would know, although Rynlyn had seemed oblivious of it, she thought.

"I think his mind wasn't on your mental abilities but your sheer physical beauty," Cair said.

Another hard blush stole over Tessa's face. She knew he wasn't flirting with her. His love for his lady-wife was legendary. He was saying what he thought.

"So," he said, rubbing his hands together. "I've a board set up on the forward deck. Shall we see if I'm any better at moving the pieces than Ry?"

She smiled. "I'm a tough opponent," she warned.

"Good! I need a challenge. Davan can't play worth a fig." He held a hand out to indicate she was to precede him. "By the way, have you heard the story about Davan and the eggs?"

* * * * *

The prison on Amerigen was as foreboding as Tessa had imagined it would be. Built of dark gray stone, it rose up off the dusty white plain like a malevolent toad – its warty walls seeming to ooze some noxious poison.

"Not a very hospitable place, is it?" Cair asked. He was standing beside her as the vid-com screen panned across the vast prison's exterior.

"It is hideous," she said with a shudder.

Nine stories tall, the structure resembled a medieval fortress with crenulations and thin arrow-slit windows not large enough for even a very thin man to squeeze through. The massive wooden doors looked as though they could be breached but Cair told her there was nine feet of titanium behind the panels.

"It takes a special mechanism to open those doors but they haven't been opened in over thirty years. I'll wager the gears are rusted closed by now."

"Then how do we get inside?" she asked.

"We transport by particle transfer," he said. At her look of dismay, he assured her she wouldn't feel a thing. "One minute you're on the transport pad, the next you're in the prison with twenty guards surrounding you with laser rifles."

"You've been here before?" she asked.

"Once. I came to deliver news to one of the inmates," he said. "You've heard of B'Rieth Avatás?"

"The Saurian who killed Amethyst," she said.

"Aye. His mother was a guard here. I came to give her the news of his passing in person."

"You killed him, didn't you?" she inquired.

"I did," he stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "I expected his dam to be upset at his passing but instead she laughed. I guess there was no love lost between her and that particular offspring, but then again the Saurians have a nest of them at each birth."

"So I've heard."

"Her children numbered in the hundreds, I was told." He scowled. "She looked it."

"Is she still here?"

"No," he answered. "She died not too long after. In the Ifreanda uprising – the one and only such revolt this prison has ever had." At her look of unease he told her

another rebellion was highly unlikely. "The prisoners are now fitted with *pléascán* devices that have been welded around their necks. There are sensors in the device that measure aggression. Any antagonistic move on their part will send a high-power surge of electrical current through their brains to disable them. A second surge will render them unconscious and a third will kill them instantly. Gives new meaning to the saying three strikes and you're out."

"I can see that it does," she said.

"Let's get down to the transport pad. I don't like being here any longer than I have to," he told her. "Does Ryn's mother know you're coming?"

"No," she replied. "I didn't want to take a chance that she would refuse to see me."

"She can't," he said. "The inmates have no privileges whatsoever. She can't refuse to see you, but she can refuse to talk to you. However, if you want her to talk, she can be made to do so."

Tessa flinched. "You mean coerced?"

"Tortured," he corrected.

"I won't allow that," she told him.

"I didn't think you would, but I don't think you'll have to resort to such measures. If you're half as powerful as I think you are you'll be able to pull the information out of her brain without her even knowing you're doing it."

"Unless she has psi powers as well," she reminded him.

"If she did, she wouldn't be here," he said. "She'd be on Utuk Xul."

At the mention of the most infamous prison colony in the megaverse, Tessa felt her skin prickle. That was not a place anyone would like to visit.

Cair proved right in what he'd said about the particle transfer. Tessa didn't feel anything unpleasant save for a slight tingling of her flesh that passed quickly. The transport was her first and she could see a great advantage by traveling in such a way.

"Saves wear and tear on the old body," the prince observed, "but they say you lose a few ounces of weight each transfer."

"Then run me back through it about ten pounds worth!" she laughed.

Cair rolled his eyes. "You women are all alike. Never satisfied with perfection."

Upon recognizing The Black Sun, the guards lowered their weapons although they maintained their menacing stance meant no doubt to quell any troublemaking.

"Your highness, welcome back," the warden said, bowing low. "We are honored to have you with us."

"I'm just visiting, Karl," Cair said with a wink. "Not planning on staying."

The warden grinned. "We'd have it no other way."

"This is Lady Tessa, the betrothed of Captain Rynlyn Rede," Cair introduced her.

A look of surprise shot over the warden's face then he bowed to her. "A pleasure, milady. A true pleasure!"

"She's here to visit one of your prisoners."

Straightening, the look of surprise turned to one of unease on the warden's beefy face. "A certain relative of your husband-to-be, milady?" He glanced at Cair. "Surely not."

"She is still here?" Tessa asked.

"Aye, milady but..." The warden shifted from one foot to the other and began wringing his hands. "She is not fit company for such as yourself. She is not sane."

"Nevertheless, I must speak with her, Warden," she said in a firm voice.

"Can you not dissuade her, your highness?" the warden asked, his agitation increasing. "Nothing good could come of her talking to Rede."

"She's made her mind up, Karl, and so it will be. If you are concerned with milady's safety, place the Rede woman in high restraint."

"I will," the warden said. "I most definitely will, but I want to go on record as saying I think this a very ill-conceived idea."

"So noted," Cair said. "Now please make the arrangements. We need to leave as soon as possible."

"Aye, your highness," the warden said, his voice revealing his despair. "I'll see to it. If you like, you may wait in my office until we've brought her down to the interrogation room." He looked almost ready to cry. "Would you like some refreshment? A cup of Bhrasail coffee perhaps?"

Cair looked at Tessa who shook her head. "No thanks. We'll be fine."

"Sergeant Murphy, show his grace and the lady to my office," the warden said as he hurried away.

"This way, your grace," the sergeant said in a respectful tone.

Less than twenty minutes later—as Tessa paced the warden's office and Cair sat watching her—the door opened and the warden came in, blotting his face with a handkerchief.

"She is having a bad day, I'm afraid," he said. "Would you please reconsider seeing her, your ladyship?"

Unaccustomed to being addressed by such a lofty title, Tessa's first instinct was to look around the room to see whom the man was addressing. When the prince cleared his throat, she swung her gaze toward him.

"I believe Lady Tessa has her mind set on seeing the prisoner," he said as he pushed out of his chair. "Would you like me to accompany you, dearling?"

Tessa shook her head. "No, Cair," she said. "This is something I need to do alone."

"Not a wise decision," the warden insisted with a shake of his head. "I must again protest, your ladyship."

"Just take her to Rede," Cair ordered. "I take it the woman is restrained?"

"Securely, your grace," the warden replied, wiping his face again. "Hand, foot and throat."

"Then leave them alone to speak in private."

The warden's eyes widened. "Your grace, I can't..."

"You can and you will," Cair snapped. "No harm will come to milady. That I can promise you."

* * * * *

The stench that permeated the interrogation room was vile as Tessa entered. It stank of urine, unwashed body and something so rancid she could not identify it. Each unsettling odor came from the middle-aged woman who sat strapped to an uncomfortable-looking wooden chair. Her wrists were strapped to the chair arms, her ankles to the chair legs. A thick strip of metal circled her neck to anchor her head to the tall back of the chair.

"You sure you want me to leave you alone with her, your ladyship?" the guard inquired, shooting the prisoner a hateful look.

There was a heavy mesh screen that ran from ceiling to floor, bisecting the center of the room, separating Tessa's upholstered chair from the bare wooden one upon which sat the woman who had raised Rynlyn.

"I'm sure," Tessa said.

"The chair is bolted to the floor so there's no way she can get to the screen, but it would be best if you didn't get too close to it in any case," the guard warned.

"I understand," Tessa replied.

The guard hovered for a moment then shrugged, closing the door behind him as he departed. Silence settled on the rank room like a sodden cloak.

"I am Tessa Gervasee," she told the woman who was glaring at her with narrowed eyes. "I am Rynlyn's betrothed."

A slow, merciless smile pulled at the older woman's lips to reveal rotting rows of teeth where some were missing like collapsed grave markers in an abandoned cemetery. A rough, red tongue swept over the woman's cracked lips before she spoke.

"The little bastard know you're here?" came the croaking words that made it plain the woman rarely used her voice.

"No," Tessa answered. "He doesn't."

Straggly white hair wisped around Sgian Rede's wrinkled gray face. The prison pallor almost made her flesh meld into the shapeless gray sack she wore that passed for a uniform. Dark stains mottled the fabric, which was torn at the shoulder and hem.

"Then why are you here?" Sgian asked. Her fever-ridden eyes narrowed even more. "What you want with me?"

Tessa took a seat on the edge of the soft chair, perching there with her legs bent at a ladylike angle, hands in her lap. She slipped unnoticed into the other woman's mind to find the truth but quickly withdrew for the miasma roiling inside that withered organ had caught her unaware. She put a hand to her chest.

"Ah, one of them with the Sight! Demon spawn, you are. I should have known the boy would wind up with an evil one," Sgian said. She cackled and the sound made the hair stir on Tessa's arms. "Seen the Gatherer hovering over me, did you?"

The source of the rancid odor was now clear to Tessa. The woman sitting before her was being eaten alive by a virulent rampaging disease that was multiplying at an alarming rate. Tissue, bloodstream and every organ in the woman's dying body were seething with the cancer.

"I don't have long as you can see," Sgian told her. "Death can't come soon enough for me!"

The pain had to be excruciating. Though she was emaciated, her flesh pulled taut along her bones, she showed no outward signs of suffering. Perhaps the prison healer was medicating her.

Tessa prayed that was the case.

"So you think you know the wherefore of it, do you? Came here to get it straight in your pretty little mind?"

Tessa shook her head. She was loath to delve into the seething mass of disease-ridden tissue that encompassed Sgian's brain. That one touch had left her feeling unclean, as though she were in need of a bath. She did not care to probe the woman's mind again.

"He's not your biological son," she said instead, annoyed that her voice wavered.

Sgian's wreck of a mouth spread in a knowing leer. "Did you think he was?"

"No, the Burgon would have remembered you when he came to the colony if he'd ever..." She lifted a hand and turned it. "You know."

"Fucked me?" Sgian asked then cackled again. "No, the great one never fucked me but he had met me. He just didn't remember."

"Met you where?"

Sgian sniffed. "What's in it for me if I tell you the wherefore of it?"

Tessa considered the question very carefully before she asked her next question.

"What do you want for telling me?" Tessa countered.

"Death," was the immediate answer. Something moved in the steady, beady glare aimed at Tessa. "Now. Today."

Tessa shook her head. "That is something I can't give you."

"Pay the guard," Sgian said. "He'll slip me what it takes." She smacked her lips. "Happens all the time when families got money to pay the guards. Warden looks the other way." She cocked one thin shoulder. "One less trap to feed as he sees it."

No one should suffer what Tessa was sure Sgian Rede had to be suffering though the older woman hid it well enough, and in the Cosmic press of things no doubt deserved every twinge of pain the megaverse sent her way. Pride was what she'd seen moving behind the watery orbs. Pride but also a rampaging need so frantic to end the pain it had a life of its own.

"You'll tell me the truth?"

"I may be many things, your ladyship, but I have always told the truth!" Sgian said with a hiss. "Wouldn't know any other way."

"Yet you lived a lie, making the world believe Rynlyn was your son."

Sgian snorted. "Everyone at the Colony knew he wasn't! They knew whose son he was and he suffered for it."

Tessa flinched at those words. "What happened to his mother?"

"Pay the guard," the other woman said, clamping her lips together.

For a long moment Tessa stared at Sgian. It was a decision for which she knew the Cosmic Forces would eventually make her pay. For every act of mercy, blessings were returned to the sender threefold but for every work of evil, malevolence was returned without leniency tenfold. But she had to know and if the only way to do that was to hurry Sgian Rede into the arms of the Gatherer, so be it.

Tessa rose to her feet, went to the door and knocked. When the guard answered, she spoke to him. He looked past her then nodded.

"Aye, your ladyship. She told you the right of it. For a hundred quoons I can give her a boost of the Briar. The warden won't care if the old hag meets her finish this day."

"Then procure whatever is needed to end her life," Tessa told him.

Beyond the guard, Cair Ghrian stood leaning against the wall. He straightened when he heard Tessa's words. He glanced at the guard who was ambling away.

"You sure you want to do that?" the prince questioned.

"Aye," Tessa said. "She'll not answer any other way."

"Want me to question her?" he asked. As a Reaper, he had abilities that could make it easier to gather the information Tessa sought.

"No, your grace," Tessa said. "I would not put you through it." She let the situation flow from her mind to his, watched him flinch, and then saw him nod as he leaned against the wall once more, accepting her decision, though from the expression on his handsome face she knew it didn't sit well with him.

Gently closing the door, Tessa walked back to the chair, but instead of sitting, she went to the screen and hooked her fingers through the thick mesh.

"You're a brave one, you are," Sgian said with a burst of derision.

"Let me be clear with you, Madame Rede. I love Rynlyn very much," Tessa said. "I would do anything for him. He needs to know the truth of his heritage."

Surprise flickered over Sgian's haggard face. "He don't know?"

"Neither does the Burgon," Tessa said.

"I'd like to be a fly on the wall when the great one finds out!" Sgian said with a hateful smirk. "All those years wasted when he could have been coddling the brat."

"They are very close," Tessa said. "They have much affection for one another. Now they will know why."

Despite her restraints, Sgian managed to lift her shoulders as though such a thing had no meaning to her whatsoever.

"Is his mother still alive?"

"Deader than a doornail," Sgian said.

In a way that was a relief to hear, Tessa thought. If Ryn's mother were still alive, she'd have to be found, brought to him. She wasn't sure he needed such a thing in his life.

"Who was she?"

For the next half-hour the older woman gave Tessa the particulars of Rynlyn's birth and the wherefore of how he'd wound up with her and her husband at Pannys Sheshaght. The more she heard, the sicker Tessa became until she backed away from the screen and held her hands up to plead for a surcease to the wretched story of Rynlyn's life with Sgian.

"I suppose he wasn't a bad child as boys go," she heard Sgian say. "But he was always underfoot, always trying to please me, bringing me weeds he called flowers." She snorted. "Can you imagine such crap?"

Tessa looked up as tears ran down her cheeks. "He just wanted to be loved."

Another strange movement passed through Sgian's gaze then vanished. She shrugged.

"That's something we didn't give out at Pannys Sheshaght."

"That's something I intend to see he gets in abundance from here on out," Tessa vowed through clenched teeth.

"Suit yourself," the other woman said. "No skin off my nose."

The guard opened the door behind Sgian and entered with a vac-syringe in his hand. He looked to Tessa.

"Is there anything else you want to say?" Tessa asked.

Sgian Rede cut her eyes to the side in an attempt to see the guard. She smacked her lips as though awaiting a feast. "He got the venefice?"

"Aye," Tessa agreed. "He has the poison."

"Then you tell the brat I don't regret a single thing I done to him. Tell him..." She smacked her lips again. "Tell him I enjoyed every minute of it!"

Tessa drew in a breath. The bitch was about to die, yet her last words were meant to add further hurt to a man who did not deserve it, had never deserved it. She looked up at the guard, her eyes filled with vengeance.

"Is there someone else in this place who deserves a surcease of this wretched life?"

The guard nodded. "I know of one such."

Tessa lifted her chin. "Then give that person the Briar and my wishes for an easy journey with the Gatherer." She pointed her finger at Sgian. "That one deserves every twinge of pain the gods can give her!"

"No!" Sgian screeched. "You can't do that! You can't do it!" She struggled against her bonds. "Give me the venefice! I want the venefice! You promised! Let me die! I want to die!"

Tessa opened the door to the frenzied shrieks and screams and shouts tearing from the woman who had put Rynlyn through hell when he was a boy and never looked back. The loud curses and bellows of rage were cut off by the closing of the thick iron door.

"You're allowing her to live," the prince said.

"I'm allowing her to atone," Tessa said.

Cair Ghrian slipped into Tessa's mind, took from it what had transpired in the room. He blinked, his mouth sagging open, eyebrows elevated. "His son?" he questioned. "Ryn is Ryden's son?"

"He is," Tessa said. She had not attempted to block his probing but rather allowed him to see the entirety of the situation. She was not surprised when he staggered back as the full knowledge hit him.

"By the gods," he said, raking a hand through his dark hair. He shook his head with disbelief. "If that witch isn't dead by the time Ryden learns of this, he'll be in her face with fangs bared."

"Thankfully she'll be dead long before he learns of it," Tessa said. "The burden and guilt of her death doesn't need to ride upon his shoulders."

"He wouldn't care," Cair told her.

"I would," she said. "And so would Rynlyn."

"I'll not speak a word of it, milady," the prince swore.

"I wish to the gods I didn't have to speak of it, but they need to know," she said, wiping at the tears that were once again streaking down her ashen cheeks.

Cair went to her, took her into his arms in a brotherly fashion and held her as she broke down, sobbing for the horror Rynlyn had endured at the Redes' hands.

"I'll be there if you need help," he said. Clumsily he patted her back, stroked her hair. This wasn't his woman and a part of him felt a twinge of guilt for holding her, but he knew his lady would not hold it against him.

Tessa nodded against his wide chest, wishing the man who was holding her was Rynlyn.

* * * * *

The Burgon lay in the bottom bunk across from Rynlyn with his hands laced beneath his head. He was staring up at the metal support of the upper bunk, using his Reaper-enhanced night vision to count the rivets in the piece. He'd counted each one individually then diagonally left to right before counting right to left, around the perimeter—every way he could think to count the gods-forsaken things and he was bored.

Bored and tired, but suffering the sleeplessness that was a sad characteristic of his Reaper status.

He sighed, shifted so he could bring his knees up. He yawned then began counting the rivets again from the center in a boxed circle outward.

"Don't!"

The harsh command spoken in a voice that was not that of a grown man made the emperor jump. He snapped his head toward Ryn, his eyes narrowed with concern.

"Please!"

That word had been uttered with such sheer hopelessness and pain it was like a wood sliver driven beneath the fingernail of the Burgon's heart. He sat up, swung his legs off the bunk and padded in his stocking feet over to Ryn's bunk.

"Ryn?" he called, not wanting to startle the young man who was now thrashing upon the lumpy mattress. "Ryn, wake up, son."

Having once heard that shaking a person in the throes of a nightmare was not a good thing, Ryden Bakari instead stood beside the bunk and closed his eyes, letting his powers ease as gently as possible into the younger man's disturbed dreams. His intention was to issue a soft, quiet command to wake, but what was happening in Rynlyn Rede's mind at that moment so shocked the Burgon all the man could do was gasp.

Pain was engulfing Ryn. Pain so brutal, so intense, so prolonged it had turned him into a whimpering husk of a boy. His naked body bruised, battered, bleeding, he lay stretched out on his belly on a table with his wrists and ankles bound. Above him was a man who laughed as he bent over the restrained boy.

"Please don't!" Ryn screamed.

Realizing what the man was doing to the boy, the Burgon hissed like a cornered viper. A good thing or not, he reached out to shake Ryn, snapping the young warrior out of that hideous dream state in which he had been thrust.

"Ryn, wake up!" he demanded.

Ryn's eyes flew open and he sprang to a sitting position, dragging great gulps of breath into his lungs.

"You were having a bad dream," the Burgon said, struggling to keep the tears prickling behind his eyes from releasing.

Ryn's face was slick with sweat beneath his mask, his eyes wild as he turned them toward the older man. For a moment it seemed he had no idea who was speaking to

him, but then he took a ragged breath and put a forearm to his face to wipe away the sweat that was seeping from beneath the eyeholes and at the crease of his lips.

"I'm sorry I woke you," he said in a wavering voice.

"You didn't. I wasn't asleep. Now lie down," the emperor commanded, using his Reaper voice that ensured immediate obedience.

Ryn shuddered once then lay back. He put his palms to his face and scrubbed until the Burgon laid a restraining hand over them to stop the action.

"Put your hands down, son."

Ryn moved his hands to his chest, the Burgon's resting atop, caressing him.

"Forget the dream and close your eyes."

The command pressed hard into Ryn's subconscious, allowing no denial.

Rynlyn closed his eyes though his breathing was still raw, labored.

"Breathe slow and deep now. Let your heart rate slow and your blood cease to rush so rapid."

The quick, ragged breathing returned to normal. The heartbeat slowed and the blood began to flow smoothly through the young man's veins.

"Now I want you to sleep," the Burgon told him. "Sleep deep, and once you are completely under I want you to dream. You will dream of your lady."

A ghost of a smile touched Ryn's lips.

"Tessa," he whispered.

"Aye, Tessa," the Burgon agreed. "Pretty Tessa with her purple eyes and her gentle hands. Do you see her?"

Ryn's words were slurred for he was falling beneath the intense push of the Burgon's mental powers.

"Aye, I see her."

The emperor set the stage for the dream.

"Do you see the waterfall in the background? The exotic birds flying, their jewel colors shining in the light? Do you smell the jasmine wafting through the air?"

Ryn sighed. "Aye."

"Then take your lady to the waterfall and make slow, sweet love to her."

"Love," Ryn repeated, sinking further into sleep.

"Aye, son," the Burgon said. "Love. The love waiting for you in Tessa's arms."

Reaching up to run the base of the palm of his free hand over his moist eyes, Ryden Bakari waited until he was sure the young man was far under the mantle of his dreams before he eased his hand from Ryn's and stepped back.

For a long time he watched Ryn sink deeper and deeper until there was a soft, anticipatory smile on the young warrior's face. The Burgon turned away and went back

to his bunk, sitting down with his elbows on his knees, his hands threaded through the hair at the side of his head.

Bitter tears crept unchecked down Ryden Bakari's cheeks. He had not cried since the deaths of his beloved wife and children, had never expected to again. What he had seen—the ugliness, the hideousness—in Ryn's memory hurt him so fiercely he wanted something to kill.

* * * * *

Her flesh was warm with the sunlight that kissed her body. The blue-black sheen of her long hair gleamed in an errant beam filtering through the canopy of trees overhead as she walked beside him. The soft hem of her silk gown brushed against the side of his leg. Ahead of them, the undulating waterfall flowed into Lake Cullasovh, sending mists of spray high into the air. Above their heads multicolored parrots flitted from branch to branch and around them the scent of jasmine filled the air.

Their fingers entwined, Ryn brought her hand to his lips to place a fleeting kiss upon the edge of her palm. Her smile as she looked up at him was radiant, filled with love and tenderness and joy.

"The Joining takes place before the waterfall," she said. "At midnight. There will be hundreds of torches in tall brass candlesticks ringing the lake to light the ceremony, solar lights in the trees to add soft glow. The flames will reflect in the water and be so beautiful. Around the small platform upon which we will be standing in the midst of the water, there is a power source that will shine a soft blue light up through the waves to illuminate the three of us—you and me and the priest." She pointed to a concrete jetty that led out to the waterfall. "That is how we will reach the *scourcsa caudell*."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"The Joining Place."

She guided him to the jetty then out into the lovely little lake. Water lapped gently over the four-foot-wide walkway at the shoreline and covered it completely six feet out into the lake. The path to the *scourcsa caudell* slanted downward at a slow angle until the waters were up to Tessa's knees as they waded through it.

"Everything in our culture is based around the water," she said. "It is sacred to us."

He nodded for they had reached the platform upon which one day he would claim her for his bride. With hands linked, they looked at the soaring waterfall beyond, the sound of its tumbling waters strangely muted. A fine mist pebbled their arms and faces.

Ryn pulled her into his arms. "You are sacred to me," he said.

Her lips were sweet as he caressed them with his own. There was ecstasy in the dueling of their tongues, the mingling of their breaths. His body was tight to hers, his arms around her protectively, possessively. The water lapped against their legs.

"Take me there," she whispered against his mouth. "Stake your claim there."

He knew she meant the waterfall and swept her up into his arms, stepping off the platform to wade out the cascading waters, their clothes dissolving as they went.

For centuries the people of her race had Joined at Lake Cullasovh. Before gods and man their sacred unions had been blessed in the waters. When the ceremony was finished, the vows made, the Joining words spoken over them, the couple would step down into the gentle waters then make their way beneath the sheltering veil of the falls – there to consummate their wedding.

Beneath the falling waters he carried her and into the deeper recesses of the grotto that led into Mount Varanac. The mountain hung over the crystalline lake like a sentinel. Up eight steps carved by nature into a pathway that led to the sacred place, the Sacred Cave. It was not lost upon Rynlyn Rede that the pathway with its warm waters and dark, slick stones were a metaphor for the feminine channel into which he would soon be sliding.

The grotto was bathed in rosy light that filtered down in shifting sunbeams from a natural skylight thousands of feet above. Massive soft white limestone formations scalloped the walls of the cavern like bridal lace draping from the soaring ceiling.

“It is called the Cathedral,” she told him.

To the rear of the cavern was a smaller body of water that lay with its mirrored surface as still as glass. Around it was sugar-white sands that looked as soft as silk. Here – for centuries untold – the men of Tessa’s tribe had laid their mates.

He carried her to the edge of that motionless little lake and knelt on one knee, placing her gently, reverently upon the silken sand. He slid his arms from beneath her then stretched out alongside her, his hard body pressing against her length. His head braced on a fist, he stared down into her lovely face.

“Have you any idea how much I love you, Tessa?”

“As much as I love you?” she countered, reaching up to cup his handsome face.

Ryn turned his face into her palm to place a kiss.

“Seal our love, Rynlyn,” she encouraged. “Seal it here and now before the gods who are smiling down on us.”

He eased over her, slowly pushing her legs apart, settling between them, his cock hard and slick and weeping with need. She encircled him in her arms and he dipped his head to claim her taut nipple. Her fingers threaded through his hair to hold him to her breast as he suckled.

His tongue flicked over the sweet little bud. He drew it between his teeth and nibbled lightly, smiling as she writhed beneath him. He felt one long, shapely leg hook over his calf a moment before she ran the sole of her foot up and down the muscle. He switched to pay homage to her other breast, molding it with his hand, caressing it tenderly.

His cock burned with need. It throbbed, but he took his time, planting little kisses up her chest and neck until he could press his tongue into the spiral of her ear.

"Rynlyn," she said, shivering as his warm breath teased her.

"Tessa," he replied. He slanted his mouth over hers with such a heady kiss he thought he might combust with the heat pooling in his groin.

He pushed her legs farther apart with his knees, positioned his aching cock at her entrance then shifted his hands beneath her rump to lift her to him. She brought her legs up to clamp around his waist, circled his neck with her slender arms as he deepened the kiss—loath to take his mouth from hers as he arched his hips forward.

Heat—sweet and wet and intoxicating—enveloped his shaft. It clung to him. It tightened around him. It pulled him in. It beckoned deeper penetration.

He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth even as he slid deeper into her sheath. The feeling was sublime, like warm silk, and when it tensed around him, he knew absolute bliss.

"I could stay inside you forever," he said against her mouth.

"I could let you," she responded, her arms tightening around his neck.

With slow cadence he pressed forward, withdrew. Went as deep as their bodies would allow then eased back even slower. Her inner muscles squeezed him so sweetly he groaned with the sheer pleasure of it.

Her legs clamped harder around his waist—a sure sign she was more than ready for him to take his lovemaking up a notch or two.

Rotating his hips, he thrust into her at a quicker pace. His cock was rigid with need, throbbing. Their tongues did a mating dance of their own as he increased his speed, sliding her along the soft sand beneath them.

Tessa swept the tip of her tongue between his front teeth and his lip, and he shuddered, his thrusting going wild as he bucked against her.

Harder.

Faster.

With more heat and power and deliberation he took her, straining against her, lifting her ass higher as he plumbed the very depths of her sheath.

His blood was racing. His heart thundering. Their bodies were slick with sweat where their flesh touched. She was squeezing the breath from his lungs, devouring his mouth, sucking the very soul from his body. Frantic to ease the rampaging heat in his loins, to pour his seed deep within her, he hefted her higher still, his toes digging into the sand. When he came—spilling into her with such force he nearly blacked out from the strength of his release—he jerked his mouth from hers, threw his head back and howled. Around him her vaginal muscles were clamping, rippling, squeezing, vibrating and her own climax made her cry out with abandon as she came.

"You are mine!" he shouted, fiercely thrusting one last time into her hot wetness.

"Aye," he heard her agree. "I am yours. Now and forever."

Rynlyn sighed in his sleep, turning his back to the Burgon.

“Dream it again, little warrior,” Ryden Bakari said softly. “Dream it again.”

Chapter Six

Tessa was in awe of the palace on Aduaidh Prime. The black marble walls soared upward five stories in the central solarium, the floor bore inlaid onyx marble spokes radiating out from the gold-veined imperial seal set within the dark red agate base. Tumbling down from huge copper pots hanging from the domed skylight overhead were lush, thick *scorapella* vines with their shiny oval leaves alive with minute hairs—tiny aerial roots—twisting and turning. The air was aromatic with a sweet, spicy scent given off by the friction of the hairs rubbing together.

"They only grow here on Aduaidh Prime," Cair told her of the vines at which she was staring. "People have taken cuttings and tried to grow them elsewhere, but the vines wither and die. The scientists thought it was because they needed Aduaidh soil, but even then the vines refused to grow. Finally they decided it was something in the atmosphere of this planet, something not found elsewhere in the megaverse that is required for the vines to thrive."

"I've never seen anything like it," she said. She placed a fingertip on the undulating aerial roots and a burst of wondrous scent blossomed around her. The root lovingly wrapped around her finger for a moment then withdrew.

"There are those who believe the vine is sentient," the prince continued. "When a child touches it, the entire vine will tremble as though it is laughing and then curl around the child's shoulder for a moment. I've even heard—whether it's true or not—that the vine will actually tickle a child to make him laugh." He stroked the vine. "That's why they nicknamed it the giggle vine."

"I wish you'd been there for my Rynlyn when he was a child," she told the plant.

As though the plant understood her soft words, it moved to gently touch her cheek for a fleeting moment.

"If you want to see the memorial park we'd best hurry," Cair said, "while we still have light."

Tessa nodded. She looked back at the vines as the prince led her toward an elaborately carved archway, the panels of which were carved with swirling patterns and other geometrical designs. The standing columns to either side had been fashioned as sitting dragons with tails extending backward along the bullnose base cap.

When the original imperial palace had been destroyed in the attack engineered by Riordan O'Shay, those who had died in the implosion had been interred in a newly built memorial park. Just beyond the huge double glass doors that led outside to an immaculately kept greensward, the park bore row after row of simple white marble headstones sown uniformly amidst beautiful shrubs and flowering plants, trees and meandering reflection streams, but in the very center beneath four huge weeping

willow trees brought with tender care from Chrystallus were the black marble monuments of the royal family. In the midst of the two dozen ebon granite stones was a large one that bore the legend – *The Empress Anastasia, beloved wife of the Burgon*.

It was to this gravestone to show her respect that Tessa made her way, a single white rose clutched in her hand. She approached the marker with reverence and with no small amount of sadness.

She knelt before the stone, bowed her head and began the prayer for the departed.

* * * * *

Tired to the depths of his being, Rynlyn flopped down on the bunk with a devout wish that he could claw the clinging mask from his face and scratch until his heart was content. Working in the cargo bay, he was drenched with sweat and his muscles ached so horribly his legs were quivering. He hated the claustrophobic press of the artificial skin, the smell of it, the heat of it, the very existence of it. Salty sweat oozed out of the eye openings to blind him. It seeped around the edges pressed tight to his mouth, trickled under his ears. He kept swiping a handkerchief over the mask covering his face to maintain the illusion he was sweating as hard as everyone else, kept his face averted, though no one paid that much attention to him.

"Not accustomed to manual labor, are you, boy?" said Rafe Cantrell, the older of the two other men who shared quarters with Ryn and the man who called himself Zane Webb but who in fact was the most influential man in the megaverse.

"It's not that," Ryn said. "I'm not used to the heat."

"Aye, well, you'd best get used to it," Anton Bas'Rith sneered. "The Brúidúil Quadrant is a shit-hole not much better than the penal colony on Hell-Twelve."

"Never been to either," Zane Webb commented. He was stretched out on his bunk with his legs crossed. "But the heat don't bother me none." He nudged his chin toward Ryn—who was going by the name Dax Nym. "The lad is from Virago and you know how cold that gods-forsaken planet can get."

"Ain't been there myself, but I've heard it snows four hundred out of the four hundred six days a year," Rafe commented.

"Four hundred and five out of four hundred six," Ryn mumbled. "The only day it doesn't snow is the day it sleets."

Rafe laughed. "I like you, boy."

"Speak for yourself," Anton quipped.

"What's your problem, Bas'Rith?" Ryn demanded, narrowing his eyes at the man who was only a few years older than he.

Anton's lip quirked but he didn't reply as he left the room on his way to begin his shift.

"Don't pay any heed to Anton," Rafe said. "He's a bastard on a good day. Hasn't gotten over the Coalition giving in to the Alliance." He thought about that. "Or was it

the other way 'round?" He shrugged. "Don't remember and don't care. The war ain't nothing to me. I'm neutral in it."

"You don't want peace?" the man called Zane inquired.

"Peace only lasts as long as there are men who have all they want," Rafe replied. "As soon as one man decides he wants something more or wants what someone else has got, the peace will be no more. Been that way since time began. Some men, like the Burgon, always get what they want and are willing to fight to get it. Peace is just a breather in between wars."

"Hard way to look at things," Zane said, cutting his eyes over to Ryn. "You have something against the Aduaidh emperor?"

"Aye, but practical, and no, he's as good a leader as we've ever had. Yet not even he can stop the wars altogether. I doubt any mortal man can."

"Didn't I hear he's a Reaper now?" Zane inquired. "If that's true, he's no longer mortal."

Rafe's brows drew together. "Aye, I recall hearing that too." He scratched at his bewhiskered jaw. "Well, then maybe the war will finally end one day if he's still at the helm."

After Rafe had departed, Ryn turned his head to look at the Burgon. "You think the Burgon will end the war one day?"

"I believe he'll move heaven and hell in trying," came the soft answer. Ry drew his legs up, braced his hands behind his head, knocking his knees together like a bored child. "I wish they had a gym on this flying hunk of metal. I feel the need to run."

Rynlyn made a rude sound. "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you're enjoying all this hard labor."

"I am," the Burgon said, grinning. "I love tough workouts. They keep me at the top of my game so when I finally come face-to-face with O'Shay, I can tear the bastard stem to stern. By the time we reach the Brúidúil Quadrant, you'll have more muscle definition than before and you'll have lost some of that baby fat around your middle."

"Baby fat?" Ryn looked down at his belly, gripped a bit of loose flesh at his hip. He scowled. "Damn, how'd that get there?" he asked.

"Too much chair sitting and not enough weight lifting," his companion stated. "Think of your work on this ship as strenuous exercise and you'll get through it easier."

"Huh," Ryn snorted then sighed. He flung an arm over his eyes and within moments he was asleep.

"Dream of your lady," the Burgon whispered. He closed his eyes, sending his thoughts far from where he lay. "And she will dream of you."

* * * * *

When she'd finished with her bath, Tessa crawled beneath the satin coverlet, snuggled into the pale green silk sheets and thrust her clasped hands beneath the plump pillow. The suite she'd been allotted was reserved for visiting heads of state and was beautiful. She lay there sweeping her gaze over the elegant furnishings, the brocade draperies, the thick wool carpet, the lovely wallpaper and superbly turned moldings on the walls and ceiling. She'd never seen anything as lush and striking as this sumptuous room. A girl – she thought with a sigh – could get addicted to such a place.

"I wonder what Rynlyn's home is like," she said aloud, and then frowned. "Does he even have one?"

The chances were good he didn't. Most warrior captains lived onboard their vessels with the occasional shore leave taking them to such places as the three pleasure ships or back to their homeworlds. Very few had quarters off the space stations, and those who did were married. The thought of living on his ship held no real appeal for her, but then again being apart from him held even less. Perhaps they could compromise.

"Aye," she said. "If he doesn't have a place, we'll buy one and we can spend our free time there. Away from the ship and his crew where we will have privacy."

Free time was the real issue, she knew. Warriors had very little free time at their disposal, and if they were halfway around the megaverse when that time was allotted to them, it didn't make sense to journey to a faraway home to spend a few days of down time.

She sighed. So the ship it would be. Yawning, she wondered what that would be like...

He came through the door looking tired and depressed. He tried to smile but it seemed to take too much effort.

"Hard day, my love?" she asked. She stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek then put her hands to his tie to work the knot loose.

"Will this bloody war never end?" he asked, and she could hear the disheartenment in his deep voice.

"One day," she said as she slid his tie from around his neck. She tugged the uniform shirt from his trousers. "What you need is a snifter of brandy and a long rubdown."

He slipped his arms around her, trapping her hands against his chest. "What I need is my woman."

She smiled. "You have her, warrior."

His kiss was soft and tender. She could feel the exhaustion draining him of his strength so she gently pushed him away so she could undo the buttons of his shirt. He hung his head and closed his eyes as she peeled the shirt from him, unbuckled his belt, unclasped the button of his fly.

"Go into the bedroom and take your boots off. I'll be in with your brandy."

She heard him sigh, watched him walk away with his shoulders slumped. When she brought his libation, he was sitting dejectedly on their bed, his boots positioned like good little warriors side by side at the foot, socks draped over the sides.

"I'm so tired, Tessa," he told her. "I could sleep for a week."

She came to him and slipped the unbuttoned shirt from his shoulders, had him stand so she could tug his trousers off.

"Lie down, dearling," she said as placed the snifter of brandy and a wet washcloth on the bedside table.

Wearily he did as she ordered, scooting up in the bed on his side. She heard him grunt then a long, low groan escaped his slightly parted lips as he closed his eyes.

"Turn over."

Naked against the rough spread, he eased himself up then stretched out on his belly with his hands beside his head, his right cheek pressed into the pillow. She slipped off her gown and crawled onto the bed, flung a bare leg over his rump then sat upon him.

"Tickles," he said, and she knew he was referring to the sculpted array of curls at the juncture of her legs that were now grazing the crack of his ass.

"Complain, complain, complain," she said, and bent forward with her hands to the taut muscles at the flare of his shoulders.

"Gods," he moaned as she began working the stiffness from him.

For half an hour she plied the tense flesh of his upper and lower back, his thighs and calves then worked each toe individually before flexing his ankles in turn. He was so quiet she thought he might have fallen asleep.

"You still with me, warrior?" she asked.

"I'm a puddle of pudding, but aye, I'm here, wench," he mumbled.

She eased off him, ordered him to turn to his back and when he did, she moved between his spread legs, bent over and took his limp shaft into her mouth.

That made his eyes pop up, his mouth drop open and his head rise. She looked at him through her lashes as she suckled his flesh, cupped his balls.

"You've an hour to stop that," he said in a thick voice before sliding his hands into her long hair.

She swept her tongue over and around his cock, dipped the tip into the slit, swirled it down the hardening length of him. She licked him, suckled, nibbled then took him deep down her throat as her tongue caressed him in a long, slow roll. She kneaded his balls. She ran the tip of her fingernail over the puckered rim of his anus, and when he jumped, she laughed.

"Bad little wench," he accused while his hands stroked her head.

She nudged his thighs farther apart with her shoulders and began a slow, rhythmic manipulation of his flesh. With her hand tight at the base of his cock, she lifted and lowered her mouth upon him, drawing firmly on his flesh, suckling him hard.

His hands tensed in her hair, fingers pressing into her scalp. His heels dug into the mattress as he thrust his hips up in offering to her demanding mouth.

Tessa slid one hand beneath him and her middle finger into the tight little opening, causing him to jerk.

"Tessa!" he cried out just a second before he came. His hands gripped her head to hold her steady as his cum shot down her throat. The reflexive action of her swallowing made him shudder several times before he collapsed like a deflated balloon.

Easing out of him, releasing his cock, she leaned across him, took the washcloth and wiped her hand. All the while her eyes were fused with his.

"I love you," he said, pushing himself up in the bed.

"The feeling is returned," she said, laying the washcloth aside. She moved to sit beside him, their backs against the headboard. "Drink your brandy. It will help you relax."

"If I relax any more than I am at this moment, I'll be nothing more but a glob on the sheet," he told her, but swiped the snifter from the bedside table. He took a long drink of the fiery Chalean liquor then rested the base against his bare belly.

She leaned over to lay her head on his shoulder, lacing her fingers with his, putting a long leg over his, snuggling against him.

"I love the taste of you," she said, and saw his drained cock flex at her words.

"The feeling is returned," he said, setting the snifter aside. He slid down on the bed. "And I need that taste right now."

She smiled.

* * * * *

Whatever Rynlyn dreamt was apparently quite intoxicating for the young warrior was smiling, his fingers scrambling against the wool blanket upon which he was lying. The Burgon watched the tender smile for the longest time before finally swinging his legs from the bunk. Quietly, he slipped on his work boots, plucked his shirt from the footboard of the metal bunk and eased out of the room. He wasn't the least bit sleepy and was as antsy as an expectant father as he made his way along the mining ship's corridors. Making his way to the galley that was open twenty-four hours a day, he poured a cup of strong coffee.

"Can't sleep, Webb?"

The emperor of Aduaidh Prime looked around to see the captain of the *Meaineyder*.

"My muscles won't relax," the man called Webb replied. "I was afraid I'd keep Dax awake tossing and turning." He took a sip of the scalding hot coffee. "What's keeping you up this time of the morning, Captain?"

Captain Jonas Peel poured himself a cup of coffee then motioned to a nearby table, indicating Webb should join him. "This gods-be-damned war," he said. "We got word around midnight that there was a massacre at a Cengusian outpost. All dead."

The Burgon flinched. Cengus was one of the planets in the Idimmu Galaxy of the Aduaidh Quadrant, a close neighbor of his. Many planets had the Storian technology of the Net—high-level force field that kept attackers at bay and inhabitants from being extracted from the planet's surface—or something closely akin to it but the Cengus High Council had decided the technology wasn't worth the high asking price and had declined the purchase. Unfortunately, it left them vulnerable to attack.

"The acting Burgon sent troops in to take out the marauders and they managed to do so but at a great loss, however something good came of it all."

"What was that?"

"The New Alliance was able to capture Reikia Nolz. He's in custody and on his way to Riezell under heavy guard."

Ryden Bakari sat back in his chair. Nolz was the number two man within the New Coalition. His capture was indeed good news. Putting the man in a high-security cell would go a long way in instilling a major disruption of NC troops.

"I hope they hang the bastard," Captain Peel declared.

"I imagine they will," the Burgon said. "He's responsible for a lot of death and destruction."

"The thing is, we were warned there might be an attack on the *Meaineyder*. Iron plate is in high demand by the New Coalition since the New Alliance is whipping their asses and taking out their ships left and right. They need plate to reinforce their disabled hulls. We're being sent an armed escort of starcruisers to get us to the Brúidúil Quadrant. They should be joining up with us within the hour."

"That's reassuring," the Burgon commented. He took another few sips of his coffee.

"Aye. It sets my mind at ease," the captain said then changed the subject, asking the man he knew as Webb about his homeworld and family.

For the next twenty minutes or so the two men spoke of inconsequential things, told a few jokes between them and when the vid-com called the captain back to the bridge, parted company reluctantly. The two had hit it off and Ryden Bakari made a mental note to make sure Jonas Peel was awarded the captainship of something other than a lowly mining frigate. The man had drive and ambition, but most important of all, he was loyal to the New Alliance. His words about the true Burgon made Ryden Bakari smile as he finished his coffee.

"They ought to name him high lord of the megaverse in my opinion. If it weren't for the Burgon, who knows where we'd be right now?"

"High lord of the megaverse," Ryden repeated with a chuckle. "Ain't that a kick in the ballocks?"

* * * * *

At that very moment on Staillin Major in the Brúidúil Quadrant, Riordan O'Shay stood staring into the mirror at the reflection he didn't think he'd ever get accustomed to seeing. The man looking back at him bore absolutely no resemblance whatsoever to the O'Shay who had been running from the Burgon for the last few years.

"You need to alter your face," Reikia Nolz had advised a year before when the Burgon had come much too close to capturing O'Shay. "Make yourself look completely different so no one will recognize you."

After that close shave, O'Shay had seriously begun to consider the suggestion and now—now that it was done—he hated the image grimacing back at him. It wasn't him. It was a stranger he didn't know. The only good thing about it was the Burgon wouldn't know him either.

Hissing under his breath, O'Shay turned from the mirror, considering all the drastic measures he'd taken in the last few weeks to sink deeper into camouflage. Everything he'd done had cost him a small fortune, but if it worked, he might yet escape the retribution Ryden Bakari had reserved for him.

"We will do a complete makeover," the surgeon told him. "Your own mother could bump into you and not know you when the facial reconstruction is done. Your eye color will be altered. Your vocal chords will produce an entirely different sound." He had gone on to list every nuance of change that was to be done to O'Shay's body.

But the most important change had been a complete exchange of blood. Every drop that had been in O'Shay's body had been drained and replaced with blood taken from many donors. The process had been extremely painful, debilitating, but as far as O'Shay knew nothing remained of O'Shay's original blood for the Reaper in Ryden Bakari to trace.

That wasn't the case.

What O'Shay's surgeon had not mentioned and the fugitive failed to remember was that it wasn't so much the blood the Reaper could track but the DNA coding within that blood. The flesh of O'Shay's body still held the genetic markers that would make it possible for the Burgon to sniff him out.

Irritated, unable to sleep, O'Shay left his quarters. He took the underground tram from the barracks to the processing plant where he worked as a longwall-machine operator. As Felix Braventine he'd held a position as technician, but when he'd been forced to go off-world to get the facial reconstruction done, he'd returned as Gerring Strom, cutting room lackey since the technician job had been awarded to someone else during O'Shay's long absence. Now he ran the large machines with rotating drums that automatically sheared ore and loaded it on a conveyor. It was a hot, dirty, noisy job and he hated it more than he hated Ryden Bakari.

Going into the canteen where he knew he'd find the leech at this time of morning, he jerked out a chair and straddled it. "Any news?" he barked.

The Dealachan grinned. It was a sight that never failed to turn O'Shay's stomach. Completely hairless with his shiny dome gleaming beneath the overhead lights, Seilmide Onus' colorless eyes disturbed those who looked at him for any length.

"Actually, I do have some news for you," Onus said. He lowered his voice and leaned toward O'Shay although they were the only two people in the room. "Bakari made a visit to one of the pleasure ships where he spent the night with the most expensive and sought-after whore there."

O'Shay's thick eyebrows shot up toward the snow-white hair that now covered his head—a strange, inexplicable aftereffect of the draining of all the blood from his body. "Are you sure?"

"Aye, and my source tells me this is not the first time he's visited the slut. He's fucked her on all three ships according to my informant."

Settling back in his chair, O'Shay smiled. "So he's found himself a mate, has he?"

"And that's not all," Onus stated. "Guess who else was on that pleasure ship and slept with the same snatch?" Before O'Shay could chastise the man, Onus answered his own question. "Rynlyn Rede, the war hero himself!"

"Bakari's golden boy, eh?" O'Shay queried. He thought about that for a moment then narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure they shared the same woman? If Bakari fucked her, that would make her his mate. He sure as hell wouldn't allow Rede to do her if that was the case." He shook his head. "No, I don't believe Bakari fucked her, but if he's visited her on all three ships that means she's important to him."

"Important to Rede too," Onus said. "I was told he asked the twat to join with him."

Surprise shot across O'Shay's face. "No shit," he said, and the brutal smile became a leer. "Are they still with her?"

"Nah," Onus replied. "Rede left with Bakari on the big man's Fiach."

At the mention of the megaverse-famous runabout that the company O'Shay had once controlled manufactured, the fugitive from Aduaidh Prime justice cursed.

"Where the fuck did they go?"

"Haven't found that out yet."

"Did they take the woman with them?" O'Shay demanded.

"Left her on the *Chinook* but she's on Aduaidh Prime now. Got taken there by none other than The Black Sun himself."

"Ghrian," O'Shay spat. "Another Reaper I'd love to see roasting on a slow spit."

"Rede's ship got all but destroyed by an NC starhawk. He won't be commanding it for a while so I'm thinking he's joined up with Bakari in the Burgon's search for you," Onus reported.

"And you have no idea where they are," O'Shay snapped.

"I'll find out, but I do have a bit of information you might find very interesting," Onus said on a low purr.

"That being what exactly?" O'Shay asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I have a couple of men on Aduaidh Prime. If you like, I can have them sweep up that piece of tail and bring her to you," Onus said.

O'Shay blinked. "You've got men in the palace?"

Onus nodded. "Been there for a while now. How do you think I keep such close tabs on the Burgon so you keep one step ahead of him?"

A scrape on the floor outside the canteen brought both men's heads around. Each of them stiffened for standing in the doorway was Rune Degendesch, the owner of the iron mine. The Faolchú was glaring at them.

"If you men don't have enough work to do, I can find some for you," Degendesch growled.

"I'm off-duty, milord," O'Shay said, scrambling up as though he were terrified of Degendesch. "Just shooting the breeze with Onus."

Onus got to his feet more slowly, dipping his head. "I'm on my mid-morning break, milord." He picked up the mug of tea he'd been nursing and carried it to the sink. "Best be getting back to the press."

Degendesch swept his dark amber eyes over the man who called himself Gerring Strom as Strom hurried from the canteen. The Faolchú wasn't fooled by the transformation of Riordan O'Shay any more than he knew Ryden Bakari would be. The stench of treasonous filth was still there for the discerning nose even if the outward appearance had changed so drastically.

A slow smile tugged at the werewolf's expressive mouth. He knew the Burgon was even then on his way to Staillin Major and it wouldn't be long before O'Shay paid the ultimate price for having murdered the Burgon's family.

He just had to make sure Gerring Strom was still there when justice arrived.

Chapter Seven

Tessa sat on the wrought iron bench and stared at the black granite grave marker as she had every day since she'd been at the palace. She came here each day at sunset to pay her respects to the Burgon's lady for no one else was ever about at that time of the day. She could commune with the empress in private for she imagined the woman who it was said had been buried in a solid gold casket with white ermine upholstery surrounding her was listening to her words. Never having known her own mother, never having an adult woman other than the madam of the brothel where she grew up to guide her, she longed for the direction such a woman could give her.

"I love Rynlyn more with each passing day," she said. "I dream of him each night. I can't wait for his return." She smiled. "And the return of your husband. They are such wonderful men."

Two men with rakes and burlap sacks walked past, nodding politely to her. Tessa glanced at them as they set about their duties at nearby shrubs, harvesting dead leaves to drop them into the sacks. She resented the intrusion, wondered why the two were working so late, but as they continued their task, she sighed and rose to her feet, reluctantly turning away from the memorial.

The air was crisp and she pulled the fur robe closer around her. A hint of snow was in the air and she knew once it began to fall, the entire planet would be covered in a mantle of white for the next four to five months. There would be no more daily visits to the empress's grave.

Sighing heavily, she kept her head down as she walked along the flagstone pathway that led back to the palace. She did not hear the sound of stealthy footsteps closing in on her until the rough cloth was slapped over her nose and mouth. Only then did she hear the scrape of a footstep on stone as the cloying scent of some potent drug flowed into her nostrils and mouth. She struggled at the drug invading her senses, taking away her breath and plunging her into a world of darkness. The last thing she felt was the roughness of a burlap bag sliding over her.

* * * * *

Rynlyn sat up shaking so violently his teeth were chattering. He felt cold—so cold his fingers and toes ached. Swinging his legs off the bunk, he sat there staring blankly at the bare floor wondering why his heart was pounding so dangerously in his chest.

"Dream," he said, raking a hand through his tousled hair. "Must have been a real doozy." He couldn't recall the nightmare that had thrust him so ferociously from sleep,

but the remnants of it had stayed behind to dry out his mouth and cause him to gulp air.

Getting to his feet, he stood beside the bunk for a long time until his racing heart and gasping breath slowed. His face was slick with cold sweat when he ran his palm over it.

"Shite!" he exclaimed, feeling the need to get out of the room that was suddenly closing in around him. He took two long strides and jerked the door open just as the Burgon was reaching for the handle.

"By the gods, Ryn," the Burgon exclaimed. "What the fuck's wrong with you?"

"D-Dream," Ryn said, pushing unceremoniously past the emperor as though the man were just another person.

The Burgon stumbled against the door jamb—eyes wide as the young man plowed down the corridor. No one had ever dared shove him the hell out of the way and the action didn't sit well with the emperor of Aduaidh Prime. Had it been any other male who dared such a thing, Ryden Bakari would have torn him a new one. As it was, he stood watching until Ryn turned down another corridor disappearing from sight.

"Dream," the Burgon repeated. "I thought I took care of that."

His jaw clenched, he entered the room and was just about to crawl into his bunk when the ship was brutally rocked, a heavy shudder tilting it to starboard. The klaxon went off immediately and over a vid-com screen that was flashing bright red came the ominous words, "Battle stations!"

Rynlyn hit the wall hard and slid down it, his legs sprawling in front of him as the next volley was flung at the *Meaineyder*. He shook his head to clear it. Something eased down the side of his face and when he put up a hand, his fingers came away slick with blood.

"Son of a fucking bitch!" he snarled. He must have cracked his head on the wall. The blaring of the klaxon, the pulsing of the emergency lights along the ceiling combined to give him one helluva headache.

Scrambling to his feet, he was pushed roughly aside as two crewmen rushed past. One of them—Anton Bas'Rith—craned his head around and gave Ryn a murderous look but kept going.

"I'm gonna have trouble with that prick yet," Ryn grumbled.

"Nym!"

It took Ryn a second or two before he realized that was the name he was using. He turned to see the Burgon hurrying toward him.

"We're being attacked by an NC starhawk. What did you say the name of the ship was that damaged yours?" the Burgon asked.

"The *Ionsaigh*," Ryn answered.

"I thought that's what you said and that's the bitch firing at us now!"

"What kind of firepower does the *Meaineyder* have?"

The Burgon made a rude sound with his lips. "Two *marú* pulse cannons fore and aft and no one qualified onboard to work either. They can turn it on but don't have a fucking clue how to fire the gods-be-damned thing."

Ryn's lips parted. "They've got weapons no one can use?"

"We can," the Burgon said. "I'm heading aft. You go forward. Between us maybe we can keep the NC ship off-kilter until help arrives. There are two Alliance starcruisers streaming their way toward us. They should be here in fifteen minutes. Let's hope we can keep the *Ionsaigh* at bay until they get here!"

As Ryn ran toward the bridge, he speculated on what the Burgon must have told the *Meaineyder*'s captain. Surely the man had to wonder how two third-class crewmen knew anything about operating pulse cannons.

"They are primed," Captain Peel said as Ryn came sprinting onto the bridge.

Another vicious hit rocked the *Meaineyder* to larboard and the mining ship groaned.

"They're not aiming at us but rather sending shock waves around us in an attempt to stall our engines," Peel shouted above the din of the bleating klaxon.

"Shut off that fucking noise! I can't hear myself think!" Ryn said, forgetting himself as he took a seat at the *marú* console. A man of his rank would never dare speak to a captain in that way.

"Turn off the alarm!" Peel yelled.

The NC ship was sitting a few hundred yards off the nose of the *Meaineyder*. Even as Ryn watched, a ripple of ultra-speed impulse waves left the underside of the *Ionsaigh*, and the *Meaineyder* rolled farther larboard.

"They're going to have us belly-up with the next blast!" someone warned.

"The hell they will," Ryn said. He grabbed the yoke of the pulse cannon, thumbed off the switch cover on the left handle to engage the toggle to set for rapid fire then put his right thumb firmly over the firing button. He depressed the button twice, sending two heavy-duty pulse jets streaking toward the *Ionsaigh*. Both were direct hits on the communication array, vaporizing it. Without looking at the captain, he ordered the man to bring the *Meaineyder* about as quickly as possible.

"There's no room to maneuver," Peel snapped. "I can't just..."

"Then the aft cannons are worthless," Ryn hissed. He fired two more pulses before the *Ionsaigh* could react. Both hits struck home and the starhawk listed to starboard for a moment but quickly righted itself.

"The starcruisers are three minutes out and gearing up to attack!" the com officer shouted.

"The *Ionsaigh*'s engines are engaging!" the nav officer reported. "She's gonna run!"

His cannons depleted, Ryn cursed. Who the hell stored only four *marú* charges in his cannon? he wondered.

"Bring this fucking ship around!" Ryn ordered. "Slow arc if you have to, but give him a chance to cripple her before she can get up to speed! He can do a lot of damage if you give him a chance."

"Bring her around, Mr. Tolliver," Peel told the nav officer.

With the grace of a lumbering team of oxen the mining ship banked slowly, clumsily larboard just as the NC ship darted across their bow in an attempt to outrun the starcruisers that were closing in on it. Seconds later the *Meaineyder* shuddered as the starhawk vanished in a fiery explosion.

"By the gods, Webb took her out!" the nav officer said with awe. "He must have hit the weapons pod!"

Captain Peel looked away from the nav officer to stare without blinking at Ryn. The young man was powering down the cannons, pushing the yoke toward the console before swiveling around in the control chair.

"Pretty fancy shooting for a mining crewman," Peel commented.

"Aye, where'd you learn that?" the com officer inquired.

Ryn shrugged. "You'd be surprised what you pick up here and there," he said. The captain's unwavering gaze was sizing him up.

"Perhaps at a Fleet Academy," the com officer quipped.

"Stow that," Peel snapped. "Where's the starcruisers?"

"They had to make a wide swing around the debris of the *Ionsaigh*," the nav officer answered.

"Get the mission leader on the horn and patch him through to my quarters," Peel said. "Spivey, tell Webb I want him to come to my quarters!" He narrowed his eyes. "Nym, walk with me."

Rynlyn chaffed under the harsh tone but nodded agreement. He fell into step behind the captain whose hands he noticed were clenched into tight fists. He followed in silence—studying the captain's rigid shoulders as he walked. By the time they reached Peel's quarters, the Burgon was there, leaning against the wall. At the sight of the captain, he straightened.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" Ryden asked.

"Don't *Sir* me," Peel growled as he slapped his hand on the entry pad. He swept a hand at the opening. "After you, gentlemen."

Once inside the captain's quarters, the vid-com came on and the face of a slightly overweight man filled the screen. He identified himself as Captain Ryal Barkley of the starcruiser *Díotas*.

Ryn and the Burgon listened as Peel conversed with the captain of the starcruiser. They glanced at one another but refrained from speaking. When Peel turned to them with an angry glint in his eye, they braced themselves for questions to which there could be no answers.

He surprised them.

"I don't know who the fuck you two are and I don't want to know. Obviously you were sent here for a reason and I'm assuming that reason had something to do with the attack HQ knew was coming. I only wish *somebody* had thought to warn me ahead of time!"

The Burgon cleared his throat, the lie coming to him as easily as his next breath. "It was thought best that no one know, Captain. Loose lips and all that. We wanted to draw the *lonsaigh* out and this was the ideal way of doing it."

"My ship could have been damaged!" Peel bellowed. "Did no one think about that?"

"Your ship was at no time in danger, Sir," Ryn was quick to say. He glanced at the Burgon.

"You're bleeding," the captain said.

"It's nothing," Ryn said.

"Go clean yourself up in private," Peel ordered, and when Ryn would have protested, held up a staying hand. "Humor me, son. Just do what I tell you."

"You heard the captain, Nym," the Burgon snapped, seeing what the captain had. "Like he said—in private. Hop to, mister."

When Ryn left, Peel swept his hand toward the sofa. "Sit. I find myself in need of a stiff drink." He went to the bar. "How 'bout you?"

"A strong libation would not go amiss, Sir."

"Don't say that again," Peel said. "I've a feeling if I knew your true identity I might well be on one knee with my head bowed." He poured two fingers of Chalean whiskey and brought the glass over to the Burgon. He clinked his glass with the emperor's. "To the New Alliance."

"To the New Alliance and peace," the Burgon amended.

Peel eased himself into a chair across from his companion. "The masks are superb," he said then took a sip of his drink.

The Burgon smiled. "They should be since they cost us a small fortune."

"Shame his was ripped."

"They can be patched. Thankfully the damage was minor."

"Colored lenses too, I presume?" Peel asked. He looked down into his glass. "To hide the amber gleam."

Ryden laughed. "You're too astute by far, Jonas," he said then settled into the sofa. "My thought earlier this morn was that I should find you a better vessel to captain. You've only reinforced that decision."

"I'll do, I'll go wherever you send me, your..." Peel stopped as he took in the dark brow arching in warning and finished with, "Webb."

"Good man," the Burgon said with a wicked grin. "Now tell me what you know about a man named Felix Braventine on Staillin Major."

Peel frowned. "Name doesn't ring a bell. Is he at the mine?"

"One of the techs there I'm told."

"I wouldn't know any of them, but Cantrell would. He worked in the processing plant before he grew tired of it. He's a good man, but that worthless jackanapes what came with him from Staillin Major is a real piece of work," Peel supplied.

"You mean Bas'Rith?"

"I don't trust that bastard any farther than I can toss his scrawny butt. There's something about him that sets my implants on edge if you get my drift," the captain told him.

"That was the impression I got as well," the Burgon admitted. "He could be the informant O'Shay has on your ship."

"O'Shay?" Peel asked, eyebrows shooting up. "You think he's on Staillin Major?"

"I know he is," the emperor replied.

"Vid-com!" Peel called out, and when the screen came on, he asked that Miner Second Class Rafe Cantrell be asked to join him. He paused when the man on the sofa held up a hand.

"You might want to make sure no one but Cantrell gets that order."

"Good catch," Peel said, and instructed the vid-com accordingly.

"Aye Sir!" the vid-com said, and snapped off.

"That v-c is a might too quick on the draw, Jonas. To be on the safe side you might want to have Bas'Rith watched," the Burgon suggested. "If he's in contact with someone off the *Meaineyder*, he'll try to get in touch with them. Those running him will want to know about the failure of the *lonsaigh*."

Once more the captain engaged the vid-com, gave the order for Bas'Rith to be found and sequestered, his belongings searched for any kind of outside communication device. If anything was found, the man was to be arrested and escorted to the brig. Otherwise, he was to be kept under strict scrutiny until they reached their destination.

"That should cover our bases," Peel said. "Is there anything else I can do for you, milord?"

"Remember my name is Zane Webb, and if anyone asks, Nym and I spent some time on an LRC as weapons' specialists before we ran afoul of the law and wound up spending a few years at Amerigen." He drained the whiskey in his glass, shook his head at the offer of a refill. "I'll let the authorities on Amerigen know to cover our tracks by adding a few extra talents to Webb and Nym's records."

"I take it you have a way of contacting them," Peel said with a grin.

"Let's just say I too know how to cover bases, Jonas." He stood. "I've been doing it all my life."

* * * * *

"What the hell do you mean she was there?" Rynlyn shouted.

"If you don't calm your ass down, I won't tell you!" the Burgon hissed.

"Why didn't you tell me before she went? You know what I would have said!"

"Aye, I did, but she was so adamant about visiting your mother..."

"You should not have allowed it!" Ryn snarled. "You should *not* have allowed it!"

The Burgon sighed. "Sit down and let me explain something to you, little warrior!"

"I am no one's little warrior!" Ryn grated, eyes narrowed. "Not even yours!"

One dark brow shifted slowly skyward. There was no comment to that remark, only a steady, unblinking glare that told Ryn he'd gone a bit too far that time.

"The woman is insane!" he said. "It was dangerous for Tessa to have gone there!"

"The woman, as you call her, was behind a thick mesh barrier, lashed securely to a chair. She has, by the way, gone on to whatever reward the gods reserve for crazed bitches who torture little children."

Ryn stilled. "She's dead?"

"As a doornail," the Burgon quoted the old Serenian saying. "Apparently she had some kind of terminal disease. She didn't die well."

Ryn realized news of his mother's death should have had some kind of effect on him but he felt nothing. There was no relief and certainly no grief, but neither was there any kind of remorse at the woman's passing. The years he'd spent under her merciless care had wiped all compassion for her painful death completely away.

"What the hell did Tessa think she would accomplish by seeing Sgian?" Ryn asked.

"You are going to be her husband, son. She was curious, and if I know you, you didn't tell her much—if anything—about your mother."

"There wasn't anything she needed to know," Ryn snapped. "I told her I was abused. She should have left it at that." He slammed a balled fist against his thigh. "Why did she have to go there to learn the particulars of that torment?"

"To help you get over the debilitating dreams I've been trying to shield you from having since we've been on this vessel?" the Burgon asked.

Ryn couldn't deny those dreams affected him. He'd awoken far too many times in a cold sweat not to want to end them if he could. He just didn't see how Tessa knowing the gory details of his childhood would be of any help to him in vanquishing the horrible nightmares.

"She's fey, son. She'll find a way," the Burgon said, reading Ryn's thoughts. "She did it to help you so when next you see her, don't jump down that pretty little throat of hers."

"Humph," Ryn snorted as he braced an arm on the wall and lowered his forehead to his hand. "Women."

"Aye, women," the Burgon said with a heartfelt sigh. "You can barely live with them, can't live without them and can't kick them to the curb when they annoy you." He sighed again. "Life's a bitch, ain't it?"

Despite his anger, Ryn laughed, and just like that his mood lightened—no doubt just as the Burgon planned. He decided it was best to change the subject.

"So, what did Cantrell tell you about Braventine?" he asked, lowering his arm to cross it with the other over his chest as he leaned against the wall.

"Braventine left Staillin Major and never came back," the Burgon reported, "but a month later—just before Cantrell signed on to the *Meaineyder*—a new man named Gerring Strom showed up. It seems Bas'Rith and Strom took an instant liking to one another and spent a good deal of time talking privately before the mining ship left port." He gave Ryn a steady look. "Whatcha wanna bet that's O'Shay with either a mask of his own or reconstructive surgery in the hopes of eluding me?"

"Staillin Major is in the far reaches of the galaxy so there's nowhere else the bastard could go. Hiding on a mining planet with hundreds of thousands of miles of underground tunnels in which to conceal oneself is exactly where someone like O'Shay would run to cover," Ryn acknowledged.

"He's there. I feel it. And it's there I intend to find him and end his worthless life."

* * * * *

Tessa turned over, and as she did, the world around her jerked away in sharp increments, leaving her with a wildly pounding head and nausea that shot up her throat so quickly she had little time to lean over the bed before she gagged. Unfortunately her belly was empty and she was rewarded with nothing more than dry heaves. She strained and strained again before finally collapsing back on the lumpy mattress, gasping for breath. Putting a trembling hand to her violent headache, she tried to wedge her eyes open but couldn't.

"It's the drug," a gruff voice said. "Here, let me wash your face."

She tried to resist the rough cloth that was dragged over her flesh, but the coolness felt good, helped make her head stop spinning. The smell of lemons filled her nostrils as a hand slid under her neck.

"Drink," the same brusque voice ordered.

Cool, sweet-tart liquid touched her lips. It was lemonade—at least she hoped to the gods it was—and flowed down her throat as she greedily swallowed. Her mouth was parched, her tongue swollen, but the fluid soothed away the dryness. She licked her lips when the goblet was taken away.

"Thank you," she croaked. A rude snort was her answer.

Once more she tried to open her eyes, putting a shaky hand to her face.

"Ain't gonna happen, wench," her captor said. "We didn't need you seeing us so we glued your eyes shut."

Terror filled her. She scrubbed at her eyes—feeling the crackle of some foreign substance.

"No!" she said, fearful she would never see again. "No!"

Hands grabbed hers and forced her arms to the bed.

"Keep doing that and you'll harm your eyes, bitch. Leave off. It ain't permanent, but if you don't stop, you could damage something."

"Please," she said, hating the whimper in her voice. The hard hands pressing her to the mattress were like iron vises. "I can't—"

"Hush your trap!" another voice thundered, and Tessa's head snapped to the side as a heavy palm connected with her cheek.

"Don't be bruising her!" the first man warned. "You want the Burgon's fangs in your jugular?"

Crippling fingers grabbed Tessa's chin to hold her face immobile.

"Keep your mouth shut and do what we say and you just might live through this, whore. You hear me?"

Tessa mumbled agreement, more frightened of the man she sensed hovering over her than not being able to see.

"Secure her hands to the bedposts so she don't do herself no harm," the hateful one—as she was beginning to think of him—snapped. "Not that I give a flying fuck."

Afraid to protest as her wrists were tied above her, Tessa could hear the other man breathing as he leaned over her.

"You'd best do as he says," he told her. "He's a dangerous bastard at the best of times, wench." He finished binding her then moved away from the bed.

"Am I being ransomed?" she asked, and the sneering laugh that greeted her question let her know the sound had come from the dangerous man. No one answered her question so she used her witchling powers, sending them out to seek the answers.

What she learned from the men's brutal minds put her own at ease. They'd been told not to harm her beyond roughing her up and scaring her so she would behave. Some man named Onus had ordered her abduction and it had something to do with Riordan O'Shay. Onus had given them strict instructions they were not to brutalize her. At least she didn't have to worry about them raping and killing her any time soon.

So O'Shay, she thought, had to be behind her abduction. That meant he would no doubt attempt to trade her to the Burgon to ensure his own safety. The man was playing with fire and would get burned even worse now that he'd dared thumb his nose in Ryden Bakari's face. The emperor would not take kindly to having someone under his protection threatened and to have that someone kidnapped would no doubt make the vengeance when it came doubly brutal upon the perpetrators.

Though she could not see with her eyes, she could with the Third Eye within her fey mind. She could see through the eyes of the man whose mind she probed and visited first one then the other to get a good look at each as well as her surroundings.

She studied the men until she had memorized every facet of their facial features and mannerisms. She'd know them anywhere once this was over.

As best she could, she relaxed, deciding it was best not to stir up any vicious behavior in either man.

Chapter Eight

Ever since learning his lady had gone to visit his mother, Rynlyn had been on pins and needles over the situation. Though there was nothing he could do about it now – the damage had already been done before he even learned of it—he couldn't stop worrying. He had no idea why Tessa felt compelled to go see the wicked old bitch and he feared what she might have learned would alter her feelings for him.

As he worked the controls of the stacker—layering the processed iron sheeting on separating stacks according to thickness—he wondered just how much Sgian Rede had revealed about his past. The woman hated him so vehemently he was fairly sure she'd told it all—every last sordid tidbit he was sure had sickened and appalled Tessa.

One horrible day stood out in his memory like the exposed nerve of a throbbing tooth. He paused with the pallet of sheeting swaying to and fro over a stack, going back to that hellish time as though it had happened only the day before...

"Beat him until he drops," the elder had insisted. "Perhaps then the little bastard will learn some humility!"

The *bata*—the instrument used by the Pannys Sheshaght to discipline the children of the cult—was a wicked piece of work. Four feet long, one and one-quarter inch in diameter, the thick rattan rod was flanged upward from the end in quarter-inch strips to a length of eighteen inches. Before it was applied, it was soaked in brine to keep the strips supple and unbreakable. Its sting was so brutal, the edges of the strips so sharp, it sliced easily into the flesh. After four or five passes of the *bata*, the skin split apart and continued to split until the recipient passed out.

What he was being punished for that day had long since been struck from his memory, but he still remembered the pain, the abiding humiliation of being punished before the entire community, and the agony that had been visited upon him after the punishment had been carried out. He relived the punishment over and over in his dreams. That day had become the one constant his subconscious refused to forget.

The *bata* Master had caned him until the blood ran freely down Rynlyn's legs, until his buttocks were on fire both inside and out. The ginger root was wedged tight in his anus and the burning was driving him mad. With each pass of the *bata*, he could not refrain from clenching the muscles of his ass and that only added to the misery flaming inside him.

But the caning had only been a prelude to the real torture the elder had decreed for him. When he had awakened from the beating, the true agony had yet to begin at the hands of the man who...

"What the fuck are you doing up there, Nym? Jacking off?"

Rynlyn jumped at the sound of the Burgon's bellow. He shook himself, looked down to the cargo bay floor where the great man stood with hands on hips, glaring up at him. The Burgon spread his arms as though asking for an explanation.

"Sorry!" Ryn yelled, and pushed the controls to ease the pallet atop the waiting stack. He finished the stacking then shut down the machine, climbed out of the control booth and put his feet to either side of the forty-foot-high ladder then slid down the side rungs.

"Oh, that was cute," the Burgon grumbled. "Fall and break a leg next time why don't you? Do you also run with a scissors clutched in your grubby little paw?" He slapped the palm of his hand to the back of Ryn's head. "That's what rungs are for, you little jackass!"

Rynlyn turned beet red at the reprimand but made no comment. Had it been anyone other than the Burgon he knew he would have lashed into the man with both barrels. He knew better than to try that with the emperor.

"We'll be at Staillin Major in less than four hours," the Burgon told him. "If you've finished your task, you might want to go back to our quarters and freshen up, check your mask."

Rynlyn nodded. "What's going to happen with Bas'Rith?"

The traitor's possessions had been searched and what was found condemned the man. A miniature vid-com transmitter, a list of codes that had yet to be broken by the Alliance, more money than a mere miner second class should have in his possession, and a book with names and locations that suggested those listed were New Coalition plants on the New Alliance ships and facilities to which they'd been assigned. Bas'Rith was arrested and had spent the last three days in solitary confinement in the brig.

"Well, we sure as hell can't let him off the vessel," the Burgon replied. "If he has an accomplice on this ship, it won't make any difference. Peel won't be allowing any of the crew off the ship when we dock, nor will there be any transmissions he isn't listening in on. Incoming transmissions will be blocked as well. He's going to spread the rumor there's serious illness onboard and the crew quarantined. As soon as the cargo is offloaded, the ship will head to the healing colony on Leste."

"Don't you imagine O'Shay knows by now the *Ionsaigh* was destroyed?" Ryn asked as he removed the thick gloves he was wearing.

"Oh, I'm sure he does."

"Then won't he be suspicious when he doesn't hear from Bas'Rith?"

"Won't matter if he is. My guess is he'll be there when the ship docks, waiting to read his spy the riot act over not reporting in. With the description Cantrell gave us of Strom, O'Shay should be easy to pick out in the crowd. Using our powers of misdirection, we'll slip off the ship undetected as the iron plating is offloaded by the

class-ten constructs since no humans will be allowed on the ship because of the quarantine."

Ryn thought of the class-tens and frowned. He hated the giant robotic constructs. They unnerved him. He said as much.

"I'm not all that fond of them either, but I've known a couple belonging to a Riezell Guardian that came in gods-be-damned handy once," the Burgon admitted. "Scary sons of bitches though."

"This from a Reaper?" Rynlyn whispered. "The most feared entity in the megaverse."

"Nay, little warrior," the Burgon said. "There is an entity even more feared."

Rynlyn's left eyebrow shot up. "What would that be?"

The Burgon shuddered. "An angry wife," came the answer accompanied by a knowing grin.

For the next few hours the crew of the mining ship prepared for its arrival at Staillin Major. The cargo had been placed where it could easily be removed by the ten-foot-tall robots known as constructs. A sweep of the crew's quarters and belongings had not turned up any more communication devices so it was hoped Bas'Rith was the only treasonous one among them. When told they could not disembark or make contact with anyone on Staillin Major, only a handful of the men complained.

"We're under a communication lockdown for security reasons," the captain announced over the intraship vid-com. He also told them they would be allowed a two-week R & R on Leste to make up for not being allowed to leave the ship at the mining colony.

When the *Meaineyder* nosed into her docking bay on the colony, the cargo doors lifted and the constructs lumbered in to remove the iron plate as though it were sheets of tissue paper. From the huge, flat rectangles upon which they stood to the communications array housed in the clear dome of their heads, the class-ten titanium monsters were an impressive sight. Their broad shoulders were boxy. The upper torsos and arms were fitted with hydraulic sleeves that gave the robots a greater range of motion. Their heads were very small in comparison to their torsos with two bright red gleaming lights for eyes, and their legs were wedge-shaped, built for speed and endurance.

On the bridge, the Burgon and Rynlyn stood with Captain Peel as the outside vid-com cameras swept the crowd of workers on the loading dock.

"I don't see anyone that matches Cantrell's description," Rynlyn said.

The captain turned to the com officer. "Get Cantrell up here ASAP."

"Aye Sir!"

"I hope to the gods the bastard didn't get spooked and take off running when he heard about the *Ionsaigh*," Rynlyn grumbled.

"Don't see why he would have," the Burgon commented. "O'Shay isn't so smart that he would have put two and two together to come up with me being onboard the *Meaineyder*, and that's the only reason the coward would have skipped."

Cantrell joined them at the vid-com. "You wanted me, Cap'n?"

"Do you see Strom?" Peel inquired.

Cantrell bent toward the screen, searching the men milling about. He shook his head. "No Sir. I don't see him."

The Burgon released a long, weary breath. "I should have known it wouldn't be easy to find his gods-be-damned ass."

"He may be on duty, Webb," Cantrell said. "You could ask the work supervisor..."

"Who might alert Strom that he's being sought," Peel snapped. "That wouldn't be wise. He'd run for sure then."

"Didn't think of that," Cantrell mumbled.

"We'll just have to make a side trip into the mining office and get a look at the work schedules," the Burgon suggested. He slapped the back of his hand against Ryn's shoulder. "Let's go, Nym."

"Good hunting," Peel said.

"We'll contact you as soon as we find the bastard," the Burgon told him.

Using their scythelord powers, the Aduaidh Prime emperor and Chalean warrior walked sight unseen from the cargo bay and onto the loading docks, skirting the massive constructs whose footpads shook the corrugated metal walkway with each step they took. Going by the directions Cantrell had given them to locate the mining office, the two warriors moved among the workers with ease. As they went, they kept an eye out for the white-haired man who the Burgon was convinced was Riordan O'Shay.

Knowing the work schedule would be posted on the office wall beside the clerk's desk, Ryn slipped into the room, studied it then left without the clerk being aware anyone had come in.

"Gerring Strom is on duty on level five," Ryn told the Burgon when they were well out of earshot of any listeners. "He's a cutter—whatever that is. That explains why he didn't meet the ship. I suppose he'll be waiting for Bas'Rith to come to him."

"I'm guessing he had someone else waiting for the ship to dock," the Burgon told him. "That someone might be on his way down to level five."

* * * * *

The Dealachan Seilmide Onus waited until the man he'd come to see spotted him standing in the shadows. A slight nod from Gerring Strom was all Onus needed to bide his time, waiting until Strom shut down the cutter.

"Taking a break!" Strom yelled to the pit foreman who waved a dismissive arm in acknowledgment.

Onus moved farther back in the shadows since bright light bothered him and the overheads were harsh in the cutter room. His bald pate and pale white flesh stood out like beacons in the low illumination. The nearly transparent color of his strange eyes lent even more eeriness to his hairless features.

"Has the ship docked?" the man now known as Strom snapped as he stripped the work gloves from his hands.

"Aye, but no one is being allowed off," Onus said. "It is being said there is disease on the ship and the crew is being confined. The captain has plotted a course to Leste for when they leave here."

"Disease?" Strom barked. "What kind of disease?"

Onus shook his head. "That I don't know. Constructs are offloading the plate with no sign whatsoever of any crewmen in the cargo hold."

"Did you try to raise Bas'Rith?" At Onus' slow nod and unnerving silence, Strom ground his teeth. "And?" he pressed.

"All transmission to and from the ship is being blocked." Onus scratched his neck. "If it's a highly contagious disease they don't want anyone to know the crew has contracted, that would make sense since they don't want information leaked, but..."

"But?"

"If one of your enemies is onboard and will attempt to sneak off to look for you, the blockade of transmission from Bas'Rith would make sense, wouldn't it?"

"I hope you have someone watching the ship," Strom hissed.

"That goes without saying, but if *he* is onboard, no one would see him leave, would they?"

Strom chewed on his bottom lip. "Aye, no one would. He'd walk off with our watcher none the wiser."

"So what are your wishes?" Onus inquired.

Looking about him as though he expected the Burgon to materialize at any moment, Strom pressed back into the shadows with his henchmen. "Has the other thing been accomplished?"

"She is hidden away where no one will ever find her," Onus assured him.

"She hasn't been touched?" Strom queried, unaware fear was rife in his voice.

"The men know better. They have no desire to incur the wrath of the Burgon or yours either."

Strom continued to chew on his lip. In another lifetime he had ordered death and destruction to rain down upon Ryden Bakari, but had he known the emperor's family was in residence at the imperial palace, he would never have issued the order. Being responsible for the massacre of the Burgon's family had placed their war on a very personal level.

"I need to get off this planet," Strom decided. "I don't like the feeling I'm getting. Instinct tells me if it's not Bakari, something else is headed my way."

"The runabout you had me secrete for you is on the other side of the facility. If you're going, you'd best leave now."

"Aye," Strom agreed. Without another word he slipped past Onus and melted into the darker shadows of the corridor that led down to the next level and the outside hatch.

* * * * *

Rune Degendesch was waiting at the entrance to level five when the Burgon and Ryn arrived. The Faolchú was leaning against a thick wooden roof support, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

Having allowed the concealment of their misdirection to dissolve as they ventured farther down the mine corridors—bypassing the tram and taking the stairs carved into the stone—the two warriors were alone beneath the flickering phospho lights that lit their passage. When they became aware they were no longer the only ones in the corridor, they halted, quickly exchanging a look as their hands slid smoothly to the weapons at their thighs.

"Did you have a pleasant trip, Ry?" Degendesch inquired in a conversational tone.

The Burgon's shoulders relaxed and a small smile twitched at his lips. "I should have smelled you, werewolf," he said as he and Ryn drew nearer.

"I smelled you the minute you strolled out of the cargo hold," Degendesch quipped. He pushed away from the timber. "May I suggest a stronger soap?"

"I must be slipping. I didn't sense you," the emperor said as he extended his hand.

Degendesch gripped Bakari's wrist. "I too was camouflaged. What kind of warrior would I be if I had allowed you to scent me?" He shrugged as he drew the Burgon into a quick, comradely embrace before releasing him. "Besides, I was expecting your sorry ass."

"He's still here then? He is Strom?"

"He is. My guess is he's already making tracks out of here. I saw one of his gang headed this way and followed. The Dealachan slithered back this way, but when I went in to check on him, Strom was not in the cutting room. There is, however, a strong stench of him down the corridor that leads from the cutting room to level six and there's a safety hatch leading topside on that level. Each level has a safety hatch but only level six is not in operation right now so there will be no one there to see him taking the hatch topside to report him. I didn't follow, but I did send word that the hatch opening is to be watched. As soon as Strom shoots his ugly head out, they'll let me know."

"You think he's got transportation off-world?" Ryn asked.

"Oh, there's a Fiach up there," Degendesch said with a merciless grin. "I figured he'd have a way to escape so I went looking. They thought they had it well-hidden but I

discovered it a few weeks back. That's where he's headed, but he's in for a big surprise. That runabout ain't going nowhere."

"Thank you, my friend," the Burgon said, slapping the Faolchú on the back. "I owe you one."

"The quickest way to get to the Fiach before O'Shay does is via the tram. He'll be climbing up six levels and that's going to take him half an hour or longer depending on his stamina," the mine owner told the Burgon. "Let's get to the tram. We'll be there waiting for the bastard."

* * * * *

Riordan O'Shay aka Gerring Strom was winded by the time he began struggling to push the hatch cover up. His arms felt like rubber from pulling himself up the last twenty feet or so of rungs. His head ached and his belly muscles were cramping almost as much as the ones in his thighs. The clank of the metal cover falling back, the rush of fresh air helped to revive him somewhat, but it took every last ounce of his strength to scoot out of the hatch and onto the rocky soil of the plateau. He scrambled forward and flipped to his back, dragging great gulps of air into his depleted lungs.

"I'm too old for this," he mumbled.

Years of running from the Burgon had taken their toll on O'Shay. He was tired, ready for this to stop, and he was beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. All he had to do was trade the woman for his freedom. It seemed simple, but first he had to get off Staillin Major and to a safer place from which to contact Onus.

Grunting, he pushed himself up and rose shakily to his feet. He was sure he knew where the runabout had been hidden, but before the light faded any more than it already had, he needed to find the craft. His steps dragging, he went toward a sandstone bluff a few hundred yards away.

* * * * *

Three warriors watched O'Shay stumbling toward the bluff from where they were concealed behind a ring of standing stones.

"That's him," the Burgon said, sniffing the air. His eyes were glacier cold. His tone was as hot as lava. "He doesn't look anything like the O'Shay I knew, but I'd know that stench anywhere."

"His face was completely reconstructed and I've a notion he had his blood drained and replaced," Degendesch said. "Fool didn't realize the stink of him would still be in the tissue and organs. You can't drain that completely."

"Is there anywhere for him to run once he realizes the runabout has been put out of commission?" Rynlyn asked.

"Beyond the bluff is nothing but miles of desert with no water anywhere save at the mining complex. He knows that. All the workers were told at orientation. Unless he

wants to perish in that infernal heat once the sun rises to its zenith tomorrow, he'll have to come back this way."

"He's got two choices," the Burgon said in a steely tone. "The desert or me."

"If I were him, I know which one I'd pick," Degendesch said. "I'd rather die in the heat than be torn apart piece by bloody piece."

"I don't know. Being torn apart would be quicker," Rynlyn suggested.

"I can promise you his death won't be quick or easy, little warrior," Ryden Bakari stated.

"He doesn't deserve mercy," Degendesch observed. "Whatever you do won't be nearly enough, Ry."

The men waited until the mine owner was certain O'Shay had reached the Fiach and discovered it wasn't functional before they crept out from behind the standing stones to make their way quietly forward.

Above them the sky was a dark amber color—the exact shade of the Reaper's hot gaze—and the temperature was dropping. Soon the night wind would come sweeping across the desert and its chill would be enough to thicken the blood.

They had traveled a score of yards when they heard the howl of frustration that could only have come from O'Shay's throat. Cursing—violent and vindictive—followed then the crunch of rock as the fugitive started back the way he had gone.

The Burgon motioned his companions into hiding, wanting O'Shay to have his back to them before he sprang his trap. With the grumbling, mumbling and vile cursing coming their way, he knew the man he'd been searching for was unaware of what lay ahead of him.

"I'll rip off his arm and shove it up his hairless ass!" O'Shay snarled as he passed within three feet of the place where Ryden Bakari, the emperor of Aduaidh Prime, stood. "Gods-be-damned incompetent fucker!"

"Having a bad day, Riordan?"

O'Shay whipped around, his eyes bulging from his head as the Burgon stepped from the shadows and into a dying beam of sunlight. The fugitive's mouth dropped open. His hands came up.

"No!" he hissed. "No." He shook his head. "I didn't know they were at the palace. I swear to the gods I didn't know!"

From where he stood watching the scene unfold, Rynlyn looked down at O'Shay's feet and smirked. A widening area of darkness was spreading out from the bastard's boots. O'Shay had pissed himself.

"Doesn't matter," the Burgon said. "You're a dead man either way."

O'Shay spun around, intending to run, but realized his path back to the mining facility was being blocked by the mine owner and another man he realized was Rynlyn Rede. Sheer terror shifted across his changed features. There was nowhere for him to

flee. The moment he realized his predicament, his facial expression changed from fear to outrage. He flung around to face the Burgon, chin raised.

"I am tired of you hounding me!" O'Shay shouted. "I won't live like this for the rest of my life!"

"Then come here and let me end that worthless life for you!" the Burgon spat as he started forward.

"Kill me and you'll never find your woman!"

The Burgon stopped still in his tracks. Without thinking he shot a mental probe into his enemy's mind to glean his meaning. So violent was the probe delivered, it staggered O'Shay and brought about instant nose and ear bleeds.

"If I die, she's at their mercy. They will rape her to death!" O'Shay hissed, wiping an arm under his streaming nostril. "I promise you they will!"

Ryden Bakari plucked Tessa's name from the miasma of guilt and treachery that was Riordan O'Shay's brain. His eyes flared wide as he realized the man was telling the truth and Tessa was in the clutches of very bad men.

"Where is she?" the Burgon growled through clenched teeth.

"Where you will never find her," O'Shay said. He was backing away from the savagery flitting over the emperor's cold face. "I don't even know where she is, but I can get to her. I'll exchange her for my freedom."

Rynlyn as well had slipped into O'Shay's thoughts and what he discovered there made him bellow with fury. He lunged for the man, but Degendesch snaked out a hand to grab him, to keep him from his target.

"I will kill the son of a bitch!" Ryn yelled.

"Not before we find out where Tessa is," the Burgon declared.

"Then I'll rip her whereabouts from him!" Ryn said as he struggled to get free of Degendesch, but the werewolf was much stronger and held him easily.

"I'm willing to make a deal," O'Shay said, sweeping his tongue over dry lips. He was staring into the Burgon's eyes, which had turned crimson with rage.

"I don't deal with traitors," the emperor told him.

"You will if you want to save her life."

"He can't be trusted!" Ryn shouted. "You know that, Ry!"

"Tell your lap dog to shut his pie-hole or he'll never share the tart with you again, Bakari," O'Shay said, gaining a bit of courage because the Burgon had yet to take another step.

"What is it you want?" the Burgon asked.

"Your word you will stop trying to kill me," O'Shay was quick to say. "Your word as Burgon, as emperor of Aduaidh Prime, that you'll leave me the fuck alone! I want your hand on it and your oath on the lives of your dead family that you'll not come after me again."

"How do I know you'll let Tessa go if I comply with that demand?"

"You don't," Degendesch said. "The bastard isn't to be trusted, Ry."

"That's a fact!" Ryn put in.

"We'll meet on the Plains of Geschäft and make the exchange," O'Shay said, gaining more daring. "The woman for my freedom." He glanced at Degendesch. "But you have to promise not to attack me in Reaper form. Neither of us can bring weapons to the planet or our lives would be forfeit. I know all too well how a Reaper exacted his revenge when he Transitioned. You have to swear to me you won't do that."

"So you can do even more damage to the New Alliance by leading the NC once you leave Geschäft?" the Burgon questioned.

"I'll swear to you that I won't," O'Shay said. "I'm tired, Bakari. I want to stop running. I want the war to end."

"And we want you to stop breathing!" Rynlyn snarled, his lips drawn back from his teeth.

"Be quiet, Rynlyn," the Burgon warned the younger warrior. "This is between O'Shay and me."

"He included me when he took my woman," Rynlyn argued.

"Take his ass back to the facility," the emperor ordered Degendesch. "I can't think with all that turmoil rolling around inside him."

"No! Ry, don't trust him!" Rynlyn snapped, trying to get out of the werewolf's grip, but Degendesch hefted the younger man over his shoulder, turned and walked off with him even as Rede was cursing a blue streak, pounding on the Faolchú's back in an effort to make him stop.

"You need to curb that one or he'll be a real problem in a few years," O'Shay warned.

The Burgon narrowed his eyes at his enemy. He hated the man with a passion that was all but consuming him where he stood. He wanted nothing more than to get his hands on the bastard and start ripping off arms, tearing out organs, sinking his aching fangs and claws into O'Shay's flesh, but Tessa's life was hanging in the balance. He knew it as well as he knew O'Shay's men would harm her if he did not stop them.

"I don't believe I can trust you, O'Shay," he told the fugitive. "How do I know you'll bring Tessa to the meeting?"

"On the grave of my son, if you'll swear to me this will end, if you'll give me your hand and swear on your own dead wife's soul that you won't kill me, we will end this, Bakari. I've no reason to want to see the woman dead. She's nothing to me, but I suspect she is all to you and Rede. Whether you believe me or not, I didn't want your wife and children dead. That was a mistake I will have to live with for as long as I draw breath."

"Aye," the Burgon said, a muscle working in his jaw. "You will atone for that in one way or another whether I kill you or not."

O'Shay took a step back. The look on the emperor's face was enough to put abject fear in the bravest warrior. He put a shaky hand to his temple.

"I can feel you rampaging through my mind. You'll not get her whereabouts like that. Not even I know where she is and won't until I contact the man holding her," the former owner of Tappas Industries declared.

Having already established that, the Burgon was feverishly considering his options. He had the information on the contact, knew where to find him. He could kill O'Shay as he so longed to do, get to the contact and discover where Tessa was being held, but he ran the risk of her getting hurt. There were too many unknown variables involved. Keeping her safe was the paramount issue and though he didn't trust O'Shay, he knew the bastard would keep his end of the bargain to finally be free of Ryden Bakari's relentless thirst for vengeance.

"Do we have a deal?" O'Shay pressed, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. Despite the cool desert evening, sweat was dotting his upper lip and forehead, glistening in the light from the rising moon. He thrust out a trembling hand.

The Burgon could hear the ragged breathing coming from his enemy. He could hear the bastard's heart pounding, the blood rushing through his veins. He inhaled the stink of fear oozing from O'Shay's pores and when he took two steps forward to grasp the other man's hand, he felt the terror raging through O'Shay's soul. He pulled the fugitive close, bringing them nose to nose. When he spoke, he did so through tightly clenched teeth.

"You fuck with me, O'Shay, and I swear to you I'll not only come after you this time but after everything you've ever held dear. I've left your family out of this because it was between me and you, but if you don't bring her to the Plains in the same good health she was in last I saw her, your family and loved ones, friends and even your fucking grandmother will pay the consequence." He squeezed O'Shay's hand. "Are we clear on that, you worthless piece of shite?"

"Aye," O'Shay said, his face twisting with pain as his shoulder dipped beneath the savage grip.

Releasing the man's hand, rubbing his own down his pants for the mere touch of O'Shay's flesh sickened him, the Burgon stepped back. "I'll have Degendesch provide you with a runabout. If you're not on the Plains with Tessa by sunset in four days' time, your family will live to regret it."

O'Shay shook his head. "I can't make it..." came the objection.

"I know where your contact is, O'Shay," the Burgon cut him off. "I know how long it will take you to fly that runabout there, pick up Tessa and then head for the Aduaidh Quadrant. Four days, O'Shay. That's all I'm giving you."

"That's on the other side of the galaxy!" O'Shay protested. "What if the runabout...?"

"Then you'll see just how fast and how powerful your old company made the Fiach you'll be flying."

"What of Bas'Rith?" O'Shay asked. "Is he still alive?"

"For the time being. He's in custody on Leste."

"I want him released."

The Burgon scowled. "That's not part of the deal."

"I want him released," the fugitive declared again.

"I've no time to deal with that shite right now!" the Burgon hissed. "That traitor is the least of my fucking worries!"

"Then I want your word you that you will release him when you return from the Plains."

Irritation turned the Burgon's face harder still but he nodded.

"I give you my word as Burgon I will release him."

That said, the Burgon walked past O'Shay, shouldering the man aside, and toward the mining facility.

"I can't make it there that fast!" O'Shay yelled after him.

"You'd better pray you can," the Burgon tossed behind him as he continued walking without a backward glance.

Chapter Nine

It was all Rynlyn could do to stand on the catwalk and watch O'Shay maneuvering the runabout out of its slip. His hands were curled around the iron railing so tight the knuckles had bled of color.

"Trust me on this, Ryn," the Burgon said. "That's all I ask."

"He's going to run," Ryn said, eyes hot pinpoints of rage.

"No, he knows it's not to his advantage to do so," Degendesch put in. "He'll bring your lady to the Plains."

"If they have hurt her..."

Ryden Bakari laid a comforting hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Look at me, Ryn," he said, and when the young man did, the Burgon's hand tightened. "Believe me when I tell you that anyone involved in her abduction will not live to boast of it. There will be vengeance, little warrior. There *will* be payback." He took his hand away.

"Speaking of which," Degendesch injected, "I wish you hadn't allowed the Dealachan to accompany O'Shay. I wanted to pulverize that slimy leech for his part in this."

"You'll get your chance, Rune. He set up the kidnapping, and for that his life is forfeit," the Burgon told him.

"So what now?" Degendesch asked, his gaze tracking the runabout that was speeding away from Staillin Major.

"Since that was the only Fiach you had and the only other transportation is a bulk carrier, can we hitch a ride to Leste to meet up with the *Meaineyder*? I'm requisitioning the ship to take us to Breathnóir so I can pick up my Fiach but I'll see you're reimbursed for the captain and crew as well as any revenue you might lose."

Degendesch waved a dismissive hand at the offer. "She's yours for as long as you need her. Use her however you see fit. I don't need to be reimbursed. I do have a request though."

"Name it."

"I'd like to accompany you if you don't mind. You might need an extra sword hand."

"I'd be honored to have you with us," the Burgon said.

Ryn was so angry he kept his thoughts and words to himself. The Burgon's gaze kept straying to him as though the great man were trying to gauge Ryn's emotions, but the emperor made no attempt to probe the younger warrior's mind. Not that it would do him much good, Ryn thought, for he'd shut that part of himself down so tight he

had developed one helluva headache. It wouldn't do for the Burgon to know how furious Ryn was with him or how wrong he believed the whole thing was going to go down.

"I'll have the carrier ready to go in under an hour," he heard the mine owner saying, "and I'll send word to Jonas that we'll be rendezvousing with him tomorrow morning."

"That works for me," the Burgon agreed. "Truth to be told, I could use a night's sleep. Might as well do that on the carrier if you can squeeze us into a berth."

"No need," Degendesch said. "You can have the captain's cabin and Ryn the first mate's. They can bunk in the workers' quarters here on the facility. There is a shower between those two cabins reserved for ranking crewmen. You can go onboard now and I'll have my steward bring you supper. I'd invite you to dine with me but I've got some things that need seeing to before we leave tomorrow."

"Much obliged. My belly is rumbling even as we speak and I'd be poor company anyway. I didn't get much sleep last night," the Burgon admitted.

"Then I'll see you both in the morning," Degendesch said, nodding to Ryn as he turned to leave.

After a few moments of silence as Ryn stared at the empty space where the runabout had lain in its docking harness, his companion released a long, put-upon sigh.

"Okay, boy," the Burgon said. "Get it off your chest and spit it out."

"You shouldn't have allowed him to leave!" Ryn hissed. His eyes were hard as flint. "That was gods-be-damned stupid!"

Ryden Bakari didn't as much as blink while he studied the younger man. His gaze was locked with Rynlyn's. Had it been another warrior who had dared questioned his authority and decisions, the chances were good that man would be on the floor at the Burgon's feet, licking his boots while the threat of a very painful death hovered over him. As it was, the Burgon had great respect and affection for the young man and restrained from pummeling him into space dust.

"I know you are upset, worried about Tessa, and for that I will overlook your disrespectful words. But don't you *ever* question my judgment again, Rede," the emperor said after the silence had grown uncomfortable. "If you do—personal feelings for you aside—I will slap your ass in Amerigen until you are in your dotage."

"I—"

The Burgon held up a staying hand. "Don't say another word because that word might be the one that will put you in shackles."

Ryn clamped his teeth together though his eyes were still snapping with anger. He pushed away from the railing, his shoulders as tense as steel springs.

"Get your ass on the ship, take a shower and cool off before you do or say something you will regret," came the order.

His hands doubled into fists, Ryn pivoted on his heel and stormed off, heading for the bulk carrier. His boot heels rang on the corrugated gangplank as he boarded the unwieldy vessel.

"Hot-headed little prick," the Burgon grumbled under his breath then he snorted. Rynlyn reminded him of himself at that age so he couldn't fault the boy too much. He was a strong leader, a powerful warrior who had been taught at the Academy that orders and decisions were only as good as the man who issued them.

Shaking his head at the impetuosity of youth, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants and strolled leisurely toward the carrier.

* * * * *

Unaware they were being watched, Tessa's abductors sat playing cards while she leaned against the headboard of the rough wood bed. Her eyelids were closed but she was observing the men as clearly as if she were able to open her eyes. She studied their mannerisms, knew when they were cheating, read their thoughts and took from them all she would need to give a more than adequate description to Ryn.

Though the men had not hurt her—other than the one slap that had left her face bruised—neither had they gone out of their way to make her comfortable. The food they provided was nearly edible but at least it helped to keep up her strength. The water they gave her tasted of sulfur, tainting the lemonade they'd provided. The room was either too cold or too hot. There never seemed to be a happy medium.

"Two score, nine!" the one she had learned was named Steffus proclaimed. "I win!"

The one named Felz mumbled a choice obscenity then tossed his cards on the rickety table. "You're cheating but I can't catch you at it," he complained.

Tessa could have told him. She was glad neither was looking her way for she smiled then laid her head on the pillow, putting them out of mind, shutting off their vulgar words and ego-inflated boasting about the next round of the game. She tried to relax, waiting for the visitor who should arrive any minute now.

They hadn't told her, but she'd gleaned the information from their squalid minds that O'Shay and the man who was behind her abduction were on their way to retrieve her. It had taken every ounce of restraint not to whoop when she learned she was to be handed over to the Burgon on the Plains of Geschäft.

"Onus says she'd best not have the first scratch on her lily-white skin either," the kinder of the two kidnappers grumbled. "Best hope that bruise fades quickly."

"Maybe she'll trip and fall on the ice in that godsforsaken wasteland," the other man shot back. "That would account for the bruise."

Wasteland, Tessa thought. That was an apt description of the Plains. She'd never been there but she'd heard of it, seen vid-com shots of the isolated place.

Ranged in an immense semicircle along the cold desert north of the capitol city of Führen on Aduaidh Prime, the Plains was an enigma no scientist could adequately

explain. Violent winds blowing from many directions across the sand seas had created star dunes that were rimmed with ice most of the time since the weather never warmed enough for anything to grow amidst the bright rose sands of the barren land. The only refuge on was the *Goath Pluais*—the Wind Cave—where ice crystals blew against visitors like shards of glass. There was no water, no animal life on the ever-changing and desolate land. Large black meteorites like massive boulders littered the landscape. Even during high summer temperature on the Plains of Geschäft was a brisk twenty-five degrees. The twenty-mile-per-hour winds that swept without ceasing across the sand made it seem more like five.

Long before the first Burgon was awarded his mantle of power and authority, the lawgivers of Aduaidh Prime had declared the barren landscape of the Plains as a no-man's land where debts of will were settled in honorable fashion. Only three humanoid life forms were allowed access to the region at any one given time—generally the two combatants and a referee. Non-humanoid forms such as cybots and the like were never allowed to be on the ships that landed there. It had been decreed that all battles between men—and the occasional women—must be carried out strictly via hand-to-hand combat. No weapons of any kind could be brought to the Plains. Before a ship was allowed to land, a thorough scan was done to make sure there was nothing aboard that could be used as a weapon and that only three humanoids stepped foot on the desolate ground. If either of those laws was broken, the culprit would not live to leave Geschäft. His or her ship would be blown to space particles by a starcruiser orbiting Aduaidh Prime.

A knock sounded at the cabin door and Felz shot to his feet, his hand going to the dagger that was ever-present at his waist. Through Steffus' eyes she saw the brutal Felz lick his lips as though he thirsted to shed blood with the dangerous blade.

"Who is it?" Steffus called out.

"Who the fuck do you think it is?" came a snarled query.

"It's Onus," Felz said with a bob of his head. "I'd know that hiss of a voice anywhere. Let him in." He resheathed his dagger—reluctantly it seemed to Tessa—then she lost sight of him as Steffus moved to the door.

She switched her seeing to Felz as Steffus opened the portal and stepped back, bowing slightly at the waist.

"It's good to see you, milord," Steffus greeted the man Tessa knew had to be Riordan O'Shay.

Seeing him through Felz's eyes, she was at eye level with the most sought-after criminal in the megaverse. To her, he didn't look like much until he swung his eyes toward the bed and she had a look at the hard-edged profile with its clenched jaw.

"What's wrong with her eyes?"

Felz shifted from foot to foot. "We had to glue 'em shut, milord. Didn't want her to be able to recognize us."

"You what?" O'Shay thundered as he hurried to the bed.

Tessa felt his hands on her face—his palm gentle as he lifted her chin.

"Milady, did they hurt you?"

Tessa slipped into his mind and saw him staring down at her with true concern. His gaze was wandering over the bruise that was worse than she realized. It was mottled dark purple with yellow specks running through it and it covered much of her left cheek.

"Slapped me," she said. "Hard."

O'Shay rounded on the men. "Which one of you bastards did this?"

"She acted up and..." Felz began explaining.

"No, I did not," Tessa denied.

"Bitch is lying!" Felz snarled.

"You were not to touch her! Not to lay your filthy hands on her!" O'Shay thundered. "Have you any notion what he'll do to you for this?" He sounded as though he would explode with fury. "What else did you do?"

"Nothing, milord!" Steffus was quick to answer. "I swear on my old man's head we didn't do nothing untoward to her!"

"Get me something to dissolve this glue," O'Shay ordered as he ran a gentle thumb over Tessa's caked lashes. "You'd better pray there's been no damage to her eyesight."

"Chemist said there wouldn't be," Felz muttered. "Didn't want her seeing us. Didn't want the Burgon after us."

"That's a moot point now," O'Shay said with a snort. "You hit her and for that you'll pay."

"Here's your money," the man who had come in with O'Shay said.

Tessa couldn't see the speaker, but out of the corner of O'Shay's eye she saw him hand something to Felz, who was the leader of the two.

"Now get the fuck out of here before she does get a look at you," the man told the two kidnappers.

"Here's the solvent, milord," Steffus said. "Chemist said to use it stingily with a cloth soaked in warm water."

"Onus, get me a wet cloth," O'Shay commanded.

Tessa heard the door open and close and knew her abductors had fled. Not that it would do them any good. There was nowhere in the megaverse they could hide where the Burgon would not find them. She might argue for Steffus' life but Felz was another matter.

"You have my sincerest apologies for the way you were treated, milady," O'Shay told her. He glanced at the man he'd sent for the cloth, and when Tessa gasped, he swung his head toward her.

"What's the matter?" he asked her. "Are you in pain?"

She shook her head. "Cramp," she managed to say to hide her mistake.

O'Shay's face turned red. Like most men, when a woman used that word around him he was uncomfortable, his eyes going everywhere except to her.

"Do you need...?" He flung out a hand as though trying to catch the thought as it floated in the air past him. "You know." He looked to the man beside him. "What do they call the things they use when it's that time of the month?"

The forehead of the hairless man O'Shay was regarding crinkled. "I've no idea. Our women do not have monthlies."

"I am fine," Tessa said, embarrassed for by cramp she had not meant what O'Shay had perceived as the problem but rather a spasm of her leg muscle.

"You're sure?" O'Shay pressed.

"Aye, I'm very sure," Tessa told him.

"Then hold still and I'll be as quick and gentle with this as I can."

It took O'Shay fifteen torturous minutes to soften and dissolve the glue. Though her eyes were sensitive to the light after being closed for several days, there was no blurring of her vision or pain. She could see as clearly as before after a few moments of focusing.

"Again, I apologize for what those two miscreants did. I assure you they will be punished for daring such a thing," O'Shay said. He exchanged a quick look with the man standing to his left who nodded in understanding of O'Shay's decree. The man left, closing the door behind him.

Tessa had to admit O'Shay was being as polite and gentle with her as any man could. When she looked up at him, she could see the guilt he felt.

"He despised me before this," he told her. "Now that hate has gone even deeper. If he did not care for you so dearly, I wouldn't be here right now. He would have killed me on Staillin Major."

"Do you blame him for hating you, Mr. O'Shay?" she asked as he moved away from the bed to allow her to rise. "You murdered his family."

O'Shay sighed. "Aye, but I did not know his family was in residence when I issued the order. Had I known..." He shrugged. "Water under the bridge. What is done is done. I can't go back and change it no matter how much I wish I could."

Tessa rose to her feet. She looked toward the bathroom. "I need to freshen up," she said.

O'Shay nodded, pulled out a chair and sat at the table where the two kidnappers had been playing cards. "We'll leave as soon as you are ready, but please be quick. He gave me a limited time to have you at the Plains."

Over the length of her imprisonment, her abductors had led her to the bathroom and stood outside it while she relieved, guiding her back to the bed when she was finished. In vain she had tried to wash off the glue that kept her eyelids sealed but the substance had resisted the warm water. After a few attempts she'd given up, feeling her way from toilet to sink to door with outstretched hands. Now she got a look at the filthy

room she'd been using and gagged. The smell had been bad, she thought. She should have known it would look like this.

When she'd washed her face, raked her hands through her tangled hair, she joined O'Shay again. He was staring at the tabletop, apparently lost in thought, his eyes narrowed with what she realized was inner pain.

"I'm ready," she said.

He pushed his chair back and stood, sweeping a gentlemanly hand toward the door.

A dark blue Fiach runabout sat a few yards away. On its side were the initials DMCI in bright red letters.

"Degendesch Mining Company, Incorporated," O'Shay said even though she hadn't asked.

"Degendesch?" she queried. "As in Quirin? Major Quirin Degendesch of the United Court?" She knew the judge all too well.

"As in Rune," O'Shay replied as they headed for the Fiach. "His eldest son."

And she knew Rune. His handsome face came to mind as well as his potent werewolf way of making love. She felt a blush heat her cheeks.

Once they were in the runabout and she was strapped into the co-pilot seat, Tessa stared at the control console with awe.

"This is a beautiful craft," she said. She looked at him. "You designed it, didn't you?"

"My pride and joy," he said as his hands moved quickly over the controls. "It had been my intention to leave this to my son, but he was killed in battle. I have two daughters, but when Tappas Industries was confiscated by the New Alliance, they were asked to leave the company. My wife worked there as well, but she too was kicked to the curb, if you will."

Tessa thought he had no one to blame for all that but himself, yet she refrained from saying so. She knew he was all too aware who was at fault in the situation.

"I understand congratulations are in order," O'Shay said as the Fiach began to lift free of the ground. "Many women will envy you having won the heart of the Alliance's greatest young warrior." He shot her a quick look as he nosed the runabout to starboard, away from any buildings. "He has as nasty a temper as does the Burgon."

She slipped into his mind, relieved to find he hadn't put two and two together to realize the two men were related.

"What would you do if someone had kidnapped your wife, Mr. O'Shay?" she inquired. "Would you not be angry?"

"I would be relieved," he said with a laugh as he pushed the throttle forward and the craft began to pick up speed as it moved toward the horizon. "She is a harpy in the best of times. I have not missed her, believe me."

The Fiach's nose rose as it accelerated, the force of the Gs pulling at Tessa in not an unpleasant feeling as the sleek ship soared over the tree line then banked slowly.

"You don't love your wife?" she asked.

"No, I never have. There was another woman I loved. I lost her to a man they call The Phantom," he said, and she saw he was grinding his teeth. "Jetta was my consolation prize. Her father was Marcus Tappas." He chuckled. "I bet you can't imagine why I asked her to marry me."

There was no need for her to, she thought, so she turned her head to look down as the land fell rapidly away. "Where were we?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" he asked.

"Not really. I was just curious."

Tessa lapsed into silence and O'Shay seemed content to keep it that way. He was a skilled flyer, but then again she supposed he would have to be considering how he had made his fortune.

* * * * *

Ryn consumed his food with a single-mindedness that amused the Burgon, shoveling it into his mouth from a fist gripping the fork as though it were a weapon. It was a very palatable meal prepared by Degendes' private chef—only the best for Rune—but the young warrior was chomping it as though it were Academy fare.

"If you don't ease off on the anger, little warrior, you're going to stroke out," the Burgon teased.

The Chalean paused with a forkful of food halfway to his mouth and gave his companion a stormy look. Slowly he lowered his hand, resting the side of his arm on the edge of the table.

"Please stop calling me that," he said. "I am not a child, your excellency. I believe I have earned the right to be treated with respect."

The emperor leaned back in his chair, regarding Ryn with a raised eyebrow. "Aye, that you have."

"Then I would ask that you refrain from insulting me," Ryn stated, bringing the fork of food to his lips.

"It isn't an insult, Rynlyn," the Burgon said. "It is a term of affection." When Ryn blinked, the older man smiled. "How many other men do you think I have given that nickname?"

"I've no idea," he said as he ladled the food into his mouth.

"None. Not a single one." His smile widened. "Can you imagine me calling Cair Ghrian or Gabriel Leveche by that name? Or Harmattan?"

Ryn slowed on his chewing. "I would think they'd challenge you to physical combat if you did."

"Is that what you want?" the Burgon inquired. "Do you need to work off that anger by sparring with me?" He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "If that's the case, I would be more than happy to oblige you."

"There's no way in hell I could win against you, milord Reaper," Ryn grumbled. "I'd be a fool to even try."

"True, but it might help dissipate some of that gods-be-damned testosterone raging in your system if I blackened your eye for you." He smiled sweetly and wagged his brows.

"I just want my woman," Ryn stated. "And I want Riordan O'Shay's head for putting her through this!"

"O'Shay will not come through this unscathed," the Burgon told him. "If that's what you're thinking, let me put your mind at ease."

"You can't kill him on the Plains!" Ryn protested. "If you even try, they'll blow your ship—and my woman—out of the air as soon as you take off! The law holds even for you!"

"I will take no weapon to the Plains, Ryn, nor will I use my Reaper abilities, which are now considered weapons since a certain warrior I know used them to defeat his enemy there."

"So O'Shay leaves the Plains and you don't go after him again. That was part of the deal. How does that compute with you saying he'll not come through this unscathed?"

"Trust me, son," the Burgon said. "All will be as it was intended."

Ryn pushed his plate aside. He hadn't enjoyed the meal, had only been going through the motions to appease his companion. He needed to be up pacing or—better yet—slamming his fist into something. He was on edge, antsy, so keyed he knew he'd never be able to sleep, though the bunk in the first mate's quarters had looked enticingly comfortable.

Reading the thoughts going through Ryn's mind, the Burgon lowered his head, hiding the slight smile hovering on his lips. He would make sure Ryn slept and slept soundly. It was just a matter of finding the right moment to plant the seed in the young man's troubled mind.

"Do you love Miriam Quillan?"

Caught unaware by the question, the Burgon answered before he thought.

"With all my heart."

The moment the words left his lips, Ryden Bakari winced. He looked up at his interrogator with narrowed eyes.

Ryn grinned. "Gotcha," he said, wagging his own brows.

"You're asking for a pounding, brat," the emperor warned.

"I think she'll make you a fine mate," Ryn said. "I've always liked Miri. I took her out once. Did you know that?"

The Burgon was grinding his teeth. Had it been possible, steam would have been sprouting from his nostrils.

"It was about six months after she'd been told her husband died. She was vulnerable and spent the entire night reminiscing about him. I let her talk, thinking maybe she'd need comforting at the end."

The amber eyes became thin slits of ice. "Choose your next words very carefully, little boy, else they may be your last."

Ryn settled back, crossed his arms over his chest. "I held her while she cried. I dried her tears then I—"

"Careful," came the drawn-out warning.

"I left her apartment."

There was a slow release of breath from the Burgon.

A slow, mischievous grin spread over Ryn's face. "We could have a double Joining, you know." He tilted his head to one side. "That is if you don't mind the ceremony taking place on Seabhac instead of at the imperial palace on Aduaidh Prime."

The Burgon's eyelids lifted and he stared hard at the other man.

"One of these days that inappropriate sense of humor of yours is going to get you stomped into the ground, Rede."

"Annoying, isn't it?" Ryn asked as he uncrossed his arms and pushed back from the table. "To be teased about something you don't find amusing in the least." He got to his feet. "Kinda pisses you off, doesn't it?"

"Get your ass to bed before I rip you a new one, Rede," the Burgon ordered. He shot the psychic command to sleep and sleep deep—without dreams—to the young warrior while Ryn's mind was churning with laughter.

"Sweet dreams of Miri," Ryn said, chuckling, as he went to the door. He turned, gave the Burgon a crisp salute before leaving.

Chapter Ten

Standing beside the Burgon the next morning as they waited for the bulk carrier to settle beside the *Meaineyder* on Leste, Ryn couldn't help but notice the dark circles under the emperor's eyes. He doubted the powerful man had slept at all though he himself had crashed like a kitten having a nap attack. He suspected the refreshing sleep had been provided to him by his companion.

"The *Meaineyder* is the only one of my ships on which I haven't flown," Degendesch said.

"I warn you," the Burgon said. "I want Captain Peel for something other than hauling ore. The Alliance needs a man like him and you will need to start looking for someone else to helm the *Meaineyder*."

"Never let it be said I stood in the way of a good man's advancement," Degendesch replied. "I'm sorry to lose him, but you can offer him far more than I ever could."

Once they were on the *Meaineyder* and streaking at top speed toward Breathnóir, the three warriors as well as Peel settled down in the *Meaineyder* captain's office to discuss what would happen in the next twenty-four hours.

"After I leave, I want you to take the *Meaineyder* to Führen. Tessa and I will join you there and you will fly us to Seabhac."

"Why Seabhac?" Degendesch inquired.

"So Ryn and Tessa can be legally Joined in accordance with her beliefs," the Burgon told him. "I want to see that marriage done and sanctioned by her people before I leave for Riezell."

"Won't we need permission from the Seabhachuan *Sagartacht* before that can happen?" Ryn asked, astonished at this twist in the scenario.

"I've already arranged it," the Burgon declared. "The priesthood agreed to speed up the license and make allowances under the circumstances. They weren't happy about the first Joining, but to them it isn't legal anyway so it really doesn't exist."

"You're as good as hobbled twice-over, Rede," Degendesch chuckled.

"Unless you don't want to be," the Burgon said, one brow arched.

"I want to be."

"All right then that's settled. Next order of business is Bas'Rith. Make sure he stays put."

"I take it you want to keep him onboard the *Meaineyder* rather than turn him over to the authorities at Führen?" Peel inquired.

"Aye.

"Why?" Ryn asked.

"I vowed to O'Shay I would release the bastard."

"Have you forgotten he was responsible for the attack on this ship?" Ryn reminded him.

"I haven't forgotten." A nasty grin stretched the Burgon's full lips. "I said I'd release him. I just didn't say how I would release him."

"What happens after Seabhac?" Degendesch inquired.

"I'm gonna buy you a new Fiach," the Burgon said. "Top of the line."

"What about the one O'Shay has?" the werewolf queried. "Why can't I just get that back?"

"Would you rather have it or a brand new X-9?" was the reply.

"Never liked midnight blue anyway. I'd like the X-9 in steel gray with the DMCI logo in crimson with a black drop shadow, if you please," Degendesch decided with a boyish grin.

"Consider it yours, Rune."

"And after you provide the craft, what then?" Ryn asked.

"I'm on my way to Riezell," was the answer.

"It's about time," Degendesch said with a nod. "Give her my regards."

The Burgon turned to the werewolf. "Give who your regards?"

"Oh, I don't know. A certain secretary perhaps?"

Ryn snickered—drawing the narrowed eyes of the Burgon to him. He held up his hands. "Wasn't me."

"The both of you can go to Hell-Twelve," the Burgon snapped, shooting up from the table. "As a matter of fact, I may send you both there for an extended stay pounding rocks on that superheated penal colony!"

Once he was out of the room, Degendesch looked at Ryn. "Did he think no one knew?"

"I didn't until a few days ago," Ryn replied.

"I've known for a year at least," the werewolf told him.

Peel was scowling until Degendesch explained about Miriam Quillan. He whistled. "Don't know her, but it's good news that he's gonna have himself someone to care for."

"Should take some of the rough edges off that bad temper he's had for the last three years," Degendesch suggested.

"Do you have a lady in your life, Rune?" Ryn inquired.

"Oh, by the gods, no!" the Faolchú was quick to say, eyes wide. "That's the last thing I need!"

"Famous last words," Peel muttered, scratching his chin. "You may have caught the gods' notice with that last comment, milord."

Degendesch shuddered. "Let's hope not."

* * * * *

The mining ship made it to Breathnóir in record time and while Degendesch remained onboard with Peel, Ryn walked with the Burgon to the *Dilseacht*, the Burgon's black Fiach with the red Reaper insignia on its tail.

"Come onboard for a minute," the Burgon ordered.

Ryn followed the man he admired – and if truth were told, cared deeply for – into the expensive interior of the custom-made runabout.

"Have a seat while I change," the emperor said as he ducked into the sleeping quarters that had been specially incorporated into the multi-million *óari* machine. When he returned, he was dressed in the black uniform of a Reaper.

"Brutal," Ryn complimented him as the Burgon laid a pair of supple black leather gloves on the console beside the young man.

"I don't want you to worry about Tessa," the Burgon said. He opened a compartment and fished his hand inside.

Ryn watched what the Burgon was doing with a pounding heart and when the emperor of Aduaidh Prime drew on the black gloves, the young warrior looked up at him with awe.

The Burgon smiled. "You have nothing to worry about, Ryn. I will bring your lady back to you, safe and sound." He stared hard at Ryn for a moment. "Now go."

Ryn hesitated. "Are you sure about this?"

"Go, son. You know I must do this alone."

Ryn walked to the hatchway, turned then snapped to attention.

"May the Wind be always at your back, your excellency!" he said, executing a very sharp salute. He held the Burgon's gaze for a moment longer then ducked out of the runabout.

* * * * *

Tessa shivered inside the ice cave, huddled over the fire O'Shay had built. The wind was whipping under the overhang to make the flames dance like dervishes in the fire pit. She watched O'Shay as he paced.

"We should have stayed inside the ship," she said.

"That wasn't safe," O'Shay said. He fingered the small vid-com that kept him in communication with the starcruiser that was patrolling the Plains.

"Why wasn't it safe? Surely you don't think the Burgon would blow it up," she told him.

"He might not, but I won't say the same for others who might want to curry favor with him by executing me," O'Shay snapped. He plowed his hand repeatedly through his white hair.

"If they did that, they wouldn't be currying favor, Mr. O'Shay, but incurring his wrath," she stated. "He gave his word and that is very important to him."

"Aye," O'Shay agreed.

"Besides, I imagine the cruiser would take out anyone intent on harming you."

"Maybe."

The sound of an approaching engine brought O'Shay's head up and he hurried to the overhang. He peered out, craning his neck so he could look into the heavens.

"It's him," he said. He jumped as the miniature vid-com pinged.

"The Burgon has arrived," a robotic voice reported. "He is alone and there are no weapons aboard his craft. His defense system has been redlined for your protection."

Tessa got up from the rock upon which she'd been perched and moved toward the cave's opening.

"You stay here," O'Shay said. "I'll go out to meet with him first."

"If he doesn't see me, he's going to be upset. I need to be at your side, Mr. O'Shay," she reasoned with him. "Don't give him reason to think you've harmed me. He would not handle such thoughts well."

O'Shay chewed on his lip for a moment, watching the X-9 settle beside the borrowed Fiach in which he and Tessa had arrived on the Plains. He never took his eyes from the sinister black runabout.

"Aye, you may be right," he said. He reached for her hand.

Tessa had no choice but to place her hand in his although the contact troubled her. She felt the clamminess of his skin, the coldness of it, and it bothered her in ways she didn't understand. It was like touching the hand of some loathsome creature from the depths of the Abyss for it was slick with nervous perspiration.

Walking out into the brisk, blowing wind with its icy shards plucking at their clothing, Tessa and O'Shay stopped a few yards away from the Burgon's runabout. As its hatch began to open, she felt O'Shay shudder.

"He will keep his word," she said. "He will not attack you, and you heard the vid-com tell you he brought no weapons, that his weapons system has been put offline."

"I don't trust him any more than he trusts me," O'Shay said. He gripped Tessa's hand so tight she winced.

Tessa felt a surge of adrenaline shoot through her system when the gull-wing door of the runabout opened. Her heart was pounding fiercely, her throat dry. She feared the Burgon's rage more than she let on and knowing he was being forced to give up the man for whom he'd hunted so obsessively ensured he would not be in a good frame of mind.

Ryden Bakari stepped out of the Fiach, the sounds of his boot heels on the gangplank muffled by the low howl of the fierce wind. His salt-and-pepper-colored hair blew into his eyes and he raked his gloved hand through it to push the strands back over his forehead. Even from a distance, she could discern the heated amber of his cold eyes.

Tessa thought the man had never looked more handsome.

Or savage.

His gaze was steady on her as he walked toward her. He never blinked though she knew the wind was whipping into his eyes as it was her own.

"Are you all right, Tessa?" he asked when he was close enough for her to hear his words.

"Aye, your excellency," she said.

The lethal gaze shifted to the dark bruise on her face—a bruise no amount of makeup could conceal—and she watched him stiffen.

"He didn't do it," she was quick to say. "It was his men."

"And therefore his responsibility," the Burgon snapped.

"The men who harmed her are no more," O'Shay said. "They disobeyed my orders and they paid for it."

The muscles in the emperor's jaw bunched. He switched his attention from Tessa to the man he had been tracking for so many years.

"This is where it ends, O'Shay," he said.

"I've kept my word," O'Shay said, licking his lips. Tessa could feel him trembling and his hand was like a vise around hers.

"And I will keep mine. When I make a vow, I see it through."

Those Reaper eyes shifted once more to Tessa and softened just a fraction.

"Wait for me in my ship, Tessa," he commanded her.

Tessa wasn't sure O'Shay was going to release his grip on her. It seemed to her she was the man's lifeline, his anchor, and he was very reluctant to let her go.

"He gave his word," she said, and managed to pull her hand free of O'Shay's moist grip. She ran her hand down her skirt to rid her palm of his sweat.

Without a backward glance, she walked away from the fugitive and toward the Burgon. As she reached him, she gave him a look of deep apology.

"I'm sorry, Ryden," she said, knowing she was responsible for denying him the revenge he had sought for so long.

"Go to the ship," he said, not even looking her way. His attention was riveted on O'Shay.

She didn't know what else to say to him but rather hung her head and did as she was told. She had just reached the gangplank when she heard O'Shay shout.

"You swore!" O'Shay said, terror rife in his voice and she turned to see what was happening.

The Burgon was walking toward O'Shay. O'Shay was stumbling backward.

"You said you wouldn't attack me!"

"No one is coming after you, O'Shay," she heard the Burgon say. "I never break a vow. I swore I would not attack you and I will not."

"Then stay where you are!" O'Shay yelled.

"I want this over with once and for all."

The wind howled, cutting off whatever else was being said. Tessa was freezing, her teeth chattering. If she didn't get inside the warmth of the Fiach, she might well catch lung fever. Reluctantly, she darted inside, going immediately to the front of the craft to look out through the wide sweep of windshield.

With relief, she spied a miniature vid-com like the one O'Shay had and picked it up. She thumbed on the screen and could hear the men clearly over the low hum of the wind just as the crew of the starcruiser patrolling above could hear what was taking place on the Plains.

"I need closure," she heard the Burgon say, and watched as he got within a few feet of O'Shay.

"If you come at me..." O'Shay said, plastering his back to the wall of the ice cave.

"I've no desire to have my own people exterminate me, O'Shay," the emperor said. "All I want is an end to this war between us."

Tessa watched as the Burgon peeled the glove from his right hand.

"What are you doing?" O'Shay shrieked.

"Offering you my hand in peace," was the reply. He thrust his hand toward O'Shay.

Tessa held her breath—wondering if O'Shay would accept the offer. Time seemed to stand still with the Burgon's outstretched hand glowing white in the fading light of the sun. For what seemed like an eternity O'Shay didn't move then he slowly brought his own hand up to clasp Ryden Bakari's.

On the small vid-com screen she saw the Burgon smile. Saw him release O'Shay's hand and turn his back on the man as though dismissing him. Over his shoulder as he walked away, she saw O'Shay look down at his hand then rub it on the leg of his pants.

Her eyebrows came together as she watched O'Shay repeatedly scrubbing his hand on his pants, his shirt, and she knew.

"Oh my gods," she whispered, putting a trembling hand to her lips.

The Burgon was coming toward his Fiach at a leisurely pace, that hard, brittle smile still in place. His eyes met hers through the windshield and she thought she saw a crimson spark flash through the amber orbs. Very slowly she looked back to where O'Shay was standing in the whipping wind.

"What did you do?" she heard him yell. *"What did you do, Bakari?"*

"I ended it," the Burgon replied.

Heavy footfalls came up the gangplank but she didn't look around. With horrified fascination she watched O'Shay lurch away from the ice cave, stumbling forward with such a ghastly look on his face she couldn't help but cringe. She saw him drop to his knees.

"Buckle yourself in, wench," the Burgon told her as he slid past her and into the pilot's seat.

Tessa continued to watch O'Shay. His hands were at his throat. His face was turning a horrible shade of blue.

"Tessa, sit down and strap in."

The command brooked no disobedience and Tessa fumbled her way into the co-pilot's seat. For a brief second, she looked at the very capable hand that was flicking the switches and buttons on the control panel of the runabout—a hand that was once more sheathed in black leather.

"Ryden?" she questioned.

The Burgon was staring out the windshield, watching the man he hated more than he'd ever hated anyone falling to his side, clawing at his throat, eyes wild, legs thrashing, body twisting.

"I brought no weapons to the Plains," he said. "I did not Transition. All I did was shake the bastard's hand."

Her gaze lowered to the gloved hand. She knew what he had done. She knew what O'Shay had tried to wipe off on his pants—no doubt thinking the Burgon's hands were as cold-sweat slick as his own. She should have known Ryden Bakari had never had any intention of allowing O'Shay to leave the Plains alive.

"Will they punish you for this?" she asked, thinking of the crew of the starcruiser who at that very moment was watching Riordan O'Shay dying on the Plains of Geschäft. She half expected a missile to plow into the runabout any moment.

"Why would they?" he asked as the Fiach began to lift from the icy ground. "All I did was seal the bargain he and I made. You can't crucify a guy for shaking a man's hand, wench."

The last sight Tessa Gervasee had of O'Shay as the Fiach banked sharply into the wind was his body sprawled on the shifting sands, his eyes wide, one hand—the one coated with the deadly poison Maiden's Briar that Ryden Bakari rubbed into his own flesh every night of his life—reaching toward the heavens. Within a matter of hours, those same sands would flow over him, sealing him on the Plains for eternity.

Chapter Eleven

"What the hell are you doing here, Degendesch?"

The werewolf turned with a hard scowl on his handsome face, hand going to the ever-present dagger at his thigh, recognized the speaker and gave a rude snort.

"They'll let anyone on Aduaidh Prime these days," the Faolchú grunted then held out a hand. "How's it hanging, Ghrian?"

Prince Cair Ghrian took his friend's hand then drew him into a brotherly embrace. With his lips at the mine owner's ear, he said, "Longer than yours, wolfboy."

Degendesch snorted again. "In your dreams maybe." He pushed Ghrian playfully away. "So what *are* you doing here?"

"I need to talk to our wandering Burgon on Alliance business. There is a matter our acting Burgon doesn't feel comfortable handling," Cair replied.

"Tev?" Degendesch asked, one brow shooting up. "Since when has Tev Ben-Alkazar been uncomfortable about anything?"

"This regards Rekia Nolz. He's been tried and sentenced to death by hanging. Admiral Peyton DesGardens is now in charge of the New Coalition and has issued a request for clemency, stating Nolz is related to Ryden."

"Related in what way?"

Ghrian lowered his voice. "He is saying Nolz is Ry's illegitimate son."

Degendesch blinked and his lips parted. "You've got to be shitting me?"

"Wish I were. I had never seen Nolz but when Tev sent me a vid-com shot of him, I have to admit there is a very strong resemblance between him and Ry. They did a DNA test and guess what?"

"Mother of the gods," Degendesch said, stunned by the news. "He's going to shit a brick when he hears about this."

"I heard he isn't here. Do you know where I can find him?"

"He's on his way back here with Rynlyn Rede's woman."

Ghrian frowned. "Where the hell did she go now?" he asked, and then held up a hand. "Please tell me that wench did not go back to Amerigen to meet with yet another prisoner!"

The werewolf scratched the side of his face. "You didn't hear she was kidnapped from here?"

Ghrian's eyes widened. "What?"

Degendesch nodded. "By two of Riordan O'Shay's men."

Ghrian stared at his friend for a long moment, searching the Faolchú's dark brown eyes. "But she's all right?"

"Aye. O'Shay made a bargain with Ry. He said he would exchange her for the Burgon's promise to stop hunting him, to let him just disappear into the megaverse."

"And Ry agreed to that?" Ghrian's voice was incredulous.

"He met with O'Shay on the Plains and now he's on his way back with Rede's woman," came the answer.

"He just left O'Shay there? Unharmmed?"

"You can't take weapons to the Plains, Cair," the werewolf reminded him. "And Ry wasn't allowed to Transition after a certain mutual friend of ours dispatched an enemy while gallivanting around in Reaper fur. His weapons system would have been redlined by the cruiser patrolling the Plains." He shrugged. "Rede's woman was more important to him than taking our O'Shay."

"Oh, this is not good," Ghrian said. "That man has lived for the revenge he intended to extract from O'Shay. If we thought he was hell to live with before, he's bound to be ten times worse now!"

"That's what I think, but Ryn doesn't seem to have the same worry. As soon as Ryn heard they were on their way back and both were safe, he's been skipping around here like a little girl gathering flowers to make a daisy chain." He lowered his voice. "I swear I heard the prick whistling."

"Pricks don't whistle, wolfboy," Ghrian said with a sniff. "Dribble and gush, but they don't whistle."

Degendesch rolled his eyes. "You know gods-be-damned well what I meant, you asswipe."

Ghrian chuckled at the insult. "So when is the great man scheduled to arrive?"

"Within the hour." Degendesch threw a heavy arm around Ghrian's shoulders. "What say we pass the time swilling down some good Ionarian rot gut in the guest quarters?"

"It's better than standing around here."

"Hey, why don't you come with us to Seabhac when we leave?" Degendesch asked as they walked.

"Why are you going to Seabhac?"

"To get Rede legally hitched. Tess' people don't consider the first ceremony on the *Chinook* as a true Joining," the werewolf stated. "The Burgon is going to give the bride away."

"I'd like that. Sure, count me in."

"Maybe you should wait to tell him about Nolz until after the ceremony. Let him have a few minutes of peace anyway," Degendesch advised.

"Aye, that might be best."

They took the wide steps that led up to the main concourse of the imperial palace and turned down a corridor that led to a commons room where they could get a drink. They were surprised to see Ryn and Captain Peel already there, sitting together with snifters of Chalean brandy in front of them.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Degendesch said then introduced Peel to Ghrian.

"I've heard good things about you, Jonas," Ghrian said as he took a seat.

"The Burgon is giving him his own LRC," Ryn informed the prince. "Fresh off the assembly line."

"Congratulations," Ghrian said.

Ryn turned to give Ghrian a hard look. "I wasn't happy to hear you took my lady to Amerigen, Cair."

"I tried to talk her out of it, but she had her mind made up," Ghrian said. "I apologize if it upset you."

"It did. I'm not sure I can ever forgive you for your part in it."

An uncomfortable silence settled at the table. It wasn't until after the barmaid came to take the newcomers' orders and had left before Degendesch cleared his throat, drawing the eyes of the other three men.

"So what do you think? Will the Burgon reclaim his signet ring from Tev and take over the duties again?" he asked.

"Tev is more than ready to hand the reins over to Ry again. Rutheen is chomping at the bit to get him back into retirement," Ghrian said.

"Even when she was determined to get him out from under her feet?" Degendesch asked.

"The grass always seems greener on the other side of the fence until you're actually standing over there," Peel said. "I've not had the pleasure of meeting Admiral Ben-Alkazar but I hear he's not the kind of warrior to remain idle for long. I cringe at the thought of retiring. That's what usually kills a man."

"Ruthie wants to travel," Ghrian said. "That should keep Tev active enough."

"I imagine Ry will dump a shit pot full of money on him in thanks for all Tev's done while Ry was off chasing O'Shay," Degendesch suggested.

"Or give him his own personal Fiach with an unlimited fuel ticket in order to take Rutheen traveling," Ryn mumbled. "He loves to give away Fiachs."

"That's sort of like thumbing his nose at O'Shay," Ghrian commented. "I know it must be eating Ry alive to let the man live, not to go after him again."

Ryn smiled. "I'm sure our Burgon is very content with the way things went on the Plaines," he said.

Ghrian stared at him—the only one there with the ability to slip into the younger man's mind, and when he did, Ghrian's eyes widened. He slumped back in his chair

just as the barmaid brought his drink. Stunned by what he'd gleaned from Ryn's thoughts, he stared at the younger man.

"Did you really think O'Shay would walk away from this, Cair?" Ryn asked.

"But how?" Ghrian asked.

Ryn lifted his snifter. "Ask him yourself when he gets here."

"He's dead, isn't he?" Degendesch asked, homing in on the vibrations wafting between the two warriors. "O'Shay bought it on the Plains. He did, didn't he?"

"You'll have to ask Ry," Ryn said then thrust his snifter out. "To the Burgon."

"To the Burgon!" the other men said, clinking their glasses and mugs against Ryn's.

* * * * *

The Burgon shut down the engines of his runabout then turned in his seat to look at Tessa. Her beautiful face still wore the stamp of unease upon it, her lavender eyes regarded him with such worry it made his heart ache.

"Everything is all right, Tessa," he assured her. "Nothing will be said of what happened on the Plains. Justice was served. There will be no penalty."

"He regretted his part in the death of your family," she said. "He really wasn't a bad man."

Ryden shook his head. "No, there you're wrong, sweeting. He was a very bad man." When she started to speak, he held up a gloved hand, frowning as her attention shifted to the lethal appendage. "Have you ever met Rory Quinn?"

Tessa tore her gaze from the black leather. "The Phantom? Aye, I have met him."

"O'Shay once had Quinn strapped to a table with a pendulum swinging above it. He intended for Rory to die a very gruesome death. The why of it doesn't matter. Let it suffice to say that even though he may not have known my family was in residence at the palace, he knew there would be hundreds of deaths. He didn't bat an eye when he ordered it. So, aye, Riordan O'Shay was a very bad man. He needed to pay for the death and destruction he wreaked on our world. You don't get a pass for such things." He swiveled his head toward the side window then looked back at her. "Now put a welcoming smile on those sultry lips and go out to meet your man. He's waiting out there shifting from foot to foot like a little boy desperately in need of a urinal."

She stared into his eyes for a long moment then nodded, reached down to unbuckle her safety harness. Without another word she slipped out of the co-pilot seat and walked toward the runabout's hatch, barely missing a step as it popped open. She walked sedately down the steps, but the moment she saw Rynlyn, saw him open his arms, she flew to him, flinging her arms around him as he lifted her from the ground and swung her around.

The Burgon came down the steps of his ship with a satisfied smile on his finely chiseled lips. He cocked a brow to find Cair Ghrian standing alongside Rune Degendesch.

"He's going with us to Seabhac," Degendesch said as Bakari joined them.

"The more the merrier," the Burgon replied. He glanced at the *Meaineyder* sitting in a slip a few ships over. "We all set?"

"Peel is onboard. I heard his engines come online as soon as your runabout was spotted," Degendesch answered.

"Then let's get her in the air." He gave a loud, piercing whistle and both Ryn and Tessa looked around. He cocked his head toward the mining vessel.

"What's gonna happen to my old ship?" Degendesch asked as he fell into step beside the Burgon. "The thought of it rotting on the Plaines doesn't sit well. It is too fine a ship for such an ignoble ending."

The Burgon rolled his eyes. "You are such a nag, werewolf. I told you I'd give you a new ship, but if you must have that one too, I'll drop you off on my way to Riezell. How's that?"

"Acceptable," Degendesch said, jamming his hands into the pockets of his pants. "Entirely acceptable."

* * * * *

Anton Bas'Rith paced the tiny cell in which he was incarcerated and cursed both the Burgon and Rynlyn Rede. He knew the emperor of Aduaidh Prime had no intention of allowing him to live. Even when told he would be released as part of the deal O'Shay had struck with the Burgon, Bas'Rith knew his life was forfeit. It was only a matter of how and where his death would happen.

Staggering as the *Meaineyder* left the docking area and began to accelerate, he wondered where they were going now. Not that it mattered. He had already made a decision about his future and he knew precisely how to implement that decision.

* * * * *

They were barely in the first mate's quarters, the door not even closed before Ryn was feverishly removing Tessa's clothing. Likewise, her hands were all over him as she peeled the shirt over his head, her fingers scrambling at the buckle to his belt.

"I died a thousand deaths," he mumbled as he tugged her gown down over her shapely hips, drawing her panties with it.

"I was never in any real danger," she replied, kicking off her shoes, popping the button on his fly.

"I aged twenty years, wench," he countered.

"Ry had everything under control," she reminded him as she slid his zipper down and splayed her hands under the waistband of his uniform pants to push them down his long legs.

"Boots, boots, boots," he hissed.

Tessa gave an answering hiss even as he fumbled with her chemise. It tore away from her body as she dropped to a squat to jerk off the hampering boots.

With one hand on her bare shoulder to steady himself Rynlyn grunted as the first boot and sock came off and with them the pant leg from that limb. He hopped to his bare foot so she could remove the other boot and sock and pant leg from him. He had only a fraction of a second to snap his head up and back to keep her head from smacking him under the chin as she shot to her feet.

Naked, they wrapped their arms around one another in a crushing embrace and his mouth came down on hers with a vengeance. His tongue thrust between her lips to taste the sweetness of her mouth. Breathing heavily through their noses, they deepened the kiss until they were rubbing against one another like two cats in heat. He tore his mouth from hers.

"Cot," he growled, bending his knees to sweep her up in his arms.

"Aye," she agreed as he carried her.

What followed was a knee to the cot, a soft body to the mattress followed by a harder body and rough knees spreading silken thighs so a thick erection could slide along a hot core. Lips locks, fingers entwined, hands pressed to either side of a beautiful woman's head. A muscled male body writhed atop a finely toned female's as tongues dueled, teeth nibbled, breaths mingled.

"I love you," Ryn whispered against her mouth.

"I love you," she returned as he swept his tongue over her bottom lip then drove it deep into her mouth.

Ryn arched his hips, pressed his cock to the creamy juncture of her legs seeking admittance. He was like hot steel as he thrust against her, the tip of his throbbing cock oozing for want of her velvet sheath. He ached with a need that was so overpowering it caused him to tremble.

"I'm here," she mumbled against his invading mouth. "I'm all right."

He needed to be inside her—pressed tight to her womb, as deep as their bodies would allow. He needed to *have* her.

He moved his lips to the hollow of her throat. "I was so scared, Tessa. I was so gods-be-damned scared I'd lost you. I would have died if I had."

She felt him tremble. "Shush, Rynnie," she said. "Don't think about it anymore." Her fingers tightened around his, their palms together.

He unlaced the fingers of his right hand and moved it between them, taking his aching cock in hand to guide it to her sweet moistness. She accommodated him by lifting her legs, wrapping them around his waist as he slid smoothly into her heat.

Slow, tantalizing movements of his hips bumped against her as he ground himself between her legs. He had insinuated his hand beneath her rump to lift her to him. Not satisfied with the depth of his thrusts, he released her other hand and wedged it

beneath her as well, hefting her to him easily as his toes dug into the mattress for purchase.

Their lips met. Their mouths fused. Her breasts flattened beneath the hard surface of his brawny chest—her nipples like pebbles pressing into his flesh. Her legs were vises around him, but he reveled in the tight constriction. His thrusting quickened.

Tessa locked her arms around his neck and strained to push her lower body as close to his as humanly possible. The feel of him sliding in and out of her—the wet sound of it—sent chills of pleasure racing through her. His arms were like iron bands wrapped around her, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her ass. His cock was hard and thick and plunging as deep inside her as it could with pleasure and a small hint of pain to prove his possession. The weight of his muscular body atop her own was so sublime she felt tears at the back of her throat.

She pulled her mouth from his and sank her teeth lightly into the side of his neck. He flinched, groaned and the speed of his thrusts increased. He rotated his hips with each downward push—grinding into her waiting body. A single drop of sweat fell from his brow to her breast. She heard his ragged breath dragging in and out of his nostrils for his jaw was set, his lips pursed with determination as he drove into her. His eyes closed as he let his head fall back. The arch of his neck fascinated her for the vein at the side was pumping furiously.

“Gods!” she heard him mutter through clenched teeth. She dropped her hands between them to pluck at his nipples, and the sound he made was part strangle, part gasp—serving as a goad to turn his body into a runaway piston.

The cot shook beneath them as he pounded into her. He was making low, growling noises deep in his throat.

She increased the pressure of her fingers on his nipples.

“Mother of the gods, woman!” he cried out then stiffened as he poured into her, losing all control of his body.

Tessa felt her own climax racing toward the finish. She slid her hands around him even as his cock continued to jerk within her. She dug her nails into his scarred back as the first ripple took her over the edge.

“Ryn!” she screamed, arching up to him, offering everything she had.

He pumped into her though his cock was drained, his flesh shrinking. There was enough steel left in his rod to give her another climax and a third. He could hear her sobbing as the forceful little squeezes gripped him. The feeling was glorious and he gathered her to him, flipping them over so that when the last pulse of her vaginal muscles erupted she was lying atop him with his arms securely around her, her legs trapped beneath him.

Panting, she lay on his chest. Sweat glistened on both their bodies. Their hearts were thudding brutally, the blood speeding through their veins. Both were breathing raggedly, depleted of strength. Both were quivering in the aftermath of a release that had rocked them to the core.

"I've never felt anything like that before," Ryn whispered hoarsely.

"Me neither," she confessed.

"I may have torn something."

She smiled. "I doubt it."

They lapsed into silence and within moments had drifted down into a deep sleep with Tessa lying stretched out upon him, his arms wrapped snugly around her, chin on the top of her head as her cheek pressed against the wiry mat of hair on his chest. Their eyes opened at the same time when the vid-com chimed.

"This had better be good," Ryn growled, looking past her shoulder to a screen that was a dark gray color indicating the caller did not wish to intrude by observing them.

"We are twenty minutes out from Seabhac," Captain Peel said. "His Excellency thought you might want to know."

"Acknowledged," Ryn said, and the screen went black.

"We should get up and shower," Tessa said as she shifted off him to roll to her back.

"Aye, we should." The scent of spent sex was heavy in the room and he knew it would be on their bodies as well. There was no doubt in his mind every man on the ship knew what they had been doing, and that made him smile.

"Don't gloat," she chastised him.

"Not gloating," he said. "That was a bragging smile, wench."

"No, Rynlyn, that was a gloating grin," she stated then turned to her side and sat up, wishing there was a shower in the room and not between their cabin and the captain's. She padded over to retrieve her gown, thinking to pull it on over her nakedness.

Ryn sat up as well to drag a hand through his tousled hair then down his sweaty chest. "I stink," he said, lifting an arm to sniff.

Tessa laughed. "Put your pants on. I'll..."

There was a knock at the door.

"Shit," Ryn said, hurrying over to snatch his uniform pants. He hopped on one foot as he struggled to draw them on.

"Rynlyn? You in there?"

"I believe that's Prince Cair calling you," Tessa said with a laugh. She headed for the small room that contained a sink and toilet. She pulled the door closed behind her as Ryn opened the cabin door.

"You got a minute?" Ghrian asked.

"Not really," she heard Ryn say. When she came back out—her gown in place—her lover was sitting on the cot drawing on his boots, his handsome face creased with concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He looked up at her. "Cair said our prisoner has escaped. He killed two guards in the process. I'm going to help look for the bastard."

"What prisoner?" she asked, but another knock at the door brought Ryn up from the bed and carried him to the door.

"Did you forget something?" he asked as he flung open the portal.

It wasn't Cair Ghrian standing framed in the doorway but a man Tessa didn't know. She took in his angry face, his blazing eyes and as Ryn took a step back, she saw the flash of a blade streaking toward the man she loved.

"Ryn!" she shouted.

Anton Bas'Rith had grown up in the savage slums of *an Égypt*, picking pockets and slitting the throats of those who fought back, strangling enemies and friends alike in order to survive. He was as handy with a blade as he was with a garrote. When he struck, his powerful aim was true and lightning fast. So quickly did he plunge his blade into Ryn's belly, it was barely out again before he drove it twice more into the shocked warrior's body.

"Ryn!" Tessa's scream was piercing as she threw herself across the cabin.

The expression on Ryn's face was one of stunned surprise. His eyes were wide as he stared death in the eye. He staggered back—bumping into Tessa. The contact kept him from falling but it also pitched him forward and onto Bas'Rith's blade still again.

"Die, you motherfucker!" the killer snarled as he twisted the blade ninety degrees and jerked it upward before he withdrew it and turned, expecting to run.

That was not to be.

Rune Degendesch shot out his arm, wrapped his fingers around Bas'Rith's neck then twisted the man's head sharply to the right. The sound of bones breaking was loud.

Tessa's arms were around Ryn but she couldn't hold him as he sank to his knees, his breath leaving him in a harsh rasp, his body shuddering as his knees hit the floor. Blood was pulsing from his wounds and he crumpled to his right side with one leg out straight, the other crooked beneath it at an angle.

"Rynlyn, *no!*" Tessa sobbed.

"Get Ryden!" she heard Degendesch tell somebody then he was kneeling beside her. "Hurry!"

Tessa was trembling so badly she could barely lift her lover's head from the floor, positioning it in her lap. Already his face was as white as new parchment. He was pressing his hands to his abdomen, the blood pulsing through his fingers and onto the floor.

"Rynlyn," she sobbed, her heart breaking. Tears were streaking down her face.

"Shush," he told her. "Don't cry."

"Don't leave me," she whimpered. "Please don't leave me."

He lifted a blood-stained hand to cup her cheek, smearing crimson on her flesh. "I love you," he said, blood bubbling from his lips.

She was staring into his eyes, watching the light begin to fade. Her heart was pounding fiercely, a wash of red flowing over her vision. She saw him giving in, realized he was accepting the fate that had been handed to him, and it made her angrier than she'd ever been in her life.

"No, Rynlyn!" she denied. "You are not going to die on me, do you hear me? You are *not* going to die!"

The Burgon came thundering into the room, coming up short when he saw Ryn lying in a rapidly expanding pool of blood that was soaking the hem of Tessa's gown.

"Merciful Alel, no," everyone heard the great man whisper.

Rynlyn moved his head so he could look at the emperor. He said something no one could make out so the Burgon knelt down beside him, putting an ear to Rynlyn's lips.

"Take care of her for me," Rynlyn asked.

"With all that I am or will ever be," Ryden Bakari swore, his voice breaking.

Ryn turned his face up so he could look into Tessa's. The young warrior tried to smile, but a grimace of pain pushed it away. "I'm sorry, baby," he whispered.

"Don't do it," Tessa hissed, lips drawn back in a vicious snarl, eyes blazing. "Don't you dare!"

His hand caressed her one last time then fell away, his face turning from her as the light left his gaze. Eyes open, he stared into whatever lay beyond the here and now.

"*Rynlyn!*" The keening sound she made brought the hair up on each man's arms. "No, Rynlyn. No!"

Tears were falling from Ryden Bakari's eyes. He reached out to lay a hand on Tessa's shoulder but her head snapped up and she knocked his arm away.

"Save him," she said between tightly clenched teeth. Her stare was shooting sparks of fire. "*Now*, Ryden. Do it *now*!"

"Tessa..." the Burgon began, shaking his head.

"Do it!" she spat—eyes wild, beautiful face drawn into a mask of fury.

"I wouldn't wish this life on..." Ryden began.

"He's your son!" she shouted at him. "Save him, Ryden! Save your boy!"

Shock flashed over the Burgon's face. He stared at her as though she'd grown a second head right before his eyes.

"She's telling you the truth, Ry," Cair said softly. "He is your natural-born son."

Ryden looked up at Ghrian with incomprehension stamped on his rugged features. When Cair nodded slowly, the Burgon lowered his gaze to the dead man.

"Do it, Ryden," Tessa said. "He is your flesh and blood."

"If you won't, I will," Ghrian insisted. "He's too good a man to let die at the hand of slime like Bas'Rith."

The emperor of Aduaidh Prime needed no further encouragement. If his son was to be a Reaper, it would be from one of his fledglings—as it was meant to be. He gritted his teeth then leaned over to take up the dagger that was still clutched in Bas'Rith's hand. He pulled it free, flipped it over so the bloody blade rested in his palm, extending the hilt toward Cair. "You'll have to do it," he said. "I can't."

Ghrian wasted no time. He shot Degendesch a quick look. "I'll need your help."

"Just name it," the werewolf told him.

"Ease Rynlyn over to his stomach while I harvest the fledgling from Ry," Ghrian said. "You'll need to make the cut on Ryn for me when I hand the blade over to you."

"Sure thing," Degendesch agreed. "How big a cut and where?"

"At least six inches long vertically, directly over his right kidney," Ghrian said then pointed to the cot. "Lie down, Ry."

The Burgon was already ripping off his shirt to expose his bare back as he went to the cot. He stretched out on the bed and didn't bat an eye as the incision was quickly made and Ghrian thrust his slender fingers into the wound to extract a fledgling.

Tessa paid no attention to what the men behind her were doing. She was sitting on the floor with Ryn's head in her lap, smoothing the hair back from his cool forehead. She was whispering to him in her native language that only the Burgon could understand. Degendesch was on his knees beside her, his hands on his thighs as he waited for the signal to make the cut on Ryn's back.

"I've got it," Ghrian said one moment, and in the next he was standing at Tessa's shoulder.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him extending the blade to the Faolchú, who took it and moved to position himself where he could make the incision in Ryn's back.

"Gods, that's an ugly-ass thing," she heard Degendesch say and looked up to see a wriggling, spiny slug-like creature pressed between Ghrian's thumb and index finger. From the pained look on the prince's face, she knew the hideous thing was stinging him. She looked away again, leveling her attention on the still profile of Rynlyn Rede. She tried to ignore the words being said.

"That's big enough."

There was a plopping sound and despite herself she shifted her gaze to the writhing, jackknifing entity that was squirming on Ryn's bare back.

"Get in there, you little bitch!" the Burgon snapped.

Fascinated by the twisting, turning ugliness of it, she watched the creature rear the top portion of its loathsome body up from Ryn's flesh. It seemed to be sniffing though there were no discernible openings that would identify a nose on the disgusting thing.

"What the fuck are you waiting for, bitch?" the Burgon shouted. "Get the hell inside my boy!"

When a tiny, forked tongue shot out, she felt bile rushing up her throat. Before she could turn away, the creature reared its front portion up higher then shot into the wound, diving down between the cut sections of flesh to disappear.

"Thank Alel," Ghrian said on a long sigh. "I was beginning to think it was too late."

"Get her out of here," the Burgon said.

"No," Tessa said. "I'm staying."

"No, you are not," Ghrian said, and hooked his hands under her arms to lift her easily to her feet. Though she struggled against him, he propelled her toward the door, kicking aside one of Bas'Rith's legs as he moved.

"I want to stay with him!" Tessa protested, lashing out in trying to pry the prince's steel grip from her upper arm.

"He wouldn't want you to," Ghrian said. "It is not a pretty sight."

"I don't care!"

"Aye, but he would," the Burgon snapped as Ghrian dragged her to the door. "Rune, you make tracks too."

Degendesch was close on their heels, quickly exiting the room at the Burgon's order. He barely had the door closed behind him before a horrible shriek of sound echoed from the cabin.

The shrill howl shook Tessa and the other men who had gathered outside the cabin—including Peel. However, it didn't faze either Ghrian or Degendesch who knew the sound of Transitioning all too well.

There were more howls, thuds, heavy bumps against the wall, shrieks of fury and the unmistakable sound of claws dragging down the metal of the door.

"Take her to the bridge," Ghrian said, pushing Tessa firmly toward the werewolf, "and keep her there. She doesn't need to hear this."

Degendesch shackled Tessa's arm within an inflexible grip and pulled her down the corridor.

Tessa was shivering uncontrollably as the sounds increased in volume and duration behind them. The others had backed away from the cabin door. When something heavy struck it with enough force to make it rattle, she looked back to see men pounding down the corridor in the opposite direction.

"He's hurting, isn't he?" she asked softly. She put a hand to the blood streaking her cheek.

"Aye, wench, I'll not lie to you," the werewolf said. "But he's alive." He gave her a commiserating look. "That's all that matters, isn't it?"

She nodded, unable to reply. Her throat felt constricted, her mouth dry as she listened to the ungodly yowls coming from the cabin. Once again she shuddered hard and the werewolf draped an arm around her.

"It's gonna be all right, Tessa," he said gently.

Tessa felt as though she were walking in a vat of thick molasses. It took effort to lift each foot, to take a step. Her body felt numb to the point where she couldn't feel Degendesch's heavy arm encircling her. When they arrived on the bridge, she didn't notice the crewmen staring at her as the Faolchú ushered her to the seat normally reserved for the first mate.

Degendesch swiveled his head around and asked the man closest to him to fetch a glass of water for her and a cloth to wipe her face.

"I'd give you a healthy shot of Chalean whiskey but I know what that would do to you," the werewolf said as he hunkered down before her, his hands on the chair arms. "You okay?"

Again she nodded. In agitation, she was twisting her fingers together atop her skirt. Her lips were pursed tightly shut, her eyes downcast.

"Here you go, milord," the man said, who had returned with the glass of water and a wet towel.

Degendesch took the glass and held it out to Tessa. "Take a drink, lass."

She didn't want the liquid but drank it anyway. It had no taste and the coolness of it didn't even register. It was wet and relieved the dryness in her mouth, but it did not begin to quench the need that ached within her. She took a few sips then handed the glass back to Degendesch. He took it then gently ran the warm, wet cloth over her face, washing away the stain of Rynlyn's lifeblood.

"The first time is always the hardest," she heard the werewolf say.

Still again she nodded, unable to find words, to speak them for they kept sticking in her throat.

"Milord?"

Degendesch looked around, acknowledging the com officer. "Aye?"

"We are being hailed from Seabhac, milord. They've given us clearance to land. What are your orders?"

The Faolchú got to his feet, tossing the cloth aside. "Put us down, Mr. Whitney, and inform Seabhac Control that the Burgon is otherwise engaged at the moment, prohibiting us from immediately disembarking. Tell them when he has completed his business, we will let them know."

"Aye, aye, Sir!" the com officer replied.

"How l-long?" Tessa managed to ask in a hoarse voice.

Degendesch understood what she was asking and shifted one wide shoulder. "I can't answer that, sweeting. There's never any set length of time. It may be half an hour or it could be several. He..." The werewolf cut himself off when he saw the elevator doors open and the Burgon step out of the cage.

"The Burgon is on the bridge!" the security officer announced unnecessarily, and Tessa looked around to see Ryden Bakari frowning.

"Don't do that," the emperor snapped. "They can bloody well see me!"

The security man blushed and went to one knee, his doubled fist to his chest. "Forgive me, your excellency!" he said in a trembling voice.

"And don't do that either! Get the fuck up. I'm in no mood for any of that reverential shit right now!"

Tessa pushed out of the first mate's chair as the Burgon stomped over to her. She flinched when he reached for her hand.

"We need to talk, wench," he said, tugging her firmly behind him to the elevator.

"Be gentle with her, Ry," Degendesch advised, but the emperor did not acknowledge the suggestion. His hand was tight around Tessa's as though he expected her to bolt.

As the elevator doors closed, Tessa risked looking up at his set, hard face.

"Is he all right?" she asked in a squeaky little voice.

"He was sleeping and most likely will for an hour or so," he informed her. "He took the Transition well though he was not pleased with what was happening to him. Gods-be-damned little bastard snapped at me." A muscle worked in his cheek. "He snapped at *me*! Fucking tried to bite *me*! I ought not to feed his sorry ass when he wakes."

Tessa tucked her bottom lip between her teeth as those words settled in her mind. A slight whimper came from somewhere deep inside her.

"He won't blame you, Tessa," the Burgon said. "He will blame me so stop that infernal whining. It takes a strong woman to be the mate of a Reaper. You're a strong woman. You're already his mate. He'll need you now more than ever."

Nothing more was said until he escorted her to the captain's office, motioning for her to sit in one of the two chairs flanking Peel's desk. He took the other, plopping down in it before running a blood-stained hand through his salt-and-pepper hair.

"All right," he said, his voice hard. "Out with it. I want the entire story."

Tessa swallowed – wishing she had another glass of water to wet her suddenly dry mouth. When he growled at her, she knew his patience was rapidly dwindling.

"You know I went to Amerigen," she said.

"To see his mother," the Burgon snapped, waving a dismissive hand. "I know gods-be-damned well I never fucked that bitch. I remember her face as clearly as I remember Anastasia's. I would never have stooped to putting my cock in something that looked like that even if I had all my sheets to the fucking wind!"

"She wasn't his real mother," she told him.

"That goes without saying," he hissed. "Get on with it, wench!"

Tessa took a long, steadying breath. "I will tell it all, Ryden, but you have to promise me..."

"I don't *have* to do anything! I'm the gods-be-damned Burgon, woman!" he bellowed then struggled visibly to get his fierce temper under control. He was gripping the arms of the chair as though they were mortal enemies he was strangling.

"Let me tell the story then yell at me!" she shouted back at him, her grief pushed aside. "Don't say anything until I've finished."

"I am not making any promises," he stated, eyes flashing.

She took another fortifying intake of air then began to speak in a low voice.

"Do you remember the night your first child was born?" she asked. When he didn't answer—only glared at her—she sighed deeply, whining his name with exasperation. "Ryden?"

"I thought you didn't want me to talk! Aye, I remember it," he said. "What of it?"

"It was snowing hard that evening," she reminded him. "There were whiteout conditions all over Aduaidh Prime and the healer was down in Führen for there was an outbreak of fever. Your lady-wife went into labor but there was no way to send for the healer so her ladies-in-waiting sent for a midwife."

The Burgon's head went back as though she'd slapped him. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "By the gods, *that's* why the bitch looked so familiar!" he grated. "She was the one who delivered Siobadh." He narrowed his eyes even more. "Did she deliver Rynlyn as well?"

"Aye," she answered. "She did."

"Then who is his mother?" His breathing became ragged. "Is she still alive?"

"No, she is not."

"Who was she?" he demanded.

"Here's where I want you to just listen to what I have to say and not interrupt. I..."

He growled—flashing his fangs—but instead of scaring her, it annoyed her. She hissed at him and he closed his mouth, waving a hand to signal her to continue.

"The labor was long," she said, "as most first labors are. Your lady-wife was exhausted by the time her son was born. You were outside her chambers pacing, most likely using your formidable temper to send everyone scurrying away from you. Whatever the reason, you were alone in the corridor. When Sgian Rede came out with a bundle of bloody sheets to tell you your son had arrived, you all but shoved her to the floor in your rush to get to your lady-wife." She gave him a pitying look. "That was a mistake. You should have questioned her."

"Why?" he snapped. "What the hell did I care what the old bag had to say? I was more concerned with Anastasia's well-being."

Tessa nodded. "She was weak."

"Very weak," he said, moisture filling his eyes. "But she was recovering quickly enough. Just holding her son seemed to give her all the strength she needed."

"She named your son Siobadh, which means blizzard in the old language."

"Aye," he said, and a soft smile tugged fleetingly at his lips. "She said it was a strong name for a strong boy." He hung his head. "He was not as strong as we thought."

"He died when he was three?"

"He'd just turned four," the Burgon said, his head coming up. "What has any of this to do with Rynlyn?"

"There were two sons born to your lady-wife that night."

For a long moment the emperor stared at her as though he hadn't understood her words then his face slowly began losing its coloring. He didn't blink—barely took a breath—and when he spoke, it was no more than a whisper.

"Twins?"

"Identical twins," Tessa answered.

He collapsed in his chair. "The bloody sheets?"

"Concealed Rynlyn," she said gently. "He was the smaller of the two, had yet to utter a cry. I'm told he very rarely cried."

A single tear slid down Ryden Bakari's cheek. "Did she believe him dead then?" He flung out a questioning hand. "Anastasia? Did she think our son was dead?"

Tessa shook her head. "No, Ry. She knew he lived."

"Did the old hag just take him then?" He was struggling to understand what had happened that night.

"No, she gave Sgian permission to take him."

"What?" the Burgon gasped. "Why?"

"Think, Ry," Tessa said in a gentle voice. "Why would she not have wanted to keep him? Why would she have asked the midwife to take him and find a good, loving home for him?"

He seemed not to be grasping what she was implying but then the words struck a memory from his own past and his pallor increased. "Sweet Merciful Alel! The Cormótas," he said, pain registering on his face.

"Aye," she said. "The Cormótas, the Competition." She watched him scrub a trembling hand over his face. "She did not want her sons to meet on the field of honor to vie for your throne when the time came. She did not want one to kill the other to become Burgon as is the custom so she sent the smaller one away to keep him safe."

Sheer agony flitted through the Burgon's eyes. "But he wasn't safe."

"She had no way of knowing what would happen to him, Ry," Tessa reminded him. "She thought Sgian would find a good home for him."

"Like you find a good home for an unwanted kitten?" he exploded, shooting to his feet. "How could she? How could she do that to our son?"

"She thought she was doing what was best," Tessa defended the empress. "The decision must have hurt her very deeply."

He spun around, pointing a finger at her. Shook it. "That is why when Síobadh died she bade me search for the woman who had delivered him! She was nearly beside herself wanting the bitch found. For days she didn't sleep. Didn't eat." He raked his

hand through his hair, tousling it into wiry peaks. "We searched high and low for that woman but Anastasia's ladies-in-waiting didn't know where she'd taken herself off to!"

"She and her husband had been trying for years to enter the Pannys Sheshaght but because Sgian was childless, their petition was turned down. But with a son, they were accepted," Tessa said. "They left the day after Rynlyn was born."

He was back to pacing, his lips drawn back to reveal his fangs. When she said nothing more, he glanced over at her. Something in her expression brought his pacing to an abrupt stop. "What?" he barked. "Tell it all, wench! Don't spare me!"

She laced her fingers together in her lap, lowered her head, unable to look at him as she said, "They had the Burgon's firstborn son with them and that bought them an honored place within the cult."

She heard his harsh, indrawn breath then the question, "Why did it?"

It took her a few moments to answer as she reached up to swipe at her own tears.

"Because you were persecuting them, trying to shut them down," she said. "They now had a way to exact their revenge on you without you knowing."

"By torturing and raping my child?" he asked in a choked voice.

Tessa nodded silently.

He slumped against the wall, his hands over his face and the sobs that tore from him were pitiful to hear. Tessa stood and went to him, reached out to touch him, but he held up a staying hand, obviously not wanting to be touched or consoled.

"Leave me," he said brokenly. When she hesitated, he ordered her to go with a harsh command that left no doubt he meant it.

The last she saw of him, he was sliding down the wall to the floor, his keening sounding eerie as she closed the door on his grief.

* * * * *

Cair Ghrian opened the door. His devastatingly handsome face held a sad smile.

"I've been expecting you," he said in a soft voice.

She lifted her chin. "Are you going to tell me no?" she asked.

He stepped back to allow her entry into the quarters he was sharing with Degendesch. "Nope," he replied, closing the door behind her.

Chapter Twelve

When Rynlyn woke he was lying curled on his side on the cot—as naked as the day he'd been born. A blanket lay over his bare hips and he was sweating profusely. He kicked it off, wondering why he felt so feverish, his skin so sticky.

For a moment he lay there with his brows drawn together then turned to his back to stare up at the ceiling. Memory was hazy for him as he tried to dredge it up past the brutal headache that was pounding through his temples. He put a hand to his temple to rub at the fierce ache.

He put out his tongue to lick at his dry lips, trying to fathom why he felt so parched, his mouth so depleted of moisture. Swallowing with difficulty, he sat up. Almost immediately his head spun crazily, nausea rushing up his throat. He twisted to the side, but though he gagged—retched violently—nothing came up. He strained so hard to rid himself of whatever was causing his sickness, his chest and belly began to hurt. Pressing a hand to his lower abdomen, he felt something crinkly against his palm and looked down.

“What the hell?” he asked, seeing the dried blood all over his belly, upper thighs and streaked along his right side.

There were no wounds, no scratches that would have caused such a large volume of reddish-brown stain to be coating his flesh. There were no parallel stains on the coverlet beneath his bare ass.

Mystified, he swung his legs from the cot—his head swimming so unmercifully with the move he had to grab the sides of the mattress to keep from pitching to the floor on his face.

It was then he saw the pool of blood on the floor. The imprint of boot heels radiated out from it—coming toward the cot, going toward the door. There was also a strange drag of stain that looked as though a cloth had been dredged through it.

“Someone died here,” he said, but try as hard as he could he could not bring up a memory, a face, a sound or scent that would fill in the pieces of the puzzle.

He sniffed—wondering why his smell seemed so much keener. He blinked—realizing his eyesight was sharper, the colors around him more intense. His hearing was more acute as well, for he could hear footsteps outside in the corridor.

Carefully he stood, wobbled for a moment but then straightened to his full six-foot, two-inch height, squaring his shoulders. He swept his gaze about the cabin but saw no clothing, nothing he could don. The thought of venturing out into the corridor butt-naked did not appeal to him. His eyes shifted to the vid-com.

“Screen on,” he ordered.

Instantly the bright flash of gray erupted with such intensity he had to throw up an arm to block the intrusion.

"You're awake, milord. I'll let the Burgon know!" someone said, but he had no idea who for he couldn't bear to look at the bright screen. Fortunately it blinked off, casting him into dimmer light once again.

It was at the mention of the Burgon that he began to itch, clawing at his skin as though there were ants crawling beneath the flesh. He dragged his nails down his arms, across his bare chest. It was a very unpleasant sensation and it carried with it a tearing hunger that drove through him like a sharp blade. He doubled over with the pain of it, staggering back to the bed when he curled up in a fetal position, whimpering like a child. The opening of the door barely registered.

"Turn over, son. You need to feed."

Feed? he thought for just a fleeting second then the word jolted him like a fist to the chin. He flipped over, staring up at the Burgon with wild eyes.

"What did you do to me?" he gasped.

Ryden Bakari sat down on the mattress, unbuttoning the sleeve of his shirt to roll it up. "You were dead, Ryn. I brought you back to life," he stated. "Now you must feed."

In the open doorway, Rune Degendesch watched the scene unfold. He leaned against the jamb with his arms crossed over his brawny chest. His presence had been requested for the emperor feared Rynlyn would lash out upon discovering what had been done to him. It was thought it might take the two of them to force Rynlyn to take Sustenance.

That did not prove to be the case.

Rynlyn took the arm offered him and sank his erupting fangs into it as hard as he could—hard enough to make the Burgon flinch.

"He's punishing you," Degendesch said softly.

The Burgon sighed heavily. "Aye, he is, and doing a bang-up job of it too." He winced, staring down into furious eyes that were glowing a piercing crimson. He smiled. "Yeah, little warrior. I know you're pissed but you'll get over it."

Degendesch laughed and pushed away from the jamb. "I think you have everything under control, my friend," he said. Shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants, he sauntered off, his presence unneeded.

"If you're wondering about the blood," the Burgon said, "it's yours. Bas'Rith stabbed you four times before Rune snapped his neck."

Ryn stopped feeding long enough to narrow his eyes. He was stunned that he could read the Burgon's mind. He saw the scene of him lying on the floor with his head in Tessa's lap as his life's blood drained from him. He knew he was seeing it through the Burgon's eyes.

"Aye, well, that's one of the many perks of being a baby Reaper," the emperor said with a chuckle. "That and now that you've tasted my blood, you can find me no matter

where I try to hide. I took a taste of yours when you Transitioned so I can find you if need be."

A nasty grunt came from deep down Rynlyn's throat. He drew hard on the flesh pierced by his fangs.

"Tessa is fine," the Burgon said, squinting against the ragged pain in his arm. "She wasn't hurt. She's with Ghrian at the moment."

Once more Ryn stopped drawing the rich, red nourishment into his mouth. The thoughts going through the Burgon's mind at that moment were angry and potently clear. The young warrior slowly retracted his fangs though he kept his death-grip on the Burgon's arm, nails digging into the flesh.

"You let her take one of his fledglings?" came the enraged accusation.

"You think I could have stopped her?" the Burgon countered. "It was her choice to make, though I am not pleased she did it. Cair and I will have a little talk about his involvement."

Ryn swept a greedy tongue over his bloody lips then pushed the Burgon's arm away. "That's twice now he's pissed me off by allowing my woman to do something he knew gods-be-damned well I wouldn't want done!"

"Then *you* take it up with him," the Burgon said.

"I fucking well will!" Ryn growled. He wiped the back of his arm over his mouth. "Where the fuck are my clothes?"

A dark brow lifted slowly. "I am still your Burgon, boy," he stated. "Best you keep a civil tongue in that mouth of yours or I'll pull it out by the root."

"It'll grow back," Ryn said with a lift of his chin.

"Then I'll pull it out again and keep pulling it out until you've learned some much-needed manners," the older man warned. "You may be a Reaper now, but you are still under my authority and don't you forget it."

Ryn snorted again as the Burgon lifted his arm and licked at the twin punctures that were slowly healing. He flicked his gaze to Ryn. "What comes next you're not going to like."

"As though I'm liking any of this," Ryn complained.

With a wave of his hand, the Burgon clothed the young warrior in the black uniform of a Reaper.

Rynlyn blinked, surprised by the maneuver.

"I don't do that even for myself so consider yourself blessed," the Burgon said, "but I'm tired of looking at that pitiful thing you call a cock."

"Will I be able to do that?" Ryn asked, ignoring the jibe about his manhood.

"Aye," the Burgon said then grinned. "You can undress a woman with just that kind of ease too."

Despite his anger at the situation, Ryn smiled wickedly. "That will come in handy, though I like undressing my woman."

"Sit up and let's get this over with."

"What?"

"The tenerse," the older man said. He produced a vac-syringe filled with a purple liquid. "I warn you. It's gonna hurt like hell."

Ryn was unprepared for just how badly the drug would hurt as it was injected into the vein at the side of his neck. He yelped like a little boy—which vastly amused the Burgon.

"You'll get used to it."

"The hell I will," Ryn said, rubbing vigorously at the stinging agony.

"Now we need to talk."

"No, now I need to find my woman," Ryn disagreed. "Then I need to snap Cair Ghrian in half."

"No, now we need to talk about your father and your brother."

Ryn's head snapped up. "I don't have a brother and my father is dead."

"Well, unfortunately you do and he's sitting on death row in Riezell, and your father is very much alive. You're going to have to come with me to Riezell so we can put a stop to it before your brother swings."

"Who? Who the hell are you talking about?" Ryn asked, probing the Burgon's mind for truth of what he was saying.

"Rekia Nolz," the Burgon said.

"No fucking way!" Ryn stated. "When did my parents have another son?"

"I should have clarified. He's your half brother. Apparently his mother was one of my conquests before Stasia and I were married."

"One of your..." Ryn's eyes flared. The truth of it was right there for him to read and it staggered him.

"Like I said," the Burgon told him as he draped a heavy arm around his son. "We need to talk."

Epilogue

Had he not been a Reaper who healed superhumanly fast, Cair Ghrian would have been sporting a blackened eye as he stood between Rune Degendesch and Jonas Peel as the three witnessed the Joining ceremony of Rynlyn Rede and Tessa Gervasee. Ryn's fist had done its job when the two had met to discuss Ghrian's propensity for interfering in the younger warrior's life.

"She makes a beautiful bride, doesn't she?" Degendesch whispered.

"Aye, she does," Peel agreed.

"And an even more beautiful Lady Reaper," Ghrian put in. He flexed his jaw, surprised it still ached from the second lucky hit the young whippersnapper had gotten off before Ghrian had put him down.

"I believe you'll think twice before butting into Rede's business again, huh?" Degendesch challenged.

"Fuck off and die," Ghrian grumbled.

The werewolf snickered and returned his attention to the ritual taking place in the middle of the lake.

It was a beautiful ceremony that concluded with Ryn and Tessa kneeling before the priest to receive the blessing of Joining. When they rose, they were legally man and wife in the eyes of the tribes of Seabhac.

"Now he'll pick her up and carry her beneath the waterfall and into the Sacred Cave of Passion or Lust or whatever the hell it is they call it," Degendesch informed Ghrian and Peel.

"Sacred Cave of Fervor," Peel reported. When the other two men looked at him, he shrugged. "I asked."

"And how long will they be in there?" Ghrian asked. He was anxious to get home to his own mate. It had been many weeks since last he'd seen Davan.

Peel ran his nails down the edge of his cheek several times. "That depends. They'll consummate the Joining, so however long that takes, that's how long it takes."

"Great," Ghrian grumbled. "Now I wish I hadn't agreed to go with Ry to Riezell to help with this Reikia Nolz shit." He snorted. "It could be another two weeks or more before I get home to Amhantar!"

"I offered to go in your stead," the werewolf reminded him.

"You're not a Reaper," the prince snapped.

"Next best thing," Degendesch defended.

Ghrian rolled his eyes. "You wish."

"There they go," Peel said as the newly joined couple disappeared beneath the cascading fall of water. He rubbed his hands together. "Now the feasting begins!"

"Without the bride and groom?" Ghrian inquired.

"Apparently the wedding party and guests would starve otherwise so the feast starts without them," Peel replied.

"Oh, now that's encouraging," Ghrian mumbled with disgust.

Degendesch threw a comradely arm around his fellow Deathwielder. "Come along, little prince. Let's turn that frown upside down and..." He grunted as Ghrian slammed a hard elbow into his side.

* * * * *

Inside the Sacred Cave the air was soft with mist, a pale yellowish glow coming from high above where a natural vent in the mountain's slope allowed light to filter down to the grotto toward which Rynlyn walked.

Both he and his bride were soaked through. Her soft blue gown was pressed to her like a second skin.

"A Seabhachuan bride wears blue on her Joining day for it is the color of the water element," the priest had explained to Ryn as he and his acolytes helped the young man prepare for the ceremony. "Blue is the symbol of loyalty and faithfulness. The wearing of light blue on her Joining day signifies a bride has great love for her mate."

With his woman in his arms Rynlyn moved deeper into the mist of the grotto. The milky green water of the underground lake was soothing on the eye. It lent peacefulness to its surroundings. The stalactites and stalagmites that rippled around the grotto, hung from the ceiling, pushing up from the floor, clustered in boxwork along the walls were breathtakingly lovely as they shimmered with a pearlescent glow reflected from the water.

He took her to a shadowed spot where pristine white sand glistened like crushed diamonds beside the gently lapping water. The scent of sunshine and clean water filled the cavern as he dropped to his knees and lowered her to the silky silicone blanket.

Tessa smiled up at him, her heart aching at the handsome sight in presented in his black uniform—a uniform he wore with pride.

"Why fight it?" he'd asked. "It's not like I can do anything about it now."

Though those had been his words, she had intuited the feelings beneath them. Because he had been turned, he was alive. He was with her. He had discovered he was the son of a man for whom he not only had great respect but true affection and was loved and respected by that man in return. His new life as a Reaper had given him gifts for which he had not asked but the gods had seen fit to bestow.

Why fight it indeed? she thought.

One moment she was dressed and the next he had passed a hand over her to render her naked to his smoldering gaze. She arched a brow, her lips pursed with amusement.

"You are evil," she said, love for him glowing in her smiling eyes.

Another wave and his clothing was gone. He stretched out beside her, propping his head on a closed fist.

"Are you complaining, wench?" he inquired, reaching out his free hand to trace lazy circles around one dark areola with the tip of his middle finger.

"No, warrior. I am merely stating fact," she said.

He bent his head to capture the nipple that was benefiting from the nearness of his circling finger. His tongue slid across the hard little pebble before he clamped it lightly between his teeth. He looked up at her through his eyelashes as he worried the nubbin with teeth and tongue.

Tessa lifted her hand to thread her fingers through his dark hair. She stared into eyes that were no longer green but a deep amber color.

"How?" she asked him. "Why?"

"Ry believes it is because amber represents energy and Reapers are governed by that. He thinks our power lies in our eyes. We Transition, we shapeshift, we manipulate molecules. We utilize energy in ways no other beings can."

"We?" she questioned.

"You and me," he replied. It was the first time he had made mention of the fact Cair Ghrian had turned her, had given her one of his fledglings. "And amber has always been worn as a protection against dark sorcery."

"But my eyes haven't changed," she said.

"Perhaps that's because you're a female and not a warrior," he told her. He shrugged again. "Who other than the goddess really knows?"

He moved over her, settling between her thighs as she spread her legs to accommodate him.

"No more talk?" she asked, lacing her arms around his neck.

"No more talk," he agreed, and slanted his mouth over hers.

He rubbed his growing erection against her core—sliding it along the wet heat. His tongue mated with hers as he pushed his left hand beneath her shapely rump and lowered his right to his cock. Without missing a beat he slid into her sheath then slid his right hand under to lift her for a deeper penetration.

"Umm," she said, her mouth captive beneath his.

"Umm?" he answered, grinding against her.

"Umm."

He increased the cadence of his thrusts until he had plumbed the depths of her velvety moistness—going as deep as he could. He grunted when she lifted her legs to encircle his waist and moved her hands down his chest to tweak his nipples.

A soft chuckle erupted from her throat as a gasp was drawn from his. They were staring into one another's eyes and Tessa arched one dark brow in question. He wagged

his in reply, and without breaking the capture of her lips began to pump into her with more force until she closed her eyes, a beatific look of pleasure upon her lovely face.

They came together there in a bright rush of exploding passion. Hard ripples gripped his steely rod. Thick spurts of cum shot deep within her. He groaned as she lightly twisted his nipples and shuddered violently as the last pulse of fluid left him. Two squeezes more of her vaginal muscles and she melted into the sand, her hooked legs dropping free of his body.

He turned so she lay in his arms, her cheek against his chest. For a long moment they lay with their eyes closed, their heartbeats slowly steadying. Idly he ran the tips of his fingers up and down her bare arm.

"I love you," she mumbled against his chest.

"I love you too," he vowed.

Beyond the Sacred Cave the world could wait. Rynlyn had found his peace. It would be many hours before he was ready to return to the world of war and a brother he needed to help save from certain death. At that moment, the only thing that mattered was losing himself in the sweet heat of his heart's mate.

"Again?" she asked, yawning.

"Again," he answered, rolling her to her back.

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 40 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Ellora's Cavemen: Dreams of the Oasis IV *anthology*

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails I *anthology*

Ellora's Cavemen: Seasons of Seduction II *anthology*

Dancing on the Wind

Fated Mates *anthology*

Ghost Wind

HardWind

In the Arms of the Wind

Journey of the Wind

Passion's Mistral

Shades of the Wind

WesternWind 1: WyndRiver Sinner

WesternWind 2: Reaper's Revenge

WesternWind 3: Prime Reaper

WesternWind 4: Tears of the Reaper

WesternWind 5: Her Reaper's Arms

WesternWind 6: My Reaper's Daughter

WesternWind 7: Embrace the Wind

WesternWind 8: BlackMoon Reaper

WindVerse: Ardor's Leveche

WindVerse: Hunger's Harmattan

WindVerse: Phantom of the Wind

WindVerse: Pleasure's Foehn

WindVerse: Prisoners of the Wind

WindWorld: Desire's Sirocco

WindWorld: Longing's Levant

WindWorld: Lucien's Khamsin

WindWorld: Rapture's Etesian

WyndRaider

*And see Charlotte Boyett-Compo's stories at Cerridwen Press
(www.cerridwenpress.com):*

BlackWind: Sean and Bronwyn

BlackWind: Viraiden and Bronwyn

Desert Wind

In the Wind's Eye

Taken By the Wind



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