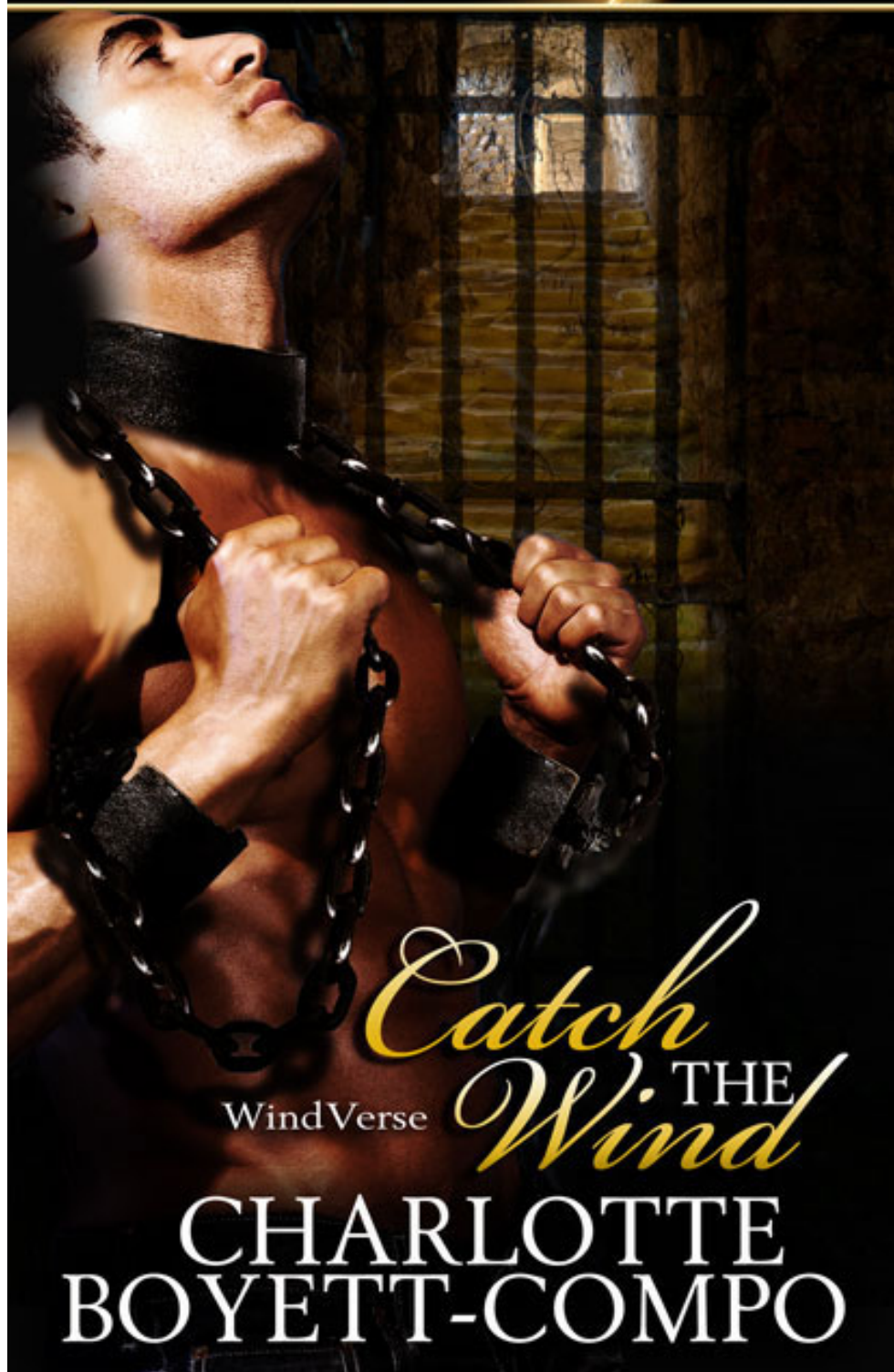


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Catch THE *Wind*

WindVerse

CHARLOTTE
BOYETT-COMPO

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Catch the Wind

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CATCH THE WIND

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Dedication

To Tom. I miss you more with each passing day. I'll love you 'til time is no more and even beyond. When my last breath is taken, I know you'll be there waiting for me.

Prologue

Lieutenant Colonel Dominia Alamaine rolled her shoulders against the unease that had settled upon them like a heavy wet wool blanket. Eyes and nostrils stinging, she squinted against the noxious fumes wafting up from below the floor of the mesh iron cage of the elevator. The piercing shriek of the rusted chains on the lowering cage combined with the stench of escaping methane gas was giving her a brutal headache. She put up a hand to rub at the sharp stab of agony over her right eye.

"This is your first visit to our facility, isn't it, Colonel?" the warden asked. "We don't get many visitors, you know." He blotted his sweaty face with a handkerchief. In the glow from the phospho lamps attached to the inside of the cage, his porcine face had taken on a bluish cast that reminded her of bloated corpses she'd seen on battlefields.

"How many prisoners are incarcerated here?" Emissary Santos Delgado inquired. The representative from the United Court of Justice on *an tSualainn* shot Dominia a meaningful look for not even the UCJ knew how many men and women were being held at Utuk Xul.

"More than our share," Warden Xaphan replied dryly. He turned to the emissary. "But we have plenty of room for many more if need be."

Spying a luminescent marking on the black craggy wall of the shaft down which they were traveling, Dominia's unease increased. They were already at the fifteen-hundred-yard mark and when she looked down, there was nothing but blackness below the platform of the cage. The farther down they went, the worse her headache since the atmospheric pressure was hundreds of times greater than up top. She knew the vertical shaft was at least five thousand yards deep but possibly even deeper. Just as with the count of prisoners at the maximum-security installation, such data had never been made available. However, she had been told it was believed the main levels of the penal colony stretched across thirty-two hundred yards of a complex network of limestone galleries and tubes and there was a sublevel beneath where the worst offenders were kept. Four hundred and seventy yards of passageways had been mapped and surveyed officially, but it was thought there were many hundreds more.

She shivered for the air was getting colder the lower they went.

"Forty-nine degrees," the warden informed her upon seeing her shiver again. "You are from Bandar, aren't you, Colonel?"

Dominia shifted her gaze to the fat man, striving to stifle still another shiver. "I am. What of it?"

"You're not accustomed to such low temperatures," the fat man stated.

"I trained on the Plains of Geschäft for two weeks," she snapped. "I can handle the cold."

"But you'll never get used to it, eh?" A flicker of a smile spread over the warden's pudgy face. "We have two other hell hags working here. They..."

The words were no sooner past the man's rubbery lips before Dominia sprang at him—arching her hand beneath the multiple folds of sagging skin under his weak chin to grasp his neck. She backed him against the mesh wall of the cage and pinned him there.

"Use that derogatory term again and I'll snap your neck like a gods-be-damned twig!" she said. She shook him like a cat with a mouse. "Are we clear?"

"Perfectly!" the warden squeaked. His eyes were wide in his flaccid face and when she released him, he took a few steps back from the tall Bandarian warrioress.

"I believe she prefers to be called a Daughter of the Night," the emissary quipped, striving to keep from breaking into a smile. "They all do."

"Aye, indeed," the warden said as he massaged his throat. He eyed her warily, bringing up his handkerchief to scrub at his oily face.

Switching her attention to the emissary, Dominia enunciated each word clearly. "I prefer to be called a Riezell Guardian for that is what I was before I retired," she stated then lifted her chin. "The honor is still mine—retired or not."

"Of course, Colonel," the emissary agreed, bobbing his head. "It is, indeed, very much an honor to be among the cadre of Guardians."

At the rear of the elevator, the two burly guards who had accompanied them snickered. When she slowly swiveled her head in their direction, twin sneers vanished like morning mist from their beefy faces and hard eyes lowered before the deadly onslaught of the Guardian's sharp stare.

Emitting an irritated exhalation of breath, Dominia returned her attention to the rough walls of the shaft just as they passed the three-thousand-yard level. The throbbing between her temples and the ungodly stabbing pain above her right eye had doubled in intensity. She had to force herself not to rub at the agony.

"I heard there was an execution here last week," the emissary commented.

The warden nodded. "A mass murderer from Sauria," he replied. "He opted for lethal injection, though if it had been left up to me, I would have fried his reptilian ass."

"Draqu Avatás, wasn't it?" Dominia asked, and when the warden acknowledged that had been the man executed, she snorted. "I would have impaled his scaly asshole with a dull pike, ran it out his mouth and left him to cure in the hot sun."

Though the emissary winced at the bloodthirsty description, the warden laughed. "Aye, well, sometimes the United Court of Justice binds our hands so we cannot exact the punishment these miscreants deserve," he said. "Allowing them to choose their form of execution should not be permitted."

"No criminal—no matter the crime—deserves cruel and unusual punishment," the emissary was quick to point out. "That is part of the Charter of Planets signed by the Burgon and ratified—"

"Had it been one of your teenage daughters Avatás savaged with his dual cocks, I think you'd feel differently," Dominia interrupted.

"I've no doubt he would," the warden agreed. "I read the transcript of the Saurian's trial." He shuddered. "As hardened as I have become to the crimes these reprobates commit topside, even I was sickened by what Avatás did to his victims before he allowed them to die."

Dominia almost groaned as the elevator passed the six-thousand-yard mark and there was still unrelieved black beneath the cage. A slow, simmering anger was beginning to replace the irritation.

"We've not far to go now," the warden said as though he sensed her impatience.

"Is this the only way down to the main level?" the emissary inquired.

"For security reasons it is," the warden answered, "and there will be a score of heavily armed guards at the bottom, just as there were at the top. Each man carries a laser carbine. They have orders to shoot to kill. If a prisoner attempts escape, it is the last thing he or she will ever do."

"How many have tried?" Dominia asked.

"Since I have been at the helm—and that is fifteen years now—nary a single one has been so foolish."

"And has anyone ever been paroled from this facility?" Dominia asked with a snort.

"I am happy to report the answer is no. We are sent the worst of the worst, Colonel," the warden stated. "These are the dregs of the megaversal societies, the mass murderers, the serial killers, the child molesters and sick degenerates of the lowest order. Trust me. You do not want such criminals returned to society."

"So what exactly did Kanvar Barda do to wind up here?" she demanded.

The warden straightened his round shoulders. "I am not at liberty to discuss his case with you, Colonel. His record is sealed." He squeezed his shoulders together. "As are all the records of our inmates."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" she queried, relieved to see a flicker of light below them. The elevator slowed.

"Frankly, I am surprised he is being released," the warden continued. "From all I know of him, he is a very dangerous man."

"More dangerous than you know," Dominia mumbled. She staggered as the cage came to an abrupt halt a goodly distance from the cave floor. Looking down through the iron mesh, she saw several guards staring up at them—carbines at the ready.

"Forest gnome," the warden called down then explained that was the code of the day to let the guards know all was well.

The cage lowered again and settled with a gentle clank. A titanium ramp was extended to the cage, hooked into two slots along the front of the elevator floor and a guard crossed over it to unlock the heavy padlock that had been applied topside to secure the cage door.

"You take no chances," the emissary commented.

"We can't afford to," the warden replied. He swept a hand before him to indicate Dominia was to precede him.

Feeling on edge with the laser carbines aimed at her—the steady red beams pointed at her head—Dominia stepped from the cage, glancing down at the sheer drop over which she passed. Out of habit, her hand went to her hip where her own laser pistol should have been. She frowned when she remembered she was weaponless. Forced to relinquish the pistol as well as the laser whip and onyx-bladed dagger that were her stock in trade before being allowed into Utuk Xul, she felt even more naked now than she had an hour earlier when relieved of her armament.

A rail-thin man came hurrying forward, his face set in a tight scowl. The guards moved back as though they would be contaminated should they come into contact with his person.

"My sub-warden," the warden explained. "He is not the friendliest of men and the guards do not care for him, but he gets the job done."

"How do the prisoners feel regarding him?" the emissary inquired, his head swiveling from side to side as he watched shadowy figures moving about at the periphery of the stone chamber into which he walked.

"Their feelings do not concern us, Emissary," the warden said with a sniff.

"Warden Xaphan, you are late," the thin man snapped as he reached them. "We expected you half an hour ago."

"The release papers were not in order," the warden said, sending a quick look to Dominia. "A few changes had to be made."

The thin man lifted his chin. "What changes?" he asked, his tone conveying his anger.

"None that concern you," Dominia said and, when the bony sub-warden turned a nasty glare upon her, arched her brow as though daring him to voice his irritation.

Sub-warden Sheol's upper lip twitched before he deliberately looked away from the colonel. He held out an emaciated hand. "The papers," he demanded.

Warden Xaphan reached into the breast pocket of his royal blue uniform and pulled out the release papers, wincing as they were snatched out of his hands.

"If things are not in order, there will be no release today," the sub-warden declared.

Dominia had to bite her tongue to keep from lashing out at the officious little bastard. As he flipped through the papers—his beady eyes getting hotter and hotter with fury as he searched for that one loophole, one error that would deny the prisoner's release—she dug her fingernails into her palms to refrain from laughing. When the sub-

warden reached the last page, he snapped his head up. There was unconcealed wrath emblazoned on his pinched face.

"I want to go on record as saying this is an ill-advised and exceedingly foolhardy disaster, Warden Xaphan!" he snarled.

"So noted," the warden acknowledged.

"Ah, where is the prisoner?" the emissary inquired. He ran a finger beneath his collar, his Adam's apple jumping as the sub-warden impaled him with a furious glower.

"In his cell where he belongs!" the sub-warden replied.

"You were told to have him here and ready to go," Dominia stated. When the skeletal face whipped toward hers, she smiled for there was rage and lethal ferocity in the thin man's glare.

"This is a mistake!" the sub-warden shouted. He started to say something else but found his throat locked in the iron grip of the woman who pushed him backward until he was pressed against rough timber.

"Don't ever raise your voice to me, you pompous little turd!" she warned. She dug her thumb into his carotid artery. "Do you understand?"

The sub-warden stared into her eyes and Dominia was surprised that he was neither intimidated nor afraid of her. His thin lips pulled back into a grimace of disdain, but he made no move to extract himself from her grip. He stood stock-still, never breaking eye contact. She watched his nostrils flare and stepped back, releasing him. When he did not cough from the brutal pressure she had applied or reach up to rub his bruised throat, she was forced to begrudgingly admire his courage.

"You will rue having released him," Sub-warden Sheol said, directing his prediction to the warden. "He will come after us. Mark my words."

"What have you done to him to warrant that happening?" the emissary asked. He looked from the silent sub-warden to the warden. "It is against the penal code to use torture or —"

Dominia snorted, her rolling eyes and shaking head leaving no doubt as to what she thought of the emissary's statement. She glared at the sub-warden. "Take us to him," she ordered, and when the man did not seem inclined to move, she narrowed her eyes. "Now!"

The sub-warden flicked his eyes to one of the guards and nodded. He said nothing, pushing from the rock wall. He straightened his uniform tunic, brushed his hands down the front then pivoted on his heel and walked off without a backward glance.

"That's the way to win friends and influence enemies," Dominia mumbled, and heard one of the nearby guards snickering.

"If you will come with us, Colonel," the guard to whom the sub-warden had looked spoke up.

"Where's his cell?" she asked as the man headed for the elevator.

"On the lowest level," the guard replied.

"Well, of course it is," she said on a long, annoyed sigh.

* * * * *

Jaegar Rozakaris watched the scrawny, flea-infested rat as it scurried across the iron floor. It stopped to scratch industriously behind its tiny ear then lowered its twitching nose to the ground again as it searched for food. Little things like the visit of the rodent fascinated him. Locked in solitary confinement, he'd been without human companionship for years, so the smallest diversion from his dark, lonely and silent world was greatly appreciated. When the rat lifted its head, aimed its unwavering gaze at Jaegar then rose up on its haunches, he shrugged.

"Sorry. There wasn't anything left," Jaegar said.

The rat stayed perched on his hind end for a moment longer before it scampered away, fleeing back into the crack or crevice from which it had materialized.

Sighing loudly, Jaegar laid his head against the cold, damp metal wall of his cell. He closed his eyes with the express purpose of transporting his mind as far from the dank, filthy cell as he could get it. However, that wasn't to be. Try as hard as he might, he couldn't dredge up anything that resembled freedom, and he opened his eyes again, sighing tiredly.

"Even my memories are leaving me," he complained.

The stench from the slop bucket sitting on its platform two feet from him didn't help. Normally the bucket was lifted up through the six-inch hole in the ceiling of his cell every morning, emptied then returned to him, but that hadn't been the case today. As best as he could tell, it was almost time for his one meal of the day—lowered in a double bucket-like utensil that housed tepid, sulfur-laced water atop whatever glop was being served as nourishment—yet the bucket with his shit and piss still sat where he'd placed it. His stomach growled as the thought of food—no matter how unpalatable it might be—gnawed at his peace of mind.

It occurred to him as he stared at the offensive bucket that perhaps they had decided to starve him for a few days just for the hell of it. As punishments went, that wasn't much in comparison to the other things they'd done to him over the years, but it was bad enough. The only bright spot in his dark-stained world was that meager helping of watery gruel or bland porridge. While he sat cross-legged, dipping his dirty fingers with their chewed fingernails into the bucket, he had hope he'd live one more day.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Maybe they weren't punishing him but planning on starving him to death.

Not a good way to go, he thought, although as malnourished and thin as he knew himself to be, it wouldn't take all that long to turn his living death into a true one.

He looked up at the tiny infrared light that blinked above the door to his cell. The camera and microphone were on 24/7. The night-vision capabilities recorded every move, every sound he made, and someone, somewhere within the facility was monitoring him at that very moment.

“Piss needs emptying,” he said, “and I’m hungry.”

Not that anyone would come any quicker because he dared to complain. If anything, they’d probably take even longer now.

He shrugged and put up an iron-manacled hand to scratch under his chin. Once in a while—and he never knew when that was going to be, though he thought it might be every six weeks or so—they put something in his water that knocked him completely out. When he woke, he would be clean-shaven and bathed, his ragged prison uniform replaced with a cleaner, if not better one. Yesterday had been one of those days.

That furtive handling bothered him more than his imprisonment. It hurt him more than the pain they had inflicted early on. The prophets only knew what else they did to him while he was unconscious. Just thinking of the eyes seeing him naked, the hands touching him, bathing him, cutting his hair and shaving him sent shudders of revulsion down his spine. If such insidious doings were meant to intimidate him, they surely did. He loathed being touched by the unknown.

A little noise in the corner of his cell made him turn his head. The rat was back and had brought a friend.

“No,” Jaegar said, shaking his head. “You aren’t going to take a few nibbles out of me for shits and giggles. Go away and take your buddy with you.” He moved his shackled foot, but the rodents made no effort to flee. They sat in the corner and stared balefully at him with their wiry whiskers twitching.

If he’d been entirely human, he wouldn’t have been able to see so clearly in the pitch darkness that filled his cell from one wall to the other. He wouldn’t have been able to hear the quiet intake and expulsion of air from the rats’ tiny lungs. His nostrils would not have been as sensitive to the musky rodent scent.

A muted clang brought his head up slowly. He turned his eyes to the ceiling, but the chain attached to the handle of the slop bucket hadn’t moved. Another sound lowered his head and swiveled it toward the thick iron door. Such sounds were never heard and that meant only one thing—someone was coming.

He cocked his head to one side, listened intently. He sniffed the air.

Four distinct smells washed over him, bombarded his senses.

His eyebrows slashed together. Deep furrows appeared over his nose as he drew in the scents once more, testing the air just as the rats were doing.

Four smells. Three were male.

The three male scents he didn’t care about, but the fourth scent—

He inhaled deeply, too overwhelmed with that scent, too stunned by it to react to the scrape of feet outside his cell, the mumble of voices pitched low, the sound of a key grating in the door lock.

He could feel the accelerated thunder of his heart as the lock disengaged, the rusted hinges began to shriek.

Light blinded him as the door creaked open to allow lantern light to flood the cell. The heavy chain attached to his wrist clanked against the wall. He threw up his arm to block the harsh intrusion that was painful in its intensity then turned his face aside, closing his eyes. The beam of light drove through his head like the blade of a hot dagger.

"Turn that light down!"

It was a voice he had never expected to ever hear again—speaking with authority he knew all too well—and as the light decreased, he slowly lowered his arm, squinting as he wedged his eyelids open to stare disbelievingly at the two people who had entered his hateful world.

"Milord?"

He couldn't speak. He didn't dare. Though her back was to the light, her eyes in shadow, there was no doubt in his mind who she was when she dropped to a squat beside him.

"Milord?" she repeated, and he hated the pity he heard in her voice. When she put out a hand to touch him, he cringed, sliding as far along the wall as his restraints would allow.

He heard her whip around, felt the air as it was displaced, drew in the scent of her righteous anger as it was expelled alongside a demand to know what they had done to him.

"He's shackled hand, foot and neck to that goddess-be-damned wall like a dog!" she exploded. "Where the hell did you think he could go?"

"He is a Shadowlord," the warden protested. "If he isn't chained with iron, he can use his powers to—"

"He is in an iron-sheathed cell!" she shouted, slapping her hand against the wall so loudly Jaegar winced. "His powers are nullified in here. Those shackles are meant to torture and humiliate him!" She moved so quickly the warden had no time to jump back, coming toe-to-toe with him, her lips drawn back over her teeth. "What other evil shit have you done to him?"

"He hasn't been t-touched!" the warden stuttered. "As you can see we cleaned him up."

"Look at him!" she snarled, and shame ratcheted through Jaegar. "You call that not being touched? There are scars all over him!"

He hid his face against the wall, pressed his cheek to the cold metal wall for he had no idea how he looked. From the quiver in her voice, he knew it must be bad.

"T-they'll heal, won't t-they?" the warden asked, his voice quivering. "Once he has his powers back. They'll—"

"Unlock those gods-be-damned irons!" she said. "Get those things off him before I strangle you with my bare hands, you son of donkey semen!"

Once more the air moved around him, and he felt her withdrawing, getting to her feet, moving aside for the hated guard. He heard the unknown man speaking softly to her, but his heart was beating so fast, so hard he couldn't make out the words. He could not believe she was here—that any of them were. By his reckoning, it had been seven, maybe eight, years since he'd last seen a human face, heard a human voice, felt hands on him. He had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from crying out as the guard knelt down in front of him to unlock the shackle from his ankle for the iron had long since bitten into his flesh, almost melded with it. As the band came away, he could not keep the groan of pain from coming, and she pounded on that, whirling around so quickly the guard had no time to spring back before she backhanded him aside.

"How dare you hurt him!" she shouted. "Give me those fucking keys!"

He didn't want her to unlock the manacles circling his wrists. He didn't want her flesh to touch his. Despite the bath, the shave, he felt things crawling on him, and he didn't want her contaminated by the contact. As she hunkered down at his side, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, he tried to shy away from her touch, quivering like a leaf in a hard wind.

"I'll be gentle, warrior," she said softly. "I swear it."

He couldn't help himself. He was drowning in the sweet waves of her soft voice, helpless to ignore the gentle pressure on his shoulder. Breathing freely for the first time in years as she unlocked the heavy iron collar from around his neck, he felt as though he could float up through the ceiling. Slowly—infinately so—he turned his head toward her. The unknown man standing behind her now held the lantern and its light fell fully on the most beautiful face in the whole of the megaverse. His throat closed as he looked into the tearful green eyes of the only woman he'd ever loved.

Chapter One

Eight years earlier

Eejderha Palace on an Tuirc

"Where have you been?" his uncle demanded as he followed Jaegar into his chambers. He turned, poked his head out the doorway to see if anyone was nearby then shut the door. He repeated his question with a hiss.

"Where I shouldn't have been."

Lyden Rozakaris lifted his hands to the sky. "I knew it. I *knew* it!"

"Then why did you ask?"

"Jaegar, you know what your mother is going to say!" Lyden grouched. "Your ass is grass, boy!"

Jaegar walked past his uncle without as much as a sidelong glance at the man who was only three months older than him. They had grown up more like brothers than uncle and nephew. They were certainly closer than most siblings and Jaegar loved Lyden whereas he had no love for his younger brother Riashi.

Lyden threw himself down on Jaegar's bed as the younger man undressed. "Was it worth it?" he asked.

"Aye, it was worth it," Jaegar said as he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. "The little darlin' could suck the plating off a blast shield with that mouth of hers."

"Well, enjoy it while you can because as soon as Aunt Audrina finds out you went to Francach against her express orders, you will pay dearly for getting your whistle blown!"

Unbuttoning his pants and shoving them down his long legs, Jaegar shrugged. "I have no intention of telling her, and if you do, your ass is grass, Rozakaris."

"If you don't think she had spies trailing you, you're a bigger fool than I thought," Lyden replied. He plucked at the fur bed throw. "You take chances most men wouldn't even consider."

"I'm not most men," Jaegar stated.

"Unfortunately you aren't," Lyden agreed, "but your flesh will tear and your blood will run the same as mine if you run afoul of your mother!" He shook a finger at Jaegar. "Remember what she did to Riashi when he disobeyed her?"

Stripped of his clothing, Jaegar turned to give his uncle a cocky smile as he spread his arms wide. "Do you think she would want to mar the perfection she helped create?" He turned around—flaunting his nudity—then slapped a hand on his bare buttock. "This is prime beef on the hoof, unk!"

Lyden pursed his lips as Jaegar strolled into the bathing chamber. There were fingernail marks down Jaegar's broad back and over his buttocks—mute evidence of an afternoon rolling in the hay. His nephew might be the heir to the throne of *an Tuirc*, but sometimes he acted as though he were a common foot soldier in the employ of the crown. Jaegar's exploits were legendary and his mother's reprisals swift and exacting. Every time the young prince spread his restless wings, the queen was at hand ready to clip them. Sooner or later Lyden knew there was going to be a reckoning, and he feared Jaegar would come out on the raw end of the deal.

"Stop obsessing!" Jaegar called out from the shower. "I can hear you over the spray of the water!"

Sighing heavily, Lyden rolled over to his back and drew his knees up. Bracing his hands behind his head, he stared at the pressed tin ceiling overhead. "She's going to castrate you one of these days," he said in a normal tone of voice, but he knew with his extraordinary hearing Jaegar had heard him.

"And deprive herself of a grandson to bully? I highly doubt it!" Jaegar told him. "The old bat is primed to do battle with the next generation of Rozakaris males."

He hadn't heard her come in, but as soon as he felt the icy flow of the queen's personality as it invaded the sunny room, Lyden sprang off the bed—putting distance between him and the stately woman standing at the foot of Jaegar's bed. He stumbled against Jaegar's night table, snaked out a quick hand to keep the lamp from tumbling to the floor as it rocked on the tabletop. Face flaming, he stepped away from the bed.

"Your Majesty!" he said, bowing deeply even as he edged around her. "I beg your leave!"

Hands clenched at her waist, Queen Audrina turned a frosty green glare to her husband's only brother. There was hatred in her arctic eyes. "Go," she said as she tracked Lyden's slow, measured progress toward the door.

"Aye, Your Majesty," Lyden said, careful to close the portal quietly behind him.

Jaegar had felt his mother's intrusion the moment she opened the door. The temperature in the shower had dipped sharply with her arrival. He paused in his bath then continued—slower than before and with a grimace on his face. He knew it would do him no good to dawdle, but he was in no hurry to confront her. The force of her anger had a life of its own—pushing against him, raking at him with unsheathed steel claws.

Turning off the water, he shook his wet hair, threaded his fingers through it then sluiced the droplets from his chest and sides before opening the door. He was not surprised to find her standing in the doorway, her sharp stare traveling down him, as though he were a side of mutton being sized up for purchase.

Snatching a towel from the rack, he wrapped it around his waist and stepped from the shower.

"Turn around," his mother ordered.

For just a split second Jaegar was tempted to tell her no, but he knew if he did, she was as liable to call the guards to enforce her demand as not. Expelling a loud breath, he turned, holding his arms out so she could get a good look.

"Oh for the love of the prophets, Jaegar!" his mother snapped. "That is disgusting!"

"I'll only be young and free once," Jaegar reminded her. "I'm a man, Mother. I am not a monk, though if you had your way, I've no doubt that is how I would be forced to act."

His mother came into the bathing chamber, and when he turned, she reacted to his words, just as he knew she would. Her slap rocked his face to the side, but he said nothing. Over the years, he'd lost count of the times she'd punished him in that fashion. Instead, he turned his face to her – giving her the kind of bland look he had practiced to perfection.

"What if that whore was diseased?" she demanded. "What if she gets with child?"

He lifted his chin. "She isn't and she won't."

His mother narrowed her eyes. "And you know this how, Jaegar?"

Steeling himself against another slap, he shrugged. "You know I would sense it if there was anything wrong with her, and as for her getting pregnant, that would be hard to do considering where the sperm went. I am careful where I sow my seed, Mother."

"Crude," his mother said with a twist of her painted lips. "But that is to be expected from a boy who thinks with the piece of flesh dangling between his legs."

He cocked a shoulder even though every fiber of his being screamed at him to tell her he was no longer a boy but a thirty-year-old man with needs she seemed to think he could do without.

His mother turned her back on him, left the bathing chamber, even though he knew she would not leave his room until she had drawn as much blood as would satisfy her. He also knew if he dawdled she would return. Clenching his jaw, he entered his chamber and walked to the armoire.

"Your father wishes you to be in attendance this afternoon during the court session," his mother said. She was standing at his window, looking down at the courtyard, and at his slight groan turned her head to give him an arch look. "It falls to you one day to handle such matters, Jaegar. Your father will not live forever," she said. "And do not step into that garment until you have put on underwear!"

Gritting his teeth, he tossed the pants aside. He jerked open a drawer to retrieve his underwear. It should bother him that his mother was staring pointedly at his naked body, but he had long ago lost any embarrassment over the issue. However, when she returned to gazing out the window, he was relieved.

"Who's going to be at the session?" he asked as he pulled on his pants then sat in a chair to slip on his socks. When his mother didn't answer right away, he looked up. From her stiff posture, he knew it had to be someone whom she did not approve. He repeated his question.

"A hell hag," she replied, and there was acid dripping from her tone. "The daughter of Torrey, the Bandar queen." She waved her hand. "Her name escapes me."

"Lauryl Coedil?" His eyes widened. At his mother's nod, he whistled. "What's she doing here?"

"I have no idea nor do I care," was the reply. "She sent word she wanted an audience with your father, and since she is now the wife of Prince Glade Aeolian, he could not deny her."

Jaegar blinked, stunned by the news. "Glade married a hell hag?"

"Unfortunately so. There is no accounting for taste these days when marriages are no longer arranged by the royal families," his mother snapped. She turned from the window. "They are here so finish with your dressing and join your father. I am sure there is a lesson in this he wishes you to learn."

"They? Is Glade here too?" he asked, but his mother was on her way out the door, ignoring his question. Leaving the chair, he went to the window and pushed the drape aside with the back of his hand. He had known Glade since childhood. The Faolchú prince and he had spent many drunken nights laughing and carousing when they were at the Academy together.

Nevertheless, Glade was not with the tall, stately woman Jaegar recognized as Lauryl Coedil. There was another woman—almost as tall, standing with her back to him so he could not see her face—with Lauryl. When the Bandarian princess lifted her head and looked right at him, he lifted a hand in greeting—a hand she ignored.

"So that's how we're gonna play it," he said, and watched until Lauryl and the other woman were no longer in view. He let the drape fall back into place and chuckled. Without doubt, Lauryl didn't want anyone to know she was acquainted with him.

Intimately acquainted, he thought as he went to the armoire to pick out a shirt. As he dressed, his thoughts were on the Daughter of the Night.

They had met six years earlier when she had been tracking a merry bigamist for a Bhrasailian duchess. It was in a seedy waterside tavern where the air was thick with the smoke from a dozen pipes and just as many cheroots. As someone passed his table, collided with his shoulder, he snarled, turning his angry eyes up to the offending party. He was just drunk enough to want to fight, but when he looked into the narrowed sapphire eyes of the offender, his anger evaporated. All he could do was mumble, "You bumped into me."

"You wanna make something of it?" she'd snapped, her voice low and husky yet filled with a lethal intent that would have been hard to miss.

"Aye," he'd said, and he gave her a sloppy, drunken grin. "I'd like to fuck you, wench."

For just a moment those dark blue eyes had sparked deadly fire, but he could feel them moving over his face, across his shoulders, down his chest, and when she craned her head to look down at his lap, he had scooted back to allow her a view of a hardening cock that was pressing at his pants.

"Ten inches," he boasted.

She'd arched a golden brow beneath the floppy hat that had no doubt been meant to shield her lovely face. "But do you know how to use that sausage, sailor?"

He'd snaked out a hand to take hers. He had pulled her closer, pulled her down until he had her palm pressed to the iron-hard erection. "Every fucking inch of it, baby, and then some."

She'd laughed and jerked her hand from his grip. "Get a bottle of dark rum and come up to room twelve." Her smile had been predatory. "We'll see how good you are."

One night, he thought. He'd spent one rip-roaring, intensely pleasurable night between the hell hag's silky thighs and awakened to an empty place beside him in the mussed bed. He was sore but so sated he could barely stand. She'd used him unmercifully all night, and he had enjoyed the hell out of her knowing hands and powerful thighs.

Furthermore, now Glade Aeolian had the exclusive use of that sweet cunt and those luscious lips. It was nearly unheard of for a Daughter of the Night to marry, but when one did, it was for life with any thought of extramarital affairs slipping off the wine menu.

"Lucky bastard," he said as he left his chambers.

Not that he would ever marry such a woman when it came time for him to give up the single life—a time rapidly approaching, he thought with a grimace. No, a woman like Lauryl was just too forceful for a man like him. Maybe that was Glade's cup of tea but it certainly wasn't Jaegar's. Since she was here, that meant Lauryl was still working as a tracker, a bounty hunter, so she was just as dangerous and just as unpredictable as any other hell hag. Idly he wondered what arrangement she had with Glade for he couldn't see the Faolchú prince allowing his woman to work without there having been some kind of understanding beforehand.

As he left the stairs and headed for the throne room, he heard rich feminine laughter then his father's bass rumble of humor. He relaxed his shoulders. Whatever had brought Lauryl and her hell hag companion here couldn't be all that significant if there was laughter involved. When he walked into the room, he was surprised to see not only his father but the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Justice as well as the Minister of the *an Tuircese* Armed Forces in attendance. Six sets of eyes shifted toward him.

"You're late," his father grumbled. "As usual." He held out a hand toward Lauryl. "Our guest is Princess Lauryl Coedil-Aeolian of Faolchú and her partner Captain Dominia Alamaine of Bandar. They are here on urgent business."

Jaegar's eyes moved from Lauryl's expressionless face to that of the woman's standing beside her. Both women were dressed in serviceable gray slacks topped with bulky sweaters for the air had turned nippy in the last few days. Lauryl's sweater was black but the other woman's was a dark gray that strikingly complemented the rich

green color of her eyes. Her hair was burnished red mahogany that hung in a long thick braid to the center of her back. The black boots she wore were mud-caked – as were the cuffs of her slacks – but that did not mar the regal beauty she presented.

“Ladies,” Jaegar said, striding toward them. He took the hand Lauryl offered and brought it to his lips. “It is a pleasure to meet Glade’s beloved at last.”

Lauryl’s eyes twinkled and her lips twitched, but she inclined her head politely. “A pleasure to meet the heir to the throne of *an Tuirc* as well, Prince Jaegar.”

When he released Lauryl’s hand and reached for the other young woman’s, he saw amusement in her verdant gaze and knew she was aware this was not the first time he and Lauryl had met. His eyes locked on hers, he winked as he straightened after placing a soft kiss on the back of her hand.

“The ladies are here on business that concerns us,” the king said. “It seems we have a thief in our midst.” Jaegar’s father frowned. “One who has been stealing arms from our storehouse and selling them to our enemy *an Iaráic*.”

Jaegar’s brows drew together. “Someone from the military or part of the government?”

“Colonel Answan Udell,” the Minister of the *an Tuircese* Armed Forces said bitterly. “The man earmarked to replace me when I retire.” He turned to his king. “Again, Your Majesty, I humbly apologize for this...”

The king waved away the apology. “We do not blame you, Roderick. You did not know the bastard was a conniving thief.”

“Padding his own nest for retirement, I imagine,” Lauryl said. She crossed her arms over her ample chest.

“I take it the *an Iaráinian* government hired you to track down the culprit,” Jaegar said.

“Not the *an Iaráinian* government precisely but rather some of their high-ranking officials who wanted us to bring back the *an Iaráinian* women he took off a ship bound for Cengus,” Lauryl’s companion said.

“Luckily he had plans to sell them, so he treated them well enough, didn’t allow his men to maul them,” Dominia said. “We found them on *an Ostair* and have already sent them back via armed escort to *an Iaráin*.”

“Dominia speaks several Arabach dialects,” Lauryl said. “I have never been able to master those guttural tones.” She shrugged. “Including those of *an Tuirc*.” Her eyes flicked to Jaegar. “I can’t seem to relax my throat well enough.”

He had to hide his smile behind a hasty cough for he remembered all too well just how much she could relax her throat.

“Princess Lauryl came to apprise us of her mission. She captured Udell early this morn. Since he was on *an Tuirc* soil, she brought him to us to deal with.”

“*An Iaráin* won’t care that you’ve turned him over to our justice?” Jaegar inquired.

"They don't care what I do with him," Lauryl replied. "I had their permission to deal with him any way I saw fit. I thought he should be turned over to you for whatever punishment you wish to mete out to him."

"He's a very unpleasant man," Dominia said. "Worse than most arms dealers with whom I've dealt. Lucky for him this was his first foray into human trafficking. If he'd brutalized any of those women, I would have castrated him and left him to bleed out."

"You are a tracker as well, then?" Jaegar asked.

"Dominia is a Riezell Guardian," Lauryl said.

Jaegar's brows shot up. "I am impressed," he said, sweeping his gaze down the beautiful woman in front of him.

"You should be," Lauryl said. "She's gods-be-damned good at her job." She paused then smiled slyly. "As well as a multitude of other more—shall we say—pleasurable things."

Jaegar found himself staring into the lush green eyes of Lauryl's companion. She was sizing him up, he thought. No two ways about it. He was sure Lauryl had already clued her in on the kind of lover he was. From the looks she was giving him, there was no mistaking her interest.

An interest he shared. He cleared his throat.

"I am sure the king would agree with me when I say we would like to reward you both for bringing the traitor to our attention," he said.

"I have offered them a finder's fee but they turned it down," his father remarked.

"We were paid handsomely by *an Iaráin*," Lauryl said.

"But there must be something we can do to show our appreciation."

"It isn't necessary, Prince Jaegar," Lauryl told him.

"Why don't you at least stay for the noon meal?" he asked impulsively, not daring to look at his father for the king rarely liked having outsiders at his table.

Lauryl exchanged a look with Dominia then gave Jaegar a megawatt smile. "We would be delighted to break bread with you, Prince Jaegar." Her left eyebrow quirked. "I'm sure you have a bottle of dark rum lurking somewhere in your pantry."

Jaegar grinned. "I'm sure we do, Princess Lauryl."

* * * * *

He shoved her against the wall and fastened his mouth hungrily to hers. Her hands were spiked through his hair—holding his head steady as she ground her lips against his. She thrust her tongue fiercely into his mouth. He grunted and his hand went under her sweater, cupping the firm mound of her breast, squeezing it, palming her nipple. He was wedged between her legs, the heavy thickness of his erection rubbing against her. She brought her right leg up to hook it over his hip, drawing him closer still. He rocked against her, dragging the hardness from side to side.

"Aye, warrior," she said, nipping at his bottom lip. "Aye!"

"I want you." The three words were husky, rife with passion.

"No shit," she whispered against his mouth then stabbed her tongue deep past his lips then quickly withdrew.

"Now!" he growled, and lifted her.

Dominia crooked her left leg over his right hip and locked him between her strong legs as he turned away from the wall and started walking. Tearing her mouth from his, she lowered her forehead to his shoulder so he could see where he was going.

Jaegar had a lustful scent about him that was driving her crazy. Pheromones, she thought—hot, musk-laced and wild. They drew her in like quicksand. His kind was known for their sexual prowess and if his scent was an advance guarantee of what was to come, she was in for the treat she'd been promised.

"He's a fucking stallion," Lauryl had told her. "He rocked my world, I can tell you and that isn't easily done!"

"And I'll rock yours," he muttered as he took the stairs as easily, as though he did not have her one hundred and ten pounds wrapped around him.

She reminded herself to be very careful around this man. Those like him had immense psychic abilities that were almost as legendary as the sexual ones that ruled them. Shadowlords could be dangerous.

She ached between her legs and fire was racing through her loins, begging to be put out with the thickness she felt prodding her through the fabric of their clothing with every step he took. Every movement of his body sent waves of pure heat washing over her entire body. She'd never wanted a man as badly as she wanted this one.

"Hurry," she said against his shirt as he reached the landing.

"Baby, this *is* me hurrying!" he shot back.

She felt him lift his leg and the vibration as he kicked open a door made her jump in his arms. The bang of the door as he kicked it shut behind their entrance into a bedchamber caused her breathing to accelerate.

"Is this your room?" she asked.

"No," he said as he took her to the bed.

"Whose room is it then?"

"How the hell should I know?" he growled, lowering her to the bed. He stepped back, lifted one leg and peeled off first one boot then the other. The buttons on his shirt went flying as he ripped it open.

"You don't know whose room is it, and you didn't lock the door? Anyone could walk in and I don't like to be interrupted," she complained. She jerked the sweater over her head and shook her hair free of it as it came off. She saw him wave his hand at the door then heard the snick of the lock. She grinned. "Neat little trick. Can you teach me to do that?" She lay back to unbutton her pants as he shrugged out of his shirt. Her gaze lowered to his arm. "Nice tats."

"Nice tits," he growled.

He stripped off his belt, flung it aside, ran the buttons of his pants like a man who had a lot of practice undressing quickly. "I've got other tricks to teach you, sweetie," he said with a savage twist of his lips. He shoved his pants down his hips then kicked them off.

She swallowed hard the moment his thick cock sprang free. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She'd known many men but never one quite as well endowed as this one. She was barely aware of him tugging off her boots as she reclined there on her elbows staring up at him.

"By the gods you are built like a fucking bull!" she told him. She swiped her tongue over her upper lip, dragging quick breaths in as he put a knee to the mattress.

"And I've the staying power of one as well," he said, looming over her. His hands hooked in the waistband of her pants, and with one smooth move, he had them off her.

Dominia felt heat staining her cheeks for the first time in her life. She disdained underwear and only wore a bra because it wasn't a good idea to be unbound if there was a skirmish of any kind.

"You shaved just for me?" he asked in a teasing voice.

"I had all my unwanted body hair removed by a laser," she said, watching his amber eyes grow as hot as magma. "Legs, underarms, between my legs."

He laid his hand on her smooth mound, the base of his palm touching her swollen clit. "I like it," he said. He flexed his fingers over the hairless plain of her sex. "So soft, so silky." He turned his hand palm up to cup her between the legs, one dark brow arching upward as he locked eyes with her. "And so hot."

"So wet," she said, licking her lips. The feel of his hand on her was sending waves of unadulterated lust straight through her.

"Aye?" he questioned. He moved to position himself between her legs and nudged her thighs apart, stroking them slowly as he gazed at her core.

He dragged his index finger down the right side of her folds with a featherlight touch that made her stomach muscles quiver. She shivered when he pulled that questing digit up the left side then lightly circled her aching clit.

"Let's see how wet you are," he said, his voice husky.

Dominia arched her hips off the mattress as his finger touched the opening of her sheath. He didn't insert it but she wanted him to, needed him to. She wanted the impalement. She craved it.

"Slowly, wench," he said with a crooked grin. "We've got all afternoon."

She wanted to remind him that his parents and Lauryl were in the library—no doubt knowing perfectly well what he was doing at that moment.

"Doesn't matter," he said, reading her mind.

He made a tiny little circle of her opening. Circumnavigated it again. And still again until she wanted to scream at him to shove his finger into her and be done with it. She squirmed, lifted her hips slightly in invitation.

"Patience, sweeting," he said. "Patience." She watched his eyes turn molten gold. "It will be worth it, I promise." His circling slowed. "Relax. Enjoy the ride."

Dominia forced her body to settle down, to meld to the mattress, resisting the urge to grab handfuls of coverlet.

"You like to be tasted?" he whispered, and a chill trickled down her spine.

"Like you wouldn't believe, but it's been a while," she answered.

"My treat then."

The moment he pushed down in the bed and lowered his face between her legs, Dominia closed her eyes in anticipation of his hot tongue. His breath was warm as he blew it across her wet folds. She felt him spread his fingers along the creases of her thighs then groaned as he ran his thumbs down either side of her vaginal lips from clit to opening. He eased her apart, flicked out his tongue to lap at the juices that seeped from her. Reaching above her, she laced her hands around the bars of the iron bedstead and drew her knees up—the better for him to have complete access.

"Sweet," he said, his words vibrated against her slick flesh. "Sweet like summer wine."

She jerked as he licked her opening, dragging the flat of his tongue all the way up to her aching clit. Tucking her bottom lip between her teeth as he made butterfly forays against that swollen nub with the tip of his tongue was the only way she could stifle another groan. The moment he drew her clit between his lips, she cried out, coming so hard and with such a force, she jerked the headboard of the bed away from the wall.

"Gods!" she said, not having been prepared for the untimely arrival of that kind of bliss.

Jaegar lifted his head as she trembled, her belly quivering as another little climax took hold. It hadn't been his intention to make her come so soon but now that he knew she had a hair trigger, he smiled. Knowing was owning in his book.

"Liked that, did you?" he asked.

Dominia kept her eyes closed. Her body felt alive—as though an electrical current flowed through it. She shivered again and would have replied that she indeed liked it, but he lowered his head once more and those marvelously talented lips and the fabulously gifted tongue took her over once again. She clung to the bedstead as though it were a lifeline.

Though she hadn't been a virgin for quite some time and had known more than her share of men over the years, she knew she could swear without a doubt that she'd never experienced a man as capable as this one. He was turning her inside out with his hot breath against her hairless pubes, and his knowledgeable tongue was doing such wickedly delicious things to her cunt. The force of his lips against her clit, her opening,

the flick and lap of his tongue, the pressure of his thumb tips holding her apart for his exploration sent unremitting pleasure through her. It occurred to her if he was as good with his cock as he was with his mouth, she was in for a rare treat.

"Why don't I show you?" he asked.

She opened her eyes as he eased over her. His broad shoulders blocked out her surroundings as he wedged between her thighs—his hard cock flexing upon her smooth mound. Muscular arms bracketed her shoulders, his warrior's hands pushing deep into the mattress to support him.

"Now I can take this slow or I can ram into you like the bull you named me," he said in a husky voice, never taking his eyes from hers. "I'd prefer it slow, but if you like to be hurt..." He cocked a shoulder.

"Sex should be pleasurable," she stated. "It shouldn't be torture."

"My thoughts exactly."

Dominia licked her lips, watched his eyes flick to the motion then slowly lift to hers. A dark, sinister gleam entered that golden gaze, and he ground his hips against her.

"Staying power, huh?" she asked, not recognizing her own voice. She was having trouble breathing, but it wasn't from the weight of his lower body pressing into hers.

"Oh yeah, baby, and then some," he replied.

His toes were digging into the mattress beside her inner ankles, so she lifted her foot to smooth it down his hairy calf.

"I don't particularly like pain."

"Me neither." His eyes dipped to her breasts. "Would you prefer I worked on them a while until you're ready for me to take you?"

"I'm ready for you now," she said. The thought of not having him inside her as soon as possible wasn't to her liking.

"And I'm ready for you."

"Quick and hard, then," she said as she pulled off her shirt and unhooked her bra, her breasts swaying as she tossed the garment aside.

One dark brow lifted and an easy, mesmerizing smile pulled across his lips. His head tilted slightly to one side. "You're sure that's how you want it?" he asked.

"Aye," she said, swallowing.

"Positive?"

Dominia frowned. "I said as much, didn't I?"

"Just wanted to make sure you know what you're getting into," he said then his smile widened even more. "Or rather what I'm getting into."

Never one to back away from a challenge, Dominia raised her chin. "Show me what you've got, warrior. Give it your best shot."

That smile became a predatory leer, a dangerous tug of full lips upon which she wanted nothing more than to nibble.

"You're sure now?" he queried.

She brought her hands from the headboard and wrapped them around his biceps, digging her short nails into his flesh. "Aye, you conceited prick. I want it quick and..."

The words were snatched out of her mouth for he moved so quickly, so expertly she didn't realize what he was about until the tip of the broad head of his cock was inside her. She sucked in a breath. He was barely within her channel, yet he was stretching her.

"He's hard and he's long and he's big, wench," he warned her. "He'll hurt you if I'm not careful."

"I can take it," she said, panting, for her entire lower body was on fire with wanting this man deep inside her. When he moved a fraction of an inch deeper, her eyes widened. "Oh!"

"Yeah, that's what I mean," he said. "I don't think you'd have liked it if I had rammed into you."

"You're right," she admitted, not the least bit ashamed of owning up to not wanting to be hurt with that massive cock.

"I tell you what," he said then withdrew before she could stop him. He ignored her groan as he moved off her to lie on his side. "Let's work on these for a while."

She gasped as he bent his head to her breast and drew her nipple deep into his mouth. His tongue danced over the little peak until it was stiff and so sensitive she had to thread her fingers through his hair to pull him away.

"Warrior, you're killing me!" she protested.

"Nay, wench, I'm only getting started." He rose up so he could attach his sweet mouth to her other breast—lavishing as many attentions upon it as he had its twin. The weight of his wide chest was heavenly, but she wanted him full length along her body, pressing her hard to the mattress.

"As good as that feels," she said, tugging on his thick hair, "I'd just as soon have your cock sliding into me, warrior."

"Umm," he said against her breast. His teeth clamped firmly on the swollen nubbin, and then he stabbed it repeatedly with the tip of his tongue.

"Stop!" she pleaded. "I can't take much more of that!" She yanked his hair brutally.

Jaegar raised his head and gave her a grin that—had it been on the face of any other man—she would have slapped away. As it was, she had no time to chastise him for he was moving over her again, his hand on his cock, and she realized his shaft was just as hard as it had been.

"If I don't want it to go limp, it won't," he said with a cocky confidence that made her grit her teeth.

"Then do something with it!" she said, and dug her nails into his shoulders. "I want you, you arrogant bastard!"

His laugh set her nerves on edge, but it wasn't an irritating laugh. It was one she recognized from her own repertoire of chortles. It said he was playing with her, teasing her, that he wasn't ready to get down to the business at hand just quite yet.

He reached between them to rub the tip of his cock slowly along her folds. She could feel the pre-cum seeping from him—could even smell it—and that sent waves of excitement racing through her lower body. Her belly clenched, her cunt pulsed. He was stroking her with his shaft, and she opened her mouth to protest, but he leaned over her and took her mouth with his, using his tongue to effectively silence her.

The man could kiss, she thought as she held his head. Whoever taught him had taught him well. He used his tongue—not like a battering ram as some men did—as enticement to deeper pleasures. It was a will-o'-the-wisp beckoning for her to follow, urging her along a pathway to something more exciting and satisfying than she'd ever experienced before.

His hand slid down her belly, over the hairless mons, and he dipped his middle finger into her opening—probing slowly, shallowly, exquisitely.

She writhed beneath him, thrusting her hips up slightly. The moment she did, he withdrew his finger.

“Warrior, don't!” she said, pulling her mouth from his. “I want...”

He put his lips to her ear, whispered in a rough, gruff voice that sent shivers down her side. “I want you, you adorable little wench,” he told her. “I want to fuck you until I pass out.”

She would have moved her ear from his mouth but his hand shot up, and he grasped her chin to anchor her head, to keep her from turning away. His teeth raked over her earlobe.

“Beg me to take you,” he whispered, the words sending chills along her sides.

Dominia moaned. She was a Daughter of the Night and the women of her clan did not beg for anything and especially from a male!

“Don't think at all, baby,” he ordered. His placed his palm over her breast, rubbed the nipple with the cup of his hand. “Just do, wench. Let yourself go and just do.”

Dominia wasn't sure she could. She'd been taught from childhood to develop strict control over her emotions, not to let her desires run away with her. Self-discipline had been hammered into her head long before she could walk. Letting someone else take the lead was as anathema to a Daughter of the Night as allowing a man to rule her. To give one control was unheard of yet—she had to admit—to some extent, Lauryl had handed over a portion of herself to Glade.

“Perhaps because he is her bond-companion, she feels the need to bend to his will at times,” her aunt had said with no small degree of disgust. “That is what comes of allowing a man to gain the advantage! Put them in their place and keep them there if you want any semblance of peace in your life.”

"Maybe it's because she loves him," the man lying beside her said softly as he plucked her thoughts from the ether. "It's all give and take, wench. That's what it means to be married."

"Then I'm grateful I'll never know that side of life," she said with a sniff, "for Joining is not on my list of things to do."

She watched him frown. "I wish I had that option but..." He shrugged. "Unfortunately it is my destiny to take a wife and make an heir."

"Your problem," she said. "Not mine."

He sighed. "So true." He closed his hand over her breast and squeezed gently. "I don't want to talk about it anyway." He thrust his tongue into the spiral of her ear and chuckled when she shivered.

"You are an evil man," she said, and realized his cock was flexing against her leg.

"I am, but I am very good at that evil."

Once again he moved over her, settling between her thighs, nudging them apart with his knees.

"We'll dispense with the begging," he said. His hand was on his cock and he had it poised against her opening. "Just tell me you want me. That's all I need to hear."

"You know I do," she said. She slipped her hands along his waist then frowned. "What's this?" Her fingertips touched a puckered scar on his right side.

"Nothing. Concentrate, wench."

"This feels like a —"

"What do you want?" he interrupted.

"You know what I want," she said, her fingers leaving the thick scar.

"But you gotta say it," he said, his voice rising and falling in singsong teasing.

Dominia clenched her teeth. A part of her wanted to laugh and another wanted to strangle him. "Jaegar, I want you," she said, and ran her hands up his upper arms to curl her fingers over his shoulders. She shook him roughly. "I want you to fuck me 'til you pass out."

"Alrighty then!" he said with a grin, and eased the tip of his cock into her.

Dominia took a deep breath as inch by slow inch he pushed inside her. He was stretching her but it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was a heady sensation that made her pulse race for this was all man. Everything about him screamed fighter to her. From the broad shoulders tapering down to a flat, rock-hard belly and narrow hips to the long legs between which hung that marvelous shaft. His hands were large, calloused, but they were gentle with her. They weren't clumsy but sure. For such a brawny, tall man, he had a supple grace that she found intriguing. That boded well for him coming out on the winning side of a sword match.

"Stop. Thinking," he instructed. He was in her as far as she thought he could go, but with each word he pushed just a tad deeper until Dominia feared he was pressed

tight to her very womb. "You think entirely too much, wench. It's giving me a wicked headache." He rotated his hips against her, withdrew his cock an inch or two then settled it to the hilt once more. "And not the kind of headache I like having."

She wrapped her arms around his neck to bring his head down, his lips to hers. Claiming him with a fierce kiss, branding him with her tongue, she stared into his eyes without blinking, silently challenging him.

Jaegar pulled his mouth from hers and gave her a merry grin. "Is that your way of saying I talk too much?" he asked.

"Entirely too much, warrior," she agreed. "Less talk, more action."

He withdrew slowly then just as slowly pressed into her. His eyes steady on hers, he began a slow glide—in and out, in and out. Around him, her juices flowed so the thrusting was easy yet caused the necessary friction.

"Nice," she said, and lifted her legs to cage him to her. "Very, very nice."

"Happy to serve," he responded, and increased the tempo of his strokes. He pushed his hands under her rump to lift her higher.

She watched a bead of sweat easing down the center of his chest and wished she could flick out her tongue to catch the salty drop. It slipped through the thick hair between his pectorals, disappearing from view. Her gaze lifted to his face. She smiled.

He increased the cadence of his thrusts, but this time he held the downward stroke a bit longer before withdrawing halfway from her sheath. With each push, he pressed hard then released. He watched her eyes, knew she liked the slight pain his thick cock provided when he went deep. He pulled her higher still against him and dug his toes into the mattress. The rhythm increased, increased again—and yet again—until she was breathing shallowly, quickly and her legs clamped tighter around his hips. He dug his fingers into her ass.

"Aye!" she growled. Her arms became steel bands around his neck. Her legs were vises melding the two of them together.

Jaegar toyed with the notion of stopping and starting again, but he knew the frustration would turn her into a ferocious hellion he wasn't prepared to joist with at that moment. Ordinarily he would have played with her for at least half an hour—if not longer to bring her to complete capitulation—but he didn't think she'd let him get away with that. He was afraid if he stopped she'd tear him apart with her nails and teeth.

He thrust harder into her, faster. Beneath them the mattress bounced and she grunted with each of his long strokes. She clawed at his shoulders as she hugged him.

"You want it all?" he asked, his own breathing heavy, fast.

Dominia shuddered. "There's more?" she asked in a voice she thought sounded almost fearful.

"Only this."

He shoved hard into her sheath, and she cried out. How was it possible, she wondered, for him to go any deeper inside her? He ground against her, screwing his

hips between her spread thighs. His lower body jerked forward and withdrew. The pressure he was building within her was making her head spin.

Pure, unadulterated carnal pleasure was rippling through Dominia. She thought she had known fulfilling sexual delights before, but they had been nothing in comparison to the enjoyment Jaegar was providing. With each stroke the fire in her loins leapt higher. Her blood was pounding so hard she could hear it in her ears and the most exquisite heaviness was forming between her legs.

One moment he was pumping fiercely into her and the next Dominia was screaming his name, clutching him to her as pulse after pulse tightened her vaginal muscles around his stiff shaft. She writhed beneath him as she rode the wave of lust that overtook her. Intense, enduring, an orgasm that went on and on until she thought the top of her head would explode.

"Jaegar!" she cried out.

He took that moment to release his seed – going perfectly still as his cock leapt deep within her. His hands were tight on her ass as he held her to him until the last drop of cum shot from him. Breathing heavily, slick with sweat, he collapsed atop her – careful to keep most of his weight on his elbows so he would not crush her. His head fell to her shoulder as her fingers laced through his damp hair.

"By the goddess, man," she whispered. "Were you trying to kill me then?"

"You ordered the full-service deal, didn't you?" he asked in between pants then yawned. He started to close his eyes.

"Oh no you don't!" she said, tugging on his hair. "This isn't your room."

"My keep," he mumbled. "Thus my room." He yawned again.

"I have three words for you," she said, and jerked a bit harder on his thick locks. "Your father, your mother and Lauryl."

"That's six words, wench," he grumbled. "You're bad at math, aren't you?"

"You need to get up," she said, and tried to lever him.

He pumped listlessly against her a couple of times. "Can't just yet. Give me ten minutes and I'll have it up again."

"Jaegar," she said, drawing the word out in warning. "Get up."

He sighed heavily then rolled off her. "Nag, nag, nag," he complained, and threw an arm over his eyes.

Though every instinct within her was shrieking at her to stay with him, Dominia sat up and swung her legs from the bed. Bending down, she scooped her discarded clothes from the floor. She could feel his gaze on her from beneath the awning of his arm and was proud she had a body men liked to admire. When she was dressed, she moved toward the door.

"You felt it, didn't you?" he asked.

She stopped with her back to him, her hand on the doorknob. For a moment she didn't say anything and then she nodded. "And you?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I hadn't," he answered.

Dominia turned to look at him. He was propped up on his elbows, his black hair tousled, amber eyes fastened on her. She wanted nothing more than to fling herself on him and have her way with him again and again until he begged for mercy.

"Anytime, anywhere," he said softly. "I think that's been established."

Her hand tightened on the doorknob. "I wasn't expecting this, Jaegar."

A smile hovered on his full lips. "And you think I was?" he countered.

She stared at him—memorizing the handsome planes of his dark face, the power of his captivating body, the strength of purpose in his golden gaze—and felt something twist inside her.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

He lifted one shoulder but didn't answer. She thought he might well be imprinting her face in his memory too.

"I've got to go," she said, her shoulders drooping a bit. She didn't want to leave. For the first time in her life, she wanted what she had always sworn she didn't.

"Me too," he said, reading her mind. Lines formed over his slightly hooked nose—the only imperfection on his beautiful face. "We'll just play it where it lies, okay?"

"Aye," she said, opening the door. "We'll just play it where it lies." She had no idea what that meant, but if he was copasetic with what had happened, she could be as well.

As the closing of the door shut out the sight of her, Jaegar lay down again. He stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

"You are in so much trouble, Jaegar Rozakaris," he said.

Chapter Two

"Oh shit," Lauryl said the moment she and Dominia were outside Eejderha Palace. "Have you lost what little mind you had?"

"You think I had a clue? I screwed him," Dominia said. "Just like you knew I was going to. That was all I intended, not this!"

Lauryl had docked their Fiach runabout on the platform reserved for visitors, and it was toward the crimson-red craft they were walking. Both warrioresses were walking fast, anxious to put the *an Tuirc* capitol behind them before Jaegar's mother found out what had transpired in the unknown servant's bedchamber.

"Aye, but bonding, Dominia? Bonding?"

"It happened. How was I to know it would?"

"If I had thought for one minute this would occur..." Lauryl shook her head. "My mother is going to lash me for sure!"

"Your mother won't care one way or another," Dominia grumbled. "It's my mother you've got to worry about."

"Aye, and you as well!" Lauryl snapped. "She'll have both our hides tacked to that cabin on her game preserve!" She reached out to grab her cousin's arm. "Dominia, really! Why him of all people? Do you realize his mother is the megaverse's biggest bitch?"

Shaking off Lauryl's grip, Dominia threw up her hand. "How the hell was I supposed to know this would happen, Lauryl?" she snapped. "It's not like I planned it." She narrowed her eyes. "And besides, it's all your fault!"

Lauryl's mouth dropped open. "My fault?" she echoed. "How the fuck is it my fault?"

"Come with me to Corrán, Domi," Dominia mimicked. "You've got to see it to believe it. He's built like a racehorse!"

"Aye, he is, but screwing him 'til you're sated is one thing, cousin. Doing what you did is..." She flung out a hand as she searched for the right words to say.

"Exactly what you did with Glade Aeolian?" Dominia challenged.

They reached the Fiach and Lauryl stopped. Putting her hands on her hips, she hung her head. "I knew you'd throw that in my face." She stomped her booted foot. "I just knew you would the moment I saw you entering the parlor."

"Well, what's done is done. You can't change what happened to you, and I can't change what happened to me," Dominia groused.

"But Jaegar Rozakaris, Dominia!" Lauryl complained. She slapped her palm against the security panel and the runabout's gull-wing door slid silently open. "Of all the men in the megaverse for you to choose as your bond-companion, he should have been near the very bottom of the list!"

"I had no intention of ever choosing a bond-companion and in *an Tuirc* they call it bond-mate!" Dominia threw back at her. "It just happened!" She stomped up the steps in her cousin's wake.

"Well, what the hell did he say?" Lauryl demanded. "How did he react?"

Dominia frowned. "As though it were nothing more than a minor inconvenience. He was very calm about it actually."

A hiss came from the very depths of Lauryl Coedil-Aeolian. "That is so not good!"

"What do you mean?" she asked as Lauryl hurried to the captain's chair and ran through the liftoff procedure with hands flying.

"Get buckled in and let's get out of here before the feces hit the oscillating rotor," Lauryl ordered.

Taking her place in the copilot's seat, Dominia reached for the flight harness. "Am I missing something here?" she asked.

"What exactly did he say?" Lauryl questioned as the runabout's mighty engines roared to life.

"He said we'd just play it where it lies."

Lauryl groaned. She pulled back on the throttle and the craft lifted, dark gray dust billowing from under the dual thrusters to obscure the sight of the impressive fortress that was Jaegar's birthright. She glanced sideways at her cousin. "Do you remember me telling you he's grand master at that silly game the *an Tuircese* call *acimak*?"

"Aye, so?"

"Well, Glade plays that asinine game too," Lauryl told her as she banked the Fiach into the gunmetal gray sky where rain was beginning to fall. "One of the tenets of the game is to play it where it lies."

"All right," Dominia said. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Lauryl said as she did a quick scan to make sure they weren't being tailed, "if fortune puts your ball in a place where you didn't want it to go—they call it the rough—and that's just too fucking bad. You will have to get your ball out the best way you can. If where the ball landed was somewhere from which you can't easily extract it, you can pick it up and toss it to a better location, but you'll have to take a penalty." She cast Dominia a hard look. "You play it where it lies, make the best of it or face the penalty." She sighed. "In this case it's his balls that are in the rough. His mother is going to have a screaming stroke when she finds out he's bonded with you." She cast the younger woman an apologetic grin. "No offense meant."

"None taken."

Dominia folded her arms over her chest and slumped in the seat, turning her head to watch the rain lashing against the wraparound plexishield windscreen. A lone drop falling down the surface reminded her vividly of the sweat droplet that had eased down Jaegar's chest.

"I won't be able to live without him now, will I?" she asked quietly.

"Not comfortably, no," Lauryl replied. "You will need to be around him at least most of the time to stay happy and stay sane."

"Great," Dominia said on a long, tired sigh. "That's just great."

* * * * *

At that moment, Jaegar was pacing the solarium. The rain had turned the room dark and dreary and the deluge was coming down in heavy sheets, obscuring the landscape beyond the glass. As a child, he had taken refuge in this room for he could hide under one of the many long counters with an adventure book and lose himself in the words. It had been a sad and disappointing day when his mother had discovered his hiding place.

"Books are for dreamers," she'd snarled, snatching the offending volume from his hands. "Go! Report to Master Badeem for your fencing lesson!"

He was ten years old on that day and the book had been a secret birthday gift from Lyden. When he returned to his room that afternoon, it was to find it ransacked and the stash of beloved books he had hidden from his mother had been found and were at that moment burning in the fireplace.

"You have better things to do with your time than read, Jaegar!" his mother insisted.

A flare of lightning drew his attention to the wide sweep of windows where hanging plants cascaded down from the glass ceiling. Digging his hands into the pockets of his pants, he stared at the wavering pattern of water running down the windows and wondered why his mother hated him so fiercely.

There had never been the smallest amount of affection pretended on her part. Her glower was without even a trace of warmth. Her words to him were spoken with annoyance, with seeming irritation that she had to address him at all. The absence of love had toughened him over the years, hardened his heart somewhat toward most women. Although he did not object to taking the pleasures they offered, neither was he inclined to want to spend time with them past the last spurt and grunt.

"Until today," he mused as he hung his head.

Totally unexpected and completely beyond what he had decided he wanted out of life, what had taken place earlier that day had shaken the foundation of Jaegar Rozakaris' world.

"And flung me so far off course, I may never find my way back," he said aloud.

There was going to be hell to pay when his mother found out, he thought. Keeping it from her for as long as he could was imperative. Just imagining what she would say, would do once she found out he had bonded with a woman not of her choosing sent concern stabbing through his brain. The lady was not the calmest of individuals at the best of times. Vindictiveness and unrestrained fury were high on her list of approved reactions to things that did not sit well with her.

Jaegar sighed. The battle of wills this time would be fierce, brutal. He was apt to get more than a prolonged lashing of her barbed tongue. His left cheek developed a phantom stinging in it as memories of other ferocious arguments he'd had with her over the years rose up to needle him.

"Why are you hiding in here?"

Smiling, Jaegar didn't turn but continued to stare out the window. "You think I'm hiding?"

Lyden came over to stand beside him, nudging his nephew with his shoulder. "I know you are." He leaned forward to peer into Jaegar's face. "Oh shite. What have you done now?"

Instead of answering the question, Jaegar posed one of his own.

"Where did you disappear to this morning? We had company I wanted you to meet."

"Aye, the hell hags," Lyden said. "I saw them." He shrugged. "Had no desire to meet them, but from afar they were right comely wenches." He cleared his throat. "Heard you boffed one in old Mathias' room. Is that why you're hiding?"

A pained expression puckered Jaegar's face. Mathias Bledingsole was the keep's castellan, an autocratic stick of a man with no sense of humor and a jaundiced eye for anyone under the age of forty. The castellan would take Jaegar to task for sullyng his bedchamber.

"Not hiding," Jaegar mumbled, turning from the window. With his shoulders hunched and his hands still thrust into his pockets, he headed for the door.

"She knows of course," Lyden said. "As does the entire keep." There was a pause then as Jaegar reached the door. Lyden raised his voice. "And she's looking for you."

Wincing at that news, Jaegar came up short. He thought it best not to return to the great hall. His bedchamber was to be avoided as well. He knew his mother would have spies searching for him. Undecided where he should go, he heard Lyden snicker.

"You might as well go to her and face the music, Jae. Putting it off will only make her madder," his uncle advised.

"There are," Jaegar looked up at the ceiling, "extenuating circumstances."

"I figured as much else you wouldn't be hiding in here."

Muscle working in his jaw, Jaegar pivoted from the door to stomp over to a set of peacock chairs flanking a low wicker table. "I am not hiding," he said as he took a seat.

"Call it what you will," Lyden said, joining him. "Lollygagging, dillydallying, frillyfrallying, dragging your feet, procrastinating." He bumped his nephew's boot with his own. "Hiding. It's all the same. You are keeping out of your mother's reach and that tells me those extenuating circumstances of which you speak are going to fire her temper."

"Doesn't take much to do that," Jaegar complained as he slumped down in the chair.

"That's true," Lyden agreed. He braced his elbows on the arms of the chair and made a steeple of his fingers. "Just how bad is it going to be so I'll know how best to provision myself in my chambers to ride out the storm?"

Jaegar laid his head on the tall fan back of the chair and closed his eyes, his long legs stretched out. "Remember that winter when it snowed so heavily it took nearly the whole of the garrison to dig us out?"

Lyden said nothing for a moment then whistled. "That bad, eh?"

"Worse," Jaegar answered. "It may well take the entire kingdom to keep my mother from boiling me in oil."

"By the prophet, Jae. What exactly did you do this time?" Lyden questioned. "Surely screwing a hell hag does not constitute being rendered to fat in one of your mama's cauldrons, Jaegar. It wasn't the smartest move you've ever made—and especially not under your mother's roof—but neither was it a complete calamity."

"Bonding would be cause, don't you think?"

"Aye but..." Lyden stopped. "By the prophets, tell me that isn't what you did!"

"I knew the moment the climax started," Jaegar said quietly, opening his eyes. "It wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. I didn't just take her, Lyden. I branded her with that seed."

"I do *not* want to hear this!" Lyden said. He shot from the chair, plowed a hand through his thick brownish-red hair, began to pace. "This is not good." He speared Jaegar with a hard glower. "This is not good at all, you moronic prick!"

"And at the moment the climax stopped, I knew she had claimed my heart." Hopelessly he looked up at his uncle and best friend. "I fell in love with her."

"Oh *please!*" Lyden shouted. "Your mother won't just boil you in oil for this, Rozakaris. She will have you drawn and quartered first!"

"It wasn't as though I planned it," Jaegar told him. "I felt at peace with her, Lyden. I felt... Hell, I can't explain just how I did feel. She makes me want to look for happiness in my life."

"You don't even know what happiness is," Lyden reminded him.

"No, but maybe I will one day," Jaegar answered.

"What do you know of her, Jaegar? Who is she? Is she, at least, of royal blood?"

Jaegar lifted one shoulder. "I've no idea. She could be a peasant for all I know."

Lyden stabbed a rigid finger at his nephew. "You are so screwed if she is!"

"What would you have me do?" Jaegar asked. "Once bonded, always bonded for a Shadowlord. You know that. Only death can sever the bond."

"Well, that is one option," Lyden snapped. When Jaegar growled at him, Lyden fanned a dismissive hand toward him. "I wasn't advocating you going after the little darling and wringing her neck, so stop giving me that look."

"If you aren't going to help me, just leave me be," Jaegar said on a long sigh. "I'm already regretting having confided in you."

"Well, it's not as though you'd have told anyone else *except* me!" Lyden scoffed. "I'm the only true friend you've got."

"I have to hide this from her, Lyden, for as long as I can. She'll whip out that book of hexes and spells and turn Dominia into a toadlet."

"There isn't much in the way of options open to you, you idjut," his uncle said. "You're not getting any younger and your mother is no less inclined to be bride hunting for you. As a matter of fact, I hear she has asked Captain Ben-Rashim to have the bower ship provisioned. I found out she's making plans to go to *an Éigipt, Arabach* and Diabolusia, so she'll be gone at least six months. I'll give you one guess why she's taking the trip."

"I wish she'd mind her own prophets-be-damned business and leave mine to me," Jaegar grumbled.

"Since you're disinclined to find a bride on your own, I suppose she feels she has to do it for you."

"Interfering old biddy," Jaegar declared then pushed from the chair. He stood with his hands on his hips, his head thrown back. "Meddlesome harpy."

"Ah Jaegar?" Lyden said in a strangled voice that alerted Jaegar they were no longer alone.

From the fear trembling in his uncle's voice, Jaegar knew who had entered the room. When he lowered his head, his gaze met that of his mother, and he imagined he could see steam coming out of the woman's nostrils. He half expected her to charge him, head lowered like an enraged bull.

Lyden didn't wait to be told to leave this time. He scuttled out of the room as though the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. Without a backward glance, he closed the door behind him, closing mother and son into the dismal gloom cast by the storm beyond the glass.

"You may be too old for me to turn you over my knee, Jaegar Rozakaris, but you are not too old for me to have the *ta'zeer* take an inch or two of flesh from your backside with my quirt," his mother told him with narrowed eyes. "I do not appreciate being labeled either a meddlesome harpy nor an interfering old biddy."

"Then stop interfering and meddling in my life!" he flung at her.

"Stop rutting in every willing female body who comes your way!" she shot back.

"I am a grown man," he said, chin up. "I have the appetites of a grown man. If I want to lie with a woman, that is my right. You have no say in it."

Queen Audrina gave him a look that left no doubt in his mind what she thought of his words. Her green stare raked him from head to foot then she tossed her head and took the chair he had earlier vacated. "Sit," she ordered.

"I've things to do," he said, making a course for the door.

"Sit, you ungrateful little bastard!" she shrieked.

Jaegar halted instantly. For his mother to insult him by naming him what he knew himself to be—the product of another man's seed, a man other than his mother's husband—he knew she had thrown all caution to the Winds. He turned to face her, double lines of worry appearing over his nose.

"I don't believe that is a wise thing to call me even if you are angry," he said softly. He glanced at the chair but remained where he was.

"Stubborn and willful. The older you get, the more like your father you become," she said, face hard and eyes drilling into him like lightning bolts. "I have prayed to the prophets every night that you would not inherit his arrogance and unreliable nature, but I see Al-el turned a deaf ear to my prayers."

Not once since he had learned of his illegitimate status on the night before he left for the Academy had his mother mentioned one word to him of his true father. No doubt he was never meant to know his parentage and most likely would not have until he came into his powers had he not been where he wasn't supposed to be.

Trying to sneak into his father's reading room to pilfer a book, he heard his mother arguing with her husband as he passed her door. Normally he would have blocked out the harsh language, but the king's words brought him to a stumbling halt.

"Jaegar may not be the son of my loins, Audrina, but he is the son of my heart! I could not have wished for a better child to carry on the Rozakaris name!"

"I know you have feelings for him, Abdul, but..."

"Feelings?" the king asked. "Feelings? Woman, I love the boy! I do not want him sent to the Academy. He is only ten. Ten, Audrina! I will have instructors brought here. What if he should meet his real father? Don't you think he will know the man on sight?"

"No, I do not! Furthermore, the bastard is rarely at the Academy these days since that bitch of a wife of his has given him still another daughter to fawn over!" A smug smile touched her lips. "At least I gave him a son!"

Hearing words that told him his entire life had been a lie, Jaegar lurched backward, his shoulders striking the wall opposite his mother's chamber door. When her door immediately flew open, he stared into her shocked face. He watched her eyes narrow and knew he was in deep trouble.

"Were you eavesdropping, brat?" she demanded, reaching out to grab him by the ear. Twisting it viciously, she repeated the question.

"Nay, lady. I was not!" he replied, knowing better than to try to break free of her favorite hold on him. He had no choice but to follow her as she pulled him ruthlessly into her chamber.

"He heard!" she pronounced, dragging him over to the king. "The brat knows!"

Striving to keep from crying for the pain in his ear was brutal, he was grateful when the man he thought was his father ordered Jaegar's mother to release him. She did but not before she added a vicious slap to the pain she'd already inflicted.

"That is enough!" the king snapped. "He's just a child, Audrina. Have some compassion for your own son!" He took her by the arm and propelled her to a chair, all but shoving her into the seat.

Jaegar trembled as the king approached him, reaching out to wrap his hands around Jaegar's upper arms.

"How much did you hear, son?" he asked gently.

"N-nothing," Jaegar stammered, but the look of disappointment on the king's face at having told a lie made him lower his head, and he answered truthfully. "That you're not my real father."

The king moved a hand to Jaegar's chin and lifted it. There was a sad smile on the older man's face and moisture had filled his dark eyes. "Have I not been a father to you, Jaegar?" he asked. "In every way a man can?"

"Aye, milord," Jaegar said.

"Did I not proudly give you my name?"

Jaegar nodded, unable to speak for his throat was closing from the tears he was trying so hard not to shed.

"And do you not know I love you with all my heart, son?" he asked. His grip on Jaegar's chin tightened lightly. "Have I not publicly declared you the heir to the kingdom of *an Tuirc*, the heir apparent to the throne?"

"An unworthy heir apparent," his mother scoffed.

"You are my son," the king stated, ignoring his wife. He released Jaegar's chin to place his palm against his chest. "Here in my heart. Where it truly matters." He hunkered down so he was looking up into Jaegar's face. Once more his hands gripped Jaegar's. "You are old enough that you should be told the truth, but that should come from your mother's lips. I will leave you to hear—"

"No, Papa!" Jaegar cried, flinging himself into the king's arms, wrapping his own tight around the older man's neck. "Don't leave me with her!"

But he had. Despite the tears that could no longer be held back and flowed unchecked down Jaegar's cheeks, the king gently extricated himself from the fierce hold of Jaegar's arms.

"It will be all right," he'd said, but that had not been the case.

Though she told him nothing more than that his father was a very powerful warrior, his mother refused to name the man who had impregnated her.

"He does not know you exist, and I want to keep it that way!" she declared. "And if you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone, I will have the king disinherit you!"

Therefore, he kept the secret to himself all these years—wondering about the man who had sired him but afraid to learn his identity. Even when the powers came to him when he turned thirteen, he pushed aside all thought of the man whose seed had made him a Shadowlord, refusing to think about it. As far as everyone except his mother and the king knew, the powers that had come upon him had come from the Black Ascendency, the Otherworldly Spirit that conferred such abilities on those it considered worthy.

Even after he became an adult, out of respect for the man who had reared him as his own, Jaegar made no effort to discover who his real father was. He'd learned the hard way it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

However, now he wanted to know.

"Who is he, Mother?" he demanded. "I want a name."

His mother pursed her lips, and for a moment he thought she would not answer, but then she smiled slowly. It was a hateful, bitter smile that did not reach her cold eyes.

"Sancara Ben-Sulil," she answered. "The Deathlord of Rysalia."

Completely overwhelmed, Jaegar couldn't find his voice. He simply stared at her. He had never met the man, but he had heard of Ben-Sulil—who hadn't? The warrior was exalted in his own land and revered in others. He was a warrior among warriors, a leader of great renown and one of the most powerful Shadowlords ever known. His very name invoked fear in his enemies. It was whispered that he was the illegitimate son of the king.

"I was a concubine at the court of King Abdellah," he heard his mother say, but he could barely understand her words for the blood was rushing through his ears. "The king gave me to the Deathlord as his bedmate." Her mouth twisted. "When I tried to kill him..."

Jaegar blinked. "The Rysalian king?" he asked. "You tried to kill the king?"

"Of course not, you dolt!" his mother snapped. "The Deathlord. And do not look at me in that fashion! I was not the first concubine who attempted to assassinate a Deathlord with Maiden's Briar! She had no better luck than did I in ridding herself of a Shadowlord!" She hissed like a cornered snake. "By the Prophet I hate that bastard almost as much as I hate you!"

That was something new, he thought as he stared into her angry face. Admitting she bore him no love—though he had suspected it since old enough to understand the meaning of the word—seemed to please her. Ironically, it had no impact on him. It should have hurt but it didn't. That surprised him.

"Had he not gotten me with child, I would still be at Abbadon but, I suppose, I should be grateful to you for one stroke of luck," she snarled.

He folded his arms to keep from slapping the smirk from her face. "How so?" he inquired.

"Jesslyn hated the Deathlord as much as I did. She wanted a way to hurt him but more than that, she wanted to protect her cousin from knowing of your existence. She did not want the bitch hurt despite their differences."

He knew Jesslyn was the queen of Rysalia, and he suspected the cousin to whom she alluded was Ben-Sulil's then-future wife, the ex-Riezell Guardian Darjeen Konstantine, an Oceanian warrioress who was among the first of the Guardians commissioned. He also suspected the Rysalian queen did not want his mother around for reasons of her own.

"So she put a bug in Abdellah's ear, and he offered me to Abdul for his seraglio but I parlayed that into the *an Tuirc* king making me his first wife," she said, her chin high. "Fortunately for you he didn't mind I was with child for an accident had left him unable to foster a brat on any woman and he needed an heir."

That news stunned Jaegar but he managed to keep the surprise from his face. "And Riashi?" he asked, amazed he could speak so calmly. "Whose son is he?"

"I have no idea nor do I care," she said, waving away the question as though it were of no importance. "One of many men who have come to my bed over the years."

Whore, he thought. His mother was nothing more than a common whore and the man he thought of his father, a to-be-pitied cuckold. He could not help but wonder why the king allowed such behavior for under the Laws of Alel, adultery was a major sin punishable by death at the hands of a stone-mob.

His unwavering stare must have made her nervous for she reached up to touch the thin iron choker that circled her neck. He remembered well the day he'd first seen her wearing it. It was the day of his twelfth birthday and there was—as usual—a formal party in the great hall with dignitaries from all over the Domhan Quadrant in attendance. Wondering why his fashionable mother was not wearing the diamonds and gold that were her constant companions, he dared to ask. The slap she gave him split his lip, and he quickly put distance between them, keeping any more questions to himself. From that day onward, however, the iron choker remained as a permanent piece of jewelry for her, and now he knew why.

Iron was a conduit metal that allowed magical energy to travel through it if it was in a straight or curved line. If bent into the form of the letter Z, the power built and when expelled was twice as potent. However, if the two ends of an iron bar were forged together—as in a choker or manacle cuffs—the energy was absorbed, deflected, making it impossible for the mage to wield even a semblance of power. A mage trapped in a room lined with iron would find his powers gone. Conversely, the wearing of iron kept the wearer from being attacked by magical energy. It also shielded the wearer's thoughts from the mage. If the wearer's wrists were circled with iron, he or she could not wield power. His mother's wrists were bare.

"It never occurred to me to read your mind," he said as he watched her caress the choker. "It seemed dirty."

"Not that you could have," she said smugly.

Jaegar cocked his head to one side. "Could he read your thoughts?" he asked of his real father. "Or did you hide behind an iron band even then?"

"There was no need. He never gave me a second thought," she said with a snort. "He used me and tossed me aside when he was through. I was no more to him than a clump of shit stuck to his boot heel." She tossed her head. "I wasn't even worried about him figuring out I had it in mind to dose him with Maiden's Briar. The son of a bitch's mind wasn't on me but on the Oceanian twat he was thinking of courting."

He flinched at the vulgar word. Coming from his mother's mouth, it seemed doubly offensive, but it said more to him of her character than anything else she'd said. Shaking his head at the crudeness, he turned toward the door.

"I'm not finished with you," she snapped.

"Aye, well, I'm finished with you," he said, and kept walking.

"Jaegar, get your ass back in here!" she demanded, her voice shrill.

"*Cehenneme git*," he muttered, though not loud enough for her to have heard. After all, she was still his mother and telling her to go to hell was rude. He owed her respect, though she had done nothing to earn it.

He heard the scrape of the chair on the flagstone floor and her crude curse. He didn't want a scene, but if she would not hold her tongue, there would be one. As he reached the spiral stairs that led down to the great hall, she was right behind, grabbing at his shirt, but he shrugged her off and continued walking, fearful she would shove him down the stairs. Instead, she hurried after him, hissing and blowing like a beached whale.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" she yelled when he reached the bottom and kept walking, heading for the front entrance. "Jaegar! Come back here this instant!"

From the corner of his eye, he saw the man who had reared him standing just inside the library door. He nodded respectfully but did not break stride. A servant rushed to open the front door for him, and at that moment, a vase went sailing past his ear, hit the doorframe and shattered, the shards scattering on the floor at his feet.

Jaegar stopped, turned and – as he did – another vase was hurled at him. He put up a hand and the vase froze in midair. It hung suspended, perfectly still, three feet from the floor. His gaze shifted from the pottery to his mother's enraged countenance. When she opened her mouth to berate him, he silenced her with a careless flick of his wrist. The vase she had thrown at him shot back toward her, stopping within an inch of her horrified eyes.

"Never again, lady," he said softly. "I will never again be your whipping boy, and you will no longer have rule over me. It is over and done."

That said, he turned his back on her and walked out the door.

Audrina trembled with impotent rage. She feared she had lost all control over Jaegar and that left a very bitter taste in her mind.

"No, you arrogant little whelp," she said through clenched teeth. "It isn't over. Not by a long shot!"

Chapter Three

It took Jaegar four days to decide he needed to find the woman to whom he was now bound for all time. He had fought the urge to search for her every step of the way, but like a drug addict, he began to experience what he came to think of as withdrawal symptoms. His body itched, it burned and it needed hers. His thoughts were filled with the memory of her face, the way she felt in his arms, the pleasure she had given him. Nothing he did could force those thoughts from surfacing, so after a while he simply stopped trying to push them aside.

He went after her.

After nearly a week of diligent searching and utilizing the network of spies at his disposal, he found her on Ollainnis—prisoner in tow—and waited until she'd turned the felon over to the Ollainnis High Command before making his presence known.

Dominia turned at the tap on her shoulder. Her eyes flared then darted around as though she expected trouble.

"Hello," he said with a slight smile.

"Ah hello," she answered then grabbed his arm, pulling him along with her as she exited the Tribunal Hall. Her next words were whispered. "What are you doing here?"

He answered truthfully. "I'm horny."

She stumbled to a stop, raked him stem to stern with her beautiful green eyes then frowned, her hand tightening on his arm. "So am I but I'm on duty, Rozakaris," she snapped. "Can this wait?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I think not. I'm horny now, Domi." He shrugged. "I may not be horny in ten minutes time."

She sighed. "I highly doubt that." She looked around then pulled him down a dark corridor. He trailed along behind her without a word.

A right turn. A left. Down a flight of stairs and around a corner.

"Ah, have you done this before?" he inquired.

"Done what?"

"Propelled a warrior to his ravishing in the Tribunal Hall?"

"Every chance I get," she told him.

"I thought as much," he said, coming to a stop. He jerked her around, pushing her against the wall. "How many times and with whom so I will know who to kill and how long to make his agony last?"

His body pressed hotly against hers, his hands on her ass, molding her lower body to his. Dominia thrust her hands through his dark hair, tugging with enough savagery to make him wince.

"And how many cunts have you slipped your cock into, sweet cheeks?" she countered. She pulled his head back before clamping her teeth lightly on the exposed column of his neck. She spoke against his flesh. "I'm asking just so I'll know how many bitches to drain dry as husks if I ever become One with the Blood."

He whipped a hand from her rump to her right breast, covering the mound, squeezing harder than he normally would. Her low grunt and the lessening of the pain in his scalp made it possible for him to snap his head free of her hold.

"I hurt," he said, and pushed the thick bulge of his shaft against her. "Do you feel that?"

Dominia never missed a beat. She shoved him away and before he could react, spun him around, pushed him so his back hit the wall then dropped to her knees, her hands going to the fly of his pants.

"Well, let's do something about it," she said with a fierce snarl, quickly working his belt free to tug at the zipper.

Jaegar opened his mouth to make a pithy comeback but the words died in his throat as she reached into his fly and wrapped her fingers around his stiff shaft, pulling it free of his pants. Flattening his palms against the wall behind him, he drew in a harsh breath as she enveloped him in the warm, wet recesses of her soft mouth. The hard pull on his cock as her throat relaxed and she took him in as far as it would go made his heart skip a beat.

"Umm," she said around his flesh, tongue pressing against the underside of his rod. One hand was firmly at the base of his shaft, pushing rhythmically toward his groin while the other was kneading his balls with an expertise that brought sweat to his upper lip.

"Mother of the Prophet," he whispered. Her mouth was turning him inside out. Her hands making his blood boil. He clawed at the wall—nails scraping the rough plaster.

Dominia shifted her position on the hard floor for the rough surface was digging into her knees through the wool of her uniform pants. The strong tension, the fierce suction she was plying on his hard-as-steel shaft was causing him to pant. His legs were quivering. When she began a slow, steady slide of her lips up and down his rod, she heard him actually whimper. She mentally grinned.

"Sweet Mother of..." She heard him choke as she nibbled on the engorged head of his shaft.

She increased the speed of her back-and-forth motion and his hands flew to her head. He didn't grip it as other men had when she'd blown them. His hold was loose, his fingers flexing against her scalp, dragging through her hair. She could see the corded muscles in his thighs bunching as he unconsciously arched his hips toward her.

He came hard, and because he was such a large man—his cock long and thick—Dominia pulled back so that only the broad head was still clamped between her lips as he spurted. She swallowed with each pulse of his shaft, and as she did, his hands tightened around her head.

“Merciful Alel!” he cried out, bucking against her one last time.

She had drained him, sucked every last ounce of energy and cum from his body. He was trembling from the force of the climax, dragging shallow, ragged breaths into his depleted lungs as she lapped away all trace of the seed from his cock. He looked down at her when she looked up.

“Did that soothe the hurt, baby?” she asked, her green gaze boring into him.

“*Sensiz yaşayamam,*” he whispered, stroking her hair.

“What does that mean?”

“I cannot live without you.”

“Aye,” she said, stuffing him back into his pants. “I know exactly what you mean. You are an itch in my blood, warrior.” She shook her head. “An itch in my cunt.”

He helped her to her feet after she zipped his fly then gently folded her into his embrace. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll remedy that.”

She sighed against his chest, her hand smoothing over the silk of his shirt. “I can’t, Jae. I have to get back to Riezell.”

His arms tightened around her. “Not until I ease that itch, *meleğüm.*” He kissed the top of her head. “My angel.”

Dominia smiled. “What is the *an Tuirc* word for lover?”

“*Aşk.*”

“*Aşk,*” she repeated then sighed deeply. “I really have to go, Jae.”

“I am not a selfish man, Domi,” he told her. “Let me love you.”

She eased out of his arms, lifted a hand to his cheek, caressed it gently. “Don’t you know I received pleasure from giving it to you?” she asked.

“Don’t you know I will regret allowing you to leave unfulfilled?” he countered. He searched her eyes. “I will die a thousand times believing I did not see to my woman’s needs.”

She smiled. “I have a job to do, *aşk.* Allow me to do it.” Leaning forward, she pressed her lips briefly to his then stepped back when he would have gathered her close again. She shook her head. “Next time. I promise.”

“When?” he asked.

She cocked a brow. “When I can meet you,” she responded.

Jaegar’s shoulders slumped and he released a long, disappointed breath. “All right, but next time I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Next time I won’t let you,” she said.

He watched her turn and walk away, hoping she'd glance back before she disappeared around the corner, but she didn't. His frustration spiraled out of control, and he had the wild urge to run after her, grab her up and carry her—kicking and screaming and clawing if that was to be the case—somewhere he could sink his cock deep into her slick channel.

"You've got more control than I do," he mumbled.

Digging his hands into his pockets, feet dragging, he rounded the corner and trudged up the stairs. He would have gone straight back to his ship and shaken the red dust of Ollainnis from his boots had not a passing senator recognized him.

"Prince Jaegar!" the little man shrieked, rushing forward, robe slapping against his short legs. "Welcome to Ollainnis! To what do we owe this visit from your esteemed self?"

Groaning under his breath, gritting his teeth, Jaegar pasted a tight smile on his face. "Senator Ben-Gehdim. What luck to run into you."

"Come, we must hurry to the palace!" the senator proclaimed. "His Majesty will be most pleased you are gracing us with your presence!"

* * * * *

Two weeks of trailing behind Dominia like a little lost puppy as he followed her across the Domhan Quadrant and into the Aduaidh had brought Jaegar to the conclusion that he was in deep shit. He missed her by a day on Riezell, by three hours on Francach where he heard she had picked up the trail of an arms dealer on his way to Gaelach. On Gaelach, he had spent thousands of *dynaus* but never learned her whereabouts on the lush green planet. When he received word from one of his spies that her ship had refueled on Virago, he left the Domhan Quadrant and sped into the Burgon's neck of the woods—the Aduaidh Quadrant of the Idimmu Galaxy.

"If you don't let him know you're traipsing through his quadrant, he'll send one of his agents after you to find out why you haven't," Lyden warned him when he vid-commed his uncle.

"I'm not sure the Burgon will take a call from me," Jaegar said.

"Then call one of his hounds of hell," Lyden suggested. "Try Rory Quinn."

Luckily for Jaegar, the personal call to Quinn had resulted in finding out Dominia was on her way to Basaraba with an arms dealer in chains and a shipment of laser cannons in the hold of the cruiser following her Fiach.

"I'll let the Burgon know you're bouncing around in his territory," Quinn told him.

Setting course for the Federated Moons of Rysalia—and in particular the middle moon of Basaraba—Jaegar was in good spirits because of Quinn's final piece of information.

"She'll be on Basaraba at least a week, possibly as long as two," Quinn told him. "She'll have to attend Galeen's trial and testify, plus there's a forum she is being required to attend."

"That's the best news I've had in weeks!" Jaegar replied.

"Hey, by the way! Let King Abdellah know you're coming," the man known as The Phantom warned. "He doesn't like surprises and you sure as hell don't want him to sic Ben-Sulil on you. Trust me on that, my friend!"

In his rush to catch up with Dominia, to be with her, to ease the ache in his heart and shaft, Jaegar had pushed all thoughts of Sancara Ben-Sulil from his mind. The name brought him up short.

"I will," he mumbled. "I'm not ready to confront him yet."

If Quinn wondered at Jaegar's strange wording, he did not show it. His smile was warm as the vid-com screen went blank. For the next three hours Jaegar brooded about the Deathlord and was still brooding when the vid-com beeped a warning signal that yanked him rudely from his thoughts.

The Ennead Air Command informed him there was fighting in the sector to which he was headed, and he was ordered to change course and make for Ennead with as much speed as his runabout could pour on.

Several days later, his ship nestled in a docking bay slip on Ennead, Jaegar stumbled into the head and reached out to grab hold of the titanium sink. He swayed for a moment then slowly lifted his head, straining to focus his eyes. He leaned forward.

"You are fucking *wasted*, Rozakaris," he said to himself in the mirror.

He looked awful, he thought as he turned his face from side to side. He hadn't shaved since leaving the palace on Ollainnis and there were dark shadows under his tired eyes. The Chalean whiskey he'd been consuming in massive quantities was beginning to take its toll. His hands trembled and his gait was none too steady as he turned from the mirror and stumbled back to his bunk.

Flinging himself facedown, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Legs splayed, arms to either side of his head, he twisted his fingers in the rumpled covers and growled with frustration.

"What have you done to me, Domi?" he mumbled, feeling as though an intricate part of him were missing somehow.

It seemed no amount of whiskey could stop the erotic dreams that plagued him whenever he drifted into sleep. Those dreams were doing as much damage to his soul as the booze was to his body. They were such lustful mind wanderings, such carnal pleasures that he woke feeling the dampness of his own fluids sticking to his groin. Wet dreams, wicked dreams and dreams that made him want Dominia all the more kept his hand reaching for the booze.

With a whimper, he flipped to his back and dropped both arms across his face. The ping of the vid-com coming to life shot through his skull like laser-cannon fire — causing him to slap both hands to his ears.

“Your grace?” the computer inquired.

“Go away,” Jaegar grumbled. “Can’t you see I’m dying here?”

“Then perhaps you should refrain from having me reproduce more cups of liquor,” the vid-com’s voice suggested.

“What the fuck do you want, anyway?” he demanded, beginning to regret having chosen the High Breatain speech option for the A.I. When he heard what was unmistakably a disgruntled sniff, he felt the urge to rip out the vid-com’s wiring.

“You asked that I alert you as soon as we were given clearance from the Ennean Air Command to take off.”

He let his arms fall behind his head. “The fighting has moved on?”

“Aye, milord, it has, and we are cleared to leave the docking station.”

Having been forced to detour to Ennead when a battle broke out right in the middle of his flight to Basaraba, he had been stuck on the backward world for four miserable days. Chafing at the bit, hoping to kill two birds with one stone with a visit to Abbadon, being sidetracked to Ennead had sent him into a nasty fit of temper.

“‘Bout prophets-be-damned time!” he said, and sat up quickly — wishing he hadn’t for the cabin swept around him, as though he were on a carousel. He clutched the covers to keep from being spun off the bunk. “Shit!”

“Would you like me to prepare you a tincture of tenerse laced with a bit of water, your grace?” the vid-com queried, and Jaegar thought he detected a hint of amusement in the digital voice.

“Aye,” Jaegar agreed, swallowing the nausea that had come bubbling up his throat. He desperately needed the hangover cure despite how bad he knew the stuff would taste. He surmised he wouldn’t be able to function without it.

The sound of the duplicator engaging allowed him to carefully lower his bare feet to the cabin’s floor. Warily, he stood — arms out to the side to balance him. He remained still until the spinning in his head stopped and the urge to spew bile left him.

“Not another drop,” he promised as he cautiously minced his way across the floor. “Not even a whiff of fumes.”

“Should I make note of that, your grace?” the vid-com asked.

Jaegar thought about it for a moment. If he answered in the affirmative, the vid-com would prevent him from getting another glass of whiskey from the duplicator. He sighed.

“I suppose you’d better,” he said grudgingly. “If I keep this up, I’ll be an alcoholic in no time.”

“Wise decision, your grace,” the vid-com replied.

"Turn the shower on for me, will ya?" he asked. "I believe I stink."

"Of course, milord. Might I make a suggestion?"

"Suggest away," he said as he pulled his sweat-dampened t-shirt over his head.

"Before we leave Ennead, you might consider eating a light repast. That will help to clear your head."

Jaegar smiled. "And keep me from ditching us into the Void, huh?"

"Not that I doubt your flying skills, your grace, but —"

"So noted," Jaegar interrupted. "Fix me something light and I'll eat it after the shower."

"Right away, milord," the vid-com said, and Jaegar could have sworn he heard a sigh of relief coming from the unit.

Stripping off his pants, he padded into the bath chamber, opened the plexishield door and climbed into the sonic shower. Although he'd prefer having a ton of hot, steaming water cascading over him, he had to make do with what was available on his runabout. Turning his face up to the soft stream of hot air pulsing from the jets, he closed his eyes and tried for the hundredth time to come up with a name for his vid-com. Everyone he knew had named his or hers, but the A.I. on Jaegar's ship the *Karataavuk* had remained nameless since the *an Tuircese* prince had taken possession of the vessel six months earlier. He couldn't continue calling the vid-com shithead. That just didn't seem right.

Easing around, he sighed as the blast of ion particles beat upon his back. He braced his hands on the opposite wall and reveled in the sensation that was working the knots out of his tense muscles.

"Your grace?"

He grimaced at the vid-com's intrusion. "Aye?"

"We are being hailed by the Ennean Air Command. They wish to know if we are ready for departure and if not, when."

"Inform them I'll be out of here within the next thirty minutes."

"So noted, milord."

Jaegar opened his eyes and stared at the titanium wall before him. A name for the vid-com had flashed through his mind but he wanted to test it on the A.I. before he settled on it for a certainty.

"Vid-com?" he called out.

"Aye, your grace?"

"How 'bout Jeeves?"

"Jeeves? Really, milord?" the vid-com inquired, a hint of disapproval in the electronic voice.

Jaegar sighed. "Okay, back to the drawing board."

There was a slight delay then a crisp, "Thank you, your grace."

"Don't mention it," Jaegar mumbled. "Shower off."

As he was toweling off, he was turning over various names in his mind. He thought about what the vid-com did for him. The state-of-the-art artificial intelligence that ran the system had proven invaluable on many occasions. It wasn't just a secretary, a butler, a gatekeeper, a navigator, a copilot. It had become a...

"Companion," he said aloud, and stopped drying himself. "A partner."

"Beg pardon?" the vid-com inquired. "Did you require something, your grace?"

He considered the *an Tuirc* word for companion and then smiled. "Arkadaş," he said.

There was a slight pause. "You want me to contact one of your friends, milord?"

"No, I was giving you a name. Arkadaş."

There was another pause—this one much longer—then the vid-com spoke with a quiet tone. "I am honored you consider me a friend. I will proudly answer to the name, your grace."

"Jae," he corrected. "Friends don't stand on formality. It's Jae from now on, copy? And no argument about it."

"So noted," Arkadaş replied. It seemed to clear its throat. "And your repast is awaiting you."

"On my way," Jaegar said, tossing the towel aside.

After wolfing down his meal, Jaegar slipped into the pilot's seat and ran his hands over the various controls as though he could do it in his sleep. By the time he eased the *Karataavuk* from its docking slip and was hurtling through space, his hangover was mostly a dull ache over his right eye.

"Get our embassy on Basaraba on the horn, Arkadaş, and ask what the status is on our quarries," he ordered. "Scramble the transmission. I don't want anyone listening in."

"Contacting them now." After a moment or two of waiting, the vid-com assured him both targets' ships were still on-world.

"ETD on either?"

"None registered, Jae," Arkadaş informed him.

"She still at the fortress?"

"She is."

Jaegar smiled. "Good. And him?"

"On duty as was reported previously."

"That's the best news I've had in four days," Jaegar said, unbuckling the safety harness strapped across his chest. He settled back in the form-fitting chair, stretched out his long legs and braced his hands behind his head. "Do me a favor, will ya, Ark? I've never been to Abbadon. What's it like?"

"Ark?" the vid-com repeated, and then there was a long contented-sounding sigh. "Let me check for you, Jae."

While he waited for Ark to run a search on the mighty Rysalian fortress, Jaegar closed his eyes, lips twitching at the way the vid-com had easily switched to using his nickname.

Ark cleared its throat and Jaegar's smile widened. The vid-com was taking on more human traits as time passed.

"Abbadon Fortress is perched atop a steeply inclined plateau with only a slender serpentine trail, wide enough to accommodate one horse at a time, leading up to it. Accordingly it is almost impossible for a large force to breach its defenses in one wave. Seven levels high, the fortress is composed of sheer, black granite walls that rise one hundred feet in height. Three levels of donjons are built beneath the excavated foundation.

"On the lower levels, eight-feet-thick timbers are lined side by side behind another three feet of plaster as added protection against attack. The inside walls are lined with iron plate then plastered."

"Good way to keep out magic," Jaegar observed. "Or to prevent its release. Soldiers?"

"More than a thousand black-clad guards are on duty at any given time."

Jaegar whistled. "Mother of the Prophet! That's some kind of fucking defense!"

"Abbadon is one of a kind, Jae," Ark reminded him. "The Kensettis call it the Depths of Hell."

"Sounds like it," Jaegar responded. "By guards, do you mean Rysalian Temple Guards?"

"Aye."

"How many Shadowlords on duty?"

Ark was silent for a moment then replied, "One hundred and six, including the Deathlord, reside within the fortress. Another ninety-four live beyond its gates."

"Two hundred Shadowlords," Jaegar said with awe. "That's a lot of power at Ben-Sulil's command."

"It is said General Ben-Sulil once took an arrow meant to assassinate King Abdellah Jaborn and as a result, the king promoted the Deathlord from Major to General of all the Rysalian Forces. As his first act, Ben-Sulil reorganized the Rysalian Temple Guards and they are now as loyal to the Deathlord as are the Shadowlords."

"He also teaches a class in defense strategy at the Academy," Jaegar said. "A class I was never permitted to take." He sat forward to make a course adjustment as an asteroid field appeared on the screen. "Now I know why." He kept close watch on the screen. "What about particulars on Ben-Sulil?"

"He is fifty-six years of age but from the vid-photo, he looks much younger. He —"

Jaegar cut off the vid-com. "Lemme see!"

On his screen, the face of an unsmiling warrior appeared. The vid-photo was a version of the formal portrait of the infamous Deathlord that hung in the Hall of Heroes at the Academy. Jaegar had often stared at the portrait—drawn to it for reasons he hadn't understood at the time. The jet-black hair that was drawn straight back into a long thick braid that hung over the warrior's shoulder and the hawkish slant to his amber eyes bespoke his Hasdu heritage, but it was the gleam in those piercing eyes that held Jaegar's gaze.

"He hated sitting for that portrait," he said. "You can see the contempt in his eyes."

The full lips of the man in the vid-photo were pressed tight together, accentuating the deep cleft in his chin and making the high cheekbones even more predominant. Though long, dark lashes framed the golden orbs, they did nothing to soften the riveting stare that bore into the viewer. He wore thin gold earrings in both ears and tattooed warrior markings of the Medjai had been lasered into Ben-Sulil's temples.

"I didn't know he had been a Medjai," Jaegar remarked, referring to the elite warriors who patrolled the sanctuaries of the dead at all times. Silent as the grave itself, the Medjai were almost invisible, their black robes and obsidian blades blending in with the darkness surrounding them so that anyone who dared enter the holy caverns to defile those at eternal rest would never see the light of day again.

"That was his first assignment," Ark reported. "He was a fierce protector, ruthless with his kills and fearless, and soon came to the attention of a Temple Guard recruiter. When it was learned he had the powers of a Shadowlord, he was taken to Abbadon."

"And the rest, as they say, is history," Jaegar muttered. He continued to stare at the portrait until something hit the side of his ship, and he realized he needed to be paying attention to the asteroid field.

"Jae, we are being hailed by the *Kraliçe*," Ark told him.

Jaegar's jaw clenched. The *Kraliçe* was the bower ship, his mother's vessel. "What's her position?"

"She is in orbit around *an Afraic* in preparation for docking."

"Ignore the hail."

It wasn't the first time his mother had tried to contact him. She had been trying ever since he left the palace. He had yet to answer and had no intention of doing so. He preferred to let her stew in her own juices and not listen to the vitriolic diatribe he knew she'd hurl at him. He also knew she was aware of where he was going, and he couldn't help snickering.

"Believing I'm going to Abbadon to see my real father really sticks in her craw like a sharp thorn," he said. "Ark, how close are we to Basaraba?"

"Two hours, twenty-two minutes and four seconds," the vid-com replied.

It would be the longest two hours, twenty-two minutes and four seconds of his life, Jaegar thought. He was anxious to see Dominia—that went beyond saying—but the possibility of seeing his father face-to-face was making his palms sweat and putting

butterflies in his gut. He ran his hands down his dark brown pants. With the asteroid field behind him, he typed in the commands for autopilot to take over flying the vessel then got up to pace off some of the nervous energy building inside him. He wasn't so sure he was ready to meet the man.

Or his family.

"How many daughters does he have?" he inquired.

"Six," Ark answered. "The oldest is twenty-five."

"Older than I would have thought," he mused. "What's her name? What's all their names and ages?"

"Aysel is the oldest and then in order of birth, Esen, Yildiz, Hazan, Nuray and Tulay, who—at the age of four—is what is called an oops baby."

"Busy man," Jaegar said, "but I am the only son."

For some reason that pleased him. Not only did he have siblings, he was the oldest.

"Half sisters," he said. "But blood kin, still." He thought of Riashi and frowned.

He and Riashi had never gotten along. Truth be told, they hated one another. Riashi wanted the throne, wanted to be the heir apparent so badly his hatred for Jaegar was like a festering wound ready to burst. The two warred constantly, could not be in the same room with one another without fighting. Once Jaegar ascended the Panther Throne, he knew Riashi would be more of a problem than he already was. The king had not designated the younger man as anything other than a prince of the House of Rozakaris, as was the monarch's right. If—when Jaegar took a bride—and there was no issue and death befell Jaegar, then it would be up to the Tribunal to elevate Riashi to a position to inherit the throne. Until such time, the young prince held no real power at Eejderha. That he had no authority brutally angered Riashi.

"We are being hailed again, Jae," Ark said with a touch of exasperation in its electronic voice.

"She doesn't give up, does she?" Jaegar grumbled. "Just ignore it. Listening to her vent her spleen is the last thing I need right now."

Taking a seat in the pilot's chair, he braced his elbows on the arms and laced his fingers together as he stared out the plexishield windscreen at the black sweep of space before him. His mind was tumbling with possibilities but he hadn't decided yet whether or not he would—or even could—make contact with Ben-Sulil. The very thought of it made him edgy. Wild scenarios raced through his brain to make him even more nervous. He was still sitting wrapped in thought when the dark orange globe of Basaraba appeared before him.

"That's one big moon," Jaegar observed.

"It is the largest of the three, although Rysalia is the most inhabited. Annwn is the bleakest by far. Actually, though they each started out as a moon around the planet Rysalia—which was destroyed many centuries ago—they have since been reclassified as planets. The reason for this was —"

"If the center of gravity, called the barycenter, is outside the larger object, then the smaller object is a planet," Jaegar said, showing off his knowledge of megaversal astrophysics. "The moons were named before the old planet was hit by a humungous asteroid. They were flung far apart by the collision and developed gravity of their own."

"Precisely," Ark granted, "and we are being hailed now by the Basarabian Port Authority."

"Tell them who I am and that I would like an audience with King Abdellah."

"They will wish to know why you are visiting, Jae," Ark reminded him.

"Say I'm here to extend greetings as the future king of *an Tuirc* and would like to open diplomatic channels."

As he spoke, the other two globes that represented the Federated Moons of Rysalia appeared in the distance to either side of Basaraba. Jaegar knew Rysalia was the large red planet due to its massive amounts of iron in the surface rocks and Annwn, the gray one.

"Remarkable," he said as his ship moved closer to the sandstone-colored planet. It was, by far, the largest he'd ever seen and he felt dwarfed and humbled by its size. Forgetting Ark was speaking to the Port Authority, he asked if Basaraba was the largest known planet.

"One moment, please!" Ark snapped.

Feeling the chastisement, Jaegar pursed his lips then reached down to buckle his harness in preparation for landing if he were given the okay. He disengaged the autopilot and took the controls.

"All right, now what did you ask?"

"Never mind," Jaegar mumbled. "Are we cleared?"

"Aye," Ark answered, and already the coordinates for the docking bay to which they had been directed were scrolling across the flight screen in front of Jaegar.

If he had thought he was nervous before, as he guided his ship into the docking terminal and nosed it into the bay, settling its weight into the harness, he was even more anxious as he cut his engines. The sound of the mighty plasma machines shutting down put a stamp of finality to the journey. What might lay ahead once he stepped off his ship started a restless whirling in his gut.

"Can you find out where she is right now?" he asked then drew in a quick breath. "Wait! Scramble the query to our embassy. I don't want her to know I'm here and if the Port Authority intercepts the message, they might notify her I'm asking about her."

Unbuckling the harness, Jaegar sat where he was, chewing on a thumbnail, his eyes narrowed, forehead furrowed until Ark informed him Dominia was at that moment in a conference with Colonel Baruk Kastamine, the second highest-ranking military man in the Rysalian Central Command.

"Wonder what that's all about," Jaegar mused. "Must be the forum Rory mentioned."

"Do you want me to find out?"

He thought about it then shook his head. "No, I probably don't want to know. It's most likely Guardian business, and she wouldn't want me butting in. Just find out exactly where the conference is being held and where her quarters are."

"She was not given any, Jae. She prefers to stay onboard her ship the *Amynta*."

"That's better yet. Find out where it's docked."

"While I am doing that, Jae, perhaps you should dress as befitting the heir apparent?"

Jaegar looked down at his casual attire and scowled. "Aye, you're right. He'll expect all the pomp and circumstance and shiny brass buttons, won't he?"

"Most assuredly."

Growling, he got to his feet and stomped into his quarters to don the steel blue dress uniform with its rows of medals and intricate braided black shoulder cords. He retrieved the black boots with the high-gloss shine, the ceremonial sword in its silver sheath, the hat cap with the gaudy braiding on the visor that marked him as an admiral of the *an Tuircese* fleet, and the white gloves at which he winced each time he was forced to wear them.

"Pomp and circumstance," he mumbled as he stripped out of his shirt and pants and stepped into the wool uniform slacks, hating the feel of the scratchy material against his bare legs. "Spectacle and show."

He opened a box, took out a medallion on a heavy chain and hung it over his head before pulling on a lightweight gray undershirt. He swung the heavy dress jacket, which buttoned down the right side of his chest and ended in a mandarin collar that fit snug at his throat around his shoulders, stuck his arms into the sleeves then buttoned it. Sitting down on the bunk, he pulled on the boots, stood and reached for the sword in its heavy scabbard that hung on the wall.

"Pageantry and gaudy display," he grouched as he buckled the sword in place at his waist. He lifted his left leg to buff the toe of his boot on the back of his uniform-clad leg. "By the Prophet, I hate it!"

But, he thought as he looked into the full-length mirror, he looked damn good. So impressed with the dashing picture he made in the full dress uniform, he failed to notice the whiskers that shadowed his lean jaw.

Chapter Four

Believing Colonel Baruk Kastamine had to be one of the handsomest men whose lecture she'd ever attended, Dominia sat drawing doodles in her notebook as he continued to speak in his deep, smoky voice. Now and again she would give herself a treat and look up at the Rysalian warrior. Each time she did, his gaze would shift to her and she'd quickly look away. The man wasn't married and had a reputation for being quite the ladies' man. She didn't want to encourage any untoward advances he might be inclined to make. She was – after all – taken.

"Taken," she whispered. Aye, that she was. Not that she had ever intended to be or wanted to be but that was a moot point now. She belonged to Jaegar Rozakaris and one day the *an Tuirc* prince would come to claim her.

"But will you be ready?" Lauryl's question popped into Dominia's mind whenever thoughts of Jaegar materialized. Dominia hadn't been able to answer it then and she couldn't answer it now. Being honest with herself, she had no idea if and when she would ever be ready to settle down.

Though she wanted Jaegar with such an intense craving it made her belly clench and sheath weep, she worked at forcing the man from her brain. It wasn't working, of course. He was firmly entrenched there and the want and need of him was growing with every passing day. It seemed she had absolutely no control over the hunger that had turned her to mush. Frustrated, she tossed the pen to the desk, folded her arms and let her head fall back, blowing out a long breath.

"Am I boring you, Major?"

Dominia snapped her head down and felt her face burn as every male eye in the room swept to her. She pulled her legs in, squared her shoulders and shook her head. The colonel's black eyes were boring into her.

"Sir, no Sir!" she snapped.

"Then you were listening to my words?" Kastamine queried.

"Aye Sir, I was!" she answered, and noticed the men glaring at her had narrowed their gazes. Heat flamed in her cheeks and her mouth went dry.

"In that case, repeat my last statement."

Panic shot through Dominia for she had no idea what the man had been talking about. His voice had lulled her, intrigued her, but the actual words had not registered.

"Ah..." She swallowed, feeling the irritation of the male warriors aimed directly at her. "I...You..."

"You were comparing the Burgon's current policy on the punishment of traitors with that of the Rysalian Central Command."

Dominia whipped her head around, stunned to see the object of her obsession sitting in the back row, feet propped atop his desk, arms crossed over his chest.

Kastamine put up a hand to shade his eyes from the glare of the light over his head. His frown was lethal. "And you are who exactly?"

"Prince Jaegar Rozakaris of *an Tuirc*."

There was a mumble among the men and the sound of bodies turning as warriors tried to get a better view of the man sitting in the shadows at the back of the lecture hall.

"Actually, some of what you say is outdated," Jaegar went on. "The Burgon has halted the summary execution of those convicted of treason and has instead decided to imprison them at Utuk Xul."

"A fate worse than death," a warrior sitting near Dominia declared.

"My thoughts exactly," Jaegar said. "I agree with the R.C.C. Behead them and be done with it."

The colonel stepped away from the podium and into the aisle. "Your belief in capital punishment is not in keeping with your father's policies," he said.

"My father is a kind and generous man. He believes you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar," Jaegar said.

"Meaning?" someone asked.

"Meaning he believes that capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime. He wishes to rehabilitate criminals, not dispatch them. However, my feeling is if you show mercy, you show weakness." He shrugged. "Some men can't be rehabilitated. The only way to stop them is to kill them."

While Jaegar was speaking, Kastamine was making his way up the stairs to the midpoint of the lecture hall. He stopped beside Dominia's desk and rested a clenched fist on its top.

"I agree with you, your grace," the colonel said. "It is good to know when you take the reins of *an Tuirc*, it will be with an iron hand."

Jaegar smiled. "An iron hand for some and a soft one for others," he said.

Dominia felt his words like a silky stroke down her back and flexed her shoulders. Kastamine had switched his gaze to her.

"You should thank his grace for saving your ass, Major," the colonel told her before turning and heading back to the podium. "That will be all for today. Tomorrow morning 0600." He looked around—stare going straight to Dominia. "Come prepared."

The scrape of feet was loud in the room as the warriors rose, gathered their portable vid-coms, notebooks and pens. As they filed past her, most shot Dominia a look of silent reproach—some bordering on strong censure. She stayed where she was for many had stopped to introduce themselves to Jaegar. When Kastamine walked past her again with his lecture materials in hand, she felt the keen bite of his displeasure when he didn't even glance her way.

She waited until there was silence in the room before getting to her feet.

"Domi got in trouble. Domi got in trou...ble," Jaegar said in a childish singsong that set her teeth on edge.

"Knock it off," she snapped as she climbed the steps to where he sat. She was annoyed that he was still sitting with his booted feet crossed on the desk. "Did you greet those men in such a disrespectful posture?" She rolled her eyes. "And with a scruffy growth of fuzz on your face? Jaegar, really!"

Jaegar put a hand to his chin and frowned then shrugged carelessly. "There wasn't a royal among them so I outrank each and every one, *meleğüm*."

"They are each and every one a powerful warlord," she told him, juggling the vid-com and notebook so she could slap one hand on her hip. "They are the heads of their respective military commands. Each and every one a highly decorated hero."

"As am I," he said, nudging his chin toward the fruit salad of medals on his chest.

Dominia made a rude sound with her lips. "Those medals don't mean anything, Rozakaris. They're all show."

The smile slid from Jaegar's face and a muscle bunched in his jaw. "If you believe that you know nothing about me, Alamaine. I earned every one of these medals. They weren't just tossed my way because I am the son of Abdul Rozakaris!" He unfolded his arms and reached for a black medal with a red heart in the center. He lifted it from his chest. "I nearly died earning this showy piece of shit!"

"The scar on your side," she said softly.

His head dipped once. "A laser bayonet," he acknowledged. "One that skirted the edge of my liver—searing a portion of it to ash—then took out my gall bladder. Not that I needed it."

"I didn't know," she said, feeling contrite.

"Now you do," he stated, uncrossing his ankles and dropping his feet to the floor with a loud thud. He stood. "You wanna argue some more, or can we go to your ship and make like bunnies until 1900 hours?"

"Why only until then?" she asked, letting her gaze travel down the uniform, liking what she saw but preferring her man in the raw.

He rolled his eyes as she had. "Because that's when I have to show up at the stupid state dinner Abdellah insists on foisting off on me whether I like it or not." One dark brow arched. "Wanna come?"

"No more so than I want a dripping venereal disease," she answered.

He sighed. "That's what I thought. I don't want to go either, but I can't get out of it. That's what comes of tailing my bond-mate halfway across the fucking megaverse just to get a little nookie."

She reached up to put a hand on his cheek. "Poor baby. Ever thought of taking matters into your own hand?"

Jaegar growled and looked menacing.

"You want me to go with you?" His silent, little boy nod made her smile. "As if you thought I wouldn't."

His shrug said it all as he reached for the vid-com and notebooks, tucked them against his hip then slung an arm around her shoulders. "I'm horny again."

"Imagine that."

* * * * *

Hot, slick, sweaty. It was a lover's dance in which the rhythm pounded through their brains and the grunting, growling and moaning was the lustful music urging on their slippery bodies.

They writhed, thrashing like whipping palm fronds in a monsoon. Twisting, turning, wrapping around each other, their lips were locked—tongues mating—and their hands never stopped stroking, plucking, kneading, massaging, squeezing. The sheets beneath them bunched and were kicked aside until there was only bare mattress. The air was redolent with the scent of their combined juices and the musky perfume of lust.

To keep the medallion from striking her under the chin as he rocked against her, she swung it around so it hung down his back. "What is this thing?" she asked.

"Protection," he said, grunting as he drove into her.

"From what?" she questioned then hissed as the heavy iron disc slipped over his shoulder to bang into her chin once again. "Jaegar!"

"I have to wear it while I'm here, okay?" he said, panting as he braced above her, slapping his groin to hers, hips thrusting like pistons.

"Why?"

"Domi!" he complained. "I'm a bit distracted right now, wench. Work with me here, will ya, babe?" He slammed into her so hard she yelped.

"All right already!" Her legs tightened around him. She slipped her fingers through his tousled hair and tugged. "Picky, picky, aren't you?"

To keep her quiet, Jaegar slanted his mouth across hers and claimed it with a searing probe of his tongue. Her grunt told him she liked that. He deepened the kiss and with every forward snap of his hips, he rocked her luscious body against his. The blood was boiling in his groin. He was aching for release.

Dominia felt the pressure building. Her fingers slid from his hair to his shoulders and she dug her nails into his flesh. His kiss was scalding her with desire. His cock was stretching her, filling her so thoroughly she couldn't seem to get enough of it. It felt as though her body were drawing him up inside her, taking him over, absorbing him, and when the first quiver of her inner muscles closed around that hard shaft, she bucked against him with such force she nearly unseated him.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he stared wide-eyed at her as the quiver became a ferocious clutching that threatened to pulverize his shaft. It jerked at him, pulled, clenched until his mouth dropped open in stunned surprise.

Her breathing stilled. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Her lips skinned back from her teeth and every muscle in her body went rigid as stone as her climax went on and on until she screamed. She shuddered from head to toe then collapsed like a broken toy, her eyes closed, body still quivering.

Jaegar stared at her with disbelief. "Damn, woman!" he growled, but then his own release overpowered him at that moment. It flowed over him, through him, around him like molten lava and erupted with so much power he saw stars behind his eyes. His arms locked, toes digging into the mattress. His hips pumped one last time as hot cum shot deep into his lover's body.

Dominia opened her eyes to see him fling his head back. His roar as the cum spurted again and again told her he was completely wrapped up in the orgasm. He was feeling his as intently as she had felt her own. He was experiencing the world spinning off course under him, just as she had. When he collapsed atop her – panting, struggling to draw breath, shivering, heart pounding furiously against her breast – she gathered him close to hold him tight.

For a long time neither of them could speak. Their bodies were slick with sweat, their breathing ragged, their energy completely sapped. Her arms held him protectively and his head was cradled on her shoulder. The sound of their strained breaths was loud in the cabin.

"Do you...?" she finally asked, pausing to get her trembling words under tighter control. "Do you think we will ever be able to make love without declaring war on each other's bodies?"

She watched him smile. "Maybe in our dotage, *meleşüm*," he replied. He swallowed hard. "When we are too old to go at it like warthogs in heat."

"Not until then?" she asked, bringing one hand up to stroke his damp hair.

"Most likely not." His eyes were closed and the feel of her smoothing his hair made him want to sleep. He yawned.

"Good," she said. "I'd hate to think we would get all mushy and soft and gentle until we hit our nineties."

"Boring," he said, and yawned again.

"It would be, wouldn't it?"

Her hand moved to his sweaty back, and she trailed the tips of her fingers over his flesh, feeling the goose bumps popping up where she stroked. He shivered then rolled off her, gathering her close so her head was in the hollow of his shoulder.

"How many times was that?" he asked.

"Three, but who's counting?" She lifted her head to look past him to the clock on the shelf beside her bunk. "We've got another half-hour before we have to start getting ready for that goddess-be-damned dinner."

He groaned. "Don't remind me. I—"

The ping of her vid-com cut him off and his groan became a growl.

"Aye," she called out in answer.

"You have a visitor, Domi," the vid-com reported.

"Who is it?"

"General Sancara Ben-Sulil," the vid-com reported.

Dominia felt her lover flinch and craned her head to look up at him. "What?"

Jaegar sat up, plowing a hand through his hair before he lowered it to touch the medallion around his neck. "You'd best not keep the Deathlord waiting."

Her gaze went to the thin iron chain and the heavy disk attached to it. "That's to keep your thoughts from him, isn't it?"

"Get the door, *meleğüm*," he ordered then swung his legs from the bed.

She watched him disappear into her bathing chamber before getting up and reaching for her robe. "Tell the general I'll be right there, Filos."

"Will do," the vid-com replied.

"Filos?" Jaegar asked.

"It means companion in Bandarian," she said.

"Mine is Arkadaş. Ark for short," he said. "Guess what that means in *an Tuircese*." He motioned her toward the hatch. "Go. You don't keep a Deathlord on hold, *meleğüm*."

Though she felt uncomfortable speaking to the important visitor standing outside her ship's door clad only in a thin silk robe, Dominia agreed with Jaegar that it was best not to keep a man like Ben-Sulil cooling his heels while she dressed. Nevertheless, when she placed her hand against the door's control panel and it slid into the hull, she felt even more anxious.

He had to be the fiercest-looking warrior she had ever seen. His height—reported at six feet, eight inches—was intimidating enough but the breadth of his wide shoulders, the unmistakable strength in the muscles that bulged under the sleeves of his uniform shirt, put her in awe of him. The unwavering stare of his amber eyes as they swept over her with a careless flick before settling on her own sent chills through her body.

"Sorry for the intrusion, Major," the Deathlord said in a deep voice that made her stomach muscles tighten, "but I have urgent business with his grace, Prince Jaegar."

Those steely golden orbs moved from hers for just a fraction of a second and she knew they were seeking her lover.

"Would you tell him I need to speak with him?"

Dominia nodded and stepped back. "Would you like to come onboard, Sir?"

Ben-Sulil shook his head. "Not necessary. If I could just speak with him for a few moments?"

She was intensely aware of the tightly checked power that kept him standing straight with his arms hanging loosely at his sides. His hands were relaxed but she had the impression he was struggling to keep them from balling into fists. This was a man unaccustomed to running errands and that was what she felt he must be doing there.

"His grace is in the shower, I believe," she said, and felt heat staining her cheeks. "I'll urge him to hurry."

The Deathlord inclined his head in silence. He raised his arms and crossed them over his broad chest—straining the fabric of his black shirt—and shifted his legs farther apart in an apparent attempt to get comfortable while he waited. His eyes bored into hers then lifted to a point somewhere over her head, dismissing her.

Though she'd never met the infamous Deathlord of Rysalia, she had hoped to before leaving Basaraba. He was a legend, his exploits having taken on mythical proportions across the megaverse. It was an honor for him to even know a person's name unless—of course—in the knowing that person had incurred his disfavor. She could feel his stare on her back as she made her way to her cabin.

"Is he still here?" Jaegar inquired.

"That was a quick shower," she observed then nodded. "He wants to speak with you."

Her lover's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"He didn't say except to tell me it was business of an urgent nature. He seems a bit put out that he had to come looking for you."

Jaegar sighed as he buttoned his uniform jacket. "King Abdellah probably sent him here to make prophets-be-damned sure I attended the dinner."

"That would explain the disdain in his demeanor," she acknowledged. "Or it could be because he disapproves of us being together."

His head came up. "Why would you say that?"

She took hold of the lapel of her silk robe and shook it. "Maybe from how I was dressed when I greeted him?"

He frowned then flung out a dismissive hand. "It doesn't matter. Get ready. I won't leave without you."

"Maybe I should —"

"You should do what I tell you, wench," he snapped then pivoted on his heel.

"Ah no..." she drawled, her back up. "Don't pull that crap with me, Rozakaris." She started after him, realized the Deathlord could see her and stopped. She allowed her lover to continue on toward the ship's door and instead clenched her teeth and headed for the shower.

As he advanced toward the Deathlord, Jaegar watched the man unfold his arms, straighten then click his heels together as he stiffened his body into a respectful posture.

"At ease, General."

"I ask your pardon for the interruption, your grace," Ben-Sulil said, his probing stare assessing Jaegar.

"Not a problem," Jaegar said. He was amazed his voice was steady for it was taking an effort to keep it so. "You have come as my escort?"

Jaegar saw one black brow cock upward and the golden gaze so like his own fill with a touch of confusion.

"No, your grace," the Deathlord answered. "I was asked by my king to inform you that your mother is most anxious to get in touch with you. She has sent several transmissions—the first of which just reached us due to solar storms in that sector."

"My mother," Jaegar repeated, letting the word drop like a heavy rock.

"Aye, your grace," Ben-Sulil replied. "If you would prefer not to contact her from the Major's vid-com..." He let the warning hang as once again a thick black brow lifted as though in challenge.

"The major is my bond-mate," Jaegar said defensively, and could have bitten his tongue. He had not meant to reveal that to anyone. It was bad enough Lyden and Lauryl knew the truth.

To give the Deathlord his due, he allowed no reaction to show at the news. He simply bowed his head slowly in acknowledgement. "Then congratulations are in order," he said smoothly. "I have heard nothing but good things about the major."

"You know my mother," Jaegar stated on a rush of breath, and dug his fingernails into his palms. He hadn't meant to say that either.

The thick black brows clashed. "I don't believe I have had the honor," Ben-Sulil replied, the bewilderment making his face less harsh.

"Wrong," Jaegar declared, lowering his head, shaking it. "Wrong, all wrong. This is not the way it was supposed to go down."

"I beg your pardon?"

Jaegar looked up, searching the perplexed gaze staring back at him. "This isn't how I wanted it to be when we first met."

Ben-Sulil cocked his head to one side. "Your grace, I'm not following you. If there is something I can do for you..."

"Audrina Kancik," Jaegar interrupted. "Audrina Kancik is my mother."

Once more the Deathlord's forehead creased with what Jaegar knew was mystification. His eyes searched Jaegar's for a moment then the young prince watched the color leach rapidly from the general's ruddy complexion. He saw the powerful man actually take a step back, his lips parting. "Audrina is your mother?" he whispered.

Jaegar nodded, swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears.

"Who is...?" The general stopped, took a deep breath then swept his tongue over his upper lip. His voice was less deep, less filled with authority when he strained to ask again. "Who...?" He couldn't seem to get the words out.

Jaegar's face crinkled. "You," he said softly. "You are my father."

General Sancara Ben-Sulil took another step back—eyes wide now, chest heaving. He stared at the younger man as though he were looking at an apparition. The dark brows were drawn together, the handsome face creased with shock. He shook his head. "No, that can't be."

Hurt that a man he had idolized since he was a young boy was rejecting him, Jaegar felt tears burning behind his eyes. "I'm sorry if that distresses you, General," he heard himself say. The hurt was crushing his soul, the disappointment strangling him. "No one need know of—"

The Deathlord took two quick steps and enveloped Jaegar in a bear hug that would have snapped the spine of a weaker man. The tight embrace was like a vise wrapped around him.

"They lied to me," Ben-Sulil said, his voice breaking. "The queen said you were stillborn!"

That his father had known of the conception but was told the child had not survived explained why Jaegar's mother did not want the Deathlord to know of his existence.

His father released him, took hold of his upper arms and pushed Jaegar back, gaze sweeping hungrily over the young man's face. "If I had known... If I had only known it was a lie..." His grip tightened to bruising force. "I would have moved heaven and earth to find you. I would have brought you home!" He dragged Jaegar close again, wrapping him once more in the fierce hold.

Able to lift his arms only a little so he could embrace the man holding him, Jaegar felt betraying moisture easing down his left cheek. He'd never felt so unmanned or so helpless in his life. This was not the way he had wanted to meet his father. Hell, he hadn't even been sure he had wanted to meet him in the first place. The reaction was certainly more than he could have anticipated.

"My son," the Deathlord said. "You are my son!"

As soon as the words were out of Ben-Sulil's mouth, he pushed Jaegar away, suspicion flowing over his dark features like acid. "Why didn't I feel you as soon as you came to Basaraba?" he demanded. "If you are who you say you are, I should have sensed your presence!"

Jaegar lifted his left hand and ran the top two buttons of his jacket, reached inside and pulled out the medallion. He held it up. "I came prepared," he said. "In case I felt I shouldn't let you know my real identity."

The Deathlord's gaze lowered to the medallion. "A spike," he said, lips twisting with disdain. His eyes shot up to Jaegar's, narrowed. "Why would you think you needed to keep it secret?"

"I think the two of you need to discuss this in a place more private than on the docking ramp," Dominia said quietly.

"I agree," the Deathlord said. He wrapped a strong hand around Jaegar's arm. "Walk with me, boy."

Jaegar looked around at Dominia and frowned. He wasn't accustomed to people giving him orders—not even the *an Tuirc* king everyone believed was his father. As he was drawn away from his lover's ship, he realized she was still in her silk robe.

"Take that prophets-be-damned thing from around your neck," his father demanded. "I hate spikes."

Annoyed with himself that he hastily did as he was told, Jaegar ground his teeth, clutching the iron necklace in his fist as they walked. He shrugged off the grip his father had on his arm.

"And don't start our relationship off with an attitude, son," the Deathlord snapped.

"Then don't begin by treating me like a boy in short pants," Jaegar threw back at him. "I'm a grown man, and I am a prince of the royal house of Rozakaris."

"If that's a subtle reminder to continue calling you your grace, forget it. I won't do it unless we're in public. Don't worry. I'll show you the respect you're due," his father said. He glanced at the young man walking beside him. "Did you know my middle name is Jaegar?"

That surprised Jaegar but at the same time it made his heart swell with pride. "No," he replied. "Mine is Amirkhani."

"That was her father's name. I met him once. Not a bad fellow. Damn Jesslyn and that mean-as-an-asp Audrina!" Ben-Sulil growled. "I never put two and two together when I heard the name of Abdul's wife. If I had, I would have come to *an Tuirc* to investigate." He doubled his hand into a fist and struck his chest—hard—three times. "*Benim yanilma. Benim yanilma. Benim affedilamez yanilma!*"

It was a prayer litany Jaegar had voiced many times in his life. It meant my mistake. My unpardonable mistake.

"It's not your fault," he told his father. "You didn't know."

"I shouldn't have taken Jesslyn's word for it. Darjeen warned me the bitch was as treacherous as she is beautiful." He indicated a corridor down which he wanted Jaegar to walk. "When did you find out?"

"I was ten and —"

Ben-Sulil came to a halt, reaching out to grab Jaegar's arm once again. "Ten?" he asked, incredulity rife in his voice. "You've known all this time and never came to confront me?"

"I overheard my father..." Jaegar stopped for he saw hurt pass over the Deathlord's intense face. He began again. "I overheard King Abdul speaking to my mother. I don't believe I was supposed to ever learn of my true parentage. She refused to give me your

name until only a few weeks ago. She took to wearing an iron collar to prevent me from reading her mind."

"Does Abdul know?"

Jaegar nodded. "He has never treated me any differently than if I were his own flesh and blood. He has been a good parent to me."

"Better than your mother, I would guess," Ben-Sulil said through clenched teeth.

"He has."

"Tell me what you thought when you found out he wasn't your sire?"

"Naturally I was curious about the man who had helped give me life, but I have great affection for the one who had been there for me for as long as I could remember. I have deep respect for him, abiding love, and I always will. Knowing he was not my real father did not change my affections for him."

"Nor should it," the Deathlord agreed. "I would have thought less of you had you said that it did."

"I put the truth out of my mind," Jaegar told him. "Even when I was sent to the Academy, I made no attempt to find out which warrior among the staff was a Shadowlord." He shrugged. "At any rate, it would never have occurred to me in my wildest dreams that it could be you."

"Were we there at the same time?" his father queried.

"I believe you were there some of the time, aye. I never got to see you, and by the time my powers came into play three years later, you had left the staff."

"Else I would have felt your presence," Ben-Sulil said. He put his hands on his hips and dropped his head. "All that time wasted. All those years."

The sound of footsteps coming toward them made both men jump.

"Let's take this to my quarters," the Deathlord advised. "I have so many questions for you."

"The dinner?" Jaegar reminded him.

"Oh shit!" Ben-Sulil groused. "I had let that slip my mind." He looked down at his watch then chewed on his lip for a moment. "Afterward then?"

"I have all the time in the world."

"Good." He paused, and then asked if Jaegar was going to contact his mother. "That was why I was sent to you."

The young man's smile was purely evil. "Not unless hell freezes over."

Chapter Five

"Stop fidgeting!" Dominia said, batting his hand aside when he tried to loosen the constriction of his collar.

"I want to be presentable, *meleşüm*," he complained.

"And you will but not if you keep tugging at your collar."

"It's too tight!"

"No," she said, drawing the word out as though she were speaking to a child. "You're just looking for things to stew over."

"I'm telling you it's too tight," he mumbled. "I ought to know if the fucking thing is too tight, Domi. I can barely breathe!"

"Then don't," she said blithely, batting her eyes at him when he growled at her. She pushed his hands away once again. He turned from her, throwing his hands into the air.

"What if they don't like me?" he asked, beginning to pace.

Dominia sighed. He'd asked that same question at least a dozen times since they had left Abbadon earlier that afternoon to make the trek across the desert to the *wadi* where the Deathlord's keep was situated. Now as they stood in the guest suite to which they'd been taken, her lover's nervousness had increased even more than when they'd boarded the runabout.

"Why wouldn't they like you, *aşık*?" she asked calmly.

He shrugged like the little boy to which she was beginning to liken him. "I'm... I'm me."

"Well, there is that," she said with a laugh. "And reason enough, I suppose, to dislike you." His narrowed gaze as he stopped pacing to glare at her made her laugh again.

"It's not funny, Dominia!" he snarled.

"Oh I think it is," she said. "You were bad enough at the king's meal last night and when your father invited us out here to meet the rest of your family today, I saw the panic in your eyes."

"Wasn't panic," he said with a sniff and a toss of his dark hair.

She went to him, shaking her head at his stubbornness. When he opened his mouth to say something else she knew would be utterly foolish, she turned her palm and cupped him firmly between the legs, cutting him off in mid-complaint. She rubbed—hard.

"What's this?" she asked.

As it always did when she touched it, his cock hardened to steel in his trousers. Blood pooled in his groin and the burning ache in his shaft took his breath away.

"You don't play fair," he said in a throaty voice.

"Want me to relieve some of this tension, your grace?" she asked, and before he could either agree or deny her offer, she sank to her knees before him and his cock was free of its constriction.

The wet warmth of her mouth never failed to do the most world-shattering things to him, he thought, as she relaxed her throat and took as much of him past her lips as would go. She used the flat of her tongue to sweep along the underside of his shaft—undulating that sweet little muscle to caress him.

"*Sana çok ihtiyacım var,*" he whispered as he stroked her hair. When she looked up at him through her lashes, he translated. "I need you so much."

She pulled her lips free of his flesh—causing him to draw in a breath. "You have me, *aşık.*" Her smile before she took him into her mouth again to lave his thick cock made his heart skip a beat.

"You are the most beautiful woman in the world to me," he said, his fingers trailing through her unbound hair.

Dominia looked up—his cock tight between her lips. She winked at him and increased the pressure of the suction around him. Once more he drew in a quick breath and his hips pushed forward of their own accord.

"Ah Dominia," he sighed, her lips giving him such glorious pleasure. At the moment he spilled his juices down her throat—a throat rhythmically milking him of every last drop—he was positive no man had ever loved a woman as much as he loved this one.

She felt him shudder as the climax washed over and through him. His hand tightened on her head for just a moment then stilled. A long breath escaped his lungs, and she looked up to see his eyes were closed, a sweet little smile on his chiseled lips.

"You liked that?" she asked as she released her hold on his flesh.

He didn't answer but his eyes slowly lifted and in them she saw something that widened her own. He leaned over her, took her arms and lifted her to her feet.

"My turn," he said, sweeping her into the strength of his powerful arms.

He carried her to the bed and sat her on the edge of the mattress. He knelt at her feet, took the hem of her gown and flipped it up to her thighs, pushed her knees apart and hooked his fingers in the lacy triangle that covered her wet sex, tugging it to one side. Arching a brow at her, he lowered his head and flicked his tongue over the hardening nub of her clitoris.

Dominia's hands curled around the edge of the mattress and she let her head fall back.

"You bad boy," she said in a husky voice, and smiled when he grunted his agreement.

His warm breath washed over her as he nibbled at the sensitive pearl. Her fingers brutally gripped the coverlet as she denied the urge to jerk under his merciless attack. She was trembling violently as he worried that receptive nubbin. It was exquisite torment, exacting torture and it was turning her into hot liquid beneath his expert tongue.

He eased a finger into her sheath and Dominia cried out, clamping her teeth down on her bottom lip as he made her hips writhe on the mattress. The in-and-out stroke of his long, thick middle finger was in cadence with the flick of his tongue, the draw of his lips. When he twisted his finger and pressed upward to find her G-spot, she saw bright bursts of light at the periphery of her tightly closed eyes.

"Jaegar!" she said, and ripples of release pulsed through her cunt, tugging at his fingers.

"That's my baby," he said, easing his finger from her.

Dominia opened her eyes and lowered her head in time to see him put the wet finger in his mouth, his gaze never leaving hers. He sucked her juices from his flesh then pulled his finger free.

"You taste like honey," he told her.

She threaded her fingers through his black curls and held his head. "You do know I love you beyond measure, don't you?"

He smiled for she had been the first of them to say the word. His heart swelled with his emotions. "*Seni bütün kalbimle seviyorum,*" he said, hand to heart. "I love you with all my heart."

Her face filled with wonder. "Do you really?"

"Aye," he said. He tugged her gown over her thighs and stood, holding his hand out to her. She slipped her hands in his before he added, "Now let's go meet my family so I can set our Joining date."

Dominia's face lost every ounce of color. "W-what?"

"Oh shit. I forgot. My bad."

He went down on one knee. With her hand tight in his, his eyes fused on hers, he asked her to be his wife.

"Dominia Alamaine, light of my life, love of my heart, companion of my soul, will you consent to make an honest man of me and take me as your most devoted husband, faithful lover, fierce protector and the future father of your children?"

She stared at him in shock. Although it was a given that one day this might happen, she was not prepared for it to happen so soon after their meeting. She had expected months—if not years—of courting before he proposed to her. She knew what her answer would be—had known from the moment they had bonded—but for the life of her she couldn't get the words past her lips.

Jaegar's smile wavered. "You do want me, don't you?"

She nodded slowly, her head going up and down, her body numb from head to toe.

"And you love me," he said. "You just admitted it a few moments ago."

Again, she nodded, her gaze probing his.

"So what's the holdup, *meleğüm*?"

She had to clear her throat to answer. "You're sure this is what you want?"

"As sure as I am the sun will rise in the east and set in the west." He frowned. "Well, except in the Tabhartas Galaxy but that doesn't count."

"You're positive?" she wanted clarified.

Jaegar sighed heavily. "Aye, wench. I am very positive."

Dominia had always hated women who cried at the drop of a hat. She never cried, would not allow herself to, but she felt herself coming closer than she ever had and that annoyed her. She stomped the tears down, lifted her chin, took a deep breath and said, "Okay. I'll marry you, Rozakaris, but if you even so much as look at another woman, I'll geld you. Is that clear?"

"As rain," he agreed, and shot to his feet, drawing her along with him. He slipped one arm around her, buried one hand in her loose hair and bent her back, fastening his mouth to hers to seal the deal.

* * * * *

Hands on hips, green eyes flashing, the precocious little girl demanded, "Are you really my brudder?"

Jaegar hunkered down before her. "I really am, Tulay."

She narrowed her eyes. "How you know my name? I not told you my name."

"Tulay?" her mother said softly. "Don't do that."

Turning his head to look at the lovely woman who was his stepmother, Jaegar lifted his brows.

Darjeen Ben-Sulil shook her head in exasperation. "She knows how to speak properly, but she's been around Ling-Yi too often of late."

"Ling-Yi is a Chrystallusian martial arts teacher," Jaegar's father informed him. "Your sisters are training under him."

"As will I when I am old enough," Tulay announced. She cocked her head to one side, studying her brother then said in perfect *an Tuircese*, "*Sen güzeal sin.*"

Jaegar laughed. "Why, thank you, little sister. You are beautiful on the eyes too."

Tulay turned her intent speculation on Dominia. "But she isn't."

"Tulay!" her mother exclaimed, and started forward but Jaegar held up his hand.

"You mean my lady?" Jaegar asked, and as his little sister nodded once emphatically, he lowered his voice. "The legendary Riezell Guardian?"

The little girl's eyes widened. "She's a Guardian? Like my mama was?"

"A Guardian major," Jaegar replied.

The little girl slowly turned her eyes back to Dominia. She tilted her head. "Are you sure, *erkek kardeş*?" she asked, calling him her brother.

"Aye, *kiz kardeş*, and I'll let you in on a little secret."

Tulay turned her full attention to her brother. "That being what?" she asked in a grown-up voice.

Jaegar glanced at Dominia who was standing a few feet away. "She asked me if I thought you would honor her by being her flower girl at our Joining."

"Huh," was the little girl's reaction, pretending to an indifference her little eyes couldn't sustain for they were suddenly glittering with excitement. After a moment, she sniffed. "I might be persuaded."

"I would take it as a great favor if you would," he said solemnly.

"We'll see," Tulay said then turned suddenly, threw her thin arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely. She placed a sloppy kiss on his cheek then—face red—wriggled out of his embrace. She gave him a teasing look. "I believe I will like having an older brother!"

That said, she ran from the room, calling to someone named Neela.

"You've made a conquest, big brother," Hazan, his middle sister, remarked. "That, in and of itself, is quite an accomplishment." At twenty, the green-eyed, black-haired beauty bore a closer resemblance to her mother than did the other five daughters of Darjeen.

"Come," the Deathlord said, "let's take a seat and discuss this Joining that will give me another beautiful daughter to spoil." He crooked his arm to escort Jaegar's lady to a low divan strewn with colorful silk pillows.

Dominia laughed, taking his arm. She was beginning to see a lot of the son in the father and had already formed a bond with the Deathlord. She liked his wife and had found his daughters warm and friendly.

"It cannot take place until I gain permission from the Guardians," she said as she took a seat. "As things stand now, that may be at least a year."

"And this is all right with you, Jaegar?" his father inquired. He had taken a seat in a large chair with deep cushions.

"Dominia is sworn to her job," the younger Shadowlord answered. "I won't ask her to cast it aside until she is ready to do so."

"It is a dangerous job she does," Darjeen said, her brow furrowed. "I should know although I was only in the corps for a couple of years before your father demanded I resign and marry him."

"You make it sound as though I pulled you out of there by your hair. You wanted to marry me," her husband said with a grunt.

"Will you not worry for her safety, Jaegar?" Darjeen asked, ignoring her mate's words.

"Remember the old saying, *sevgilim*. An overprotective eye gets the speck," Ben-Sulil advised her.

His wife waved her hand at his words. "Aye, *aşik*, but remember that other old saying that states, the one who burns his mouth for drinking milk too hot eats even yogurt carefully."

The Deathlord inclined his head at her reference to life's bad experiences teaching people to be cautious. "True, my dearest one, but then again every man has his own style of eating yogurt," her husband responded.

"Which means?" Dominia queried.

"Which means each of us has a different way of doing things," Ben-Sulil replied. He shrugged. "Who's to say which is right and which is wrong?"

"Naturally I'll worry about her," Jaegar said, directing his words to his stepmother. "But she's a very capable woman and I trust her judgment. I don't believe she will be careless with her life now that it no longer belongs entirely to her."

At his words, Dominia's eyes softened. She had been taught since she was a toddler not to trust men, to take anything they said with a large grain of salt. Honeyed words and flowery phrases coming from a warrior meant only that he wanted to get into her pants. He might compliment her on her warrior abilities but the accolade was only a prelude to getting what he wanted—a roll in the bunk. She was not accustomed to men who spoke loving words and meant them.

"A year is a long time to wait when you are bonded," she heard the Deathlord's wife say. "It will be frustrating for the two of you, a mental and physical ordeal. Will not the nervousness and need put an unnecessary strain on your relationship?"

"I hope not," Dominia said. "I would like to think our bond is strong enough to survive any trial."

"I suppose you will find out," Darjeen said, her voice filled with concern.

"I will wait for her," Jaegar said. "I will be there when she's ready."

Ben-Sulil crossed an ankle over his knee and observed his son attentively. "What of your mother? How does she feel about this?"

Jaegar knew his father already had the answer to that. He had felt the light but deft mental probing that had gently nudged open his mind as the others spoke. The skilful prying had felt like a shadow flitting through his head, and he hadn't tried to turn it aside, though he doubted he could have.

"She doesn't know," Jaegar answered as much for Darjeen as for his five sisters who were sitting silently and respectfully off to one side. "She will not be pleased."

"Why would she not?" Aysel, the oldest sister, inquired. She had recently married a high-ranking member of the Shadowlords.

"Because she wants to pick his bride for him," her father answered.

"I remember Audrina," Darjeen said. "She was a very controlling woman."

"She still is," Jaegar told her. "Her idea of the perfect wife for me is some wallflower princess from one of the Domhan Quadrants, a woman she can bully and..."

"Control," his father mumbled.

"Precisely," Jaegar agreed. "A timid mouse – lifeless, listless, lusterless and afraid of her own shadow."

"As well as your mother's," the Deathlord put in.

"Especially my mother's," Jaegar stated. "And that isn't Dominia."

"Not hardly," Dominia agreed. "I'll give her a run for her money."

"When will you tell her?" Darjeen inquired.

"Right now he's hiding from her," his father said with a laugh.

"I'm not hiding," Jaegar denied. "I'm simply ignoring her. She's out there somewhere bride hunting so let her enjoy her little delusion while it lasts."

"But what if she contracts for a bride?" Aysel asked, and Jaegar realized she must have been the designated questioner from among his sisters.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," Jaegar answered.

"The sooner you tell her, the easier your head will lie on the pillow at night, Jaegar," Ben-Sulil advised. "Better yet, you should issue an announcement to the megaversal media that you have met your bond-mate. That would settle the matter once and for all."

"It would let the fathers of the women your mother is considering know you are off the market and help them save face if they have entered into negotiations with the queen," Aysel suggested, her sisters nodding in agreement.

"A sage and solid proposal, my daughter," the Deathlord granted. "And something upon which your brother should reflect."

"I'll certainly bear it in mind," Jaegar said. "Thank you, Aysel."

"Well, I hate to bid you a good evening, but I must be up early tomorrow," Dominia said. "Colonel Kastamine will have my head on a platter if I am late for his last lecture."

"He does love to hear himself talk," Ben-Sulil said with a sigh. "I think that is why he took to these forums so readily." He smiled at Dominia. "He has only high praise for you, Domi. It may even be you will graduate at the head of your class."

"From your lips to the goddess's ear," Dominia said. "That would be a good mark in my jacket when it comes time for promotion."

"Do you wish to become a Principal?" her host inquired.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I've seen what that entails and that's the last thing I need. Once you reach thirty, you're old in this business and anyone older than that who stays moves up to Command – if they remain with the Guardians."

"How old are you, Domi?" Aysel asked.

"Twenty-eight," she said, getting to her feet – as did everyone else in the room.

"So two more years and you're out?" her host queried.

"Certainly no more than that," Dominia replied. "I'll start losing my edge."

"I doubt that," the Deathlord said. He swept a hand in front of him to indicate she was to precede him.

"I have a question," Nuray said, raising her hand politely. She seemed to be the timid one, the politest.

"Aye, little one?" Jaegar asked.

"It's for the major," the young woman said, blushing.

"Ask," Dominia said with a soft smile.

Nuray cleared her throat. "I have heard them called Principal Riezell Guardians, but I have also heard them called Primary Riezell Guardians." She cocked her head to one side. "Which is correct?"

"Either one," Dominia said. "They mean the same thing and are interchangeable. I think some Guardians—like our Amazeen sisters—and a few at Command prefer Primary. It depends on what the word means in their native language, I believe. Most of us, though, prefer Principal."

"I see," Nuray said, inclining her head respectfully. "Thank you."

"Are you going back with Dominia or will you stay awhile with us, Jaegar?" Hazan asked.

"A gentleman always sees his lady home, Hazan," her mother declared.

"And he has issues to mull over," her father said.

The two men exchanged a look. Jaegar knew it was the older man's way of saying Jaegar should settle the matter of Audrina's interfering plans before things got out of control.

"I'll see to it," he promised.

"That is a wise decision," his father said.

The runabout that Jaegar had piloted to his father's desert retreat sat like a large crimson bird on the bright orange sand, its wings glinting in the moonlight. Two guards stood beside the sleek Fiach, which carried the official seal of the Deathlords emblazoned on its gull-wing hatch.

"May the Wind be at your back, my son," Ben-Sulil said, pulling Jaegar into his arms for a quick embrace and a firm slap on his back.

"And at yours..." There was only a slight pause before he gave the older man the title he had been longing to for the last several hours. "Papa."

Pride showed in Sancara Ben-Sulil's golden gaze and he nodded in acknowledgement of the term of respect. He turned to Dominia and she saw moisture sparkling in the Deathlord's eyes before he gave her a light hug, kissed her on the forehead then stepped back.

Jaegar saw something pass between the two. It was a look that spoke volumes—a request for protection and safekeeping for a son and the acceptance of the task by the son's lover.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Jaegar asked, and his father nodded, reaching out to wrap an arm around his wife's slender waist.

"Have a safe trip back to the fortress," Darjeen told them.

Aysel and her sisters stood off to one side—waving and smiling—as Jaegar took Dominia's hand and began walking toward the runabout.

"I like your family," she said.

"They like you," Jaegar said.

"They *love* you," she countered.

He looked down at her—a smug look on his face. "They did, didn't they?"

* * * * *

"Despite you being you," she said dryly with a nudge of her hip.

"They complement one another," Ben-Sulil commented.

"There is great love within them," Darjeen said as she leaned against her husband and smiled at the laughter coming from the retreating couple.

"A love that will be sorely tested if I know Audrina," he prophesied.

"And you do know the stinking cow," Darjeen grumbled, and when her husband pulled back and looked down at her with surprise, she cocked a shoulder. "I'm just saying."

"Be nice," he said, tweaking her nose.

"I wanted to slit her throat when I graduated from Guardian training simply because you'd bedded the filthy whore," she said. "Now I'm glad I didn't for Jaegar would never have been born."

"As soon as I made up my mind to marry you, I put her aside," he reminded her.

"You knew I'd never have you otherwise."

"You Guardians are a possessive bunch," he quipped. "I need to educate my son on a few of the finer points of handling warrioresses like you and Domi."

She snorted at his remark then warned, "He'll need you if that treacherous mother of his starts causing him trouble."

The Deathlord looked from her beautiful face to the couple who were entering the runabout. "I will be there for him as I was not allowed to be before." His gaze darkened to a brooding stare. "For that, I will never forgive his mother."

Chapter Six

"You aren't helping, warrior," Dominia said with a hiss as she pushed his hands from her bare breasts for the third time. She pulled the lacy bra he'd unsnapped around her and elbowed him away from her as she snapped the front closure into place.

Jaegar was behind her, pressed against her thong-clad rump. He lowered his lips to the sensitive base of her neck where it met her shoulder. His kiss was electric and sent chills down her spine.

"Stop it!" she ordered. "I can't be late again this morning!"

It was her last day at Abbadon—graduation day. The lectures had finished the day before, and she'd been flushed, breathless and ten minutes late for the final one. Colonel Kastamine had turned, looked up at the clock above the podium and frowned. Every male in the room had given her a glower that said they knew precisely what made her late.

"Glad you could join us, Major," was all Kastamine had said, but the way he said it had made Dominia slink down in her seat, wishing she could melt through the stone floor.

"I mean it, Jaegar! Cut it out!" She pushed him away with her ass then groaned when he caught her hips and ground his hard erection against her bare cheeks.

"I'm horny," he said, gliding up to cover her breasts yet again.

"You are always horny!" she accused. "I believe you stay that way on purpose!"

"I'll be quick," he said, sweeping his thick bulge from side to side across her rump. "You know I can be."

Sighing deeply—for she was aroused to the point of wanting to crawl all over him and knew her protests were falling on deaf ears—she turned in his arms, put hers around his neck and gave him a look hotter than the fires in a smeltery.

"You are incorrigible, *aşık*."

Jaegar reached down to pull his straining cock through the fly of his silk pajamas. He rubbed the tip of it along the lacy triangle of her thong. "True, but you wouldn't have me any other way."

"If Kastamine flunks me, you'll have General Strom breathing down your neck. He doesn't like his operatives to fail at anything."

Unrepentant, her lover shrugged. "The colonel isn't going to fail you. You heard the Deathlord. You'll more than likely graduate with honors."

As he spoke, he was slowly backing her toward the wall. It was a dance for him—the steps to which she was becoming adept. Her arms fell from around his neck as her

back touched the wall before he stepped back, dropped to his knees, lowering the thong in one graceful move.

"Step out," he ordered, and she lifted one foot then the other. He shot up, tossed the thong behind him then leaned into her—his jutting cock going unerringly where it desired to be.

Dominia never failed to marvel at his strength as he cupped her buttocks and lifted her ass, sliding into her with a powerful thrust, filling her completely when she locked her legs around his waist. She drew in her breath as he began the slow arch of his hips.

"You said you'd be quick," she said, running her tongue over her dry lips for her man sucked everything from her with his lovemaking—moisture, energy, willpower. He took it all.

"I lied," he mumbled as he pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat, and then nibbled his way to her mouth. He raked his teeth across her bottom lip before taking her lips in a hard, punishing kiss.

Spiking her fingers through his hair, Dominia forgot about all else save the man whose tantalizing body was slowly turning hers into its slave. She craved him, lusted after him and stayed awake simply to watch him sleep because he was so devastatingly handsome.

Furthermore, he was hers.

"Ben sadece sana aittim," he whispered against her mouth.

"Which means?"

"I belong only to you," he replied.

"Stop reading my thoughts."

"Stop talking then," he said, covering her mouth. He rammed into her as his tongue took possession of hers.

That overwhelming heat was swirling in her cunt with each of his commanding strokes. His clean, masculine scent was enveloping her and that never failed to send sharp desire through her entire body. She breathed him in as her body took him in, and she never wanted to be without this sensual, sexy man.

He dragged his mouth from hers. "Stop thinking too," he ordered, and with a fierce grunt arched hard into her slick channel. Laying his head on her shoulder, he increased the speed and strength of his thrusts.

Dominia loved it when he lost control like that, when he used his cock like a battering ram. In the mirror across the cabin, she could see his buttocks flexing. He was standing on his tiptoes as he strained into her, the muscles across his shoulders flexing.

"Take me. Take your woman hard," she whispered, and smiled when he shuddered as her warm breath spiraled through his ear canal. She clamped her teeth onto his earlobe and—though she would have thought it impossible—increased his thrusts to a frenzied pounding.

The pleasure was building within her. His heat, his scent, the pressure of his slick, masculine body rubbing against hers, the potent push of his thick shaft stretching her to the point of pain – it all combined to send her careening over the precipice and into the maelstrom. She clutched at his head, his shoulders, dug her nails into his back as wave after wave of intense release rippled through her lower body. She felt him stiffen for just a split second then he was spilling into her with hot spasms that rocked his body and caused him to emit a loud hiss through his clenched teeth.

Once. Twice. Three times he rammed his body into hers then stood there quivering, his legs shaking beneath him.

"Sweet Mother of the Prophet, woman," he said in between pants, looking up at her with wonder. "What the hell have you done to my self-control?"

Dominia smiled. "I never knew you had any, warrior," she replied. She stroked the black hair from his forehead and leaned in to place a soft kiss on the faint lines that marred his flesh then moved to kiss away the double lines between his thick brows.

"*Seni çok seviyorum*," he said, his eyes fused with hers. "I love you so much."

"I know, warrior," she replied gently. "I love *you* more than life."

His ferocious hold had loosened, and as he stepped back, she lowered her legs to the floor. She snaked her arms around him, gave him a quick hug then let go.

"I really do have to go, Jae," she said.

He nodded as she stepped aside, bent down to retrieve her thong then continued on to the head. He turned to watch her through the open doorway, stuffing himself back into his pajamas while he observed her washing his juices from her thighs.

"Are you going straight back to Riezell after the ceremony?" he asked, his heart aching already.

Dominia twisted her head around to give him a look that questioned why he was asking something he already knew the answer to.

"I could meet you there," he suggested.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "That would not be wise and besides..." Her look turned stern. "You need to go back to *an Tuirc* and settle things with your mother. She needs to be told about us."

"She's not on *an Tuirc*," he said, going over to her bunk. He sat down and hunched forward, elbows on his knees, fingers threaded together as he watched her dress. "She's in *an Iaráin*."

"Let her know you're on your way home, and she'll probably be there before you," Dominia advised.

"With some fat *an Iaráinian* sheep in tow, no doubt."

"Doubtful."

"You don't know my mother," he grumbled. "She means to see me shackled before the year is out."

"You are already shackled, warrior," Dominia reminded him. "With chains of love."

He smiled for she had donned her gray dress uniform with its shiny copper oak cluster collar insignia. "You sure you don't want to trade those oak leaves for an anchor?" he asked.

"I'm positive," she stated. "I don't want to be a Principal RG. There's too much paperwork and besides..." She shrugged. "I'm not a political animal. I hate dealing with those blockheads and even though General Strom is a fair and supportive boss, he's still a politician at heart."

"So I've heard."

She smoothed the pleated pants of her uniform, adjusted the black tie at her throat, dusted imaginary lint from her tunic then turned side to side to see if there were any wrinkles. "How do I look?"

"Çok güzelsin," he answered.

His compliment warmed her heart. No man had ever told her she was beautiful—not even one with whom she was having a romp—and the way Jaegar said it, she believed it with all her heart.

"I think I'm ready."

She came over to him, leaned down and kissed him. When he gave her the pleading look she knew was coming, she shook her head.

"No, I don't want you there. The colonel is already annoyed with me. If he sees you, it will only piss him off, and he'll report it to Strom." Her mouth twisted. "If he hasn't already."

"Let him," Jaegar said in a defiant tone. "You are entitled to a private life outside the reach of the Guardians."

"The Guardians don't think so," she reminded him.

"Screw 'em then," he stated, a muscle working in his jaw.

She laid a hand to that jaw. "I'll contact you in a week and let you know where I'll be going next. Maybe we can slip in some time together."

He hated it and knew he was going to hate it even more as the days stretched into weeks into months—maybe years. His heart was already aching, his body itching to grab her and hold her down, make her stay with him.

"Jaegar..." she drawled.

"In a week," he acknowledged, and knew it would be the longest week of his life.

Watching her walk out the door was the hardest thing he'd done to date. He wanted so desperately to be with her every waking moment and to lie beside her as he had for the last two nights—her body against his, her hand resting on his bare chest. Even knowing the bonding was responsible for the intense desire to be constantly in her company, he suspected even if they hadn't connected in that way, on that primeval

level, he would want to be with her. Meeting her had changed him in ways he liked and yet feared. He knew he would never be the same if he ever lost her.

Getting to his feet, he thought of taking a shower before he left her ship, but he wasn't really in the mood. Besides, he had her smell all over him, and he wanted to keep that link to her for as long as he could.

You need to go back to an Tuirc and settle things with your mother. She needs to be told about us.

Her words pricked at his skin like barbs. The last thing he wanted to do was confront his control freak of a mother, to tell her he had bonded with a woman he knew his mother would find unacceptable. He was not looking forward to the battle of wills that he knew was coming. Already he could see the twisted look of hate on his mother's face, hear her shouts of rage and feel the vicious sting of her palm to his cheek. It would be a brutal scene unlike any before it and that would spawn a plethora of troubles he wished he could postpone.

Dressing slowly, lethargically, his mind was in turmoil as he contemplated just how bad it was going to be when he returned to his homeworld. Although he believed he would have his uncle and the king on his side, both those men feared his mother's tongue and wrath and were quick to make themselves scarce when either was engaged. It wasn't so much that Lyden and the king were cowards. Rather, they preferred to flee from discord of any kind, taking refuge as far from Audrina as they could get. Only Riashi seemed to thrive on the queen's vitriolic nature, goading her into tantrums from which he was generally exempt.

Releasing a long, tired breath, he picked up his boots and pulled them on. He felt sick to his stomach just thinking about the confrontation with his mother. She would hurl insults at him and Dominia, verbally attack them both with as much savage scorn as she could muster then—when he held firm—come at him with hands and nails. Idly he reached up to touch the faint scar on the ridge of his jaw where she'd clawed him when he was but a small boy. Her anger that day had been brutal, but he knew in his soul that the coming one would be worse yet.

Unconsciously his hand went to the front of his trousers. Dominia's words came back to him from their first night together in her ship.

"You're circumcised. I like that."

"Then the pain was worth it."

She pursed her lips. "You can't possibly remember how it felt," she chided.

"Aye, well, I remember it all too well. It hurt like hell."

"You just remember someone telling you about it."

"Domi, no one had to tell me. I remember every ungodly moment of the ordeal. I even offered to pay the sünnetçi more than my father was paying him if he wouldn't cut me."

Dominia's lips parted in surprise. "How old were you?"

"Nine."

"Merciful Alluvia!" she whispered. "Why did they wait so long to do it? Why not when you were born?"

"It was my mother's wish to wait until I was older."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" he asked quietly. "It is a coming-of-age ordeal, Dominia. The older you are, the worse it will hurt."

"Oh Jaegar." His lover's eyes filled with tears.

He shrugged. "It is a tradition of our people, *meleşüm*. There is a grand celebration at the palace with special foods and ceremonial dress. For everyone except the boy about to be mutilated, it's a grand occasion."

"Tell me," she said, no doubt sensing his need – one he'd kept to himself through the years – to discuss what had happened.

Jaegar massaged himself through the fabric of his trousers, the memory of the pain coming back to him. He went back over what he had told Dominia.

"They dressed me in a long, loose robe and led me on horseback into the hall designated for such purposes. I could not dismount until my father gave me a purse of gold and my *kirve*, my godfather, came forward to lead me to the *sünnetçi*, the circumciser.

"The people around me were chanting, crowding close to see the surgery as my *kirve* took a seat in a chair then ordered me to sit on his lap. The *sünnetçi* knelt in front of me and pushed the robe up. He made me open my legs wide then took my penis in his hand. His assistant handed him a ceremonial dagger and I nearly pissed myself. That blade looked so sharp. It was then I pleaded with him not to cut me and that set my mother off like you wouldn't believe."

"Why?"

"Because the people laughed. I had shamed her before them. She said I was a craven coward, would never be a warrior. I was useless, not a man. I would never be a true man."

"Bitch," Dominia stated.

"No one listened to her. I wasn't the first to offer money to a *sünnetçi*. I have heard many men speak of their *sünnetçi* and they all speak of being afraid, of dreading the pain of the cutting, the stitching that follows."

"Ouch," she said, her face showing her discomfort at his words. "Didn't they give you any anesthetic?"

He shook his head. "Not allowed. It hurt so badly I wished I could pass out but I didn't cry, didn't squeal as I have heard other boys do since. I tried not to wince but that I could not hold in. The pain was intense. When it was over, the *sünnetçi* put the foreskin in a glass vial and gave it to my mother."

"For joy, for joy," his lady mumbled. "Hey, Mom, here's your trophy!"

"Then they lifted me off my kirve's lap and carried me to a bed in the corner where I was to recuperate." He shrugged again. "People came by, shook my hand and gave me presents. That part of it wasn't bad at all."

The remembered pain, the harsh words his mother spoke to him later that evening had stayed with Jaegar. She had waited until bedtime when no one was there to hear or see the revenge she took on her son.

"Bastard!" she spat, slapping him as hard as she could several times, pummeling him about the head and shoulders with her fists, raking her nails down his arms as he lifted them over his head to ward off her blows. "How dare you humiliate me in front of my friends? In front of the dignitaries who traveled here to watch you become a man? Put your arms down, you little coward. Put them down!"

She had split his lip – again – and given him a black eye but that was nothing compared to the stinging, burning pain that lay between his legs. He had cried himself to sleep that night and the next.

"I am ashamed of you," he said aloud, lifting his head to stare sightlessly across the cabin of Dominia's ship as he repeated his mother's words to him. "What a disappointment you are."

Well, he thought, as he turned and headed for the hatch, she was going to be even more disappointed in him by the time it was all said and done. In a way, he was looking forward to crushing her well-planned hopes and dreams.

* * * * *

He was awaiting the opening of the iris at the end of the docking corridor. The eye was slowly opening – the apparatus peeling back to reveal the ebon span beyond. Dual rows of lights flashed from where he sat on the runway all the way to the iris.

"As though I need a 'you are here and that's where you should be' marker to get me out of the fucking docking bay," he grumbled as the opening cycled to its full circumference.

"You are clear for takeoff, your grace," Basarabian control told him.

"Roger, Control," he agreed, setting his vessel to moving down the long runway.

"She's doing it again." Ark's electronic voice held a touch of exasperation in it.

"Tell her to fuck off," Jaegar snapped. He pushed the throttle all the way forward and the *Karatavuk* went screaming along the runway, gathering speed, the nose lifting slightly from the thick tungsten flooring.

"Temper, temper," Ark cautioned as Jaegar took the runabout through the iris and banked steeply to starboard.

"Get her on the horn then," he ordered the computer. He barely glanced down when his mother's face appeared on the vid-com screen.

"How dare you ignore me, Jaegar!" were the first words out of her mouth. "I—"

"I'm on my way back to *an Tuirc*. Be there when I arrive," he interrupted then made a chopping motion toward his throat to alert Ark to cut the transmission. "I won't answer any more of her hails."

"Aye, your grace," Ark said.

"Jae!" he snapped irritably. "I told you to call me Jae."

"With all due respect, Jae, you weren't Jae just now. You were Prince Jaegar, his grace, the heir apparent to the Panther Throne commanding a subject," Ark informed him.

Jaegar chuckled. "Was I that haughty?"

"Haughty and very authoritative."

"Good," he said with a nod. "Maybe that will get her notice for once."

"If the continuous hails are any indication, I'd say you have her full attention."

* * * * *

Easing the *Karataavuk* into the docking harness, Jaegar cut the engines, feeling the vessel settle in its assigned berth. He glanced at the quartet of uniformed men standing on the corrugated metal walkway that intersected with the gangway from his slip and knew precisely why they were there. A tight smile that never reached his eyes moved over his face. They—like his mother—were in for a surprise.

"Ark, find Captain Younan and ask him to join us."

"Locating him now."

Jaegar slowly unbuckled his safety harness, his eyes never leaving the guards. They were tough-looking men—eyes harsh, lips tight, faces completely expressionless. All were larger than he, heavily packed with muscles and each carrying a sheathed dagger at his hip. He knew them to be members of his mother's personal guard. They were loyal to her primarily because they feared her. Whatever the order she gave, they carried it out with brutal efficiency. However, never before had she sent her men after him. It was a mute testament to how uncertain she was of his state of mind that they now stood sentinel on the walkway, waiting to escort him to wherever she waited.

"Captain Younan is on his way, Jae," Ark reported.

"Can you raise my lady for me?"

"Negative," Ark responded. "All communication from this ship beyond *an Tuirc* is being blocked."

"That's what I thought she'd do," Jaegar said. "She thinks I'll try to contact my father to ask for his help."

Spying the captain of the *an Tuirc* national army advancing along the upper catwalk, Jaegar wondered if his mother's guards would attempt to keep Younan from boarding the *Karataavuk*. If they did, he was sure there would be hell to pay for the good captain had no use for what he had labeled the queen's bully-boys. The burly warrior would make mincemeat of all four men then toss their butts into the brig.

Jaegar was a bit disappointed when the captain came down the stairs from the upper level and bulldozed his way through the guards without a backward look—the men moving aside, careful not to touch him. By the time Younan crossed the gangplank, Jaegar had the hatch open.

"You must have really pissed her off this time, son," Younan said as he marched into the ship. "I hear she has issued an order to have guards posted at your chamber door."

"I want them gone," Jaegar said. He nudged his chin toward the guards. "Them first."

Younan folded his arms over his chest. "Do you now? And are you making that a royal order, your grace?"

Jaegar met the captain's narrowed eyes. "I am." He got to his feet. "Where's King Abdul?"

The captain blinked. "He and Lord Lyden saw the lay of the land and fled over to *an Ghréig* as soon as the queen's ship docked yesterday. I've heard the servants are still cleaning the destruction she wrought in her chambers upon her return."

"And Riashi?"

Lips twisting with disdain, Younan snorted. "Your brother is skulking about as is his wont. No doubt he'll show his face when the fun begins."

"Call your men and have those bastards out there forcibly removed. I want every one of my mother's guards found and installed in the brig until further notice."

Younan whistled. "That bad, is it?"

"That was a direct order, Captain," Jaegar said. "With my father off-world, I am the law until he returns, am I not?"

A slow nod, a bright twinkle of his hawkish black eyes was the only answer the captain saw fit to extend.

"Then see it gets done."

Unfolding his arms, Younan reached up to touch the mini vid-com pinned to the left shoulder board of his uniform. "Sancaktar, I have a royal command to round up the queen's elite and jail them. See to it ASAP."

"With force, Captain?" asked the voice of Younan's 2-I-C.

"Aye. By whatever means necessary," Younan acknowledged.

"Aye, aye Sir!"

Younan came to stand beside Jaegar at the console.

"They seem nervous to you?" Jaegar inquired.

"If shifting from boot to boot is any indication, aye, I'd say they are a touch uneasy with us staring back at them," Younan replied. "See the way the tall one keeps flicking his eyes to the upper catwalk? He knows trouble is on the way."

"I think he knew that the minute you came barreling through their ranks," Jaegar told him. "Oh and I want communications between this ship and the outside reopened."

"She closed you down, did she?" Younan asked. He arched a bushy black brow. "I don't know what you've gone and done now but this feels like war to me."

"Just get the com officer on duty to open the channels for me and stop giving me that look."

"What look?" Younan asked.

"You know what look and here comes your men."

Younan smiled. "Like the little avenging angels they are."

There was nothing little about the squad of warriors bearing down on the queen's men. Neither was there anything angelic about them. They looked tough as nails and twice as sharp, and from the looks on their faces, eager to do battle with the four men who now were exchanging worried looks between them.

"Reassessing the idea of whether to fight or surrender," Younan observed. "The tall one is gonna fight. The others—after seeing him set down—will surrender without so much as a peep."

"You think?"

"I know," Younan stated.

"I want the channels opened, Younan," Jaegar reminded him.

Reaching up to contact Sancaktar once again, Younan ordered the 2-I-C to contact the communications officer on duty and order him to rescind the blocking of the prince's communication status. "Tell him I don't believe he wants to get in the middle of this. Make sure he understands that any further orders regarding off-world coms will come through either you or me, copy?"

"Copy, Sir!"

Both men flinched as the tall man went down under the vicious pounding of three of the captain's squad. The remaining members of the queen's guards clasped their hands behind their backs and assumed a parade rest posture.

"He's good," Jaegar said of his mother's man. "Not too bright but a good fighter."

"I beg to differ, your grace. A few lucky punches and a roundhouse kick do not a good fighter make," Younan argued. "He's down now." A smile tugged at his thin lips. "And out like a light."

As the unconscious man was tossed like a sack of salt over the shoulder of one of Younan's men and the remainder of the queen's guard marched away, Jaegar told the captain he could leave.

"Thanks for your help."

"Any time, your grace," Younan drawled. "Best you stay here until I let you know we've got all her bullies incapacitated."

"I've got a personal call to make anyway."

Once Younan left, Jaegar closed the hatch and ordered Ark to scramble a call to Dominia. The prince sat down and propped his feet on the console to wait for the transmission to go through. As his lover's smiling face appeared on the vid-com screen, Jaegar felt the jolt of sexual desire run like lightning through his veins.

"Where are you right now?" he asked.

"Obviously on my ship," she said. "Are you home?"

"And about to beard the dragoness in her lair."

"Poor baby," she said, her lips puckering into a moue. "It was nice knowing you."

Jaegar laughed. "You can't get rid of me that easily, wench."

"I hope not."

"Have you been given a new assignment?"

"I'll be leaving within the hour for Ildathach. I've got a money launderer to arrest." Her smile slipped a notch. "Unfortunately for me, there's some heavy fighting going on over that way."

Jaegar's heart skipped a beat. "You be careful out there."

"I will."

They were quiet for a few seconds—each lost in thought—then Jaegar licked his lips. "You know what I wish I could do right now?" he asked.

Dominia tilted her head to one side, the smile returning full force to her lovely face, an impish sparkle entering her eye. "Are we on a secure channel, warrior?"

"We are."

"Then let me tell you what I wish you were doing, studly one," she said in a low, husky voice.

Chapter Seven

His cock leapt at her words, and as she spoke, the thickness in his trousers pressed tight against the fabric.

“I wish we were in the rain forest on *Bhrasail*, lying beneath the spreading canopy high above our heads, the mists from a nearby waterfall coating our naked bodies. I am on my back with one knee raised, my arms to either side of my head. You are lying on your side beside me, tracing intricate patterns on my bare belly.

“I can feel your cock pressed against my thigh. It’s hard as stone and the tip is oozing pearly drops onto my flesh.

“My body clenches, tightens with anticipation because I can see unbridled lust building in your eyes as you look at me. You want me. I want you. I can feel your arousal deep within me, the scent of your desire rising up all around us. I need you. I must have you.

“You slide your hand up to gently cup my left breast. You run the pad of your thumb over my nipple until it is as hard as your cock. Then you lean over me and draw the little nub into your mouth, drawing deeply as you sweep your tongue across its pebbled surface.

“I strain against your mouth, offering my breast to you. Offering you my body. My hips arch and your cock stirs, smearing the pre-cum along the side of my thigh.

“You switch your attention to my right breast, squeezing it firmly as you take the tight bud between your lips and rake your teeth across it. With my nipple between your teeth, your hand glides down my chest, my belly. You dip a fingertip into my navel, circle it then smooth your palm over my mons and to the slick heat that aches so desperately for your plundering. You cup my sex. You rub it firmly, allowing your middle finger to slide along the opening.

“You don’t enter me—not just yet. Your palm is scraping delicately along my folds. Back and forth. Back and forth. The heaviness at the base of your palm drives me mad with desire as it presses on my mons.

“You splay your fingers and rake index and ring fingers down the inner canals of my sex, gently stroking, causing my cunt to weep with need of penetration.

“Back and forth. Back and forth. This time your middle finger taps at my opening—a request to enter. A request I gladly acknowledge. A request for which my body burns. There is heat on your fingertip as it grazes my slit. I arch my hips to you in pleading but—instead—you pull your hand upward until the strong, hot fingertip touches my clit.

"You tap it and it responds, causing my hips to writhe on the cool mat of leaves you have spread for our bower. You circle it, lightly rake your nail over the burgeoning button.

"I cry out, buck, wriggle my bare ass on the ground with growing need. I want you inside me. I want your cock sliding into me, stretching me, filling me, pounding into my body. I want to feel the weight of you pressing me down, holding me down, conquering.

"I whimper for you have worked my clit until all the nerve endings are exquisitely aroused and primed to explode. I hurt for want of you. I am dying for need of you.

"Slowly—so slowly I want to scream—you lower your hand until once more your finger is at my entrance. You stop with it placed there at the slick opening, hot juices flowing out in entreaty.

"Please, *aşık!* I beg you. 'Take me. Thrust your cock deep between my thighs. Ram me with your powerful thrust, warrior. Pulse within me!'

"But you only smile that evil smile that tells me you wish to torture me even more. Your finger eases into me—not much but enough to make me moan for more. It parts my inner folds and sinks a little deeper.

"Warrior, please! I beseech you. 'Fill me! Push hard. Push deep. Impale me!'

"Yet still you show me no mercy. Your finger inches like the shadows of the day ever deeper but at such a pace I am beside myself with seething desire. I want to grab your hand and force the questing digit deep inside me but I fear if I do, you will not ease the raw, sexual hunger that is driving me insane with want of you.

"At last you are in me as deep as you can go. I feel your finger crook and then you slowly begin to turn it. I know what you are after. I know what it is you seek and my entire body quivers in anticipation. Your finger glides slowly in and out. In and out then it presses upward until it touches that wondrous spot I know you will torment unmercifully.

"But that isn't what you do. I watch your eyes change. I see the gold erupting to fiery embers. Before I can get away, you are over me, caging me with your body, jerking my thighs apart and yanking my hips up to meet the thick, glistening head of your cock. Your fingers dig into my ass. You haul me higher still until—in one quick, slick, powerful thrust—you impale me on the full length of your long, hot shaft."

"There I go making war on you again," he whispered, his voice thick with desire.

"I feel you stretching me. I fear I will rip for you are so huge, your cock so broad it completely fills me. The tip is against my womb and lightning is zigzagging through my blood as you thrust your hips forward brutally, sending electrical currents down my spine.

"Your strokes become harder, deeper, your hips driving against me, rocking my body. My inner muscles clamp upon your rod and squeeze, tighten until you are mindless with the same fierce lust that is driving me to rake my nails along your ass.

"I lift my legs and lock them around your hips as you slam into me with so much force, so much power, I can do nothing more but cling to you to keep from being torn apart by your insatiable lust.

"You have taken me over, claimed me completely. Your body controls mine, owns mine. Over and over again your hips shoot forward and the sound of our groins meeting sounds loud – even over the tumble of the waterfall.

"Lust is crawling through me like a panther. It growls. It bares its teeth as the fire begins to build. The blood is pooling in my clit. It is pooling in your cock. Your balls are tight. I can feel them slamming against my lower opening.

"You shift your arms under me, wrenching me higher. I cry out but you are mindless to my slight pain. Your eyes are boring into mine. Your lips are pulled back. Like the panther you show your teeth. You growl low in your throat. A fever glint of blood-red passion enters your stare, and then you are pumping furiously, driving into me with brutal abandon. You grunt with your effort with each forward thrust, the explosions of your breath fanning over my tight nipples."

"I don't seem to be able to make gentle love to you, do I?" he asked, his hand rubbing his stiff cock.

She shivered. "I love the way you take me," she said. "I love it. I crave it. I need it. I hunger for your dominance, your power as you thrust into me."

"I can feel the release coming," he told her. "It's like an inferno. It burns me inside and out. Fire is crawling over my skin. My balls ache. They are so tight I can barely draw breath. Your cunt is wrapped around me like slick velvet. It clings to my flesh as it seeks to draw the seed from my cock. It squeezes, it bears down in tight little ripples as it swallows me."

"Aye," she breathed. "Aye. You feel it, warrior. You feel me tightening around you."

"I am lost to everything around us as I pound into you. Your scent fills my nostrils and drives me mad with desire. I want to go deeper inside you until I disappear into your wet heat. I want to crawl inside and make a home there so I will be with you every moment of every day."

"Fill me, warrior," she said, panting. "Fill your woman with your cum."

"You pulse around me! You squeeze me. The release is a stroke away, my lady, and I strain toward it. I can hear my own whimpers as I drive like a runaway piston into your hot channel."

"Aye! Take me, Jaegar. Take me!"

Unaware his hand was stroking his cock through the fabric of his trousers, his palm pressing down hard on the thick erection, Jaegar's eyes were closed at the moment he released his seed. He groaned, bucking his hips in the pilot's seat, completely lost to anything and everything around him.

Light years away, Dominia was spiraling down from her own intense climax. She was lying curled on her bunk with her hand between her quivering thighs. Her head thrown back on the pillow, her knees wide as she clutched at her throbbing groin.

"Sweet, merciful Alluvia," she whispered, blood pounding furiously in her ears.

Breathing heavily, both slowly opened their eyes at the same time. Only one set of eyes held embarrassment and those belonged to Jaegar. Stunned to see where he was, realizing what he had just done as he sat behind the broad windscreen of his craft—in full view of anyone who might have been passing—he jerked his hand from his crotch, eyes flaring as heat rushed to his cheeks.

"Mother of the Prophet," he moaned.

Thankfully no one had seen him doing what—in his religion—was considered a major violation. The front of his trousers was dark with his juices and the fabric stuck to him like glue. He was gasping for breath, feeling lightheaded as the blood raced through his body.

"Jaegar?"

Dominia's weak voice pulled him back from the bellow of frustration that had been about to erupt from his throat.

"Aye, *meleşüm*?" he managed to respond.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Aye," he said, shaking his head at the lapse of good sense that could have been catastrophic had anyone been a witness to his thoughtless and selfish act.

"Did you come?"

"Like a fucking racehorse," he admitted, and a tentative smile twitched his lips. "You?"

"This mare was running right alongside you," she replied.

"Let's not do that again," he suggested. "My heart can't take it."

"Next time," she said, her voice sultry and filled with promise, "it will be the real thing."

"Next time," he said. He heard the click of the vid-com, signaling she had broken their connection, and he slumped in the chair. He was trembling, his knees weak. His mouth was dry but his palms were slick with sweat. He ran them down his thighs and winced as the wetness between his legs reminded him it was there.

On shaking legs, he got up and minced his way to the head, grimacing every step of the way.

* * * * *

For the better part of two hours Queen Audrina had paced from one end of the throne room to the other. The guards she had ordered to safeguard the main entrance to the room had disappeared. Likewise the four warriors who had been watching the east

and west exits were no longer there. When she had tried to use the vid-com, she found it inoperable. There was no way she could contact her personal guards, and when she tried to leave the room, she found all three doors locked from the outside. Pounding upon the heavy oaken panels, screaming invective at whoever had dared to detain her had gained her nothing.

Now as she heard the click of the lock cycling open, she whipped around with fury, her eyes flashing with deadly sparks of hatred. Palms slick with bloody half-moon indentations, lips drawn back with a snarl, she took a step forward only to come up short as Jaegar came into the room.

It wasn't the stone-hard look on his face that stilled her nor was it the steady stare from the molten gold eyes. His broad shoulders were back, spine straight as he came toward her, hands hanging loosely at his sides. Though he was much taller than she, his height had never been an issue as far as she was concerned. To her, he was still a boy. She'd paid scant attention over the years to the development of the corded muscles in his arms and thighs and the wide expanse of his chest. However, at that moment, Audrina was keenly aware of every physical aspect of her son as well as the mental ones—completely unexpected airs of unstoppable power and authority rolling off him in waves. All because during the thirteen years since becoming a Shadowlord he had never once donned the unrelieved black of his sorcerer heritage...

Until now.

He stopped ten feet from her. "Mother," he said with a slight inclination of his head.

Audrina lifted her chin. "So you met the bastard, did you, and he managed to forge a backbone for you?" When he didn't reply to her taunt, she flung out a dismissive hand. "The uniform of a Shadowlord does not one make, Jaegar Rozakaris."

He shifted his legs apart and crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes steady on her angry face. The air of nonchalance seemed to aggravate her even more, and she took a step toward him, hand raised.

"Don't."

The one word was spoken quietly and with deadly calm. His face was completely without expression, his amber eyes unblinking.

His mother's eyes narrowed into thin slits of pure malice. "Do you presume to give me orders, boy?"

"I ceased being a boy long ago, Mother," he told her.

She snorted, her derision aimed straight at his pride, but when the impassive countenance did not change, the look of hurt she expected to see did not materialize, she faltered. Her sticky palm itched to slam against his cheek. She wanted to rake her nails down that handsome visage, scar it, mark it for all time. Although it bore little resemblance to Sancara Ben-Sulil's, her son's looks were a vivid reminder of the man she so loathed.

"I am still your mother!" she threw at him. "You owe me respect!"

"Aye, you are, and as the woman who gave me life, I do respect you, and I thank you for it. It would have been just as easy to snuff out that life. A son should show reverence to his mother, but I can't do that. As the woman who has made my life a living hell from as far back as I can remember, all I can do is pity you for the twisted, evil bitch you are."

"How dare you say such a thing to me!" she gasped. She came at him with both hands curled into claws.

Jaegar moved so quickly she never saw it. He grabbed her before she could drag her sharp nails down his cheeks and held her effortlessly, his eyes boring into hers with a coldness she had never experienced in her son's gaze. She lifted her knee to jab it into his groin but found herself shoved backward across the room. She flew over the steps of the dais and landed in the gilded red chair that sat beside the king's, her rump hitting the thick cushion with hardly any force.

"Never again," he said, striding toward her with hands clenched into fists. "Never again will I let you lay a hand to me, woman!"

Audrina knew real fear for the first time. She stared it in the eye as it came toward her and pressed close against the chair's back, every muscle in her body suddenly frozen. Unable to speak, to move, all she could do was draw in a stunned breath as her son advanced to her chair, curled his hands around the arms and leaned close.

"This," he said, never breaking eye contact with her, "is the way it's gonna be." He paused for a moment, his gaze shifted down to her neck. The iron choker she had worn for so long was gone. He slowly returned his attention to her frightened eyes and the smile he gave her was venomous.

She could feel him entering her mind like a shadow. The sensation flowed like soft, warm heat, and it missed nothing. It delved into every crease, every fold, dipped into all the wells where memories and thoughts and opinions were stored. It took in everything. All that was her—everything that made her what she had become—was examined closely, evaluated. As the shadow withdrew, she felt as though she had been violated in the worst way. Nothing had been denied the shadow. It knew all there was to know of her now.

"Interesting," her son commented.

Her heart was pounding furiously—so savagely there was a thick band of constriction squeezing at her chest. It had been foolish not to replace the choker when she had returned to *an Tuirc*. Her pride, her conceit had removed it and replaced it with the luxurious jewels she had worn to the palaces of *an Iaráin*, *an Afraic*, *Arabach* and all the other planets to which she had trekked in an effort to find a suitable bride for Jaegar. She regretted her thoughtlessness in leaving off her only protection for she knew Sancara's bastard son would use against her what he had taken from her mind.

"Too bad all those alliances you made while on your travels won't matter in the least," he said, a muscle grinding in his cheek. "There will be no merging of any of those royal families with this one. No self-effacing, submissive little miss you can cow

and browbeat into submission will be creeping between my sheets. There won't be any advantageous unions to advance your position."

With every word her son spoke, Audrina's anger at him went deeper and deeper. She could do nothing but stare into his handsome face, listen to what he was saying, but her thoughts were whirling like a dark maelstrom inside her head. She didn't think he could talk and read her mind at the same time. If he could, he would see the hatred turning to lethal revulsion.

"You are going to cease your attempts to run my life through this misguided conception that I owe it to you. I don't. My life is my own. I will live it as I see fit." His scrutiny moved from her right eye to her left then back again. "I will choose my own road to travel and the person with whom I wish to take that journey with me." He pushed away from the chair, straightened to tower above her. "In fact I have already chosen. I have not only chosen, I have bonded with her. She was chosen for me by the Fates, and she will be my bride." He cocked his head to one side, the cold smile that never reached his eyes returning. "As a matter of fact, you've already met her."

An explosion of air drove from Audrina's lungs and—along with it—the last vestiges of sanity she still possessed. Irrational fury washed over her until she could see a bright red haze flooding her vision. Her stare grew as sharp as a dagger and just as deadly. Though she couldn't move, couldn't speak, Audrina hurled a savage thought at him and took pleasure in seeing him flinch. His expression never altered but the golden eyes took on a measure of unease that was encouraging.

"Not this time, Mother," he said, shaking his head. "You've more than met your match in her."

He turned to leave but stopped. With his back to her, he told her to return to her room when he was gone and not to bother calling for her guards for they were all behind bars in the donjon.

"Go to your room," he repeated, "and remain there until I decide what to do with you."

His words sent shards of terror through her. She knew she had to get away from him as quickly as possible, away from his psychic influence. She must retrieve the choker and flee Eejderha and place herself well out of his reach. As soon as the door closed behind him, the paralysis into which he'd placed her vanished. She sucked in a ragged breath then shot from the chair, running from the room as fast as she could. She had to get to her room, find the choker. Thankfully Abdul was paranoid, mistrustful and suspicious of those who claimed to be his friends and allies. He kept a fully fueled and well-maintained runabout secreted underground in case the palace was ever overrun by enemies. Should it be where he was incapacitated, he had taught her to fly the older model Fiach so she could get herself and their sons to safety.

"Trust no one to go with you. Take only the boys, Audrina. Go to *an Égypt* and my cousin Mahdi. He will keep you safe."

Her skirts hiked above her knees, the queen rushed up the stairs to her chambers, hoping no one was about to see her mad dash. Luck was with her—or against her, she thought, depending on how she chose to look at the situation. Hurrying into her chambers, she went straight to her jewelry box and quickly attached the choker, breathing somewhat easier that she had a modicum of protection against Jaegar's prying.

She ran to the bed, stripped a pillowcase from its pillow. She emptied the contents of her jewelry box into the case then ran to the small wall safe behind a portrait of Jaegar and Riashi when they were boys. Hurriedly working the dial, she threw the door open and extracted all the money and more costly gems and jewelry, dumping them into the pillowcase. Anything else that was of great matter to her—that she treasured—she grabbed up and added to the bundle. The last thing she took was a serviceable dagger.

"Let him try to stop me," she sneered. "I'll gut the little bastard!"

She went to the door that connected her room with Abdul's, put her ear to the portal and upon hearing only silence, jerked open the door and made quick work of taking everything of value from her husband's room. Once she had as much as she could comfortably carry, she went to the hidden passage that led to the complex system of secret tunnels.

Within fifteen minutes she was sitting behind the controls of the runabout, working the remote controls that would open a slab of the redstone wall so she could taxi the craft onto the wide rock ledge that served as a runaway.

Five minutes later she was airborne, not breathing easy until *an Tuirc* was but a dot behind her.

* * * * *

So unnerved and sickened by what he had seen in his mother's mind when he intruded there, Jaegar had barely made it to a trash can before he started puking. He bent over with one hand to the wall and the other on his hip as the hot bile came. The images he had seen jerked through his mind to prick at his very soul. They hurt him so deeply his knees threatened to buckle from under him. He pushed from the wall and staggered to a chair, falling into it with a grunt. For a moment he sat that way—staring with unbelieving eyes across the room—then brought his hands up to bury his face in them. Groaning, he bent forward, the pain more than he could bear.

"Oh god!" he whispered over and over again.

He was shaking, the malevolence he'd discovered in his mother's memories blotting out everything else around him. It had taken all his courage and strength not to show her how those memories and thoughts had affected him, how they had pierced his very soul.

For a long while he sat there hunched over—replaying the vile images in his own mind until they threatened to permanently cripple him. That he could not allow and got

shakily to his feet, tossing his head violently from side to side in the hope he could banish the imagery, yet it remained.

Like his mother had, he ran up the stairs and to his own chambers, slamming the door shut behind him. His suite of rooms was one floor below hers, his room directly beneath hers, and he looked up at the ceiling, shivering as he imagined her up there plotting her next revenge against him. Despite knowing he shouldn't, he sent out a probe to touch her diseased mind and when he sensed nothing, knew she must have put the choker on again.

"The damage has already been done," he whispered. "I know all your evil secrets, Mother."

He looked down at his trembling hands. There had been one exacting moment when he'd been inside her head, taken in the atrocious things she'd done in her lifetime, that he had wanted to snap her neck like a twig. He had brutally stamped down that urge, but it was still with him. He slapped his palms against his thighs and rubbed them savagely against his pants.

Like a man going through the pangs of withdrawal, he began pacing to rid himself of the overpowering need to go to her room and end her life. One, two, three circuits across his room did nothing to lessen the urge. The more the images moved across his mind's eye, the worse it got. He wished with all his heart he had Dominia with him at that moment. He needed to see her, hear her, feel her arms around him. He needed the calm and safety he knew she would offer.

Snapping his head around, he stared at the vid-com console on his desk. He swallowed, ran the back of his hand across his nose then strode to the only means he had of being with his bond-mate.

"Vid-com on!" he barked, grabbing the chair and pulling it away from the desk. He flung a long leg over the back and crashed onto the seat.

"How may I be of service to you, your grace?" the vid-com inquired.

"Contact Major Dominia Alamaine at this vid-addy," Jaegar snapped, giving Dominia's ship number. He realized too late it wasn't the wisest thing to do in hailing her from the palace, but he had to see her, hear her or he was going to do something he knew he would regret.

Almost immediately her concerned face appeared on the vid-screen.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Talk to me," he said. "Domi, talk to me, or I'm going to crawl out of my fucking skin!"

Dominia's eyes showed her alarm at his words. "Jaegar, tell me what's wrong."

"I told her about us," he said. "I didn't tell her your name, but I told her I had bonded with you."

"Why didn't you give her my name?" she questioned.

"I didn't dare!" he said, shaking his head. His voice was ragged, louder than it needed to be. "I couldn't, Domi. I couldn't!"

"All right," she said. "Calm down. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

He had to struggle to get his emotions under control. He plowed a hand through his hair. "I went swimming in the murky cesspool of her mind. What I saw..." He shuddered. "Mother of the Prophet, why did I do that?" He pounded his fist on the desk. "Why the fuck did I do that?"

Even from many light-years away, Dominia jumped at the violence coming from him in waves. "Jaegar, you need to calm down," she said quietly.

"I wish to the Prophet I had stayed out of her head! It was all I could do not to put my hands around her neck and squeeze until the light left her eyes!"

"Where is she now?" she asked, worried he might do just that.

"In her room," he said. He scrubbed at his face. "I called her evil, but there has to be another word to describe just how wicked that woman is, how immoral and depraved!"

"Now you are scaring me," Dominia said. "What did you see that has affected you so strongly?"

"All of them, Domi!" he shouted, his eyes wide. "Every last one of them! She had every one of them murdered."

Dominia's eyes narrowed in confusion. "Who, baby? Who are you talking about?"

His face crinkled and tears slid down his pale cheeks. She watched his lips tremble.

"Every girl from the palace that I've ever lain with," he said, his voice breaking. "Every one."

Her lips parted in shock. "Oh Jaegar, surely not!"

"I saw it! Beginning with the one just before you!" he said. "She had them brought to her in the donjon and watched while her men raped them. When they were finished, they cut the girls' throats then tossed them down a shaft."

"Merciful Alluvia," Dominia said, putting a hand to her mouth.

"There were dozens of them, Dominia," he said, his voice pitiful to hear. "Dozens." He shook his head. "What kind of bastard was I that I took that many without a second thought?" He buried his face in his hands.

"Have you told the king about this?" she asked, sensing she needed to get his mind away from the guilt in which he was drowning.

"He's not here," he told her. "And I can't stay, *meleğüm*, I can't. There's no telling what I'll do if I'm anywhere near her!"

"Don't do something you'll regret."

"I should put her in Galrath," he said.

Dominia winced. "The Serenian convent?"

"Maybe the nuns will beat some humility into her." He raked his fingers through his hair again. "I've got to get out of here before I go up there and beat her myself!"

"Where will you go?" she asked.

He shook his head, the bleakness in his eyes cutting her to the quick when he raised his face. "I don't know. I just know I don't dare stay here."

"Then go back to Basaraba," she said. "Go to your father. Talk to him."

"Where are you?" he asked, pleading in his voice. "Domi, I need to be with you."

"My assignment was changed at the last minute and I'm on my way to Sasana to arrest a drug dealer. Alexa Tyne was going to do it but her father died, and she had to return to Chale to handle the funeral arrangements."

"I'll come to you," he said. "I..." She was shaking her head. "Why not?"

"Because I'm working, Jaegar." She tilted her head to one side in an effort to soften the denial. "You and I both know what will happen the moment we see one another. I can't be distracted right now. Rupert Gaines is a mean son of a bitch, and he's not going to make it easy for me to take him down." She smiled gently. "Go to Basaraba. I'll try to meet you there once I put Gaines behind bars."

Jaegar's shoulders slumped. He knew he was acting like a spoiled child. Dominia was a Riezell Guardian. She had a job to do, and he shouldn't make it any harder for her.

"I just need you," he defended himself.

"I know, *aşık*, and we'll be together as soon as possible. Just keep it together for me until then. Okay?"

He nodded. He wasn't a weak man, but it must seem that way to her. He lifted his head, needing to show her he had some self-control, some self-respect left. "I'll contact the king, have him come back. I don't dare to leave her here alone. There's no telling what she might do. For all intents and purposes, she's under house arrest, her personal guard installed in the donjon, but there may be others at the palace who could be made to help her."

"What is it you think she'll do?"

"Come after you. I marked you when I took you here that day. She knew and she's already paid someone to find you. I saw it in her mind," he said. The thought of that happening struck at him with unbridled fear.

"Let her," Dominia said. "I'm not concerned."

"She'll realize who I meant when I said I bonded if she hasn't already," he said, his face stricken with remorse. "That will only double her efforts to have you found and —"

"Not going to happen," she said, knowing what she had stopped him from saying aloud. "I'd make mincemeat out of whomever she sent after me."

"You have to let the Guardians know," he said. "Domi, you have to be careful!"

"I'll handle it, Jae," she said in a firm voice. She started to say something encouraging but a knock on his door took his face from her sight.

"Not now!" he yelled.

"Your grace, it is important," the person outside his door insisted.

"See what he wants," Dominia said, and heard her lover curse as he shot from the chair and stalked to the door, flinging it open.

"What?" he barked, and Dominia smiled. She knew he needed that anger to replace the diminished confidence he had in himself.

"The queen has left the palace, your grace," a tall, stately man in the uniform of the *an Tuirc* armed services said. "She used the runabout hidden in the cave."

"Fuck!" Jaegar bellowed. "How long ago?"

"Within the last few minutes. She didn't alert air command she was leaving, just took off. My guess is she's heading for *an* —"

"I know where she'll go! And I know right where I'm going to put her ass when I catch up with her!" Jaegar snapped. "Have my ship fueled and get me a contingent of men to accompany me to *an Éigipt*."

"Your runabout?" the captain questioned, thick brows drawn together.

"No, Yousef! Shit, how many men do you think I can cram into my fucking Fiach?"

"Knowing you?" came the dry response. "As many as you could get in there and still fly."

Dominia laughed and was rewarded by Jaegar jerking around to pin her with a narrow-eyed glare. Her eyebrows arched when he jabbed a rigid finger in her direction.

"You be careful on Sasana, and I'll see you in Basaraba. Vid-com out!" he snarled.

On her end of the terminated transmission, Dominia stared at the black screen before her and felt a momentary shiver of unease ripple down her back.

"At least he's gotten over the self-pity," she mumbled as she settled back in the form-fitting chair of her runabout.

She hadn't wanted to tell him about the man she had taken out a few nights earlier. The bastard had to be the one Jaegar's mother had sent to murder her. She knew he was right in fearing the bitch would keep trying, keep sending men to rid her son of his bond-companion. That didn't particularly bother her. What concerned her was his next meeting with his mother.

She knew if Jaegar gave in to the urge to punish his mother — the punishment fitting the crimes she had committed — he would not be able to live with himself. It was his state of mind, his potential damage that made her act.

"Filos, get me that insipid bimbo at Command Central."

"Right away, Domi," the vid-com replied.

The face of General Strom's new secretary came on the screen. Her large lips were slathered with a thick coating of bright red lipstick and the two bright spots of rouge on her high cheekbones made her look like a marionette.

"How may I help you, Major?" the woman whose name escaped Dominia inquired.

"What's your name again?" Dominia demanded, missing Miriam Quillan more each time she was forced to speak with the bleached blonde with the oversized lips.

"Once again, it is Francine Melton, Major. Francine. Melton," the woman said with an annoyed sigh. "Is there something you require?"

"I want the vid-addy of a runabout heading toward *an Éigipt* from *an Tuirc* and I need it like ten minutes ago," Dominia ordered.

"I would imagine there are several runabouts..."

"Get me the goddess-be-damned addy now, Melton!" Dominia shouted.

"Is there a problem, Major?"

It was the voice of her commanding officer General Maximillian Strom, and as the man moved into the scope of the vid-com screen, Dominia resisted the urge to groan.

"It's a personal matter, Sir," she replied.

"I see," Strom said, frowning. "Pray refrain from raising your voice to my secretary, if you would." He held up a hand, anticipating his operative's response. "She isn't Miri and we need to be patient with her while she's learning the ropes. If you ladies would ease up on her, things would go a lot smoother."

That told Dominia she wasn't the only one having trouble with the vapid sexpot with her tight clothing and her condescending smirk.

"Then you tell her to start showing the Guardians the respect we are due, Sir, or you might find yourself looking for another secretary who will," Dominia warned.

"Noted," Strom said with a twitch of his lips. He turned toward Francine, asked if she had the information his operative needed. At her curt nod, he put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Then give it to her and don't keep her waiting again."

"Aye Sir," the secretary mumbled, turning a vengeful face toward Dominia. "There are three runabouts destined for *an Éigipt*. Two have flight numbers and were cleared through the *an Tuircese* air command but the third —"

"That's the one I want," Dominia interrupted.

Francine pursed her outsized lips. "That addy is Panther 1-56-8485. If you would like me to —"

Dominia cut off the transmission, gave the vid-addy to her onboard computer. Her hands clenched on the controls of her vessel as she waited for the hail to be answered.

"Panther 1 is ignoring us, Domi," Filos reported.

"Bitch," Dominia said under her breath then decided to say what she felt she needed to. "Queen Audrina, this is Major Dominia Alamaine with the Riezell Guardians. I don't need to hear from you, but you do need to heed my warning. Jaegar knows you are heading for *an Éigipt* and even now is on his way to intercept you. If you don't want to wind up at Galrath Convent, I suggest you alter your flight plans."

"Why are you telling me this?" came the heated demand. No image formed on the vid-screen, which remained black.

"Because I don't want him hurting any more than he already is. If he gets his hands on you, only the goddess knows what he'll do," Dominia answered.

"You're the hell hag," the queen said, making the word sound vulgar.

"I am a Bandarian Daughter of the Night, aye," Dominia said, gritting her teeth. "And your son's bond-companion. I will be his bride."

There was a rude noise. "The only thing you'll be is a moldering corpse when I'm through with you, whore!"

"I wouldn't make threats if I—" Dominia began but heard the click that signaled the transmission had been terminated at the other end. "Shit!"

Well, she thought, she'd tried. If the woman had any sense at all, she'd listen to the warning and alter her course. That wouldn't stop Jaegar from going after her when he didn't find her in *an Égipt* but it might buy her some time.

Not that she cared what happened to the crone. As a matter of fact, she had plans of her own for Jaegar's evil mother.

Chapter Eight

The laser shot took a good-sized chunk off the granite above her head and Dominia cursed as she scooted farther back along the hospital wall. She put a hand to her cheek and came away with a smear of blood where the rock had struck her face.

"Son of a bitch," she snarled.

Her situation wasn't good. She'd walked right into a trap set by Rupert Gaines and wished she could slam her boot into her own ass for being so stupid. Had her mind not been divided, her worries about Jaegar diverting her attention from the situation, she would have smelled the rat who was crouched across the corridor with two of his henchman, waiting for her laser pistol to run dry of charge.

Another prolonged blast of fire came at her, and she threw her arms over her head as more granite shattered off the wall, showering her with stinging shards. With her head down, face covered, she was startled when something hard and heavy struck her, knocking her flat on her ass. She raised her pistol, ready to fire, and found herself staring into Jaegar's smiling face.

"Hey," he said.

Dominia clamped her eyes shut, shook her head to clear it, then opened her lids, stunned to see her lover hunkered there beside her. "Hey yourself," she replied. She wanted to throw her arms around him—or slap the shit out of him for being in harm's way. She forced both urges down and went for levity. "Whatcha up to, warrior?"

"About ten inches, give or take a spurt," he answered. He flinched as they were pelted with more fire and a rain of crumbling granite.

"Just stopping in to say hey, are you?" she asked.

"Well, I *was* in the neighborhood."

"Oh? Aren't you a long way from *an Éigipt*?"

He shrugged, whipped around and sent a long burst of laser fire toward Gaines and his men before turning and pressing his back to the wall. "She wasn't there but I think you already knew that, didn't you, *meleşüm*?"

"I didn't want you doing something you'd be sorry for, *aşık*," she replied.

He reached out to cup her cheek with his free hand, rubbing his thumb over her lips. "Aren't you sweet?" he asked.

She batted her eyes at him. "As molasses," she responded. "With just enough bite to make me interesting."

"That," he said with a laugh, "you surely are."

Once more, Gaines and his men opened up with a volley of fire that shredded the edge of the wall even more.

"I'm getting tired of this shit," Jaegar snapped. He had two additional laser pistols tucked in his waistband and pulled one out, handed it to her. "It's fully charged. Yours?"

"Almost spent," she reported. She looked him over. "I like you in black."

"I like me in black too," he said. "Okay, you know where they are. I'm going to go out first, blast the hell out of the wall over their head." He drew the other pistol from his waist. "You go in under me, aiming at the floor with your weapon and in the middle with mine. When yours is empty, concentrate right in the middle, keep them in their hidey hole until we can get over there and fry the fuckers."

"I need to take Gaines alive," she disagreed.

"I ain't making no promises," he warned. "Either way, the two bastards with him are toast."

"Make up your mind, Rozakaris," she snapped. "You can't fry them and toast them at the same time."

He leaned in, took her lips in a hard kiss then winked.

"On three," he said. "*Bir, iki...*" He was out of sight before he finished counting in his native language.

"*Uc!*" she snapped. "*Bir, iki, uc, warrior!*"

The sustained fire shattered the wall around Gaines. One of his men fell to the floor, smoke coming from a hole between his staring eyes. A scarlet beam went right past Jaegar's shoulder—singeing the fabric of his shirt—as he walked like a juggernaut toward the drug dealer's hiding place.

"Alluvia, protect his crazy ass!" Dominia prayed as she concentrated her fire where he'd told her.

"Quarter!" someone yelled. "Quarter!"

"Quarter, hell," she heard Jaegar snarl. "You fucking ruined my shirt, you asshole, and made my woman bleed!" He fired a long blast directly at the big hole in the center of the wall and was rewarded with a scream of pain.

"Quarter!" another voice shouted. "Fucking quarter, you gods-be-damned bitch!"

"That's Gaines," Dominia said. She moved up alongside her lover, keeping the barrel of her pistol trained on the gaping hole where a pair of hands suddenly appeared.

"We're coming out and we're unarmed!" Gaines yelled.

"One move I don't like and I'll turn you to cinders," Jaegar warned.

Gaines' accomplice was shoved out of the hole, and he went automatically to his knees with his hands behind his head, fingers laced. There was a black hole seared into his left shoulder, the fabric of his shirt still smoldering.

"On your belly, creep," Dominia ordered. "Ankles crossed!"

The man was quick to obey, studiously avoiding looking at his fallen comrade as he stretched out on his stomach.

"Come on out, Gaines," Dominia yelled.

"All right, all right!"

A thin-as-a-rail man sidestepped from the damaged alcove where he and his men had been hiding. His hands were in the air so high it looked as though he were reaching for the stars beyond the hospital ceiling. "I'm not resisting," he said. "You can see I'm not resisting."

"On your knees," Jaegar snapped. He kept his pistol's sight trained on the left side of the drug dealer's chest.

Gaines dropped like a rock, going to his belly before he could be ordered. He snapped one ankle over the other, drawing his hands down and behind him for the titanium cuffs Dominia was unclipping from her belt. The red beam from the prince's pistol was now on the top of the dealer's head.

"We make a pretty good team," Jaegar commented as Dominia straddled Gaines and slapped the cuffs around his wrist.

"Don't get any notions in that feeble mind of yours, Rozakaris," she mumbled.

Gaines lifted his head. "Rozakaris?" he repeated. "Prince Jaegar Rozakaris?"

Jaegar's smile was quick, never warmed his eyes, then slid away as he watched Dominia draw a thin wrist tie from the pocket of her uniform pants and wrap it around the henchman's wrists. As she tightened it, the man beneath her yelped.

"You're a pussy," she insulted him.

"You hurt my shoulder, bitch!" the man complained.

"I'll hurt you where it counts if you call her bitch again," Jaegar threatened.

Dominia grinned up at him then tapped the vid-com badge on her belt. "Two to transport." She sat down on the floor and leaned her back against the wall, exhausted from the long firefight she had envisioned as ending in an entirely different way had Jaegar not shown up.

Long after the authorities had come to take Gaines and his comrade into custody and carted away the dead man, Jaegar and Dominia sat side by side on the hard floor – not speaking, their fingers entwined. They ignored the rubberneckers who came to view the place where there had been a violent battle.

"I need a shower," Dominia finally said.

"I need a blowjob," he said then wobbled his head toward her. "Any chance I can talk you into wetting my whistle?"

"Any chance I can get you to make love to me slowly, gently and with a great deal of tenderness?" she countered.

He lifted one dark brow. "You really want that, *meleşüm*?"

"Aye," she said. "I'd like to experience it just once before I'm too old to really enjoy it."

"Not a chance," he said, scooting his back up the wall then extending his hand to help her up. "We'll never be too old to enjoy it."

"I'm just saying," she said as she got to her feet.

Jaegar hooked an arm around her waist, tugged her roughly to him. "Okay, if you twist my gonads, I might be coerced into being the sweet and temperate lover just this once."

"Wouldn't twisting your gonads be defeating the purpose of a slow, gentle and tender bout of lovemaking?" she asked as they started down the corridor.

"Hey, I gotta get something out of this!" he protested.

"We'll see," she said, laying her head on his shoulder. "We'll see."

* * * * *

They were in his ship this time—her first visit to his runabout—with a *Do Not Disturb* notice having been posted with the port authorities at the Sasana docking station.

"Under no circumstances are we to be disturbed."

It had been Prince Jaegar Rozakaris, the heir apparent to the Panther Throne of *an Tuirc*, who had stated the command. The officer on duty had nodded his assurance such would be the case.

With Dominia's prisoners already in the brig on the Class P starcruiser, the *Barracoon*, that had been dispatched to transport Gaines to Riezell, and her report completed to Command Central, she had the next twelve hours to herself.

"Wanna drink?" he asked after locking the hatch and engaging a switch that swept protective shields over the forward and aft windscreens. The shields would prevent spying eyes from viewing what went on inside the vessel.

"Do you have any plum wine?" she asked.

"Chrystallusian or Francach?"

"Either," she said.

He asked Ark to duplicate two glasses of Chrystallusian wine, took the glasses from the duplicator when they appeared then nudged his chin toward the short corridor that led to his quarters.

"You gonna ply me with liquor then take advantage of me, eh?" she said, taking a sip of the wine. "Is that your plan?"

"I'm going to worship you, my love," he said. He put a hand to her back to escort her down the corridor. "With hands and mouth and a very hard cock."

"Alrighty then," she said.

His quarters were exactly as she had pictured them—messy and crammed with the books he had told her he devoured by the pound. Every available inch of space was crowded with boxes of books or strewn with discarded clothing. She plucked a shirt from his bunk and tossed it over a box.

“I believe I’ve walked into the room of a teenage boy,” she complained. She looked around. “Where are the digiposters of nekkid bimbos with ginormous tits?”

He shrugged. “So I’m not a merry upstairs maid. Sue me.” He set his wineglass on the shelf beside his bunk, took hers and placed it there as well. He took a deep breath. “Now let’s see if I can be a civilized horndog.”

He started with the top button of her tunic and eased the silver fasteners from their holes slowly, his eyes locked on hers. When the last button was undone, he pushed the tunic from her shoulders and down her arms, sweeping it aside to lay it carefully atop one of the boxes.

“Good boy,” she said.

His eyebrows rose in acknowledgement of the compliment then reached for the white t-shirt tucked into the waistband of her gunmetal gray slacks. With infinite care, he drew the fabric from the waistband then pulled it over her head as she lifted her arms to aid him. Smoldering heat filled his golden orbs as her lacy white bra came into sight. He put his hands on her sides over the delicate material, slid them around to flick open the bra’s catch with one expert move.

“Ooh,” she said, drawing the word out. “That was smooth.”

His grin was wicked as he pulled the bra away from her, the straps falling softly down her arms. He tossed it atop her tunic then crooked a finger into her waistband and drew her closer. He tilted his head to the side, slanted his mouth over hers and used his teeth to tug her lips apart. When she opened to him, he slid his tongue inside the warm cavern for just a second before moving back, his finger gliding over to the fly of her slacks. One-handed, he flicked open the button then ran the zipper down.

Dominia shuddered. She was beginning to think she’d done the wrong thing in asking him to be slow. She was crawling out of her skin, wanting him to touch her exposed breasts, to cover them with his hands, to run his thumb over the stiffening peaks. Her nipples were so hard and aching so intensely she had to tuck her bottom lip between her teeth to keep from begging him to speed up.

“You wanted it slow and gentle, baby,” he reminded her, reading her mind. “And that’s what you’re gonna get.”

Putting his hands on her hips, he backed her to the bunk and pushed her gently to a seated position on the edge. He squatted to remove her boots and socks, tucking the socks inside the footwear before placing it off to one side. He took one foot between his hands and began to massage it slowly, with meticulous care, working each toe individually before he reached for her other foot.

“You’re into sexual torture, aren’t you?” she asked, her voice husky. “Why am I just discovering that?”

Her blood was reaching boiling point as he ran his hand beneath the leg of her slacks to gently knead her calf.

"Are you complaining?" he asked.

"I'm horny," she said. "And you're making it worse."

"That was my intention," he said, getting gracefully to his feet.

He drew her from the bed, worked the slacks down her hips and legs then took great care in folding them along the sharp crease before putting them with the tunic and bra. Clad only in the wisp of a thong, she had never felt so aroused in her life.

"Rip it off," she said, curling her tongue over her bottom lip.

He shook his head. "Patience, *meleğüm*. I've only just started."

Dominia groaned and could have bitten off her tongue. He gave her a look that said he was playing by her rules, only doing what she had asked from him. She dug her fingernails into her palm, be damned if she would show him again how desperately she wanted him to toss her to the bunk and ravage her until they were both sore and having trouble walking.

He put his hands to her hips, angled the fingers down toward the side straps of the thong then pushed them beneath the stretchy fabric. With infinite slowness that had her grinding her teeth, he lowered the thong over her long legs. With his eyes fused with hers, he brought the flimsy garment to his face and inhaled the scent of her sex.

"You smell so good, so wet," he pronounced. "So incredibly exciting."

"Oh now that's just not playing fair!" she whined.

He told her to sit, and she was quick to do as he bid. The blood was pounding through her ears, her body quivering with every hot glance he sent her. As he put his hands to the black shirt that fit him like a second skin, she licked her lips.

"Easy, love," he warned. "I'm not made of stone."

He ran the buttons slowly, shrugged out of the shirt, frowning at the hole in the sleeve. Not bothering to be careful with it for it was bound for the rag bin, he tossed it aside. Crossing his arms over his chest, he pulled the gray undershirt over his head and let it fall behind.

"Messy, messy," she said, but her eyes were glued to the thick bulge in his pants.

He motioned her over so he could sit down to tug off his boots, and she resisted the urge to run her hand over his bare back. There was the one scar where he had been hit by the laser bayonet and a few other faint lines that indicated he'd led a typical boyhood, but it was the mole high on his left shoulder blade that drew her attention and held it. She wanted to put her lips there, to lick it.

"When I'm through with you, you can do whatever you want to me," he said, and Dominia felt the quiver deep in her lower body at his words.

The boots and socks gone, he stood, unbuckled his belt, slowly unzipped his trousers then pushed them down his legs. She wasn't in the least bit surprised there was

no underwear beneath the black pants. There was, however, a hard cock that sprang free with purposeful intent.

"Oh my," she whispered, unable to take her eyes from the jutting evidence of his arousal.

There was a pearly drop clinging to the broad head, and she reached out to touch it but he shook his head. "Lie down on your stomach," he ordered. "I'm nowhere near finished with you, wench."

Wanting his hands on her, eager to feel his hard body pressing into hers, she scrambled around, drawing her knees onto the bunk and turning so she could stretch out in the center of the surprisingly soft mattress.

The mattress dipped as he put a knee to the bunk then threw a leg over her upturned rump, easing down so he was sitting with his cock lying along the crease of her ass. She writhed beneath him, wanting to shift her legs apart but his strong thighs held hers captive as he leaned toward her.

His palms were rough with calluses as he smoothed them over the bare flesh to either side of her neck and that turned her on even more than the weight of him straddling her ass. The fingers kneading her tight muscles were strong, applying just the right amount of pressure to ease the knots and tension.

"Jaegar?" she asked.

"Shush," he hissed softly. "No talking." He spread her arms above her to run his hands up each, massaging from shoulder to wrist—linking his fingers with hers for a moment—then made his way back down to her shoulders in a slow, languid manipulation. He worked the muscles of her shoulder, upper back, then scooted farther down until he was sitting over the crease of her knees. He leaned forward to knead the muscles of her waist and lower back then cupped her ass in a strong dual grip.

"Ah..." she moaned. She loved the feel of his fingers plying the muscles of her ass. It sent shivers of pure delight ricocheting through her. She closed her eyes to better savor the sensation.

By the time he moved again—wedging himself between her spread legs to sit on his haunches at her ankles—she was a limp pool of supremely relaxed female. With his firm, sure strokes on her thighs as he ran his palms from crook of knee to the swell of her ass, spreading his fingers along her outer thighs then pressing his thumbs along the inner, she had reached pure bliss.

Or thought she had until he worked his way down her calves then picked up one foot to massage in between his hands.

"Merciful Alluvia," she groaned. "Oh Jaegar, that's..."

"I told you to shush, wench," he commanded. His thumbs were pressing over the entire surface of the arch in small little circles that made her squirm. He worked each toe individually, flexed her foot—rotating it in a broad circle—then concentrated on spreading the circles over the ball and between her toes. As he switched to the other

foot to continue his ministrations, Dominia was hopelessly lost in paradise. He had to tell her twice to turn over before his words registered.

Lethargically she turned over and lay like a rag doll as he started his massaging with her shins and slowly worked his way up.

"You like torturing women, don't you?" she asked, and when he just smiled, she closed her eyes again.

His fingers were so strong as they worked up her thighs. She held her breath—expecting him to touch her between her legs—but he moved on, caressing her hips, her waist, the sides of her chest. She waited for him to put his hands to her breasts but he bypassed them to work the muscles of her shoulders and neck.

"You know, of course," he said, watching her open one eye. "I am memorizing every mole, every freckle, every nook and cranny of your body."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"It is," he declared, and slid his hands to the mounds of her breasts.

"That isn't what your cock is doing," she accused, looking down at the hard shaft that flexed beneath her attention.

"Unfortunately he has a mind of his own," Jaegar said with a sigh. "I have never been able to control the little bastard."

"Ain't nothing little about him, warrior," she scoffed.

"You bragging or complaining, wench?"

"Huh," she snorted.

He was so clinical with massaging her breasts, she wanted to arch into him, force him to squeeze, to pluck, to lightly pinch, but that didn't seem to be part of his agenda. He used both hands to ply each breast—careful to avoid touching the sensitive peak. After thoroughly kneading both, his palms glided down her sides and across to the slight indentation of her belly.

He smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked, wedging the other eye open as well.

"Your lack of curls," he said then laid his palm flat on her mound. "Here." He caressed her. "It intrigues me." He smoothed over her flesh. "So smooth and soft." His eyes lifted to hers. "Like an infant's."

"But she's all woman," Dominia said, her voice thick with need.

"That," he said, "she is."

"Are we finished with being nice now?" she asked.

His hand stilled on her mons. "Are you ready for me to make war, *meleşüm*?"

"I was ready twenty minutes ago," she confessed. "I..."

He covered her in one smooth move, ruthlessly pushing her knees apart with his. He hooked her knees over his shoulder, slipped his hands beneath her to lever her up then drove into her savagely.

"Yeppers, that's what I was talking about!" she said.

She clung to him as he thrust hard into her wet cunt. He was like an iron rod covered in silk—stretching her, filling her, forcing himself to the hilt. He swirled his hips, ground against her, used his cock like a battering ram as he rocked her vigorously.

Heat was spiraling through her lower body. Her nipples were tight, breasts aching. She locked her legs around his neck and arched her hips up to meet his every thrust.

The orgasm that erupted from Jaegar Rozakaris was so forceful he thought his head would explode. It rocked him so violently all he could do was dig his fingernails into her ass and hold on, fearful he would shoot into space like a rocket if he wasn't grounded.

Dominia felt the pleasure no less powerfully. She cried out—bucking under him as undulation after undulation flowed through her sheath. The soft inner muscles of her body gripped him hard, released, gripped again rapidly milking every last drop of semen from his pulsing cock.

He jerked against her then went as still as a statue as the last spurt shot from his rod—pressed so deeply inside her, he feared he might pierce her womb. One last ripple moved over his cock and then she too went still.

Jaegar crumpled like a broken doll atop her and lay there straining to draw breath. He was slick with sweat and his heart was pounding as though he'd run a marathon. So spent, drained, depleted—completely exhausted. When she stretched her legs out to either side of him, he nuzzled the side of his face in the hollow of her neck as her arms went around him.

"I liked our little skirmish, *aşık*," she said.

"Skirmish, hell," he grumbled. "That was an all-out battle, wench." He yawned. "Mayhap even a megawar."

She craned her neck to look down at his face as she smoothed the hair from his forehead. "Are you tired?"

"I haven't slept in two days," he admitted.

"Poor baby," she said. She glanced at the digital readout on the vid-com across the room. "I have about nine hours left. A few hours sleep wouldn't do me any harm."

"Wake me before you leave," he said, yawning again. Already his voice was slurred.

"Jaegar?"

"Umm?"

"We need to talk about your mother."

He groaned. "No, we don't."

"But..."

"Not now," he muttered.

She could hear the fatigue in his voice, but she was worried about where the crazed woman was and what she might be doing. "Not talking about it won't make it go away," she said.

"I told you not now," he snapped, and rolled to his side, turning his back to her.

She lay there staring at the vid-com until his breathing was deep and slow then she eased from the bed, dressing quietly. As she pulled on her clothes, she watched his face while he slept. He looked so young, so vulnerable, and she was worried about him. He was a careful man in every situation except where his mother was concerned and that bothered her.

Slipping from his runabout, she made her way to hers as the light from the Sasana sun lowered slowly in the sky. She had a little more than eight and a half hours of down time before she had to report back to Riezell. It certainly wasn't enough time to make it to Basaraba and back but she could contact the Deathlord and apprise him of the situation for something told her Jaegar had not.

"I'm going to protect your tight *an Tuircese* ass whether you like it or not, pretty boy," she mumbled.

Chapter Nine

Annoyed Dominia hadn't wakened him when she left Sasana, Jaegar was out of sorts as he pushed the runabout to its top limits. Having his feelings hurt by his lady's sneaky retreat wasn't the only reason he was in a foul mood. He had awakened to Ark informing him he had a message from the man the vid-com had taken to calling papa number two – King Abdul.

"Why are you still abed, Jaegar?" the king questioned as soon as Jaegar okayed the hail. "Are you ill?"

"What time is it?" he asked as he swung his legs from the bunk. He glanced at the vid-com screen to see the king scowling.

"Zero nine forty! I repeat, are you ill?"

Jaegar ran a hand through his tousled hair. "No, Papa. Just tired. I haven't been sleeping well of late."

"I've no wonder," came the reply. "All this mess with your mother departing for regions unknown and now Riashi. It's enough to make me pull out what hair I have left!"

Jaegar's brows slashed together. "What's the problem with Riashi?"

The king threw his hands into the air—a sure sign he was agitated to distraction. "He's come up missing too. Cleaned out his wall safe, packed a pair of bags as best his manservant can tell then hired a gypsy transporter to fly him to *an Indiacha*. From there, who knows where the little fool went? That's as far as my men could track him."

"My guess? He's wherever she is," Jaegar said, but refrained from adding "and good riddance".

"My feelings as well. When are you coming home, son?" the king demanded. "It is not good that both my sons are out and about at a time like this."

"I'll be leaving here as soon as I shower and get something in my groaning belly," Jaegar informed him. "Has something else happened to cause you worry, Papa?"

"Nothing having you with me would not cure," the older man stated. "Mahmet Nazanin is spouting his incendiary rhetoric in the marketplaces again. Sometimes I feel inclined to hire one of those *an Indiachian phansigars* to rid me of that vile man's continued opposition."

"You would never do that, Papa," Jaegar said although he might if Nazanin continued to ferment unrest against the Panther Throne. The senator from the northern zone was starting to piss him off.

"I can fantasize of doing it though," the king said with a sniff. "When are you coming home?"

Jaegar sighed. "I'll be there in time for supper, Papa."

"Supper?" the king gasped. "Just where are you, Jaegar?"

Resisting the urge to sigh again, Jaegar ground his teeth. "On Sasana."

"That's not too far away. Can't you get here any sooner? Must you dawdle, Jaegar?" There was petulance and not a little loneliness in the question.

"Aye, Papa. I'll do my best," Jaegar replied, striving to keep from cursing.

Now he was pushing his craft beyond its safe limits and trying to keep from ordering Ark to hail Dominia.

* * * * *

Queen Audrina noted her younger son needed a haircut and ordered the servant hovering quietly in the background to fetch a barber.

"I like my hair this way, Mother," Riashi protested, but his words fell on deaf ears.

His mother's gaze went to the *an Indiachian* her son had hired to escort him to the villa on *an Iodáil* where she had taken up residence. His jet-black eyes were steady on her as he stood beside the young prince. Tall for his race, muscular, his complexion was nearly as dark as that of the Necromanian woman Audrina had hired to be her personal maid. However, what held her attention was an exceedingly handsome face beneath the wrap of his black turban, the end of which curled over his right shoulder.

"And you are?" she queried with a lift of one brow.

"I am Birendra Parekh, Your Majesty," he replied with a hand to his waist and a slight bow. His dark gaze smoldered as it settled on her again. "And I am at your service."

"Birendra came highly recommended, Mother," Riashi said.

"And at a great cost, no doubt," Audrina commented. "Tell me, Sri Parekh. Are you a *phansigar*?"

The mercenary's white-toothed grin was dazzling against the dark plane of his face. "Please call me Birendra." He shook his head. "If I was of the *phan* cult, Your Majesty, I would not admit to it. To do so would be to court the notice of the *Poleenyn Eddyr-Cohollyssagh*. In my line of work, that would be a grave mistake."

"I would imagine so," she agreed, thinking the intergalactic policing force was most likely after this man already. "What, exactly, is your line of work, Birendra?"

He shrugged. "A little of this, a little of that. Whatever the market will bear."

The servant returned, once more silently waiting in the background until the queen turned toward him.

"He is here?"

"Aye, Your Majesty," the man replied.

"Go with him, Riashi," Audrina ordered. "Birendra and I have business to which we must attend."

The young man frowned. "What kind of business, Mother?" he asked, but at her quelling look, he ducked his head and was quick to leave them alone.

"A brash boy with no manners and a propensity to put his nose where it does not belong," she grumbled.

"Yet a young man keenly aware of the power his mother wields," Birendra said.

"Let us hope so," Audrina said. She clapped her hands and another servant appeared. "I want coffee served in the *peristylum*."

As the servant hurried away, the queen was keenly aware of the mercenary's fathomless gaze sweeping her from head to toe. Normally such an insolent perusal would have angered her but this time it caused a wild flutter deep in her belly. It had been a long time since she had entertained a handsome man in her chambers and this one would look heavenly stretched out upon the white fur that covered her bed.

"You are as rude as my son is brash," she observed, sweeping a hand before her to indicate he was to follow her from the room.

"Forgive me if I have offended you, Majesty," he said smoothly, "but I find you an extremely seductive woman."

She glanced back at him. "Do you now?"

Deep shadows lined the walls as she led him to the colonnaded garden open to the warm *an Iodáilian* weather. There, plush chaises with brightly colored silk cushions ringed the fountain, the black marble of its architecture making the water look mysterious.

"Do you swim, Birendra?" she asked as she took a seat on a chaise adorned with scarlet and turquoise cushions.

"I do," he replied, taking the chaise beside her at her urging.

Arriving with the coffee tray, the servant placed it on the table between the two chairs and at the queen's nod, poured a cup for Audrina then one for her guest. The pungent scent of the strong, black *an Tuirc* brew filled the air. Executing a deep bow, the servant disappeared as quietly as she had arrived.

Audrina brought the delicate bone china cup to her lips, looking through the wafting steam to give the man beside her a penetrating look. "In the nude, Birendra?" she inquired then took a sip of the coffee.

"There is no other way to swim, Majesty," he answered as he too sipped the brew.

She smiled. "With your turban or not?"

"However you would like me," he replied boldly.

"I would like you bare for my eyes to feast upon," she said. "I would see if what is underneath the tunic and slacks lives up to what it promises."

Making no comment to her provocative statement, Birendra set his cup on the table then stood. He reached up to unwind the turban, freeing his waist-length coarse black hair. Tossing the turban to the chaise, he crossed his arms and pulled the tunic from his chest, baring thickly corded muscles and a thick mat of crisp black hair between the

pectorals. When he kicked off the soft kid boots he wore then stepped out of his slacks, he spread his legs and arms for her inspection.

"Very nice," she said, her eyes gleaming.

"Does it?" he asked. His voice was deep and husky.

"Live up to the promise?" she inquired. At his nod, she curled her tongue over her lips. "Oh aye, Birendra. It does indeed."

He took a step, held out his hand. "You look overly warm in that caftan, Majesty. Perhaps a dip in the *piscine* would cool you."

She set aside her cup, took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "Or heat my blood to boiling," she countered, staring avidly at the heavy erection growing between his legs.

The mercenary raked his heated stare over the soft silk of her garment. "Are you naked beneath that frock, *bahaar*?"

She moistened her lips. "What do you think?"

"How attached to it are you?"

"I have many such..."

She got no further for without warning he grasped the front of the silk and tore it down the middle. Audrina gasped—her eyes going wide with shock and anger, lips parted to berate him—but he dragged her to him, slammed his mouth over hers and thrust his tongue deep inside.

Not accustomed to men treating her in such a fashion, she fought him, beating her fists against his back, but he would not release her. His hold on her—his arms like steel bands around her body—tightened and his kiss became a scorching punishment that took away her breath. His hips pumped forward to prod her with the rigid shaft jutting toward her.

She opened her hands to claw at his bare back, taking pleasure in hearing him grunt as she dragged her nails down his flesh. He responded to her revenge by reaching down, hooking one of her legs and slapping it over his hip, surging forward to press his rod at the opening of her sex. His mouth still in possession of hers, he fell with her to the chaise, shooting a hand under her other leg to hike it to his hip as they landed. Reaching between them to take hold of his cock, he savagely rammed it into her wet cunt.

Audrina felt blood where his teeth had hit against her lip as they went down, but it didn't matter. He was pounding his rod into her sheath with savage pumps of his hips. One strong hand held her leg clasped tightly to his body while the other was clamped around her breast, squeezing firmly. The tongue he was using as a battering ram took her mouth in rhythm to the brutal thrusts of his cock.

She grabbed dual handfuls of his long hair and wrapped them around her wrists, jerking viciously as he rode her. Locking her ankles together behind him, she caught

him to her, as though she were a vise—squeezing his waist as powerfully as he was squeezing her breast.

Fire raced through her veins and into her cunt. She was amazed at how tight she felt around him. Having known dozens of men in a carnal way, she no longer possessed the elastic vaginal walls of a less experienced woman. The men she had taken to her bed had never filled her so completely as this one did nor had she ever experienced a cock as thick and long, as big and powerful as the one embedded within her sheath.

He jabbed hard enough to bring tears to her eyes, but as he did, her climax came like wildfire—taking him with her into the flames. His yowl of release made her feel more like a woman than she ever had in her life.

His hips bucked one final time, and then he relaxed atop her for a moment before sliding to his side, drawing her into the hollow of his shoulder. She clung to him as the aftershocks of her release rippled through her. Possessively his hand roamed down her belly to the sticky wetness between her thighs. He cupped her—smearing his seed and her juices as though it were lotion.

“Sweet pussy,” he said against her ear. “Sweet, lonely little pussy.”

“You should not—”

He didn’t allow her to finish, four fingers jamming hard into her sore cunt as his thumb pressed down on her clit. “Whose woman are you, eh?” he demanded. “Who owns this sweet little pussy?”

Audrina’s eyes flared and despite her vast experience with men, she felt her face flame. No man had ever dared to speak to her in such a manner nor manhandled her as this one had. She put a hand to his shoulder to push him away, but he would not allow it. He pushed harder between her folds until she moaned from the pain of it.

“Who owns this wet little pussy?” he asked again, his voice gruff, his eyes hard.

“You do,” she said, panting.

“And whose hard, thick cock do you want inside this hot little pussy?” He twisted his fingers cruelly.

“Yours,” she breathed, looking up into eyes as wicked as the ones that stared back at her from her mirror each morning.

“Aye, little pussy,” he said. “Now clean me.”

“What?” she whispered, disbelieving he would dare order her to do such a thing.

Birendra grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back. “I said clean me, *kutiyaa*. With your tongue.”

Shock flashed through Audrina. She shuddered then cried out when he lowered his head and took her breast into his mouth, raking his teeth over the tight peak.

He savaged her with his tongue until she was pleading with him to stop. He looked up. “Are you going to clean me?”

“Aye,” she said, lost in the evil glint issuing from his eyes.

He slipped his palm behind her neck to jerk her from the chaise, shoving her down over his groin. "Then do it."

For the last five minutes, Riashi Rozakaris had been standing beneath one of the soaring arches of the *peristylum*, watching the carnal display that had both stunned and excited him. His eyes met those of the man he had met on *an Indiacha*. Their conversation on that dry, dusty planet came back to him.

"Given enough incentive, a man will do whatever you wish him to do," Birendra said. "What is it you want done?"

"I need to get to *an Iodáil*, and I need to do so secretly," Riashi answered. "I will pay you half now and the other half when I reach *an Iodáil* safely."

The mercenary's grin was as deadly as a wolf's. "What will prevent me from taking all your money now and leaving you to rot in an alley?"

Fear had sent a trickle of piss down his leg, but Riashi managed to keep his voice steady and his body from shaking beneath the steady glare of the man. He lifted his chin. "I only have half the money. My mother has the other half."

"Ah, a mama's boy," Birendra sneered. "How quaint." His dark eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "How do I know your mama will pay the rest of the transportation fee?"

"You have my word as..." Riashi swallowed hard, sure he should not give his true identity to the man, lest he be held for ransom. "As one man of honor to another," he finished.

Birendra had laughed—as had the men around him. When the laughter ran its course, he grabbed Riashi by the front of his shirt and yanked him to him. "Listen, you son of a pimp, I have no honor. There is no honor among thieves or haven't you ever heard that old saying?"

"I will pay you however much you ask," Riashi said, his desperation to get away showing in his fearful eyes.

"Oh I know you will, you little result of a torn condom, and if you play me false, I'll stick my fist up your tight little ass and pull out your guts. Do you hear what I am saying to you?" He shook Riashi like a dog would a cat. "Do you?"

"Aye!" Riashi answered, bobbing his head.

The mercenary and his men laughed as Riashi was released to stagger backward.

"You'd best be listening," one of the men said. "The last man who double crossed Sri Parekh was found with his throat cut and his dick sticking out of his mouth."

Staring into the steady eyes of the man his mother was servicing, Riashi felt the tremor that he had restrained on *an Indiacha*. If the man whose slow smile was as malevolent as they came was not a *phansigar*, he was the next best thing.

* * * * *

His head propped on one dark fist, Birendra watched Audrina brushing her hair from the comfort of her plush bed. He had not allowed her to clothe herself after their tryst but rather had made her walk naked to the stairway and up to her room—his hand wrapped securely around her upper arm. He had given her no time to apologize for her state of undress to the son they passed on the way. Instead, he had ordered Riashi to make himself useful and have a meal sent up to his mother's room.

"I am a queen," she had protested only once, and the slap he had given her had driven her to her knees.

"You are my whore," Birendra stated. "Speak when I tell you that you can. Otherwise, keep silent!"

His men had taken over the villa, flowing into the rich estate like shadows to overwhelm the guards Audrina had hired with money she'd acquired from selling her jewels on the *an Iodáil* black market. The guards were gone—either dead or having fled—and the servants were being used and abused as the mercenary's men saw fit. As for Riashi, he was locked in his quarters.

"Tell me again whose cunt you are," Birendra ordered.

"Yours," Audrina said, wincing from the split in her lip his slap had awarded her.

"Whose were you before me?"

She tensed, knowing this was coming. She was fairly sure the mercenary would use her until he had his fill then ransom her to Abdul. Her first thought was to lie but her gaze skipped to the heavy black belt he had draped over the footboard of the bed.

"Don't make me ask twice, little pussy," he growled.

"King Abdul of *an Tuirc*," she said. "But he'll not ransom me if that is what you think."

"Come here."

Terror rushed through Audrina for the tone of his voice was filled with meanness. She didn't dare refuse him. Shooting up from her vanity, she came quickly to the bed, feeling her knees knocking as she stared into his midnight eyes.

"Sit down," he ordered, patting the bed, and when she did, he snaked out a hand to grab her right nipple, twisting it viciously.

To give Audrina her due, she did not cry out at the painful grip. Though agony was spreading through her breast and into her shoulder at his hard pinch—his nails digging into the soft bud—arousal was pushing wet heat between her legs.

"Did I ask your opinion, cunt?" he demanded, working her nipple between his nails.

"No, Sri Birendra!" she said, twisting her body to relieve a bit of the pain.

"Then keep your mouth shut except to answer!" He released her nipple but grabbed her arm to drag her across the bed. He rolled her under him, shoving her thighs wide. "Why would he not pay ransom for you?" he asked. "Is he tired of your little pussy, or does he have a new one to sink into?"

"I left him," she said, arching her hips, wanting him to thrust hard into her aching cunt.

"Why?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

"Because of what I did."

"And what was it you did?"

She told him all of it—from the murder of the seventeen-year-old girl who claimed Jaegar's innocence when he was fourteen to the last one she had ordered slain. She revealed how she was trying to find someone to murder the hell hag to whom her son had bound himself.

"No one in their right mind would attempt to kill a Riezell Guardian!" Birendra snapped. "A man would have to be desperate to even consider such folly!"

"I want her dead!" Audrina said. "She is not worthy of my son. He will be king. I will not allow her to sit beside him as queen."

Birendra swirled his hips over her lower body, torturing her with the promise of the hard cock that swept over her belly and along her thighs.

"No," he said, "you want to be the one to sit beside him as the queen mother with some timid mouse hovering in the background to provide him with the occasional heir."

"I will choose a fitting bride for him," she said through clenched teeth. "One of whom I will not be ashamed!"

"And you want to rule through him, don't you, little pussy?" he asked, cocking his head to one side as he reached up to roughly knead her breast.

"Is it wrong of me to want such power?" she asked.

"Oh no," he replied. "Not wrong at all and admirable in my book, but from what you tell me of your elder son, he will not be easy to bend to your will."

"He will," she stated.

"Are you so sure?"

Audrina licked her lips. "I will make him do as he is told."

The mercenary cocked a thick black brow. "And just how will you do that? If you have no leverage over him, what incentive is there for him to do as you demand?"

"I have leverage," she defended.

"That being what, exactly?"

For the first time Audrina considered the power and authority over Jaegar she had lost when he'd read her mind. She bit her bottom lip, worried now that the control she once had was no more.

"Now on the other hand," she heard Birendra say, "there is the other son. The fly who sits on the ass of a diseased whore who trembles at his own shadow." He reached up to tap his finger against the side of his nose. "Now that one you would have no trouble controlling."

"But Riashi is not the heir apparent," Audrina said.

"He would be if the true one was no more."

Though she bore no love for either of her children, she was still their mother. She had given them life, but she would not hand them death. She shook her head. "No. No, I will not allow Jaegar to be killed. I might like to see him punished for his disrespect of me, but I will not see him murdered!"

"Did I say he needed to be killed, little pussy?" the mercenary asked then slapped her, rocking her head to the side. "Do not tell me what you will or will not allow! If I want him dead, I'll ply the garrotte myself!"

A whimper strained from Audrina's throat. Fear mixed with lust in her mind and body, and she could not refrain from writhing beneath the powerful warrior pinning her to the bed. Her breasts ached as she pushed them against his thick chest.

"That old man Rozakaris is useless as the leader of *an Tuirc*," she heard Birendra say. "Now I, on the other hand, will make a strong leader for your people." He stabbed his cock at her entrance. "I will make a great power behind the throne."

Audrina went as still as a statue. "Are you saying you are thinking of assassinating Abdul?" she asked. Not that she cared if Abdul left her world. If he did, things would certainly be safer for her.

"With your dickless son on the Panther Throne and me pulling his strings, my men and I could use *an Tuirc* as a base for our operations and the *Poleenyn Eddyr-Cohollyssagh* would be none the wiser." He eased his cock a half inch into her sheath. "Tell me, do you still have the papaver plants growing wild in the mountains?"

"Aye, but it is illegal for anyone other than the pharmaceutical companies to harvest the capsules to make *tenerse*," she protested.

"Do you think I give a warthog's prick if it's legal or not?" he scoffed. "When I rule *an Tuirc*, I will make the laws!" He pushed in all the way, grinding into her like a piston. "I will be the richest man in the Cairghrian Galaxy. Even richer than the Cosaints! Hell, I will be richer than the Burgon!"

Audrina thought of the riches of the imperial palace on Aduaidh Prime and moisture flooded her mouth. She was no longer aware of the hard cock thrusting in and out of her cunt, her greed had pushed the lust aside.

"But what of Jaegar?" she asked. She risked another slap, lifting her chin to stare the mercenary in the eye. "He is my son. I don't want him killed. Hurt, if necessary, but not killed."

Birendra shrugged. "So he disappears," he said.

"How?" she asked, her heart thudding heavily in her chest.

"Men disappear all the time, little pussy," he said with a snort.

"Shadowlords don't."

She watched Birendra blink, blink again.

"Your son is a mage?"

She flung out a dismissive hand. "Some call them that. He can wield magic, so I suppose that does qualify him as such."

"Ah, I see. The Black Ascendency was bestowed upon him then."

"No, he was born a Shadow —" She broke off, her eyes widening. She rapidly licked her lips. "I mean, aye, aye! The Raven came down to grant him the powers of —"

Birendra's jaw clenched and when he spoke, it was through his teeth. "Don't lie to me. Whose son is he?" he demanded.

"Abdul..."

He gave her a hard look. "No! He is not the son of Abdul Rozakaris!" he snarled. "Not if he was born a Shadowlord. Who are you trying to fool, cunt?"

She flinched as he raised his hand to hit her, and hurriedly said, "His father is Sancara Ben-Sulil and you do not want to make an enemy of him."

"No," the mercenary agreed. "I assuredly do not and neither will I harm a mage."

"So you see then that this idea of yours is impossible," she said.

"Not if the little Shadowlord is brought to heel and locked in iron," he said. His slow smile was the most treacherous thing she'd ever seen. "Locked in irons in the bowels of Utuk Xul where he'll be no bother to anyone."

"They would find him there," she protested.

"No one will find him there, little pussy," he stated with such confidence she pushed aside all thoughts of the pleasure his cock could give her and paid attention to his words.

"I have put men there before," he said. "Men whose families or the families of their enemies did not want them seen again and did not mind paying a hefty price to make them disappear. There are no records published of who is jailed in that stink hole. Not even the UCJ knows who is imprisoned there. I pay good coin to see those I put there stay there."

"Utuk Xul," she said, mulling the word over in her mind. "That might work. He would need to be locked securely in iron manacles so he cannot ply his magic and have an iron collar placed around his neck so he cannot communicate with his father."

"That can be arranged," Birendra said. He increased the tempo of his thrusts, swiveling his hips as he pushed his toes into the mattress.

"But what of the hell hag?" she asked. "He's bonded with her. She'll not rest until she finds him. We must kill her. She —"

"I will not harm a Guardian!" he shouted. "Not now, not ever! I don't want those bloodhounds on my ass! She can look all she wants, but she'll not find him where I intend to see him put! Besides, we do not kill women." He jammed hard into her. "Hurt them? Perhaps. But we do not kill them."

"If there is even a chance of the Deathlord learning where he is, who put him there..." she said then shuddered. "We'll both meet a hellish end."

“Leave it to me,” Birendra said. He slammed brutally into her, making her whine.
“So tell me, where is this Jaegar now?”

Chapter Ten

"I'd say roughly nine thousand credits, but it could run more," the mechanic said.

"You're kidding, right?" Jaegar asked, feeling a lump settling in his belly.

"Nope, don't kid," the man replied, hawking up a wad of phlegm then turning his head to spit it a goodly distance from the runabout. "Blown output valves on propulsion tubes ain't no laughing matter."

"Not at nine thousand credits," Jaegar mumbled.

"Or more," the mechanic insisted.

Standing with his hands on his hips, Jaegar dropped his head to his chest and sighed. "All right. Just fix it."

"You got the money?"

Slowly the prince lifted his head and fixed the older man with a steely glower. "Do you know who I am?" he asked.

The man gave a fatalistic shrug. "A gent with two blown output valves on a machine that costs more than I'll make in twenty years," he responded. "Other than that, I don't give a Diabolusian warthog's ass who you are, son. Don't even care if you stole the gods-be-damned thang." He scratched at the crotch of his filthy jumpsuit that smelled heavily of oil and body sweat, spat again. "So long's you got the funds, that's all that matters to me."

"You'll get your money," Jaegar growled.

"Uh-huh," the man said with a nod, "or the Fiach is mine."

More annoyed with himself than he was with the highway robber gouging him on what was a relatively minor replacement on the runabout, Jaegar thrust his hands into the pockets of his pants and stalked out of the hangar. It was misting rain—which should have added to his pique—but instead he turned his face up to the coolness as he walked from the hangar to the tavern across the way.

When the warning chime sounded and the engine light had come on, the young Shadowlord had turned the air blue with his curses. He had no one save himself to blame for the blown valves. After all, he'd been pushing the runabout beyond the safe range for over an hour when disaster struck. Knowing he was at fault hadn't made him feel any less foolish. Having to inform King Abdul he wouldn't be there as expected had garnered him a sound lecture on taking care of his possessions.

"You'd think I was a green youth," he complained as he neared the seedy-looking tavern.

It didn't help that he was forced to land on Rusuil—a backwoods planet in the middle of the Aneas Quadrant that was so small it wasn't on any star map. The entire dreary little world consisted of a tavern, a refueling station, a ship maintenance hangar and a few disreputable huts occupied by those who owned the three buildings. It was not a hospitable place, and although there were a few ships scattered on the docking platforms of the refueling station, there was no one to be seen.

Which meant they were most likely in the tavern.

The moment he pulled open the rusted iron door, every head in the place swiveled around to investigate the new arrival. One or two continued to stare as Jaegar made his way to the bar but most returned to the mugs on their tables or the conversation he had interrupted when he came in.

Counting seven patrons, the barkeep, a brace of party girls who looked as though they had every disease known to mankind, the sleazy establishment with its low phospho lighting and stained floor left a lot to be desired. The heavy stench of sulfur and another more obnoxious odor filled the air, making his eyes water. Apparently the air conditioning was on the fritz for the room was thick with oppressive heat.

"What'll it be?" the barkeep inquired.

"Chalean whiskey," Jaegar said. He glanced at a man standing a few feet away along the bar, nodded when the man nodded to him then took the glass of whiskey. He knocked it back and wobbled it on the bar in a silent request for a refill. "Leave the bottle."

"That your Fiach?" the barkeep asked.

"Aye," Jaegar agreed, and decided conversation with the man wasn't something he wanted at that moment. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a credit chip, slapped it down on the bar and then picked up the filled glass and the bottle. He walked over to one of the dilapidated tables, hooked his boot on a chair leg to draw it out and sat down, blowing out a long, tired breath.

"From what I've seen, Milos does good work," the man standing at the bar said, turning so he could look at Jaegar. He braced his elbows on the bar top. "I don't think you have to worry about your vessel."

Jaegar looked over at him. "That's good to know. It's costing me an arm and half a leg for him to fix the prophets-be-damned ship."

"I know what you mean," the man said.

"Where do you call home?"

"Serenia."

"You're a long way from home," Jaegar observed as he rolled up his sleeves and popped the top two buttons of his shirt for the heat was getting to him.

"Guess we both are." He pushed away from the bar. "Mind if I join you?"

Considering the other man had his own bottle and glass and spoke with a cultivated accent, Jaegar shrugged. "Sure, why not? Have a seat."

Swinging a leg over one of the chairs, the man sat then thrust out his hand. "Reed Summerton," he said.

Jaegar took the proffered hand. "Jaegar," he said. "Jaegar Amirkhani." He thought it best not to give his real name in a place such as this.

Summerton glanced down at Jaegar's right forearm. "I like the tats. What exactly do they signify?"

Jaegar glanced down at the black tattoo too. "The top one is a Chalean tribal symbol for panther and the two lower ones are the *an Tuirc* words for first and warrior. I designed it myself."

"Sharp," Reed pronounced. "But you aren't Chalean, are you? Not with that accent."

Jaegar grinned. "I am from *an Tuirc*."

"Ah, okay. So what are you doing in the hinterlands, Jaegar?" Reed questioned.

"On my way back from visiting my fiancée," he replied. "You?"

"On shore leave before signing in to my first posting," the other man said. "I'm being sent to U.X." He took a sip of his drink.

Jaegar whistled. "That's got to be a tough assignment."

"So I've heard." Reed drained his glass and poured another shot, waving away the two ladies of the evening who were slowly making their way over to Jaegar's table.

"You don't sound like I imagine a guard to sound. What's your O.S.?" Jaegar asked, referring to Summerton's occupational specialty.

"I'm a healer," Reed confessed. "I come from a long line of Summertons who have made healing their profession." He relaxed in the chair, shooting his long legs out in front of him. "Stupid me, I enlisted right after graduation and for my trouble, I'll be spending my entire tour of duty at Utuk Xul." He saluted Jaegar with his glass. "For joy, for joy."

"Is that a four-year commitment?"

"Eight for healers," Reed replied. "The really bad thing is there's no off-world leaves during your rotation. You get a month of down time every year, but you can't depart U.X."

"Why is that?"

Summerton shrugged. "Something about the ultra-secretive security attached to that wretched place. Once you're there, you're there until your assignment is over. You can send and receive mail from your relatives, but I imagine the letters are censored." He put his empty glass on the scarred tabletop and rocked it around and around. "That's because you are required to sign a sensitive compartmented information nondisclosure statement. You can't discuss anything you see or are told about at the prison."

"Sounds to me like you've signed on for your own prison sentence," Jaegar said. "Did you know what you were getting into?"

Reed shook his head. "I had no idea security at U.X. was that strict, but then again I never thought I'd wind up serving there."

Jaegar polished off his glass of whiskey then pushed the glass and bottle aside. "Makes you wonder what's so hush-hush about the goings-on at the place, doesn't it?"

"I guess I'll find out."

"At any rate, that's a prophets-be-damned long assignment," Jaegar observed.

"What I was told is there are four healers on U.X. at all times." He leaned over to pour himself another shot then settled back. "There are four levels to the prison. The first level is admin, the kitchens, housing for staff, maintenance and equipment, that sort of thing. Second and third levels are prisoners. The fourth is where the worst of them are kept. Your first year, you are assigned as staff healer on the first level." He took a sip of his drink then licked his lips. "I guess it's to get you acclimated to the isolation."

"That makes sense."

"The next year you're dropped down a level and the year after that you go to the third level. The fourth year you go down to that last level. There's one healer per level and somewhere around four hundred prisoners on each of the lower levels."

"I can see the need for more than one healer," Jaegar said. "That's a lot of prisoners for one man to take care of."

"The fourth year you go down to the worst level and stay there for the fifth year. Then work your way up again until your tour is over." He looked around the tavern. "What do you reckon are the odds I'd contract some dastardly debilitating infection if I asked for something to eat here?"

"Your duplicator not working?"

"Nothing on my ship is working," Reed said. "Power supply got fried in an ion storm. I was lucky to make it here."

"If you're hungry, we can go over and use my duplicator," Jaegar said. "I can guarantee you the food is well above grade."

"I sure would appreciate it," Reed said. "I've been starving ever since I limped in here last night but didn't want to trust the food in this place."

"Then let's head over," Jaegar said. "It's my feeding time too."

* * * * *

By the time Reed's ship was ready the next morning, he and Jaegar had spent an entertaining afternoon and evening together. The two men had bonded quickly, telling their life stories to one another.

"I hope I find a woman like that," Reed said when Jaegar spent an hour extolling the virtues of his bond-mate. "She sounds very special."

"My lady is a Riezell Guardian."

It hadn't been brag or boast but a quiet assertion given with more than a touch of humility.

They discovered they were both avid chess players and spent the long hours hunched over Jaegar's ivory-inlaid board as they revealed more of themselves to the other than they ever had to another living soul. It was with reluctance that the healer left to bunk on his Class 2 starcruiser in the wee hours of the morning. For the first time in his life, the healer was delighted to find another male who had the same interests, opinions and beliefs as his own.

As for Jaegar, he realized how much he missed the camaraderie he had experienced while at the Academy and the friendships—like the one he had developed with Glade Aeolian—that had developed over the twelve years he was a student there.

It was with regret that Jaegar bid his newfound friend goodbye. He hated Summertown would—for all practical purposes—be as much an inmate at Utuk Xul as the prisoners he was going to tend. He hoped when Reed's tour of duty was up, they would meet again.

* * * * *

"I have learned he is not at the palace as you thought. Where else might he have gone?"

"Riezell?"

"Not there," Birendra snapped. "Nor is he on Basaraba."

"I do have a few servants still loyal to me on *an Tuirc*," Audrina told Birendra as she watched him winding the turban around his long hair. "Perhaps they can find out where Jaegar is. Surely, Abdul would know."

"We don't need the king to become suspicious and warn the boy someone is looking for him," the mercenary reminded her.

"The servants to whom I am referring would never reveal anything to Abdul," she said. "They hate him."

Adjusting the turban more comfortably, Birendra turned from the mirror. "Give me their names and I will have my man contact them."

Audrina's brows shot up. "You have a man at Eejderha?"

"I have men everywhere," came the brusque answer. "Though this one is not actually in the palace, he can be counted on to get the information we need to find your son."

The queen looked down at the needlepoint in her lap. It was the only thing she could find to do with her hands to keep them from Birendra's muscular body. The man was a drug to which she had become addicted. The worse he treated her, the more she clung to him—needing his brutish ways to make her feel truly alive for the first time in many years. She thrived on the occasional slap he executed with careless disdain. The pain felt good and gave her ideas that both shamed and excited her. She was waiting for

just the right moment to broach the subject of those delicious ideas with the handsome warrior.

"I don't want him hurt too badly when you find him," she said. It was a measure of how much dependence she was beginning to have in her lover that she had gone from demanding Jaegar be taken without violence to allowing some punishment was necessary to break the prince's spirit.

"There won't be any scarring," Birendra said. "At least none that can be seen. Is that good enough?"

"I don't particularly want him to suffer," she said with a shrug.

"But you said you wanted him punished for showing disrespect," he reminded her.

"The punishment will be in being separated from his bond-mate," she said. "That will be agony for him. To know he will never see her, touch her again will break him."

"So I'm told," the mercenary said with a twist of his lips. "Only a weak man would attach himself to a female in such a way he would allow this to happen."

She looked up. "Such would not be the way of it with you, would it, Birendra?"

"Never," he stated. "I am too strong to allow myself to be ruled by a woman." He snorted. "Women were made to be ruled by men, to be dominated and know their place."

Audrina felt her heart miss a beat. Her fingers stilled on the needlepoint. "Do you prefer to be in a position to do that?" she asked, hearing the blood suddenly pounding in her ears.

"To do what?" he growled.

"To dominate and put a woman in her place."

He turned to face her and did not fail to recognize the need in her half-lidded eyes. "Is that what you want, little pussy?" he asked, walking slowly over to where she sat. "To be made to know your place?"

She licked her lips. Her breath was coming in quick little jerks and heat flooded between her crossed legs. "I have been toying with the idea."

Birendra's smile was mean as he hunkered down before her. He put his hands to her thighs and jerked them far apart, tossed the hem of her gown up then thrust his hand between her legs. He drove three fingers into her sheath, his smile widening as she groaned.

"Do you want to be bound to a rack and sexually abused, cunt?" he asked in a gruff voice. He twisted his fingers savagely inside her.

Audrina let go of the needlepoint and grabbed the arms of her chair, arching her hips up to his brutal invasion. "Aye," she whispered. "I want to know how it feels."

A dangerous gleam entered the black eyes of the mercenary. "Then you shall, little pussy. You shall."

Strolling through the gardens, Riashi heard his mother scream and cursed. He knew what the bitch was up to—again. He was disgusted by her behavior almost as much as he was terrified of the man he had brought into their lives. Not a moment passed that he did not regret having made the acquaintance of the mercenary. Had he known what would ensue, he would have looked elsewhere for help.

Yet—he thought as he slapped his hands to his ears to drown out another piercing scream coming from his mother’s chambers—the man did have plans that would ultimately benefit Riashi. As soon as the king was eliminated and Jaegar put out of commission, the throne would come to him.

Sitting down on the edge of the fountain, he bent forward, pressing his hands tighter to his head. Still the screams could be heard.

“I will be king,” he began the litany he had said many times over the past two days as much to drown out the screaming as to reinforce his dream. “I will be king. I *will* be king!”

He had known for many years that Abdul was not his father. He didn’t care one way or another as long as the old man claimed him as his son and provided for him in his will. Unlike Jaegar, he had pressed his mother, endured her vicious battering until she had finally given in and spoken the name of his true father. Finding out the man was dead was a relief. He didn’t want anyone coming forward to muddy the waters and deny him the inheritance he believed was his due. Though he had never seriously considered taking over the mantle of king because Jaegar had been named heir apparent, it had never been out of his dreams. Until recently he had not known Jaegar too was a bastard, so to his way of thinking, the throne was up for grabs. Learning the king was to be assassinated, Jaegar cast aside and the throne turned over to him had changed everything. Now it was all Riashi could think about.

The screaming had stopped for the time being so Riashi lowered his hands. He thought about Jaegar and the plans the mercenary had for him. Besides ascending the Panther Throne and ruling *an Tuirc*, that was the greatest of impending pleasures to which he had to look forward.

“Utuk Xul,” Riashi said aloud, and pictured the vilest cesspool he could imagine. “A fitting place for you, big brother.”

He hated the warrior who was his brother. All his life he had spent endless hours trying to best Jaegar in any manner of endeavors—sports, games, whatever—and had never been able to. Jaegar had always been stronger, more determined to win. The competition between them had been fierce and the older they got, the more ferocious. Riashi had to admit that was his fault though. Jaegar hadn’t wanted to take the rivalry to a more violent level but Riashi had goaded the older boy into it.

“Not that it did me any good,” Riashi said, wincing for the screaming had started again.

No matter what he'd tried, no matter how brutal he'd attacked Jaegar, or what he'd done to enflame the other boy's anger, Riashi had never won the encounter and usually had been set down in a humiliating way.

"But he never deliberately hurt me. He was always careful not to."

And that had made Riashi all the more determined to come out on top. The careless ease with which Jaegar had triumphed infuriated the younger boy and the hatred went deeper.

"Well, this time I'm going to win," Riashi said as he got up. He had to put distance between him and the screaming. As he hurried through the villa and into the bright sunshine of the countryside, the thought of Jaegar rotting away at Utuk Xul made the day even more delightful.

* * * * *

"Three more days?" Jaegar demanded, eyebrows slashed together.

"I ain't got no ceramic O-rings that will fit the propulsion tube of your craft," Milos said with a jut of his chin. "If you hadn't over fired the engines, the one on there wouldn't have cracked in the first place. Weren't my fault it finished breaking when I put on the valve."

"Mother of the Prophet!" Jaegar snapped. The last thing he wanted to do was spend another hour on Rusuil. The place had to be the hairy ass crack of the megaverse. "What the fuck am I going to do for three fucking days on this prophets-be-damned rock? I can't stay here three more days!"

"You can hire onto one of the mining transports what come through here to refuel or else catch a ride with the next ship what comes to do the same," Milos said with a shrug.

Neither option was worth considering, Jaegar thought. His was the only decent ship left on the planet, the rest having departed already. What were left were the pieces of shit rust buckets that belonged to the inhabitants. He doubted together they'd make one craft worthy of flying a few clicks past Rusuil's atmosphere.

"Fuck!" he said, throwing his hands into the air. "This is fucking great. Just fucking great!" He didn't want to call someone from home to come fetch him as though he were a green youth.

"Ain't my fault," Milos mumbled as he wiped his hands on a greasy rag. "Maybe next time you won't push that ship to hell and back."

Growling, Jaegar stomped over to the runabout and went inside. He hated having to call *an Tuirc* to tell the king he was going to be later still in coming home.

Plopping down in the pilot's chair, he scraped his hands over his face and hissed, slamming his booted heel against the floor like an eight-year old spoiled brat.

"Might as well get it over with," he grouched. "Ark, hail *an Tuirc*."

"Hailing," Ark complied.

It wasn't the king who answered the personal hail. It was one of the maids cleaning the monarch's chambers. She told Jaegar his father had taken a trip into the interior where there had been an explosion in one of the copper mines.

"How many hurt?" Jaegar asked, his own troubles dissolving in the face of such news.

"I don't know, your grace," the woman said. "Are you on your way back?"

"Unfortunately not for a few days."

"Is there a message for the king?" she asked.

"Aye, tell him I'm stuck on Rusuil while they order a ship part off-world and tell him to hail me when he gets back to let me know how things are at the mine."

He didn't notice the gleam in the woman's eye as she inclined her head in acknowledgement of his order.

* * * * *

"Where are you going?" Audrina asked, wringing her hands. Her face was very pale, her arms and neck splotted with dark bruises. She gingerly touched her black eye.

"Rusuil," Birendra replied. He finished stuffing his bag then glanced around. "Don't worry. I'm leaving a few of my men here to protect you."

"To keep us prisoner, you mean," she said.

The mercenary didn't bother to answer the charge.

"When will you be back?"

Without missing a beat, Birendra pivoted on the ball of his foot and backhanded Audrina, knocking her across the room. She staggered into a lamp, overturned the table upon which it set and crashed to the floor with a hand to her injured face. She stared wide eyed at him, blood trickling from her nose.

"Cease asking me questions, *kutiya*," he thundered, calling her a bitch. "I will return when I return!"

She watched him heft the bag, turn and stride from the room as though nothing had happened. Trembling, she pushed to a sitting position and remained there until she heard the door to the villa's entrance slam shut.

"He's going to kill you one of these days, Mother."

She swiveled her head toward the Francach doors that led out to her private terrace. Her son stood framed in the opening, regarding her with what she suspected was unconcern.

"Help me up," she said, stretching out her arm.

Riashi came into the room and took her hand, levered her up. "You should learn to watch your mouth around him." He handed her a kerchief from the pocket of his slacks.

"You should mind your own business," she mumbled as she dabbed at her nose. "I know what I am doing."

"Aye," he agreed. "Using yourself as a punching bag. Brilliant plan, Mother."

"It keeps him from coming after you!" she said then took a seat on the edge of a chair. "Or sending one of his perverted men after you."

Riashi's eyebrows shot up. "Really? And what if they already come after me, Mother? What if I go after them as well?"

Audrina slowly lifted her head to give her youngest son a stunned look. "You are not a *bandaa*!" she said, using the term Birendra used to insult a bisexual servant.

"You know nothing of what I am, Mother," Riashi said. "You've never cared enough to ask."

That said, he sauntered from her room, leaving her staring after him with disbelief.

"You will marry and give me a grandchild!" she yelled after him then cringed when she heard him laugh.

For a long time she sat with her head tilted back, the handkerchief pressed to her nose. She suspected Birendra had discovered where Jaegar was and had gone after him. She didn't believe the mercenary would kill Jaegar because he could be used as leverage should the need arise. Stashed where he could not disrupt the plans for seizing control of *an Tuirc*, if it became necessary to bring him back, they could. The only fly in the ointment was that she had no doubt Birendra would hurt her son if the need arose. It didn't really concern her all that much that Jaegar might be wounded in the skirmish. After all, Shadowlords had remarkably quick healing powers.

The important thing was to make sure no one knew where her son had been taken—especially not the hell hag who would no doubt move heaven and earth to find him.

"But you won't," Audrina said. "He is lost to you, bitch." She smiled. "Forever."

Chapter Eleven

Dominia laughed. "Are you stuck on that ugly planet with no one to play with?"

"Ha, ha, ha," Jaegar groused. "This place sucks, wench."

"Been there. Done that. Still got the rash to prove it," she said with a grin. "Tell Milos hello for me. He's such a cutie."

He rolled his eyes. "Changing the subject..." He propped his feet on the control console. "I've been trying to contact *an Tuirc* for the last couple of hours, but I'm not getting through. Have any idea why that is?"

"No, but I can check for you," she said. "It could be —"

The vid-com screen went black.

"Hey!" Jaegar said. "What the hell happened, Ark?"

"I'm not sure, Jae," the computer answered. "I don't seem to be getting a signal."

"Milos must have jiggled something loose on the com array," Jaegar complained. He dropped his feet to the floor and stood. As he started for the door, he noticed a ship coming in for a landing. He stopped to look as it was an *an Indiachian* ship but with markings he'd never seen before. The vessel was a matte black gull-wing craft with a strange eight-armed figure painted on the hull from bow to stern. As the dust settled around the ship, he got a closer look at the painting. It was a gruesome image of a blue-skinned woman with a bright red tongue. She wore a necklace of human skulls and around her waist was a belt of severed male heads and hands.

"Lovely," he said with a shudder of distaste.

Milos stuck his head through the hatch opening. "I'd keep my ass in this ship if I was you, son. Them are *phansigars* what just landed or I'll eat my jumpsuit."

Jaegar slowly turned his eyes back to the spectacle of the stygian ship. Though his father had joked of hiring the infamous *an Indiachian* assassins to do away with a political rival, no one in their right mind really considered getting involved with the sect. They were a dangerous cult of thieves who practiced large-scale robbery and murder of travelers across the megaverse. Their particular method of murder was strangulation.

Reaching forward, he hit the control to close the hatch of his ship. The newcomers might not be *phansigars* but he had no intention of finding out firsthand. As the black ship's hatch opened and the steps folded down, he stood back from the windscreen to watch the men who exited the craft.

There were three of them—all tall, dark, burly men in loose-fitting robes wearing black turbans, but the man Jaegar immediately recognized as the leader was at least six

inches taller than his comrades. When his gaze leveled on Jaegar's ship, the hairs on the prince's arm stood up. He didn't feel easy until the trio disappeared into the tavern.

"Ark, is the com up yet?" he asked, keeping the men in sight.

"Negative, Jae. Still not getting a signal."

"Shit," Jaegar cursed. He ran a hand through his hair. "Do a check on all the weapons and make sure each is fully charged and functional. Set the perimeter alarm as well. I don't want any unexpected company."

"So noted," the computer said in a grave voice.

A rap on the hatch made Jaegar jump, and he cursed again, irritated at himself. "Vid-com screen on," he commanded, and was relieved to see Milos standing on the other side of the hatch. "Aye?"

Milos leaned close to the speaker on the hull. "I got the O-ring attached. How 'bout running her through start-up and let's see if there's anything else needs doing 'fore I clear you for takeoff," the mechanic told him.

"Will do," Jaegar replied. He slid into the pilot's chair and started going through the complicated procedures that would engage the mighty engines of the runabout. As soon as the engines came online, Jaegar gave a whoop. There were no red lines on the readouts, no blinking lights or warning chimes, and when he revved up the power, the machine purred like a kitten.

Milos' voice came from the vid-com. "Ease her back some. I've got a few adjustments I wanna make."

Backing off on the power, Jaegar released a long breath as his ship idled. He asked Ark to try raising a signal but the com unit wasn't working. He tried calling Milos but realized the man probably couldn't hear him if he had his head in the belly of the ship. Annoyed, he hopped up from the chair and went to the hatch, slapped his hand on the door control panel. Not waiting until the steps rotated down from its compartment, he jumped from the ship and headed to the stern. The noise from the idling engine was loud with the hull panel laid aside. Milos gave him a confused look as he walked toward the mechanic.

"Did you accidentally nick a wire on the com array?" he shouted to Milos.

"What?" the mechanic shouted back, putting a hand behind his ear.

"Did you clip a wire on the com array?"

He saw Milos' eyes flick away from him, widen, and knew they had company. He started to turn when something hit his shoulder. He yelped, slapping a hand to the burning pain to find a dart of some kind stuck into his flesh. He pulled it out, letting it drop from his fingers as the burning flared across his flesh.

"Run, boy!" Milos yelled. "Get the fuck in your ship. Now!"

Jaegar would have done just that but the three men from the *an Indiachian* ship were running toward him. One had a tranq gun in his hand and was aiming at Jaegar again.

There was no way he could make it to the ship's hatch, which was on the other side of the ship, before the trio reached him.

"Run!" Milos bellowed. He pointed to the refueling station.

What Jaegar thought was a tranq dart hit the hull of the Fiach and bounced off. He didn't feel woozy, groggy from whatever had hit him and thought perhaps his Shadowlord powers were forcing enough adrenaline through his system the tranquilizer hadn't kicked in. He prayed it wouldn't as he took off across the landing pad with the three men changing course to intercept him.

Running for his life, he felt the first brutal pain lance through his stomach and grabbed his belly. It was a burning, crippling pain and nausea began building at the back of his throat. He whipped his head around in time to actually see the next dart coming at him. It hit him in the small of the back and he went down, skidding on the dark gray sand blowing across the pad. He tried to get his feet working to push himself up, but the pain in his belly had become a nightmarish agony that brought tears to his eyes. Though he got to his knees, he doubled over from the pain, clutching at his stomach, and fell flat on his face.

The men were on him before he had time to take another breath. One skidded to a stop and knelt at his feet while the other two scrambled to his head. Through the excruciating burning eating away at his belly, he felt the cold wrap of iron banding his ankles. He wanted to kick out, but he couldn't. Due to the wicked pain eating him alive, he couldn't straighten his legs. He didn't dare. He barely managed to get a hand up to send one of the men leaning over him flying through the air. It was too little, too late though, as the leader of the group pressed a brutal knee to Jaegar's back, flattening him on the pad. He bent forward to slap a strong hand to Jaegar's head to hold it pressed roughly to the concrete pad, grains of sand digging into his right cheek.

"You aren't going anywhere, pretty boy. Get those shackles on him!"

Nausea was racing up Jaegar's throat now and the ungodly pain in his gut was draining all his strength. Every joint in his body suddenly ached and when the iron bands were clamped into place around his wrists, he was too weak to resist. Neither did he fight when the iron collar was secured around his neck.

"Give me another dart," he heard the leader say. "I want this little bastard completely powerless."

Another burning, lancing pain drove through Jaegar's neck, and he screamed as whatever was in the dart spread through his carotid. Blackness blurred his vision for a moment, and then he was puking, bringing up everything he'd had that day. His entire body itched and his hands began to swell—causing the iron to bite into his flesh.

The last thing he remembered was being hoisted roughly between two of his captors and carried into the maw of the black gull-wing ship.

* * * * *

"Major, we've got a problem."

Dominia sat up as General Strom's face appeared on her vid-com screen. "Sir?"

There had been no preamble, no warning chime from the vid-com that a transmission was coming through. Her commanding officer simply appeared like an avenging angel from the blackness of the vid-screen.

"Prince Jaegar Rozakaris has been abducted."

Her world came to a screeching halt, sleep vanishing in an instant. Dominia stared at the screen, unable to speak. Fear went through her like an icy blade. Her mouth was suddenly devoid of all moisture.

"W-what happened?" she asked, forcing the words from her constricted throat.

"He was taken from Rusuil by a trio of *phansigars*. Command Central believes it's for ransom."

"*Phansigars*?" she repeated, eyes wide, stark terror driving deep into her belly. "They don't kidnap people, Sir. They..." She couldn't say it. She shook her head to negate the thought. "Are you sure it was *phansigars*?"

"From the description the mechanic on Rusuil gave, aye. Their leader is named Parada Abhaya but he uses as many aliases as there are planets in the megaverse. He's at the very top of the *Poleenyn Eddyr-Cohollyssagh's* most-wanted list. The man is as brutal as they come."

"I know who he is," she said, her brain reeling. "Was he there?"

"We don't know. No one knows what the bastard looks like. It could have been just one of his groups. The gods know he has dozens scattered across the Cairghrian Galaxy."

"Has his father been informed? Jaegar's, I mean?"

"King Abdul is unreachable," General Strom told her. "There was some kind of disaster in the interior, and he's out of touch for now. I've sent a messenger to inform him. This really isn't news we wanted to give him over a vid-com anyway."

Dominia hadn't been thinking of the *an Tuircese* king when she asked if Jaegar's father had been told of his abduction. She knew she'd have to tell the Deathlord. Together they would find Jaegar and exact the revenge needed.

"There is a reason the *phansigars* will not kill the prince," Strom said. "Despite their bloodthirsty profession, they do have a strict code by which they live. They will not kill women, those who create, such as musicians, carpenters, dancers, writers and blacksmiths. Nor will they kill the maimed or leprous. Thankfully for us, mages are among those off-limits to their nooses and since Prince Jaegar is a Shadowlord, they will not kill him."

Dominia drew an unsteady breath. "Praise the goddess for that," she said, her voice shaky.

"I've sent two male operatives to Rusuil, but unfortunately our Principal is on R&R, and I hate to bring her back this soon. She needs the rest. Taborn and Shimota can't be

counted on and Tyne is in mourning so she's out of the loop. That leaves you, so I'm giving you a temporary position as Principal, although the accompanying promotion to lieutenant colonel will be permanent."

"Principal?" Dominia said, shaking her head, her thoughts racing as she wondered why Taborn and Shimota were on the general's shit list. "Sir, I'd rather not..."

"You don't have a choice here, Colonel! I am well aware you have no desire to be a Principal RG," Strom snapped. "I don't like this any more than you do since you have a vested interest in Prince Jaegar, but that's the way the cookie crumbles. Get your ass out there and find him!"

"Aye Sir!" she agreed.

Strom's face softened. "And good luck, Domi. May the Wind be at your back."

"Thank you, Sir," she said, feeling tears spiking behind her eyes.

When the transmission ended, Dominia sat on her bunk feeling the soul inside her shriveling. The man she loved, the man with whom she had an unbreakable, unshakeable bond was at risk—possibly hurt—and that terrified her as nothing ever had in her life.

"I'll find you, *aşık*," she whispered as a tear rolled down her cheek. "By the goddess and your prophets, I will! And I promise you I will not rest until you are home!"

* * * * *

The Burgon—Ryden Bakari, Emperor of Aduaidh Prime—crumpled the sheet of paper brought to him by one of the servants and cursed beneath his breath.

"Bad news?" his wife inquired.

"We've had a kidnapping," he snapped. "The son of the *an Tuirc* king." He threw the paper across their chamber. "Gods-be-damned *phansigars*!"

The empress frowned. "That's not their usual method of operation, is it?"

"Not to my knowledge it isn't and I know everything!" her husband growled.

Miri pursed her lips. "You'd like to think so, but I do have my doubts at times, Ry."

"I am omnipotent, wench!" he said, casting a quirked brow in her direction. "Did you not read the contract that says so?"

"I'll have to look it over again," she said dryly. "I must have missed that part."

Ryden flopped down on their bed. "This is not good, Miri. The bond between the New Alliance and *an Tuirc* is a fragile thing at best and with that asshole Mahmet Nazanin running off at the mouth about independence and democracy for *an Tuirc*, we've had to walk a fine line over there. The idjut wants a civil war and may well get one now."

His lady had been General Strom's secretary before their marriage and—before that—secretary to General Alphon Morrison. She was privy to many secrets of which not even her husband was aware.

"He's a troublemaker, that's for sure. My take on King Abdul is he's a good man if a bit ineffectual. The real power behind the throne will be Prince Jaegar when he ascends." She went to sit beside her husband. "It is he who has been taken?"

"Aye," the Burgon said. "And we need to get the boy back safely. The alternative is unthinkable."

"Prince Riashi," she said, nodding. "Not a young man I would pick to be the leader of a large monarchy such as *an Tuirc*."

Her husband sighed. "I think we know who will wield the power if that one takes the Panther Throne."

"Queen Audrina, the audacious," Miri stated. "I've never heard anything good about that woman. General Strom despises her and General Morrison feared her."

"With good reason," Ryden said. "Though he hasn't been able to prove it, Strom believes she has hired men to murder people she wants out of her way. He doesn't trust her any further than he can see her."

"You do know Prince Jaegar is bonded with Major Dominia Alamaine, a Daughter of the Night?"

The Burgon blinked. "*Hell* no, I didn't know that!"

Miri's eyes twinkled. "I thought you said you knew everything, warrior."

"*Lhiannan*, don't make me turn your shapely ass over my knee for being disrespectful of your emperor," he warned. "Why didn't you tell me about this before now, Miriam?" He held up a hand. "And don't give me any shite about my omnipotence!"

She giggled. "It didn't seem all that important—interesting and intriguing, but not particularly important. I knew it would piss off the queen having a hell hag for a daughter-in-law."

"She's a Guardian, isn't she?" He narrowed his eyes. "And who told you she had bonded with Jaegar?"

"Chastain Neff-Cosaint. I had a vid-mail from her a few days ago. She heard about it from Ardor Leveche, who learned of it from Davan Ghrian, who got it from her friend Lauryl Coedil, who is—"

"Enough!" the Burgon grumbled. "You women have a stronger network of spies than I do!"

"I bid you remember that should you do something you think you can hide from me, warrior," his wife cautioned.

He got to his feet, walked to the window. "All discussion aside, we must get Rozakaris as quickly as possible."

"It doesn't make sense that the *phansigars* would break tradition and venture into kidnapping," Miri said. "There's more to this, warrior. Much more."

"My thoughts exactly." He went over to the vid-com on the desk. "Vid-com on!"

"How many I be of service, Your Excellency?" the computer asked.

"I need my men contacted," the Burgon said. "The usual suspects. Tell them I want them to drop whatever they're doing and get here ASAP. This is a red tri-star meeting so make sure they understand that. Highest priority and fullest secrecy. Add Taegin Drae to the list. And hop to it. I want them here yesterday!"

"Aye, Your Excellency!"

"Red tri-star?" Miri questioned when the vid-com clicked off.

"That tells them they are not to let anyone know they're coming and to use maximum subterfuge once they get here." He grinned. "It's dress-up time for the hounds!"

"Wicked little boys at play," she said beneath her breath.

"What?" her husband asked, trying to probe her mind, but his Reaper abilities didn't work on his Lady-Reaper. She deflected the probe right back at him. When he growled, she simply blew him a kiss.

* * * * *

Jaegar had never been truly sick in his life. The recuperation abilities of a Shadowlord were legendary, and even in childhood, he had been immune to the illnesses that plagued other boys his same age. It was only when something alien to his natural chemical makeup was introduced into his body that trouble began.

Like Chalean whiskey and the highly potent Chrystallusian plum wine he loved so well.

Hangovers notwithstanding, the young prince had never so much as contracted a cold, and to find himself laid low, in debilitating pain that ate at his insides like liquid fire and so weak he couldn't lift his head, was a completely bewildering experience.

Agony stabbed at his right side—alternately cutting and sharp then dull and aching, throbbing. If he drew a deep breath, hiccupped or coughed, the pain was so violent he wished he could pass out. More pain intermittently shot from the top of his right shoulder down his arm then brought the sensation of paralysis to the whole of his right side. To add to the pain, a fever gripped him to burn his flesh as the pain was burning his insides. A bitter taste permeated his mouth, which did not help the horrendous nausea that seemed to be getting worse.

He was sick and getting sicker by the minute.

"I think I may have given him too much of the drug. I should not have listened to the *tantric*," Birendra said as he watched his captive straining to relieve himself still again. The stench of vomit in the bucket beside the bunk made him crinkle his nose.

"May I suggest the bark, rind and leaves of the pomegranate, Sri Parekh?" one of Birendra's men asked.

"No, ginger tea," the other protested with a shake of his head. "My mother swore by it."

"We will try the ginger," Birendra said. "That cannot hurt." He was frowning sharply. "I believe that last dose is what has caused this sickness."

"But see how he favors his right side and will not lie on the left?" the man who had proposed the pomegranate concoction pointed out. "Mayhap there is something wrong with his insides."

"The shortness of breath, the vomiting, coughing and fever concern me," Birendra said. "The drug I gave him should not have caused that."

"What was it, Sri Parekh?"

"Nothing that should have done this to him. It was merely a concentrated dose of *ahanin* the *tantric* said would further weaken the Shadowlord's powers." He ground his teeth. "I should not have listened to the old fool."

"You do not think it will kill him, do you, Sri Parekh?" the ginger advocate whispered.

"By the goddess Kalia, no!" Birendra snapped. "We will not even court such disaster by speaking of it." He pushed the man. "Get your ginger tea and be quick about it!" He turned to the pomegranate man. "Increase our speed. We need to reach our destination sooner than planned. They have healers there who will know how to handle this."

"Aye, Sri Parekh!"

A fit of coughing came over Birendra's captive and with it violent shaking as pain flooded the young man's body. He began gasping for breath, bending over the edge of the bunk as he tried to breathe. Though the mercenary had no compassion within him, he was, however, a very superstitious man. To harm a mage was a grievous sin in the eyes of his sect. The only time a *phansigar* was permitted to kill such a man was if the *phan's* life was in mortal danger.

Chewing on his bottom lip, Birendra watched the prince's suffering for as long as he could stand it. Guilt had settled on his shoulders like a heavy weight. He went to the bunk, kicked aside the bucket for he was fairly sure there was nothing left in the young man's belly by now.

"Do not strain so," he said. He put out his hand to touch the fevered brow of his captive, hesitated, then placed his palm on the prince's forehead and eased him down onto his right side. He looked around. "Where is the tea, Gagan?"

"It is here, Sri Parekh," Gagan said, hurrying over with the lukewarm tea. "I made sure it was not too hot for him to drink."

"Give it to me." Birendra took the cup then hooked his hand behind Jaegar's neck. "You must drink this, Shadowlord," he said.

Jaegar was locked up too tightly in the coils of agony shifting through his belly to be aware of those around him. His vision was red-tinted, the pain blocking out all sound and understanding. As the cup touched his lips, he tried to turn his head away. The smell of the warm liquid filling his nostrils exasperated the nausea.

"No," he whispered.

"By the goddess, he is burning up," Birendra said. The palm of his hand resting on the young man's neck felt as though it were pressed to the hot hull of a recently landed craft. He could feel the sweat slicking his own flesh.

"We are half an hour from our target," the pomegranate man called out. "Do you wish me to announce our arrival?"

"Contact Sheol. Tell him to have a healer standing by. Give him the Shadowlord's symptoms. Perhaps he will have something to give him as soon as we arrive," Birendra ordered. He looked over at Gagan. "Come hold his head. I need to get some liquid into him."

Though he tried to push his tormentors away, Jaegar couldn't accomplish it. His arms were weighted down by the heavy iron manacles, making it nearly impossible to lift them in his weakened state. Gagan held his head steady—tilted down—so Birendra could drizzle the ginger tea into the prince's mouth.

"You must drink, boy," Birendra insisted. "It will help."

Liquid dripping down his chin, choking from the tea being forced down his throat, Jaegar managed to swallow enough of the fluid to satisfy the mercenary. As soon as Gagan gently laid his head on the hard pillow, Jaegar writhed as pain enveloped him in fresh waves, biting into his stomach like lava. Tears of agony brightened his eyes.

"It was not my intent to hurt you, Shadowlord," Birendra said, coming as close as he ever had to voicing an apology to anyone. "If the drug I gave you did this to you, it puts guilt in my soul."

Wanting to be left alone, Jaegar turned his head away from the frowning face of his captor. He would not beg the man, would not plead with him for he knew it would be useless. For whatever purpose he'd been kidnapped, wherever he was being taken, he'd soon find out. Obviously they needed him alive and that gave him hope he would stay that way.

"Sheol says they will be ready for him. We are to land in our usual place on the far side of the facility and, as always, he will have someone there to collect the Shadowlord and take him through the maintenance entrance."

Birendra's lips drew back from his teeth, his eyes blazing with anger. "Did you tell him our prisoner was a Shadowlord, Adir?"

"Nay, Sri Parekh!" the man was quick to deny. "I know not to say anything of those we take there! But—"

"But what?"

"He asked if there would be special needs for the prisoner."

Birendra narrowed his eyes. "And what did you tell him?"

"I said he would need an iron-sheathed cell and iron chains to contain him," the man replied with a whimper.

A muscle ticked in Birendra's cheek. "So he will know the prisoner is a Shadowlord!"

The man hung his head. "I am afraid so, Sri Parekh," he replied.

"Did you give him a name?"

The man snapped his head no, his eyes going wide. "Nay, Sri Parekh! I would never do such a thing!"

Birendra cursed the man to *naraka* for the demons to feast on his flesh. "You had best not. No one can know where we have put the Shadowlord or who he really is. No one must ever find him."

The words chilled Jaegar. He slowly turned his head to look at the tall man in the blue turban. The mercenary was in profile to him. He must have felt Jaegar's steady regard for he turned to gaze down at him.

"Aye, Shadowlord," the man said. "You heard correctly. There will be no return from where I am taking you."

Chapter Twelve

Utuk Xul Prison in the Aduaidh Quadrant of the Idimmu Galaxy

Three years and a few days later

Reed Summerton tossed the satchel he carried onto the bunk and looked about the dismal room where he would spend the next year of his miserable life. He had finally arrived at the lowest level of the penal facility and at the lowest ebb of his life.

"Where do you want this, Healer?" the guard who carried Reed's box of books inquired.

"Anywhere," Reed said listlessly. "What does it matter?"

"Your assistants Anshar and Indra will meet with you in the sickbay when you are ready," the guard told him.

The healer nodded and threw up his hand in acknowledgement. He was tired—bone-weary—and had the headache from hell pounding between his temples. This far beneath the planet's surface, the atmospheric pressure would take some getting used to. He'd thought it had been bad on sublevel three when he'd taken his post there the year before but here? Here it was worse yet.

"You need anything else, milord?" the guard asked.

"Is there anything needing my attention?" Reed asked, sitting down on the bunk. He scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Nothing that can't wait," was the reply. "There's one old man who's been trying to die for a couple of days now. He's in a coma. Ain't nothing to be done about him."

"Healer Stanus told me about him in the briefing this morning. Anything else?"

"No, milord."

"Then I'm going to try to sleep off this wicked headache." He stretched out on the bunk, wincing at the hard mattress.

"It'll pass," the guard said. "Takes a day or two to adjust."

"Aye," Reed agreed. "Turn out the light when you leave, will ya?"

"Of course, milord."

The low phospho light went out and as the guard eased the door shut, near-total darkness enveloped the stone room. Save for the faint glow from the small heater that kept the room warm, the chamber would have been claustrophobic in its lightlessness.

Reaching into the pocket of his pants, Reed pulled out the small vial of tenerse, uncorked it, brought it to his lips and took a small sip. The strong neuroleptic would help ease the pain in his head, but he used the highly addictive liquid sparingly. He

knew what the drug could do to those who abused it. Two of the healers stationed with him had fallen victim to the cherry-flavored drug's power.

He recapped the vial, stuffed it back in his pocket and turned to his side, thrusting his hands under the too-soft pillow. Willing his body to remain absolutely still, he concentrated on taking in slow, deep breaths.

As the drug pulled a soft blanket over his senses, he drifted into that pliable world where he could escape the harsh realities of prison life. His memories of happier, brighter times took over.

And in particular of the beautiful woman he had met nearly three years earlier who had captured his heart...

"We want a list of every prisoner incarcerated here."

The man who stood in the warden's office was tall and dark and dangerous. His amber eyes bore a red spark within them that boded ill for anyone who dared deny him what he wanted.

"Your Majesty, I beg your indulgence," Warden Xaphan said, "but such a thing would take days...perhaps weeks...to put together. There are hundreds of prisoners on each level, and we have three levels of..."

"I don't give a rat's ass how long it takes!" the warrior king thundered. "We will stay until we have seen every last wretched inhabitant of this pisshole!"

"But, King Gabriel..." the warden whined. No other words came from his quivering lips for the warrior grabbed him by the shirtfront and jerked him off his feet.

"Every. Last. Fucking. Inmate!" Gabriel Leveche bellowed. He shook the warden as though the man weighed less than a feather pillow. "Is that fucking clear to you, asswipe?"

"It w-would help if I knew who you were l-looking for," the warden stammered.

"That's none of your business," Leveche barked then shoved the fat man from him. His head whipped around as he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Reed Summerton, Your Majesty. I am one of the healers here."

"How long have you been here?" a feminine voice questioned.

She was standing off to one side so Reed had not seen her when he passed the warden's office and stopped upon hearing the loud voice of the black-clad warrior. Turning his head toward her, the healer felt as though he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning. Almost as tall as he, the raven-haired beauty had the greenest eyes he'd ever seen and the most luscious red lips.

"The lady asked you a question," the warden said quickly. "Pray answer her, Summerton!"

"Two months," Reed replied, forcing himself to tear his gaze from the beauty and glance at the warden. "Is something wrong?"

"We're looking for someone," the woman said, drawing Reed's eyes to her. "How many of the prisoners have you had dealings with?"

"None as yet," he replied.

"The first year, healers work the administration level," the warden spoke up. "Next year he will head down to level two and the year after level three then four the following year."

"Then he's worthless to us," she snapped.

"Ouch," Reed said, putting a hand to his heart. "Good thing I've got tough skin because that really hurt."

"Get over it," she said with a snort.

Reed winced, staggering back. "Now that was a killing shot."

Her eyes flared. "This is not a joke, you fucking moron!"

The tall man with her almost smiled, stepping in to gently push her aside. He leveled his golden stare at Reed. "What the lady is attempting to say, in her oh-so-charming way, is this is very serious, healer. We are here on the Burgon's business."

That sobered Reed. He had the grace to blush. "My apologies, Your Majesty. I meant no disrespect."

"Leveche, let's get this done," the gorgeous woman insisted. "I'll take the second level."

"No, you won't," the warrior replied. "You'll stay here while my men and I head down to level two."

"The hell I will!" she shouted. "This is my bro..."

"You'll do as you are told, Hazan!" Leveche said, and with his anger came a flash of fang that made her take a step back.

"Reaper," Reed whispered – unaware he'd spoken until the man in question turned an irritated look his way. The healer held up his hands, backing away, shaking his head because he was too astounded to utter a single word after the warrior's glare. He'd never been face-to-face with a Reaper before that day.

"Come on, Gabriel!" the woman said with a groan. "Don't make me grovel here. I..."

"I said no. What part of the word escapes your understanding, wench?" he growled. "Your father would have my ass if I allowed it so you are not going to the lower levels. Just suck it up." He pointed a finger at the warden. "You will accompany me."

Reed stepped aside as the Reaper spun on his heel and stalked from the room, the warden following behind like a little whipped pup. As Gabriel moved, four other warriors materialized out of nowhere to flank him.

"Goddess-be-damned arrogant son of a bitch," Reed heard the woman say.

"In all fairness to King Gabriel," Reed said, "the lower levels are not a decent place for you to go, milady."

She ignored him as though he hadn't spoken. She continued to ignore him for the entire six days she and the Reaper remained at Utuk Xul.

Try as hard as he might, Reed could not ignore the gorgeous, ferocious woman who paced like a caged tigress from one end of the main hallway to the other as she waited each day for news from the men who were interviewing the inmates. When King Gabriel appeared at the end of the grueling sessions, she would run to him – face hopeful.

"Did you find him? Is he here?" she asked, even though it was obvious to Reed from the expressions on the faces of the men that such had not been the case.

On the last evening the Reaper and his team came up from the lowest level for the final time, the woman Reed knew only as Hazan did not run to greet them. She stood where she was and the light of hope faded from her verdant eyes.

"I'm sorry, sweeting," Leveche said. "I had hoped..." He shook his head. "He's not here."

Reed's heart broke as he watched the lovely woman bury her face in her hands. He would have given anything to be in the Reaper's boots as Leveche drew her into his arms to comfort her as she sobbed wretchedly.

"We will find him. We won't stop looking until we do," he said as he stroked Hazan's back.

But that had not eased the tears that cascaded down her face. She turned and ran past Reed, fleeing to the room that had been allocated her while she was there.

"Will you be leaving now, Your Majesty?" the warden asked.

"Aye," Leveche said, sighing deeply. "As soon as I collect my ward."

"Is there anything I can do?" Reed asked. "She is so distraught."

"Thank you, but no, healer," the Reaper replied. "This is hard on all of us."

The last time Reed saw the devastatingly beautiful woman with the midnight hair, her head was down, her shoulders slumped as she walked beside the Storian king, his arm draped protectively around her shoulders.

That night, nearly three years earlier, he dreamed of her for the first time...

Coming awake from yet another vivid, erotic dream in which he and the mysterious Hazan had been vigorously engaged in lovemaking, the healer wiped the sweat from his face on the sleeve of his tunic.

"This has to stop, Summerton," he warned himself. The erection that was pressing painfully at his pants, the tight-as-a-fist throbbing in his balls, was beginning to be a real problem. "Having wet dreams every night for nearly three years about a woman you never even touched is just plain wrong."

Swinging his legs from the bunk, he stood, put his hands to his back and stretched. The worst of the headache was gone, but he felt fuzzy around the edges thanks to the tenerse. He turned on the phospho light—blinking against even the dim intrusion—and began rummaging through his satchel for the bottle of water he kept there. He had just taken a sip when the small vid-com screen hanging on the wall flared to life. The brightness drove like a spike through his eyes, and he threw up a hand to block the glare.

"Sorry to bother you, Healer Summerton," a man said, "but one of the prisoners needs your attention."

Reed nodded as he walked to the titanium toilet in the corner of the room. "I'll be down there as soon as I take a leak."

"We'll come get you, milord. He's not in the sickbay. He's in sol-con down in the tubes."

Two guards were waiting for him when Reed came out of his room carrying his diagnostic kit. "Sol-con?" he repeated.

"Solitary confinement," one of the men replied. In his hand he carried a case he told Reed contained what he'd need to take care of the prisoner.

The healer frowned. "And the tubes? What's that?"

"It's where they put prisoners like him. It's a sublevel deep below this one. No contact at any time."

Reed stopped walking. He put out a hand to stop the guard on his right. "What do you mean no contact at any time?"

"Just that, milord," the guard answered. "No human contact. He never sees anyone and no one speaks to him. He's monitored on the vid-com day in and day out so that's how we know he's sick again. His food and water are lowered into the cell by a robotic arm and the slop bucket is removed the same way. When we have to knock him out, we lace his food with pairilis and then the healers can go to work on him."

"Why wasn't I told about this?" Reed demanded. "That kind of treatment is inhumane. What did he do to warrant treatment like that?"

"He's one of Sub-warden Sheol's special prisoners," the man told him. "It's his rules we follow where them inmates are concerned."

"Who the hell gave Sheol the authority to abuse the prisoners? Such mistreatment is against UCJ policy. I'll certainly mention this in my next report!"

The guards looked uneasily at one another and the older of the two shook his head.

"You don't want to do that, milord. You don't go questioning what Sub-warden Sheol does," the other guard warned. "He will make your life hell if you do."

"How can he make it any worse?" Reed grouched.

"He can make it so you don't rotate back up when this tour is over," the guard replied. "You'll be stuck here for five years instead of two."

Grinding his teeth, Reed thought that would surely be the end of his sanity if he were forced to stay on level four for the remainder of his time at Utuk Xul. What he'd seen of this level, it was far worse than the two above it and the prisoners he'd spied covertly watching him as he left the elevator were far scarier than their counterparts up two levels.

"Just do your job and don't make waves, milord," the guard told him. "That's the only way you can survive this hell-hole."

"So what's wrong with the prisoner?" the healer asked, his conscience prodding him as they stepped into the elevator and the door closed.

"Don't know. He came to us damaged," the guard reported.

"Damaged how?" Reed asked and staggered as the elevator began descending. "Was he hurt when they brought him in?"

"He was doubled up like his gut was killing him. He was groaning something fierce, but he didn't have a mark on him," Fason replied. "Leastwise none I could see before the sub-warden hurried up and threw a cloth over his face to keep us from getting a good look at him."

"It's his liver," the other guard said. "That's what I heard Healer Bergen say. He's got liver and kidney problems, and sometimes they flare up and he needs meds to keep him from screaming."

"Then he should be in sickbay and not in solitary confinement!" Reed snapped. "We'll bring him up to the—"

"No, milord, we will not," Fason stated. "He is chained to the wall and only the sub-warden has the key to the shackles."

"Sweet merciful Alel! That is unconscionable! Where the hell could he go? How the hell could he get out of the cell and up this fucking shaft to escape?" Reed exploded.

"Milord, it ain't got nothing to do with him trying to escape. He can't and that's a given. Reason he's chained is 'cause he's a Shadowlord and Sub-warden Sheol ain't takin' no chances of him using any powers that could set him free or do harm to any of us."

"A Shadowlord?" Reed repeated. "Here? Why?"

"Don't know and don't want to know. Only found out what he was when I overheard the sub-warden call him that."

"Who is this man?" Reed demanded. "What's his name?"

"Kanvar Barda is the name the sub-warden gave him, the name he put on whatever papers there needs to be, but you can bet your last gold piece that ain't the man's real name," Fason answered.

"Barda," Reed repeated, his mind working feverishly. "That's a Storian name, isn't it?"

"Could be."

Memory of the Storian king searching Utuk Xul for one particular man nearly three years earlier flashed across the healer's mind. He'd wager the prisoner in sol-con was that man.

The elevator jarred to a stop and as the grinding, shrieking scrape of the chains ceased, Reed could hear the distant unmistakable sound of screaming. As the door to the cage was thrown open, he could see five jagged holes about six feet in diameter pitting the rock wall. Each was sealed off by an iron door with an oversized padlock.

Fason headed for the farthest hole and reached out to flick on the vid-com beside the rusted door. He hunted and pecked his way across the keyboard beneath the small screen and a whirling sound started down the corridor off to Reed's right.

The healer had always been deathly afraid of cybots and Class 10 constructs scared him more than all the others. As soon as the seven-foot-tall monstrosity came lumbering in his direction, he stepped back, his heart pounding as the thick titanium body bore

down on him like the juggernaut it was. In its metal hand, it carried a tranq pistol. "What is that thing going to do?" he asked, nervously eyeing the 'bot.

"See that panel about midways up the wall?" Worley asked. "The 'bot will open that and fire the tranq dart into the prisoner. We gotta do it this way because he won't eat so we can't drug him. Once he's out, we'll go in."

"He *can't* eat because he's in pain," Reed mumbled under his breath then shifted from foot to foot, keeping an eye on the 'bot until the A.I. had performed its duty then shuffled back down the corridor and out of sight.

"He's out," Fason said, clicking off the vid-com. "You stay here, milord, until I get him ready for you."

"Ready?" Reed questioned, taking a step toward the cell, but Worley moved in front of him, shaking his head.

"No, milord. You can't go in until we say you can."

Blowing an annoyed breath through his nose, Reed stood back, watching Fason take a light into the pitch-black cell. He heard the rattle of chains then the guard called out that he could come in. Cursing under his breath, the healer marched into the cell. He came up short.

"Sweet, Merciful Ale!" Reed exploded. "Where the hell is his bunk?"

"Don't got one," Fason replied.

"Why not?" The healer was so enraged he wanted to smash his fist into the guard's beefy face.

"Milord, best you take that up with the sub-warden," Fason said. "Those are his orders. We just carry 'em out."

What truly angered Reed was the fact Fason had covered the unconscious man's face with a cloth so it could not be seen. He had the urge to bend over, snatch the cloth away, but was afraid if he did the guards would hustle him from the cell and the prisoner would suffer for his fit of pique.

Instead, he hunkered down, opened his kit and took out the diagnostic scanner, passing it slowly over the slumped body, taking in the grime-packed, chipped nails on the hand turned palm up at the prisoner's side, the dirty bare feet and the raw wounds around his ankles and wrists where the iron manacles had abraded the flesh.

"This is unconscionable," he snapped. "No one should be forced to live like this. No one."

The scanner beeped and he started to look at the results when his attention fell to the prisoner's right arm and the tattoos inked there.

At that moment, Reed Summerton's world slipped completely off kilter.

* * * * *

On the other side of the galaxy, Dominia came awake with a start, jerked out of her restless sleep as though by a cold, clammy hand. Her heart was pounding so hard she put a hand to it, afraid it would rip right through her rib cage. She stared into the darkness, wondering what had thrust her so brutally from sleep. Putting a shaky hand to her face, she felt the moisture running down her temples and wiped it away. Over the last three and a bit years, night sweats had become a way of life.

Tossing aside the covers, she got out of bed. She knew from experience there would be no returning to sleep for her. A glance at the vid-com showed it was two thirty in the morning. Tomorrow – she thought with a sigh – would be a long, long day.

Feeling claustrophobic in the elegant room in which she'd spent her youth, she padded to the door, opened it quietly so as not to wake any of her relatives and walked down the corridor. The marble flooring beneath her bare feet was cool, helping to dissipate the heavy heat that seemed to be wearing her down. Taking the stairs down to the third level of her mother's mansion, she made her way to the sitting room and the wide double doors that led to the deep, curving balcony that overlooked the garden. As soon as she opened the mullioned doors, a soft night wind caressed her fevered body. Going to the elaborate wrought iron railing, she braced her hands on the top railing and inhaled the delicious scent of jasmine wafting on the breeze.

"Couldn't sleep either?"

The soft voice of her mother did not startle Dominia. This was not the first time she had come to this spot late at night and found her mother already there or coming out to join her shortly thereafter.

"Something woke me," Dominia said. "How 'bout you? What are you doing out here again?"

"Worrying about you," her mother said quietly. She got up from her chair and came over to her daughter, putting a gentle hand on Dominia's back. She rubbed lightly. "You've lost so much weight, I can feel your rib cage."

Considering they'd had this same conversation before, Dominia didn't respond to the gentle chiding. Both knew it would do no good.

"He's out there, Mama," she said. "He's alive and waiting for me to find him."

Her mother slipped her arm around Dominia's waist. "Aye, Domi," she said. "I know."

Where others believed Jaegar had gone on to make his peace with the Wind, her mother did not, and for that Dominia was grateful. To be bonded to a man was to know when he crossed over. She did not feel that was the case and her mother accepted it as fact. She trusted her daughter's feelings.

"You'll be leaving in the morning?" her mother asked.

"It's already morning," Dominia said, and laid her head against her mother's. "But aye, I will be."

"And where do you go now?"

Dominia drew in a long breath then let it out slowly. "General Strom needs me to make a trip out to Réalta Madra and pick up some documents in a certain spy's underground vault."

"You'll be careful, I know, but I'll ask anyway," her mother said softly. "And from there?"

Dominia smiled. "You know me all too well."

"You are my child," came the reminder.

"I thought since I'll be in the Green Sector, I'd make a side trip over to Seabhac and see if the Oracle has heard anything."

"Wouldn't she have contacted you if she had?"

"Not necessarily," Dominia replied. "She gets hundreds of requests every week. Mine is no more important to her than any of the others."

Her mother pursed her lips. "She is not the only prophetess searching for your bond-companion," she said. "The Daughters of the Multitude's Great Lady as well as the Amazeen Arch-High Priestess are doing all they can to aid our Supreme Vicaress."

"Believe me, I appreciate all they do. I know the Burgon and his hounds of hell haven't given up on Jaegar either, but finding him isn't the priority it was at the start," Dominia complained.

"Except to you and his father," her mother injected.

"And Hazan," Dominia said. "That one is going to be a warrior to reckon with. She has petitioned to become a Guardian and will most likely be accepted." She smiled. "I thought her so meek when first I met her, yet she's proven to be almost as tenacious as I am in looking for her brother."

"I have a feeling in my heart you will find him," her mother told her. When her daughter yawned, she shook her gently. "Why don't you lie down and try to rest? Even if you don't sleep, your body needs the down time."

"Aye," Dominia agreed. "I should go back to bed else I'll be flying in a fog tomorrow."

Though she had not expected to fall asleep, she did almost as soon as her head hit the pillow and with the sleep, came the dream...

Jaegar was sitting on the lush green grass, clad only in loose black silk trousers. Muscular chest bare, knees drawn up into the circle of his arms, bare feet crossed at the ankles, he was staring across the heaving waters of Lake Iremos. In the middle of the lake, a sailboat battled the wind, its brilliant white sheeting popping like gunfire across the water.

"I am like that boat," he said softly.

"How so, aşık?" In a soft blue gown she lay beside her lover, staring at his profile.

"See how it struggles to get to shore? The Wind is keeping it from coming home."

She turned to look at the boat. "She has a good captain. He'll bring her in safely."

The wind whipped at his dark hair. "All it takes is one misstep to capsize her. One miscalculation, one slip-up, one lapse in judgment or just one instance of overlooking the obvious and she'll slip beneath the waves and disappear forever." He turned to look at her with sad, sad eyes. "I am like that boat, *meleşüm*."

Sitting up, she took his face between her palms and locked her gaze with his. "I won't let you disappear, *aşık*. I will never stop looking."

"Don't let me go, Domi," he pleaded. "Don't let me slip beneath the waves and be forgotten."

"I won't," she insisted.

"I am out there," he said as though he hadn't heard her. "I am out there waiting."

She moved to her knees beside him, drawing his head to her breast. "And I will find you," she swore. "I will find you!"

"Bring me home, *meleşüm*," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Please bring me home."

All she had to give him at that moment was herself. They were alone on the lakeshore with no one for miles and miles save the sailor struggling to get his boat to the dock. She wanted desperately to erase the pain in his wounded eyes, to ease the deep lines of tension carved into his forehead. Moving in front of him, she unlocked his clenched fingers, his crossed legs and wedged her body between his spread thighs.

"I love you more than life itself," she told him, once more pressing his cheeks between her palms. "There is nothing I would not do for you. I would give my life for you and take thousands if need be to save you."

"Don't let them win, milady," he pleaded with her. "If they win, I'll be lost for all time."

He wrapped his arms around her and lay back, dragging her up his body as he locked her tight against him. One hand went to the back of her head as he brought her mouth to his, turning her to her back, wedging one thigh between hers. He nibbled at her bottom lip until she opened for him, drew his tongue inside the sweet warmth of the slick recess.

His kiss was deep and it made her belly clench. She threaded her fingers through his black curls. The weight of him pressing her down was wonderful, so sensual, so heady. She hooked a leg over his thigh and arched her hips.

He kissed his way down her neck and to the V of her bodice, pushing it aside so he could cup one breast and lift it from its silky covering to wrap his lips around the tight little peak. His tongue rasped across the nipple, swirling around it before he tenderly clamped it between his teeth.

Magically their clothing disappeared into the netherworld of dreamland and the wind covered them like a warm, soft blanket. It ruffled his hair, played over their bodies like silk as he moved lower to place a kiss on her bellybutton, each hip.

"I need you inside me," she whispered. "I need to feel your body in mine."

He looked up and the sad smile that touched his chiseled lips broke her heart. Sliding his heavy body over hers, he wedged his hands beneath her rump and lifted her, his rigid cock poised at the entrance of her sheath.

"Find me, *meleşüm*," he said. "Please, find me." Slowly he sank into her wet heat.

Dominia closed her eyes and held him tight as he began the exquisite rocking of his body against hers. His shaft stroked her inner muscles so powerfully, so gloriously. The scent of their combined juices filled her nostrils as she drew in a long, satisfied breath.

"Find me," he said again, the rhythm of his gliding thrusts increasing.

She brought her other leg up and lashed him to her, her hands buried in his thick curls. The rub of his chest hair against the sensitive peaks of her breasts intensified until her nipples were tingling from the erotic abrasion.

Sinking and retreating, sinking and retreating, his cock filled her completely. It stretched her so deliciously and pressed so deeply into her aching body she wanted to hold him there forever.

"Find me," he whispered, and his thrusts became more heated, sped up until he was ramming into her with powerful jabs. "Find me."

Dominia clasped him to her, imprisoning him within her arms. As long as she held him, he was there with her. As long as she could feel the strength of his commanding body, experience the potency of his rigid, swollen cock, she felt alive and there was hope burning in her heart.

"I love you," she said. Her arms were like iron bands around his powerful shoulders.

She clung to him as their bodies pounded savagely together. His fingers clamped into the soft muscles of her ass and hers dug into the flexing muscles of his shoulders. The sound of their lower bodies meeting, his ragged breath as he rammed into her, filled her ears. His scent enveloped her and she dragged that wonderful part of him deep into her lungs to hold it there.

"Don't leave me again!" she begged.

"I am here, meleğüm. I am here for now," he said between pants.

Their releases came in tandem – so powerful, so potent the world around them shifted on its axis. The ground trembled as the ripples of climax pulsed around his cock. The wind gusted fiercely as his cum poured deep into her channel. The sky above them wavered with white-hot heat then exploded like an Tsínian fireworks with fiery streaks of multicolored rockets bursting in the bright azure heavens.

With one last hard shove of his hips to hers, he sagged against her, trembling, gulping air into his depleted lungs.

"Jaegar," she said, "stay with me. Please stay with me."

Although her arms tightened even more around him, she could feel him slipping out of her grip.

"Jaegar, no!" she cried out.

The wind wrenched him from her arms, and as it flowed over her sweaty body, its blasts left her cold – cold and dead inside. She threw out her arms to snatch him back as he began to move away from her.

"Please, don't take him!" she begged. She rose to her knees with her arms outstretched, her fingers curving uselessly. "Don't take him again!"

The sky darkened rapidly until it was a dull gray shot with a spider web of ugly red veins. An unsettling odor blasted from the wind – the stench of unwashed bodies and dankness, rot and decay.

He was being drawn across the heaving waters of the lake. One strong hand was out to her, his face filled with unbearable sorrow.

"Find me!" he pleaded, his voice as forlorn and sad as she'd ever heard it in her nightly imaginings. "Find me before its too late."

"Jaegar!" she screamed, stumbling to her feet.

Black swirls filled the angry sky, and as she ran toward the waterline, he was sucked up into the maw of the storm, disappearing from view.

"Jaegar!"

Dominia was thrust from her dream—gasping for breath, feeling the prickle of chills on her shoulders and arms and down her sides. Sweat trickled from her temples and beneath the folds of her breasts. Her heart was pounding furiously.

She slapped her hands to her face, scrubbed brutally at her flesh. She drew her knees up and rocked back and forth in nearly unbearable misery. The needing of her bond-companion, the inability to be with him was driving her slowly insane. Like the withdrawal symptoms of a long-time drug addict, it was beginning to crush her spirit and her ability to be strong.

"I will not cry," she said through gritted teeth. "I will not!"

In all this time he had been missing, his whereabouts a mystery, his fate unknown, she had not given in to the weakness of tears. Her Daughters of the Night teachings had strengthened her backbone and her Riezell Guardian training had hardened the soft shell around her heart. She feared if she ever once gave in to the treacherous prickling at the back of her eyes, she would be unable to stop. The release would weaken her, cause her resolve to evaporate like mist on a warm morning. As long as she did not cry, did not allow the softer side of her nature to prevail, she had optimism. If she let the tears fall, she knew the ache, the sharp pain of wanting him, needing him, would take her over the edge into a place from which there would be no returning.

Spiking her hands through her hair, she pushed the short strands from her face. She had cut it a year after Jaegar vanished from her life in a ritual of her religion called *kourema*. The long, dark red braid was shorn at the nape of her neck and then buried in an urn beneath the altar of the goddess Agapi. It was a rare rite practiced only by women who had lost a bond-companion but knew him to be alive. Had she known for a certainty that Jaegar was dead, the braid would have been burned and the ashes placed with great ceremony in the brass urn reserved for Dominia's final resting in the Garden of Warrioreesses.

The *kourema* was one of the few observances of the tenets of her upbringing that Dominia had observed. At thirty-two years of age, she had gone through the first nine degrees of the Celestial Descendency. Although for some of those degrees that required her physical presence on Bandar, her participation in the training of her sisters, she had been given dispensation as a Riezell Guardian. The next degree was coming up in three years but it had never been her desire to seek the upper four levels of Vicaress, Abbess,

Tribal queen and—ultimately—Queen of the Daughters of the Night. Now she wondered if the next degree might not be useful to her in finding Jaegar.

"But do you really want to become a Vicaress?" she whispered.

Very few people outside the Daughters of the Night knew what it meant to take the higher orders. The entire process was shrouded in secrecy, but she had explained it to Jaegar's father because the decision she had to make was one she would not make lightly. That night came back to haunt her...

"I cannot discuss this with my mother for I know what she would say," she told him. "She would advise against it."

"You can run anything by me, kerime," he assured her, using the Rysalian word for daughter-in-law. "What would this degree entail?"

"When a witch has reached her thirty-fifth birthday, she may decide to become One with the Blood. What this means is she may become immortal by accepting the bite of her queen. In other words, she will become a vampire."

Ben-Sulil frowned. "I thought only your queen was a vampire," he said.

"That is what most people think. Very few Daughters take the higher degrees," she explained. "It is not something you enter into lightly or without a great deal of thought. With the advancement comes greater responsibilities."

They were walking in his garden on Basaraba with the moonlight filtering through the date palms. The soft clacking of the fronds in the desert's night breeze vividly reminded her of seared bones on a funeral pyre clacking together.

The Deathlord moved silently, his hands clasped behind his back, the black of his uniform blending in with the shadows. He turned to look down at her. "What would be the advantage of you taking such a degree?"

She paused by a bubbling fountain and sat down on its rim to fan her hand through the cascading waters.

"I will never stop looking for him, kayinpeder." She had given him the respectful title of father-in-law for each thought of her as Jaegar's wife. "I will not rest until I find him." She looked out over the garden. "No matter how long it takes. He will be with me again."

"Ah," Ben-Sulil said, taking a seat beside her. "And if you are immortal, you can continue your quest for as long as there is time. Is that your thought?"

She nodded, hanging her head.

He reached out, took her hand between his. "Domi, look at me."

She lifted eyes to his and in them he could see the sheen of unshed tears.

"Dearling, eternity is a long time to mourn for what will never be again," he said softly. "Jaegar would not want that." When she tried to pull her hand free, he kept his grip on it.

"He's not dead," she said. "I would know if he was!"

"No, I don't believe he's left this world either," Ben-Sulil said. "I feel as though I would know it as well, but I do not sense his presence and that isn't a good sign."

"That only means he's being held somewhere there's iron!" she snapped. "He's probably shackled with it."

"I imagine that is the case," he agreed. "Whoever took him and for whatever purpose, they knew he was a Shadowlord. They would need to harness his powers to keep him."

"If you'd only let me go to an Tuirc!" she said with bitterness. "Now it's too late!"

"The Burgon and I agreed Audrina wouldn't have brought him there," he said sternly. "Even if she was behind this, she would not –"

"You know she was!" she snarled, jerking her hand free. "Who else stood to gain by Jaegar's disappearance?"

"But we cannot prove it, Dominia," he reminded her.

"If you had let me question her before Riashi took the throne, before they installed the Net over an Tuirc..."

"He is not there," Ben-Sulil stated with such assurance she wanted to hit him. "We have an informant on an Tuirc who went over every inch of that prophets-be-damned planet and Jaegar is not there. Now the Net is in place we no longer hear from the informant but he, like you, will never stop looking."

"She knows where he is!" she protested. "His bitch mother knows!"

"Most likely," he acknowledged, "but getting her to tell would have been like pulling eyeteeth."

"It wouldn't have just been eyeteeth! I would have pulled her apart limb by limb until she told me!" Dominia said, shooting up from the fountain. "And that little shithead motherfucker she calls king as well."

"And started a war with an Tuirc and her allies?" he asked calmly, shaking his head. "Abdul's assassination –"

"Which she was responsible for!" she interrupted. "How long after Jaegar vanished did that man meet his death? A week? Two? You know goddess-be-damned well she paid to have him murdered so that pretender could take the Panther Throne!"

"I've no doubt but as I was about to say, his assassination created havoc there for many weeks before the new king was installed. If you had gone in there, the chances are good you wouldn't have come back out again." He leveled a hard look upon her. "Believe me when I tell you an an Tuircese prison is not where you would want to spend the remainder of your life."

She flung out an angry hand. "She wouldn't have allowed me to live that long, anyway, if I'd been tossed into one of those filthy cells."

"Precisely," the Deathlord said. "Then where would that have left Jaegar?"

Clenching her fists at her sides, she let her head fall back and screamed like a wounded animal. People had come running from the villa – the Deathlord's wife and unmarried daughters, servants, all those who had come to care for Dominia as the bond-mate of the master's only son.

Ben-Sulil waved them all away, shooing them back into the house as he came over to her and wrapped his arms around her.

"I want my man back!" she whimpered.

"I know, dearling. I know," he said as he soothed a hand down her back. "Only you know what is best and whatever your decision, I will stand behind you."

"I want him back," she said again, battling the tears she refused to shed. "And I want that bitch dead!"

"Then do what you have to," he advised.

The first rays of the false dawn were lighting the sky in the east. Dominia watched their rosy fingers reaching up from the horizon and thought of her own hands reaching out to Jaegar as he was torn from her arms.

"I will find you, *aşık*," she swore. She felt her heart thudding hard against her chest. "And if I haven't by the time it comes for me to become One with the Blood, I will take the vows and keep searching. I'll not rest until you are at my side or your ashes are mixed with mine."

Chapter Thirteen

Utuk Xul Prison in the Aduaidh Quadrant of the Idimmu Galaxy

Four years and ten months later

All Reed could do to comfort the man he called Kanvar Barda was to make some changes in the poor bastard's life. In exchange for spending the remainder of his tour of duty in the very bowels of U.X., Sub-warden Sheol gave in to a few concessions that made the prisoner's existence more humane.

"A bath, haircut and shave, clean clothes once a month."

"Once a year," Sheol stated.

"Every month!" Reed insisted.

"All right. Once every six months then."

"Not acceptable! Once a month. That is UCJ code!" the healer shouted. "And his cell cleaned while he is being bathed!"

Sheol's eyes had narrowed with lethal intent. "You bleeding heart liberals make me sick. You have no idea what crimes that man has committed."

Reed knew the prisoner in question had committed no crimes—at least none that would have had him sent to Utuk Xul. He was fairly sure he knew precisely why Prince Jaegar Rozakaris was in the living hell of the prison and who had sent him there.

Instead, he had gone toe-to-toe with the evil little dictator who ruled the lowest level of U.X. with an iron hand.

"I don't care what he did," Reed said. "He is still a human being, and he will be treated that way as long as I am here!"

The sub-warden's thin lips stretched into a smile so malevolent it made the hair stand up on Reed's arms. "For as long as you are here," he repeated. He nodded slowly. "All right, healer. Once a month but the rule remains. He is to know no human contact."

"Why the hell not?" Reed exploded. "That is cruel and inhumane punishment and against UCJ code! I will report—"

"Report and he will suffer for it," Sheol warned. "Oh I promise you, he will! Is that what you want?"

Fear for the friend he had made that night on Rusuil shot through Reed. His father hadn't raised a fool. He knew when to back off though it left a decidedly bitter taste in his mouth.

"Is it?" Sheol pressed.

After a long silence, the healer shook his head. "No."

"I thought not."

Sheol had lifted a bony hand and thrust a rigid finger against Reed's chest. "And when you leave here—if you leave here alive—you'd best remember the paper you signed, the sensitive compartmented information nondisclosure statement. Revealing anything of what goes on here is against the law. One word about Kanvar Barda to anyone and you'll end up back here as an inmate, and I really don't think you'd like to be where he is now!" The man's hateful eyes narrowed to thin slits as he jabbed his finger again into Reed's chest. "Do you?"

Knocking the hand aside, Reed had stormed away. At least he had received some relief for Jaegar. Clean clothes, a bath, shave and haircut might seem like little things, but he prayed they would sustain his friend until he could find a way to get the prince released from the cesspool that had become Jaegar's life.

Walking into the man's cell to treat him yet again for the ailment that plagued the Shadowlord, Reed had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming. Jaegar lay as still as death from the drug the cybot had shot into him and with his face covered. Never allowed to be there when the guards took the prisoner from his cell to be groomed, Reed couldn't be sure the orders were carried out as prescribed although Worley swore that was the case.

"I want to see him," he said as he filled the vac-syringe with the drug that would help the agony Jaegar experienced several times a month. He squatted down beside his patient.

"You know I can't..." Worley began.

"Who's to know?" Reed said. He looked up at the man standing over him. "Turn away while I make sure he's all right and I'll see you get an extra two days topside."

Such an offer was worth its weight in gold. Guards on the lowest level were rarely allowed to spend more than a day every four months. Three days would be akin to visiting paradise.

"I don't know," Worley said, mulling over the offer.

"With one of the whores," Reed said. That would cost him dearly but he knew it could be arranged.

Worley chewed on his bottom lip. "Just a look?" he asked. "You won't say nothing to him?"

Reed released an irritated breath. "Do you think he could hear me if I did?" he snapped.

"Don't know what a Shadowlord can and can't do," Worley defended. He sniffed. "Two days with a whore, you said?"

The healer nodded, holding his breath.

"All right, but make it quick!"

Hand trembling, Reed had reached for the cloth that covered Jaegar's face. When he tugged it free, he felt his heart sink. It was all he could do not to moan.

"Hurry it up!" Worley grumbled.

Carefully Reed replaced the cloth, finished with the injection then rose to his feet. He had to get out of the cell before he started to scream.

"Two days now," Worley said, following him out of the cell. He turned to lock the cell door as Reed bounded up the steps. "Two days, you hear!"

* * * * *

Hazan took a deep breath then knocked on the door that led to the room allotted to Dominia when she came to Basaraba.

"Come!"

The twenty-eight-year-old woman stilled her nervous hand and opened the door, plastering a warm smile on her face.

"No," Dominia said firmly. She was at the bed, packing her bag.

The smile slipped from Hazan's face to be replaced with anger. "I haven't even asked!"

"The answer will still be no."

"He is my brother!" Hazan protested. She came into the room to stand at the foot of the bed with her hands on her hips.

"A brother you barely know," Dominia reminded her.

"What the hell difference does that make?"

Dominia straightened and turned to the young woman she had come to love as dearly as a sister. Her gaze took in the black leather pants and dark blue blouse, the dagger sheathed at Hazan's right thigh and the laser pistol strapped to her left, the gun belt hanging low. "Does your father and mother know what you have planned, Haz?"

Hazan lifted her chin. "I am not a little girl anymore, Dominia. I am a woman grown. I am as old as you were when first you met Jaegar. If I were a Guardian..."

"Which you aren't," Dominia stated.

"Only because you spoke against my application!" Jaegar's sister snarled.

Dominia crossed her arms over her chest. "I was not the one who did that." She knew Hazan's mother had but would never reveal that to the girl. "You don't join the Guardians to exact revenge on those you don't like, Hazan."

"But you stay in it to do so," Hazan countered. "Refusing to take a desk job so you can stay in the field and look for him."

"Why I stay is none of your concern," Dominia said, her eyes frosty. "And the reasons I do so are my own."

"I am a capable warrioress!" Hazan shouted. "I am good with the blade and the pistol. I can wield a laser whip with the best of them! My martial arts awards number in the —"

"It's that hot head of yours that has kept you from being an RG, not your abilities." She held up a hand as Hazan would have continued arguing. "Which I admit are

exceptional, but it takes more than the ability to bring a man twice your size down and keep him there to make you Guardian material. A clear head is a must."

"Such as you had on Farisia?" Hazan snapped.

Dominia sighed. She had to give the girl that one. She had lost her temper big-time on that wicked little world.

"Sit down, Hazan," she said, feeling the need to explain what had happened.

"I'd rather stand!"

"Sit. Down." The two words were accompanied by a slight show of fang that not only caused Hazan to blink but to plop her ass down in a chair as quickly as her legs could take her to one.

Dominia leaned against the bedpost. "When you find the man who is going to rock your world—and you will—you are going to discover something totally beyond your comprehension at present. That thing is a fire in the blood that goes beyond the sexual part of the relationship."

Hazan blushed for as hard as it was for her sisters—or her parents for that matter—to conceive, the young woman was still a virgin. She had explained that she was saving herself for the right man and until he came along, she would remain chaste. When asked what would happen if he should fail to appear, her answer was always the same—he would.

"That fire does so much more than just heat your blood to boiling, Haz. It lights your way. It warms you. It comforts you. It reminds you of the man who ignited it within you. When you are no longer able to see him, to speak to him, to write to him and receive—" Her voice broke, and she had to take a deep breath before she could continue. "Receive letters from him, to know he's alive and well, that fire begins to die. When all you have of it is smoldering coals, a little part of you begins to burn away."

"Domi..."

Dominia shook her head. "And when someone deliberately tries to extinguish that fire, you will do everything within your power to make sure that doesn't happen. Because once the coals are cold and all your hopes and dreams and prayers have turned to ash, there is no reason to get up in the morning. There is no reason to go on."

Hazan's eyes tracked Dominia as the older woman returned to her packing. She knew the lecture wasn't finished by the clenching and unclenching of Dominia's jaw.

"That's what happened on Farisia," she said. "That goddess-be-damned bastard opened his mouth and all this shit about Jaegar being worm fodder somewhere on that piss-ass planet came out." She shrugged. "So I took out a few teeth with my fist. No biggie."

"I think it was a bit more than that," Hazan found the courage to say. "A lot more than that."

Dominia nodded. "If Ruan Cosaint hadn't been with me that day, I doubt I would have even listened to that prickless wonder but the Wraith thought it worth

investigating what the man was babbling about. To me, he was just a drunken braggart but Ruan heard something I didn't in the man's goading words."

And because Cosaint had listened, the long-lost runabout of Prince Jaegar Rozakaris finally was found on the far side of the planet's fog-shrouded mountains.

"The *Karatavuk* had plowed into the side of a mountain then slid down it to land in a water-filled gully. Her nose was pointing upward and the aft was crumpled like a piece of discarded notepaper. Getting in to her was a challenge, but we managed to slip between a small gap in the hull's breach."

"And found a charred body at the console," Hazan said softly, having heard the tale from her father.

"A body I knew wasn't Jaegar's," Dominia said. "Whoever had stolen the Fiach from Rusuil died in her when she crashed, the flash fire that swept through the cabin destroyed nearly everything in its path." She snapped the locks on her satchel. "We were able to retrieve a few things." She turned her eyes to the armoire across the room and stared at it for a moment. "They'll be there when I find him and bring him home."

"But after you left the crash site..." Hazan said, bolstering up her nerve to prove a point.

"Okay!" Dominia snapped. "So I went back to the bar where we found that bastard and cleaned his clock like a mad housewife after a mouse on her clean kitchen floor!" Her eyes flared. "I was pissed, Hazan! Royally pissed! That fucking ship had been there for years. Years! And no one on that gods-forsaken planet had let us know. They knew it was there. When our people—Lorcan and Roman Shanahan and later Ardor Khan Leveche—went there searching for Jaegar, not one bloody word was said about the *Karatavuk* lying up there on that fucking mountain!"

"You bit him," Hazan accused.

Dominia flinched. "Yeah, I did. So what? He deserved it," she mumbled. "I would have drained the bastard dry if Ruan hadn't pulled me away from him."

"Yet you expect me to sit here and cool my heels. You tell me I have a hot head when you all but chomped that man's neck in half! You need backup—as evidenced by the Wraith being with you that day. There's no one to accompany you right now. You said so yourself at supper tonight. I would be there if you—"

"No," Dominia said. "You are not coming with me and that's final. I don't need backup."

"That let me go as your sister, your friend!"

"No!"

Dominia grabbed the satchel and started walking, shoving Hazan aside when the young woman tried to block her way. When Hazan reached out to grab her arm, Dominia spun around and hissed, her fangs fully extended and eyes a bright scarlet red.

Hazan jumped back. Her heart leapt up to her throat and she swallowed with difficulty.

"I. Don't. Need. Your. Help!" Dominia snarled.

"It's there if you need it."

The calm voice of reason came from the doorway and the tall male who stood just inside the room. Ben-Sulil held up his hand when his daughter would have argued, his frown all the warning he needed for her to snap her mouth shut.

"Thank you," Dominia muttered as she walked past him.

"The Wind be at your back, *kerime*," he said with a bow of his head.

"And at yours," Dominia replied.

* * * * *

Though Sub-warden Sheol had done everything he could to keep Reed Summerton from being released from duty a couple of months later, the healer shook the dust of Utuk Xul from his boots and settled into the seat of the transport that would take him and three other former employees of the prison to Aduaidh Prime. As he buckled the harness around him, he thought of Sheol's parting words.

"If you divulge anything of what you know, Summerton, I can promise you he won't be here when they arrive to investigate. They won't find a trace of him. No one will." The man's smirk had been ruthless. "And you will be arrested for revealing top secret information. I look forward to having you here as a prisoner."

By then Reed had discovered what had happened to Worley. He half expected to have one of the guards or prisoners come after him too but apparently it was easier to dispose of a guard than a healer. Fear for his own safety, however, wasn't the issue. Fear of what would happen to Jaegar was uppermost in his mind. It was a measure of how completely Sheol ruled the lower level of Utuk Xul that the little bastard felt no threat to that rule ever happening.

Settling back in the seat as the transport began to lift from the planet's surface, Reed knew he dared say nothing about Jaegar Rozakaris. If he exposed the inhumane treatment going on at the prison, he could wind up being incarcerated there too.

"What good would that do, Jae?" he asked.

"What?" the man across the aisle from him inquired. Reed knew him as one of the guards from level two.

Reed felt a stab of unease go down his back. He wouldn't put it past Sheol to have a spy watching his every move. He shook his head. "Don't like flying," he said.

The man pursed his lips as though the admission disgusted him then ignored the healer the rest of the flight.

Chewing on his thumbnail, Reed's conscience began to prick at him. He had bonded with Jaegar that evening on Rusuil—really bonded—and he had looked forward to visiting the man on *an Tuirc* after his service was over.

As the ship winged its way toward Aduaidh Prime, dozens of ideas popped into the healer's head and he discarded every one as being too dangerous or too lame to work.

"There's got to be a way to let his family..." He stopped—and not because he'd spoken out loud but because he was sure it had been the prince's family who had sent him to that living hell. Although he hadn't heard any recent news of what was going on in that quadrant of the Cairghrian Galaxy, he did know the old king had died and been replaced by the younger son Riashi. It was also rumored the military as well as the court was being run by a brutal authoritarian named Birendra Parekh. To seal themselves off from their enemies and the law, the *an Tuircese* had installed the Net, the Amhantarian security system that did not allow ships other than Parekh's either in or out of *an Tuirc's* atmosphere.

"Who can I tell?" he asked himself. "If not his family, who?"

* * * * *

Dominia barely glanced at the transport as it settled into its docking harness. She was tired, hungry and had one of the ugly headaches she always got when she was on her period. She was in no mood to swap pleasantries with the Burgon, but she knew he would expect her to come to supper that evening. Miri would be hurt if she didn't. However, jacking her jaws didn't appeal to her and listening to the emperor tell her they were not giving up on finding Jaegar was nothing more than posturing at this point.

Not that she thought the Burgon and his hounds of hell had stopped looking. She knew that would never happen, but Jaegar had become low on their list of priorities after eight years. She didn't blame them. They didn't have the same vested interest in finding her bond-companion as she did.

Slapping her hand against the door lock pad beside the gull-wing of her Fiach, she winced as it made a strange shrieking sound.

"Colonel Alamaine?"

She looked around at the portmaster who was waiting to take the ship's manifest from the arriving transport.

"Aye?"

"Want me to have someone look at that hatch?" he asked.

"I'd appreciate it." Her eyes flicked to the transport's door as it slid back, distracting her, then she returned her attention to the portmaster. "And while he's at it, would you ask him to check the left propulsion vent? That goddess-be-damned thing has been rattling of late."

"Will do, Colonel," the man agreed.

Men were filing out of the transport and from the looks of them, they hadn't seen the light of day in quite a while. They were a pasty gray color and apparently the bright lights of the docking bay were playing hell with their eyes for each of them was squinting against the glare.

"Prison guards," she thought, yet one of them stood too straight, walked with too much assurance to be anything but upper staff. From the black bag he carried, she pegged him as a healer. When he looked her way, she nodded.

Reed returned her stiff greeting but not before the male in him assessed her unique beauty. "Pretty lady," he mumbled.

"Huh. Riezell Guardian," the guard from the second level said out of the corner of his mouth. "It's written all over her."

Reed snapped his head around to the woman who had nodded at him but her back was to him as she headed for the catwalk. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Sure as I'm standing here," the guard said. "I can smell them bitches a mile away." He snorted. "And that gray uniform is a dead giveaway, Doc."

Jaegar's words from long ago rose up to smack Reed in the face. "*My lady is a Riezell Guardian.*"

The healer's heart jerked in his chest. He had to catch up to the woman, speak to her, ask if she knew a Guardian named Dominia Alamaine. Afraid he was being watched though, he couldn't just run after her, calling out for her to stop. After all, she was a law enforcement officer. His actions would be reported.

Affecting a nonchalance he certainly didn't feel, he gave his papers to the portmaster, trying to keep an eye on where the Guardian went. He had to wait until his papers were stamped for entry into the facility before he could follow her and hoped he wouldn't lose track of her before then.

"Just a minute," the portmaster said, looking away from Reed's papers to call out to a man who had appeared at the docking sling of the transport.

Biting his tongue to keep from ordering the portmaster to hurry up, Reed was straining to keep the Guardian in his sight. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears and his palms were sweating as he clenched and unclenched them at his side.

"Aye Sir?" the man answered the portmaster.

"Colonel Alamaine needs you to see to the door of her runabout and check out her left prop vent. She says there's a rattle."

"Aye, aye Sir."

Reed's eyes flared. "Colonel Alamaine?" he said. "As in Dominia Alamaine?"

"That's her," the portmaster said. "Used to be the Principal RG but she's sort of semiretired now." He stamped Reed's papers and handed them back to the healer. "Guess you've heard of her, huh?"

Reed couldn't speak but there was no need.

"Who hasn't?" the guard from level two asked with a grunt. "I've heard that woman is as mean as a cornered ghoret."

"She's nice to those who are nice to her," the portmaster said, waving a stunned Reed aside as he reached for the guard's papers. "You don't want to get on her bad side though."

"Yeah, well, I heard..."

Reed tuned out the rest of the conversation. He could barely see the back of the Guardian's uniform as she turned down a corridor off the catwalk. With his bag clutched tight in his hand, he took the corrugated steps as quickly as he dared. Heart thundering in his ears, he increased his speed, too afraid he'd lose her to worry about being watched by one of Sheol's men.

It was a sixth sense with which Dominia had been born that rippled along her nerve endings as she strolled slowly along the promenade that led from the docking facility to the palace. She knew she was being followed. Though she didn't look around, she could feel her shadow hurrying toward her, and she hoped—even prayed—his intentions were bad because she was really in the mood to take someone's head off and had been since leaving Basaraba. A good fight would do her worlds of good. Besides, she was in no hurry to get where she was going. By now she knew the Burgon had been told she was on his homeworld. He knew her well enough to know she'd come to him when she was ready.

Up ahead, she saw the barricade of the security checkpoint and slowed her steps, taking her time sauntering along, giving her tracker time to catch up. She was glad there was a good long line at the five stations. She didn't have to go through the same strident security checks as other visitors because a retinal scanner would confirm her identity to the guards, and she would be ushered into the highly secured area like visiting royalty.

Which—in a manner of speaking—she supposed she was since the Burgon and his lady-wife considered her Prince Jaegar's mate. Had she wanted to, she could have docked her runabout in the private section reserved for the emperor and his network of spies, but she preferred not calling attention to herself now that too many people knew she had ascended to become One with the Blood.

He was almost to her, she thought, smelling the fear on him like a strong cologne. He was panting—sweating too—and when she pivoted around to confront him, was disappointed he wasn't armed.

"What the fuck do you want?" she asked, eyes hard. She watched him cut his eyes back and forth as though looking for help or a place to hide.

"You're Colonel Alamaine?" he asked, his voice quivering.

"Yeah, so?" she snarled, surprised it was the healer from the transport.

He appeared to be screwing up his courage and when he took a step toward her, she braced for him to attack. "You lost something," he whispered.

Dominia's eyebrows shot together. "What?" she demanded.

"Something important to you," he said, once more sweeping his attention around them, seeming relieved no one was paying them any heed.

"Get the fuck away from me," Dominia snapped. "I haven't lost anything." She started to turn, and he made the mistake of grabbing for her arm. Before he could take another breath, she had him facedown on the marble floor with his arm jacked high up his back. "That was a mistake, asshole!" she told him.

"Please," he said, grunting from the pressure she was applying. He saw boots hurrying toward them and groaned. He hadn't wanted for anyone else to see or hear what was happening. "You have to listen to me."

"I don't have to do squat," she grumbled. "Get this bastard into lockup."

"Colonel, please!" Reed said as two guards leaned over him and grabbed his arms, jerking him up from the floor.

Dominia was turning away, striding purposefully toward the checkpoint when his words stopped her dead still in her tracks.

"Something lost eight years ago!"

She whipped around, her eyes flaring, and she was on him again in three giant strides, her hand shooting out to grab a handful of his dark brown hair. She jerked his head back and with lips peeled back from her fangs, she put her face as close to his as she could get it.

"What. The. Fuck. Do. You. Mean?" she said, punctuating each word with a vicious tug on his hair.

"Private," he managed to say as tears of pain blossomed in his eyes. "Please!"

She looked into his eyes and saw something that warned her their conversation needed to be for her ears only. With a crisp nod, she instructed the guards to follow her. They trailed behind her, dragging the healer between them. Stopping only long enough to lean over to place her eye against the scanner and be cleared for entry, she never looked around as the men trailed her.

"If anyone asks, say he was arrested for daring to touch me," she told the security guard.

"Aye, aye, Colonel!"

She knew a place just off the main entrance to the palace where they could speak in private. It was off-limits to the public and required a handprint ID to enter. It was there she led the men and their captive. Slapping her hand on the panel, the door slid open and she walked inside where there was a table and two chairs.

"Sit his raunchy ass down!" she ordered the guards, and Reed was shoved into one of the hard metal chairs. Her deadly gaze lifted to the men. "Out."

Without a word of protest, the guards left her alone with the prisoner, closing the door behind them.

Dominia clenched her fists and leaned across the table. "You have thirty seconds before I pull your tongue out through your asshole, dickwad."

Reed swallowed. He'd been going through what he could say over and over in his mind as he trailed her down the promenade. He thought he had found a way without actually violating the letter of the sensitive compartmented information nondisclosure statement.

"There are prisons here in the Aduaidh Quadrant," he said.

Dominia let out a curse that told him what he could do with his mother then straightened with the express intention of knocking some—if not all—his teeth from his mouth.

"Some prisons are worse than others!" he said, fear turning his pasty face even whiter as she came around the end of the table.

"Tell me something I don't know, you dickless wonder!" she snarled.

"Prisons where a man can get lost if you know the right people," he said on a rush.

Dominia stopped. Her eyes bore into him like red-hot drills. Encouraged by her sudden stillness and silence, the healer swallowed audibly.

"You can pay to have a man put there." He shook his head. "Hidden where no one can find him. Where no one will ever find him if they don't know where to look."

She lowered her voice to a low, lethal growl. She wasn't going to just take out his teeth, she thought. She was going to snap his neck for getting her hopes up. "Don't you think we went through every fucking prison in every fucking galaxy, asshole?"

"But you didn't find what you were looking for," he was quick to say. "Maybe you didn't look deep enough."

"We examined all the records of every prisoner in..."

Afraid he was one step away from being seriously mauled, the healer didn't feel he had anything to lose. "Are you sure?" he countered. "Are you sure you saw every record or did you just see what they wanted you to see?"

She lifted her arm then slammed her balled fist down on the metal table. "Spit it out or so help me, I'm going to pulverize your puny ass!"

"I signed a sensitive compartmented information nondisclosure statement," he said. "Do you know what that means?"

"Aye, I know what the fuck it..." She stopped, realization settling in. If he told her outright, he would be liable for arrest, and she would have no choice but to be the one to drag him before a magistrate. He could end up in the very place he'd been sent to heal the prisoners.

Her headache flared white-hot for an instant and she staggered back, motioning him to sit down as he shot up to keep her from falling. She skirted the table, grabbed the other chair and straddled it. For a long time neither of them said anything then she licked her lips.

"The worst prisoners are sent to Utuk Xul," she said. "Is that where you were?"

"It's hell, Colonel. A hell where no man should ever be sent," he replied.

"There are four levels," she said. At his slow nod, she licked her lips again. "Are there levels below those we don't know about?"

"You know how some cave systems have lava tubes?" he asked, evading answering. "Miles and miles of them that wander underneath the ground?"

Dominia closed her eyes for a moment. "He's at Utuk Xul in one of those tubes." She shot out a hand to grab his arm. "Alive? Is he alive?"

"I treated no dead men in that place," he answered.

A shuddery breath wavered in Dominia's chest. "How long ago did you leave the prison?"

"Five hours," he said.

"And he was alive five hours ago?"

"I treated no dead men in that place," he repeated, his eyes searching hers.

Dominia put a hand to her mouth and wasn't surprised it shook. "If you are lying to me..."

"I met a man," he said, "on Rusuil. We were stranded there together for just one night but in those few hours we became friends. He told me about the woman he loved, the woman who was his life, and he told me how he was going to spend that life with her. I want him to be with her. More than anything, I want him to be with her."

He heard her whimper and knew his words hurt her.

"I need to tell the Burgon. I—"

"Wait!" he said as she pushed back from the table, overturning her chair. "People die in prisons every day, Colonel. There are guards who will stick a knife in a man's ribs or cut his throat for a single gold piece. Unprotected inmates are at the mercy of those men. Such crimes are covered up with precision. It is never wise to let the right hand know what the left is doing."

She stared at him as comprehension set in. "If they know we are coming, they would get rid of the evidence."

Reed clasped his hands together to still their trembling. "Papers signed by the Burgon, taken by hand to the UCJ and countersigned by Major Quirin Degendesch with an official seal would be the only way to get a prisoner paroled from a place like that. Those papers would need to be accompanied by an emissary from the UCJ and those papers should not be presented until a squadron of well-armed ships are surrounding the planet and all communications from the planet to outside sources are blocked until the end of the situation."

"So those outside sources won't know the prisoner has been rescued," she said. "If they don't know we're coming, they can't cover up what they've done."

"No one can know anything until the emissary from the UCJ is standing on Level One and in turn presents the parole papers to the warden. The warden and sub-warden—especially the sub-warden—would need to be told that if the prisoner being paroled is not presented alive and well when his rescuers arrive, they will be held

accountable. If he isn't presented alive and well, they'll be executed on the spot. No discussion on that count," he warned her. "They need to know if one hair is harmed on the prisoner's head or if—the gods forbid—he is dead, they will die a brutal death."

"And die in agony such as they could never conceive!" she snapped. "Meted out by an enraged hell hag."

"That would not be amiss," he agreed.

"His name is not on any prison records," she said. "Did they give him a false name?"

It had dawned on Reed several years earlier what the name Kanvar Barda meant in the *an Indiachian* language. He held her gaze. "Do you know the *an Indiachian* language, Colonel?"

"I know a few words," she said.

"Do you know the word for prince?"

She thought a moment. "Kanvar," she said. Her heart was racing.

"And the word for slave?"

Dominia flinched and she had to wrack her memory for that word. She should know it but it escaped her. She shook her head, frustrated. "No, I can't..."

"Think," he told her. "It's not a big word. Only five letters." When she shook her head again, he rapped his knuckles on the table. "It means the same as prisoner."

"Barda!" she cried. "Barda Kanvar?"

"You must get the name correct on the papers else they will tell you there is no prisoner there by that name," he cautioned. "Everything must be perfect."

"Not Barda Kanvar?" she said, wanting to slap him. She looked down—her eyes tracking back and forth. "Not Barda Kanvar?"

"Do you get things ass backward often, Colonel?" he asked softly.

"Hell no, I don't!" she snapped. "I..." Her eyebrows shot up. "Not Barda Kanvar but Kanvar Barda!"

He sat back, hands up and arms spread as though in surrender. He wasn't prepared when she came rushing around the table and fell on him, throwing her arms around his neck.

"Thank you!" she said. "Thank you! *Thank you!*" She moved back, grabbed him by the arm. "Now come with me, whoever the fuck you are!"

Chapter Fourteen

Utuk Xul Prison in the Aduaidh Quadrant of the Idimmu Galaxy
Present time

He was so quiet on the way up in the elevator she asked the emissary if he was sleeping.

"I believe so," was the soft reply.

The guard holding Jaegar in his arms kept giving Dominia a fearful look and the warden was quiet, his lips pressed tightly together.

Dominia stared into the uneasy eyes of the guard. "What's your name?"

"Fason, ma'am," the guard said.

"Well, Fason, when was the last time this man stood on his own two feet? When did he last take a step?"

The guard swallowed. "I d-don't know."

Her enraged glare went to the warden. "Well?"

"I don't know either, Colonel," the warden confessed. "You would have to ask Sub-warden Sheol. The lower levels are his bailiwick."

"And of course you knew nothing of the way he was treating his prisoners," the emissary snapped.

"If I had..."

"You'd have done nothing about it," Dominia stated. "Believe me when I tell you this will be your last post, Warden Xaphan. You'll be lucky if the Burgon doesn't put you to the guillotine for the way you have allowed this man to be treated."

"I did not know he was important to the emperor!" the warden said.

"When King Gabriel came to this pigsty and his men searched all the prisoners, you knew this man was here," she accused. "You knew he was the one for whom the Reaper was looking."

"No! I swear to you if I had, I would have —"

"Done nothing different," Dominia said, "now shut the fuck up before I relieve you of your tongue!"

"But..."

"I would listen to the colonel if I was you," the emissary broke in. "Her patience is wearing thinner with every labored breath this man makes."

As the elevator passed level four, she caught sight of the sub-warden. He gave her a smug smile that made her want to order the cage halted, but she didn't. She kept her eyes on him until she could no longer see the ugly bastard. She'd deal with him later.

It took what seemed like hours to Dominia for the elevator to reach the administrative level topside. Two of the imperial guards from the Burgon's palace were stationed at the elevator, and as soon as the doors opened, one of them motioned for a gurney from sickbay to be wheeled over. Ten more men wearing the personal insignia of the Burgon stood nearby, laser rifles pointed at the fearful prison administrative personnel.

"Easy with him," Dominia ordered quietly. "He's asleep and I'd just as soon not wake him."

The guard bobbed his head curtly, using hand signals to order the healer and his assistant away from the gurney. He personally took charge of the unconscious man, easing him from Fason's arms, handling him with great care as he laid him down upon the gurney. More hand signals and two imperial guards came forward to push the gurney through the airlock doors that led to the docking station.

"Leste, Pali?" she called out, and two more guards hurried over. "You will accompany me below." She turned to the warden. "Let's go."

"But why are we going back down?" the warden asked, his voice pitched abnormally high.

"We are going down to arrest the other guard who mistreated his grace," she said. She looked to the imperial guard who had placed Jaegar on the gurney. She pointed to Fason. "Kona, have one of your men take this bastard to Lorcan's ship and tell the Reaper to put his ass in the brig."

"His grace?" the warden echoed then turned pale. "A royal? He was a royal?"

"Is!" Dominia shouted. "He is the rightful king of *an Tuirc*, you pig-faced baboon!"

"Merciful Alel," the warden whined, putting his hands to his face. "I didn't know. I swear to you, I did not know!"

"Well, you do now," Dominia said with a snort.

Imperial guards came forward at a signal from Kona, took hold of Fason and jerked him toward the airlock.

"Wait!" Dominia called out. "How many others are on that level, Fason?"

"There are no others," the guard said listlessly. His tone said he knew his fate was sealed.

"Are there records of who was there?" she demanded.

"In the sub-warden's office," Fason replied. "I don't know it for a fact but I'd be willing to bet he has a secret book with the real names of the prisoners who were kept in the tubes."

"For blackmail purposes, no doubt," Dominia snarled. She jerked her thumb toward the airlock and the guards led Fason away.

"Colonel, I would like to accompany you, if I may," Kona said. "Yulton can take charge here."

"Fine by me," Dominia said. "Just don't get in my fucking way."

Once more, she wedged into the elevator, reaching up to rub at the hideous pain throbbing between her temples. It wasn't just the atmospheric pressure, she was anxious to get her business done at Utuk Xul then go to the man she loved. She knew they had taken him straight to the medivac ship the *Sláinte* and the TAOS unit the healer Reed Summerton had told her would be needed. Summerton was there to take care of his friend, and she had all the faith in the megaverse in the Serenian healer.

"By the gods, heads are going to roll at that fucking prison!" the Burgon had bellowed when she had taken the healer to him and explained where Jaegar was. The emperor had thrown a temper tantrum that had shocked everyone who witnessed it.

"Right under my nose the entire time!" Ryden Bakari had thundered. Not even his gentle lady-wife could calm him as he roared his fury. "He was right under my nose! Less than two hundred clicks away from my fucking front door!"

Summerton had been given a full pardon by the Burgon as well as absolution by Major Quirin Degendesch of the UCJ who had been contacted via vid-com. The two men had signed papers stating the information the healer had gathered at U.X. was part of an undercover operation investigating prison abuse, dating those papers retroactively eight years previous. There would be no legal ramifications for Reed and after he told the whole story to the emperor and the UCJ attorney general, a special session of the United Court of Justice was hastily convened. A massive reorganization of Utuk Xul was the only thing on the agenda.

"I will take that place apart until I know the name of every living thing inside those fucking walls!" the Burgon growled. "This will never be allowed to happen again!"

As the elevator slipped past levels two and three, Dominia felt the tension building in her gut. Her first trip down had been filled with uncertainty, true fear that she would not find Jaegar or—if she did—that he would be dead. She was terrified the sub-warden would ignore the warning of what would happen should he do something to her bond-companion. As soon as she'd seen Jaegar's beautiful golden eyes, the fear had been replaced by a fury so great her vision had become tinged crimson.

He couldn't stand, his legs useless, no strength or tone left in the muscles from years of not being able to use them. He had passed out the moment he was lifted from the floor and it was all she could do not to wreck havoc on everyone around her. It had taken her all of two minutes on the horn with the Burgon to ask for what she needed, what she had to have, what she demanded. She had gotten it—with the emperor's blessing.

The outward calmness had been excruciatingly hard to sustain as she returned from Utuk Xul's Com Unit to where the warden stood. That calmness was now slipping. The vampire within her was clawing its way to the surface, and she could feel the hunting fangs descending into her mouth, piercing her tongue.

"You will come with me!" she told the warden and shoved him into the cage.

When the elevator reached the fourth level, she turned to him. "Which guard was his?" she said, her hard gaze going over the men gathered.

"The one with the eye patch," he told her. "I think his name is Prevost."

"I don't give a shit what his name is," she snapped. "Are you sure he's the other one?"

"I am," the warden said.

Sub-warden Sheol blinked with surprise as he came out of his office and saw the three imperial guards in the cage with the warden and the Riezell Guardian. He had a sheath of papers clutched in his hand. He froze as the prison guards went through the procedure to allow the visitors entry onto that level. He winced as the warden gave the day's second code for it was rare for Xaphan to venture down into the prison proper and to have done so twice in one day was unheard of.

"Did you forget something, warden?" he asked, the papers in his hand rattling.

The warden pointed to Prevost. "She's come to arrest him."

"What for?" the man in question demanded. "I was only doing my duty as it was given to me!"

"And enjoyed every minute of it from what I've heard," Dominia said. She cocked her chin toward him and Leste and Pali rushed the burly guard, slamming him against the wall to shackle his hands behind his back.

"I only did what Sheol told me to do!" he snarled.

"Sub-warden Sheol, I want you to accompany me down to the tubes," Dominia said.

The man's small eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why?"

"Because I am ordering you to," she said, holding his stare. "I want you to hand over to me the records healer Summerton left in the bathing chamber."

"I knew that treasonous little bastard was behind this!" Sheol said. "Well, I can guarantee you I will testify gladly at his trial!"

Dominia ignored the comment. She turned and headed for the elevator.

"Do you want me to come along, Colonel?" Kona asked.

"Did I ask you to?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Then keep your ass here," she said. She crossed the bridge and stood in the cage opening. "I don't have all day, Sheol."

"It is Sub-warden Sheol," he declared as he took his time joining her in the cage. "I insist you show me the respect I am due, Colonel."

"Oh you're going to get what's due you, Sheol," she said as the cage door snapped shut. "That I can promise you."

"What does that mean?" Sheol demanded.

She let the elevator drop a hundred feet before she turned to him. "It means you fucked with the wrong man this time."

The last thing Hjun Sheol saw were the fangs coming at his throat.

* * * * *

Since no one could leave the fourth level until the elevator came back up, Kona, Pali, Leste, the warden and Prevost were waiting as the cage settled. The retractable bridge was run out and when the door opened and only the Guardian stood inside the wire lift, the warden backed away.

"Where's Sheol?" he asked. "Why isn't he with you?"

"Bring the prisoners, Kona," Dominia ordered, "and let's blow this cesspit."

"Prisoners?" the warden repeated. "Prisoners?"

"Yeah, asshole, I think that means you," Kona snarled, and took hold of the fat man's pudgy arm.

"No, no, no, no, no!" the warden said, trying to twist out of Kona's firm grip, dragging his feet as the muscular guard pulled him toward the cage. "You can't do this! You can't hold me responsible for what Sheol did!"

Shrieking and stumbling, Xaphan was pulled into the cage and shoved against the mesh, held there by Kona's powerful arm. Prevost fought too but one powerful punch from Leste's left hook and the guard went down for the count.

"That's a mean hook you got there, Leste," Dominia complimented him.

"That was for the bruises I saw on the prince's face," Leste replied.

Dominia didn't tell the guard the bruises most likely weren't caused by mistreatment but by the illness Prince Jaegar had contracted. It didn't matter to her what the men did to Prevost or the warden. She'd accomplished the two things she'd come to Utuk Xul to do. One lay onboard the *Sláinte* and what was left of the other lay in a heap inside the cell where Kanvar Barda had lost eight years of his life.

* * * * *

Only one ship was docked in the bay beyond the air lock but five more were spread out in an arc around the planet's perimeter. As soon as she was onboard the medivac ship, Dominia ordered the com officer to hail the defenders and let them know everyone was safely onboard. The com officer opened the channel so everyone on the bridge could hear the whoops of relief coming from the other ships.

"Take us out of here, Captain Breen," she ordered.

"With pleasure, Colonel," Liam Breen agreed.

She smiled at the emissary as she made her way to the elevator that would take her to sickbay. She was nervous again—her gut twisted like a bail of barbed wire. Putting a hand to her chest, she willed the thunderous beating to ease so she could draw a decent breath.

"Thank you, Alluvia," she whispered, closing her eyes for a moment. "Thank you for allowing me to find him."

As soon as the elevator came to a stop, a wave of emotion swept over her, but she pushed it firmly aside. She had to see him, touch him, have him open his eyes and look at her again. Nothing else mattered at that moment. When the doors peeled back, Sancara Ben-Sulil was the first thing she saw. Her eyes nearly popped out of her head as fear shot up from the very pit of her being.

"No!" the Deathlord said, taking in the sudden pallor and fear radiating from her in waves. "I just wanted to be here to take you to him." He put out a hand to take hers. "They're putting him in the TAOS unit, and it's in another part of sickbay."

"He's..." She had to swallow the terror clogging her throat before she could speak. "He's all right?"

"Summerton says he will be. We have to let the TAOS do its part." He drew her gently from the elevator then tucked an arm around her shoulders. "He's still asleep."

"That's not good though, is it?" she asked, exploring his expression, searching for something that wasn't quite right.

"Stop borrowing trouble, *kerime*," he cautioned. "Summerton believes it is Jaegar's body simply shutting down because the pain of being carried was too great for him."

"Oh goddess," she moaned. "We didn't consider that!"

"He's not feeling it now so stop thinking about it!" Ben-Sulil ordered. "You'll make yourself sick and what good would that do him?"

She lifted her chin for he said the correct thing to snap her out of the unease spreading through her mind. "You're right."

"Of course I'm right," he said, squeezing her to him.

He led her to a set of double doors and at their approach, the panels slid back silently to reveal a large room in which a strange-looking machine took center stage.

"The TAOS unit," the Deathlord said needlessly, and Dominia realized he was not as blasé about things as he appeared. She sensed his worry just beneath the surface calm he showed to the world.

Shaped like a long, clear glass tunnel, wires so thin they could not be seen by the human eye formed a network grid like a fine mesh along the surface of the domed glass. A sled made of plexishield stood poised to be inserted into the mapping module. Plastic web restraints for the head, upper arms, chest, wrists, waist, thighs and ankles dangled from the sled's edges. It was a formidable piece of machinery.

"Where is he?" she asked.

Reed came out of a small room off the larger one. He was dressed in the serviceable whites of the ship's medivac personnel.

"Summerton?" she asked, moving out from beneath Ben-Sulil's arm. "Where is Jaegar?"

"Being prepared for the central venous line needed to administer the pairilis," the healer said. "He is waking up, but I was hoping he'd stay out long enough for me to get the catheter into his jugular."

"What's the pairilis for?" the Deathlord asked.

"He has to be completely still during the mapping so the images don't blur. It is essential we get an accurate position of every organ, vein and bone in his body so when the R.E.P.'s start, there won't be any margin for error. Having him under a heavy anesthetic is the only way to ensure he remains perfectly still."

"R.E.P.?" Dominia asked.

"Come on into the prep room," Reed said. "I want him to be able to see you the moment his eyes open. I'll explain how the TAOS works while I'm doing the line."

Dominia and Jaegar's father followed the healer into a small room where the prince was lying on a padded gurney. His clothing had been removed and only a small mesh cloth covered his groin.

"We'll remove even that when we put him in the unit. There can't be any obstruction between his flesh and the pulses," Reed said.

Though Jaegar's eyelids were fluttering, he didn't seem inclined to open them. The fingers of one hand twitched and Dominia went to him, took his hand in hers.

"I'm here, *aşık*," she said. "Your mate is here."

"Let's see if I can't get this line in before he comes fully awake," the healer suggested and moved over to where a med tech stood with a tray of instruments. He picked up what he told them was a cannula. "It's a plastic tube that will be inserted into Jae's vein. The IV tube will be attached to the cannula once it's in place."

"I hate needles," Dominia said.

"Did I tell you what TAOS stands for?" he asked as he worked.

"No," Dominia said. She was stroking Jaegar's hand, hating that he was so thin, his body so frail looking. He had lost so much weight.

"It stands for tissue, artery, organ and skeletal," the healer explained. "It is a diagnostic and restoration unit that can repair almost any kind of injury through a series of rapid energy pulses—R.E.P.s The pulses will meticulously knit broken bones together, disinfect, cauterize and close wounds and destroy any bacterial microorganisms that might be a problem later on. The Amhantarians developed it and it works along the lines of their Net. Where the Net deconstructs, the TAOS reconstructs."

"You map the injuries first," Ben-Sulil said as he reached out to touch his son's tousled hair—fresh from a good shampoo and disinfecting.

"Every sector of the body is mapped and shows up on the three-dimensional diagnostic screen. Those coordinates have to be precise because even the slightest miscalculation of energy pulsation can cause damage."

"Hence the drug and the restraints," the Deathlord said.

"Correct. In Jaegar's case, there has been massive damage done to his kidneys and liver and—I suspect—his heart and pancreas as well. So that's what we need to repair, and it's going to take a while."

"How did that happen?" Dominia demanded. "What the hell did they do to him in that gods'-forsaken hole?"

"The damage didn't come from what was done to him at U.X.," the healer told her. "Although the leaching of the iron from the manacles into his skin didn't help matters." He shook his head. "No, the damage came from a massive dose of what I believe was *ahanin*. I suspect the men who kidnapped him administered that."

"*Ahanin*?" Ben-Sulil exclaimed. "Mother of the prophets!"

"What is it?" Dominia asked, feeling her heart accelerate.

"A drug no Shadowlord should ever be given!" Jaegar's father said. "It could have easily killed him!"

"Aye, it could have." He turned to Dominia. "It is a concentrated iron dosage meant for severely anemic patients," Reed said. "In Jae's case, it was meant to completely incapacitate him."

"Instead, it destroyed his liver?" the Deathlord snarled.

"The TAOS can repair it, but he also may need a transfusion," the healer said.

"I will gladly give him every drop of my blood if it is needed," Ben-Sulil stated. "I can have my men come from Basaraba."

"We will all donate," Dominia said. When the healer shook his head, she asked why not.

"Because Shadowlords have a very rare blood type," Jaegar's father told her. "We can only receive blood from our own kind."

"We'll cross that bridge if we need to," Reed said. "Let's get this line in and start mapping out what the TAOS needs to fix."

After cleaning the insertion site on the side of Jaegar's neck, the healer took the cannula and slid it gently into the vein, efficiently connected the IV tube. There was a groan from his patient and Jaegar slowly opened his eyes.

"Hey there, lazy bones," Reed said with a smile. "Decided to join the party, did you?"

Jaegar's brows drew together but it wasn't the healer he was looking at but the woman standing on the other side of the gurney. Her hand held his and her beautiful green eyes were too bright, filled with so much love he felt overwhelmed by it.

"We are on the medivac ship *Sláinte*," she told him as she caressed his hand. "Bound for Aduaidh Prime."

"You found me," he whispered.

"Did you doubt I would?" she asked with a wavering smile that tried to hide the pain in her words but only underlined it.

"Never," he said. He tried to lift his free hand but couldn't.

"You're about to go beddie-byes, Jae, so if you're gonna kiss him, Domi, you'd better make it fast."

She leaned over, stroking the hair from her bond-companion's forehead. "I love you," she said then pressed her lips to his. When she pulled back, she saw a tear easing down Jaegar's cheek.

"Here we go," Reed said, and depressed the plunger on the vac-syringe containing thirty milligrams of the potent sedative.

"Love. You," Jaegar sighed then his eyelids slid closed.

"Sweet dreams, big guy," Reed said as he taped the IV tubing in place then nodded for the med tech to roll the gurney into the next room.

Dominia and Ben-Sulil watched as Jaegar was eased onto the TAOS' sled. Reed removed the cloth from over Jaegar's groin, helped the med tech secure the body restraints and then pushed a button on the top of the unit. The sled glided silently into the domed glass capsule and a panel at his feet slid up to completely enclose Jaegar within.

"You're welcome to stay and watch," Reed said. "Actually it's quite fascinating, but the mapping is going to take at least an hour, possibly two."

"How long does he have to be in that thing?" Dominia questioned.

"It depends on how much damage there is to repair, but my guess is no less than a week."

"A week?" she gasped.

"He'll be administered additional meds and fluids through the catheter, and he'll be asleep the entire time."

"What about nourishment?" Ben-Sulil asked.

"With the pairilis, he's more or less in suspended animation. We can't introduce anything but the meds into his system to hinder the reconstructing. The fluids will keep him hydrated." He turned to look at Jaegar. "He's accustomed to getting very little food so his body couldn't handle much in the way of nourishment right now anyway. Even when he's up and about, we'll have to take it slowly."

"Bastards!" Ben-Sulil growled.

Reed glanced at Dominia. "Would you like me to have a cot brought in, Domi?"

"Aye," she said so softly both men frowned.

"Why don't you go get something to eat?" the healer suggested. "I know you haven't had much in the last three days."

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"Domi..." the Deathlord began, but she shook her head, spun on her heel and ran from the room. When he started after her, Reed snaked out a hand to stop him. Ben-Sulil shook off the hand but stayed where he was.

"She's got to come to terms with all this," the healer said.

"Not alone, she doesn't!"

"Aye, I think she does."

Though his gaze was worried, Ben-Sulil's shoulders slumped and he released a long sigh. His eyes went to his son. "I'm gonna stay for a while," he said.

"I'll get you a chair."

* * * * *

Dominia and the Deathlord had been allotted quarters on the *Sláinte*. Reed had been given a temporary assignment as the *Sláinte*'s healer in residence since the ship had been pulled off rotation until Jaegar's health was restored. The healer assigned to the medivac had decided to take a much-needed R&R during the ship's down time.

Instead of going to her room for the privacy she so desperately needed, she headed for the ship's chapel. There were prayers to all the deities—both hers and Jaegar's—to whom she owed a tremendous debt of gratitude. Spending a few hours on her knees was not too high a price to pay for what had been given back to her.

Soft, cool air scented with incense flowed over her as she pressed the entrance pad beside the chapel's door. Inside, the circular room was filled with a low light filtering a soothing green color from the backlit stained-glass panels containing images of the major gods and goddesses of the megaverse. Each wall was filled with dozens of the panels and their beauty was breathtaking. The three sections of upholstered chairs circumnavigated the perimeter of the room, and in the exact center was an altar upon which sat two tall, copper candlesticks holding lit pale yellow tapers and a copper bowl in which a lotus blossom floated. Strains of comforting music—she thought perhaps it was Gaelach—played unobtrusively in the background.

Going to a chair that faced the magnificent rendition of Alluvia, the Sorcerer Goddess, she slipped to the floor and began the prayer of thanksgiving owed to the goddess. From there, she moved—always on her knees—to kneel before each of the gods and goddess to whom she needed to show her gratitude. When the last prayer was said, she returned to her original position in front of Alluvia. With her head bowed, shoulders collapsed, she brought her hands to her face and knelt there rocking back and forth, a low keening coming from her throat.

But her eyes were dry. She was struggling to hold the tears at bay. Her throat was thick with the need to throw her head back to release the scream that had been pushing at her vocal cords since the moment she had seen Jaegar in that awful place.

Thinking of the penetrating darkness in which he'd been confined, the heavy shackles chaining him to the wall like a whipped dog, elevated the level of her keening. She ran her fingers into her short hair and tugged viciously, welcoming the pain in her scalp. Her eyes filled with unspeakable misery, she turned her head to look into the faces of each of the gods and goddesses of justice—Ma'at, Utu, Forseti, Mandanu, Tsedek, Murukan, and finally Alluvia.

"I want those who did this to him to be judged! I want them punished!" Her chest heaved with emotion. "Tell me what I must do, and I will do it to see they pay for their deeds. I want them..."

The dam broke and Dominia—Tenth Degree Adept of the Celestial Descendancy, colonel in the Riezell Guardians, bond-companion of a Shadowlord—collapsed to the floor like a broken doll, tears streaming down her cheeks, her sobs heartbreaking to hear.

Not since she was a very young child had she given in to feminine weakness as the Daughters of the Night referred to weeping. She had held every sorrow, disappointment, frustration, regret and unhappiness at bay, not allowing the pathetic flaws of untrained women to touch her. She was not a woman who cried, who shed tears for anyone or anything. She was a strong woman, a warrioress, a deadly Vicaress who had become One with the Blood, a highly trained operative in the most lethal organization in the megaverse. Yet there she lay curled helplessly in a fetal position with her hands covering her face, her body racked with brutal sobbing.

“Jaegar!” she cried, his bruised face with the new lines and faint scars carved into it made her heart ache. Her voice broke as she called his name again.

Powerless, vulnerable, incapable of pushing the soul-searing agony from her heart and mind, she cried until there were no more tears left in her body. Even though the tears ceased, the low, keening whimpers did not. It was a heartwrenching sound that kept passersby from entering the chapel. Such agony of soul did not need witnesses.

Hours passed and still she lay on the carpeted floor—eyes unblinking as she stared into the face of the Sorcerer Goddess. Drained, her broken heart struggling to piece itself back together again, she did not possess the energy to push to a sitting position, and so she lay there, feeling the numbness of her sorrow seeping into the very marrow of her bones.

When at last she found the strength, she rose to her feet but continued to face Alluvia’s image.

“Give me what I need to make them pay for all the pain they handed him,” she said quietly.

“It is not your vengeance to take, Daughter.”

The words came to her on the gentle flow of air moving across her face. Never had the goddess spoken to her, and she would have dropped to her knees, but she felt phantom hands holding her upright.

“The vengeance is his, Dominia. Do not rob him of it,” the soft voice said. *“Now go and watch over the champion of your heart. Even in his enforced slumber he is reaching out to you. Go to him.”*

Dominia needed no further coaxing. If her love needed her, she would not fail him. She went to the door, pressed the exit pad and all but ran down the corridor to sickbay.

Chapter Fifteen

Aboard the Sláinte

Aduaidh Prime Docking Port, five days later

Reed threw his cards onto the table. "I'm out," he said, shooting Rory Quinn a nasty look. "You've got the luck of the Domhan, Phantom."

Quinn grinned. "Cengusians have far more luck than the Domhans, healer," he said.

"Aye," Ruan Cosaint agreed. "Evidenced by the many times Quinn escaped Riezell Conclave justice before going legit."

"Who says I'm legit?" The Phantom demanded. "Don't be insulting me, Wraith!"

Cosaint snickered. "I'm gonna call," he told Quinn, and threw in a hundred-mark credit.

"Too rich for me," Ben-Sulil admitted. "I'm out."

"You've got more money than the gods, Deathlord," Quinn complained. "I need a few tons of it to buy my lady a new runabout."

"I wish Kenni had remained healer on the *Sláinte*," Captain Breen said wistfully. He had been the first to fold and was sitting back with his arms folded as he shot Reed a considering look. "Perhaps you would reflect on bidding for the position?"

"Don't like your present healer?" Cair Ghrian inquired. He met his friend's hundred-mark credit.

"Have you met him?" Breen countered. "He's got the bedside manner of a Diabolusian warthog with a bad tooth."

"I wouldn't mind remaining here," Reed said. He took a sip of Chalean brandy. "I like the med techs and I enjoy taking Liam's money."

Captain Breen snorted at that comment.

"Reed, what's this about you having to use something called an EnergySurg on Jaegar?"

The men looked around as Dominia came into the recreational room.

"Come join us, *kerime*," Ben-Sulil suggested. "Use some of that witchiness of yours to win back my money from The Phantom."

Dominia shook her head as she pulled a chair from an empty table and swung it around backward to sit down, bracing her arms on the back. "I've got better sense than to play card games with a Cengusian." She turned her attention to Reed.

"I'm afraid I need to remove his spleen. The TAOS can't repair it."

"Been there, done that," Rory said. He shook his head. "I swear those TAOS things love to munch spleens."

"What do you think of Reed remaining with us?" Breen asked Dominia.

"I don't think you could find a better healer," she said. "I'd trust him with my life, and I'm trusting him with something even more important to me."

Every man at the table smiled at her words. Each had been forced at one time or another to remove her from the TAOS room so she could eat and take some exercise. Otherwise, she'd have spent every waking hour beside Jaegar.

"I heard Leveche pulled in this morning," she told the men, and saw the healer's head snap up.

"Aye, he'll be joining us as soon as he finishes reporting to the Burgon," Ruan said. "If I know the two of them, they'll throw some of their money into The Phantom's coffers."

"The more, the merrier," Quinn joked. "Now all we need is Rynlyn and Taegin Drae to round out the hounds."

"Ah, do you think King Gabriel will have his Rysalian associate with him?" Reed asked.

Dominia and Ben-Sulil exchanged a glance.

"What associate would that be?" the Deathlord asked.

Reed threw out a hand and answered nonchalantly. "I believe her name is Hazan."

Dominia started to speak but Jaegar's father laid a restraining hand on her arm. "How do you know of that one?" he demanded.

Reed shrugged. He wasn't looking up but staring down into the swirling liquid of his snifter, so he didn't see the looks being exchanged or pick up on the sudden quiet that had settled on the table.

"I met her on U.X.," he said. "When she and the Storian king came searching for Jaegar." He shrugged again, a frown forming on his face. "Actually, we didn't really speak. She just insulted me then ignored me the rest of the time she was there."

"Deplorable manners in a woman are unacceptable," Ben-Sulil said, and when Reed's head came up and the healer turned angry eyes to him, the Deathlord's left eyebrow crooked up. "You take exception to my observation, healer?"

"She was understandably concerned with finding Jaegar," he said. "I didn't take her brusqueness as anything else but nervousness."

"What does this woman look like?" Dominia asked, and felt Ben-Sulil's hand tighten on her arm.

"She was a veritable goddess," Reed said with a sigh. "Long black hair and the greenest eyes." He sighed again. "A man could get lost in those eyes. I would like to get lost in those eyes and stay there forever. And her body..." He sighed a third time—so loudly it sounded like an asthma attack.

No one said anything. Except for Reed, every head turned toward the Deathlord, breaths held.

"She had a nice body, did she?" Ben-Sulil asked in a low, deep voice.

"Sweet Merciful Alel did she ever!" Reed said. He looked up—oblivious to the silence of the others. He brought his hands up, fingers only inches apart. "I could have spanned her little waist with my hands."

"Hmm," the Deathlord growled. "So you're saying she was beautiful."

"Aye," Reed said.

"Think you're man enough to tame her?"

The healer blinked. "You don't tame a woman like her, milord!" he said, offended by the question. "You accept her as she is." He shook his head. "Besides, I doubt anyone could tame my Hazan."

"Your Hazan?" Ben-Sulil snapped, nearly choking on the words.

"Sancara," Dominia warned in a whisper.

"She is of marriageable age, Dominia!" the Deathlord stated. "I have often said to her mother that it is high time Hazan Theas took a husband." He jabbed a finger in Reed's direction. "She could do worse than Summerton! Far worse!"

"Theas?" Reed questioned. "That's her last name?"

"Ah no..." Dominia began, but Jaegar's father didn't give her a chance to finish.

"Theas is her middle name. Her last name is Ben-Sulil," he stated.

"Oh then she's kin to you!" the healer said. "Would you intro...?" He stopped, glancing around the table at the wide eyes staring at him, the parted lips, the expectant looks on the faces of the Burgon's hounds of hell and turned as pale as a sheet of fresh parchment. His mouth dropped open and only a squeak of sound came out.

"I will speak to her as soon as she arrives," he heard the Deathlord say. "We will have you engaged before the day is out."

Breaths were released in one concerted rush and shoulders that had been held rigidly in anticipation of the Deathlord erupting into fury, slumped.

"Eng-gaged?" Reed echoed. He swallowed hard. "To your d-daughter?"

"You could do worse," Ben-Sulil stated. "I will expect the Joining ceremony to be performed straightaway." He looked to Breen. "You will do the honors, Captain?"

"I would be delighted," Breen agreed.

"Ah well, now wait a min—" Reed said.

"I volunteer to be the maid of honor," Dominia said.

"I could be persuaded to be best man," Quinn put in.

"If you twist my arm, I could sing for the ceremony," Ruan volunteered.

"Gabe plays a mean guitar," Cair said. "I know he'd provide the music for the Wraith."

"What? What?" Reed asked then shook his head. "No. I mean I... We..." He gave Dominia a pleading look and when she—as well as everyone else—started laughing, he knew he'd been had.

"If you could see your face!" she said.

"I'd like to see the back of his pants," Ruan quipped.

"Funny. Very funny!" Reed grumbled.

"All kidding aside," the Deathlord said, "if you are of a mind to court her, healer, you have my blessing."

Reed's eyebrows shot up. "I do?"

"My family owes you," Ben-Sulil said, and when the healer would have protested, he held up his hand. "No, we do. My son owes you his life and there is naught I would not do to repay you. If you want Hazan, she shall be yours."

"I've got to check on Jaegar!" Reed said, and scurried from the table to the accompaniment of howling laughter.

"You are terrible," Dominia told the Deathlord.

The Deathlord looked about the table. "I don't think any of you realize I was being serious," Ben-Sulil said. "I would like very much to see my daughter settled down with Summerton. He would make her a good mate." He turned to Dominia. "And speaking of which, do you not think it would a good thing for you and Jaegar to Join when he wakes?"

"If that's what he wants," she replied.

"I'll do the honors," Breen stated.

"Then consider it on your schedule," the Deathlord pronounced.

* * * * *

The EnergySurg extraction of Jaegar's spleen was textbook perfect and there were only a few minor injuries that needed healing before he could be taken out of the TAOS unit. As Dominia stood beside the glass tube, she realized the pain lines had smoothed from her lover's face. The bruises were gone and the faint scars on his cheeks and jaws had faded.

"Careless nicks from a straight razor are my guess," Reed had said of the scars.

Where the shackles had all but bonded to the flesh of his ankles, wrists and neck, the skin now was unmarred. It might have been the rosy light of the TAOS unit's pulses, but she preferred to think the pink in his cheeks was a sign of his renewing health.

"I think we can spring him outta there in about an hour," the healer said as he came to stand beside her. "I've already started backing off on the meds so he'll wake easier."

Dominia surprised herself by slipping her arm around Reed's waist. "Thank you, Reed, for all you've done for him."

"My deepest pleasure, milady," he said, squeezing her around the shoulders.

"And my deepest apology for teasing you before the hounds," she said, and when he laughed and released her, she looked up at him. "We had you going, didn't we?"

"Aye, well, to learn the woman I'd been having wet dreams about—and thank the gods I didn't say that in front of your future father-in-law—was the daughter of an infamous Deathlord nearly made me faint," he admitted with a grin.

"I'm glad you refrained from making that admission," she responded.

"Me too."

He walked around to the other side of the machine, looked at the screen then nodded. "Aye, I think we can shut this piece of Amhantarian genius down sooner than I thought. The big guy is anxious to get out of here so his body is healing at a faster rate than expected." He clamped the port on the IV tubing then punched in the command to shut down the TAOS. Applying the switch, he followed the sled as it eased from the interior of the glass tube then with quick efficiency removed the catheter from Jaegar's neck and used liquid adhesive to close the puncture.

"How long before he'll come out of it?" she asked, nibbling on her bottom lip.

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes. As I said, I want him to wake naturally. Hopefully we can get some good hearty broth, a few crackers and some gelatin in him. I imagine he'll start chomping at the bit to be up and about. Maybe tomorrow we'll have him sitting up. Late in the day maybe take him for a ride in a wheelchair. Day after, I'd like to get him on his feet." He began removing the restraints. "He's gonna be as weak as a kitten for the next twelve to twenty-four hours and something tells me he isn't going to like that. Thank Alel for the Shadowlord ability to heal rapidly because I doubt he'll be a meek patient."

"He'll behave and considering where he was and the condition he was in, I believe he'll regard anything as a vast improvement," she told him.

Breen stuck his head in the door. "The Burgon and King Gabriel are here," he said. He grinned. "And King Gabriel's assistant, Lady Hazan."

"They must have had a lot of business to take care of," Dominia said, not daring to look at Reed for fear she'd laugh. "They were supposed to have joined us two hours ago."

"I think there must be something going down over in the Cairghrian Galaxy," the captain reported. "We've been listening to transmissions all morning from a few Class 9 stardestroyers steaming toward the Domhan Quadrant."

"That encompasses a lot of territory," Dominia said, "including *an Tuirc*."

"And therein lays the kernel of the problem," the Emperor of Aduaidh Prime said as he appeared in the doorway. "How's our boy?"

"He'll be waking soon," Dominia said as the Burgon came into the room. "Something happening on *an Tuirc*?"

"I've sent ships to blockade the planet. Finally got back recon that the *an Indiachian* who is calling the shots for the *an Tuircese* military has been sneaking ships loaded with papaver plants through the Net."

"Isn't that the plant used to make tenerse?" she asked.

"Aye," Reed answered for the Burgon. "Some people call it a tenerse plant."

"There's no telling how many millions the *an Tuircese* have made selling the plants on the black market since this man took over," the Burgon snapped. "We are going to shut them down then find the fields they're using to grow them and burn them to a crisp. We don't need any more of that shit addicting the people."

"You'll need to get through the Net first," Cair Ghrian said as he joined them.

"Well, get your ass in gear and find us a way to do that!" the Burgon ordered. "Your people invented the gods-be-damned thing! Shut it the hell down."

"I'm on it already!" Cair shot back. "Just wanted to see how the surgery went."

"A complete success," Reed said.

"You heard, now go!" the emperor told Ghrian.

Cair rolled his eyes and sauntered off, walking as slowly as he could.

"Asshole!" the Burgon shouted after him.

"Dickhead!" came the reply from down the hall.

"I'm going to geld that boy yet," the Burgon mumbled.

"What are you going to do about this Birendra Parekh?" Reed asked, hiding a smile. He had yet to voice his suspicions to anyone concerning the man Worley had let slip had brought many secret prisoners to Utuk Xul.

"Arrest his ass," the Burgon answered. "The UCJ has already sent a letter of censure to King Riashi." The name brought a twist of disgust to the emperor's lips as though it had caused a bad taste in his mouth.

"They haven't told the *an Tuircese* that Jaegar has been found, have they?" Dominia asked.

"By the gods, no, wench!" the Burgon snapped. "We don't want them to know until Jaegar is well enough to take back what is rightfully his. The UCJ wants him on the throne, that useless brother of his under house arrest, and—if I have my way—that harpy of a mother of his installed at Galrath."

"That was where Jaegar intended she be sent," Dominia said.

"Aye, well, we know she was the one who paid for King Abdul's murder, although we can't prove it. She needs to be locked up and the key tossed in the deepest ocean." He took a last look at Jaegar then told Dominia and the healer he had a meeting with the rest of his hounds. "Join us if you want, Colonel."

Dominia agreed she would after Jaegar woke. She reached out to put a staying hand on the Burgon's arm. "May I speak with you in private before you go?"

"Surely," the emperor replied.

They walked a few feet away and Dominia lowered her voice so Reed could not hear. "I have a request of you, Your Excellency."

"This concerns his mother?" Ryden Bakari asked, and Dominia nodded.

"Long before now, I wanted to go to *an Tuirc* and release that crazed bitch from her earthly existence, but I was prevented from doing so." She turned to look at Jaegar. "She is responsible for all the pain he has suffered in his life, and I would like to make sure he never knows another moment of hurt at her hands."

The Burgon crossed his arms over his chest. "You don't think the convent is punishment enough?"

She looked back at him. "Do you?"

He shrugged. "What would you have done, Guardian?"

"Anything can happen between *an Tuirc* and Galrath," she said. "I am sure she will be very irate that she is being taken to such a vile place."

"No doubt that will be the case." He smiled nastily. "Those in a high state of agitation have been known to suffer massive heart attacks from which they never recover."

"So I have heard," she said, her eyes steady on his.

For a moment the Emperor of Aduaidh Prime just looked at her then he gave a slow nod. He uncrossed his arms and turned away. "Healer, you come with me," he said.

Reed started to protest, to say he needed to see to his patient, but the look on Ryden Bakari's face brooked no argument. "Aye, Your Excellency," he replied, and followed the Burgon from the room.

"Meleğüm?"

Dominia spun around, her heart skipping a beat as she saw Jaegar's eyes open, the light in them no longer febrile. "Hey, sleepyhead," she said, reaching for his hand. She brought his knuckles to her lips. "What a lay-a-bed you have turned out to be. Is this going to be problem from now on?"

His lips moved as though he tried to smile but didn't quite have the strength to do it. His gaze roamed over her face. "You cut your hair."

She shrugged, reaching up to tug at a lock of hair at her ear. "It'll grow back."

"You were mourning me?" he asked, brows slashed together in what she recognized as anguish.

"No, *aşık*, I was not mourning you. I knew you were alive." She brought his hand to her heart. "I felt you here."

His eyelids drifted shut for a moment then he tried to lick his lips.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked, and at his grunt, she released his hand and hurried to pour him a glass of water. Sliding her hand under his neck, she lifted his head and put the rim of the glass to his lips. "Not too much at first."

The cool water flowed down his parched throat and Jaegar felt it all the way to his belly. He had a slight headache, but he thought that might well be because he was as hungry as he was thirsty.

"I think that's enough for right now," she said. She eased his head to the sled. "You want a pillow, baby?"

"Aye," he said. "Head hurts."

She found one in a closet and tucked it beneath him, smoothing the hair back from his forehead. "You are going to be just fine."

He arched his head back, frowned when he saw the glass dome of the TAOS unit. "What's that?" he asked, reaching for her hand. He placed it on his chest and held it there. She could feel his heart beating steadily and slowly.

She explained to him what the machine was, what it had done. She told him about his spleen and the schedule Reed had outlined to her for his recovery process.

"He was your healer at U.X.," she said, and let it go at that.

"Reed," he said. "I remember him." He swallowed. "Met on Rusuil."

"Uh-huh," she said, still stroking his hair with her free hand.

"Good man?" he queried, eyelids closing again.

"A hero in this woman's eyes," she said, and when his eyes opened, she thought she detected a glint of jealousy in the golden depths. "He brought my man back to me."

For the next hour she told him all about what had happened from the time she first learned he was missing until he was taken from the TAOS. The only things she did not tell him were those that dealt with what had transpired in *an Tuirc* since his kidnapping.

"Your father, the Deathlord, is here," she said. "Your family, my mother, Lauryl, the Burgon's hounds, they have been my strength through all of this. I'm not sure I could have survived without them."

"Not true. Strong woman," he said. He was struggling to keep his eyes open. He was so tired, so weak.

"You go back to sleep," she said. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

His eyelids drifted down. "Promise?"

"On my love for you," she swore.

"And mine for you," he mumbled.

"And yours for me," she said, knowing he was already asleep.

* * * * *

"I think we can move him from the sled to one of the beds in sickbay," Reed told her a little while later. "It will be more comfortable for him than the sled."

"Move my cot beside it," she said. "I don't want him left alone for one minute."

The healer's brow crinkled. "Why not?"

"There was something in his eyes, Reed," she said. "I think he's afraid of being taken again."

"Ain't gonna happen," Reed stated.

"You know that and I know that, but we need to make sure he knows that," she told him.

* * * * *

When he woke, Jaegar had a single moment of terror spark through his body for he had no idea where he was. He didn't recognize his surroundings. Though he struggled to sit up, he couldn't. His arms felt boneless, the muscles atrophied. It was all he could do to turn his head, but what he saw reassured him. The room in which he lay on a soft, comfortable bed was a soothing, muted gray color that was easy on the eyes. It smelled of disinfectant but it wasn't an unpleasant smell. It was a clean, warm smell. There was no sheet over his bare chest, but his lower body was covered with soft cotton pajamas in an agreeable blue color. He felt at ease lying there—not too warm, not too cool. The mattress beneath him was neither too soft nor too firm. It fitted his body as though it had been molded just for his weight. Above his head was a light shelf with a faint, pearly white light arcing over the gray ceiling. It gave off just enough light that it was not obtrusive.

However, it was the other person in the room with him who drew his attention like a magnet. He sighed for he had feared he had dreamt her.

She lay on her left side, facing him with her hands tucked childlike beneath her pillow. One leg was crooked at the knee, the other stretched out upon the bed across from his. She too was wearing the pale blue pajamas but hers covered her from neck to wrist to ankle. The sheet that perhaps had covered her earlier had been kicked aside and lay partially on the floor. His gaze wandered down to her bare feet and he smiled when he saw the bright red toenail polish. It surprised him. When, he wondered, had she taken to using such a frilly female thing?

He watched her sleep, taking joy in just being able to see her, be near her, to hear her soft breath. His heart was filled with love, aching so painfully with the need to touch her, to hold her, to have her body close to his. He wanted her in his bed more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. He was a selfish bastard, he thought as he willed her to open her eyes and see him looking at her. He needed her touch. He needed her arms. He needed her.

Perhaps subconsciously she felt that need and stirred in her sleep. She turned to her back, her crooked knee falling to the mattress to widen the V between her thighs. Her head turned so her face was away from him.

"*Meleğim,*" he whispered, and when she did not respond, he gathered every last ounce of willpower he had in reserve and with trembling arms levered himself to a semi-reclining position.

Just that little bit of activity sapped his energy and it flattened him to his back. He sighed with frustration. It annoyed him that he was so feeble, so frail, but he wasn't going to let it beat him. He'd been beaten down too much as it was. Taking a few deep breaths, he held the last one then tried again—arms trembling violently as he forced his body to sit up.

Blowing hard as though he'd run a ten-mile marathon, he willed his legs to move, to swing from the bed. It took some effort, a lot of resolve, but he managed to get one hooked over the mattress and was about to try for the other when her voice brought an immediate halt to his struggles.

"Don't you bloody dare!"

He turned his head to look at her.

She hopped out of the bed, fearing he would fall before she could get to him. She pushed him back onto the bed, picked up his leg and hefted it onto the mattress as though the heavy appendage weighed no more than that of a child.

"Just what the heck did you think you were doing?" she demanded.

"Needed you," he said, trying to lift his arm to take her hand, but he was too drained to get it to move. "Please."

"Then scoot over," she said.

"Can't." He had depleted what little strength he had. "Too weak."

"Okay," she said. Carefully she climbed over him then stretched out beside him, her head on the pillow beside his, her body against his limp arm. She curled her right hand around his biceps and laced the fingers of her other hand with his.

"Hey," he said, his eyes running over her face like a starving man's would a banquet laid before him.

"Hey, yourself."

"Come here often?" he asked, wanting so desperately to put his arm around her, he was being suffocated by the desire.

"Only when I hear there's a good-looking, helpless warrior who won't be able to stave off my lecherous advances," she replied.

"Yeah, I figured that was why you were here," he said, his voice thick. "I know what your type wants, wench."

"And that would be what, warrior?" she countered. She inhaled the clean scent of him, his unique scent—a scent she once had thought she might never know again.

"Rape, ravaging and pillaging," he said, and though he didn't smile, his eyes twinkled with humor.

"Yeppers, that's me. Ye olde rapist, ravager and pillager." She squeezed his hand. "Want me to go to work on you now? Rock your world? Turn you inside out with my loving?"

"You just might kill me if you do," he said.

"I promise I'll be gentle," she said, wagging her brows.

He surprised her by laughing, and it was the most wonderful sound she'd ever heard. It brought tears to her eyes, and she wanted to throw herself on him, smother him with kisses, squeeze him until he popped.

"Do it," he said.

Had she forgotten he could read minds? she thought as she stared into his beautiful golden eyes.

"Aren't you afraid I'll screw you to death?" she asked, smiling.

"If you do, I'll die a happy man." He tightened his fingers around hers. "I don't have much strength, *meleğim*, but that doesn't seem to have stopped you know who from getting stiff as a board."

Dominia craned her head to look down at the juncture of his thighs. The hard bulge at the crotch of his pants was unmistakable. It flexed as though it knew she was looking at it.

"Well, fancy that," she said, gliding her hand from his biceps down his arm and across to his groin. The moment she touched his straining cock, he groaned. Without another word, she peeled her fingers from his and moved down on the bed, wedging her body between his thighs, pushing his legs gently apart before reaching into the fly of his pajamas to free his shaft.

"Merciful Alel!" he gasped as her fingers closed around him at the base. He shuddered, his chest heaving. His fingers dug into the sheet beneath his hips.

She took him into her warm, moist mouth, and though he tried with all his might not to come, to prolong the moment, he couldn't prevent it. His hips arched of their own accord, driving him deeper between her lips, and he came hard and thick into her mouth. Her hand cupped his balls and squeezed gently and the bed shook beneath him as his body convulsed.

"God!" he cried out as her tongue worked the spurts from his shaft, milked him, drained him, her lips drawing hard on his rigid length, sucking away every last ounce of cum from his deprived cock.

Dominia looked up past his quivering belly as she licked the juices from his rod. She swirled her tongue around the broad head—torturing him—as his legs trembled, and he gasped for breath. When his cock was clean, she slid up beside him. The smile that had started on her lips froze for she saw a tear ease from the corner of his eye.

"*Aşık?*" she said, the look on his face ripping her to the core.

He made a strangled sound deep in his throat, as though he were desperately trying to hold his emotions inside. He was shaking from the effort and when a second tear fell, she felt her heart break. She forced her left arm beneath his shoulders, reached across him to take his left shoulder and pulled it toward her on his side, draped his arm over her waist and guided his head to her breast.

"It's okay," she said. "There's no one here but me and you." She ran her hand up and down his back. "You can let go. Just let it go, baby."

He took a hitching breath, and then he buried his face against her neck. She felt moisture easing down her shoulder, and then he began to cry. The sound of this strong, proud man sobbing like a hurt child tore her up inside. It was such a lost, wretched and miserable sound, so filled with hurt and abject loneliness that she wished with all her heart she had the one responsible for having caused his pain there before her at that moment. There would be nothing left of them when she was finished.

"I thought I'd lost you," he cried. "Domi, I thought I had lost you!"

"Never," she said. Her arms were like steel bands wrapped around him. "Never in this lifetime or any other."

"I hurt without you," he whispered. "I hurt so bad."

"There is no more hurt, *aşık*," she said. "I swear to you, there will be no more hurt."

As she held him, she thought of the terrible confession that would have to be made. A part of her worried that he would reject her when he found out what she had done, what she had become. Even then she could feel the fangs wanting to descend in her mouth as she fought the hunger to sink them into his neck to begin the process of making him One with the Blood as well. The urge to bind him to her for eternity was so strong she had to struggle with it with every beat of his heart.

Nevertheless, that decision would be his to make. She would not demand he join her in her vampiric world. She would not coerce him into becoming like her. Whatever decision he made, she would abide by it.

Chapter Sixteen

Palace of the Emperor on Aduaidh Prime

His body healed though his spirit was still mending, Jaegar was taken by wheelchair to the luxurious apartments the Empress Miri had set aside for the prince's comfort. Grumbling like an old bear because he was not allowed to walk from the *Sláinte* to the palace, he ignored Reed who was walking beside him as a med tech pushed the chair.

"Stop pouting," the healer said, glancing over Jaegar's head to wink at Dominia.

"Domi, tell that bumbling asswipe I will never get the strength back in my legs if I don't use them," Jaegar snapped.

"Domi," Reed responded, "please tell your stubborn mule of a bond-companion that his legs would not have carried him but a tenth of the way from the ship to where we are presently."

"Domi," Jaegar said, craning his head to look up at her, "tell him —"

"Tell him yourself," Dominia said. "I am not your interpreter, *aşik*. You are acting like a child. Reed only wants what is best for you."

"It makes me look weak!" Jaegar complained.

"What does?"

"This prophets-be-damned chair!" he stated, slamming his palms down on the arms.

"You *are* weak," Reed reminded him. "Your legs wouldn't hold you up to walk this far. Would you rather have fallen flat on that ugly face of yours in front of the Burgon's people?"

Jaegar snapped his head around to level a narrow-eyed glare at his friend. "I would have appreciated the opportunity to do so, aye!"

"Spoiled brat," the Deathlord observed as he fell into step beside Dominia. "Stop that infernal complaining before I take you over my knee."

"I'd like to see you try," Jaegar mumbled under his breath.

"What?" his father said, easing Dominia aside, so he could step directly in front of the chair, halting its momentum. He leaned over and put his hands on the chair arms. "Repeat to me the blasphemy you dared to let slip from your childish lips."

Jaegar looked into his father's eyes and recognized a glint of reprimand in the pointed gaze. "I said I'd try," he lied.

One dark brow slanted upward. "I am not hard of hearing, boy," Ben-Sulil told him. "I heard what you said, but I would like for you to repeat it."

"It's the medication," Reed said. "Makes him say silly things."

"Makes him say stupid things," Dominia corrected. "He knows perfectly well he's in no condition to spar with you, milord."

"Aye, well when he is—and I fully intend to make sure he is in top fighting shape in record time—I am going to wipe the floor with his impertinent ass. As it stands right now, a Diabolusian wartpiglet could best him without a single oink, so he's no challenge to me or anyone else," the Deathlord said. He moved in closer to his son, locking eyes with him. "Let me just say this to you once for it will not need to be repeated. Never will you best me, boy. You are a Shadowlord, aye, and before all this you were a fair to middling warrior from what I hear, but you are not a Deathlord. As such, I can—and will—make mincemeat of you if you do not show me the respect I am due both as your superior and your father!" He straightened, never breaking eye contact. "Are we clear on the matter?"

"Very clear," Jaegar said, though it stuck in his craw to do so.

"Good," Ben-Sulil said, and stepped back, motioning the chair forward.

"A little tough on him, weren't you?" Dominia asked softly as the others moved ahead of them.

"He's healing quickly but not as quickly as he'd like to think. He needs time. He's also going to need toughness in the coming weeks—perhaps even months—to get him in fighting form. Insulting a warrior, all but calling him a weakling is an incentive you should understand well, Guardian."

"I do indeed," she agreed. "It's just that he's a bit fragile right now. His ego took a major beating in Utuk Xul."

"I understand that," Ben-Sulil said, "and it is only fitting that you—as his bond-mate—pamper him but I will not. That is not the Shadowlord way nor would he appreciate it if I molycoddled him. By all means in the privacy of your rooms indulge and spoil him—up to a point—but say nothing when he is among us men. We will push him as hard as we see fit to make him strong again."

* * * * *

It was the huge walk-in shower that caught and held Jaegar's attention as he limped from the wheelchair into the bathing chamber. He stared at the eight-foot-square tiled cubicle with its ninety-six jets arranged in three tiers in three of the walls and the four jets angling from the ceiling—one hundred swivel jets that could stream forth hot water.

"Water, *meleşüm*," he whispered in awe. "Not ion particles but real, honest to goodness hot water!"

"You're wanting to try it out," she said, but her observation was a moot point for he was already stripping out of his clothing, letting the shirt and pants drop to the tiled

floor. She clucked her tongue then bent over to pick up his clothes. "I'll take that as a yes."

He hobbled into the shower and whistled. "And there are benches wide enough to sleep on in here!"

"It also serves as a sauna," she said. "That is the reason for the benches."

He looked for the controls but didn't see any. "Turn it on?" he asked.

Dominia walked to the panel that operated the shower and punched in the water temperature, pulse speed and type of blast from the jets. "Ready?"

"Aye!" he yelled as he shut the door.

The moment the hot water touched him, every ounce of care and weariness left Jaegar's body. Standing in the very center of the shower with his eyes closed, he hung his head as the water pulsed in two-second intervals from the triple rows of jets on the walls. Overhead, the four jets sent down a mist that was cooler than the water hitting the rest of him.

"I have died and gone to *cennet*," he mumbled then smiled when the shower door opened.

She slipped her arms around his wet body and molded hers to his back. He reached up to cover her hands with his where they clasped at his waist.

"Shall I bathe you, my love?" she asked, and felt him stiffen.

The smile vanished from Jaegar's face. "No," he said – too curtly, too quickly. He stepped away from her, pushing her arms from around him.

Too late she realized what had set him off. He had behaved in a similar fashion the first time the med tech came into sickbay with a basin and rags to give him in a bath.

"No!" her lover had shouted. "Get away from me! You're not going to put your hands on me!"

Stunned by his reaction, Dominia had asked what was wrong, but he wouldn't tell her. It had been Reed who had explained Jaegar's behavior.

"He was rendered unconscious then taken to the baths. I think what he fears they might have done to him in there is behind his outburst."

"You don't think...?" She hadn't been able to ask, the mere thought sending shudders of fear and revulsion through her.

"I honestly don't know, Domi. They could have done anything."

"*Aşık*," she said softly. "I am your woman, not your enemy." She turned him to face her.

"I know that," he said, and reached for the soap that set in a little niche under one row of jets. He lathered it between his hands. "I just don't want you bathing me." He glanced at her. "You're not my servant."

"And you are not mine, but it would give me great pleasure to have you bathe me," she told him.

Jaegar paused as he turned the soap over and over in his hands. His gaze fell to her breasts then lifted to her face. "I could do that," he said, and came to her. He ran the soap over her shoulders, down each arm and across her upper chest then handed it to her before molding his hands around her breasts—kneading them more than actually bathing them. His thumbs fanned over her nipples then he ran his palms under her arms. He didn't seem to notice the suds slipping from her flesh as he put his hands to her breasts again to mold them, lift and squeeze, massage them gently.

"You have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen," he said. The water was cascading down his hair and spiking in his lashes as he gazed into her eyes. "I used to dream of holding them in my hands and kissing them, sucking the nipples."

"There is nothing stopping you from doing just that," she said in a husky tone. She could feel his erection bumping against her belly.

"When I've finished bathing you," he said, and held out his hand for the soap.

He eased his hands slowly down every inch of her belly, hips, thighs and legs then hunkered down to lift her left foot then the right from the tiles, soaping between the toes, gliding his palms over the arches. When he was satisfied with her feet, he stood, turned her gently and—beginning at the nape of her neck—worked his way down her backside, taking time to firmly massage her calves as he knelt at her feet.

"I'll give you an hour to quit that," she said on a long sigh, and heard him chuckle. She felt him get to his feet behind her then once more he turned her to face him. He handed her the soap, took a bottle of shampoo from the niche where he'd found the soap and squeezed a goodly sized dollop into his palm.

It was sheer bliss to feel him working the lather into her scalp. His fingers were so strong, so sure and eased all the tension from her shoulders and neck.

"I hate that you cut your hair," he said as he spread his fingers through it to wash away the lather.

"I won't again," she said then a flash of him in advanced age lying on his deathbed flickered through her mind and she knew she was lying to him. When the time came for her to part from him, she would have shorn her hair to the scalp and wear it so for the remainder of her long life.

His hands stilled. "What did you do?" he asked.

Dominia opened her eyes and looked up into his. The golden orbs were filled with pain and in that moment, she knew he had read her mind.

"What did you do, *meleşüm*?" he repeated, searching her eyes.

"What I had to do, *aşık*," she answered. She felt him probing lightly then watched his shoulders slump.

"For me," he said, hanging his head. "You did that for me."

"For us," she said. "I would never have stopped looking for you."

They had never talked about her being a Daughter of the Night for there had been no reason to. Nor had they possessed the time to venture into such serious waters

before he disappeared. Obviously he had read her thoughts on not wanting to become One with the Blood and had accepted it. Now he knew she had forsaken what she had truly wanted so she could continue searching for him. The guilt rolled off him like the suds that were creeping down her legs.

"I'm sorry, Jaegar, but if I had to do it again, I would," she said. "You were my life. You *are* my life. There is nothing I would not do for you."

He slowly lifted his head, looked at her silently for a long moment then extended his hand for the soap she held, exchanging it with the shampoo. "Would you wash my hair before you bathe me, *sevgilim*?"

Dominia drew in a breath. He had called her his wife and her heart missed a beat. Though his father brought up the subject of them marrying every chance the Deathlord got, Jaegar had shown no interest in accepting Captain Breen's offer to perform the ceremony. He was not ready, he told her, and would not be until he felt himself worthy of her once again. Despite her protests, he had been adamant.

She took the shampoo as he put the soap in the niche. Her love for him at that moment was so strong, so powerful it made her knees weak. She saw him wince and knew his legs were beginning to give out. His pride was causing him pain and she'd have none of that.

"Sit down on the bench so I can reach you," she ordered, and saw relief shift through his gaze.

He sat on the wide marble bench and closed his eyes. As she worked the shampoo through his thick hair, she stared at his face. He was an extraordinarily handsome man with his high cheekbones, long—almost feminine—lashes, aristocratic nose and full lips. He had made the decision to keep his hair longer than he normally wore it and had a few days growth of beard. That rugged, slightly unkempt look pleased her for it gave him the look of a pirate. All he needed was a gold earring in his left ear to complete the picture.

"Buy me one and I'll have it pierced," he mumbled.

"Stay out of my mind, warrior," she warned, tugging gently on his curls.

He opened one eye to look at her then closed it as she ran her hands into the stubble to shampoo it too. That done, she put the shampoo in the niche and took out the soap. With infinite care she bathed him—careful that her hands did not linger near his groin for any length of time. She soaped him well, had him stand and turn, brace himself against the wall as she washed his back, buttocks, thighs and calves. When he flinched and stiffened when she touched his ass, she started to hum and he slowly relaxed, lifting each foot in turn for her to soap it.

"I just thought of something," he said, twisting his head around to look down at her when she knelt behind him.

"What?" she said

"I didn't wash all of you."

Lust drove a red-hot spike through her at his words. She rose to her feet.

"What didn't you wash?" she asked, knowing full well what he meant.

He pushed away from the wall, turned and held out his hand. "Gimme the soap and I'll show you."

She looked down at his open palm then gave him the soap. She swallowed as he rotated it between his palms.

"You forgot something of mine too," he said in a voice laced with a growl.

"I did?" she asked as he stepped up to her, lowered his hand.

"Aye, you surely did. Open your legs for me, *meleşüm*," he ordered. She did as bid and he ran his palm between her legs.

Slowly, gently he rubbed her back and forth with the bar of soap then tossed it to one of the benches. With infinite care, he spread the soapy folds apart to glide his fingers along the creases.

"Give me your hand."

She held out her hand, and he lathered her palm.

"Finish your job, wench," he told her.

She reached for his cock, wrapped her fingers around it and ran them along the stiff length, tugging gently but firmly as he stroked between her legs. He lowered his head to her neck and kissed her where her neck met her shoulder, nibbling gently. She groaned and felt him laugh.

"*Meleşüm*?" he questioned.

"Aye?" she sighed.

"I can't remain standing," he confessed. "As much as I want to, I can't." He removed his hand from her sex and gave her an apologetic look.

"That," she said, "is why there are benches in here." With her hand still wrapped around his cock, she walked him backward.

"I thought that was for the sauna," he said.

"I lied," she told him, and put a hand on his shoulder to force him down. "The benches are for warriors to sit upon so their wenches can straddle their cocks."

She saw him shiver at her words and gave him no chance to comment for she did just that, guiding his steely shaft into the wet folds of her cunt. She draped her arms around his neck. "Like so."

Jaegar laughed. "Remind me to thank the Burgon for his thoughtfulness in providing said benches," he said, wrapping his arms around her.

She arched a brow. "Who said it was the Burgon who had them placed here, warrior?" she demanded.

"Then remind me to thank the empress."

"You'll do no such thing!" she scoffed. When he would have said more, she put a finger to his lips. "Shush, warrior, and reap the benefits of whoever decided benches

were needed in here." She flexed the muscles of her vagina around him to emphasis her words.

Jaegar laid his head back on the tile wall. He closed his eyes. "I am yours to do with as it pleases you, wench," he said against her finger then nipped at it. He opened one eye. "Try not to hurt him, will ya?"

Sitting on his lap with his thick, rigid manhood pressed deep within her, her knees folded beside his thighs, she put one palm flat to the wall and the other to his right biceps then raised and lowered her cunt upon his rod.

"Ah..." he sighed, and his arms grew taut around her.

"Like that, do you?" she asked, grinding against him.

"Aye, wench. You know I do," he said in a gruff voice.

She put her mouth to his and drew his bottom lip between her teeth, willing him to look at her. When he opened his eyes, she bit down just a tad harder then sucked his lip between hers. His chuckle of amusement pleased her but when she thrust her tongue into his mouth, his intake of breath made her shiver. His groan sent chills down her sides.

Jaegar fanned his hands up her back to press against her shoulder blades, driving her body upon his shaft. He began a rhythmic arching of his hips to meet her downward strokes, feeling his balls tighten with each clench of her vaginal muscles. His thighs tensed beneath hers, levering her upward so he could do his own thrusting. She moaned against his mouth, and he took over the kiss, sliding his tongue deep into the warm cavern.

Dominia spiked her fingers through his wet hair, angling his head so she could take back the kiss, but he didn't give her a chance. He slid off the bench, turned and lowered her to the slick marble, stretching one leg along the bench and using the other to keep them upon the hard surface. His hips shot forward to bury his cock as far inside her as it would go. Lifting her legs, she encircled his waist, tilting her lower body to give him full access.

Wicked delight raced through Jaegar's blood. He increased his speed until he was pumping into her with wild abandon. The warm water flowing over them, steam rising from the tile floor, her lush body gripping him with hot, velvet fingers all combined to drive him mad.

When they came together in a roaring rush that had them both crying out with the powerful release, Jaegar knew there was nothing standing between them and the Joining vows. He felt whole again, worthy of the beautiful, loyal woman beneath him.

"Tomorrow," he said, dragging in breath to calm his racing heart.

"Tomorrow?" she questioned, licking the moisture from her lips.

"Tomorrow will be our Joining day," he stated.

* * * * *

Those gathered at the palace of the Burgon ranked among the who's who of the New Alliance—Ruan and Chastain Cosaint, Cair and Davan Ghrian, Gabriel and Ardor Leveche, Taegin and Marin Drae, Rory and Kendall Quinn, Ailyn and Shanee Harmattan, Rynlyn and Tessa Rede, Glade and Lauryl Aeolian, Sancara and Darjeen Ben-Sulil and their six daughters and two son-in-laws, Admiral Tev Ben-Alkazar, and Chief Tribunalist Quirin Degendesch of the U.J.C.—more than half of them brought to Aduaidh Prime via the Burgon's new toy, a state of the art BlackMoon transport module. Had the New Coalition been capable of penetrating the ultra-tight security over the planet, New Alliance leadership might well have been wiped out in one attack.

"Nervous?" Lauryl asked.

Dominia's hands were trembling. "Scared shitless is more like it," she confessed. She was staring into a full-length mirror at the pale green gown Lauryl had brought as the something new for the wedding.

"You look beautiful," Hazan said softly. "Jae's gonna be the one scared shitless when he sees you."

"His mouth will water," Chastain said.

"His hands will sweat," Ardor added.

"And he'll want to grab you up and run as fast as he can to the nearest bedchamber as soon as the priest finishes the blessing," Shanee stated.

The other women in the room laughed at the Amazeen's prediction.

"Why would Jae do that, mama?" twelve-year-old Tulay inquired. The young girl—when told she was a bit too old to be a flower girl now—had been thrilled to accept a place as junior bridesmaid, to be accompanied on the arm of the handsome Glade Aeolian.

"To be alone with her," her oldest sister answered Tulay, "and have her all to himself."

Cheeks blushing for the women had forgotten the presence of the little girl, they were all relieved to see Tulay shrug away the explanation and breathed a sigh of relief when she made no comment.

"If you will permit me," Darjeen, Jaegar's stepmother said, "I have the something old for your Joining." She stepped forward with a small velvet box and handed it to Lauryl who was to be the matron of honor.

Lauryl opened the box, whistled then drew a medallion from its satin bed.

"It is the Ben-Sulil family crest," Darjeen said as Lauryl draped the gold chain around Dominia's neck. "The medallion is nine generations old. Only the brides taking the Ben-Sulil name have worn it."

Dominia lifted the medallion and ran her thumb over the intricate crest. "I am honored, milady."

"We are honored to have you join our family," Darjeen replied. She looked around at Dominia's mother.

Lanea Alamaine smiled as she came forward. "Now for your something borrowed," she said. She too held a velvet box and when she opened it, everyone drew in a quick breath for the bracelet she withdrew from its cushioned bed was stunningly beautiful.

"This heirloom," she said, "has been worn only once in the last fifty years. Rare is the bride whose wrist it encircles." She unclasped the heavy white gold clip. "It is called the *omologia*, the bond. It was given by King Stavros of Oceania to his bride three hundred years ago and has been handed down to those Daughters of the Night who have found their one true love, their bond-companion."

The bracelet bore nine five-carat heart-shaped diamonds framed in white gold filigree settings and sparkled as though the sun had been captured in the facets.

"It is breathtaking," Dominia said as her mother clamped the priceless jewelry around her wrist.

"And your sisters among the Guardians have provided your something blue," Chastain said. She brought over a white foil box tied with a silver bow and handed it to Dominia. "Wear it with joy."

Dominia knew what the traditional Gift of Sapphire was and glanced at Tulay.

"I have seen the gift, and it is lovely. I believe those who have not seen it would enjoy doing so," Darjeen gave her okay on showing what was inside the box to her young daughter.

Placing the box on the dressing table, Dominia untied the bow and took off the lid. Folding aside the tissue paper, she pulled from the box a dark blue silk nightgown.

"Oh pretty!" Tulay said, reaching out to touch the shiny fabric.

Cut in a deep V, the gown had tiny crystal beads along the neckline and along the floor-length hem. Two straps were also studded with the sparkling crystals.

"Jae's really gonna like that," his youngest sister announced, and the women laughed.

"I think you're right," Dominia said.

The sound of a gong reverberated outside the room.

"It's time, daughter," Lanea said.

Dominia couldn't answer for her heart had leapt to her throat.

"Breathe, sister," Aysel suggested. "Deep and slow."

"Remember he's only a man, Guardian," Hazan stated.

"Listen who's talking," Esen, the second eldest of the Deathlord's daughters scoffed. "She, who has been following the healer around as though she were his shadow!"

"Another Joining in our future, sister," Yildiz, the third oldest, predicted.

Hazan blushed. "Don't be silly! I find him interesting. That's all. He's only..."

"A man," the other women finished for her amidst laughter.

Once more the gong sounded. Tessa went to the door and opened it.

Taking a steadying breath, Dominia took the bouquet Kendall handed her and lifted her chin. "All right. Let's do this," she said.

Chapter Seventeen

Abbadon Fortress

Jaegar landed flat on his back staring up at the high ceiling of the gymnasium.

"Your baby sister could do better than that," Ben-Sulil growled. "Get your ass up and try it again!"

Sighing deeply, Jaegar wearily pushed himself up from the mat, gritting his teeth to the various aches and pains that riddled his body. He stifled the groan that tried to escape as he straightened to his full height.

"Pussy," his father proclaimed with a cocked lip. "Now come at me as though you actually believe you can put me down." He snorted. "You won't, but give it your best shot."

Sweeping his gaze about the room, Jaegar took comfort in having been able to best Rory Quinn and Taegin Drae who were sitting on the sidelines, grinning at him. He knew they were waiting for him to fly ass over teakettle yet again at the hands of the Deathlord – over whom he was beginning to think he'd never prevail.

"Getting tired there, Pretty Boy?" Rory quipped. "Wanna go take a little nappy poo before your Da puts you down again?"

"A week's worth of napping won't help him, Phantom," Taegin said with a grunt.

"I took you down, Drae," Jaegar snapped, a muscle flaring in his cheek.

"Aye, well, I'm not a Deathlord, now am I?" the Tiogar replied.

"You gonna fight with the big dog or keep yapping at the pups?" Ben-Sulil demanded as he circled his son.

Jaegar bent forward in a fighting stance, determination turning his face hard. "I'm gonna take you down, old man," he snapped.

Both Rory and Taegin hooted.

After a few feints, the younger Shadowlord rushed his father – grabbing for the older man's legs – and found himself dangling upside down with the Deathlord's arms wrapped securely around his waist. As his father fell backward to the mat with Jaegar in his grip, the younger man found himself flat on his back yet again.

However, the maneuver didn't quite turn out as Ben-Sulil intended. As the Deathlord started to roll to his side to pin his son beneath him, Jaegar clamped his legs around his father's neck and sat up – his haunches very effectively pinning the older man's shoulders to the mat.

Surprise flitted through the Deathlord's dark gaze a moment before he arched his back and brought his own legs up with the intention of locking his ankles around

Jaegar's neck to jerk him backward. As soon as he did, Jaegar reached up to grab his father's ankles in a tight grip to prevent him.

"Uh-uh," Jaegar said. "The takedown is mine, old man." He pushed his father's legs apart.

Ben-Sulil narrowed his eyes. "No, the takedown is a draw."

"How do you figure that? I've got you pinned to the mat."

"True, but neither of us can move. You release my ankles and I'll go for your neck again. Take the draw," the Deathlord advised. "It's better than an all-out failure."

After a moment's thought, the younger Shadowlord shrugged. "All right," he said, and let go of his father's legs. He half expected to have those legs wrapped around him as he was jerked backward but that didn't happen.

"Get the hell off me," Ben-Sulil grumbled. "Your bony ass is digging into my fucking chest."

Once he was on his feet, Jaegar extended a hand to help his father up, but the older man knocked it aside, arching his back and springing up from the mat like a man half his age.

"I'd like to say you're ready to go after what's rightfully yours, but I don't believe that's the case just yet," the Deathlord pronounced.

"I'm fit," Jaegar protested.

"There's fit and then there's fit," his father scoffed. "Physically? Aye, you probably are fit. I think you can best any man who comes at you as long as he isn't a Deathlord." He cocked a shoulder. "Do you want that throne back bad enough to do whatever it takes to get it?"

"If you're asking if I'm prepared to kill to take it back, aye, I am," Jaegar stated.

"You'd better be prophets-be-damned sure that's the case," Ben-Sulil said, "because you are going to have to fight to the death with the *an Indiachian*."

When Jaegar had been told who was running the *an Tuirc* military, who was the real power behind the Panther Throne now, the young Shadowlord was furious.

"That's the bastard who kidnapped me!" he snarled.

"We thought as much. We're also fairly certain he is also responsible for the murder of King Abdul, though we know Audrina ordered it done," his father said. "Proving it will be hard unless Parekh testifies against her, and he can't do that without incriminating himself. I don't think he wants to end up beneath the Burgon's guillotine."

"He won't," Jaegar declared. "He'll spill his life's blood on my blade!"

Ben-Sulil rolled his head from side to side, working the kinks out of his neck. It was late in the afternoon, and he was getting hungry, looking forward to the hearty meal he'd take with the men who would be accompanying him and his son to *an Tuirc* in a few days. "Something just occurred to me," he said, stopping in mid-roll. He frowned.

"We will get to the planet via the BlackMoon but how will the *an Tuircese* not pick up the heat signatures of the ships coming in behind us?"

"Leave that to me," Rory said. "Remember the *Raptor*, General Morrison's ship? The Burgon gave that ship to me and my people took it apart, added some Scaanagh technology and we developed a nice little unit that you can put on a ship to make it virtually invisible to all prying eyes. They can look right at the heat sig on the scanners and not even see it." He grinned. "Thanks to our Scaan abilities and Tappas Industries."

"Didn't I hear somewhere that you were among the first humanoids Riordan O'Shay used his BlackMoon technology on?" the Deathlord inquired.

"Took me right off the *Sláinte* without so much as a by-your-leave," The Phantom acknowledged. "The *Raptor* has some serious stealth techno built in, as well, but we incorporated that into what we call the *Focáil Leat* unit."

"You're kidding, right?" Taegin said, chuckling. "You didn't name it the *Focáil Leat*."

Quinn nodded, put a hand to his heart. "I swear to you, Drae, that's its name."

When both Jaegar and his father looked puzzled, the Tiogar explained that *Focáil Leat* in Cengusian meant fuck off.

"That's one way to thumb your nose at the opposition," Ben-Sulil commented. He slung an arm around his son's shoulder. "Let's make our way over to the chow hall. All this horsing around with you has worked up my appetite."

"Horsing around?" Jaegar asked, insulted. "You called that horsing around?"

"It wasn't true sparring, boy," his father replied. "It was —"

Both Drae and Quinn jumped back as Jaegar grabbed his father's arm, ducked under it, twisted it and then flipped the Deathlord in a move that landed the older man on his back with Jaegar's bare foot pressed against Ben-Sulil's windpipe, his arm cranking his father's in a grip that brought pained surprise to the Deathlord's face.

"If I but stomp down on your throat, I'll not only crush your larynx, I'll pivot and snap your neck at the same time," Jaegar said in a deadly voice. "To me, this isn't horsing around. To me, it is dead serious, old man!"

Ben-Sulil looked up into his son's eyes and saw determination sparking from the amber eyes identical to his own. A quiet look of admiration and respect formed on the Deathlord's face.

"Well done, Prince Jaegar," he said, barely able to speak for there was nothing playful about the pressure being applied to his throat. "Well done."

Jaegar removed his foot, eased up on the wrenching force he'd used on his father's arm then yanked the older man to his feet. He drew Ben-Sulil to him, so they were chest to chest. "Just so you know," he said, "I've killed two men in that fashion and the chances are I'll do so again."

The Deathlord laid a fatherly hand on the young Shadowlord's shoulder and squeezed. "Just so you know, I am proud to call you my son."

* * * * *

Dominia was not allowed to go with the six men who accompanied her husband in the BlackMoon unit. She had been forced to bide her time along with Hazan onboard King Gabriel Leveche's ship, the *Sangunar*. Pacing one end of the bridge to the other, she did not see the look that passed between the Storian and her sister-in-law nor was she aware she had bitten her nails to the quick until the Reaper growled, drawing her attention.

"The scent of fresh blood is not a good thing in this man's presence, Rozakaris," he snapped. "It is distracting so cease what you are doing and sit your ass down before I toss you into my containment cell!"

"Reaper," his wife admonished him softly from the chair beside his own. She too was obviously attracted to the blood welling up along Dominia's cuticles and squirmed in her seat.

"Sorry," Dominia mumbled for she was all too aware of what a blood scent could cause. She took a seat in the empty navigator's chair as Leveche's ship orbited *an Tuirc* unseen and undetected. "I'm just worried."

"Nothing to worry about," Leveche said. He clasped his hands and put them behind his head. "Have faith in your man."

"I do," Dominia said. "It's his mother, brother and that *an Indiachian* merc I don't trust."

"Once the *an Tuircese* realize their true prince has returned, they will leap to overthrow the pretenders," Ruan Cosaint said over the vid-com. He was aboard his own ship the *Turas* with full stealth communications employed.

"I agree," Cair Ghrian said. He too was on his ship the *Miodôg* – also in orbit around *an Tuirc*.

Rounding out the firepower should it be necessary were Taegin Drae's ship the *Revenge* and Rory Quinn's *Lhong Shee* – both captained by their seconds-in-command.

Two hours before, Jaegar along with Sancara Ben-Sulil, Rory Quinn, Taegin Drae, Rynlyn Rede, Ailyn Harmattan, and Aysel Ben-Sulil's husband, Kahlil Sidharta, had transported to the same tunnel from which Audrina Rozakaris had fled *an Tuirc* eight years earlier.

"Why haven't we heard something from him?" Dominia asked. She put her thumb to her lips, but at the Reaper's low rumble of displeasure thought better of it.

"He said it would take them half an hour to get up to his parents' room through the hidden tunnels," Ardor said. "Give him time, Domi."

"They can't go running through there like a pack of Diabolusian mules," the Reaper reminded her. "Being cautious takes more time than streaking in there with laser pistols blazing, wench."

Her nerves stretched so taut she could feel them shrieking, Dominia closed her eyes and said a silent prayer to Alluvia.

* * * * *

His back pressed to the wall of the tunnel, Jaegar held up his hand to bid the others stop. At his side was his father, and together they moved into position to either side of the secret door that led into what was once King Abdul's bedchamber. Voices coming from the other side prevented Jaegar from releasing the catch that would spring open the portal.

Jaegar leaned in so he could put his ear to the wooden panel. The sound was barely audible for beyond the door hung a thick tapestry, hiding the entrance to the tunnel. Due to the muffled quality, he used his Shadowlord abilities to hone in on the words being spoken—as did his father—and what he heard sent waves of disgust through Jaegar's soul.

Though it had been many years since the Deathlord had heard Audrina's voice, he recognized it and felt the same aversion to the woman at that moment as he had over three decades before. Ben-Sulil looked into his son's stricken eyes and wanted to pull the young man from the door so he could not hear. No son should ever be forced to listen to the filth coming from the mouth of the woman who had given him birth.

"Don't listen," Ben-Sulil said into his son's mind.

Jaegar shook his head. It was too late. The vulgar words, grunts and groans were branded upon his mind for all time. He hung his head, squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to take in every last crude and offensive thing his mother said and pleaded to be done to her. Though it made him physically sick to listen to the vile things she proposed her lover do, he would not shut out the sickening words.

"She is sick," his father sent. *"Her mind is twisted."*

"No, she is simply evil," Jaegar returned. *"She knows what she's about."*

Though the other men with them were growing restless, eager to get on with their mission, Jaegar kept them silent and still until the voices inside the room ceased. He lifted his head as a door closed in the room beyond. His eyes met those of his father. When Ben-Sulil held up one finger, Jaegar nodded.

"But who?" he asked.

He was trying to decide if he should just go on into the room, confront whoever was there and take his chances that it was his mother instead of her *an Indiachian* lover, when he heard the door close again. He cocked his head to one side—sending his Shadowlord powers into the room beyond.

There was no movement, no sound. He opened his eyes, turned his head to look at the men behind him. He pointed to the room then reached for the hidden latch that would open it. As quietly as he could, he disengaged the latch, eased the door open—grateful the hinges were well-oiled—and pushed the tapestry aside. The room was empty.

Slipping inside the chamber he realized the *an Indiachian* must be using as his own, he was barely aware of the other six men entering behind him. His glance went over the

tumbled sheets on the bed, the faint splotches he knew must be blood, and then tore his eyes from the nauseating sight. Walking quietly to the door, he put his ear to the panel then stepped back, easing it open. Luck was with him for when he poked his head into the hall, he was relieved to find it empty.

Already having given his team detailed information regarding the layout of the palace, it was Jaegar's plan to look for Riashi, arrest him and put him where he would be safe, then go after his mother. His intention was to make sure she did not have time to rally any servants who still had misguided loyalty to her. The last thing he wanted to do was kill anyone he didn't need to.

Holding up three fingers, he pointed to Rynlyn, Rory and Taegin then pointed to his left—meaning, they were to take that side of the hall. He and his father and brother-in-law would take the right. With the exceptions of the Deathlord and Aysel's husband who was also a Shadowlord, the others were members of the Order of Taibhse and carried deathwielder swords—deadly weapons with razor-thin blades invisible to the naked eye. Both Ben-Sulil and Kahlil had scimitars sheathed in their waistbands. Adding to that, the three were masters at misdirection—the ability to walk right past guards without being seen.

"Ready?" Jaegar mouthed, and his men nodded solemnly. Taking a deep breath, he moved into the hall with his father and the Tiogar close behind him.

The plan was for Jaegar and his family to make their way down the stairs and to the throne room where it was believed Riashi would be holding court at that time of the day. The time had been carefully chosen and Jaegar had made sure there was plenty of leeway so he and his men would arrive in the middle of the session. What he could not plan for was how many of the *an Indiachian's* men—if indeed any—would be in attendance. He was hoping only the Tribunal and Council members would be there.

The other men would head for the military command unit where, hopefully, they would waltz right past the sentries, enter the operations room and shut down the Net so the ships in orbit could hold the entire planet under the bull's-eye of their laser cannons—a deterrent only for Jaegar wanted no civilians harmed.

Dressed in uniforms as close to the originals as the duplicator on Leveche's ship could create them, Ben-Sulil and Kahlil moved to flank Jaegar as he left the stairs. Though he was using the misdirection talents learned through the Order of Taibhse, Jaegar knew the Shadowlords could see him. Hopefully, any guards they passed on the way to the throne room would not—until he was ready to reveal his presence in the palace.

The raucous noise of voices raised in anger grew louder as the trio reached the throne room. Two guards were posted outside the open doors but neither reacted as Ben-Sulil and Kahlil sent mind-clouding waves of energy toward them.

"Turn and walk away," Ben-Sulil ordered. "Go to your barracks and stay there."

Without a word the two men left their post.

Jaegar paused in the doorway, surveying the mob gathered in the throne room. Both sides of the chamber were filled to overflowing with councilors, tribunalists, senior statesmen, upper-level bureaucrats, high-ranking military officers and embassy officials from various planets in the Cairghrian Galaxy. Crowded alongside them were affluent landowners whom Jaegar recognized as being among the rich and powerful of *an Tuirc* and prosperous merchants dressed in expensive silk robes. They all seemed to be talking or shouting at once and the din was deafening.

At the far end of the room, sitting upon the Panther Throne was Riashi. He looked more bored than irritated by the commotion. His chin was propped on his fist as he surveyed the room.

"Silence!" a tall man demanded. His voice pierced the racket like a gunshot and gained the attention of those whose noisemaking abruptly stopped. The sudden quiet was almost as deafening as the uproar had been.

"I will not abide another such outburst. If any of you speak out of turn again, you will be thrown into the donjon!"

It was the queen's demanding voice and as a merchant stepped back from the center aisle that led from the door to the throne, Jaegar saw her sitting in the chair reserved for her on the dais. He was shaken by her appearance, his lips parting as he stared at her in disbelief.

Clothed in a gown made of gold cloth that shimmered beneath the light from the wide clerestory windows high above, Audrina sat regally in her chair. The deep cut of the gown's bodice revealed breasts much larger in size than he remembered her possessing. Her hair was unbound and as black as pitch with not a single streak of the gray that had been there when Jaegar had last seen her. Though he was a good fifty feet from where she sat, he had no problem seeing the marked differences in her face. It was as smooth and unlined as that of a woman half her age. Her lips were fuller, plumper and painted a bright cherry red. The dark kohl that lined her eyes reminded him vividly of the women of pleasure he'd once seen onboard the pleasure ship the *Foehn*.

"*She looks no different than when I knew her as a young concubine,*" his father sent to him.

"*How is that possible?*"

"*Surgery,*" Ben-Sulil replied. "*Most likely done by a master laserist in Bhrasail.*"

"*She looks young enough to be my sister!*" Jaegar observed.

"*Aye, well, she always was a vain woman.*"

"Now let us discuss the matter at hand without the fury," his mother said, snapping Jaegar out of his shock. "Lord Chirin, I believe you were the last to speak. Continue with what you were saying."

A man Jaegar had always thought was the most crooked politician he'd ever known bowed his head. At the queen's silent hand signal, he advanced to the dais, turned to face those gathered.

"If it please your majesties, the blockade has become more than a nuisance to those of us who regularly travel beyond *an Tuirc*. Our businesses are suffering. Our outside interests are in dire need of attention. Many essentials are becoming depleted. We are—for all intents and purposes—stuck in a vacuum." He spread his hands. "No one outside *an Tuirc* can contact us. Our families and friends and business associates have no way of knowing if we are alive or dead!"

There was a murmur of agreement as heads bobbed.

"I know all that, Chirin," Riashi snapped. "You are beating a dead horse."

"We are open for suggestions as to what we might do to alleviate the situation, Lord Chirin," the queen said.

"If any one of them has a way to end the blockade I'd like to hear it," her son grumbled. "So far all I've heard is talk."

"The Burgon wants Lord High Commander Parekh," Lord Chirin said. "If we..."

"That will never happen," the queen stated in a harsh voice, her eyes narrowing. "We will not give in to Ryden Bakari's blackmail!"

"May I speak, your majesty?" one of the tribunalists asked.

"If it is to condemn the lord high commander or suggest he be handed over to Bakari, no you may not!" the queen declared. "There will be no discussion of it!"

"What would you have us do then, your majesty?" the tribunalist queried. "What happens when those things we cannot produce here on *an Tuirc* have become—as Lord Chirin reminded us—depleted?"

"We will tighten our belts and do without," the queen answered.

There was more mumbling and the sound was uglier than it had been a moment before.

"Lord Keirst, you wish to speak?" the queen said, her angry eyes switching to one of the land barons.

From his place in the doorway, Jaegar clenched and unclenched his hands as one after the other those assembled had their say. For over half an hour he listened to the rumblings—growing angrier by the moment, heartsick at what he was hearing of the trials and tribulations his people had endured in his absence. The only bright spot was they knew where the blame for their present predicament should be placed. From the looks on their faces, the tone of their voices and the tense body language, not a one of them supported Parekh and would turn him over to the Burgon without hesitation. Wondering where that man was, Jaegar's curiosity was sated when Riashi interrupted one orator to remind him the lord high commander was in the papaver fields, overseeing the harvesting of crops and not there to defend himself.

"What good will having those seeds do us?" General Mahdokht demanded. "They are the reason we are in this mess with the New Alliance now! It is illegal for anyone other than the pharmaceutical companies to harvest the papaver plants. We are not drug smugglers! At least we were not until Parekh and his band of thieves took control

of our planet! He has made us renegades, brigands, blackening our reputations and turning us into a parody of what we once were. We are nothing more than criminals like Birendra Parekh!"

"That is enough!" the queen shouted, rising to her feet. She pointed a scarlet-tipped finger at the general. "Arrest that man!"

"You will not!" Jaegar commanded.

Every head snapped around.

Every eye locked onto the tall, imposing man standing in the doorway then widened as they recognized him.

Every throat drew in a shocked gasp.

"Prince Jaegar!" someone cried out.

Riashi's face was chalk white, his mouth open. His lips moved but no sound ventured forth. He cut his terrified eyes to his mother, who was staring at the new arrival as though he were a piece of offal clinging to her shoe.

Her chin lifted and pure evil washed over her face. "You will not –"

"Not another word!" Jaegar ordered.

Audrina threw her shoulders back. "I will do as I –"

"I said shut the hell up! Sit your ass down, woman!" Jaegar thundered.

There must have been something deadly showing in the golden blaze of her son's eyes for the queen stumbled back, putting up a hand to protect herself from what she saw.

"Jaegar..." Riashi managed to get out then stopped as those enraged eyes swept to him.

"Get up. You are not worthy to be where you sit," Jaegar growled at his brother.

"We thought you were dead!" Riashi protested. "Thank the prophets you are home!"

"Get. Off. That. Throne," Jaegar said, stressing each word through his teeth as though they were lashes falling upon the younger man's back.

Riashi shot up as though propelled from the barrel of cannon. "Of course, brother. I was only standing in for you!"

Heads swiveling back and forth between the man who was wearing the crown of *an Tuirc* and the man King Abdul had proclaimed his rightful heir, those gathered suddenly came to their senses and with a loud rush hit the floor, going to their knees with heads bowed, though neither Riashi nor his mother followed suit.

"Hail King Jaegar!" The voice belonged to General Mahdokht and the words were repeated by everyone except Jaegar and the queen.

"General, take your men and arrest Parekh's band of thieves," Jaegar ordered. "If they resist, you have my permission to engage with deadly force."

"You do not have my permission!" Audrina shouted. "Nor King Riashi's!"

"He doesn't need your permission," Jaegar declared. "He will do as his king bids."

"I do not recognize you as our king," his mother told Jaegar with a sneer. She lifted her hand to point at Ben-Sulil who stood behind Jaegar. "That Rysalian bastard is his father, not Abdul Rozakaris."

Shocked gasps filled the room as every head came up to stare at Jaegar.

"Aye, he is my father, and I am proud to introduce him as such," Jaegar admitted. He met the confused eyes of several ranking tribunalists. "He is General Sancara Ben-Sulil, Deathlord of Abbadon."

Again the gasps rang out and those closest to Ben-Sulil moved back—walking on their knees to get away from the infamous Deathlord.

"General, do as I command," Jaegar said softly.

"Aye, your majesty," the general acknowledged, and turned smartly away, signaling for his men to follow him from the room through a side exit.

"Now that you know this man is not your rightful king," Audrina stated. "King Riashi..."

"Who isn't one of Abdul's children either, has no claim whatsoever on the Panther Throne."

The new voice that came from behind Jaegar belonged to none other than the Emperor of Aduaidh Prime, the Burgon Ryden Bakari.

Once more, heads went down but this time fists were clenched and pressed to the hearts of every man there—including Jaegar though the true king of *an Tuirc* did not go to his knees before the great man. He stood—as did his brother and mother—whose face had gone as deathly white as Riashi's.

"If there is one of you who questions Jaegar Rozakaris' right to the Panther Throne, let me disabuse him of that notion here and now," the Burgon said, leaving the four guards who had accompanied him to the planet at the door and striding past Jaegar. He swept a contemptuous look over the queen then turned his back on her, leaving no doubt in the minds of the others what he thought of her. "The document naming the man King Abdul considered his legal heir—though he knew full well Jaegar was not a child of his loins—is on file on *an tSualainn* at the United Court of Justice and has been since Jaegar's birth. That document is countersigned by both the former Burgon and Major General Asyid Azzamin, past chief justice. You may view said document by accessing the document files of the UCJ."

"Jaegar, I pledge you my fealty!" Riashi said, going to one knee on the edge of the dais.

"It's King Jaegar to you, you little shit," the Burgon admonished without looking around.

Riashi winced but rapidly bobbed his head in agreement. "Aye, Your Excellency. King Jaegar. My apologies to you both."

The Burgon's lips twisted at the ass-kissing attitude, and he ignored the young man. He looked out over the assembled – meeting as many eyes as he could see among the kneeling men – then spread his hands palm up and lifted them to indicate they had his permission to get to their feet. When they had and the noise of their movements quieted, he cleared his throat.

"It will be my pleasure to bestow the mantle of authority upon King Jaegar later this afternoon. If you are so inclined, you may attend the ceremony. As per his request, it will be a simple matter without the pomp and circumstance the two of us despise. It will merely be – and I am quoting his words – an investment of authority and not the crowning of a king."

"I have no use for a crown," Jaegar said. "The prophets-be-damned thing would only give me a headache."

Nervous laughter rang out among the assemblage and more than one eye strayed to Riashi who was quick to whip the gold circlet from his head.

"Any questions?" the Burgon asked, and groaned beneath his breath as several hands shot into the air. He nodded to the man closest to him. "Aye?"

"What's to be done about the blockade, Your Excellency?"

"It will be lifted when my business here is done," he said then looked to another man.

"Will there be a fine levied against us for the drug trafficking?"

"Did you take part in the running of those drugs?"

"Nay!" those gathered said loudly.

"Did you approve of the running?"

"Nay!" The word was shouted even louder.

"Then no fines will be imposed," the Burgon said. "Those responsible will be dealt with and the one directly responsible will have harsh justice meted out to him."

"No, Your Excellency, I beg you, no!" Audrina said. She hopped from the dais like a woman twenty years her junior and went to her knees, hands clasped as she looked up at the emperor. "I beg you spare his life!"

"That decision isn't mine to make, madam," the Burgon said with a frosty smile. "Best look to your king for any leniency he sees fit to extend, although I'd venture to say a pardon is out of the question."

"Who ordered King Abdul's death?" Jaegar asked, but his mother acted as though she hadn't heard him. Her eyes, tears running from the corners, were still on the Burgon.

"Please, Your Excellency. He will murder the lord high commander!"

The Burgon cocked his head to one side. "And why is that, milady?" he asked in a deceptively gentle voice. "Could it be because Parekh is the man responsible for kidnapping King Jaegar and placing him in solitary confinement beneath the bowels of Utuk Xul where he had absolutely no human contact for eight long years?"

Another gasp—this time of horror—spread through the crowd. Eyes filled with fury locked onto the queen and held.

“And could it be because Parekh was acting on your request to remove King Jaegar as an obstacle to your assuming the authority of the Panther Throne after ordering the death of your husband King Abdul?”

“I did not!” she denied.

“Oh but you did,” the Burgon said. “We have proof of it.” He lifted a hand and Lyden Rozakaris came from the crowd.

Jaegar smiled for the first time, stepping forward to embrace the uncle he had not seen in eight long years. As they held one another, Jaegar felt for the first time that he was truly home.

“I missed you, brat,” Lyden said, his voice breaking. “But I knew you’d return to us. If I had known for a certainty she was the one behind your disappearance...”

“I’m here now,” Jaegar interrupted him. He pushed Lyden away then put a hand to his uncle’s face. “You look tired.”

“Sick and tired,” Lyden said. “Of Audrina and her mercenary and that idjut who took your throne.”

“Tell the men here what you reported to the UCJ,” the Burgon ordered Lyden.

Lyden turned to face his peers. “I overheard your queen discussing with her lover the death of my brother,” he said. “Though she did not come right out and admit it, I knew from the words she spoke that she was responsible for his death.”

“He lies!” Audrina shouted. “He has never liked me! He will say whatever he can to make me the culprit in my husband’s death!”

“I tried to warn Abdul not to go to Jerico that morn, but he wouldn’t listen. He thought he was well protected,” Lyden said, ignoring her outburst. “I sent word to *an tSualainn* but without concrete proof of her complicity, they could not act. Then all communications between *an Tuirc* and the outside world were ordered shut down by the so-called lord high commander to cover up his nefarious dealings. Had it not been, I would have continued making reports to the Burgon.”

“You lie!” the queen said, getting to her feet with her hands curved into claws. She leapt at Lyden but Jaegar stepped between them, bringing her up short. She pulled back her hand to slap him.

“Do it,” he said, “and it will be the last thing you ever do.”

“He is lying!” his mother screamed at him, spittle flying from her lips.

“I will vouch for what he says!” Lord Chirin spoke up. “Lyden confided in me the day the king died that he feared the queen had contracted for his death.” He looked around. “Lord Beleuhn was there. The three of us discussed it!”

“True,” the man named stated. “I have always thought her guilty of the king’s assassination.”

Loud voices broke out. Fingers were pointed at the queen. The Burgon held up his hand in a demand for silence.

"Without her direct confession or that of her accomplice, she cannot be sentenced to death for her complicity in the matter, but she will be punished," he said. "You have my word on it."

A roar of approval went through the room.

"How?" someone asked.

"She will go where I intended to send her before I was taken from you," Jaegar said. "To Galrath."

"No!"

His mother went wild with fury and threw herself on him, raking her fingernails down his cheek before Lyden and the Deathlord could pull her away. Twisting and turning, shrieking like the madwoman she was, she cursed them all, screeching at the top of her lungs.

"Get her out of here," the Burgon told two of his guards and the struggling woman was transferred from one duo attempting to restrain her to another. As she was taken from the throne, screaming obscenities and dire threats, he released a long, tired sigh. He took out a handkerchief and handed it to Jaegar. "That bitch is crazed," he asserted.

Blotting at the scratches stinging his cheek, Jaegar nodded. "She always has been, I think."

"Where is the mercenary? Do you know?" the emperor asked.

"In the papaver fields," Jaegar said. He pulled the handkerchief from his face, looked down at the splotches of blood on the cloth and frowned. "I've been debating whether to go after his ass or let him come to me."

"I assume the Net is down," Lyden said. "Aren't you afraid he'll escape?"

"Not a chance," the Burgon said. "The blockade is still in place. Any ship attempting to leave *an Tuircese* air space will be stopped and boarded and those on her arrested."

"And sent to Utuk Xul, I hope!" Lord Chirin exclaimed.

"You can count on it, milord," Jaegar said.

"Good," Lord Chirin said, nodding. He nudged his chin toward Riashi. "What about him?"

Eyes moved to the young prince who was still hunkered down.

"What should I do with you, Riashi?" Jaegar asked in a quiet voice.

"I had nothing to do with her schemes, Jae..." Riashi's terrified gaze shifted to the Burgon then skipped away. "King Jaegar!"

"He's a weak, ineffectual little prick, harmless enough," Lyden said. "What he needs is discipline. Something he has sorely lacked over the years."

"Riashi?" Jaegar asked, his stare leveled on the younger man. "What fate do you think you deserve?"

"Don't send me to prison," Riashi pleaded. "I beg you, my brother." He clasped his hands much as his mother had done. "Please don't! I would not last a day in such a place."

"Yet your brother lasted eight years in solitary confinement," the Burgon stated, and had to raise his voice to be heard over the hisses of anger from the crowd. "He survived and so could you. I wouldn't blame him if he sent you to the fate your hateful mother reserved for him."

"Get up, Riashi," Jaegar said with a sigh. "I'm not going to send you to prison."

"I've just the place for him," Ben-Sulil said. "I will take him back with me to Abbadon."

"Ab-bbbb..." Riashi's eyes rolled up in his head, and he pitched forward. Jaegar caught him before he hit the floor.

Ben-Sulil laughed then nudged Kahlil. "Take that little pussy back to Leveche's ship and put him in one of the containment cells." He winked at his son. "That should scare the shit out of him, don't you think?" He turned to Lyden and held out his hand. "I am the brat's father."

"You have my sympathies," Lyden said, taking the Deathlord's hand.

"Your Excellency, would you say the words of office over me now so I can be about the business of cleaning up the mess my mother helped make of my world?" Jaegar asked. He fingered the hilt of the deathwielder in the sheath at his thigh.

"You are going to the papaver fields," Ben-Sulil said, a frown creasing his face.

"Aye," Jaegar said. "I've a disease to eradicate."

"I will accompany you," the father said to the son.

"I would have it no other way," the son agreed.

Chapter Eighteen

"Will you please stop that infernal pacing, wench?" Leveche pleaded with Dominia. "I am getting seasick watching you!"

"How long does it take to stab a pig in the gut then hie your ass back here?" Dominia snapped. "Huh? How long?"

Ardor laid a gentling hand on her husband's arm for his golden eyes flashed, and she knew instinctively he would say something he might well regret later. He cut those orbs to her and—sure enough—she saw a glint of Reaper red hovering there.

"She is understandably nervous, Reaper," she told him. "As I would be if that was you down there."

The Storian king sniffed. "Well, it ain't and she's starting to get on the last nerve I have left."

His wife massaged his arm. "Perhaps we should retire to our quarters for a bit so you can relax."

A speculative light chased the red glint away. "I believe I might need relaxing," Leveche admitted.

"What the hell is taking so long?" Dominia demanded as she strode to the vid-screen. "Punch up that goddess-be-damned field again, will you?"

Leveche clamped his mouth shut as he got up from the command chair. His lady-wife threaded her fingers through his and tugged him toward the bridge elevator. He sent one final glare toward the Riezell Guardian who was now tapping her foot impatiently as the vid-com panned over the papaver field.

"Where are you, Rozakaris?" he heard her growl.

"Most likely hiding from her and I don't blame the poor fool," Leveche mumbled as the elevator doors shushed open.

"You are so bad," Ardor said.

The doors barely closed before the infamous Lord Savidos grabbed his lady and pinned her to the wall. "I'll show you just how bad I can be," he said, capturing her mouth with his.

* * * * *

"Aye," Dominia told the com officer. "Scan that area to the left. No, go back a few yards."

For the next ten minutes the com officer slowly scanned every inch of the fields—zooming in on the heat signatures of the workers gathering the papaver plants. He expanded the search farther up the mountain paths, panning quadrant by quadrant.

“Stop! Back up!” Dominia said. “There! Right there! That’s him!”

Hazan hadn’t been paying attention to her sister-in-law. Her thoughts had been on Reed Summerton who had taken over the healer duties on the *Sláinte*. She missed the man who had made it clear to her that he intended to have her as his own one day. Although she had decided to lead him on a merry chase until she was sure he was the one to whom she was destined to spend her life, she found absence truly did make the heart grow fonder. Truth be told, she thought, she was already more than a little in love with the Serenian. Suddenly needing to get her mind off Reed, Dominia’s outburst drew the young woman out of her musing and to her feet.

“Jae?” she asked. “You see Jae?”

“Aye, he’s talking to a group of men,” Dominia said, pointing to the screen.

“That’s Papa,” Hazan said, “and Kahlil. Who are the others?”

Dominia shrugged. “An *Tuircese* soldiers, I think.” She put a hand on the com officer’s shoulder. “Put that on the large screen, will ya?”

Both women looked up as the sixty-inch black screen pulsed to life.

“Zoom in on the prince.”

“The king,” Hazan said.

Dominia made a sound between snort and admiration as the vid-cam zeroed in on the man she loved.

“There’s Rory and Taegin,” Hazan commented, “but I don’t see Ryn.”

“He’s on the other side of Kahlil, off screen,” Dominia told her.

“They don’t look angry like they’re about to engage in fighting,” her sister-in-law said.

On the screen, one of the workers to whom Jaegar was speaking lifted his arm and pointed to the hills behind him.

“That must be where Parekh is,” Dominia said. She chewed on her bottom lip then blinked. “Oh he isn’t!”

Jaegar was walking toward a brace of horses tied to a hitching post.

“What the hell does he know about...?”

She stopped for both her husband and his father were untying the mounts and—without the use of the stirrups—vaulted onto the backs of the steeds, putting heel to flank to set the beasts into motion.

“Papa is a very experienced rider,” Hazan said. “Apparently Jae is too.”

“Most an *Tuircese* men are,” Leveche said as he joined them. “I imagine Jaegar grew up on the back of a Rysalian thoroughbred.”

Dominia glanced around at the Storian king and was relieved to see the boorish light had fled his amber eyes. "Feeling better now?" she asked.

The dangerous man the megaverse knew as Lord Savidos ignored her question. "I don't know that I like the two of them going up there by themselves," he said, a frown forming on his handsome face. He touched the mini vid-com that was clipped to his belt. "Rory?"

"Aye?" came the immediate reply.

"I'm going to send you and your fellow hounds on Jae's heels."

"Shite," The Phantom grumbled. "I hate that gods-be-damned BM unit." There was a loud sigh. "All right. Do your dirty, Gabe."

"Kahlil and the soldiers will be joining you," the Reaper advised then looked to the engineer whose fingers were already paused over the BlackMoon's keyboard.

"Locking on," the engineer said.

"Don't pick them up until we have the coordinates where the king's headed then drop them at strategic points around him," Leveche ordered. "There's no telling what he's riding into."

"Aye Sir!"

The vid-com tracked Jaegar and the Deathlord as they rode up the twisting trail through the jagged rocks. Dominia admired the way her man sat his mount, the ease with which he rode. Her heart swelled with pride in him for he was the very image of a confident, dangerous warrior.

"Pull back and let's see if we can't find out what lies at the top of that trail," Leveche ordered the com officer. "Engage the heat sig probe. I want to know if there is anyone lurking among those boulders."

"Aye Sir," the com officer replied, and did as he was prompted. "I don't see any telltale wavering coming from the rocks, just the natural ground heat emissions."

"All right, let's see what's up top then."

As the vid-com panned over the ridge of the hill, a corrugated metal shack came into view, the lowering sunlight catching in the grooves of the sheeting. Five workers were carrying boxes of what looked to be plants from the building while three others stood observing the loading of a wagon. A ninth man sat on the wagon seat holding the reins to the two mules' harnesses.

"That's a lot of tenerse in the making," Leveche said.

"A lot of illegal profit for the merces," Dominia replied. As she watched, the taller of the three men standing watch over the wagon looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun's rays.

"Lookout up in the rocks," Leveche said. "And he just told them they've got company coming."

"I count ten men," Dominia said.

"Daval?" Leveche asked the com officer.

"Ten heat sigs, Sir."

Leveche fingered his mini vid-com. "Rory, there are ten men up there. Three look to be *an Indiachian* and the others *an Tuircese*. There's a lookout in the rocks, and he could be with the mercs. I doubt the *an Tuircese* will attack once they see Jaegar but let's put them out of commission ASAP." He nodded to the man controlling the BlackMoon unit.

"Will do," came The Phantom's reply.

"And Rory? Leave the leader for Jaegar. That's his game," the Reaper ordered.

"Yep."

Dominia lifted her hand to her mouth.

"Don't you freaking do it," Leveche warned. He slapped at her. "Stop that."

Growling at him, she bared her fangs, but when he bared his, she quickly closed her mouth. His were not only much bigger and longer and sharper-looking, the flicker of warning in his eyes said he hadn't shown them to her simply as a challenge.

"Huh," he snorted smugly, and looked away, his attention on the coming confrontation for the vid-com screen was filled with the arrival of Quinn and his team surrounding the area. Rynlyn was nowhere to be seen but when a body tumbled down the hill and came to a sprawl at the edge of the clearing, it was evident where the Burgon's son had been transported by the BlackMoon unit.

"Show-off," Leveche mumbled.

"As befits a future Burgon," Ardor said as she came up behind him, slipping her arms around his waist. She squeezed him. "Arrogance of ability is such a turn-on."

"Kahlil and Taegin have Parekh's men in hand," Hazan said. "Looks like the merc leader is going to square off with Jae."

"That's what he was hoping would happen," Leveche drawled. As the two warriors moved away from the others, drew daggers and bent forward in fighting stances, without even looking her way, the Reaper idly reached out to slap Dominia's hand as she began lifting it. "I said no."

Watching her husband move like a dancer through the fight soon had Dominia's full attention. The parries were done with precision but the feints and thrusts were masterfully executed. As though it were an extension of his own hand, the dagger swept across Parekh's midsection and drew first blood—the man's loose white tunic blossoming crimson petals. She saw Jaegar smile, watched his lips move and knew instinctively he was taunting his opponent.

"That boy's got balls of titanium," Leveche said with a chuckle.

"Like someone else I know," Ardor said quietly.

"I've no idea who you mean, wench," her husband said with a sniff.

"Drawing first blood," Ardor said as though she hadn't heard him, "is a great psychological advantage."

"I like his triangle stance and the hammer grip. He's got his shield hand facing toward him so a strike by his opponent won't hit the arteries at the underside of the wrist. The boy knows his shit."

"Oh goddess!" Dominia gasped for Parekh lashed out to catch Jaegar's shield hand on the outside of the forearm. She saw pain flash over her husband's face before he jumped back.

"I thought he was keeping that hand stretched out too far forward, it was bound to become a target," Ardor said. "He won't make that mistake again."

"Got a little too cocky, I think," Leveche commented. "Do a screen in screen and zoom in on the blade the merc is using. I want to see it up close." When the image appeared on the small inset at the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, the Reaper whistled. "That is one nasty piece of work."

Despite wanting to watch the progress of the fight, the warrioress in Dominia wanted to see the blade as well. She flicked her eyes to the smaller screen. Her heart leapt in her throat for the blade was indeed a wicked piece of weaponry. She noted the trailing point with a frontal gut hook—used to hook under an opponent's skin to pull and rip the flesh and gut the organs. If Jaegar's enemy stabbed the blade into her husband's belly, it could do vicious damage.

"Have faith in your man," the Reaper told her. "He's gods-be-damned good with that dagger of his. Someone taught him well."

The two men moved over the dusty ground, slashing at one another, sweeping the blades in deadly arcs across each other's bodies. Blood appeared on Jaegar's upper arm, his left thigh, along his cheek. He stumbled a few times but managed to dodge the thrusts that would have impaled him. He took a cut to his chest and another to his shoulder but his blade was doing as much—if not more—damage to his opponent. Both men were losing blood.

"Jaegar!" Dominia cried out as her husband went to one knee, quickly scrambling away from the vicious kick aimed at his head.

"Watch yourself, Jaegar," Ardor whispered.

As they watched, Parekh thrust forward, aiming at Jaegar's midsection. The younger man barely had time to jerk backward to keep from being jabbed with the slightly tipped blade. Shifting his weight to his back leg and moving his lead foot back, Jaegar created additional distance between him and the mercenary's blade by curving his stomach inward. At the same time, he executed a brutal slash to Parekh's arm—slicing it all the way to the bone. Using his forward momentum, he stepped in to stab the *an Indiachian's* fighting shoulder before jumping back and to the side, missing the lunge that would have sliced open his side.

"That's too close for comfort, boy," Leveche said. "Finish the bastard off. We're not getting any younger up here!"

Dominia drove her fingernails into her palms as Parekh switched the blade to his left hand. She could see the hatred pulling the man's lips back from his teeth, almost

feel the savagery building in his brain. He struck out at Jaegar but her husband danced away – but not before putting a long slice in the mercenary’s thigh.

“Getting too cocky again,” Ardor warned.

Dominia gasped as the scene changed to one of disbelief. She knew what she was seeing would become the stuff of nightmares for years to come. There was no doubt in her mind she would replay it repeatedly in slow motion, waking from the dream in a cold sweat, trembling, gasping for breath.

Jaegar – leaping back from a vicious side sweep, his boot heel catching on a rock, his foot sliding out from under him, going down hard on his back in the loose shale, dust rising up from the ground as he fell, knife flying from his hand.

Parekh – grinning broadly, twirled the knife in his hand to clutch the handle in an ice-pick grip, lifting the blade high overhead, falling forward to land on Jaegar with the blade aimed straight at the younger man’s heart.

Leveche – gasping and going as still as death as his wife took hold of his arm in a punishing grip.

Frame by frame the horror unfolded before Domi’s eyes. She ceased to breathe. Her heart stopped beating. Terror washed over her like potent acid, searing her to the marrow of her being.

However, before Parekh’s body fell atop Jaegar’s, the young Shadowlord put up a hand and the mercenary froze in midair. For a split second Jaegar didn’t move then he flipped to the side, away from the descending body and Parekh slammed into the rocky ground with such a force his body bounced, kicking up more dust.

“Mother of the Goddess,” Dominia whispered, a trembling hand to her mouth.

Parekh still clutched the knife in his hands as he pushed to his knees. Jaegar was desperately trying to find his blade – twisting his head from side to side searching for it. The mercenary sprang from the ground, coming at Jaegar with the knife raised over his head. Jaegar caught both the *an Indiachian*’s wrists in his hands, and they scuffled in the sand, Parekh trying to hook a foot behind Jaegar’s legs to bring him down. More dust rose from beneath their boots as they moved across the ground.

“Headbutt him!” Leveche shouted. “Headbutt him, Jaegar!”

As though his words had been heard, Jaegar did just that – slamming his forehead into Parekh’s, staggering the mercenary who stumbled back. The *an Indiachian* was sufficiently dazed by the savage blow that Jaegar could twist his knife hand down and to the side. A flash of pain shot over Parekh’s face and the dagger dropped from his fist.

“He snapped the bastard’s wrist,” Ardor said.

The next few moments shot by so quickly, Dominia couldn’t follow them. Jaegar released Parekh’s left wrist to slam the base of his palm under the mercenary’s chin, snapping his head back.

“Snapped his neck too,” Leveche said softly. “That boy is a mean fighter.”

The *an Indiachian* folded to the ground like a wet sheet.

Jaegar lifted his head and looked straight up into the vid-com, knowing he was being watched. Blood ran from a cut over his eye, from the gash in his cheek, across his upper belly, his shoulder. He was breathing hard, sweat plastering his shirt to his chest. Slowly, his lips began to move. The brutal, evil smile he sent to his wife made the hair flex on her arms.

Epilogue

"Nope," she said. "That just isn't us."

"I agree," he replied. "Give me a few minutes, and I'll do it the right way."

Dominia yawned. "Better hurry. Watching you fight wore my ass out." She looked around him to the readout at the bottom of the vid-com screen. "It's not even eight of the clock and I'm ready for bed."

They were sitting in the oversized bathtub off the bedchamber where he had spent the first thirty years of his life. The water had grown cold and the bubbles were slowly vanishing. Though he had taken a shower to rid himself of the blood that streaked his body, Dominia had insisted her husband relax in the tub to ease the kinks from his aching muscles. They hadn't been in the tub a full minute before he began a slow, easy lovemaking that had just ended in a slow, easy orgasm.

"Let's not try the leisurely and gentle thing again," he suggested. "It doesn't have any..." He frowned, searching for the right word.

"Oomph?"

"That's as good a word as any," he agreed. He got to his feet and stepped over the side of the tub, extending a hand to help her out. When she was standing on the deep pile of the fur rug beside the tub, he reached for a thick towel, swinging it around her shoulders. He pulled her to him and kissed her before turning to get a towel for himself.

"I prefer you ramming into me," she said as he dried his hair.

Jaegar gave her a look that made her so hot she swore she could feel steam coming off her wet body.

"I bored you just now," he said.

Dominia shrugged and watched as his left eyebrow rose slowly. "I'm just saying," she said, feeling her knees grow weak as he slowly curled his tongue over his lip.

"I all but put you to sleep."

"No, but look at the floor, warrior."

He glanced down then up at her. "So?"

"Not a drop of water on it. That means the lovemaking was too tame. At least a little water should be splashed on the—"

She never got to finish for he dropped his towel, snapped hers from her body, leapt at her, bent over and caught his shoulder in her midsection, hefting her over it in one smooth move. His hand came up to swat her ass.

"Wench, you are so gonna be fucked!" he growled.

Dominia laughed as she hung over his shoulder. She slapped both hands against his tight rump, drumming on each cheek as though to the beat of some phantom music.

When he reached the bed and tossed her atop the mattress, she landed on her elbows, grinning up at him with challenge.

Jaegar dove atop her, roughly pushing her thighs apart with his knees. The hard jut of his cock stabbed at her opening as he wedged his hands beneath her and jerked her body to his.

"You want it?" he asked, prodding at her but making no real effort to impale her on his rigid flesh.

"You think you're man enough to give it to me?" she countered, sweeping her tongue over her lips.

"You think you're woman enough to take it?" he shot back.

Dominia lifted her head to look down at his cock, pursed her lips. "I've seen bigger," she teased.

"Liar!" he growled and slammed into her with enough force to make her gasp. He drove deep – filling her completely – then held himself there.

"That's it?" she asked, both eyebrows elevated. "That's all you've got? I was hoping for something really hard and powerful."

"You'd better be careful what you wish for, wench," he said, beginning a slow grind against her core.

She brought her legs up to clamp them around his waist. "I always know what I'm getting into, warrior."

"But do you know what's getting into you?" he asked, thrusting forward with a savage snap of his hips.

She put a hand to her mouth. "Ho-hum."

"Ah, now that's just plain mean," he said, and pounded into her as she had wanted.

Dominia locked her arms around him, tilted her hips even more as he dug his fingernails into the soft flesh of her ass. She drew his mouth to hers and took it roughly as he was plowing his shaft through her hot folds.

Jaegar groaned low in his throat as her tongue dueled with his. His cock was on fire with a need so primitive he could no longer think. His balls were tight as a fist, aching, burning. The sound of their bodies coming together, the scent of their combined juices was driving him wild. He hammered into her soft, wet folds and at the moment those sweet muscles began to ripple around him, he became a man possessed. Frenzy took over and with it, a growl that tore his mouth from hers. Throwing back his head, he bellowed as the first hot jet of cum spurted.

Dominia stared at him as he continued to thrust into her, watching the veins at the side of his neck stand out, the muscles of his arms bunch as he slammed home one last pounding surge of his hips. He became perfectly still though his chest heaved and the veins were throbbing in his neck. Sweat dripped from his brow to land on her nipple.

"Well, that was special," she said, drawing his head down and his eyes to hers.

There it was again, she thought, as she watched that slow, evil grin she'd last seen on the hill in the papaver fields. She watched him tilt his head to one side.

"Bite me," he said.

Dominia blinked. "What?"

He rolled to his back, turned his face toward her. "Bite me," he repeated. "Make me One with the Blood."

She sat up, stunned by the request. "Warrior, you need to think about this. You—"

"I have thought about it, and it's what I want," he interrupted. "Make me like you. I want to spend eternity with you." He held her gaze. "I want to go to sleep with you in my arms every night and wake each morning with you in them. I want our lives to be linked for all time."

She searched his gaze. "You're sure?"

"Very sure." He turned his face toward the wall, baring his neck.

Dominia licked her lips. Her heart was pounding brutally in her chest. Not giving herself time to think of reasons why she shouldn't do it, she leaned over him and sank her fangs into his neck.

Jaegar gasped for the initial pain was worse than he could have imagined, but she swept her tongue over the puncture wounds and a numbness began in his flesh to replace the hurt. He closed his eyes as she drew his blood down her throat—hearing her swallow. When she lifted her head, he turned to face her.

"Now you must drink of mine," she said, and put her wrist to her mouth. She drove her fangs into her flesh then pressed her arm to his lips.

He opened his mouth and latched on to the wound, drawing upon it as though it were her breast. The taste was not what he expected and it filled his body with a sensation of warmth that flowed through every limb and organ. It was a giddy experience that left him lightheaded when she pulled her flesh free of his lips.

"We must do this twice more before you are truly One with the Blood," she said. She cupped his cheek. "From this night forward, I will take only your blood and you, mine."

He drew her to him, still feeling woozy, and cradled her head against his shoulder. He closed his eyes.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you," he repeated.

"Oh!" she gasped, peeling away from his body. "I forgot!" She scrambled from the bed.

"What?" He sat up—grabbing onto the sheet for the room whipped around him like a carousel. "What is it?"

"I have something for you," she said. She grabbed the knapsack she had brought from Leveche's ship and tossed it to the bed. "My wedding gift to you." She sat on her haunches. "Open it, warrior. Open it!"

The effects of her taking his blood and the heady essence of hers flowing through his body made it difficult for him to open the knapsack but he managed to unclasp the lock and peel back the flap. He frowned as he looked down at the small box with its terminals and wires. He looked up at her.

"What the heck is it?" he asked.

"It's Ark!" she said. "I retrieved him from your ship after it crashed on Farisia."

"Ark," he said and moisture gathered in his eyes. He looked up at her. "Ah wench." He reached for her, his heart so full of love he thought he was going to bawl like a newborn.

Dominia wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. "Happy?" she asked, stroking his hair.

"More than you'll ever know," he said on a hitching breath. He looked up into the green eyes that were his salvation—that had appeared out of the darkness of his deepest despair to lift him to the light—and realized he knew exactly what that word meant now. Lyden had asked him long ago and he'd had no answer. Now he did.

Happiness was the woman he loved.

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over seventy books. Married 42 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia, and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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