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Champagne Books Presents  
Celestial Dragon  
By  
Ciara Gold

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Champagne Books

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ISBN 1897261330

June 2006

Cover Art © Chris Butts

Produced in Canada

Champagne Books  
#35069-4604 37 ST SW  
Calgary, AB T3E 7C7  
Canada

### Dedication

I dedicate this story to my own celestial dragon, my husband Cran and to the wonderful group of ladies who helped make this story possible. Thank you, Kim, Tam, Marie, Mel, Sonja, Cindy and Marjorie.

## One

*Bastian Province of Satobik, 3015 AD*

*"Kemios? Delt? Are you here?"*

Chelian Kar's voice echoed in the empty hallway. Neither greeter answered her summons. She searched the corridor for some sign of their presence.

The incessant knocking at the front doors gained volume. Chelian Kar stood in indecision. Where were the greeters? She crept toward the door, her fingers clutching her long skirt.

Again, someone pounded on the heavy metal doors, rattling the casing with their insistent bid for admittance. Chelian's eyes scanned the hall, seeking someone other than herself to answer the summons. No one emerged from the shadows. Did she dare break the law to admit the unexpected visitor? Before her courage fled, she grasped the door handle and pulled the door wide. Having done so, she took five steps back to insure an appropriate distance from the caller and dropped her gaze to the floor.

A gentle breeze swept through the opened door, bringing with it the heady smell of *bennetor* blooms, *milimem* sprouts, and an unidentifiable scent unique to the visitor. Curious, she studied a pair of large boots, noting the strange design tooled in the *truscan* skins. A stranger called upon them, one not of their province.

She murmured formal words of greeting. "Welcome to Kel."

*"Fa teares Bande Kar?"* a male voice asked, the sound deep and rich.

Chelian's head snapped up. He spoke Fendabor, a dialect used by the ancients. Had he even understood her? Their eyes met. Realizing her mistake, she averted her gaze.

With less confidence, she repeated the welcome in Fendabor and asked, "Do you wish an audience with Sire Kar?"

"If it pleases you, yea. I have a matter of grave importance to discuss."

He seemed unperturbed by her presence. Questions ran rampant inside her head. Who was this stranger? By law, he had the authority to demand a different greeter, one who was not Deliphit. She kept her eyes trained to the floor and allowed him entrance, all the while wishing she could lift her gaze to study the man more closely.

"May I have your name so I may announce your presence?"

"I am known by Fen Dane Charst. I give you leave to call me Fen Dane."

*Fen?* Her eyes widened. He proclaimed the title of prince. Turning, she felt him fall into step behind her. Too close. The man flaunted protocol in more ways than one.

She stumbled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him reach for her elbow. A bolt of static electricity shot from his fingertips to her skin. She yanked her elbow out of his reach before his fingers could come in contact with her person and whirled to face him. While her skin tingled from the impact of the electric current, his move to touch her seared her with longing. No one willingly touched a Deliphit.

She hid her confusion behind angry words. "Have you no respect for the law? You can't touch me. Even

to look upon me invites censure. You'll get us both in trouble. Please observe protocol and kindly fall into step at least five paces behind me until I see you safely delivered."

He pushed the hood of his cloak from his head. Deep *ebonharde* eyes captured hers before she realized her own egress from the rules. His rich, dark hair with highlights of *nezarine* indicated his Fastian heritage. The heavy cloak he wore covered his large frame, masking the details of his build, but for Chelian, his face proved arresting enough. She turned away lest he accuse her of breaking Bastian law.

"I believe there has been some misunderstanding." His rich voice halted her steps.

"How so?"

"I am familiar with some of your laws and customs, but not all. You must apprise me of these rules you allude to. I cannot understand why 'tis not allowed to look upon such beauty."

She peered over her shoulder but kept her eyes carefully downcast. "Can't you see I'm Deliphit?"

"'Tis a term I am unfamiliar with."

Though it sounded sincere enough, Chelian found his admission difficult to believe. "Just keep well behind me. You need not know more."

She proceeded to lead him to her father, turning down a hall to stop before a set of double doors. Relieved that he'd stopped far behind her as requested, she tapped on one of the metal doors. At the sound of her father's voice, she swept through the portal and quickly announced Fen Dane's request for an audience.

"A stranger?" Her father turned accusing eyes toward her, his large frame more intimidating for the guilt she experienced. By the volume of papers scattered about, she'd interrupted his preparations for a meeting with the Council. He slammed his hands on the desk. "By what breach do you escort this man?"

"Forgive my slight, Father, but by grace, I couldn't leave him unattended when no greeter answered his summons."

Her father sighed. "The greeters are occupied unloading a shipment of *truscal*. The animals proved difficult to manage."

"Thank you for the explanation, Father. It relieves my mind to know I had just cause for acting against protocol."

Out of her peripheral vision, Chelian noted her father's nod of agreement. "Allow the man to enter, then take yourself off to your room. We no longer require your presence."

"*Tens er del, Sire.*" Fen Dane continued to speak Fendabor. His commanding tone made Chelian hesitate.

"Can't the man speak Fastian?"

From hooded lashes, she peered at Fen Dane. Did he truly not speak Fastian, or did he toy with her? "Nock, Father. I don't believe he can. He sends you greetings. Should I stay and translate for you?"

"*Selt.* It appears you will have to stay after all." Bande pointed a beefy finger toward the corner of the room. "Sit in that far chair. I give you leave to lift your head. My hearing isn't strong enough to hear your words if you talk to the floor."

Chelian smiled, grateful for the opportunity to be useful. She turned to Fen Dane and gave the proper introductions. "I present to you Fen Dane Charst."

"A king's son?" Her father's bald head snapped around, and he stared at the prince.

"Yea," Fen Dane answered when she'd translated but failed to elaborate.

"Fen Dane, I present to you my father, Sire Bande Kar, high chancellor of the home-unit of Kel and noble second son of King Vem from the province of Bastia."

As per custom, the man lifted his hand, palm turned out. Her father fit his large palm to the man's, welcoming him to Kel. Once done, Fen Dane removed his heavy cloak.

Nothing could have prepared Chelian for the magnificent creature hidden behind the folds of cloth. The form-fitting material that molded itself to his legs and body defined every curve and muscle. Black, *truscan* boots hugged his shins. A finely woven tunic draped over his shoulders like moonlight over *cerubic* fields. The garment, cinched at the waist with a heavy belt, fit his muscular frame with simplistic opulence. Bare flesh exposed between a low vee of *darsk* fabric beckoned her to touch his lightly furred chest.

In all her days, she'd never seen such a costume. From where did he come? Even the way he wore his long hair differed from the men of her father's acquaintance. Pulled back, it lay tight against his scalp, fastened by a string wound many times around its thickness. The style accentuated his sharp facial planes.

"My daughter seems to have lost her concentration."

The rebuke hinted at her father's amusement but caused Chelian to frown as she realized Fen Dane had made a comment she'd failed to interpret. Returning her focus to the conversation, she began to translate the dialogue between both men.

"As customary," Bande said, "I give you the hospitality of my home-unit, Kel, for the duration of ten *datons*. I assume this to be enough time to conclude whatever business brings you to our doors."

"Yea. 'Tis more than enough time, for I believe you will be very interested in what I have to discuss."

"By your manner, dress, and speech, I assume you're from a distant province and not a local home-unit."

"True. I've traveled far for this meeting. In return for your hospitality, I would offer you a gift, a sample of my purpose in seeking you out."

Fen Dane reached into the bag draped across his shoulder. He withdrew an object wrapped in thin tissue and set it upon the desk. He unveiled the gift, but Chelian became more interested in watching his tapered fingers than discovering the prize hidden within.

Bande leaned forward and, with a gentle touch, removed the wrapping from the object still cradled in Fen Dane's palm. A glitter of light caught Chelian's eye, and she tore her gaze from the man's hands to risk a glance at her father. Bande's pale eyes grew wide, arrested on the gift. Chelian's gaze swung back toward the object.

She gasped.

Before them rested the largest zeel crystal she'd ever seen. Its iridescent facets gleamed beneath the artificial lighting. Chelian restrained her urge to rise for a closer look.

Fen Dane smiled. "The stone is yours, Sire Kar."

Bande swallowed, clearly affected by the magnitude of the gift. "Your kindness is overwhelming. What do you seek in return?"

"What I seek is of a delicate nature. Before I make my request, I would have you know the extent of wealth I would bestow upon you in trade."

Bande fastened his eyes upon the stone. "Proceed, Fen Dane. You've most certainly aroused my curiosity."

"I am prepared to offer you a cargo-hold full of these crystals."

The words seemed to bait Bande's greed, and Chelian saw her father's eyes glisten. What did Kel possess that could possibly be worth the amount Fen Dane proposed?

"And in return?"

Fen Dane smiled. "'Tis a small request, but one that might meet with opposition. Know that I do not make this appeal lightly. In return for listening, I will gift you with another stone. Both stones are yours whether you accept my terms of trade or not."

"Your generosity is unheard of." Bande's cautious reply did not match the gleam in his eye. "Tell me from whence you hail."

"'Tis a small province across the Dragon Craters."

Bande's gaze caressed the stone with a possessiveness Chelian found distasteful. Preoccupied with the zeel crystal, he reacted slowly to Fen Dane's comment. "It's impossible. You couldn't have traversed across the craters. The dangers are too immense."

"'Tis impolite to contradict my claim." Fen Dane's eyes narrowed at Bande's careless remark.

"I meant no disrespect. Your bold claim surprised me. I apologize if I offended you."

"You may make amends by offering me an official introduction to your daughter."

At this, Chelian faltered over the translation. She would have to explain her position in this house, or Fen Dane would continue to break rules through ignorance of Bastian laws.

Bande frowned. "My daughter, Chelian." He shrugged with indifference. "She can't greet you formally, and you wouldn't want her to."

"I find fault with your assumption. I would very much like for her to greet me. I will consider it a slight if she refuses." Fen Dane's *ebonharde* eyes darkened with interest. Chelian squirmed beneath his intense regard.

"Nock. She can't. It's forbidden."

"You will explain."

"She is Deliphit."

Fen Dane stared at her, his expression full of inquiry. Bande's simple declaration should have been enough. How could this man not know what it meant for her to be Deliphit? He'd made mention of his



unfamiliarity of the term, yet she found his lack of knowledge unbelievable.

"You don't understand?" Bande asked.

"Nay. I need further explanation."

"A recessive gene makes an appearance every third or fourth generation. As she is my only child, we deal with the full ramifications of her affliction."

"I still do not fully understand. I see no signs of the deformity of which you speak."

Though she continued to translate, Chelian could not bear to be a third party to the discussion any longer. She interrupted her father, holding up her hand for permission to speak freely. At Bande's nod, she began. "Can't you see? I'm different. My *silveresk* hair and *nezarine* eyes mark me as Deliphit. Only three of us exist in Kel, and I'm one."

"This does not explain the prejudice toward you. Why does this difference set you apart from the others?"

Chelian shifted her gaze to the opposite wall, trying to collect her thoughts. She didn't want to verbalize all it meant to be Deliphit. It was complicated, and for some reason, she didn't like the idea of this man thinking poorly of her. For once, she wanted someone willing to connect with her on both a physical and emotional level. Fen Dane had been willing to touch her to save her from falling. No other would have dared.

In halting Fendabor, Bande elaborated. "She has a sickness within her. She has supernatural powers I'll not discuss. All you need know is that a Deliphit's touch carries a poison, an evil that has destroyed past civilizations. To my utter shame and mortification, my own daughter bears this mark."

Humiliation was second nature to Chelian, but to have her weakness exposed to this stranger caused a rare pain to rage through her veins. Her spine straightened, a gesture meant to indicate she didn't care what either man thought of her. She felt Fen Dane studying her but kept her gaze averted. Let him wonder. No doubt he too would now persecute her for being different.

"I do not fear her touch." Fen Dane's quiet words caused a shiver to run along her spine.

"Fear it or not," Bande said, "it's against the law to touch the woman while she resides within the House of Kel. For that matter, it's against the law for anyone to touch her while she resides within the Bastian Province."

Fen Dane stood and leaned his massive frame over Bande's desk. "Then would it be within my rights to touch her should she no longer live within such perimeters?"

Chelian balked at interpreting the words. She sensed an underlying danger to herself. Fen Dane turned his head her way and gave her a gentle smile. Mollified by his easy manner, she quietly put the question to her father.

"*Selt*," Bande replied. "But Chelian has never had cause to venture beyond these walls."

A dramatic pause had Chelian sitting on the edge of her seat. Fen Dane's finger reached out to stroke the crystal.

"A cargo-hold full of zeel crystal in exchange for twenty unmarried women of childbearing years. The transaction to be completed six *datons* from now."

Chelian froze. The words became difficult to form, but she managed to stumble through them.

Bande's ruddy complexion paled. "You barter in slaves?"

"Nay. I barter in mates. Each woman selected will be bound for life to a mate of superior breeding and intellect."

Her father's eyes narrowed, and he scratched his balding pate. "What of your own women? Can't you find mates within your own house?"

Fen Dane pushed the zeel crystal closer to Bande. Its numerous facets reflected beams of light, bringing Bande's attention once again to the promised wealth. Fen Dane shrugged. "My reasons remain my own. You need not concern yourself with details. The women will be well cared for. And you, Sire, will be wealthy beyond your wildest imagination."

Her father inhaled deeply, a harsh rattle in the quiet room. The crystal seemed to mesmerize him, and Bande's eyes gleamed. "*Selt*. I'll see it done."

"And Chelian?" The man persisted.

"What of her?"

She perched straighter in her chair. *Selt. What of me?*

"I would take her personally for my mate."

Chelian jumped to her feet. "*Nock!* I won't translate such a request for you."

Fen Dane gave her a gentle smile. "'Tis of no concern. I no longer need you to interpret my words."

Her brow wrinkled in dismay. She must have misunderstood. He turned his head toward her father and asked the question again in perfectly vocalized Fastian.

"Sire Kar, I humbly request your daughter for my mate."

Chelian's shocked gaze bore into Fen Dane's turned head. His attention remained trained on her father. She failed to consider the consequences of addressing the man directly.

"You had no need of me in the first place, Fen Dane. Why have you practiced such deceit?"

He turned his head slowly, and his eyes darkened with anger. "You risk much in calling me deceitful."

"Do you deny perpetuating our assumption you spoke only Fendabor?"

"Chelian," Bande said sternly, "you overstep your authority in taking this man to task. And I believe we've more serious things to discuss."

Chelian balked. Serious indeed, but as far as she was concerned, there needn't be any discussion. Surely Bande would decline the offer without further deliberation.

"He has no knowledge of our laws," she said, "or he wouldn't ask this question. Deliphits don't mate." Her temper surged forward, and she knew her outburst must sound childish.

"Chelian." Her father's eyes narrowed in warning. "You may be excused. I don't require your input into this matter."

"Father?"

"Go. Before you force me to assign retribution."

Her lips compressed into a flat line. She lifted her eyes toward Fen Dane, communicating silently her thoughts about the situation. She shouldn't have to suffer the indignation because Fen Dane had sparked her temper. With regal bearing, she turned and walked toward the door.

"Do you leave without bidding a proper parting?" The deep bass of Fen Dane's voice halted her.

He baited her!

Her head swiveled in his direction. "I can't give proper parting. Such would require us to touch, and since it's not allowed, I see no reason to intone the words."

"Don't be surly," Bande ordered. "Give the man his due."

She tried not to roll her eyes. "I bid you pleasant thoughts as you journey forth."

Fen Dane walked toward her, stopping just shy of the required five stones to incline his head. "And I bid you the same, fair maiden."

His gaze caressed her, touching her as no other had. She lowered her head. Without another word, she swept through the portal. The metal door shut with a resonating thud.

She lifted her head as she walked, a habit she practiced when no longer in the presence of others. Her heart raced with anger. How dare a stranger invade her sheltered world with nonsense of mating. Her feet pounded the *netrant* floor, matching her heart rate beat for beat. Was he truly a prince? He'd misled her once already, making her believe the only tongue he spoke was Fendabor. She shouldn't have been so gullible. She slowed her harried pace when she neared her suite. Fortunately, no one tarried in the halls. She wasn't in the mood to play the invisible Deliphit.

Alone in her rooms, she gave vent to the fury Fen Dane had invoked. A crystal figurine sailed through the air to fracture into a thousand shards. She stared at the mess she'd created. Her impetuous act did little to relieve her anxiety. She grabbed Bertil, crushing the *terrin* doll against her breast. With a soft cry, she plopped down upon her bed.

"How dare he!"

Bertil was the favorite of her *terrin* collection. Its placid features gave her comfort.

"If only you could talk, you could advise me what to do—what to make of this prince. He wants to mate with me." She set Bertil down and jumped up to pace. "He can't. It's forbidden. No man can ever have me. It's written in the *Bastian Book of Law*. A Deliphit may not mate. Otherwise, the weakness might be passed on to a resulting child. I wouldn't wish this affliction upon anyone."

She paused and turned her attention to Bertil once more.

"He almost touched me," she whispered. "I've not felt a human's touch since the change possessed me." She sank down upon the bed again, her confusion more pronounced in the aftermath of memory. "He wanted to touch me, Bertil. No one *wants* to touch a Deliphit. The thought won't leave my mind. I should be content with my life, pleased with all I have. What's wrong with me?"

She gazed into Bertil's vacant eyes. "*Selt*. I'm cursed. Invisible to my people, I yearn to belong, to feel

the touch of another. Touching? I dare not hope for such. No. It's not possible. The man can't be allowed to break the law."

She pictured Fen Dane's fingers as they poised a hair's width from her elbow. What would it have felt like? *Fen Dane*. An important sounding name for an arrogant man.

"Look at me, Bertil. I forget how he deceived me into thinking he didn't understand Fastian. The man isn't to be trusted. He must never have the opportunity to touch me. Of this I'm sure. Prince or no, he'll not have me for a mate."

A light rap sounded upon her door. She had no idea how long she'd sat curled on her bed with Bertil for company. Never could she remember being so idle. She opened the door and stepped back.

"Sire Kar wishes an audience." Kemios stood stiff and unyielding.

Chelian smiled. The young greeter took pride in his job, following the dictates of the law to the last letter. And therein lay the difficulty and confusion she'd experienced by Fen Dane's bold request. The law had been ingrained into her since birth, and though she entertained a secret desire for a different existence, she dared not go against the fabric of society.

"Does he still entertain his guest?"

"*Nock*. Fen Dane has been shown to his quarters."

The stiff set of her jaw relaxed. She had no wish to see Fen Dane again while her thoughts eddied in a quagmire of confusion.

"You may tell Bande Kar I will attend him shortly."

\* \* \* \*

Dane followed the servant down a long hall to a set of rooms. The ceiling rose high above him, giving the appearance of grandeur. Yet, by no means could he compare the home-unit of Kel with that of his own home.

The servant escorted him to his room and left him alone with instructions on how to reach the Hall of Welcome for the evening festivities. No one bothered to ask how he'd arrived or what baggage he could expect. They must have assumed he'd traveled by foot or by *hersia*, a beast of burden they'd tamed for travel. He chuckled. They had no idea just how far he'd traversed to accomplish his goal.

*Twenty females. A noble goal for me to undertake*. Added to the others he'd gathered from nearby provinces, he would journey home with ninety as prospective mates. The Verside would be well pleased. The group of men had waited a lifetime for the pleasure of female companionship. Exiled from their home, the Verside had carved a new life for themselves on a desolate planet, one devoid of women. And now, twenty *yons* later, Fen Dane would have his revenge on those who had thought to crush the Verside.

The power of the Burdven Empire had escalated since then, and he would need his wits to lead the fight against their tyranny. For this purpose, until now he'd claimed women only for his men and not for himself. The Verside needed to feel immortal, as if they fought for more than just revenge. They needed to leave Pelicosia secure in the hands of mates and children, a permanent tribute to their lives. 'Twas needful if he planned to lead an army of two hundred against an empire of thousands.

He collapsed upon the bed, weary from the day's events. His hand grazed the coverlet, an intricate weave of brilliant hues. *Nezarine* threads dominated the pattern, reminding him of a pair of eyes a similar

color, the shade of Selinian crystal moors on his own home planet.

*Chelian.*

The daughter of a noble, yet they treated her as an outcast. Her regal bearing despite her bent head intrigued him. Beneath layers of translucent fabric, her body promised to be a supple blending of gentle curves. A pert nose, high cheekbones, and a pair of exotically tilted eyes made her outshine the other women in beauty, but beauty alone hadn't swayed him from his need to remain unmated.

He stared at the ceiling and closed his eyes against bright lights that burned from an unknown power source. *Mintored* crystals offered subdued illumination for his people, something he'd taken for granted. Would Chelian be impressed with his home, with Pelicosia, or would she miss the opulence and strict protocol of the Bastian Province? Would she miss her father?

*Chelian.*

His blood stirred. Yea, he wanted her—needed her. He hadn't meant to take a mate, had purposely declined any propositions from the other women.

Until Chelian.

She alone had the power to claim his interest. His fingers still tingled with sensation, branded by the promise of sexual and spiritual fulfillment: *the spark of awareness*. The surge of electrical current flowed between couples destined to become one. No power proved greater in choosing a mate.

He could not dispel the craving he'd experienced from that one moment when the spark had arced between them. Even now, the blood pounded in his veins, and his mind filled with images of her beauty. With his attention snared by images of Chelian, not even Bastian law could prevent him from claiming her for his own.

\* \* \* \*

Chelian wiggled on the hard seat, her hands folded in her lap. That her father had summoned her to his suite boded ill. He rarely called upon her. She suspected he did so now to discuss her breach of conduct with the prince. Her actions today precipitated the beginning of many reactions, none of which were welcome.

"This is an abomination."

*"Selt."*

"You agree, yet it's you who have brought this on." Bande's jowls shook, and his voice rose. She knew he referred to Fen Dane's desire to take her for a mate.

"I couldn't ignore his summons, Sire. Had I not brought him to you, you wouldn't now be feasting your eyes upon such wealth."

He closed his eyes, and a calm settled over his features. He nodded. With a deep breath, he opened his eyes and smiled.

"True. For the possibility of trading with this stranger, I've decided to ignore protocol. He's asked that you attend his welcoming."

Chelian swallowed against the surge of apprehension this new announcement wrought. What Fen Dane had asked would be the most difficult, yet most exhilarating thing she'd done since her birth. Since her

budding, she'd watched from afar. Now, at long last, she was to be included.

"The Council of Twelve will be distressed by my presence."

"They'll adhere to my dictates since I'm ultimately the last voice in legal matters."

"They'll accuse you of favoritism because I'm your daughter."

His nostrils flared. "They dare not do it to my face."

"Selt, Sire. You're right, and I was out of line."

She sensed Bande's keen regard but dared not raise her eyes to his. She no longer cried over her affliction, long since having accepted her station in life, yet there remained a yearning, a deep desire to change things. How could she make others understand she posed no threat?

"This stranger," Bande said, "for all his promises, I sense danger. He's interested in you because you're different and for no other reason. Perhaps we can turn his interest to our advantage. It will soothe the Council of Twelve to attach a purpose for your presence at his welcoming."

Chelian's eyes flickered, and she studied the floor without really seeing it. Distressed, she began picking at the delicate threads of *mestik* that covered her body in iridescent layers. "You—you want me to spy for you?"

"Let's not call it spying. We will refer to it as ... guarding our interests. The Council of Twelve should be content if not wholly pleased with this purpose."

"It'll make Fen Dane most angry when he finds out. I don't care for this subterfuge."

"And I don't care for his purpose in wishing to trade. He must not know our laws else he wouldn't have presumed to request you for a mate."

"Your concern for me is most touching."

His palm hit the top of the desk, making her jump. Her sarcasm must have hit a nerve.

"You'll keep a civil tongue while addressing me. Do you forget I'm also your High Chancellor?"

"Nock. I forget nothing, Father."

"Perhaps you wish our laws to be different. Perhaps you wish to take Fen Dane to mate."

"I'm ever your dutiful daughter and will do what is required of me."

"Even if it means breaking our laws?"

"Would you ask me to break laws upheld by the High Chancellor just to satisfy the wishes of my father?"

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, causing the *lerrst* fabric of his pants to rustle. "I would ask you to follow both, child. Our laws do not allow you to mate with one from the province of Bastia. They are very specific as to such, but we've never had a request from outside our province. The laws don't address this type of situation. The Council of Twelve will have to make a ruling."

Her head snapped up. Her eyes made brief contact with her father's scheming façade before she averted her gaze. "You can't seriously consider his offer. I'm Deliphit."

She had never contemplated taking a mate. From the little she'd heard whispered here and there, she'd had no desire to participate in the mating ritual—until now.

A sudden vision of Fen Dane's arms wrapped around her body warmed her skin. He had no right to plant forbidden images within her mind. She shook off the visual, more determined than ever to see Fen Dane's request denied. Her father's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"I'm considering the zeel crystal and what it'll mean to our people."

Our people? Bitterness swept over her. *They have never embraced me before. Why should I sacrifice myself for them?*

She forced a calm she didn't feel. "The laws are quite specific."

"With regard to Bastian mates. Fen Dane hails from another province. One that doesn't appear to have the same concerns we do for Deliphit children."

Chelian's mind became a whirlwind of thought. Her father was considering the trade. *Nock*. Her father had already made up his mind. He planned to trade twenty mates for his precious zeel.

A Bastian woman had little say in her choice of mate. From birth to the peak of their budding stage, they knew what to expect from the mating ritual. Nobles gained alliances with other nobles, and the home-unit of Kel grew stronger. A Bastian woman prepared for such an event, basking in the knowledge that her sacrifices contributed to the overall good of the people. With twelve home-units comprising the province, a Bastian woman had twelve possible opportunities for solidifying relations.

Chelian had never had to worry with such traditions. Yet now she found herself trapped against her will. Trapped. The word described the scenario perfectly. It described her entire existence to date.

"You are seriously considering his offer?" Her hands twisted in her lap at the confusion her father's duplicity wrought.

"And why not?"

"He's not to be trusted."

"And how have you determined this after only one meeting?"

"He lied to us. He told us he couldn't speak Fastian."

"*Nock*. We only assumed such. However, I do believe he wanted us to believe he could only speak Fendabor so he would have a reason for enjoying your company longer. The man is cunning if nothing else."

"But, Father—"

Bande waved his hand. "You have leave to exit. Our discussion is concluded."

She rose slowly. What could she say to change his mind? And did she want him to change it? Fen Dane materialized in her own mind, beckoning her to take a chance. She balked at the sudden vision. He was too ... too *bratek*, too male. His virility, his authoritativeness threatened her peace of mind.

She reached for the door. From a nearby stand, the sweet smell of *bennetor* blooms overwhelmed her even as Bande's parting words stunned her.

"You'll dress in your finest for his welcoming."

She stared at her reflection in the polished metal door. What did the prince see in her that made him so bold? "As you wish, Father."

There could be no other answer. *Selt*. She would wear her finest with pride and dignity. A stirring of anticipation gathered in her chest. She'd been told her whole life she didn't belong. Did she dare allow herself hope? Could mating with Fen Dane be the answer to her most fervent desires? To be considered normal, to be treated with respect. She would have to overlook her misgivings of Fen Dane to achieve this goal.

Her heart recoiled. The man caused too many conflicting emotions to rage within her soul. She sent a silent prayer to Orius for deliverance from Fen Dane's attentions.

She took a chance at breaking the law and turned to stare at her father. He bent over the *Bastian Book of Law*, poring over each word with strict attention to details. The top of his bald head gleamed in the light. He no longer concerned himself with her presence. He lifted his eyes from the pages, and the zeal crystal arrested his attention, stealing his reason.

Would her father's greed cause him to manipulate Bastian law? Her father's smug features branded her thoughts with dread. He had made his decision and only the blessing from the Council of Twelve remained. Her heart sank.

She pushed the door wide but paused before stepping through. A thread of courage wove through her temperament, allowing her to voice her concerns. "*Selt*. I'll play the martyr for your greed, but remember well the warnings of our forefathers. A Deliphit's touch will bring ruin to the organized masses. As Fen Dane's mate, I will be required to indulge in a host of liberties. Will you and the Council of Twelve sleep well knowing such danger exists?"



## Two

"Surely, you're not going to consider this stranger's offer?" asked Vale Rave Siorci, one of the Council of Twelve.

"Look more closely at the zeel, Vale Rave." Bande pointed to the stone with an inviting flick of his wrist. "Have you ever seen a crystal of such rare clarity?"

They leaned forward. Clothing rustled. All eyes fell upon the zeel. Greed glittered upon their faces, and Bande smiled. He would have no difficulty swaying them to his thinking.

Bande leaned over the huddled group. "Lay your hands upon it and feel the energy radiating from its surface. Think what this could mean to our people. Bastians would no longer need to negotiate a treaty with the province of Braque."

"But to sell human flesh?"

"I too must offer my protest." Vale Darken Simone joined the discussion. "The laws must be upheld."

Bande shook his fist, his ire raised by their inability to think progressively. "I'm not asking you to break the law—there are always loopholes. I'm asking you to consider what it will mean for our people to be in control of that much zeel."

Murmurs rounded the table. For all their good intentions, they were still greedy men. Bande hid a grin behind a cough.

After a bit of discussion among his council, Vale Darken Sem sat forward, resting lean elbows on the table. "Have you a plan for bypassing the laws?"

Bande nodded, drawing out the moment of silence the men accorded him. With confident purpose, he presented his views. "Our laws are specific but worded to benefit those of us who make up the Council."

He flipped pages in a worn copy of the *Bastian Book of Law* until he came to the passage on the union of mates. "A mate shall be chosen for a Bastian woman by her father. Should her father no longer be available to offer this service, her father's heir shall assume this duty. Should there be no heir, the right of choice falls upon the High Chancellor. A mate must be at least of equal status as the woman in question."

He placed his hand upon the excerpt and looked up. "Nowhere does it say the mate has to be from the province of Bastia. Fen Dane assures me, the men in question are of noble birth and well able to care for our women."

"Let me see the book." Vale Rave held his hand aloft, his attitude more cautious than the rest. The others turned their eyes toward him, awaiting his opinion on the matter.

"Well?"

A puff of dust flew out as Vale Rave shut the book. "I concede your point, but we've never allowed our women to mate outside this province. It'll set a precedent. Are you willing to sacrifice our standards, our traditions for this promised wealth?"

"It's not my decision to make," Bande said. "The final verdict must come from the Council, from all of you."

Vale Teoulic Stam tapped the table, indicating his desire to speak. "If I may?"

"But of course. Another opinion would be welcome."

"I don't think we can afford to pass up the opportunity to acquire such an abundance of zeel. Our own mines are near depletion. We've had to import the necessary crystal from mines in Terrel. Our relations with the Terrelites remain shaky at best. Braque hoards the majority of zeel, but their province refuses to bargain with us. Fen Dane's offer comes at a time when we've about exhausted trade negotiations. Already, our warriors prepare for impending war. I would like to avoid bloodshed. I don't think we have any other option but to accept Fen Dane's proposal."

"What do we know of this man?" Vale Rave asked.

"We know he's very wealthy, and he claims to be a prince. Beyond that, we have no details." Bande really didn't think it mattered. The man had zeel, a commodity the Bastians needed. It seemed rather straightforward to him.

"We must know more," Vale Rave insisted. "I can't in good conscience give our fair maidens to men we know nothing about."

Murmurs of agreement met this statement.

Bande nodded. "I've already set one of our women to glean what information she can. Fen Dane has expressed a personal interest in the woman, which will make her task easier."

"Who?"

Bande stalled, not sure what kind of reception his revelation might receive. "Before I tell you whom Fen Dane wishes for mate, I would remind you of the wealth to be gained in keeping him happy."

"Tell us, Sire Bande. You've more than roused our interest."

"Also, remember Fen Dane does not make his home here and would remove his mate from this home-unit." Bande continued to hedge.

"You cannot mean..." Vale Teoulic appeared worried.

"*Selt*. Fen Dane requests my daughter Chelian for mate."

The room fell silent, each man clearly aghast at this news.

Vale Rave found his voice first. "I can bend the law only so far. This I will not approve."

"*Selt*. I agree with Vale Rave."

"I, too, must give my objections to this union."

"It's not possible."

Bande slammed his fist on the table to gain their attention again.

"Gentlemen, this verbal attack solves nothing. Fen Dane has made his wishes known. He holds the key to our continued peace within this province. Consider the good of our people."

"That's exactly what we're trying to consider here. You have a short memory if you're willing to let a

Deliphit mate—to couple and produce children. Do you forget the Rebellion of Farst?"

"The rebellion survives in our minds, not our hearts," Bande replied. "Our fathers were but children during the uprising. The pain our fathers' fathers suffered has been dulled by time. The affliction that caused a group of Deliphits to gain temporary control has been all but eradicated. Fen Dane will take Chelian far away. What harm can it cause?"

Vale Rave remained resolute. "If there's the slimmest chance any issue from such a union will produce another Deliphit child, we do a disservice by allowing them to mate. And as much as I would like to see her leave our home-unit where we can be assured she won't be a threat, I can't in good conscience send her to an unsuspecting province."

Bande narrowed his eyes. "You worry overmuch. Our laws have helped eradicate the Deliphit threat. Only three of these creatures still exist. If by chance the gene manifests itself once more through Chelian's children, we will be long dead and buried before there are enough Deliphits to pose a threat. Yet future generations will be fortified by the abundance of zeal Fen Dane brings to our coffers."

Vale Rave gaped. "I cannot believe you would overlook such dangers. No one can predict the future."

"Precisely my point. If we want the zeal, we must allow Fen Dane his preference in a mate. He seemed most adamant in his choice."

"He must have been taken in by her beauty. Perhaps her power had some strange hold upon him. Did she touch him?"

"*Nock*. I don't think so."

"We have yet to discover her full powers," Vale Rave said. "Whatever her hold over the man, I can't condone their mating."

"Then we'll see to it he finds another female equally attractive and suitable to his needs. I'll not lose this opportunity to gain so much wealth." Frustration made Bande's voice quiver.

One way or another, he meant to relieve Fen Dane of his horde of zeal.

\* \* \* \*

The Hall of Welcome beckoned travelers and dignitaries with its grandeur and opulence. Crystal doors twice the height of its patrons stood wide open. On either side of the entrance, the members of the Council of Twelve lined the path, positioned exactly three stones apart. Women sauntered between them, escorted by mates, brothers, or fathers.

Chelian gathered courage from the familiar surroundings. Though transformed by decoration and people bedecked in their finest, the hall often offered her sanctuary when empty. In awe, she absorbed the elegance that altered the room. Like a starving man allowed to sup, she feasted upon the array of lavish garments each citizen wore and trays heaped high with gourmet delights.

Leoden Mond, the official welcomer for the evening's festivities, sang out the announcement in the traditional manner.

"Presenting Tibdon Lisnarian, Keeper of the home-unit of Dresk, position ten on the Council of Twelve. On his right, his mate, Lena and his daughter, Deliah."

Chelian's father waited his turn. Unlike the couple before them, she must follow at the prescribed distance. Leoden stepped forward to announce their arrival, his voice raised a pitch higher to indicate

Bande's status.

"Presenting Sire Bande Kar, High Chancellor of the Province of Bastia, Keeper of the home-unit of Kel."

Chelian's skin grew warm. The caller of guests failed to announce her name. She knew it was more than a slight. For all intents and purposes, Chelian Lan Kar did not exist. She graced this world as an invisible walker.

She stepped into the line of greeting, five stone paces behind her father and kept her head downcast as dictated. None from the Council of Twelve lifted a hand to touch her as they'd done for her father. Her face burned with indignation, though she had expected no less. The Council offered no welcome for a Deliphit.

Several couples later, she heard the guest of honor announced. She risked lifting her head, craving another look at the man who dared subject her to his presence. Across the room, her eyes met his. His direct gaze unnerved her, and her skin prickled with heightened awareness. She stood in a corner—alone. A living statue for curious viewers. She waited, unsure what he expected of her.

"For what reason has the Deliphit been allowed admittance?"

Chelian heard Vale Tibdon query her father, mirroring her own concerns.

"Our esteemed guest requested her presence at his welcoming. I debated the proper course. However, given the nature of his visit and the importance of the item he would gift us with, I felt it prudent to give in to his demands. Fear not. Chelian has been instructed to just stand there. She'll cause no problem."

"See that she doesn't. I have no desire to see my own daughter exposed to one such as she. Deliah has a curiosity uncommon in most her age. I fear she'll try to approach Chelian with questions."

"Chelian is well aware of the law. Shall I set a guard to watch my own daughter?" Bande's voice quivered with anger.

"*Nock*, Sire Kar. I meant no offense by my observations. Instead, I will watch Deliah closely."

"No offense taken. Come, I'll introduce you to Fen Dane."

"He is a king's son then?"

"*Selt*. He wears the title of Fen, though he is vague concerning the whereabouts of his kingdom."

"I do not trust him."

"You have yet to meet him."

"*Selt*, but his manner of dress is enough to cause me unease. No one else here has come armed, yet he wears a scabbard strapped to his waist."

They walked away, and their voices faded out of range. Chelian followed them with her eyes. She too had misgivings about Fen Dane's presence.

"I find it curious how you are treated, *fiol'ston*."

She jumped. Fen Dane's voice startled her from her meditation. *Pretty one?* Had he called her pretty in Fendabor?

She kept her gaze respectfully downcast as she turned to address him. "You mustn't speak to me in such a public place. It's rude."

"Where I come from, 'tis rude to ignore the guest of honor. You will attend me this evening."

"I can't."

"But you will."

"Please, Fen Dane. What you ask is most unseemly. I'm already on display here for all to gawk at. To serve you when it's not allowed will bring more censure upon my head. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to witness such grandeur, but this is all I'm allowed to enjoy. Have pity." The silky feel of *darsk* fabric between agitated fingers gave her some measure of comfort. It was a nervous habit she'd had since her youth.

She dared a glance at his features. A deep frown marred his brow. Like a preying *verdick*, a poisonous insect stalking its victim, he began to circle her. She stood still, refusing to be baited by this man.

"I am still at a loss to understand this affliction you claim," he said. "I see skin the color of ripe *telman* fruit. Your eyes, when I am lucky enough to enjoy a glimpse, shine brighter than the moon of Meridar. Even your hair reminds me of spun *mestik*. I see ... perfection."

"My affliction isn't visible." Her voice stumbled over the words, her throat tight. No one had ever paid her tribute before. His praise embarrassed her.

"Nay. 'Tis apparently inside of you and enough to make most fear the very air you breathe. Pity. I do not fear you, *fiol'ston*. What I feel is better left for our mating."

Her eyes widened. She glared at the tips of his *truscan* boots. How dare he imply such a thing. Her heart hammered painfully within her breast. *Why does he torment me with forbidden images?*

"*Nock*. I'll never be selected for mate, and if by some miracle I am, it would not be to you, Fen Dane. You're far too bold."

"Aye. But bold is a desired quality where I come from." He inched nearer, standing half a stone closer than the recommended perimeter of distance. Hooded lids could not mask the heat radiating from his eyes.

Uncomfortable silence ensued. Her heart beat erratically within her chest. He leaned closer. A rich blending of musk and *feron* oil wafted from his skin. Her stomach fluttered. His boldness overwhelmed her, making her experience foreign sensations.

She took a step back, maintaining the five-stone length. Perhaps another subject would put her more at ease. "And ... and where is it you journey from? You've been most vague." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father approach.

"Ah, Fen Dane," Bande said. "There you are. Come, I would have you converse with the members of the Council. Each has been clamoring for an opportunity to question you."

Chelian wanted to stamp her foot. She would get no answers now. Fen Dane gave her a brief nod, acknowledging her thwarted attempt to pry information. Should she follow and eavesdrop? *Nock*. She dared not give the man the satisfaction of knowing how curious she was. Amid the room full of guests, she would maintain her secluded stance.

Lifting her head, she trailed Fen Dane's progress toward the other side of the room with her eyes. His body glided across the floor with confidence and grace. If anything, he appeared more striking this eve than he had upon their first meeting. Though she'd never entertained the idea of mating, she now found herself flooded with images in which she had no right to indulge.

She knew very little of the coupling process. While other maidens her age had been indoctrinated into the mysteries of the female's role in society, she'd been banished to her room. Yet she'd heard tales bandied about when they thought she couldn't hear. What little she did understand gave her just cause for worry. No matter how difficult her affliction, she'd strived to maintain a strong sense of self, and she now feared Fen Dane's boldness would possess her, strip her of her individuality. She knew not how to guard herself against his raw magnetism.

"He's a fine-looking specimen for a stranger," Deliah said, catching Chelian off guard.

"If you like dangerous men, perhaps. Does your father know you engage me in speech?"

"*Nock*. He would be sore unhappy if he did. It's a shame really."

"What?"

"That you're Deliphit. I hear tell he's requested twenty maidens to be selected for mates for his men. If it's true, I wouldn't mind volunteering. Especially if the men look anything like him. Too bad you can't be selected for mate. I saw how your eyes followed him."

"Do you have a point to make?" Chelian couldn't help the bitter note to her words. Deliah and her friends were always ridiculing her when they thought their fathers didn't watch.

"Just making a general observation. It must be times like these that present the most heartache for a Deliphit."

"I'm immune to your petty gibes, Deliah. And where are your partners in crime?" Deliah usually had Farahn and Neilorn along to lend support to her taunts.

"Making Fen Dane's acquaintance, I assume." She nodded toward the prince.

Chelian lifted her eyes enough to ascertain the truth of Deliah's statement. At Farahn and Neilorn's proximity to Fen Dane, a surge of emotion rushed forward, flaming her temper. She gritted her teeth. A torrent of words caught in her throat, and she swallowed the urge to scream. What had caused such a violent reaction? She knew the emotion—had dealt with its detrimental effects as she struggled with her affliction: jealousy. Confused, she pushed the emotion away. Fen Dane did not deserve such attention.

The crystal doors closed, signaling the arrival of the last guest. Leoden's voice sang out once more. "The tables are laden with delicacies. In honor of our guest, Fen Dane Charst, Sire Kar invites you to be seated."

"Ah, the mingling comes to an end." Deliah tilted her head. "I wonder where they plan to seat you. A Deliphit has never been invited to a welcoming before."

Indeed. Where *did* they plan to seat her? Surely they didn't expect her to stand in the corner for the duration of the evening.

"Chelian?"

Her eyes widened as she recognized Fen Dane's deep voice. "Fen Dane," she acknowledged.

"You will attend me this eve."

Deliah laid her hand upon Fen Dane's arm. "If you'll permit, I'll attend you." Her offer sounded like the purr of a *trex*.

"Nay," he replied. "I am honored by your offer, but 'tis Chelian who will have the honor."

"But she can't." Deliah patted his hand, her expression petulant. "She's not allowed to sup at the table with the others. I suspect that table in the corner was set up just for her."

"Then I will join her for a most private dinner."

Deliah continued as if Fen Dane hadn't spoken. "In fact, I'm not even supposed to be talking to her. If my father finds me here, he'll assign retribution for sure. Come, Fen Dane. Allow me to make you comfortable at the lead table with the other council members."

Fen Dane untangled his arm from Deliah's grasp. "'Tis my welcoming. Am I not allowed the right to choose?"

"Fen Dane." Bande approached the small group. "We await your presence to begin."

"Let them wait. There seems to be a misunderstanding I want cleared first."

"Misunderstanding? Is the choice of fare not to your liking?"

"Yea, but I would have Chelian attend me, and I have been informed 'tis not possible. 'Twas my understanding I would have the right to choose who serves me."

"*Selt*, but—"

"I'll hear none of your excuses. I would have Chelian attend me and no other. Come Chelian." Fen Dane nodded his head, indicating that she should follow.

She shot her father a sideways glance. His face deepened to a warm *vraed*, the color of *bennetor* blooms in the height of the wet seasons, but he nodded. He must know he had little choice. Fen Dane's audacity demanded Bande's acceptance of his request.

Chelian followed Fen Dane to the corner where he surprised her further. Lifting the lone table from its position, he carried it to the lead table. After eyeballing the appropriate distance, he set it down at the end, then he went back for the chair. Now she could sit closer to the other guests without compromising any laws.

"There," he said. "The table is long enough I can sit at one end and still maintain the proper distance from you, yet you are close enough to serve me."

She stared at the table. A hush had descended upon the room at Fen Dane's daring maneuver. All waited expectantly for Sire Kar to take him to task. They waited in vain.

"Attention! Attention if you please." Sire Kar tapped the table with a spearing fork. "Fen Dane has graced Kel with his presence. In accordance with the customary terms of welcome, he has stated his request. As Keeper of Kel and High Chancellor of Bastia, I grant to Fen Dane the company of my daughter Chelian for the duration of his welcoming."

The gathered crowd broke the silence with murmurings of protest.

"He can't do that."

"*Nock*. The Deliphit is given far too much freedom this eve."

"She'll bring doom upon our heads."

"Silence!" Fen Dane's voice thundered across the room. "I care not for your petty fears. 'Tis my understanding that a visitor is allowed one request from his host aside from the customary courtesies. I would have Chelian attend me this eve, and your High Chancellor has approved my request."

Bande nodded. "In keeping with proper etiquette, I give Chelian leave to lift her head. In this manner, she can better serve our guest."

She stared at the table, the floor, his boots. She did not feel inclined to lift her head as directed, such was the extent of her anger. How dare they bring her here to make a public spectacle of her.

"Leoden, you may begin serving." Sire Kar gave the signal for the guests to be seated.

"Sit, Chelian," Fen Dane said. "Your anger toward me is misplaced."

Her head snapped up, and she met his eyes straight on. "Misplaced? I don't think so. I think I have every right to display my irritation with you. Have you any idea what you've done this eve?"

"Made right a wrong that should have been corrected on the eve of your birth. No man—no government—has the right to make another feel inferior."

Stunned, her mouth gaped open. "I don't sup in public."

"You do now."

She looked around and realized that by standing, she created more of a spectacle for herself. She quickly sat. As soon as she'd taken her seat, Fen Dane sat also.

With her hands resting in her lap, she stole another glance at the lead table. Without the social training others her age had received, she felt at a loss. Around her, the women speared succulent pieces of roasted *truscal* and held it aloft for the men. Chelian frowned.

As if reading her mind, Fen Dane's voice captured her attention. "Your father has given you leave to act as if you are not Deliphit. And even so, in performing the simple courtesies of dining, you will not need to touch me."

Following the others' example, she picked up the fork and stabbed a piece of meat. What if it slipped from the fork halfway to his mouth? Or worse, what if she stabbed the prince by accident? Nervous, she lifted the fork toward him.

Concentrating on the meat and his waiting mouth, she didn't notice the way his eyes twinkled until she had almost completed the task. He opened his mouth slowly. The tip of his tongue lingered on his bottom teeth and lip. Straight white teeth sank into the tender morsel. With prolonged ease, he pulled the meat from the skewer. Nerve endings along her spine came alive with a puzzling sensation. She stared at the sensual movement of his lips. The simple act of eating had suddenly become much more.

She lifted her gaze from his mouth and met his eyes. They blazed with keen intent, as if she were the tasty morsel he devoured this eve. She swallowed. He'd only taken one bite. The entire evening yet loomed before her, yet already his actions mesmerized her, beckoned her to ... to what? She had no



understanding of her own feelings.

She forced her thoughts from the path they traversed. He stabbed a piece of *truscal* and held it aloft for her. She opened her mouth to receive the bite.

"Is this the first time you've dined in public?"

"*Selt*. It is the first time since my budding. The affliction does not manifest itself until then."

He nodded. "And this affliction? I would hear more."

She hesitated then shrugged. Perhaps in giving him some idea of the powers that she possessed, he would understand the need for restraint.

"Once I touch a person, I am able to glean that person's thoughts."

"You can read a person's mind?"

"It's more complicated than that and hard to explain. I can feel that person's emotions, seek his secrets." She didn't want to tell him the rest. She picked up the spearing fork he'd laid down and proceeded to take her turn at feeding him.

He smiled, transforming his harsh features. Far too handsome, Fen Dane made her highly uncomfortable.

"A challenge then," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"I must find a way to touch you without divulging my many secrets." *I must please you without losing my soul.*

The fork dropped from her fingers and clattered upon the table. Had he spoken that last part? What trickery caused her to hear the voice so clearly in her mind?

"You seem troubled." His head tilted to one side.

She shook her head, not wanting him to know her full distress. Perhaps her own powers were more developed than anyone knew. Could she now read minds without touching? She blinked to clear her thoughts and refocused them upon Fen Dane.

"I'm but overwhelmed by all that has occurred since greeting you at the door."

*I, too, am overwhelmed. You have captivated me with your beauty, Chelian.*

Her eyes snapped to his, but his features remained bland. Did he suspect her of gleaning his thoughts? She hadn't meant to. She hadn't even known she could.

"You need not feel burdened by my presence here, Chelian. Mayhap you will accompany me on a walk. I would see Kel through your eyes."

"I don't think that would be wise or prudent."

"Yea, mayhap you are right, but you will do so nonetheless. The alternative would be to remain here, a subject of silent ridicule. I have no liking for the many eyes that bear down upon us in hostility. 'Twas not my intent to cause you discomfort with my request." *You are intrigued by me, fascinated by my*

*interest in you. You will accept my challenge if for no other reason than to spurn Bastian law.*

"*Selt*. I do accept your challenge." Her hand flew to her mouth. She had answered his silent words and not his spoken ones. Did he realize?

He didn't seem to notice her slip. He turned to his right and addressed her father. "Do I have permission to escort your daughter from this room?"

"You see the folly in having her here?" Bande asked.

"Aye."

"By all means. Take her away, but you'll return presently. There'll be dancing. The Council hopes you'll be as taken with another as you seem to be with Chelian."

Fen Dane's eyes smoldered with promise. They roamed over her body, drinking in every facet of her being. She shivered. Desire flared within his *ebonharde* eyes.

"Then they hope in vain."

### Three

Chelian trailed behind Fen Dane, her back stiff, her head raised. Whispers echoed throughout the crowded space while eyes full of censure followed her progress through the room. She had looked forward to attending a welcoming for the first time, only to discover just how much of a pariah she had become. Fen Dane's desire to usher her from the gathering came as a pleasant gesture.

He led her to the outer courtyard. Once the crystal doors closed behind them, she lowered her gaze, ever mindful of decorum.

"Nay." Anger laced his voice.

"Beg pardon?"

"You will not lower your gaze for me. In private, you will lift your eyes to meet mine. I'll not have you cower in my presence."

She welcomed the opportunity to look him straight in the eye, but she didn't care for his imposing tone. "I do *not* cower. I but follow the dictates of the Council. Your rights to command me are limited here, Fen Dane. Although I recognize your status as a prince, your authority is confined to only those rights granted any visitor of Kel."

"You would rather stare at the floor?"

"*Nock*. I would rather be a full Kelton with equities and privileges. Unfortunately, I can't change who or what I am."

*And I do not wish you to change. You are perfect as you are.*

Chelian's eyes bulged. Surely she had dreamed his words of praise. She tried to fathom his true emotion, but he had a way of schooling his features. She turned away, and they continued in silence.

She led him along a path that meandered through colorful gardens and eventually opened into a clearing. She paused and tilted her head toward the skies. The rich display of stars nestled against an *aultid* sky gave her peace. She had brought this man to her favorite spot. *Why?* Why Fen Dane when he made her uncomfortable with his dynamic bearing?

She knew the answer. He had taken an interest in her as a person of equality. His attention frightened her. It pleased her. It confused her. She'd never felt such an array of emotions before. What should they talk about?

She cleared her throat. "I come here often to just stare out at the sky and silently worship Orius, God of Creation."

"Do you believe it possible that other life exists beyond this planet?"

Chelian laughed. "That seems to be a popular topic of late among scholars. I have yet to form an opinion. The *Book of Orius* refers to a great world from whence all creation sprang. Most interpret this to mean a holy place, a mythical land where gods chose the first beings to inhabit Satobik. Others argue there exists somewhere beyond our reach a mother planet. They say travelers crossed the universe to land here and colonize Satobik. What do you believe?"

He inched closer. She inhaled his male scent, enjoying the rich, spicy aroma. She allowed his proximity,

wondering how far he dared enter her perimeter of seclusion.

A gentle smile made the corners of his eyes crinkle. "Your world, Satobik, is but a small planet in a sea of many that sustains life. The mother planet is called Mezitane. A half *centon* ago, the technology on Mezitane advanced while resources dwindled. Soon it became necessary to seek other worlds, other resources. They sent convoys with explorers and settlers. Many planets can attribute their origins to these voyages."

She stared at him aghast. Did he believe this farfetched idea?

"Are you a historian? A scientist? From what information do you base these theories?"

"Do you doubt my word?"

She blinked. He seemed to take offense easily. He took another step into her perimeter. She stiffened, uneasy with his proximity. "*Nock*. I don't doubt your belief in all you've said, but you can't expect me to believe without tangible proof."

"Well said." He turned his attention back to the sky. "Another topic then. I would know more about you."

She frowned. Hadn't her father wanted her to find out more about him? Perhaps in discussing herself, she could earn his trust, and he in turn would be more willing to talk about himself.

"What do you wish to know?"

"Secluded from the others as you are, what keeps you entertained during the day?"

"I'm the keeper of the library. I also keep the accounts for my father."

"Have you read all the books in your library?"

She smiled. "*Selt*. I have many friends hidden between the numerous pages."

"Your only friends?"

She nodded. He had a way of emphasizing the pitfalls of her affliction.

"Loneliness is not a welcome state." He declared it as a statement of fact, as if he had prior knowledge of the emotion.

Her smile faded. "*Nock*, it isn't."

*You would not be lonely as my mate.*

"Please," she said. "Don't ... don't come any closer. You've already overstepped what would be considered appropriate distance."

He took another step, then another. Only one stone's length kept them from touching. She should pull away, correct his slight, but his eyes kept her hypnotized. His nearness caused her heart to accelerate at an alarming speed. The air between them sizzled with vibrations she didn't understand.

"Do you fear me, Chelian?"

Her breath caught. Fear him? Not him, but what he made her feel. "*Nock*. You—you should fear me."

He leaned closer. "Mmm ... Deliphit. Shall we test your powers, *fiol'ston*?"

Agitated, she took a step away from his charismatic presence. "Why do you not fear me?"

He too took a step back. "My apologies. I did not mean to push so hard. 'Twould not serve my purpose to alienate you."

"And what is your purpose?"

His arm swept wide. "To free you from this ghastly existence."

"Do you presume to pass judgment on the people of Bastian? On me?"

"You would defend what they do to you? How they treat you?"

How could she answer such a painful question? With a lift of her chin, she chose to ignore his query. He had no right to assume they mistreated her. No right at all.

Her gaze swept the dark skies, her eyes resting on a distant star. "You remind me of Vexalt."

"The Dragonslayer?"

"Myth has it Vexalt slew a mighty dragon to save his lady love, but not before the dragon sliced his chest with a sharp talon. Poison seeped through his veins, making him weak. The dragon snatched him in strong claws and flew him to the distant sky. Thinking Vexalt too weak to finish the fight, the dragon threw back his head and laughed. With one last surge of strength, Vexalt drove his dagger into the dragon's heart. Do you see that bright star? That star marks the tip of Vexalt's sword."

"Pelicosia."

"Is that what you call the star?" she asked.

"Yea."

"A historian *and* an astrologer. What other skills can you claim?"

His lips quirked into a half grin. *I could make your blood heat with passion. I could make your thighs tingle with need.*

"I could give you a new life."

Chelian wanted to run. She'd unknowingly tapped into his most intimate thoughts. There existed a connection between herself and this man that defied all she'd been told of her ailment. She swallowed, her throat painfully tight. If she could read his thoughts without his touch, what kind of reaction would she have should they ever couple?

She tilted her head skyward. A swift prayer to Orius floated from her parted lips. This man—this stranger—could never be allowed to take her for mate. The resulting union would prove disastrous for them both.

"I'm content to stay here," she said. "I've no wish to become anyone's mate. You wish for something that can't be. You should set your sights upon another."

"Content but not happy. I can feel the sadness in your heart."

"It isn't your concern, Fen Dane. You are a stranger to me."

"Mayhap, but five *datons* hence, you will accompany me to a new future. I will no longer be a stranger, but your mate. Of this I am confident." *You will be mine.*

Again, Chelian wanted to run, run so hard that her legs cramped, yet his eyes kept her snared like a netted *telsi*-fly.

"I want to touch you," he murmured, but made no move to fulfill his wish. "I want to stroke the velvet skin along your neck, your cheek. I want to feel you melt into my hand. I have not felt desire for any other creature. You will be mine."

"Nock."

The gentle curve of his lips said he knew differently. He turned then and strolled back to his welcoming, to the social glamour denied to her since her budding. She didn't know how long she remained alone with only the stars for company.

He exuded such confidence. It was hard to deny the possibility of becoming his mate. Her blood heated with temptation. To touch, to feel, to be treated as if she were normal. The promise in his eyes had overwhelmed her.

She gazed hard at the sky. The tip of Vexalt's sword gleamed brighter. The dragon prowled again. She shivered, fearful she might be its next victim. For surely, Fen Dane's touch would scorch her delicate skin with heat to rival the worst dragon, and his desire would consume her until she was naught but ashes.

\* \* \* \*

Vale Rave placed the last voting disk in the wheel. Beside it, in the center of the large circular table, the zeel crystal gleamed bright. Fen Dane rested his elbows on the table while Bande put his hand upon the spinner and rotated it counterclockwise in a quick motion. The large wheel spun at a feverish speed until finally the wheel slowed. The force of motion caused the covering over each disk to open, revealing thirteen votes.

Bande slapped his hand over the wheel, making it come to a complete stop. "Twelve for and one against. The motion passes. Fen Dane will have his women, and Chelian will become his mate."

A great roar of discussion followed the result. Vale Tibdon shoved his chair from the table and stood.

"I won't be a party to this. All of you are guilty of misinterpreting the law. Chelian should not be offered to this man for any amount of zeel."

"The vote has been cast. You must accept the decision." Sire Kar turned accusing eyes toward Vale Tibdon.

"*Selt*. I'll accept it because I have no choice, but I won't do so graciously."

"Your protest is so noted. Now sit so we may continue to work out the details."

Fen Dane waited while the men settled themselves. He marveled at the antiquated methods they used to solve a problem. Well-pleased with the outcome, he sat back. Chelian would be distressed with the news. He found the notion strange. How could she not welcome the opportunity to be free? He unnerved her. 'Twas there in her eyes for all to see.

He should have left well enough alone, but the spark changed things. He'd come to Satobik on behalf of

his men. He hadn't expected to make an offer for his own mate.

"Fen Dane," Bande said, "I formally accept your terms of trade on behalf of the Council of Twelve from the Province of Bastia."

Fen Dane inclined his head toward Sire Kar. "'Tis done then."

"When will you expect to choose the twenty females?"

"I wish to leave for my home four *datons* from now."

Vale Rave pounded the table with his fist. "*Nock*. It's not enough time. The females must have a chance to volunteer on their own, and their guardians must approve the matches. This entire affair is unorthodox. I can't think of anyone who'd agree to such a plan on such short notice."

"He has a point." Bande fingered one of the voting disks.

"Five *datons* then," Fen Dane said. "I care not what status the women possess. I would be well-pleased with daughters of nobles but will graciously accept females of less prestigious bloodlines. I am under a time constraint and must depart at the end of the given deadline."

"He's mad!" Vale Tibdon hissed. "Had I known his tastes weren't discriminatory, I would've cast my vote differently. No prince would ever select females of questionable breeding."

"I agree." Vale Rave's chair screeched as he pushed away from the table. "Given this so-called time constraint, he might as well select from our slaves, which just isn't acceptable."

Dane bristled at Vale Rave's casual dismissal of slave stock as a possible group to choose from. The Verside had been exiled for their fight against slavery. A sense of injustice made Dane more determined to conclude his business with the Bastians.

Vale Darken added his thoughts. "I, too, am leery of your motives now. I would add another stipulation to our trade agreement."

Dane clenched his teeth but gave no outward indication of his displeasure. He would hear the man before voicing any objections.

"I suggest that Fen Dane bring his men here to meet their prospective mates. I propose we host the mating ceremony in the Hall of Welcome to insure the welfare of these females."

Dane continued to keep his face free from expression, but inwardly he groaned. Thoughts of Chelian had kept him from concentrating on the matter at hand. Already she interfered with his goal. Guilt, desire, and duty fought within his conscious mind. He pushed his desire for Chelian far back into the darker regions of his thoughts and focused on duty. Obligation gave him reason to obtain mates for his men, yet guilt drove him to use drastic measures.

He gazed around the room and met the disgruntled eyes of the Bastian Council. He should never have mentioned his willingness to accept women of lesser breeding. These proud people had taken offense at his offer. Redirecting all his energy, he tried to weather these new obstacles.

"Gentlemen, please. I apologize if my impatience has weakened your judgment of me. My offer is an honest one. My only shortcoming is time. My father lies on his death bed, and I fear I must return to my home posthaste."

"Still, we have no assurances except your word—"

Dane held up his hand and slowly allowed it to pass in front of each man. He closed his eyes, focusing every ounce of telepathic energy on one outcome. *You will give to me your complete trust. All I have said this day will come to pass as I have wished it.*

He opened his eyes. Each man present had relaxed their tight expressions, their eyes riveted to the center of the table. The zeel crystal shimmered with vibrant color.

Sire Kar cleared his throat. "I see no reason why we can't accommodate the prince."

Vale Rave pursed his lips and wrinkled his brow. "Fine. We'll have twenty women ready to depart at the given time."

Dane smiled. All would work out to his benefit. "Tomorrow, I will accompany two of you about the province in search of potential mates. Will this be acceptable?"

"I don't see how anyone will allow their daughters to mate with strangers they've never met before. It makes no sense." Vale Tibdon said.

Dane stared at the man who seemed to be less susceptible to his telepathic suggestions. "Perhaps you will be one of the regents to accompany us on our quest."

"*Nock*. I'll have nothing to do with this farce." Vale Tibdon stood and slammed a fist on the table. "I can't believe the rest of you are falling for this man's charm."

Sire Kar leaned forward. "You haven't been excused, Vale Tibdon. I don't give you leave to depart."

Vale Tibdon's nose flared, anger evident in the pinched skin about his lips. "Beg pardon, Sire. I meant no offense. Have I your permission to exit?"

Sire Kar threw up his hands in defeat. "Go. I bid you pleasant thoughts as you journey forth."

"I bid you the same." Vale Tibdon turned on his heel and marched toward the closed doors. He pulled them open and looked over his shoulder. "Beware. The allure of zeel will blind you to truth."

The doors closed with a resounding click. Dane smiled. Vale Tibdon's wisdom fell upon deaf ears.

Vale Rave claimed everyone's attention once Tibdon had left. "We've yet to discuss the other."

Sire Kar nodded. "My daughter."

The room fell silent. Dane tried not to flinch at the unspoken antagonism directed toward him. Several objections flooded his thoughts with painful chaos. *She's Deliphit. She'll bring ruin upon our heads. She'll continue the genetic strand we've tried so hard to eradicate. It's against our law. We can't allow the union.*

Dane rubbed his temple. Their combined aversion to his choice of mate made it difficult for him to concentrate. He focused on Bande. He must pick one man at a time to control with his thoughts, or his purpose for coming here would be for naught.

Bande held up the zeel. "I thought we were all in agreement. The benefits of our arrangement with Fen Dane far outweigh the potential dangers. To give Chelian to Fen Dane does not compromise our laws."

Dane pivoted his thoughts toward Vale Rave. The man faltered then said, "I must agree. We need the



zeel. Fen Dane has already told us he will take Chelian far away where we'll not see her again."

Vale Darken Sem leaned back. "Perhaps we might be able to persuade Fen Dane to take our other two Deliphits as well. In this way, we rid ourselves of the threat they all pose to our society."

Dane blinked. He hadn't expected this. Why hadn't he seen this thought coming? "If that is your wish. I would gladly accept your other two Deliphits in trade."

He could reply in no other way, yet the complications this would pose to his mission might prove burdensome. Already he risked the Elder's wrath by bringing home a woman with Chelian's talents. Telepathy among women was not a desired trait. Three such women with this gift might cause chaos among his men.

"Agreed." Bande's jubilant reply was in stark contrast to the seriousness of their discussion.

The eleven remaining members lifted their fists high into the air. In turn, each man gave his pledge of agreement. Twenty maidens would be handed over to Fen Dane's men in exchange for five *turondants* of zeel.

Dane knew he should be elated. He'd accomplished what he'd set out to do—except for one small detail: Chelian. He should not have allowed his emotions to rule his decisions. Would his men understand? They would have to understand—nay, he would make them understand. Their people would be stronger in the end for accepting a woman with Chelian's abilities to live among them. Stronger and more apt to follow his lead when the time came to reclaim his nobility on Mioisiad.

## Four

They gathered full mass in the courtyard just below her window.

Chelian wiped the sleep from her eyes and gazed at the activity below. She'd slept through the first moon rising, weary from worrying over the outcome of Bande's decision. Nothing she said could sway him from following Fen Dane's wishes. She sighed, her heavy breath visible upon the cooled air. It was as if Fen Dane had some magical hold upon her father.

With the second moon's rising, a noise unlike any she'd ever heard had startled her from her troubled sleep. The sun rode high in the sky while the two moons crested the hills beyond. The *daton* had arrived and, with it, Fen Dane and his men.

She gazed upon the scene below in wonder. Twenty warriors inside metal-like contraptions hovered just above the ground. Her eyes widened. The strange vehicles floated on a cushion of air, suspended by forces she failed to understand. One by one, the crafts descended to the *felmar*-covered ground, the early growth springing to attention with the external stimulus. The noise quieted until each vehicle became silent and at rest.

The warriors crawled out of their conveyances. To one side, fifteen women huddled, their expressions pinched and drawn. Chelian's gaze settled on the woman with coloring similar to her own. Her heart raced, unable to comprehend what took place in the courtyard. *Deliphit*. They had chosen another like her. She'd heard there were two more, but they'd never been allowed to meet. Her eyes fell upon a child who stood trembling. Also *Deliphit*, but not yet past her budding period.

They would mate a child? Surely not. She whirled from the window and dressed with all haste. She must discover the truth for herself.

The soles of her slippers beat out a steady rhythm as she hurried down the hall and into the courtyard. She skidded to a halt before she found herself too close to any one person. Ever conscious of her status, she made her way to a secluded area. She tilted her head forward with chin tucked in as was customary for her position. She strained her eyes, trying to view the proceedings without lifting her head.

Fen Dane stood in front of his assembled men, a commanding presence in his military uniform. The rich *ferlai* color contrasted nicely with his dark skin tones. Pants a shade lighter than his tunic hugged muscular thighs. His cape bore the evidence of many accomplishments, the collective adornments glistening in the sunlight. The men standing at attention wore similar garb. Their obvious show of respect spoke well for the man who would be forced upon her.

Fen Dane's words were strange, unlike any she'd heard before. What language did he communicate with? His men answered in a similar dialect. She strained her mind, reaching out to read his thoughts. Silence. How was it she could glean his thoughts one day but not the next?

She studied the sea of impassive faces. How did his men feel about mating with complete strangers, women not of their own home-units? For that matter, Fen Dane and his men came from another province entirely. What tragedy had befallen their own women that they would have to travel afar to seek out strangers?

The group of females stood silent. Chelian scanned the faces. She knew only five. Her eyes settled on the other two *Deliphits* who stood on the patio, secluded from the melee. The woman appeared close to Chelian's age. Her downcast eyes stared at the symmetrical pattern made by the placement of *netrant*. Her demeanor appeared more meek than Chelian's.

As for the child, she appeared curious yet cautious. This must all be so new. It was difficult enough dealing with the consequences of being born Deliphit. The child wasn't just an outcast among people she knew. She had now become an outcast among strangers. Why the young girl appeared here among those chosen for mate remained a mystery. Chelian eased in their direction for a closer look.

"Do you come to see the other men available for mate?"

She whirled around at the casual question. Fen Dane had approached unawares. She should have been able to sense his presence. Her gaze lowered out of habit.

"I am overwhelmed by all of this, as well you know."

"Tell me how I can put your mind at ease, Chelian. I will not allow your fear."

*Not allow my fear?*

The man displayed a lot of arrogance to imagine she feared him. *Selt*, she had misgivings, but they had nothing to do with fear. She plucked at the *darsk* fabric pleated at her waist. From under her lashes, she peered at the strange conveyances.

"Tell me from whence you came. I've never seen such wonders like those that brought your men here."

"I come from across the Dragon Craters, miles beyond your comprehension."

Her fingers curled tight. Deciding none watched her, she lifted her head to glare at him. "You think I'm not capable of understanding your culture? Your technological advances?" She pointed a shaky finger toward his chest, careful to keep her distance, though she longed to throttle the self-assuredness from his face. "You think me a provincial, a simple girl with little education? I'm the keeper of our library and well-read. I take offense at your assumptions to the contrary."

"I meant no disrespect."

"Then tell me true. From whence do you come?"

He smiled, a condescending expression meant to pacify her. "I come from the tip of the Dragon's sword."

"You mock me!"

His eyes narrowed. "'Tis you who mock me. I tell you true." He smiled again. "Come, you can help with the selection process. I must match these sixteen men with those females. The women cluster, fearful of their fate. I need a mediator to make it easier on them."

"*Nock*. I don't care if your task is made easier. Especially when you continue to evade my question."

"Surly behavior is unbecoming. Sooner or later, you will have to answer only to me. Do you not see the folly in soliciting my anger early on?"

"Have I angered you enough that you will free me from this obligation?"

He laughed, the sound rich and full. Heads snapped toward the sound in surprise. She immediately lowered her head. Was his laughter so rare that his men should be startled by it?

"Nay, *fiol'ston*. 'Tis your fate to be mated to me. I would have no other." He shifted his weight between booted feet. "I find your attempts to dissuade me from my purpose amusing."

She fumed. *You will be most sorry you forced this union.*

*Nay. I consider myself fortunate to have found you.*

Her eyes widened. Did he have to be near for her to read his thoughts? This newly discovered skill alarmed her. She wanted nothing more to do with this man. His very presence threatened her sense of being. All she knew to be true would change. If she thought running away would help, she'd leave tonight, but running would only complicate things further. There would be no sanctuary for a Deliphit.

The heat of his gaze scorched her with heightened awareness. *With me, you will find more than sanctuary.*

She took a step back then another. Had she inadvertently sent him her thoughts? Must she be forever on guard with this man? She needed to leave.

"I—I bid you pleasant thoughts."

"I wish for you to stay," he said. "I really do have need of your assistance with the females."

"How so?"

"Talk to them. Calm their fears."

"They fear a Deliphit more. I doubt I would be of any help."

"And now they will have three of you to contend with. Best make your peace with the other women. You will be coexisting in a very small space for part of the journey. Once we depart your borders, we will no longer be under Bastian jurisdiction."

The *felmar*-covered ground made *augrid* by the coming seasonal change caught her eye. What exactly would that mean for her? Would she be treated with the same deference as the rest of the populace? She hadn't considered this facet of the arrangement. Freedom to be herself? But at what cost? She thought of the other females. Their mistrust lay grounded in years of conditioning. They would not easily set aside their prejudice toward her.

*Talk to them. Ease their fears.*

But how?

Fen Dane must have decided their discussion had ended. He expected her to follow through on his suggestion without having to prod her into doing so. He walked back toward his men and began giving instruction again in a foreign tongue.

Left with little choice, Chelian walked toward the other females. She could at least stand to one side and glean their concerns. Whether she could allay them remained unknown.

\* \* \* \*

"I know you are disappointed to have found only seventeen women and one child, but I think you did well for such a short period of time, Fen Dane. The men seem most excited about the choices available to them."

Dane turned to his second-in-command. Del Geod had been his friend and confidant since they had been marooned together on Pelicosia. Now, Geod was his most trusted warrior. Dane led his friend away from the gathered warriors, out of earshot.

"The men will not be choosing."

"Explain."

"You and I will choose for them. We can ill afford the time spent allowing them to know the women beforehand. The Bastian High Chancellor wishes to conduct the ceremony of bonding before we depart."

"*Cruent!*" The expletive exploded from Geod's mouth, summing up Dane's own frustration with this part of the agreement. "The men will not be pleased by this."

"Likely not, but we have no other options." Dane paused, trying to find words to tell him the rest. "Geod, I have already chosen your mate."

Geod's hand tightened into a fist. Eyebrows knotted together in a fierce frown. "Nay. Say you have not. Of all your warriors, I should have the right to choose for myself."

He tried not to flinch. Geod's anger was understandable. "The lady I have chosen is special."

"I care not if she has wings and can fly. Must you always be in control? Did you not learn anything from your brother's death?"

Dane winced at the cruelty of Geod's reminder. He knew all too well the folly in stealing a man's choice, yet this wasn't anything remotely like the other. He'd never heard of anyone dying from bedding a woman.

"Back off, Geod. My decision stands."

Geod shoved hard at Dane's chest. "'Tis unthinkable what you would have me do."

Dane's own anger flared, and his hand shot out, connecting with Geod's hard chest. Geod staggered. They faced each other like two *abion torks* bent on proving one stronger than the other.

"Have a care, Geod. I care not for the way you abuse our friendship. I am still your superior."

"And you take your status too far when you order me in this manner."

*Cease this whining! 'Tis unbecoming a warrior of Pelicosia.*

The telepathic message only served to make Geod's expression more sour.

Dane sighed, impatient with Geod's attitude. "You must set an example for the men to follow. You will accept my choice without comment. This I command as your prince. The success of our mission depends upon the cooperation of the Verside." Guilt made his demand more harsh than he'd intended. But, by the holy sword of the Dragonslayer, he was prince. In this he would be obeyed.

Geod's nostrils flared. "By your lead, Fen Dane."

"Yea, Del Geod. By my lead. When you meet your mate, you will understand better my reasons for selecting her for you. Come, 'tis time to make her acquaintance."

He turned his back toward Geod, expecting him to follow. He walked past Chelian, ignoring her as he made his way toward the other Deliphit. Sire Kar stopped him before he could reach his destination.

"Fen Dane, I want an explanation!"

"Sire." Dane acknowledged him with a brief nod of his head. "What has excited you?"

Sire Kar shaded his eyes against the glint of light reflected off the row of vehicles. "These metal contraptions. You will explain to me how they work. They've caused quite a disturbance among my people."

Indeed, the courtyard had filled with men and women not associated with their agreement. He'd never thought a simple *skazer* would attract so much attention. He should have known better, yet the Bastian architecture had led him to believe these people were more advanced with their technology. He'd obviously been wrong.

He ambled closer to one of the *skazers* and laid his hand upon its sleek surface. "They are but simple pieces of equipment used to transport a person across long distances."

Sire Kar placed his bejeweled hand upon his rounding stomach and rocked back on his heels. "Ah! Now I understand how you were able to cross the Dragon Craters. You didn't have to worry about the hot geysers of steam that tend to catch people unawares. Those geysers have served us well as a natural boundary against our enemies. You must let my engineers look at one before you leave."

"I doubt there will be time."

"Perhaps you'll make time."

"As I've told you before, we are under a time constraint." Dane didn't have the patience to deal with Sire Kar's subtle hints at the moment. "Have you made the necessary preparations for the bonding ceremony?"

"*Selt*. We will have a dance first to allow your men and our women a chance to know each other before they pair off."

"Nay. 'Tis not necessary. My second-in-command and I will select the women for our men."

"Second-in-command?"

"I would make known to you, Del Geod."

Geod and Sire Kar exchanged pleasantries. Geod's greeting fell just short of rude. No doubt, Dane's dictates had caused Geod's clipped tones. Sire Kar didn't seem to notice as he bid the man welcome.

"As you can see, we have gathered the women as requested. I think the way in which your men arrived frightened them. They do not appear happy."

"Del Geod and I will begin pairing my men with the women soon. Once this has been done, the men will make the women feel more secure in their decision to bond with strangers."

Geod's lip turned up in a sneer. "Perhaps 'tis more appropriate to consider the men's unease, Fen Dane."

The comment failed to disguise Geod's bitterness. Dane frowned. He understood the unspoken rebuke. As prince, his first priority was to his men and not the females.

He gave Geod a pointed look. Sire Kar did not need to know of the tension existing between the two men. Heightened emotions made the courtyard vibrate with negative energy. The outside stimulus tickled the sensory nerves just above his neck. The slight throbbing sensation made concentration difficult. He wouldn't be able to rely on telepathy to control the situation.

A high-pitched scream rent the air. Collectively, they turned toward the sound. No one moved.

*The child.*

The young Deliphit sat upon the ground, hysterical and bleeding. Dane rushed to her side with Del Geod close behind.

"Stop!" Sire Kar grabbed his shoulder, keeping him from reaching the child. "You can't touch her."

"The girl needs help. She bleeds."

"*Selt*, but she must heal on her own. She can receive no outside help. To do so would mean touching her."

Incredulous, Dane gaped. "Can anyone tell me what happened?"

One of the women stepped forward. "She wanted to see your vehicle up close and tried to climb inside. She lost her grip and fell. I think her leg caught on that sharp piece of metal protruding from the craft."

From his viewpoint the required distance away, the cut looked deep. The child continued to cry as she clutched her leg. It would need the services of their meditech.

*Help her.*

Dane turned his head and caught sight of Chelian nearby. Although her head remained bowed, concern etched her features. He read the plea in her thoughts.

"Del Geod, I have need of your assistance," Dane whispered. "It will be difficult among the confusion, but we have to get the child to climb into one of the *skazers* on her own."

Del Geod nodded. Dane turned toward Sire Kar. "Her name. I would know what to call her by."

"Carione Beroock, but I think her father always called her Cari for short."

Fen Dane approached as close as he dared and spoke softly. "Cari. Cari, you must stop crying. We cannot help you unless you can help yourself."

"It hurts. I want my father."

"He's not here. He couldn't bear to say goodbye, so he didn't come when we took you from your home. Do you not remember?"

She glanced up. Sire Kar narrowed his eyes and gave her a reproachful glare. She immediately lowered them again. Fen Dane's heart constricted at such cruelty. Had Chelian suffered similar indignities at this tender age?

Dane placed a hand on Del Geod's shoulder. In turn, Geod placed his hand upon Dane's shoulder. With feet akimbo, they gazed down at the hurt child. Their minds locked together toward one outcome.

*Rise! Pull yourself up.*

The crowd murmured loudly when Cari rose, placing all her weight on the one good leg.

*Climb into the metal box, Cari. Climb.*

Cari shook her head, obviously confused by the thoughts she entertained.

*Climb! Pull yourself up into the vehicle. It will take you to safety.*

Cari did as Geod and Dane bid. Against gasps of outrage from surrounding Bastians, she struggled into the odd conveyance.

*Go as far back into the box as you can.*

Dane dropped his hand from his friend. "Go back to the men and instruct Foyst to take control of this *skazer*."

"Get down from there!" Sire Kar pointed a beefy finger at Cari, his face contorted with rage.

"Leave her be." Dane knew Sire Kar had no knowledge of the telepathic message he and Geod had sent and that Cari had followed instructions. "Since she is destined to journey with us and is not required to take part in the bonding ceremony, I will make sure she is safely delivered to my home ahead of schedule." He paused. "With your permission, of course."

"She should be assigned retribution first for daring to touch your property."

"Retribution?"

"*Selt*. The child has broken a law. She has dared to touch property not her own."

"She was hurt severely. Do you not think this appropriate retribution? Will she not learn a painful lesson?"

"*Nock*. This isn't our way. You must see to it she is assigned retribution."

Dane scratched his chin. "What is considered retribution?"

"Three inches."

"Three inches? I fail to understand."

"Her hair. She must cut three inches from her hair."

"How will this be accomplished when no one can touch her?"

"If commanded, she will cut her own hair. To refuse would mean exile, and she knows she would not survive the harsh clime on her own."

His gaze swept over the women chosen for mate. Then he let his eyes roam those gathered just to watch the proceedings. Comprehension dawned. Sire Kar and his council had managed to find women whose hair length ranged from shoulder to mid back. Women not chosen for mate sported hair well past their hips. Sire Kar had chosen women who appeared to have been assigned retribution often, women whose temperaments were less than ideal.

He should be angered. Instead, he laughed at the man's intended duplicity. Sire Kar had failed to realize Dane's need for spirited women. His choices pleased Dane immensely.

"Fen Dane?"

"Yea, Sire Kar." He didn't try to hide the mirth still lingering in his voice. "Have no fear. The child will receive what she deserves."

At that point, Foyst arrived. Dane gave him instructions. The man did as bid without argument. The



warrior would transport her to a place of safety, away from these strict rules. Dane felt relieved knowing Cari would be given the best of care.

He stole a glance at Chelian. Her hair fell in thick waves just past the middle of her back. Should he be disappointed? He shrugged. He presumed the length of her hair reflected her ability to evade retribution. He'd felt the sting of her tongue often enough to know she wasn't docile.

He caught Sire Kar's attention again. "If it pleases you, Del Geod and myself will begin the selection process. That will free you to firm up plans for the ceremony tonight. Tomorrow, we depart for our homeland."

Sire Kar nodded. "So be it. I bid you pleasant thoughts."

"And I you."

When Bande had left, Dane turned to Geod who met his gaze with angry eyes. The warrior clearly hadn't forgotten what Dane planned to do. He expelled a deep breath before motioning to Geod.

"Come. 'Tis time to meet your mate."

He sauntered off with Geod close behind. He stopped five stones from the other Deliphit and held out his hand, barring Geod from approaching any closer. When Geod made no move to come closer, Dane lowered his hand.

"First, Del Geod, I have chosen for you a special woman, a woman to strengthen the line of our new nobility. You have served me well as both my friend and advisor, and as my second-in-command. I honor you with this choice. I gift you with Sialys Memrill."

When Geod made no comment, Dane continued to give Geod insight into his choice.

"Sialys is Deliphit. Until we depart these boundaries, you must refrain from physical contact of any kind." He apprised Del Geod of the laws and customs surrounding the Deliphit. Sialys remained quiet during the introductions, unable to understand their foreign dialect.

Geod's eyes widened slightly. The anger seemed to fade as he studied the woman. *I can feel her thoughts.*

Dane's gaze met his, communicating silently exactly what a treasure Sialys would prove to be. *She will make your line stronger for her many skills.*

Geod took three steps toward her and lifted his hand. She flinched, but stood her ground. Geod stretched out his hand. The electric current surged from his fingertips to her arm. Startled, she scooted away. Geod dropped his hand. Dane smiled at Geod's look of delight.

*How did you know? How did you discover we would share the spark of awareness?*

*I did not know. I only hoped.*

In the native tongue of Mioisiad, Geod continued, "'Tis as if you have found women similar to our own kind."

"'Tis why I have chosen a mate for myself as well." Dane enjoyed the stunned look upon Geod's face.

"She is Deliphit like this woman?"

"Yea. Her name is Chelian. She stands over there, near that group of women. I experienced the spark of awareness whene'er she greeted me at the door. I had not intended to choose a mate for myself, but once I felt the spark, I could think of naught else but making her mine. In this, the Elders have not lied. The attraction proved stronger than my desire to remain unfettered."

*I thought 'twas a myth. Yet I cannot deny what I felt, what I saw.*

Geod reached his hand out to Sialys once more to confirm the spark of awareness. When Sialys once again jumped back from the unfamiliar phenomena, Geod laughed. Although her head remained bowed, a hint of confusion marred her face. She turned to leave, but Geod halted her.

In Fendabor, he said, "Nay, you do not yet have permission to leave."

"I wasn't aware I needed permission."

Speaking again in the Daramile dialect of Miois, Geod turned to Dane. "She has spirit. I am honored by this gift, Fen Dane. Forgive me for doubting your wisdom." Geod paused, his brow furrowed in worry. "I fear the men may not be so understanding though."

"I, too, worry about their reaction," Dane said, "but I think we can make them see the wisdom in choosing to take these special women with us. Their gifts combined with ours will influence our bid for vengeance. Our sons will grow stronger, more powerful than any warrior has a right to be. Zan Burlorek will rue the day he forced our fathers from our home planet."

"Yea, Fen Dane. You speak true, and your foresight has merit. Forgive my earlier burst of temper. I should not have brought up Tared's death. You were not to blame."

Dane's heart wrenched. Guilt shrouded his shoulders like a heavy cloak of winter *truscal*. "You are wrong. I am to blame, and I must bear my guilt for all eternity. You only spoke true."

"Tared would not want your guilt, Fen Dane. He goaded you into giving him that command."

"Yea, but regardless, I should not have responded with anger. A ruler must keep a level head at all times. Tared's argument forced my hand, but I was the one who made the final decision. I sent my brother to his death, and nothing you can say will convince me otherwise."

"Then let us finish here," Geod said. "With the women pledged to our men, we begin our plans to avenge Tared's death. We make positive strides toward regaining that which is ours."

Dane smiled, pleased that Geod understood his motives. "Today we begin to build our future. Tomorrow, we reclaim our past."

## Five

Chelian came forward, stopping a short distance from Fen Dane but close enough to be heard with her head bowed. "Fen Dane, this ... this scheme of yours is truly offensive. I can't credit these actions from a prince."

She'd refrained from comment when he'd brought Del Geod over to meet the other Deliphit although apprehension had gnawed on her nerves. They had yet to fully resolve her position. While her father claimed the agreement had the Council's blessing, Chelian still couldn't fathom being mated to a man like Fen Dane. And now he would subject another Deliphit to a similar fate?

While she'd contemplated the destiny of the other Deliphit, Dane had gone to his men and pulled one of his warriors from the ranks. Without rhyme or reason, he matched the warrior with one of the Bastian women. His method of pairing couples appeared random, without any true direction. How could this work?

Now Fen Dane's angry eyes bore into hers. "Chelian, while I appreciate your views on the matter, 'tis unbecoming and highly inadvisable for you to address your future mate thusly in front of his men. Henceforth, you will refrain from making your objections public."

Fen Dane turned his back to her and continued the task of pairing couples. "Siercesson, you will take the woman garbed in *telsid darsk*. Geod and I both agree she will make you a suitable companion."

"Stop!" Chelian could not hold her tongue against his blatant disregard of her people's feelings. "You can't just pair people off like you might livestock. Have you considered their feelings, their suitability? What if they end up hating each other in the end? How will this affect their future family?"

"Your fathers choose for you," Fen Dane replied. "'Tis no different."

"*Nock*. Our fathers know the families and know the individual likes and dislikes of the prospective mates. You know nothing of these women."

"I have not the time to argue with you, Chelian. I asked you to help make this easier for the women. Instead you try to make things more difficult."

"Difficult? Fen Dane, you don't know the meaning of the word difficult. I'm Deliphit. I have powers you can't begin to understand. Have you any idea what will happen to you when we finally touch?"

He smiled, an infuriating turn of his lip. She glared back at him.

"I can only dream, Chelian." He turned his back on her. "If you will excuse us, we have work to accomplish and precious little time to finish it in."

She blinked. How dare he treat the subject lightly?

"You're dismissing me—dismissing my dispute? I keep thinking about this mission of yours, and I can't in good conscience mate with you. There is just too much at risk."

"'Tis too late to back out now."

"I fail to understand your lack of fear."

"But I do fear, Chelian. I fear the unnecessary worry you cause these other women."

"They *should* be worried. Not only do you contract for my hand, but now ... now you contract for two more Deliphits. I don't understand you."

He glared at her over his shoulder. "You have only one thing to understand. You are mine. No power on this planet will stop me from taking you with us on the morrow."

The feral gleam in his eye halted her arguments. The cold truth of his words settled upon her shoulders. Too many things conspired against her. The Council, her father, and now Fen Dane schemed to remove her from her home.

"Then so be it," she said. "I'll not argue any more over the matter. I'll do as I'm bid, but remember that you were forewarned." She turned, thinking the discussion at an end.

*You have nothing to fear from me. And you need not fear yourself. All will be well in the end. Trust me.*

The idea stopped her in her tracks. Trust him? Could she trust a man she knew nothing about? All attempts to glean any background information had been fielded by the vaguest tidbits. She couldn't even be sure he hailed from nobility.

She met the frightened gaze of the older Deliphit, knowing the other woman couldn't take offense. "I'm Chelian, daughter of Sire Kar. I heard Fen Dane call you Sialys."

Sialys responded to Chelian's prompt by raising her own head. "*Selt*. I am daughter to Vale Darken Sem's medical advisor, Wexley Memrill. I've been at a loss since I was brought here. Can you explain what's happening?"

"You know nothing of what's to take place?"

"*Nock*. My father seemed most anxious to be rid of me at long last. He told me I was to have a new home where he would no longer be shamed by his daughter's affliction."

Chelian closed her eyes. Was her father of the same opinion? He'd never put the thought into words, but his actions seemed to indicate a similar mind.

She inhaled deeply and reopened her eyes. Her father didn't want her either. Fen Dane did. There appeared no choice but to accept the Council's decision. She would abide by their edict and follow through with the mating ceremony. What other option did she have?

"What do you think of Del Geod?"

"He frightens me. He's too intense," Sialys complained. "He says he's to be my mate, but this can't be."

"It can and it is. I'm to be paired with Fen Dane. I've done all I could to dissuade the man, but he's stubborn. He's adamant about taking me with him to his home."

"But at least you know he exhibits kindness, else he wouldn't have bothered coercing the child into his carriage."

"Perhaps," Chelian said, "still, I can't help but wonder if the three of us aren't slated for a nefarious purpose of some kind. It seems too coincidental—three Deliphits granted permission to leave Bastia. If you ask me, he gained the Council's cooperation too readily. Kind or not, I'm leery of this whole affair. If only he would change his mind."

"If Fen Dane knew what would happen when you touch him, he'd think differently."

"*Selt*, but that won't occur until after we're already committed to each other."

"Have you considered tripping accidentally and falling against the man?"

Chelian's eyes widened. Sialys must have a devious mind to think of such a plan. "But the consequences?"

"What will be worse?" Sialys asked. "Going through with the ceremony and finding ourselves mated without any say, or showing these men the true nature of our powers? And if we do so when we're alone with them, who will witness our transgression?"

"Sialys, I will hear no more of this. 'Tis forbidden, and well you know it. I'll not be a party to such malice."

"Forgive me. It helps relieve my anxiety to think and plan. I'm probably like you, unable to carry through with premeditated deceit."

"Come, let's adjourn to the gardens where it's more peaceful and less chaotic. Perhaps there we can come to terms with our future."

Chelian navigated the crowded courtyard with a light step. Sialys had discovered the perfect plan for gaining their release, yet Chelian knew in her heart she would never be able to act upon it. It was both morally and criminally wrong. She could stumble on a loose piece of *netrant*. As wrong as the idea was, she couldn't quite shake the thought. As soon as Fen Dane felt the power of her touch and the dark magic hidden beneath her fingertips, he would regret his brash decision. If she could but summon the courage to follow through, there would be no ceremony for herself or Sialys.

\* \* \* \*

Fen Dane and Del Geod crept slowly down the long corridor. The fine hairs on the back of Dane's neck stood on end, alerting him to possible danger. Together they tried to decipher the threat permeating the air.

"I can feel the darkness," Del Geod whispered.

"Yea." Fen Dane motioned Geod to stop. "I, too, am leery of these narrow passageways. Whoever is out there means us harm."

"He has a strong resistance to our thought probes. I can feel his dark essence and the menace in his soul, but I cannot glean any other information."

"Silence." Dane withdrew the scabbard sheathed at his side. The very air became charged with evil. He could taste it, feel it. He took a step forward.

Geod mimicked his actions, making ready to greet the threat with the skill of a trained warrior. A noise made them turn their heads. Something hid in the shadows.

Dane motioned Geod to one side and took another step toward the sound.

"*Yeahhhhhhhhhh!*"

He whirled around just in time to meet the thrust of a sword with a defensive move of his own.

"*Yeahhhhhhhhhh!*"

Another attacker struck from the shadows. Geod engaged this new threat, protecting Dane's back as best he could. Dane countered each thrust, barely one step ahead of his assailant. The man exhibited moves he had never seen. He stole a glance at Geod, pleased to note that his friend handled the other man with his usual skill, but worry for Geod kept him from focusing as he should. He knew better. Lack of concentration could be the death of a warrior in a situation like this.

He blinked. The assailant had performed an acrobatic move, momentarily stunning Dane. Dane's reaction slowed. The man landed to his side, turned with amazing speed, and thrust upward.

"Dane!"

The warning came late, and the sword sliced his arm.

*"Cruent!"*

Beads of blood formed along the cut. Anger surged through his veins. With a snarl, he responded with a more aggressive approach, lunging to take the other man by surprise.

"'Tis time you took the upper hand." Geod laughed from across the hall.

Dane growled low in his throat. Geod always chose an inappropriate time to make light of a very dark situation.

"Speak for yourself, Geod."

He laughed again, and Dane heard a sudden gasp. A hard thud followed. Geod's opponent lay slain. Dane renewed his attempts for a similar outcome with his foe. He thrust once more.

"Need help?"

Dane shot Geod a heated glance. With his concentration broken, his opponent swept in for a killing blow. Dane saw it coming and knew death approached. With the speed of a *tarken*, Geod intervened, his sword piercing the man in the back. The unknown antagonist threw his arms wide. With a look of horror, he stumbled backward.

"Nay!" Dane growled. "I wanted him alive."

Geod threw him a disgusted look. "Better him dead than you. Besides, he still breathes, though not for long."

Dane sheathed his sword and stepped over the prone man. Kneeling, he placed a hand to the man's brow. Geod knelt as well and mimicked his actions. Together they might be able to read the man's thoughts enough to find out why they'd been attacked. Intense pain clouded Dane's mind.

*Why? Just tell us why?*

The man's eyes glazed over. "He didn't ... didn't want..."

*Who? Who didn't want what?*

Geod pulled away, his features troubled. But Dane didn't want to give up. Not yet. He'd seen an image of a man then a woman, but neither of the two images was clear. He needed more, needed to know who wished them harm. He needed to know if there would be further attempts before he and his men could depart. And he needed to know if the danger would follow them.

His fingers dug into the man's scalp while his mind searched for answers. *Live! Live long enough to tell me what I need to know.*

"Chelian." Breath rattled within his chest. "She—she can't..."

With a final gasp, the man's body arched then fell silent upon the floor.

Dane dropped his hands from the man's head and fell back on his heels. Could Chelian be behind this treachery? Was the idea of becoming his mate so abhorrent that she would stoop to murder?

"Chelian. I knew she didn't want to mate, didn't want to leave, but this?"

"Don't be hasty, Fen Dane. You tend to be impulsive, and I'm not all that sure what the man meant to tell us."

"But I saw a woman in his thoughts."

"I did, also, but her hair seemed longer than Chelian's and not quite the same color. I also saw a man, a man whose face seemed similar to Zan Burlorek's. All I'm asking is for you to investigate further before believing Chelian meant to do us harm."

Dane made no comment. It didn't seem possible their enemy Zan Burlorek could have followed them here. His mind fastened on the possibility, seeking answers where none seemed to exist. In the future, he would need to be more cautious.

Dane touched a hand to the man's neck, feeling for a pulse. "He's dead."

"A pity he couldn't tell us more."

Dane stood, towering over the deceased Kelton warrior. "Thank you for coming to my aid."

Geod chuckled. "I am more skilled with these than you." He held up his sword high before sheathing the weapon. "But at least you kept him at bay long enough for me to make my way to your side."

"Too bad I had no *terment* weapon with me. I am a much better marksman than a swordsman." Dane sighed. "Sire Kar will have to be notified of this attack. I leave the task to you."

"A task I do not relish." Geod nodded toward Dane's arm. "You need to get that arm bandaged."

Blood trickled freely from the cut. It needed attention, but Dane was not too keen on having one of their archaic meditechs tend to it. He groaned. "I'll see to it soon."

"And afterwards? What do you plan to do?"

"Find Chelian. I must discover for myself if her heart reads true or if I've chosen unwisely."

Geod reached out a hand and placed it on his shoulder. "Dane, I know why you want the Deliphits, but this path you've chosen is a dangerous one. I do not want to see you hurt more."

"Is this your attempt to back away from the mate I've chosen for you?"

Geod dropped his hand. "Nay. I will do my duty, and I will do it with a glad heart. You did well in choosing Sialys, but I cannot help but think we need to proceed with caution. A Deliphit's powers mixed with those of our own could very well bring about ruin."

Dane sighed. "Yea, I will consider your warning. You tell me nothing I don't already know. I must search her out. No telling where I might find the maiden."

"As late as it is, she's probably getting ready for the ceremony. Though I doubt you'll get past the guard."

"Guard?"

"Yea. I heard 'twas a custom to place a guard in front of a female's door as she readies herself for her intended mate."

"For whose protection? The man's or the woman's? Do they fear the woman will run, or do they fear the man will attack in his overzealous bid for her hand?"

Geod laughed. "Or do they feel another will steal her away? 'Tis quaint, don't you think?"

"Yea, almost as quaint as our own coronation ceremony. I would rather tame a dragon than to follow the dictates of this formality they practice. Back home, the king would just ask if the man accepted the woman as his and it would be so. I just want to take the women and be on our way."

Geod laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Patience was never a strong attribute for you."

"Nay. I have more important issues awaiting me back home. Fetch Sire Kar afore we are discovered here alone with the bodies."

"By your lead."

Del Geod inclined his head sharply, a show of respect for Dane's higher station in life. Dane gave a similar sign before he turned, going in the opposite direction Geod took.

Apprehension made Dane's gait slower than normal. He didn't want to confront Chelian and find her guilty, but he feared no other answer made sense. If Chelian proved innocent, who else would gain from his death? Heart-heavy with the duty he must perform, he made his way to her suite.

\* \* \* \*

Chelian reverently touched the translucent *lestia* made especially for the bonding ceremony. The *ruesk* color complemented her *nezarine* eyes.

The ceremonial costume could be traced back two hundred *yons* to the time life had first appeared on Satobik. Law declared the use of the *lestia* illegal on any other day. Although the fabric covered her from head to toe, the translucent weave allowed any viewer a hint of ample curves. Designed to lure a man, the magical fibers flowed invitingly around her legs as she walked.

She reached up to secure a pin that had come loose from her hair. For tonight, all the women would have their hair piled high on their heads. The length of their hair would be hidden beneath a small cap with a flowing veil. In this manner, those present wouldn't know the temperament of the various women being given to mate. Tonight, each woman would be considered special, beautiful in their own right.

She turned from the reflective glass, uncomfortable with the image she presented in the filmy costume. Heat stained her cheeks when she thought of Fen Dane and his reaction. The idea of him in his ceremonial attire left her even more disconcerted. Her heart fluttered painfully in her chest. Fear, anticipation, resignation, and regret all warred within her. She firmly pushed her misgivings aside. There seemed no point in belaboring her unwillingness to leave her home as Fen Dane's mate. She'd done everything she could think of to dissuade him from his purpose, short of breaking the law, but her efforts had been for naught.



A knock sounded on her door and she said, "Enter."

Her father pushed open the door and stepped inside. Chelian's back stiffened. *Betrayed*. This man had betrayed her trust and her love. All she'd ever wanted in life was to be loved and admired by her father, yet she understood his position. She was Deliphit, an unapproachable outcast in a society that loathed the very air she breathed. Her father had to maintain his political dignity where she was concerned. He could give no outward appearance to his true feelings. But deep down, she'd felt he still loved her.

"They begin to gather," Bande said.

"And you've come to lead me down. I'm honored."

"Don't be flippant."

"Forgive the slight, Father. It must be heartbreaking to lose your only child to a complete stranger."

"I know you might not believe me, Chelian, but I do love you. I love you even more for this sacrifice you make for the good of our people."

"I never questioned your love of me, Father. I question your respect for my wishes. I question your motives. How much of the zeal will go to the people, and how much of it will line your personal coffers?"

His cheeks puffed with the heavy breath he took. "You dare talk to me in this manner?"

"What will you do? Assign retribution? Ask me to cut my hair? How will you make me? You've already exiled me to a fate I don't want, and you can't touch me."

Hurt clouded his features. Chagrined, she turned her back to her father.

"I apologize for causing you pain, Father. I regret my harsh words, but I needed to let you know how I felt."

He sank into a nearby chair. Wilted, he appeared older. "You were always headstrong. I pray to Orius you learn to curb your tongue when you speak to Fen Dane. I don't think your prince will tolerate your blatant rudeness."

"Is your concern for him or for me?"

"You do me a disservice, and I'll have no more of it. I came to escort you to the ceremony."

"I'm not yet ready." She plucked at the layers of *lestia*. Disillusioned by her father's greed, she had no desire to enter the Hall of Welcome on her father's heels. All the other daughters would enter on their fathers' arms, a symbolic showing of the love shared between them. She would have to follow a respectable distance in her father's wake, a testament to her untouchable position in their society. She had no desire to feel so unwanted on a day meant to be special.

"You look ready to me." The chair scraped beneath his weight.

"I have a few personal things to take care of. Go on without me, Father. I'll have my guard escort me in a short while."

Silence followed. Finally, she heard her father's parting steps and the door as it shut behind him. She turned then to stare at the closed portal. Fen Dane had made his desire for her very clear. She shivered. She'd warned him, she'd even tried to scare him into withdrawing his offer, but he'd seemed unconcerned.

Although worry still clawed at her insides, she felt reassured that Fen Dane would lead her to a new life, one in which she might be accepted without censure. Hope blossomed within her chest. Whereas she'd been indecisive about Fen Dane's proposal before, she fully accepted the truth of her situation now.

In a very short while, she would be mated to Fen Dane. She would no longer have to suffer the indignities of being unwanted and untouchable.

## Six

Chelian took one last look at her reflection. She appeared pale, ashen with dread. She'd spent the better half of the *kleur* trying to convince herself things were not as bleak as they appeared. She couldn't back out now. Everyone counted on her acquiescence. Otherwise, Fen Dane might withdraw his offer of zeal.

The hinges on the door grated loudly. Someone entered who hadn't first asked permission. She whirled around at the sound.

"Surprised to see me?" Fen Dane closed the door behind him.

She didn't bother lowering her gaze, already knowing he preferred meeting her eyes straight on. "You can't be in here. How did you get past the guard?"

Fen Dane shrugged. He squared his massive shoulders and stood with his arms folded against his chest. His eyes roamed at will. "I'd think my disposal of your guard would be the least of your worries."

"What do you mean?" Her voice trembled. Something dark hid beneath the surface of his statement. The look he gave her seared her with foreboding. She wrapped her arms around her waist, all too aware of the filmy material fitted in layers against her nude body.

He dropped his arms and moved toward her. She kept her eyes trained to his as he came closer.

"Stop!"

"Why? We're alone." He took another step. His gaze caressed her with heat. "In another *kleur*, we'll be formally bonded. Perhaps we should get past the touching, see how difficult this affliction will be for our union."

She moved away. "*Nock!* You can't be serious."

"As serious as you were in wanting me gone."

"*Selt*. Of course I wanted you gone. I never wanted to be mated to you in the first place."

"Then you admit to your guilt?"

"I admit nothing. I don't know what you're asking of me. I wanted you gone, but I've prepared myself for the ceremony. I've come to terms with my father's edict."

He took another step and held out his hand, his palm outstretched toward her. The desire she'd read earlier in his eyes faded. *Did you wish me dead?*

She gasped. Of what did he accuse her?

*Nock! I could never. How can you think I...*

His hand dropped to his side. "My apologies. I had to find out for myself if your heart was pure."

"Fen Dane, what is this about?"

Her eyes searched his for answers. He radiated pain. She scanned his body and gasped. Tiny droplets of blood pooled on her floor.

"You're hurt!"

"A scratch, no thanks to one of your mercenaries."

"Someone tried to kill you? And you thought it was me?"

"Yea. He led me to believe 'twas you who wanted me gone."

Her features blanched. She and Sialys had discussed many possible scenarios for making these men back down from their claims, but none included murder. Did he truly believe her capable of such an act?

His eyes narrowed. He knew. Somehow, he knew of their plotting and scheming. She must have projected these thoughts, because his next words confirmed her fears.

"A schemer? Why did you not try some of these plans for severing our intended bond?"

How could she answer him when she didn't know the answer herself? Indecision kept her company. Her inability to act decisively until the last minute often kept her from reaching important goals. It was a weakness she didn't want to share with this man. She tried to make her mind blank, afraid she would inadvertently allow him to see this flaw in her character.

She squared her shoulders. "I knew my efforts would be futile. I don't waste time with erroneous attempts."

"Nor do I, *fiol'ston*."

She understood his meaning. He didn't think his desire for her nugatory. He'd made a hasty bid for her hand and, in his mind, felt secure with his choice of mate. He planned to make their union work against all odds. She should be flattered.

"Your arm needs tending. The wound must be deep to still be bleeding," she said, wanting to redirect the conversation and needing another purpose to occupy her thoughts.

His eyes dropped to his wound. "Have you medical supplies?"

"*Selt*. I'm required to tend my own hurts when the need arises."

She retrieved her kit and laid it upon the bed. He followed, keeping a discreet distance. She pulled out needle, thread, ointment, and bandages, glancing at him as she did so.

"You'll have to stitch it," she said.

"Nay. You will stitch it." Again his direct gaze swept over her body, desire reflected in the *ebonharde* irises that claimed her attention.

Her voice trembled. "You know I can't. I'm still bound by Bastian law."

"There is no one here to see. Who would know?"

"I would know. I cannot in good conscience break laws intended for the good of my people."

"You are not yet ready to know how your touch will affect me." He put into words what she dared to think. "Yet earlier, you considered putting it to the test in an effort to sway my mind."

"*Selt*." A heavy sigh escaped her lips. "I couldn't see myself mated to you."

"I would know what changed your mind."

"My father." She hesitated to share one of her deepest pains. Trust did not come easy for her. She inhaled deeply. "My father doesn't want me. You apparently do. Once I realized this, the right decision became clearer. I dropped any notion to redirect your desires."

"Admirable," he whispered, swaying slightly, his face ashen.

"Sit." Usually more reserved around others, the forceful command surprised her, yet she felt justified in ordering the prince. "We need to stop the bleeding."

He needed no further prodding. He lowered himself to the edge of her bed. She tossed a large pad of cloth at him. He caught it easily and pressed it to the wound.

*I need you, fiol'ston.*

She shook her head. She would not break the law. She had a moral obligation to her people, even if her people perceived no similar obligation to her. Even if she believed no such responsibility to the law, she was still bound by her religious beliefs. Orius would likely frown at her disobedience.

He sighed. "Tell me what needs be done then."

"Use the basin over there to wash the cut. I'll thread the needle for you, and you can stitch it as best you can."

He chuckled. "Liorxton will not be pleased with the scar my inept attempts will likely leave."

"Who is Liorxton?"

"Our meditech back home."

"Back home." Her thoughts wandered, imagining the home to which she headed. "I still don't know where I'm bound. It must be far."

"Yea, 'tis farther than you can imagine. But 'twill offer you your grandest wish."

"And what might that be?"

His direct gaze speared her as he paused. She leaned forward in anticipation of his words.

"To live a normal life with no restrictions placed upon your head, save those placed on all individuals."

How had he known her one true desire? Had she sent him her thoughts without knowing about it? It seemed like a silly wish, an embarrassing anomaly for a Deliphit. She had never voiced her aspirations, holding them prisoner within her heart. To do so would be to admit defeat, for there could be no normalcy for a Deliphit. And wishing things to be different betrayed a weakness of character.

He gave her a gentle smile before bending to a more serious task. The needle entered his skin. She watched his brow furrow with pain. To his credit, he made no sound. In and out, the needle wove a haphazard pattern, deftly closing the wound. She crept closer, drawn by his courage.

Sharp! Stabbing!

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. She could feel his pain!

She clutched her arm, stepping back from Fen Dane. The pain lessened. She continued to put distance between them. The farther she pulled away, the less the pain. He glanced up, and their eyes met.

"You cannot deny our connection, *fiol'ston*."

"*Selt*, but it unnerves me. I don't understand it. I don't understand you."

"We have a lifetime to correct your lack of knowledge. I look forward to the teaching."

Her throat constricted over the lump of apprehension his words evoked, and her loins tingled at the promise in his eyes. Her inexperience, her ignorance of the actual mating between man and woman gave her cause for concern. She only knew what she'd gleaned from books. Would he teach her through careful explanation and patient exploration? Or would he force himself upon her in animalistic possession? She shivered, but whether from desire or fear she wasn't sure. The man evoked a range of conflicting emotions, some that left her wanting something for which she had no name.

She elected not to respond to his comment, feeling safer with his attention directed elsewhere. "Your stitches have stopped the bleeding. That salve will help it heal faster. Rub it gently upon the area then wrap it with the bandage."

He held out the arm and turned it about. "I would never be able to replace Liorxton, but I must admit, 'tis better than I'd hoped it would be."

"It's fine work for a novice."

"It will have to do until Liorxton can fix it. I have no desire for an unsightly scar."

She failed to understand his worry. "Scars mark a warrior as fierce, able to withstand the weapons of his enemies."

"In my culture, scars show weakness. They allow the enemy to see flaws, areas on the body where others have been able to take advantage. An unflawed body tells the enemy their opponent is invincible."

Save for the fresh wound, the exposed expanse of Fen Dane's upper body bore no scars she could see. Was this the first wound he'd ever suffered? She reached out as if to explore the contours, but caught herself in time. She swallowed hard. Somehow, this man had the ability to make her forget herself, to forget her affliction. She tore her gaze from his muscular frame. She needed to redirect her thoughts.

"You haven't readied yourself yet for the ceremony," she said. "It's past time you took your leave to prepare for our bonding."

"So I'm dismissed? You will make a great queen some day. You have a diplomatic way of manipulating those around you. I bid you pleasant thoughts, *fiol'ston*." He stood and walked toward the door.

"And I bid you the same, Fen Dane."

He smiled. "Pleasant thoughts, indeed, Chelian, for they will all be centered on you. I await your beauty with the enthusiastic hunger of a gherellt *farcset*. Come to me quickly, Chelian. Come to me with no regrets."

Her skin warmed. He departed, leaving behind vivid images that unsettled her stomach. The enthusiastic hunger of a gherellt *farcset*, the fleetest of all beasts conquered by man. The animal had a voracious appetite when sexually aroused. Many jokes had been derived from this phenomenon. She'd heard them bandied about whenever she lurked in the shadows of grand affairs.

She stared at the bloodstains on the floor. She had never been allowed a maid as were other women of her station. Such would have proven too risky. She wondered if she would be given the services of a maid as Fen Dane's mate. For that matter, would she want one after having learned to care for herself so adeptly?

She stooped to wipe the blood from her floor. *Fen Dane's blood*. The chore should sicken her. Instead, a surge of pride erupted for her intended. He'd defended himself against a Kelton mercenary; no easy task for even the bravest of warriors.

When she finished, she discarded the dirty rags. As she made her way to a trash receptacle, she glanced at the bed. A glimmer caught her eye. A talisman, a medallion with a dragon engraved upon the surface beckoned her touch. Her fingers reached out for it. The pendant nestled in the indented spot where Fen Dane had sat and was attached to a delicate chain of what appeared to be expensive *xeondite* metal. In the dragon's eye, an expertly cut zeel crystal blazed brilliant.

She clutched Fen Dane's property, feeling again the connection between them. Without any misgivings, she slipped the chain around her neck. The dragon nestled warmly against the cleavage of her bosom, well protected by the warmth of her skin.

A rapid pounding at the door tore her attention away from the dragon. She crossed the room quickly and called out, "Enter."

Her guard stood before her. "Sire Kar bade me fetch you to the Hall of Welcome."

"You follow orders well, save in the guarding of my door. Did you not try to stop Fen Dane from entering?"

"Maiden? With the exception of your father, there has been no one here."

## Seven

Once again, Chelian entered the Hall of Welcome as an invited guest and savored the glamour of the decorated room. She thought her tardiness would make her the last to arrive, but she was mistaken. Fen Dane had not yet appeared.

As per custom, the intended females lined one side of the hall, while the men lined the other. Guests not participating in the ceremony sat toward the end where they could witness the proceedings. Chelian glided into place next to Sialys. Behind her, empty space hugged her shivering form. Her father's suspicious absence sparked her unease.

She should have his supporting presence at her back like the other females. *No, not like the others.* Each father rested his right palm upon his daughter's shoulder, a bold show of respect and support. If her father were at his rightful place, he would have to stand five stones behind her as Sialys's father did for her.

Outside, a tempest raged. Against the windowpanes, high winds begged entrance. Foliage scraped against the transparent metal. Even the weather conspired against Chelian's mood. She fingered a layer of *lestia*, anticipating the moment Fen Dane would appear. The dragon pendant scorched her skin where it nested between her breasts. The room felt unbearably hot, like the Traegin Sands during a full second moon.

She kept her eyes trained to the floor but wished she could see the doorway. The sound of scuffling feet indicated the late arrival of others. Knowing she would feel Fen Dane's presence the moment he took his place, disappointment mounted when she realized he was not among those who had just entered the hall.

"Halt! Halt all proceedings!"

Heads snapped toward the entrance at Sire Kar's roar of anger. Chelian forced herself to remain poised in a deferential position. Her father's bellow bounced off the walls like the enraged call of a Fentle cat.

"Sire?" One of the guards braved Sire Kar's apparent wrath.

"Guards, post yourselves!" Bande ordered. "No one is allowed to leave until the Stone of Arznan can be brought forth. Two Keltons have been found murdered in the north wing."

*Fen Dane's mercenary attackers.*

Sire Kar could refer to no others save the two who had attacked Fen Dane and Del Geod. Would her father understand a plea of self-defense? Guards stood at the open door, blocking all from coming or going. A few moments later, the stone bearer appeared with the Stone of Arznan.

Chelian cringed. Forcing her mind to go blank, she awaited her turn. Nervous vibrations would alert the stone to her knowledge of the murders. She could not afford to become involved. To do so would reveal Fen Dane's part in the deaths of the Kelton warriors and his unsanctioned presence in her room.

Where was Fen Dane? She stole a glance to her right. Del Geod was also missing. Her eyes lifted just enough to gaze at her father. He stood in the middle of the long line of ceremonial participants, his brow wrinkled in indecision. She understood his predicament. He suspected one of Fen Dane's men of the heinous crime, yet he dared not begin the interrogation with these fierce warriors. It would be politically incorrect to make his suspicions so public without just cause.

Finally, Sire Kar made his way toward the fathers standing behind their daughters. He would show his



faith by interrogating the Keltons first. He walked the line with slow progress. Each man stuck a hand upon the stone and awaited the verdict. An *aultid* hue indicated no knowledge of the incident, whereas a *telsid* glow would indicate a person had information pertinent to the crime. A series of questions could then confirm innocence or guilt.

"Cease, Sire Kar," Fen Dane announced as he sauntered calmly through the door. "You have no further need of the stone."

Chelian raised her eyes a fraction higher. Her breath caught, suspended by her reaction to Fen Dane in his ceremonial attire. The *fualic lestia* accented every hardened muscle toned by a warrior's exercise. Cinched tight at the waist by a wide *truscan* belt, the translucent fabric left very little to the imagination. A collective gasp rent the air. Fen Dane approached Sire Kar with a confident stride.

"You go too far, Fen Dane. You interrupt proceedings you know nothing of."

"You err if you think I do not possess the wit to interpret what you do here."

"And you, sir, overstep the bounds of hospitality. You stop a legal procedure meant to aid in the capture of a murderer."

"No murder took place this eve. Del Geod and I dispatched the mercenaries to their graves defending ourselves from deadly intent. With all due respect, Sire Kar, 'twas our murder those two expected to secure."

Chelian understood her father's dilemma. He needed—wanted—the zeal. To gain the wealth Fen Dane promised, he would have to overlook certain protocol.

"Then, by your admission, you took the lives of these warriors as a defensive act. But even if this is the case, we must still determine who paid these mercenaries to see you dead."

"Such knowledge is not necessary."

"What?" Sire Kar looked baffled as did the rest of those gathered. "Don't you want to know who tried to do you harm?"

"We haven't the luxury of time. Your method of ferreting out those responsible would take the majority of the evening, thus delaying the ceremony. I would have this whole affair behind me."

"I won't accept your excuses," Sire Kar said. "This is still my home-unit, my responsibility, and I won't have a guest in my home abused in such a way."

The tiny veins in Fen Dane's neck grew more pronounced as the muscles tightened around his throat. His anger became unmistakable. Chelian almost felt sympathy for her father. She viewed their confrontation with anxiety, disturbed by the pause in the ceremony. An upset stomach and the fierce pounding of her heart indicated her nervous agitation. Further delay would only prolong her discomfort. She just wanted the evening to end. In this, she and Fen Dane agreed.

Fen Dane continued the argument. "Would you deny a guest his wishes for such a special day?"

"Nock, but—"

"Enough. Give your stone back to the servant and let us be done with this bonding ritual."

Her father narrowed his eyes and stared at Fen Dane for a suspended *secton*, both like foes in a circle of

contention, neither giving in to the other. Finally, Sire Kar relented. Chelian's eyes followed him as he strolled down the line toward the end, stone in hand. He'd almost reached the stone bearer when the Stone of Arznan began to radiate a bright *telsid* color.

"*Nock!* I didn't set those men upon the prince," cried Delbar Sandsiba. "I didn't!"

Bande stopped in front of the man and held the stone up to his face. "But you have knowledge of the incident."

From her place, Chelian couldn't see Delbar's face, but his voice sounded resigned, tired even. "*Selt.* I ... I do have knowledge."

"And?"

"And I didn't want my daughter sold to these strangers like she didn't amount to anything. I didn't want her to go away."

"So you thought getting rid of Fen Dane would make the agreement null and void?"

"*Nock.* I but discussed the matter with Vale Tibdon. I never wanted anything to happen. I just expressed my thoughts about the situation. I offered a lot of conjectures, but I never ... I wouldn't ... I—"

"I've heard enough." Sire Kar turned from Delbar, the Stone of Arznan still held reverently in his hands as he walked with purpose toward the front of the line where the Council of Twelve gathered to give the Blessing of Orius.

From Chelian's position in line, she'd had a difficult time overhearing her father speaking to Delbar. She doubted that Vale Tibdon had heard Delbar's accusation, else he might have tried to leave. She leaned forward to get a better look.

As soon as her father reached the Council, the stone began to glow again. This time Bande spoke loud enough for the entire room to hear. "Vale Tibdon, you will tell all here what you know of this incident." Bande's brittle tone indicated his anger and disappointment.

"I had no choice," Vale Tibdon responded. "You break the law to serve your greedy appetite. A Deliphit should not be allowed to mate, no matter the circumstances."

"So you thought to have Fen Dane killed?"

"*Selt.* It seemed the best solution."

A pause resulted, making Chelian wonder how Bande intended to handle the situation. A Councilman was immune from the same consequences one of his subjects might endure. Fen Dane approached her father and whispered something low that she strained her ears to hear.

"*Nock!* I'll not agree to such!" Vale Tibdon reacted to Fen Dane's suggested punishment, his tone violent.

"You have no choice." Bande turned to a guard. "Locate Vale Tibdon's two daughters."

"Sire Kar, please," Vale Tibdon said. "I'll give up my seat on the Council. My son can take my place as is his right when I die. You need not take my daughters."

"They will be well cared for," Bande replied. "I have Fen Dane's word on the matter."

Shortly thereafter, the guard returned with Deliah and Katrin. To everyone's puzzlement, they were then

ushered out of the room. Chelian's eyes widened. What could have transpired?

"Can you see?" Sialys whispered.

"*Nock*. I don't know what just happened, but Vale Tibdon is most unhappy about it."

"I can't believe Vale Tibdon would feel so strongly about our departure that he would conspire to kill Fen Dane."

"It makes little sense," Chelian agreed. "It might be different if the others in the Council felt the same."

"Did you find it odd that the Council agreed so readily to giving us away?"

"*Selt*, but then everything about this affair feels odd," Chelian said. Footfalls sounded louder, and she glanced down the line. "Shh, I think Fen Dane and my father approach now. The ceremony should begin."

She saw the toes of Fen Dane's boots as he took his place across from her. She heard the rustle of her father's dress cape as he stood behind. With everyone positioned in accordance with custom, nothing could stop the ceremony from proceeding. She inhaled deeply, forcing her heart to slow its erratic flutter.

*Relax, fiol'ston. 'Twill soon be done, and you will belong to me.*

Her fingers twisted the *lestia*, wrinkling the delicate fabric. Outside, the Gronsel Winds whistled through *milimem* sprouts, a quiet roar within the hall. His words might have been intended to ease her nervousness, but they only served to heighten her anxiety.

*Shh, lift your eyes to mine, Chelian.*

*Nock, I can't.*

*Lift your eyes. I would ease the pain that lurks behind such deep nezarine.*

Against her better judgment, her eyes lifted. Her troubled gaze met his. His masterful presence dominated the entire gathering. Fully in control, his outward calm soothed her dancing nerves.

The lights dimmed, a signal for the Council of Twelve to start. As one, their voices rang out, a rich blending in a *capella* harmony. Their vocal prayers to Orius requested a blessing for all assembled. Toward the end of their musical litany, they sauntered down the row with Vale Darken leading. With a symbolic *trexil* leaf clutched in hand, each council member touched the woman's womb, praying for a fruitful union.

When Vale Darken reached Chelian, he paused. The leaf came forward, but did not brush her stomach. She cringed at the awkward slight multiplied by twelve as each councilman followed Vale Darken's example.

The procession had reached the end of the line with Sialys. The councilmen lined up again, perpendicular to those awaiting the end of the ritual. Chelian waited for another dose of humiliation as each female's father gently pushed their daughters forward and into the waiting arms of the man across from them. She and Sialys took a step forward as indicated but neither felt the comfort of their father's hand, nor did they step into the solace of their mate's waiting arms.

Fen Dane lifted his hand to touch her. Several women gasped. Chelian's eyes widened, and she shook her head from side to side. Trapped. She could not move back for fear of touching her father, nor could

she move to either side for fear of colliding with one of the women. Did he not understand such action was forbidden?

He reached out. Only a whisper of air prevented his touch. Electricity flowed from his outstretched fingers to brush her skin with tingling sensation. She moaned, her skin warmed.

*Rest easy, fiol'ston. I will save our first true touching for a time when I can devote my concentration on you and you alone.* His hand fell to his side.

Vale Darken intoned the final words. "From Orius we gain knowledge, hope, and wisdom. In honor of our God, we unite these couples. Go and prosper. This night marks a beginning. I declare the mating ritual ended and these couples joined for life."

Fen Dane nodded. "'Tis done. I grant the females time to gather their possessions. We depart in one *kleur*."

This announcement caused the hall to erupt in protest. Sire Kar had worked hard to ensure a festive end to the ritual. The food would go to waste. The entertainment would perform for an empty room. Chelian didn't understand Fen Dane's command. No one did.

"What is the meaning of this?" Bande asked.

"Consider it further compensation for the injury done to my person, Sire Kar," Fen Dane replied. "This ritual was your idea, your requirement to see our arrangement solidified. We have fulfilled our part of the bargain. Now I would see an end to our time here. I grow impatient for my home."

"But—"

"Do not make this more difficult, Sire."

"But the food, the entertainment? Surely you can wait a few more *kleurs*."

"The zeal has been unloaded and delivered to the designated storage facility. I am grateful for the females. You may tell their parents to go home now. My men will see to the women's needs from this moment on." Fen Dane clearly intended to have the final say.

"My daughter—"

"Will prosper in spite of your efforts to suppress her talents. Where we go, her gifts will be revered."

Chelian could hold her tongue no longer. She stood just within arm's length, testing her new status as mate. "Fen Dane, surely a few moments more won't disrupt your plans. My father has gone to a lot of trouble to prepare tonight's celebration."

A heavy sigh escaped his lips. "I have no wish to offend, Chelian, but our time is precious, and we have lingered far too long already. You will oversee the packing of the others."

The command in his voice gave her pause, and her hackles rose. "Why the hurry? Are we to be mates with equal opportunity to express our opinions, or are we to become slaves blindly obeying your every whim?"

Any warmth she might have detected within his *ebonharde* eyes died. A cold, immovable stranger stood before her.

"You have no knowledge of what you speak," he said. "Not even the slaves here can claim abuse. They

are more like pampered servants. That you even suspect this of me leaves me angered. Go. Pack. Be ready to leave within the *kleur*."

Her mouth gaped. He claimed disgust for her assumption, yet he ordered her with a master's demeanor. What did he expect her to think? An uneasiness settled upon her shoulders, yet her fate remained sealed. She had no recourse but to follow the path she'd chosen by accepting Fen Dane for mate.

Her gaze settled on Bande. She expected her father to offer further objections, but he didn't. Instead, he motioned for the guards to allow the men and their new mates to exit without incident. The women seemed confused by this new set of events.

Of a sudden, pandemonium erupted. Mothers of the females pushed their way through the crowd, lamenting the loss of their daughters. Fathers roared their protests, and Chelian found herself three stones too close to the crowd. Her circle of distance had been breached. Panic made her back away from the milling guests. If she didn't take action soon, she would end up violating the law by careening into someone. Sialys followed her as she wove in and out of the crowd. Together they exited into the back gardens.

Cool air touched Chelian's cheek. The season for Gronsel Winds had descended full force. The *lestia* skirt whipped around her legs. Sialys's hair fell from its carefully pinned coil. The pins loosened from Chelian's coif as well, falling to the ground like tiny shards of glass. No haven would be found here.

"We have to go back in," she yelled above the growling winds.

Sialys nodded, hugging the frail fabric to her body. "And quickly, before these winds strip us bare. Is there another way in?"

"Through that other set of doors," Chelian pointed.

Both made their way toward safety. Chelian reached the heavy door first and tugged at the handle. The winds pressed against the closure. Sialys added her strength to Chelian's, and together they leaned all their weight and strength into pulling the door open. The opposing force of the wind made it difficult. With a triumphant *oomph*, the door swung wide. The women scrambled inside and yanked it closed. Disheveled and winded, they sank against the closed door.

Chelian pressed a hand to her racing heart. "The Gronsel Winds chose a fine time to strike." Her eyes swept over her father's collection of books. They'd entered a private chamber, one restricted from her use but not unfamiliar.

"At least we're safe here," Sialys said.

"I fear we won't be for long. Fen Dane now has the right to claim his due."

"I, too, worry over the future. What will happen when we finally touch another human? Will we be able to control our powers, or will they control us?"

Chelian smiled. Sialys had put into words the very worries that plagued her. If Fen Dane had his way, she would find out sooner than anticipated. Even now, he and his men packed to leave. In less than a *kleur*, she would be en route to a new home.

Her fingers grazed the tooled design on one of her father's forbidden books. He was a selfish man to keep so many treasures from her. She smiled. How many times had she snuck into this place and rummaged at will?

With her own library doomed to neglect, she worried over its future. Surely Fen Dane wouldn't allow the volumes of manuscripts to be packed and loaded. There were just too many books, too many friends to leave behind. No longer would she be able to lose herself among the many characters that filled her shelves. Loneliness took on new meaning.

## Eight

Fen Dane tried to peer into the back seat of the *skazer*. His neck muscles strained with the attempt, and the wind tugged at his hair. "Have you secured yourself, my Lady Fem?"

*His lady princess.* The high salutation couldn't stem the apprehension Chelian felt. She inclined her head in answer to his query. Words escaped her. She clutched a bar in front of her, causing her knuckles to turn white. Her hair whipped at her face. A neglected Bertil rested in her lap, the *terrin* image the only souvenir of her home. She'd wanted nothing else from Kel to remind her of the loneliness there.

A whirring sound accompanied the lowering of a giant window. The glass dome closed with a click, and she was trapped. Her mind reached out to Fen Dane. Silence. He sat too far in front for her to connect. Alone with only her thoughts, she closed her eyes. The sides began to rattle. A great roaring noise filled her ears. Movement made her stomach roll. The Gronsel Winds pounded on the sides of the tiny contraption and rocked the *skazer* to and fro.

Her eyes flew open. "Fen Dane!"

"Tis the *skazer* priming for lift off. You have nothing to fear, so calm yourself."

"I can't. I'm going to be ill. Please let me out." She pushed on the glass hood, the gentle vibrations inside more frightening than the whirling fury outside. A shard of *netrant* hit the outer casing. The winds grew more fierce. He couldn't mean to travel in such conditions.

"*Cruent!* These winds are a nuisance. Brace yourself, Chelian. We'll be free of their turbulent grip soon."

Her hand flew to her mouth. The impact of the *skazer's* power threw her body back. Her stomach fell, and her muscles knotted. When the *skazer* pointed straight up, her helmet connected with the back of the seat and jarred her head. They soared skyward at an alarming speed.

"Keep your eyes open and don't look to either side. To do so will disorient you and make you even more queasy. 'Tis the winds working against us that make the ride rougher than it needs be. Just try to relax. The sensation will soon pass."

Not close her eyes? She didn't dare keep them open to witness her doom. He meant to kill her with this contraption. Men weren't meant to fly. She'd assumed the vehicle hovered close to the surface of the ground. If she'd had any idea he planned to travel through the air, she would never have gotten into the *skazer*. No wonder he'd managed to cross the Dragon Craters unscathed.

Finally, the vehicle broke free from the winds. The turbulent vibrations lessened. Fen Dane leveled the *skazer*, which soared gently above the land at great distances. Weightlessness claimed her, and the *skazer* slowed. She opened her eyes and pressed her hand against her rolling stomach and willed the nausea to subside.

Focusing on the glass, she took note of her surroundings. Below, her home looked like a speck of dust on a tabletop. They had climbed fathoms. What manner of man could command the skies? What technology did he possess to master such a feat?

"Where do we go?"

"Home."

"Now is not the time to be obstinate. You've skirted around this question before. I want a true answer."

Where's your home?"

She hated talking through a device in the helmet. His words sounded strange—muffled. She hated even more the inability to see his face. Her reflected image in his helmet mocked her. She waited for his answer.

"I have never lied to you, Chelian. My home is the tip of the Dragon's sword. We travel to Pelicosia, a distant planet in the Galaxy of Lennitere. But first ... first we must deposit these crater jumpers aboard the *Cressis*. The distance is too far for these small *skazers*."

"Planet? Galaxy? You're ... you're an alien? I'm mated to an alien?"

The rich sound of his laughter filled the small space. "Nay. My lineage and yours can be traced from the same planet. An alien would have an entirely different genetic make-up than ours. You may rest easy, *fiol'ston*. Our children will be normal, healthy humans."

*Our children?* His words stilled her objections. The image of children filled her with foreboding. He had yet to touch her, yet to claim what was his by right. Apprehensive, she tried to redirect her thoughts. No sense in bringing unnecessary worry upon herself.

With a deep breath, she glanced out the domed window. The sight seared her visual perception with stunning images. Her hand pressed flat against the cold glass. Stars glittered at her fingertips. It was as if she could reach out and hold one to her heart.

To her left, a particularly bright star beckoned. A gentle turn had Fen Dane guiding them toward it. The closer they approached, the brighter and more intense the star became. Her heart hammered painfully in her chest.

Fen Dane uttered foreign words into an intercom, and a reply in the same dialect rattled through the speakers. The lights grew in intensity. Chelian lurched forward then fell back. The *skazer* had been seized by some unknown force. To the right and left, she noted the other *skazers* in their party afflicted by the same trouble.

She gripped the railing in front of her again. "What's happening?"

Fen Dane ignored her query as he spoke into the intercom. Her eyes flew wide with awe. Nestled in the sky was the largest building she'd ever seen. Its massive size escaped all believability. Her eyes slammed shut then opened again. She must be dreaming.

They floated forward, drawn toward a gaping cavity inside the structure. Saliva stuck in her throat. Tense muscles caused her legs to cramp. Her beautiful *lestia* gown bore several tears, rips created by nervous fingers picking at the delicate weave. She clutched the rod before her so as to prevent any more damage to her garment.

Fen Dane guided the *skazer* into the structure. Once they'd landed, the glass dome retracted. A deafening noise exploded within the small hanger as seventeen *skazers* drifted inside to touch down beside their own. The sound lessened as, one by one, the *skazers* fell silent.

Without awaiting Fen Dane's instruction, Chelian removed the helmet and placed it in a compartment behind her seat. Sweet air filled her lungs. To her right, one of the men aided his new mate from the vehicle.

*This is it. This will be the first moment of Fen Dane's touch upon my skin.* His muscles expanded and contracted as he hefted himself from the *skazer*. He uttered no word of reassurance, no salutations



of welcome. She sat and waited.

A uniformed man approached Fen Dane. She strained to hear, but the words were unfamiliar. They conversed in the same unknown language that had baffled her earlier. In response to the man, Fen Dane began to bark orders. As soon as it appeared his orders were being followed, he walked away.

Her eyes bulged. "Fen Dane! You don't mean to leave me here?"

He continued to walk away. Could he not hear her?

"Fen Dane!"

No response. He'd forgotten her. Stunned, she sat in the *skazer* and looked about the strange setting without really seeing anything.

"Fem Chelian?"

*Princess?* Again the unfamiliar title caused her glands to perspire with apprehension. She forced her eyes downward toward the voice that hailed her.

"Fem Chelian, Fen Dane bade me direct you and the other Deliphits to the tagging room." Del Geod appeared chagrined by the task.

"Tagging room?"

"Yea. Fen Dane requires that everyone who boards the *Cressis* be scanned for an aura mapping. The procedure is harmless. Liorxton, our meditech, will also want the group of new women to undergo decontamination. When you finish with these required formalities, I will see you safely to your new quarters."

The *lestia* twisted between Chelian's tense fingers. "Fen Dane does not see fit to attend me himself?"

"He commands a ship and crew who've suffered from his absence. He is first and foremost a prince and commander who must think of his subjects before he considers his own comforts or those of his mate."

"Do I detect disapproval?" she asked.

"I but explain why it seems he has abandoned you. Come, you must disembark."

"Will you help me?"

"Nay. I dare not touch you." Instead, he rolled a set of metal stairs close to the side of the *skazer*.

Gathering a length of *lestia* in one hand and Bertil in the other, Chelian made her clumsy descent. Her heel caught the corner of her garment, and she tumbled to the ground.

No one caught her.

Away from her planet and the laws of her province, she still hadn't escaped the stigma of her affliction as she'd hoped. A cutting hurt squeezed her heart. Even here, the others kept a respectful distance. And Fen Dane? It seemed he too meant to alienate his new mate. Beneath her, the floor trembled and escalated her fear to grand proportions.

"Chelian, are you all right?" Sialys asked.

The toes of Del Geod's boots tapped against the metal floor. "She's fine. She but tripped." His tone more than his words snapped Chelian from her confusion.

"I can answer for myself." She lifted herself from the floor. Her hands were scraped raw from the fall, but otherwise she'd suffered no injuries.

"'Tis our way to take care of our women in all things," Del Geod said. "I had not realized you were unfamiliar with this aspect of our culture."

"Unless the woman is Deliphit." Chelian didn't care for the hypocrisy of his statement. He offered help, but only if it meant not touching her.

"I'm sure there are many things we must learn." Sialys agreed. She inclined her head, her manner gracious if not reserved.

"This bantering serves no one," Chelian murmured, eager to soak her burning hands in cool waters. "I would know where you wish us to reside. My head is pounding, and I wish to lie down."

"I'm afraid your rest must wait until after you visit the tagging room," Del Geod insisted.

Chelian and Sialys followed him through meandering hallways, lifting platforms, and mazes of technology they couldn't hope to understand. Along the way, men halted their duties to gawk. Were women so rare as to create such a reaction, or did these men sense the affliction that marked them as a non-touchable item? Chelian clutched Bertil to her chest, uncomfortable with either possibility.

The tagging room proved to be more of an inconvenience than anything. As princess, she was made to stand in line first, yet even then she had to wait an abominably lengthy period of time. The other women stared at her, making her uncomfortably aware they did not approve of her new status. While the pain in her hands abated, the wait served to make her headache grow in severity. By the time Liorxton took them in hand, Chelian could barely concentrate. Upon taking note of her condition, the meditech offered treatment, but she refused, not yet inclined to trust their strange medical treatments.

After the tagging ordeal, Chelian was more than happy to follow Del Geod to her chamber. The berth to which she was led could claim less space than her closet-cubicle back home. Sialys occupied the cubicle to her right and Cari the one to her left. They had separated the Deliphits from the rest of the women. Her new role as princess still carried restrictions.

"Fen Dane requests your presence for the break-day meal," Del Geod said. "Tark will fetch you when the time arrives. In the meantime, I hope you find your quarters suitable. Room aboard ship is limited. Several of the men had to vacate these rooms to accommodate all the women."

Fetch her? As if she were a pet *relcid*? Had she escaped one prison only to land in another?

The door closed before the full meaning behind Del Geod's words hit her. Fen Dane would not be joining her. Had she misunderstood his desire? Were the thoughts she'd assumed were his from her own fanciful musings and not those of Fen Dane? Had she mistaken his intent when he requested she tend his wound?

She tossed Bertil on the slim bed. Mated less than a *kleur* ago and neglected for all to see. The insult cut deeper than the talons of a *tarken*. How dare he whisk her away from family and home only to shun her. Her slippers tapped an angry path upon the metal floor. Loneliness draped her shoulders with icy fingers. At Kel, at least she'd had her books, friends written amidst worn pages.

Only the promise in Fen Dane's eyes had prompted her to embrace this new adventure. Her eyes swelled with unshed tears. Even her father's disappointment held less hurt than Fen Dane's lies.

"What now, Bertil?"

*You give up too easily. You should force the man to acknowledge your presence at the very least.* She stared at the closed door. Could she find her way around? Could she find the upper deck where Fen Dane commanded? Dare she try?

*Courage. All I need is courage.* She reached out and touched the door latch. Expelling heavy breath, she tugged at the fastener.

Locked. Discarded and locked away. Until that moment, Chelian had thought Fen Dane a man on some noble mission, but she deluded herself. What purpose did these men entertain for the collection of twenty females? Slavery? A shiver crawled along her spine. Whatever the need, these men meant them harm. She could think of no other reason for them to be locked away.

She pulled away from the door and sank down upon the bed. Sleep would not come easily. Worry for an uncertain future threatened to invade her dreams. And the memory of a pair of *ebonharde* eyes threatened to torment her soul.

\* \* \* \*

*Dane sat very still among the adults surrounding him. He lacked understanding for all the facts, but he knew today's outcome would play a major role in his own destiny. He gripped the edge of the bench and peered up at Zan Burlorek's stern expression.*

*"All rise for the Deliverance of Penalty."*

Dane stood, his mind and heart uneasy. Before the king stood his father, a man of honor and integrity. Yet the king would strip his father of all he held dear. A hush fell over the assembly.

"Kione Reecel Charst, I have found you to be guilty of high treason. While I can well understand the reasons behind your actions, the fact still remains. You have incited rebels to turn against our traditions, our customs, our laws. I have two choices open to me. Death..."

He waited for the whispers to die down before continuing. Dane held his breath. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes.

"...or living death. I choose living death."

Collective murmurs broke the taut silence at this announcement. The tightness in Dane's chest abated with this welcome news. A living death meant exile.

"Silence!" the bailiff demanded. "The king must finish his decree of judgment. The Deliverance of Penalty has not yet been read."

"Kione, you wanted my throne," Zan Burlorek continued. "I will give you a throne. You wanted changes to be made. I will give you a place where you are free to make your own laws and customs."

He paused. Dane glanced about him to see how his father's men took to this announcement. He expected smiles, but instead he found himself surrounded by grim faces. He blinked, not understanding their forlorn attitudes.

"Kione Reecel Charst, I hereby exile you and your men to Pelicosia, a planet in the Lennitere Galaxy. Your sons and the sons of your men will also accompany you. You will be given a ship to command with only enough fuel to see you there. The onboard computer has been programmed to destroy the ship and all on board should you veer from your course. The planet has been deemed habitable with only the

barest of necessities, though at present, no other intelligent life forms reside there. Kione Reecel Charst, I deliver to you the terms of penalty. Do you accept these terms?"

Dane craned his head to look at his father. There was no other choice. His father would accept. To decline meant a death sentence for Kione and all those involved with the opposition against Zan Burlorek's regime.

"You do not have the guts to sacrifice me outright," Kione replied. "You do not wish a martyr. Instead, you sentence us to a living death. With no women, we have no way of procreating. No way of continuing our family lines. What will become of our mates, our daughters?"

The king leaned forward. "As of this day, you have no mates and no daughters. Your women will be returned to their lawful place in society. Already, they are being prepared for slavery."

"No!" Teek Bieltib-Shest cried out.

Dane swiveled his head to view the commotion. Armed guards subdued his father's captain. Teek struggled against the restraining hands holding him but made no further attempts to cry out.

"Again I ask you," Zan Burlorek said. "Do you accept the Deliverance of Penalty?"

"Yea. I accept." Kione replied. A note of defeat made Dane stare hard at his father.

The metal circlet around Dane's wrist began to vibrate. He stared down at the jewelry that labeled him an enemy of the Burdven Sect of the Planet Mioisiad.

The political fiber behind his father's conviction was complicated, a tight weave of conspiracies, lies, and subterfuge. Yet Dane knew his father would accept the verdict, taking pride in knowing he'd somehow gained attention for his cause.

Dane fell in step with the other prisoners. To do otherwise would invite a painful current to flow through his veins. He stared down at the bracelet, a bitter reminder of all he would lose.

"Stand tall, my son," Kione said. "Do not let them know how heavy your heart is by the droop of your shoulders. We will make a new life for ourselves. One where the women are not subjugated and slaves do not exist."

"But, Father, there will be no women where we journey. What will happen to Mother?"

Kione's eyes filled with tears. He did not answer the question.

"Father?" Dane tilted his head back to see his father's face. At six yons, he still had a way to grow before he could meet his father's gaze at the same level.

Kione swiped at his eyes. "Never lose hope, my son. Where there is life and a collection of free thinkers, there is hope. We take among us the most brilliant of minds. I am counting on you to restore our Verside, our united cause. You and the sons of all my men will be victorious in righting the wrongs done this day."

*"I will not let you down," Dane whispered, knowing in his heart he would do whatever his father asked of him. Failure was not an option.*

Long fingers reached for the memory disk. Dane hadn't meant to delve into the past, but tonight he felt a need to be close to his father, close to the pledge that drove his actions. With well-practiced organization, he sleeved the octagon-shaped disk and placed it back in the files.

Del Geod stepped around the corner. "Here, Dane. You will need this." He handed him a glass of *fromt*, a strong fermentation of *selsi* weed and *lancerd* root.

Dane stared at the *ferlai* liquid, the tangy aroma already working its way to his tense nerves. He smiled. Geod knew him well.

"Thank you, Geod. Only you know the full extent of my burden."

"And your frustration. The women all think we mean them harm. They do not understand our lack of attention."

"And I've no intention of enlightening them yet," Dane said. "Their worry will stand us in good stead. It gives us power. We are inexperienced in the ways of the family unit, and each of us will soon find ourselves locked deep within the control of our mate. Though frustration may accompany the wait, I will not allow our men to fall victim to these women. My orders stand. We go slowly into the relationship, slowly and with the voice of command. These women will learn early who rules the hearth."

Geod threw back his head and laughed. "By the sword of the Dragonslayer, I've not heard so many words uttered from your lips in one sitting. Take another sip, Dane. Your throat must be parched after such a speech."

Dane's eyes narrowed. *Make your jokes now, Geod. We'll see who laughs later.*

Geod laughed harder. "Don't think to intimidate me with your thoughts, Dane. We are far too close for such nonsense."

In truth, they *were* close. Geod was like a brother to Dane. He finished the *fromt* in one gulp and smiled. The derisive curve of his lip echoed his mood. The pad of his left thumb stroked the tips of his fingers, back and forth. The nervous habit did little to settle his mind. He should be happy, ecstatic even over his accomplishment. He had gathered more than ninety women for his men.

"Do you think of her often?"

"Who?" Geod seemed puzzled.

"Your mother. I think of my mother and cry a little inside. I cannot remember her face. I can only remember the essence of whom she was."

"My memories are much the same, Dane. May Zan Burlorek die by the great dragon's breath. Our lives were made harder by his edict. I fear our rough ways will prove a challenge for these gentle women."

Dane picked up the decanter and poured another glass of *fromt*. He lifted the strong drink high. Light played upon the rich *ferlai* color and arrested his attention from many worries.

"A toast to our success. To the future of Pelicosia and the laughter of heirs. To the downfall of Zan Burlorek and the Burdven Empire."

Geod's chest rumbled with laughter. "To a king stupid enough to gift us with the *Cressis* and a planet rich in zeal."

Dane joined him in his mirth. "Yea. He unknowingly provided us with the means to see an end to his reign."

"To finding three Deliphits to strengthen our lines with their special gifts," Geod added. "The Verside

cannot die. With our combined genes, the Verside will grow strong once again."

Dane immediately sobered. "Yea. To Sire Kar for gifting me with his most precious gem. Already, I can feel the dragon's blood soar through my body, heating my pores to a fever pitch. I have never known lust so strong. 'Twas the way it was between my father and mother."

"I, too, feel strong desire to make Sialys mine. You did well in choosing her as my mate."

Dane stared at his friend. For long moments, neither spoke. Finally, he broke the silence. "My orders stand for you as well."

The softly spoken rebuke caused Geod to glare at him. "You give this order for more reason than you have explained. I would know why I must not touch my mate. The truth this time."

Dane leaned forward. "You see her now as a receptacle for your lust and nothing more. Time will make her more important to you. If you take her now as is your right, she will hate you for the pain you bring upon her. Time will have her craving your touch as deeply as you desire hers."

"And will you abide by your own edict?"

"I must. The men will be more inclined to follow my orders if I set the example."

"You are ever wise, Fen Dane."

"Or stupid." His chest rose and fell with soft chuckles. "What man purposely sets himself apart from that which he most covets?"

"A man with great insight. You have proven your abilities to lead. I would follow you to the bowels of the great dragon Draccus if I had to."

"I will remember those words, Geod. Once we reach Pelicosia and plant the seeds of our future, I will gather the men and take back what rightly belongs to us. I will see the Verside made great once again."

Geod's face beamed with delight. "To Draccus, the almighty Dragon God, ruler of strength and honor!"

"To Draccus!"

Both men drained their goblets. The fiery liquid did little to squelch Dane's burning desire. He'd felt guilty for leaving Chelian so quickly, but he knew he could not be close to her without touching her. He'd thought to claim her the moment they left Satobik air space, but he'd had time to think—to reflect. He wanted her too much. He needed the distance to gain some semblance of control over his raging desire. The panic he heard in her voice when she'd called out had unnerved him. He'd almost given in to his desire to sweep her up and cart her away to his room.

As difficult as it would be for him, he felt confident in the decision he'd made. For one *myon*, he must refrain from touching his mate. If he allowed himself one touch, he knew he would not be able to restrain the raging lust that boiled within his veins. One *myon* and he would claim his jewel. One *myon*. At the end of that time, they would be safely back on Pelicosia. He wished to begin his complete union to Chelian upon the soil of his planet.

His home.

## Nine

Cari rushed forward, excitement evident by the bounce in her step. "Chelian, look!"

Chelian's eyes widened with wonder. Blinking lights in an array of colors surrounded her. Never had she seen such brilliance. While she admired the interior of the deck, a small crew of men busied themselves with readings and adjustments she couldn't hope to understand. The purpose of each light was lost upon her, yet they lured her forward. Curious, she crept closer.

"Careful, lest you inadvertently send the ship careening toward unknown galaxies."

She spun toward the sound of Fen Dane's commanding voice, withdrawing her hand as she did so. "You startled me."

"'Twas not my intent."

"Indeed. And what is your intent?"

He tilted his head, his expression one of bafflement. "I do not follow."

"I don't understand why you've brought us all here. What do you have in mind for the women?"

His eyes narrowed to smoldering slits. "What does any man want from his woman?"

Her stomach chose that moment to grumble with hunger. Embarrassed, her gaze scanned the floor. "I wouldn't know, Fen Dane."

"Nay, of this I am most glad."

Her eyes lifted to meet his. Did he tease her? He acted as if she still tempted him, but how could she? He'd yet to even touch her. She'd thought—no, hoped he would give her the power to be normal. The waiting proved torturous. She'd thought last night he'd come to her. He hadn't.

"Come, my Lady Fem. Your stomach protests its lack of nourishment. We will take our break-day meal in the galley. If I have time later this *daton*, I will give you a tour of the *Cressis*."

Her gaze followed the curve of his bare arm to his hand. Disappointment flared within her chest. His hand remained limp beside his thigh. She'd anticipated his hand outstretched toward her in invitation. Dejected, she preceded him toward the exit when a squeal brought her around once again.

Fen Dane had snatched up Cari, pulling her away from the panel of lights. His expression displayed annoyance while Cari's showed dismay.

"You must not touch any of the lights, Cari. 'Twould prove dangerous to the ship and crew."

"I didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to see if they were hot."

His fierce demeanor softened. "You have a child's curiosity, but in future, you will ask someone to assist you when next you get the urge to explore. Come, you will join us for the meal."

He held Cari's hand as he brought her forward. Chelian blinked. He'd touched a Deliphit. They both seemed unchanged for the experience. Cari was young, perhaps too young to have developed her full powers. She'd gone through her budding, else her father wouldn't have given her away so readily. Yet nothing miraculous had occurred when Fen Dane touched her.

A raw pain knifed through Chelian's insides. Fen Dane had touched another. He couldn't find it within himself to touch his own mate, yet he touched Cari. No matter that she was a child, she was still Deliphit. Chelian gazed down at their entwined hands. He offered to Cari what she craved most.

*In due time, fiol'ston. In due time.*

Her eyes snapped to his. Had she dreamed the subtle chastisement?

Shaking free of her troubled thoughts, she preceded the two to the lifter. The exit door opened. She climbed inside the levitating box and waited for Fen Dane and Cari. He steered Cari inside, dropping her hand as he did so.

"Chelian, Fen Dane says I'm to live with you and him. He's going to teach me all about Pelicosia. I get a room to myself, and he's even going to let me have a pet. A ... a tro ... tra—"

"A *trelden*," he said. "I think you'll find it similar to your *relcid*, but its fur is much thicker."

"Your generosity is overwhelming," Chelian said.

He narrowed his eyes. "You need not be jealous of the child, Chelian. I refrain from touching you for a reason."

"I don't recall complaining."

"You did not have to. Your disappointment shows upon your face."

"But you touched a Deliphit. You touched Cari and nothing happened."

"She poses no threat to anyone. Her powers are limited due to her age, but she must also want to cause harm. Your affliction is controllable."

"How do you know all of this?"

"She told me."

She looked at Cari who shrugged. The door to the lifter opened, saving Chelian from making further comment. They entered the dining area where she and Cari were seated across from Fen Dane. Protocol was handled exactly as if they were still on Satobik. Servants set community plates piled high with food between mates. A spearing fork rested before Fen Dane. Because of Cari's youth, he would be responsible for feeding both Chelian and Cari. A bittersweet smell wafted from the plate, making her mouth water in anticipation.

Fen Dane's long, tapered fingers closed around the spearing fork. "What do you desire?"

Her eyes lifted to his. His eyelids dropped low over his dark eyes. Breath became difficult as feelings she could not name churned within. The innocently asked question took her far from food. Desire? She desired to be normal above all else. She desired to be touched as if she were real.

She blinked and pointed to a round, plump bite. "That looks good."

He speared the bite and brought it to her mouth. She sank her teeth into the semi-sweet morsel and savored the unfamiliar flavor.

She finished chewing and asked, "What is it?"



"You have just tasted the eyeball of a *mimiron*."

Her eyes opened wider than normal, and her stomach grumbled in protest. *Eyeball? Mimiron?* They were foul animals. He speared another bite and lifted it toward her.

She grimaced. "I don't think I care for any more. Thank you."

The eyeball on the fork bounced up and down as he laughed. "I but jest, Chelian. It's actually a seed pod from a *dangerine* tree. We have an abundance on board the ship, since it keeps well for long distances."

She smiled. He'd teased her. She hadn't thought him capable of light, trivial banter. She eyed the bite suspiciously but opened her mouth to receive what he offered. Next he offered Cari a bite, then placed the fork on the table so Chelian could spear him a piece. The feeding ritual continued until they were all sated.

"I enjoyed the meal," she said. "Thank you. The food is much different from that on Satobik."

"Yea, and you will find an even wider variety once we land. The food on board is limited to fruits, vegetables, and dried meats."

"How long will it take to reach your planet?"

"With no delays, about ... a *myon*."

"You seem hesitant. Do you expect difficulties?"

The corners of his mouth lifted, displaying perfect white teeth. "You worry too much."

"I—I can't help it," she said. "Put yourself in my place. I've been taught my whole life that Satobik is the only planet with human life. Now, of a sudden, I find myself on a spaceship traveling across galaxies so I might be mated to a man not of my world. Would you not worry a little if you were me?"

"Don't play with the napkin, Cari. Leave it in your lap while you eat until you have need of it." He turned back toward Chelian, his brow puckered in consternation. "I see your point, yet have I not been kind? Have you not received the best of care as our guest?"

"You locked me in my room. I don't find anything kind about being held captive."

"Locked? Your door was not locked."

"But it was," Chelian insisted. "I couldn't get out once you left me there. I was able to leave only when Del Geod came to fetch me."

"Did you try pulling on the handle instead of pushing?" Cari asked.

"Pulling?"

"I couldn't open the door either until I fiddled with it for a while. The closing mechanism doesn't work like the ones back home."

"Oh." She'd accused Fen Dane unjustly. Her skin grew warm. "I apologize, Fen Dane. I thought the worst."

"Apology accepted," he said. "When I escort you back, I will check to make sure you know how everything works. I am sure there are other things that will seem foreign to you."

"Like the personal closet?" Cari peered at Fen Dane, her smile contagious on her youthful features. Fen Dane popped another bite of *dangerine* pod into her mouth.

"Indeed. I will gladly show you the workings of various items within the personal closet."

His eyes met Chelian's, and she refrained from groaning out loud. These items seemed too intimate yet to share with a man. She'd rather just figure them out on her own, but she knew her skills with mechanical objects were limited. She dared not refuse his help.

Del Geod chose that moment to approach Fen Dane. Leaning over his shoulder, he closed his eyes. Chelian watched her mate frown before setting down the fork and nodding.

"I am needed elsewhere. You and Cari may attend each other for the rest of the meal."

Odd. How had Del Geod communicated without moving his lips? A suspicion planted itself, but Chelian's attention was distracted before it could firmly root. No sooner had Fen Dane stood to leave than Deliah entered, trailed by her sister Katrin. She accosted the prince when he prepared to depart.

"Fen Dane, I want a moment of your time."

"It will have to keep."

"No, it won't keep. My sister and I have been thrust into an impossible situation. One I want rectified immediately."

"Indeed."

"You forced us to make this journey," Deliah said, "but you've made no attempt to provide mates for us. We have no one here to care for our needs. I'm not used to such neglect. You've broken your word to our father. I demand you turn this vessel around and take us home."

Katrin nodded, allowing her sister to do all the talking. Chelian understood their frustration. She felt the same about Fen Dane's secretive need for so many women.

"I will attribute your ignorance of manners to a strong case of nerves," Fen Dane replied. "Do you forget you are here because of your father, because he attempted to have Del Geod and myself terminated?" Deliah pursed her lips tighter, causing Fen Dane's frown to deepen. "Enough. I have more pressing things to attend to."

"You ... you give a Deliphit more deference than you give the daughters of a noble. I demand you rectify things."

He threw his napkin onto the table. "Demand? Feon, see these women escorted from my sight. Del Geod, I believe we are needed in the engineering room."

Feon took hold of Deliah's elbow, meaning to direct her toward the exit, but she deftly yanked her arm from his grasp. Cari giggled. Deliah turned toward the sound, her face a bright *vraed*.

"I will not be treated lower than a Deliphit."

Katrin rested a calming hand upon her sister's shoulder. "Come, Deliah. You've made enough of a spectacle. I'm sure Fen Dane and his men don't wish us harm, else we'd both be feeling the pain of this *daton's* transgression."

Deliah looked around the room at the many eyes that stared at her with something akin to horror. The tip

of her tongue slipped out to wet her lips. She settled her gaze upon Chelian.

"Think you've found a safe harbor among these barbarians? Just remember from whence you came. You are and will always be an aberration. You will never blend in among these people."

Chelian tried to mask her hurt with resignation. "I know what and who I am, Deliah."

Feon smiled. "Yea. She's Fen Dane's mate, a princess who will become queen. Can *you* claim such an honor?"

Chelian blinked at the sudden moisture filling her eyes. Fen Dane's man had defended her against Deliah's taunts. If only Fen Dane felt similar pride in her.

Deliah left in a huff, no doubt bitter at having her desires rebuffed so publicly. Chelian could almost sympathize with the woman. In his own way, Fen Dane had rebuffed her too. He had taken her for mate, yet he couldn't bring himself to touch her. The public slight caused more grief than any she'd experienced on Satobik.

\* \* \* \*

"Show me."

Geod unlocked a circuit board connected to the main *servian* cells. He stepped out of the way to give Dane a closer look.

"I thought at first the difficulty resulted from a dirty *tanitare* bulb. This ship is way past its prime. Regardless, I spent most of the evening cleaning bulbs and cursing this bolt factory. When I discovered we still had a problem with the zeal feed line, I decided to check the circuit board."

Dane fingered the cut wires. The slight scent of *solfon* lingered in the air. "Are you having the same thoughts as I?"

"Either someone wants to sabotage this mission," Geod said, "or an assassin has been hired to see you dead. I like neither scenario."

"Yea."

Silence followed as each man contemplated the severity of the situation. Dane studied the cut wire as if the sharp ends might give him answers. This area had been locked. Either someone had breached the lock through nefarious methods, or someone he trusted had used the code to gain access. His shoulder blades burned with tension.

Geod stirred beside him and lifted his chin. "Any ideas who might want to cause you harm, cause us harm?"

"Nay, but I do not think this is their first attempt."

"The attack on Satobik?"

"Yea. 'Tis why I could not see punishing Vale Tibdon as was my right. And besides, we needed those two women to complete our quota."

"So Vale Tibdon was not in control of his thoughts when he ordered the attack."

"Have you any other solution?" Dane asked. "Think. I believe one of our men used mind control to manipulate Vale Tibdon. No one would think to question any of our men. In fact, Sire Kar didn't even

come near any of them with his Stone of Arznan."

"And now this." Geod indicated the circuitry with a nod of his head. "The wire is repairable, but the disconnected circuit drained our resources. It pulled power but sent it nowhere. We have enough zeal to see us home, but barely any left for mistakes. Any more setbacks and we might find ourselves drifting in space for the remainder of our lives."

"Not a very pleasing prospect," Dane said. "Let's keep this just between ourselves. I do not want anyone else knowing just how much power has been drained from our stores."

"We could always turn back and retrieve some of the bounty we gave the Bastians." Geod's eyebrows lifted in a suggestive manner.

Dane shot him a disgruntled look.

"It was just a suggestion."

"Have Tronien plot the straightest course possible for Pelicosia," Dane ordered. "You and Feon continue to tune this wreck until she functions at optimum performance. That might give us a little more leeway."

"Consider it done. And you?"

"I plan to ferret out our saboteur. Somehow, Zan Burlorek has discovered our plot to remove him from power. I have a promise to fulfill, and no one is going to stop me. Zan Burlorek must pay for his atrocities against the Verside and the people of Mioisiad. I owe it to my father. I owe it to the Verside."

"Careful, Fen Dane, lest you let your bloodlust shadow the things that are truly important."

"Have you changed your mind, Geod? Do you not plan to follow me to Mioisiad?"

"As I've told you before, I will follow you to the great bowels of the dragon beast, but I have new aspirations. I have a mate now. Do you not see this as a second chance? A mate is the beginning of family. I am looking forward to raising my sons and daughters. I do not want to throw that away for vengeance if we have no hope of winning. Some battles we were not meant to fight."

"You fail to remember Zan Burlorek's evil," Dane said. "Our spy tells us he is obsessed with power. The man has taken his need into foreign regions. He seeks new planets to control. What will stop him from coming to Pelicosia once he learns of the women?"

Del Geod had the good grace to look contrite, yet he continued to argue. "Pelicosia is too small, too weak for his appetite. I doubt he would bother."

"Nay, you must never assume where Zan Burlorek is concerned. He would take the planet just for spite, just to torment the Verside further. Our best defense is to attack when he least expects it."

"By Draccus, I cannot believe you would risk so many lives, Fen Dane. You know I believe in the cause, yet I cannot help but think there is a better way. To attack with so few seems foolhardy."

"Then I go alone. No matter what the odds, I have sworn an oath."

"And what will Chelian say when you die and leave her alone with no mate?"

Dane frowned. He stared at the circuitry without seeing any of it. Geod continued planting thoughts and ideas he did not want to dwell upon.

"I have yet to touch Sialys, and already I feel bonded."

"Love is a draining force and not advisable," Dane said. "You are a warrior, Geod. First and foremost, your allegiance is to me. Second, your allegiance is to the Verside. Your allegiance to Sialys ranks third. Never forget this."

"And revenge has a way of backfiring. Never forget that, Dane."

Geod had dropped his title, and Dane knew then that he offered this advice as his friend and not as one of his officers.

"Yea, Geod. But this is more than a need for vengeance. This is about justice and preserving our way of life. I will not have our women subjected to Zan Burlorek's idea of family. No matter the cost, I will see an end to his tyranny."

## Ten

Dane pushed the portal open without knocking. In this manner, he demonstrated his domination over their relationship. He could not visualize any other way for their bond to progress. Control was a way of life for him. He expected censure for his boldness, but he got no reaction at all. Chelian lay upon the bed, pale and unresponsive.

"I would know why you have not left this room in three *datons*." Dane discerned a slight movement of her head. The soft glow of an interior light framed her limp body.

"Miss me?"

Her toneless reply made him take a step closer. Concern filled him as he noted the pallid cast to her skin. "You are my mate. My concern is genuine." He tried not to snap at her, but frustration made his tone more harsh than necessary.

"I feel poorly."

"You should have told someone."

"I'm used to attending to myself during bouts of sickness. I just needed time to rest."

"Three *datons* is too long to be ill without help, Chelian. I apologize for not noticing your absence sooner, else I would have taken care of you."

Guilt made his words sound defensive even to his ears. He was used to caring for individuals within the Verside, but he had never been personally responsible for the welfare of a woman. He felt uncomfortable with such an obligation, yet he had instigated the union. Was he having second thoughts on the matter?

"How?" she asked. "You won't even touch me."

Eyelids weighted by more than worry and fatigue lifted slowly. Dark circles framed pools of *nezarine*. She curled into a fetal position, her arms cradling her stomach. He cringed. He had no idea how to help her.

"When did you last eat?"

"I can't."

"Can't what? Can't tell me or can't eat?"

"Can't—" Her eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth. Without another word, she ran to the personal cabinet where her stomach heaved its sparse contents.

Fen Dane stood rooted, at a loss for how to handle the situation. Sickness visited the Verside infrequently. The men were more apt to suffer a wound in practice than complain of stomach ailments or fevers. He closed his eyes and concentrated on reaching out with his mind to his meditech.

*Liorxton.*

*Here, Fen Dane.*

*I need you on the third level, compartment eighteen. One of our women is ill.*

One of our women? Why couldn't he let Liorxton know it was *his* woman that lay abed?

*On my way, Fen Dane.*

Dane took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Chelian stumbled from the cabinet and headed straight for the bed. He took a step closer, concern for his mate claiming his full attention. A foul odor wafted from the small closet. His fists clenched tight. He longed to stroke her brow and ascertain her temperature. Even at her worst, she caused his lust to rise to the surface. He dared not touch her yet. The order he had given to the Verside must include himself.

She accused him with her eyes. "I'd feel better if you'd go away and leave me in peace. Your brooding silence isn't welcome." Her head fell against the bedding, her long hair dull and limp.

"Do you hurt elsewhere?"

"What do you care?"

"I care, *fiol'ston*. It pains me that you can't see it."

"Mmm ... that's why you've been to see me each evening. That's why you stand there gawking."

His brow puckered in a frown. "Your sarcasm is unbecoming. I had duties that demanded my attention."

"Please leave, Fen Dane. I'm not good company at present."

"Dane. As my mate, you need not attach my title."

"Leave, Dane. I don't want you to see me like this."

Her chest rose and fell with the exertion of speech. He hated seeing her so weak. Guilt continued to eat at his insides. He should have checked on her sooner. He'd been selfish in keeping his distance, but in truth, he hadn't wanted to be tempted by her presence.

*Fen Dane?*

Liorxton waited just outside the door. Dane turned to admit the meditech into Chelian's chamber.

"You should have told me it was your woman who was ill, Fen Dane. I would have hurried my pace."

"Liorxton, thank you for coming. Something ails her stomach. You must make her well."

Liorxton approached the bed, but Dane stopped him with his hand. "You mustn't touch her. She's Deliphit."

"Not touch her? How do you expect me to heal her if I cannot examine her?"

Dane's lips pressed together in indecision. He wanted Chelian well, yet he did not want Liorxton to be the first to touch her. Selfishly, he reserved the pleasure for himself.

"Chelian, tell Liorxton how you suffer."

"*Nock*. I just need the two of you to leave me be. Let me die in peace."

"You exaggerate." He turned to the meditech. "She keeps emptying the contents of her stomach. And she appears feverish. Any thoughts?"

"By the splotches of red on her neck, I'd say she's contracted *Niolmiadri*."

"Beg pardon?"

"It's a stomach virus, something she must have contracted en route. We—you and I and the other men—are carriers of the virus, though we've been inoculated against actually catching it. I have already treated about fifteen other women with the same symptoms."

"I would have thought the decontamination process would have prevented such difficulties."

"Nay." Liorxton opened a bag containing an assortment of medical supplies. "The decontamination only affects diseases contracted from outside the Verside. The Verside already carried this particular virus. Do not worry. 'Twill pass quickly with proper medication." He pulled out a metal container and opened it to reveal several vials of *augrid* liquid. He lifted a vial and inserted it into a pressurized injector. "This will ease her pain and settle her stomach."

Dane nodded. "Chelian, you will consume whatever Liorxton gives you."

"Another order?" she said. "I feel blessed."

She didn't look blessed. Shame over her predicament gnawed at his conscience. If he hadn't pulled her away from her home and her family, she wouldn't now be suffering.

Liorxton placed the injector on the bedside table and backed away. "Hold it in front of your mouth and point it toward your throat. Push down on the release mechanism and the medicine will enter your system and give you immediate relief."

Chelian struggled to sit up. With shaky fingers she picked up the medicine. She held it to her opened mouth and gagged when the liquid exploded in the back of her throat. She dropped the empty injector, and her head fell back against the pillow.

The *Cressis* lurched, tossing Chelian to the far side of the bed. Knuckles white with fear gripped the coverlet. Dane grabbed for a nearby chair to steady his own stance, while Liorxton fell to the floor.

*Fen Dane! Your presence is needed on deck.*

The urgency of the telepathic summons pulled him away from his desire to be with Chelian.

"Dane?" Chelian's eyes filled with distress and something he'd hoped never to see: mistrust. The ship lurched and rocked, gripped by a nameless force. He couldn't worry over Chelian as he should, as he wanted. A stronger duty called to him.

"Liorxton, see to her care. I'll be on deck."

*Tark? What difficulty do you experience?* Dane staggered toward the portal, fighting the turbulent pitch of his ship. The door slammed behind him in his haste to heed Tark's request.

*We have encountered a nova, Fen Dane.*

*I will be on deck presently.*

He made haste as he navigated levels and corridors. An exploding star presented a serious hazard, and the *Cressis* was not equipped with the most modern equipment.

"Fen Dane, what has happened?" Several women blocked his path.



"Go back to your cabins and secure yourselves. Though I do not anticipate any trouble, the ride will be shaky for a few *mones*."

"But it's not serious? We're not going to die, are we?"

He tried to smile and assure them without lying. "The crew will do all in their power to see you safely to our destination. Now, if you will excuse me, my presence is needed on deck."

He rushed past them, not waiting to see if they followed his advice. At the moment, his main concern lay with the *Cressis* and the serious nature of the nova. By the time he reached the main deck, the ship held a steady course. Even so, the men on watch displayed a chaotic front.

Dane's presence seemed to calm things. His ability to affect the situation in a positive manner heightened his feeling of responsibility. The burden to unravel any problems they might encounter rested solely on his shoulders.

"Tark, status report."

"The force of the explosion pushed us into a ribbon," Tark replied. "The ship sliced through at least four galaxies. The navigational system is down. There's some *sersial* damage to the fourth level, but I have been told it's minor. The main *sersian* cells seem to be holding, thanks to Feon."

"Del Geod?"

"No damage to our weapons or protective shield," Geod replied, "but we are way off course, and I can't get a bearing."

"Why isn't Tronien on duty?" Dane asked. Their navigator needed to be there if the navigational system had failed. The man had some serious explaining to do.

"He's in the brig, Fen Dane."

"The brig?"

"Yea. He was caught fondling his mate. I felt it necessary to make an example of him in case any others were of a like mind. I placed him under arrest for the duration of the trip home," Del Geod reported.

Dane would have laughed if the situation weren't so dire. They would have to manage without Tronien. He could not gainsay Del Geod's authority by having the man released, and he agreed with Del Geod's handling of the matter. He'd given an order, one he meant to see obeyed. On the other hand, he could well sympathize with Tronien's desire. Lust for Chelian ran through his own veins with an urgency he found almost overwhelming. Fortunately, he had the ship and his crew; a huge responsibility capable of distracting him from Chelian's seductive powers.

"Bring me the book of charts."

"Think you can read them?" Geod asked.

"We're about to find out."

When the large book had been placed before him, Dane flipped through the pages, comparing each chart to the view outside. Nothing seemed to match up.

"Bring her to luff, Tark."

"You would have us drift aimlessly?"

"Do you question a direct order?"

"Nay. I'll see it done."

Del Geod peered over his shoulder. "It's been a long time since we've had to rely on antiquated astrology. Remember any of it?"

"Nay. I admit to a loss."

The hairs upon his neck alerted Dane to her presence. He turned to find Chelian peering at the charts from a distance, Liorxton at her side. The meditech shrugged when Dane sent him a questioning glance.

"To what purpose have you brought my mate, Liorxton?"

Liorxton opened his mouth, but Chelian spoke first.

"I ... I wanted to see your face when we all died aboard this vessel. You've taken ninety-five women from their homes only to see their lives endangered. How could you practice such deceit?"

Her anger sizzled between them, sparking his interest two-fold. The medication had already helped return a smidgen of color to her cheeks. Silence followed as each officer on deck awaited his reply. He turned his head, dismissing her concerns. Time did not allow for such petty fears.

"Return to your quarters, Chelian. You interrupt my concentration."

"Nay. I'll not be put off by your superior demands. I want to know what danger we face."

"The danger at present is minimal." He swallowed his pride, thinking it couldn't hurt to be honest. "The *Cressis* sliced through a ribbon, placing us severely off course. We are ... we are lost."

"What is a ribbon?" She took a staggering step forward.

"Space is filled with all manner of anomalies. Simply stated, a ribbon is a sort of shortcut from one galaxy to another. With a more modern ship, we might have been able to take advantage of their existence, but the *Cressis* is a relic. Unfortunately, she's all we have. Ribbons are unpredictable, and this particular ribbon has placed us in an unfamiliar galaxy."

Chelian's eyes drifted to the large viewing window. She walked slowly to the edge and studied the forest of stars that glittered in the distance. "To the right is the Georelle Galaxy. I can see the Nineyan Constellation way off in the distance."

Dane immediately flipped through the charts until he found the one which correlated to the Georelle Galaxy. Del Geod handed him a sexton, an ancient tool he'd kept as a novelty item. Dane stared at the item, frustrated that he didn't understand its use. Del Geod shrugged. He obviously lacked the knowledge to work the item as well.

Dane glanced back at Chelian. The graceful line of her back made an enticing picture as she stood against the inky blackness. "Your knowledge surprises me."

She turned. "Why? You knew I kept the library. I've even braved my father's anger to invade his private horde of books. Astrology has always intrigued me, and I spent long moments studying the subject."

"Then you might find this item of interest." He lifted the metal tool for her inspection. "It's called a sexton,

an artifact handed down four generations. I have been told it is based on an ancient instrument used by sailors on a distant planet called Earth."

She reached out to take it from him, and he shook his head. He laid it upon the chart book for her to retrieve if she wanted. Warm color flooded her cheeks, but she seemed to understand. She waited for him to step back before reaching for the instrument. Delicate hands touched the sexton with reverent awe.

A smile lit her face. "There was a similar item in our archives. The numbers are a bit worn on this one, but it appears to be functional."

"Then you are familiar with its use?"

"*Selt*. You hold it toward the sky, finding a familiar star as a start point. From there, you take a reading to determine your distance from the start point."

"Could you determine our distance from Pelicosia with this?"

Her forehead wrinkled as she stroked her chin. "I think so. Give me half a *kleur* and I could even plot you a course."

"Do you feel well enough?"

"*Selt*. I think having purpose takes my mind off my worries. I feel much better after taking the medicine. I ... I want to be useful, and I hate the thought of going back to that tiny cubicle. Please, I want to be useful. I can do this, Fen Dane."

"Yea, I believe you can."

"You can't mean to put our lives in the hands of Chelian." Deliah came through the portal to enter the main deck, her step full of purpose.

Dane groaned. "I should have thought to make this part of the ship off limits to all the women. Remind me to correct this oversight, Del Geod."

"You make light of me, Fen Dane," Deliah said. "I'm not used to being so ignored."

His eyes swept her meticulously groomed façade, and he assumed her haughty manner must result from her pampered status in the Bastian community. This particular female would likely cause them grief. She and her sister were as yet unmated to any particular male. He must rectify the situation posthaste.

"Chelian, continue with your work," Dane said. "I will see to Deliah."

Chelian barely acknowledged his statement as she was so engrossed in trying to plot their course. Her easy dismissal of him tweaked a nerve.

"I still fail to understand why you chose her over any of the rest of us, Fen Dane," Deliah said. "You can't even touch her. What good will she be to you as mate?"

"Your disrespect is distressing, Deliah," Dane replied. "Our customs do not allow a subject to question a prince's decisions."

Her lips clamped tightly.

"Tark," Dane said.

"Yea, Fen Dane?"

"I have done you a disservice. I forced you to leave the planet early before I chose for you a mate. Deliah came to us after the mating ceremony—she and her sister both. I think your forceful personality will be a suitable compliment to Deliah's arrogant demeanor. What say you? Will she suit as your mate?"

Deliah's eyes rounded to the size of *denitrate* biscuits. Dane found her reaction amusing and smiled. Tark circled around the woman, giving her a thorough inspection that caused her cheeks to glow a deep *vraed*.

"She appears small and dainty," Tark said. "I might crush her with my size."

"I think she is sturdier than she appears," Dane replied.

"You dare discuss me as if I was livestock?" Deliah said. "And this man is but a common soldier. Fen Dane, I will take only a noble for mate."

Tark growled low in his throat, clearly offended by her ridicule. "Yea, Fen Dane. I gladly accept the challenge of this one. I announce to those present my intent. I claim Deliah for my own."

"Then by the power of my throne, I proclaim it so," Dane said. "Now, escort her back to her chamber."

"Wait!" Deliah cried. "Do I not have a say?"

"Tark?" Dane lifted a brow.

"Yea, Fen Dane. I will return presently after I have seen to the care of this woman."

Deliah's verbal protests could be heard in the hall even after she'd been escorted from the deck. Dane didn't envy Tark, yet he felt confident in the man's ability to handle her. They would do well together.

"That was rather high-handed of you," Chelian said, her head still bowed over the charts.

"I did not appreciate her attack upon your character."

Slender shoulders rose and fell in a nonchalant manner. "I'm used to similar insults."

"You accept such as your due?"

Deep *nezarine* eyes lifted to his with intense regard. "*Nock*. But I don't dwell on hateful actions either."

"You seem angry, but not at Deliah. Your anger is directed toward me?"

She raised the sexton and held it up, aligning it with the stars. "Not only handsome, but astute as well. How lucky I am to have you for mate." She put the sexton back down.

Dane's nostrils flared. "You will explain your attitude."

Hands slammed down upon the charts, causing the sexton to bounce upon the sheaves of paper. "You take me from my home with false promises. You lie about our destination until I find myself soaring through space and it is too late to turn back. Anxiety makes me ill, yet you don't find it in your heart to check on my care. You abandon me to a small room for days. Oh, and let's not forget the most important of transgressions."

He folded his arms over his chest and propped his hip against the table. "By all means. Don't stop now."

"I am still a pariah. I am still as I was—untouched."

Her voice trembled, and raw pain etched her words. Guilt cut a swift path across his conscience. His arms fell to his sides, and he pushed away from the table.

*You yearn for my touch, fiol'ston?*

He smiled when she winced. Her desire for his touch pleased him. He would need to tread carefully.

"I keep my distance for a reason, but it is not what you think, Chelian."

"Then why?"

He balked at having to explain himself, but something in her eyes beckoned him to share his inner thoughts. The pad of his thumb stroked his fingertips. His hesitation made her frown before dismissing him with her eyes.

She turned her attention toward the charts, flipping through them carefully. He watched her diligence with his property. Pride made his heart full. He had chosen well. Everything would work out for them, of this he was confident.

"Chelian, I would begin our relationship on my home planet where we can be free to explore each other's gifts. Here I am torn between my duty to the *Cressis* and my duty to you. Guiding us home will take all my concentration. I do not want to be pulled from this responsibility by thoughts of you."

She pointed to the chart, ignoring his explanation. "Here, Fen Dane. If you traverse toward the Nebulire and through these three galaxies, you should find yourself on a course for Pelicosia."

He stared at her slender finger, a delicately formed extremity that could stroke the fire between his loins. If only he would allow it. A dry mouth made it difficult to swallow.

"You do not believe me," he said.

She continued to avert her gaze. "I find I'm growing tired of explanations and excuses. You gathered women from Bastia for a purpose only you and your men have knowledge of. I know better than to hope when there's no cause. I've known since my birth that a normal life wasn't meant for me."

By the dragon's sword, he wanted to comfort her; drag her into his arms and show her how wrong she was. But now was not the time. He'd made his vow, and he meant to keep it. He would make her his on the eve of their return to Pelicosia. Until then, he must keep his distance or break his vow.

*Patience, fiol'ston. I will tend you properly when we reach my home. No power on my planet or yours will stop me then.*

## Eleven

"I want to go home. There's nothing to do here." Cari voiced another complaint.

Chelian rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and asked Orius to grant her patience. "Perhaps we can make up some sort of game to play when we finish with the break-day meal." She fed another bite to Cari before feeding herself.

Cari wasn't old enough yet to participate in the mealtime ritual. As for Chelian, Fen Dane's duty to his crew kept him absent from the table for most of the meals. She wondered yet again if he wasn't avoiding her. She tried to think how she'd offended him, but nothing came to mind.

"I'd rather just go home," Cari said.

"I'm tired of traveling too, but we still have a long way until we reach our destination. Your ill humor this early in the voyage doesn't serve anyone." Chelian speared another bite for her, but the child shook her head.

"I'm tired of this strange food. I want *gelsy* cakes or *tybiak*. I don't want yucky seed pods."

Chelian set down the fork. Her own appetite had abated several bites ago. Cari wasn't the only one affected by the voyage. Boredom had made most of the women irritable of late. Her own mood could be called morose at best. She toyed with the fork and felt the back of her neck tingling with apprehension. She tried to ascertain what had caused the chill of foreboding and caught Deliah staring at her with a less-than-generous expression on her face.

"Every day they eat at the same table as we do," Deliah's voice commanded the attention of all seated at the table. "It's not right. The three of them should not be allowed to join us for meals. I think it's time we take our protests to Fen Dane."

Chelian tried to ignore Deliah's wicked tongue, but each day her complaints became more verbal, more focused, and her constant ridicule wore on Chelian's nerves. She stared at the remainder of her meal without seeing it. The food had lost all flavor.

She glanced at Sialys and noted that the woman had grown thinner under the strain as well. And to think Chelian had entertained hopes of being accepted. Dreams of a normal existence filled her nights while the cruel dawn of reality clawed at her insides. Though she'd like to lay the cause of her unhappiness at Fen Dane's feet, she had only herself to blame.

Thinking she needed to eat more and regain her strength, Chelian reached for the jelled taom at the exact moment Deliah did. Though their fingers did not touch, they came close. Deliah let out an exaggerated squeal. "Tark! Tark, I demand you assign restitution. Chelian has overstepped her circle of seclusion. She almost touched me. I won't have it."

Chelian's hands fell to her lap and began picking at the fabric of her gown. She lowered her eyes, knowing that to meet Deliah's gaze would only spur the woman to further complaints. Since Fen Dane and Del Geod were both on deck, it fell to Tark to answer any grievances.

"I think you malign the Deliphits unjustly." Tark's rich baritone in defense of them made Chelian smile.

Deliah's eyes rounded and her cheeks puffed out. Dishes ceased to rattle as others grew interested in the conversation. Silence saturated the dining area. Chelian's neck muscles stiffened with tension. All eyes rested on Deliah, awaiting her response to Tark's casual statement. She placed the spearing tool next to

her plate and glared at Tark. "You have no knowledge of a Deliphit's evil. These women are not to be trusted. Any Bastian will tell you this."

Tark leaned forward, his spearing tool pointed toward Deliah. "Have you firsthand experience with Chelian's powers? Have you felt the touch of Sialys and discerned the evilness within? Perhaps you can tell us just how Cari plans to cause us harm."

"I don't need firsthand experience to know how dangerous they are."

"But *how* do you know?" Tark asked. "You have been told your whole life that a Deliphit's touch causes harm, yet none of you can tell me exactly how. You've accepted this information on blind faith."

Chelian's attention riveted on Tark. The man defended them for no reason. Would Fen Dane share such sentiments? Murmurs of dissent rounded the table. None of the Bastian women wanted to believe Tark's assumptions.

"The law—"

Tark slammed his hands upon the table. "*Cruent!* Your laws don't apply here or on Pelicosia. This will be a new beginning for everyone."

"But—"

"Enough, Deliah. Your protests make you appear petty and small."

"And your defense of these Deliphits makes you appear stupid and ill-advised."

Chelian gasped. She'd dared to argue with Fen Dane on several occasions, had incurred his verbal wrath more than once since boarding the *Cressis*, but she would never belittle him before his men in a like manner. Deliah had much to learn about men, especially those belonging to the Verside. Tark could not accept such an insult without some form of retaliation.

"Excuse yourself from the meal, Deliah," he said. "I'll not share my plate with you this morn."

The corners of Deliah's mouth curved downward, and her eyes became slivers of fury. "Indeed. A fine idea since I don't like sharing my meal with Chelian and the others. In fact, I plan to take my meals in my room from now on."

Chelian could hold her tongue no longer. She didn't like being the focus of such bitter hatred. "Perhaps it would be best if Sialys, Cari, and I took our meals elsewhere. We don't want to cause any grief."

Tark pushed his chair from the table and stood. The look upon his face was as fierce as any she'd seen on Fen Dane's. "Nay. Since Fen Dane is not present, I will speak for him." His eyes swept the entire group. "Chelian is his mate, his princess. You must revere her as you would Fen Dane. This silly prejudice you foster must cease. The Deliphits will become a part of our society with all rights bestowed upon them."

"But the order not to touch—"

Deliah jumped on the suggestive remark made by one of the other women. "Yes, Tark. What of Fen Dane's unwillingness to touch Chelian? He obviously ordered all the men not to touch their mates because he didn't want to single out the Deliphits, but in truth he can't bring himself to fulfill his manly obligations."

Chelian's heart lurched at the bitter reminder of Fen Dane's edict. His lack of attention was no secret, but to have it voiced so publicly caused an acute pain to settle within her chest.

Tark's cheek muscle bulged and his nostrils flared. Around the table, the rest of Fen Dane's men condemned Deliah with heated looks. She had slandered Fen Dane with words no one with any prudence would ever have dared. Chelian sought to circumvent some of Tark's anger and address Deliah's concerns herself.

"Deliah, I'm sure Fen Dane has his reasons for wishing to wait until we reach his home planet. I'm used to your insults, but the prince does not deserve such abuse."

Tark turned his anger toward Chelian. "Do not think to lessen her transgression by bringing attention to your situation. The woman is mine to chastise."

"Beg pardon, Tark," Chelian said. "I did not mean to offend with my gentle rebuke."

He ran a hand over his face. Sighing, he said, "You are not capable of insult, my Fem. 'Tis I who should beg pardon for offending you with my anger. I must remember the Bastian women were raised differently. There will likely be many occasions when our views do not harmonize."

Deliah shoved back her chair, toppling it as she did. "I won't stay in this room with these Deliphits another *mone*."

Tark turned his head to watch his mate storm from the room. His face appeared grim, but he made no move to go after her.

Katrin smiled gently at Chelian. "I apologize for my sister, Chelian. She's been very irritable. She has never traveled well, and this voyage has pushed her temperament to its limits."

"I understand," Chelian said. "I think we're all a bit unsettled and not ourselves."

"It's just..." Katrin paused briefly. "It's just that there isn't anything to occupy our time. We packed too quickly to think about bringing material to sew on, and none of us thought to bring books. I tried looking at the library here, but the books are all written in a foreign tongue. I wish we could think of some way to relieve the tedium and make the time pass faster."

Katrin's innocent comment stirred a ghost of an idea in Chelian. She wasn't used to idleness either. Being left to her own devices on Satobik, she'd learned early how to entertain herself, and even she claimed boredom. The women needed a task.

"I think you've given me an idea, Katrin. These men speak a different language, one none of us are familiar with. I think we should arm ourselves with the knowledge to understand their words. I for one do not relish having them talk where we can't understand them."

Katrin's eyes widened, and her chin tilted to one side. "Think they would allow such a thing?"

"It's worth a try. I think I can talk Fen Dane into lending us one of his men as an instructor. We can use the books in the ship's library to learn from. It would be an excellent use of time since we seem to have plenty of it available. Do you think the other women would be interested in the project?"

"They would be stupid not to take advantage of this opportunity."

Sialys came up behind Katrin, careful to maintain distance. "I love the idea. When do we start?"



"Now." Chelian beamed, pleased to have a mission.

And it would also give her an opportunity to seek out Fen Dane. She'd not seen him since the episode with the exploding star. Odd how his absence seemed to irritate her, prick her nerves just enough to cause her stress. She didn't understand her reaction to the man. He refused to touch her, to embrace her as a normal woman, yet she yearned to see him, to behold his commanding presence. Could she be just a tad smitten with the man?

*Nock!* She wouldn't dare claim such feelings. Fen Dane meant nothing to her. He still remained a stranger, a shadow against the walls of her heart.

\* \* \* \*

"Nay, I can't spare even one man aboard."

"You deny us this opportunity to take advantage of idle time? Do you fear our knowledge of your language will somehow give us power?"

Fen Dane watched the rise and fall of Chelian's chest as she struggled with the words. She could not know how her presence on deck tempted his willpower. He wanted to reach out and soothe her furrowed brow.

"I fear nothing," he said. Her eyes closed for a brief moment before opening to reveal a vulnerability that unnerved him.

She sighed. "I need to be useful. I cannot abide this boredom much longer. The other women grow short of temper. Something must be done."

Her chin lowered, and he hated seeing disappointment etched on her features. "Chelian, I would grant your wish if it were in my power to do so. We fly this vessel with a skeleton crew. It was the only way we could accommodate the large number of women."

"Are we in danger of not reaching our destination?"

He smiled, enjoying her naiveté. "You worry too much. The men in my command are well-trained. It is just that every man has duties that require time and skill. At present, they are all working long shifts to make sure we do arrive in one piece."

"Not all of us, Fen Dane."

Dane whirled around at the intrusion. Liorxton stood behind him, and he eyed the man with speculation. "Do you know what you offer?"

"Yea. A chance to be more useful than tending a med-facility where no one comes in for treatment. I think I would enjoy teaching the ladies."

"The library isn't large enough to accommodate more than fifteen at one time," Dane said. "You'll have to break the group into shifts."

"Not a problem," Liorxton said. "Besides, not all of the women will want to learn."

Chelian shook her head. "No. We can't allow any of the women to refuse this opportunity. They must all be made to take the lessons."

Fen Dane frowned. He didn't like the way she tried to manipulate him. He had wanted to set the tone

early on, to let the women know the men held control of their destinies. Of late, he began to think Chelian had more control over his emotions than he'd like to admit. She filled his thoughts during the *daton* cycle and his dreams at night.

He had wanted to touch Chelian for the first time in a controlled environment where he could concentrate fully on the moment. Yet he could think of no way to make her understand that he didn't fear their imminent coupling. She thought he found her wanting.

The men grew restless over the forced celibacy Dane had imposed. The women grew jittery and short-tempered. The sooner they landed on Pelicosian soil, the sooner his life and the lives of his men could return to a semblance of normalcy. Nay, not normal. Normal suggested a state closely related to life before bringing home ninety-five women. Nothing would ever be normal again.

Dane hated giving in to Chelian's request, feeling in some small way that she'd won a brief victory, yet as he gazed into her hopeful eyes, he knew he couldn't deny her this pleasure.

"Liorxton, I put you in charge of teaching all the women. Make use of the computer as well. The women should learn how to use some of our more advanced technology. Take today to figure out a working schedule. Tomorrow you may begin lessons."

"Thank you." Chelian's lips stretched into a wide smile, and her eyes glowed with excitement.

He found her look of pleasure well worth giving in to her demands. "I am glad you are pleased, Chelian."

"You won't regret this. Dane."

"I don't expect to."

He watched her start for the door, her step light and sure. Beside him, Liorxton stirred. *Do you wish me to teach them all three dialects, Fen Dane?*

Dane smiled. In the Daramile dialect of Miois, he answered. "Nay. Teach them the Saramid dialect only. The other two will give the men some control over when they wish to converse without their mates being privy to the conversation."

"As always, I yield to your wisdom, Fen Dane." Liorxton bowed slightly.

"Let us hope Chelian will learn to do likewise. I fear she will not be easily controlled once we land."

"Nay. Already she seems to possess a strong will."

"Yea, but my will is stronger. She will learn this soon enough." Dane spoke the words with strong conviction, but in his mind there wiggled a sliver of doubt.

## Twelve

Dane growled low in his throat. Flashing *vraed* gages indicated low magnetic energy levels. The zeel had emitted all it could. The *Cressis* limped forward on residual energy, barely enough to maintain speed until they entered the gravitational pull of their home planet. He gazed up at the screen. Pelicosia was but a dot in the far distance.

"Tark, how close until the home base can get a lock on the *Cressis*?"

"We still have a hundred kilo-fathoms to go, Fen Dane."

"Feon?"

"The *serisian* cells weaken. I doubt their integrity will hold for that length."

"Fen Dane?" Chelian's luminous eyes showed her worry, her fear.

Guilt sat heavy on his shoulders, a familiar companion since knowing Chelian. He didn't like feeling responsible for the death of this particular woman.

"*Cruent!*" He tore his gaze from hers. "Someone escort this woman from the deck. I need not the distraction of her presence. Del Geod, cut power to the force fields. There should be no threats this close to home. And set life support for the bare minimum." He barely noted Tark's attempt to extract Chelian. His energies were once again engaged in solving this latest problem.

"*Nock*. I won't go," she said. "I helped the last time we faced a crisis. Maybe I can help again."

"Chelian, please." Tark could use only verbal persuasion. "The prince commands you to leave. You must go for all our sakes."

"*Nock*. I'm staying here. Short of using physical force, you can't make me leave."

Fen Dane swung around to face her again, his temper close to exploding. "I would have our first touching be a memorable event, a gentle exploration. Do not make me touch you in anger. We would both live to regret it."

She took an involuntary step back. Her mouth gaped. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would dare much to see us home safely. Now go. The deck is no place for you at present."

"I won't leave." Chelian's hand flew to the dragon medallion. Delicate fingers wrapped around the pendant, clutching it for what he assumed to be courage. Between iridescent flesh, the zeel glimmered, its facets caught by the flashing beacon of red on the instrument panel.

His eyes snapped back to hers. "You would risk the lives of every man and woman on board so you might satisfy some morbid curiosity?"

Siercession began punching buttons, his actions frenzied by the danger they faced. "Fen Dane! The *serisian* cells collapse. The *Cressis* won't have enough power to even limp home."

"Sound the command for all lights to be turned off on the lower levels," Dane commanded. "I want anything requiring unnecessary power to be shut off. That will gain us a bit more time. Del Geod, go to the main engine room. See if you can help Feon squeeze more power from this vessel. By the holy sword of the Dragonslayer, we've come too far to fail now." He'd given the command to conserve energy

*datons* ago, yet he hadn't given the order soon enough.

"By your lead, Fen Dane."

*By my lead.* Dane closed his eyes for a *mone*, feeling the weight of heavy responsibility. He owed these men a safe landing, a chance to enjoy the sweet cargo they carried. By Draccus, he'd not fail them now.

"Take the helm, Tark. I go to the engine room to see what can be done there."

"Fen Dane?" Chelian's worried voice cut through his armor, a wall of steel he'd built around his heart. He hadn't meant to care for this woman. She was merely a means to an end, a way to breathe life into a dying planet. And yet ... his eyes settled once more on the dragon pendant, a gift from his father on the eve of his coronation. The zeel mocked him, mocked his ability to see them safely home.

*Zeel.*

Dane's eyes fastened upon the answer to their dilemma. "Tark, gather all jewelry aboard ship. I care not how sentimental the men are over each piece. Stones can be replaced. Lives cannot."

"Jewelry?"

"Most of the pendants will have settings that include zeel. Now hurry. We waste time talking of the matter. Just do as I say. Take anything you collect to the engine room."

"By your lead." Tark smiled as he bowed and hurried to the task.

Dane turned to Chelian. She already had the pendant removed from around her neck. "As fond as I am of the gift, you have more need of it than I."

She draped it on the instrument panel, the stone as bright as any of the flashing lights. He gave her a brief nod before gathering the pendant. Without another word, he left the deck for the engine room.

He found Del Geod and Feon deep in conversation, their heads bent over the *sersian* cell that housed the zeel. Inside Dane could see the lifeless crystal, its facets dull and corrupted. His fist closed over the dragon pendant. The zeel stone was a fraction of the size of the zeel used to power the ship. Would it be enough to see them home? He unsheathed his dagger and began prying the stone from its setting. When he had the stone in hand, he held it out for Feon.

"Can you make this stone work?"

Feon took the zeel and held it in his palm. "I will have to tweak the settings. The magnetic pull is too strong for such a small piece of zeel."

"Then do what you must, but make it work."

Feon nodded. He handed the stone back to Dane while he began rummaging through tools. No one spoke. The clanging of metal against metal echoed off the walls. The engine had clamored to silence several *sectons* prior to Fen Dane's appearance.

Dane held the zeel in one hand and the dragon setting in the other. His fingers unconsciously stroked the contours of the dragon, gaining inner strength from the antique talisman. This had to be the answer.

Finally, Feon lifted his head, beads of perspiration clinging to his furrowed brow. "Without reading through volumes of material, I can only guess at the settings needed for something so small, and even then I doubt it will carry us very far."

"Nay, but more likely it will gain us the little bit needed to see us home. Tark is gathering more stones now."

Feon reached for Dane's zeel. He held it up to the light and smiled. "Your father will be proud this particular piece is being used for a good cause."

"Yea. He would."

Feon fitted the stone in the casing and sealed the *sersian* cell. He touched his forehead for good luck and pulled down the lever that would allow the magnets to extract energy from the zeel.

Dane held his breath as he peered into the *sersian* cell. Del Geod looked upward, his mind focused on what Dane assumed was a silent prayer to Draccus. Feon studied the instruments for any change. At first nothing appeared to be happening. Then all of a sudden, the great engines roared to life. They had gained about seven *mineltens* of time.

"Fen Dane, I gathered what I could." Tark entered the engine room with handfuls of jewelry. "The men were most generous with their possessions."

Without hesitation, Dane reached for a piece and pried the stone loose. In similar fashion, the other three men worked on the other pieces of jewelry until they had a small pile of zeel. No sooner had they finished working the stones free than the zeel inside the *sersian* cell faded. Feon quickly exchanged the used piece with fresh zeel. Together, they threw back their heads and laughed. Their efforts would see them home.

Dane sobered first. He still had work awaiting him on the main deck. "I feel confident we now have the necessary power. I leave the engine room in capable hands while I return to my post. Good work, Feon."

\* \* \* \*

Chelian hadn't left the deck when Fen Dane departed. She wanted to be where she could see what happened. And she wanted to be close to Fen Dane. She'd already rehearsed in her mind how she would handle things should the worst occur. She saw him opening his arms to her, welcoming her into the comfort of his embrace. She would feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, his warm breath against her cheek. *Selt*, in her mind, she felt it all.

He'd returned to the deck a *kleur* later, his mood more congenial than before. His gaze had swept hers only briefly before turning his mind to his duties. Although he hadn't encouraged her presence on deck, he hadn't told her to leave.

She still stood in the corner watching Dane work when the *Cressis* entered Pelicosia's gravitational pull. A roar sounded throughout the ship, shaking the walls around them. Her lips curled in a smile. Fen Dane had brought them home safely. Pride filled her heart, pride for his skill as a leader.

"Chelian."

His eyes bore into her own, pulling her close with nothing more than his gaze. Her heart skipped a beat, such was the wealth of emotion soaring through her body.

"*Selt*."

"Come closer to the viewing window," he said. "I want you to see your first real glimpse of Pelicosia." *I want you to share this moment with me.*

She sauntered closer, still wary of his abrupt change in mood. With every fathom they traveled, they came closer to a new plateau in their relationship. His eyes followed her to the viewing window, caressing every inch of her clad form. She slowed her pace, savoring his keen regard.

He beckoned her closer and stepped back so she could situate herself before the screen. From this new position, she could detect details in the terrain. Craggy mountains lined deep valleys. So far, she could see no life. She strained her eyes, looking for villages, provinces, anything that looked like dwellings. Nothing of the like appeared visible on the horizon.

*The tip of the dragon's sword. Is it still fearsome in your mind?*

A shiver crawled up her back like tiny talons against dry ground. Did his words have double meaning? She chose not to reflect upon the intimacy they would soon share.

*I go to my new home with many reservations, Fen Dane.*

*Am I one of your uncertainties?* The tip of his tongue swept across his lower lip, drawing her attention to his strong features.

*I do not fear you, but you unsettle me with your gaze. You cause feelings to erupt of which I have little understanding.*

He leaned close, so close she could feel his warm breath upon her cheek. "Then our coupling shall give you the understanding you seek, *fiol'ston*. Welcome to your new home."

She found it difficult to breathe. Fen Dane's smile softened the planes of his face. She tore her gaze from his and turned toward the window, welcoming an escape from his intense scrutiny and the images he planted in her mind.

The *Cressis* drew nearer still, hovering close to the contours of the planet. It crested one cliff-like formation, and below the land flattened into plains of deep *augrid*. The *Cressis* stalled over the level area and gently lowered itself to the ground.

"Go gather your things, Chelian. It will take a *kleur* to secure the *Cressis* before we can depart." Fen Dane's voice at her back stirred her into motion.

"But where are the houses? The people?"

"The houses are built underground. The people left behind to tend the village will be awaiting our arrival. Even now, they make ready for us."

She would have asked more, but Merel, the communications officer, interrupted her inquiries. "Fen Dane, Sengin wants to know why you don't put the *Cressis* in the docking hanger."

"Communicate back to him that our magnetic energy is unstable," Dane replied. "I do not wish to navigate the perilous ravines. We'll leave the *Cressis* here overnight and send a crew with the necessary zeal on the morrow. She'll be fine for one night. We'll post a skeleton crew to watch over her."

"We've got a long walk then, unless you're thinking to summon the beasts," Merel said.

"Nay, we walk. I'll not frighten the women senseless on their first introduction to Pelicosia. Have the men ready the women. They should take only personal belongings and one change of clothing. We'll unload the rest when the *Cressis* is docked." Dane turned to address his crew. "Del Geod, I need you to assign four extra women to every man on board. The men will need to be responsible for their individual mates

and the four extras. When we arrive at Miotone, the women not mated will be placed in the south dwellings until we can make other arrangements. Tark, you and Feon will be in charge of the *Cressis*."

"And our own mates?" Tark asked.

"Worried?"

"Well, nay, but—"

"But you are anxious to begin this new stage in your life." Dane smiled, a knowing smile stretching the muscles in his face. "I fully understand your eagerness. I will personally escort Deliah and Manrian for the two of you. "Take the helm, Tark. I go to prepare for disembarking."

"By your lead."

"How far is your home, Dane?" Chelian turned from the window.

"About half a fathom or so. We should make it there before dark fall."

"Will ... will there be lots of people to greet us?"

"You need not be nervous, Chelian. They will welcome all of you with open arms."

Her chin lifted a notch higher. "I'm not nervous."

"Then quit picking at the fabric of your skirt. You have all but ruined that particular garment."

Her face warmed as he chuckled.

"Did you think I would not notice your habits? I notice everything about you, *fiol'ston*. From the slight dimple in your cheek when you smile to the stubborn tilt of your chin when you're angered."

"I suppose I should be flattered," she said.

He shrugged. "I notice details. It is necessary to my survival, to the survival of my people. This planet is not like Satobik. We're an advanced group of people forced into primitive surroundings. We've managed nicely with the resources available, but we still lack some of the finer amenities. The climate is harsh, the terrain rugged. Hidden dangers lurk in places you would never think of."

"If you are trying to frighten me, you needn't bother," she said. "I'm already apprehensive enough without your warnings."

He tossed back his head and laughed. She might be nervous of her new situation, but she wasn't afraid of him. She never failed to speak her mind even when his mood was less than congenial. He'd chosen well. The woman who would rule beside him needed to be strong, and Chelian promised to be everything he'd hoped.

"You are a delight, my Lady Fem. Though dangers exist that I must make you aware of, I hadn't meant to frighten you. In fact, I only want to reassure you."

"Your somewhat cold reassurances have little effect upon my hammering heart. Perhaps things will look different tomorrow, but the future seems grim this *daton*."

*Cold reassurances?* A frown tugged at his mouth. He'd been more than accommodating. He'd been angered earlier when she'd been in his way, but he felt sure she'd understood. Her arms wrapped around

her body, hugging her small frame.

"Fen Dane! Fen Dane!" Cari rushed through the door and threw her small body into his arms. "Del Geod says we're here. Can we go now? Can we see our new home?"

Dane smiled down at the crown of short curls that rested against his chest. His gaze lifted to meet Chelian's and froze. Her averted eyes and stiff posture gave him reason to believe jealousy claimed her mood. His smile widened. Chelian jealous? His heart swelled at the thought. She desired his touch. Well pleased by this, he set Cari from him.

"Have you packed your things?"

"A long time ago."

"Then run toward the loading deck. We'll be there shortly to begin our trek."

"I'll go with her," Chelian said. "I still have to retrieve my bag."

"Chelian."

"Come on, Cari. Let's give Fen Dane time to make final preparations."

"Chelian."

She continued to ignore his summons, stiffly walking toward the exit.

"Chelian, you will answer me." Frustration made his voice more harsh than he'd intended.

She turned slowly. "By your lead."

His brows drew together. Even though spurred by jealousy, her derisive answer grated upon his nerves. "Yea, by my lead. Think ill of me now, but come evening you will lose all contempt for me."

"You can command many things, Fen Dane," she said. "You cannot command my heart."

"I seek only your respect. To ask for your heart requires reciprocation of feeling. I will not love you, *fiol'ston*. Love is a weakness I cannot afford."

She inclined her head slightly. "Love is a gift, one that gives strength. I pity you for not seeing this."

His head jerked back. "Pity? 'Tis not an emotion I accept and especially not from my mate. And love? It is not as if you have vast information on the subject."

He regretted the words the moment they flew from his mouth. He needn't remind her so cruelly of her past on Satobik. He doubted she'd ever been shown love. The stricken look upon her face revealed the hurt he'd caused. Yet he dared not take back the words. To do so would reveal weakness.

"I have more knowledge of it than you," she said, "else you wouldn't scoff at its existence."

"I do not protest love's existence. I merely inform you that I will not be humbled by the emotion. If you think to make me love you, you will set yourself up for heartache."

"*Nock*. A man with such a cold opinion is destined for his own heartache. I think ... I think that, down deep where it counts, you are as untouched as I am."



## Thirteen

Chelian marched ahead of Fen Dane. Behind her, she felt his magnetic presence. Hearing his footfalls mimic her own steps gave her comfort. She wasn't alone as she traveled toward a new future.

As she walked, she thought again about his opinion on love. Her heart grew heavy with the pain she sensed he kept buried deep. She hadn't meant to care for this man, yet she suddenly sensed a connection she hadn't felt before. His heart and soul were as untouched by love as hers.

"Why must we walk? Don't you have *hersias* to carry us to your house?" Deliah's accusing questions were more of many she'd pestered them with since leaving the ship. The trip would have been pleasant otherwise.

"There are no *hersias* on this planet," Dane replied. "For now, walking is the most expedient method of getting us to our destination."

No *hersias*? Chelian gazed around in puzzlement. It struck her then just what it meant to be on this planet. She would never again see the graceful gallop of a *hersia* as it crossed over *cerubic* fields. The bittersweet taste of her favorite *melose* fruit would become a distant memory. The fragrant *bennetor* blooms would no longer grace her night stand. A sudden wave of homesickness claimed her as her mind filled with images of Kel.

She halted suddenly and looked skyward. Where was Satobik? Fen Dane stopped a stone length from her, grousing at her lack of forewarning. She ignored his protest. If this was to be her new home, she wanted a good look at it.

The ground shifted beneath her feet, and her eyes widened. Movement rippled the soil where she stood. "Fen Dane?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled. "'Tis naught but *holimes*. They are harmless."

"*Holimes*?"

"I suppose they can be compared to your *pericore* worms, except they are much larger. They live close to the surface, skimming the area for nutrients. When first we arrived on Pelicosia, they were our primary food source. Come, we tarry when we should be on our way."

She continued to stall, absorbing all the sights and sounds around her. The pack on her back shifted as she knelt down. Coarse granules filtered through her fingers as she ran her hand under the soil and lifted it up. A slimy *holime* gazed back at her, its round, bulbous head much larger than its body.

"You don't appear very appetizing," she said.

Dane chuckled. "The flavor is lacking and the texture barely palatable, but it nourished our bodies when we had need of sustenance."

"Why have we stopped?" Deliah backtracked to where Chelian had paused.

"I'm eager to see our new home."

"Do you now lead, Deliah?" Dane's sarcasm failed to daunt Deliah's willful nature.

"Pardon?"

"You seem to want to make decisions that are not yours to make. We will arrive at my pace."

Deliah's eyes narrowed at his rebuke. Sensing trouble, Chelian stood, ready to proceed. She didn't want to be the catalyst that caused bitter feelings between Deliah and Fen Dane.

"I apologize for stopping. I only wanted to learn more about Miotone, a village underground." She gazed out into the distance. The terrain began to change subtly from flat, dry plains to colorful hills bursting with a variety of vegetation.

The thin air had a bite she wasn't used to. She pulled Fen Dane's cloak tighter about her body, inhaling his familiar scent. The unaccustomed weight of the small pack strapped to her back made breathing even more difficult. Determined not to show him any weakness, she forced herself to move without complaint.

The party of travelers trudged forward. They'd only journeyed a fathom and already the women tired from the exercise. Their shoulders sagged, and their steps became smaller. Fen Dane seemed to exhibit a wealth of patience as he ordered the men to slow the pace. She admired his stamina. He carried four times the load she did and seemed immune to the frigid climate.

They had just passed the halfway mark, a craggy formation of muted striations, when Fen Dane called for a moment of rest. Grateful, Chelian sank down upon an outcropping of rock. The other women followed her lead.

Deliah heaved a heavy sigh. "Why didn't we take the *skazers*? I don't understand why you torture us with this hike."

Fen Dane's eyebrows lifted, his expression patronizing. "We borrowed every bit of zeal we could locate aboard the *Cressis* just to make it home. The *skazers* lack the necessary power to carry us to our destination."

"Look, Chelian." Cari pointed skyward. A large, winged animal circled their party.

Fen Dane eyed the creature with distaste. "A *finpy*. It circles to catch us off guard. It eats meat and is not too particular from which animal it makes its meal. As long as we keep moving, it will not bother us." He signaled for their rest to end.

"But it's so pretty." Cari continued to admire the graceful flight of the *finpy* as she fell in step behind Dane.

"Many things on this planet are deceiving," he said. "Take nothing for granted—it may well cost you your life."

Chelian shivered at his caustic words. This world already seemed vastly different from Satobik. As they followed the trail, the vegetation opened to reveal a clearing. To the right, tall, spiked trees lined the way. On turning her head left, she discovered a sea of crystals shimmering in the sunlight. Her eyes widened with wonder at the vision before her. Zeel sprang up from the ground in abundant display. A gentle mist caressed the base of each formation giving the scene a mystical appearance.

"Halt the procession." Fen Dane's commanding voice interrupted the peace of the moment.

"It's a garden of zeal." Cari's youthful enthusiasm infected the group, and murmurs of delight erupted among the women.

While Fen Dane waited for the group to quiet, Cari crept forward. Mesmerized by the glint of riches, Chelian found herself following after the child.

"Stop! Go no farther." Fen Dane's voice halted Chelian's progress but seemed to spur Cari into action. The child began to run.

"Foyst, make sure no one else leaves while I go after the child."

Fen Dane dropped his pack and sprinted after Cari, his intent evident with every stride. Something dangerous lurked in the mists, else he wouldn't be so frantic in his efforts. Chelian followed at a distance, needing to be of help should he ask.

"Cari! Stop!"

The child continued to run toward the magical outcropping of zeel, giggling. She thought it a game and squealed when Fen Dane caught up to her and grabbed her about the middle. Her giggles turned to cries of pain when Fen Dane smacked her several times hard on the upper thigh.

Chelian rushed toward them. She failed to understand Fen Dane's burst of violence toward the child. "Fen Dane?"

"Stay where you are Chelian. I know not where the pits begin."

"Pits?"

"We named them the Pits of No Return. We lost three men and a child the first time we came upon this place. My own brother died here. The splendor of the zeel camouflages the pits. Greed causes men to forget their caution." He turned to Cari, his face harsh with worry. "Henceforth, you will heed my words. When I command you to stop, you will mind."

He set her from him and picked up a rock that he tossed toward the zeel. It fell, but no resounding *thunk* indicated its landing. It fell into a vast void of nothingness.

Cari's tear-filled eyes blinked several times as understanding dawned. She rubbed her thigh. "I—I would have died."

He pulled her into his strong arms, his own eyes strangely bright. "Yea. I have no wish to lose you now. The pits have claimed enough lives."

Over Cari's head, Chelian's eyes snapped to his. Did he truly care for the child? Or did he consider them all a commodity as she'd figured out when she'd been bored. For the amount of zeel Fen Dane had given her father, each woman was worth a small fortune. She followed Fen Dane and Cari back to the others.

He commanded the attention of the group with an upraised hand. "I called a halt to our trek because I wanted each and every one of you to understand how dangerous this area is. It is fairly close to our home and, as demonstrated, provides a deadly lure for unsuspecting adventurers."

"Then how do you go about mining the zeel?" Katrin peered at him, curiosity reflected in her luminous eyes.

"We have our methods," he replied, picking up his discarded pack. "None of you need worry over the matter. However, I must also caution you concerning other dangers. This land is beautiful but deceptive. 'Tis most dangerous when the sun sets and *svarkened* skies blanket the horizon. No one will be allowed to venture past the protection of the caves during *evetide*."

He gave the signal to begin moving again, and each member of their party fell into place. He kept Cari close beside him as they journeyed forward. Chelian fell back in line, allowing more distance to

accumulate between Fen Dane and herself. She needed time to assimilate her thoughts.

"This place is beginning to frighten me." Sialys came up beside Chelian, her face a mask of anxiety.

Chelian nodded. "I can't help but wonder if there are dangers within the very homes we go to. This is so different from Satobik."

Sialys gave a scoffing laugh. "I think the only danger we face there will be the men we're mated to. They lack the refinement we're used to. I don't know what's expected of me."

"*Selt*. You've put to voice my own concerns. Has ... has Del Geod touched you yet?"

"*Nock*. Has Fen Dane touched you?"

"*Nock*, and I grow weary waiting for the moment. One *mone* I anticipate how it might feel, and the next ... the next *mone* I curse the fates that brought me to this place. To him."

"We are alike in our thinking then. Del Geod frightens me with his dark looks and his commanding presence."

"I fear my reaction to Fen Dane more than I fear the man himself."

"Do you wonder just how potent our powers will be?"

"*Selt*. And you?"

Sialys nodded. "I think they exaggerated our powers, that maybe we won't be able to do all the things we've been told."

Chelian raised her eyebrows. "And this worries you?"

"*Nock*. I'd rather have no powers. I don't like being different."

"Nor do I."

A jubilant cry rang out among the men. They'd arrived. Chelian peered out over the land but saw nothing that indicated they'd reached civilization. She and Sialys exchanged baffled glances. She turned her gaze back to the terrain and stared hard.

Was it her imagination, or were the rocks moving? Slowly, men began to rise from the craggy surface. Like a swarm of *verdicks*, they approached. Chelian's heart fluttered frantically. So many people; so many men. Over a hundred men converged upon them, their excitement overwhelming as they circled the women. Where were the other women? Were there no women on Pelicosia to give them welcome? Was this the reason for Fen Dane's mission? Was this why they'd brought ninety-five women to this harsh planet?

The men pressed closer, threatening Chelian and Sialys's perimeter of seclusion. Chelian backed away from the Pelicosians, fearful of being trampled in the melee. She tried to spot Fen Dane among the crowd but failed to locate him. The men from the *Cressis* laughed and greeted the other men by name. She sidled to the edge of the gathering, content to view the proceedings from a safe distance. Just as quickly as the men had converged, they retreated toward the ground from whence they sprang.

Del Geod found Chelian once the crowd had thinned. She glanced up at his face and froze. His features were drawn and pinched. With intuitive insight, she knew something was wrong. She looked at Foyst and Liorxton. Their features bore evidence of grief. All around, the gaiety of their homecoming had died,

replaced by a disturbing sadness. And where had Fen Dane disappeared to?

"Chelian?" Del Geod caught her attention.

"Why has everyone left?" she asked. "Where is Fen Dane?"

"Chelian, he bade me take you to his quarters. You will follow me now."

"Del Geod, what has happened?"

"Come."

"*Nock*. I'll not step one foot toward Miotone until I know where Fen Dane has gone. Why doesn't he lead me?"

"He cannot. He is no longer here."

"I can see he's not here. I wish to know where he is."

Del Geod seemed to struggle with words. His eyes blinked several times. Did he fight tears? Clearly something disturbed the commander. Chelian waited, sensing that her questions irritated the man. Finally, he lifted his moist gaze to hers.

"Fen Dane goes to grieve and to prepare."

"Grieve?"

"Yea. He comes home to news of his father's death. Zan Kione has died."

Her head dropped forward, and she stared hard at the ground. Dead? Fen Dane must be terribly hurt inside. Her fingers clutched at the *lerrst* fabric of her traveling gown. She should find him, give him comfort.

She lifted her head. "I must go to him."

"Nay. 'Tis not possible. He must grieve alone and prepare for the rite of secession." Del Geod wiped at his eyes. Inner pain etched deep lines in his forehead. Fen Dane wasn't the only one who grieved.

"But—"

"Chelian, 'tis our way, our custom. You will honor his wishes on the matter. Come."

She and Sialys brought up the rear of the line as they followed Del Geod and the others toward Miotone. The entire community lay camouflaged beneath layers of rock. Steps descended into the ground, spiraling downward. Single file, they entered a tunnel of rock, a grand abyss flanked on either side by shards of crystal formations. Along the walls, crystals glowed with iridescent splendor, illuminating the path with subdued light.

The trail widened at the base to reveal a cavernous opening. The chamber was larger than their Hall of Welcome and ten times more grand. Her mouth gaped in awe as she stared at the wealth embellishing the room. Large columns of *worisk* crystals lined the outer edges while *mintored* crystals illuminated the interior with bright light. Inlaid *daem* stones created a brilliant pattern for the flooring.

She turned a full circle, absorbing every opulent article visible to the eye.

"I've never seen such raw beauty."

Cari rushed up to Chelian, her feet dancing upon the decorative floor. "Chelian, look. The rocks glow. This is so pretty."

"Did you see the columns? They looked to be carved out of a solid piece of stone."

Cari reached out to touch the column, her chubby fingers tracing the delicate designs carved upon them. Chelian mimicked her actions, surprised by the moisture clinging to their surface. No amount of beauty could mask the raw characteristics of the cave. She shivered, wondering anew what other similarities this cave could boast to those caves back on Satobik.

Del Geod beamed at their compliments. "Yea. We were most fortunate to find such a treasure. These caves stretch out deep into the belly of this planet. Living underground allows us to hide from our enemies."

"Is there another province that makes war upon your people?" Chelian tried to relate this world to her own. On Satobik, the Bastian Province had many enemies.

Del Geod gave her an indulgent smile. "Nay. We are the only intelligent inhabitants on this planet. Our enemies stretch out much farther."

Her eyebrows lifted and her mouth gaped. "Other planets make war upon you?"

"You need not worry. As I said before, we are well-protected here. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must address the newcomers."

She nodded, silently giving him permission to take his leave. She meandered to a secluded area and waited as Del Geod garnered the attention of those gathered. They were joined once again by the welcomers who'd descended upon them earlier.

"Quiet! Give me quiet, please!"

The noise died down until all that echoed within the chamber were the rhythmic heartbeats of more than two hundred people. Chelian marveled at Del Geod's command of these humans and the courtesy they afforded him.

"I speak on Fen Dane's behalf. I know you are anxious to meet your prospective mates, but you must wait until after the coronation ceremony. Fen Dane will observe the required length of time for mourning. At the end of such time, he will conquer the beast and prove his worth. In the meantime, I am housing the unmated women in the south wing as per Fen Dane's orders. These women are to remain untouched until pairing is completed." Del Geod paused, obviously waiting for the heated murmurs to die down. "The men from the *Cressis* are welcome to move their mates to their own quarters. However, in keeping with mourning rituals, Fen Dane asks you to wait until after the coronation to consummate each union."

Del Geod gave further instructions for some of the men to show the women to their quarters. Afterwards, the chamber emptied. Alone with only Sialys, Cari, and Del Geod, Chelian realized an overwhelming sense of suffocation. Buried more than a fathom below the planet's surface and galaxies away from their own home, the heavy weight of worry settled upon her shoulders. At the moment, fate seemed cruel to have plunged them so deep within this abyss.

Del Geod's footfalls echoed as he drew nearer. "Let me show you each to your place of residence before I attend to other matters."

"What matters could be more important than relieving your mate's anxiety?" Sialys's voice cracked when she voiced her concern. Even so, they all fell in behind Del Geod as he walked them down a long, narrow corridor.

"Sialys," he said, "I would like nothing more than to ease your fears, but I must meet with the Elders. They mourn for their king and could not greet our party as they should have."

"Del Geod, all we've seen are men." Chelian peered curiously down other hallways as they passed without stopping. "Are there no women on your planet?"

He stopped and turned to look at Chelian, his lips flattened to a thin line. "Nay. No women. No children. It is not my place to explain the why of it, but I think you now see our need. Without the Satobik women and those gathered from other words, this planet was doomed to die."

"We've been brought here to procreate." Chelian's flat statement gave voice to her growing suspicions. They weren't needed for emotional support, friendship, or even sexual pleasure. They were to be brood mares and nothing more.

"You are here for many purposes, but yea, the greatest gift you bring us is your ability to bear children." He turned and began walking again.

Chelian and Sialys hurried to follow after him with Cari close behind. Chelian took a deep breath, mulling over her thoughts before giving them voice. "The Satobik women will want more from a relationship. In our culture, our men lead the governing body, but it is our women who lead the household. She is more than a vessel for her man's seed. She is his helpmate, a mental nurturer. You can't expect these women to accept this role with ease."

"You are quite the advocate," Del Geod said. "Fen Dane will find no fault with his selection of mates. He will need your voice among the people."

"You've changed the subject."

"Nay. Not really. I have made a valid observation based on your heated words."

"You've remarked on my passion, my beliefs, but you haven't addressed the content of my message."

"Chelian, perhaps he refrains from comment for a reason." Sialys played mediator well. "Perhaps this conversation should be addressed to Fen Dane."

Chelian frowned. "*Selt*. I apologize, Del Geod. I'm tired from the journey and anxious over my future."

"You have every right to your anxiety," he said. "I would find it awkward to be in your place at this moment."

A prickle of foreboding crept up her back. What did he mean by his warning? "Do you know more of my circumstance than you are reporting?"

He stopped before a large archway and indicated by his open hand that she should enter. "I give you Fen Dane's residence. You and Cari will live here."

"Again, you evade my question."

He hesitated before entering the chamber. Chelian shook her head in consternation. She would have to follow the man to get her answers. She stared at the archway. Two stones distance from it stood a high

wall of rock. There were no doors. To enter the chamber, she had to go through the archway, turn abruptly right or left and pivot around the wall. When she rounded the wall, her breath caught. The opulence of the room exceeded that of the great chamber.

"This ... this is quite breathtaking."

Cari rushed past her, an exuberant bounce to her step. "Chelian, come look. The chairs are carved from stone, and there aren't any lights, just glowing rocks. And look at the giant picture of dragons painted on the wall."

Chelian followed Cari's path, impressed by Fen Dane's obvious wealth. "I had no idea he enjoyed the arts."

"Yea. He did most of the work himself."

"I'm more than impressed." Her eyes drank in the beauty of the paintings, mosaics, and carvings surrounding her on every wall. She ran her fingers lightly across the furred upholstery of a chair and turned to Del Geod. "I feel awkward invading his home without him here."

"This is now your home too. You are to make yourself welcome. Food is stored in yonder cabinet. The heating granules are kept in that box. Water is piped in from underground streams, but will need to be heated. If you have need of further assistance, you may use the intercom system."

"When will Fen Dane come?"

"You will see him after he finishes mourning. Afterwards, he must prepare for the Dragon Ceremony. You must also prepare."

"Prepare?"

"Four *datons* hence, you will join Fen Dane in the rite of secession. He will become king and you, my fem, will become his queen."

*His queen.*

Her eyes widened. Hearing Del Geod intone the words gave it concrete meaning. She'd known since finding out Fen Dane's father had died that he would become king, yet she hadn't allowed herself to think upon what meaning this would have for her.

*Queen.* She mulled over this frightening concept. How could she rule when the women from Satobik still condemned her for being Deliphit? How could she rule when she knew virtually nothing of their laws, their customs? How could she be queen when she felt so inadequate as a woman?

Her eyes traversed the interior of her new home. She'd given up a comfortable existence, one that required very little of her. Though loneliness had eaten at her soul, she'd managed to cope. She'd traveled across the universe to become Fen Dane's mate, yet she remained untouched. And now ... now she was to become queen. She'd expected things to change but not so drastically, and not with such speed.

Del Geod peered at her as if waiting for her to comment. She inhaled deeply. "Tell me what I must do."

"At the end of the tri-*myon*, I will come for you. A ceremonial dress will be sent for you to wear. Wear it and nothing else."

"Nothing else?" Her skin pricked with unease.



"Yea. No shoes, no stockings, no undergarments. Wear your hair unbound."

Would this ceremony see her more exposed than her own bonding to Fen Dane? She shivered. "Will I have to speak?"

"Nay. Your presence is all that is required. Fen Dane will ask you to join him as he conquers the dragon. Courage is all that is required to be queen. Courage and faith."

## Fourteen

Dane rushed through the portal, his cape flapping about his body. Startled, the Elders rose to greet the heir apparent, their own faces ravaged by grief.

"Tell me it isn't true. Tell me my father still lives."

"Calm yourself, Fen Dane. It does no good to carry on so."

"Nay, I'll not accept such news. I traveled with all haste to fulfill my mission—to fulfill my father's wish. He cannot have died before seeing my success."

Elder Treym approached Dane, his face full of compassion. The man's kindness only intensified Dane's emotion. He wanted to cry, to fight, to roar until his vocal chords erupted. A dragon's fury scorched his insides.

"Fen Dane, your father rested all his hopes on you ever since Tared's death. No matter what, he was always proud of you. He talked of nothing else." Elder Treym's voice cracked with honest pain.

"Yea, Fen Dane. We are all proud of you."

Dane sank into a chair. *Alone*. First Tared and now his father. Fate seemed cruel. Numbness claimed his heart as he tried to digest what it meant for Zan Kione to be gone.

"Fen Dane?" Elder Treym said.

"Yea."

"You were successful in bringing the women?"

Dane nodded, his mind distracted by other thoughts.

Elder Fyolt, another of his father's trusted associates, came to stand beside Treym. "We felt a disturbance when you arrived, a force we couldn't quite identify. The eve of Geldengough approaches, and with it, Zan Burlorek's envoy. We must hide the women lest he discovers what we've done."

Again Dane could only nod. He knew they expected him to take the lead, to give them orders, but at the moment he needed time from his responsibilities. Time to grieve for a father who'd meant the world to him. He felt Treym's hand settle upon his shoulder.

"Be patient with him, Fyolt. Our prince just had a terrible blow."

The room became quiet. Finally, Dane lifted blurry eyes. His gaze found Marolt, Del Geod's father and Zan Kione's best friend. "Tell me how he died."

Marolt cleared his throat. He appeared uncomfortable with the question. "Anxious, he waited for your return, worried you would not make it home before Zan Burlorek's spies discovered your absence. He had the rest of the Verside working day and night to prepare a hiding place for the women. He ... he came to me on the eve of his death with talk of news. He bade me meet him in private where he could confide his findings. I waited, but he never came. We found him slain at the base of the Terionk forest."

"Murdered? Here?"

"We suspected Zan Burlorek of sending us a spy, but we've found nothing to support this opinion. Only

the Elders are aware of the circumstances surrounding his death. The judicial body approved the scanning of each man's thoughts only to reveal no enemies among us."

"You did this without their knowledge?"

"Yea. It was the only way to insure they wouldn't block our probes."

Dane nodded his approval. Scanning the thoughts of a member of the Verside could only be done while the man slept, otherwise he would detect the intrusion and block the probe. But only the Elders had the authority to perpetuate such an edict. What if one of the Elders was guilty?

Dane's mind raced. How had Zan Burlorek accomplished his deceit? How had he discovered their mission to Satobik? Could one of the Elders have betrayed them? His eyes swept slowly over the seven men. Yorst? Kurig? Perhaps Tantrid or Melbio? Could it have been Fyolt or Treym? Perchance Del Geod's father Marolt? Could one of these men be the man responsible for seeing to the capture, imprisonment, and exile of the Verside? They were the only possible suspects. The other men had ranged from infant to fifteen *yons* when they'd been forced to depart Mioisiad. Unless...

He let the thought dangle. One other person had knowledge of their plans, but he had no reason to suspect the man of treachery. No, Carben could not be guilty. The Burdven spy had as much at stake if not more than Fen Dane. It had to be one of the Verside.

He might have brushed off Zan Kione's death as an accident, but after the attempts on his own life and the sabotage aboard the *Cressis*, he agreed with the Elders. Zan Kione's death had been no accident.

"I think Burlorek already knows of our mission," Dane said. "Del Geod and I were attacked while on Satobik. I can think of no one else who stands to profit from our deaths. Somehow, Burlorek managed to infiltrate the Verside. Hiding the women now seems like a waste of time and effort."

Foyst nodded. "Yea, Zan Burlorek wants full control of the zeel, but the conditions of our exile prevent him from taking more. We provide him with a limited amount, but it is hardly enough to satisfy his greed. I don't understand why he doesn't just attack Pelicosia. His forces outnumber the Verside. There would be no contest and no one to take him to task for destroying the Verside."

Dane sighed. "He knows to do so would jeopardize that which he covets. Zeel in its natural state is very fragile, and war would damage the ecosystem that sustains it. Nay, Zan Burlorek is no fool. He seeks to weaken the Verside without a full attack upon Pelicosia. Another reason why we must be aggressive in dealing with this enemy."

Marolt shook his head. "What proof have you that Zan Burlorek is responsible for your difficulties? We have other enemies besides Zan Burlorek. We should proceed as if Burlorek has no knowledge of our activities and hide the women as planned."

Dane tilted his head all the way back and gazed at the ceiling of the cave. Stalactites stabbed the air, their protrusion a reminder of the perils they faced. With a heavy sigh, he dropped his head back in place and impaled Marolt with his stare.

"Hiding the women might not be as easy as you think."

"Why?" Elder Marolt paused, searching Dane's face for answers. His eyes stretched wide. "What have you done?"

"I've done only what I thought would benefit the Verside."

"Fen Dane?"

"I have brought three Deliphits among the women."

Foyst gave him a puzzled look, one that mirrored the facial expressions of the other Elders. "What is a Deliphit?"

"A Deliphit has powers very much like our own. She can communicate telepathically. As for her other gifts, I am not quite sure of them yet. Time will tell."

Kurig sprang from his seat and pounded the table with his fist. "I cannot believe you would do such a thing! This could bring ruin upon our heads."

"Dare you accuse me of something?" Dane said.

"Zan Burlorek will be able to detect their auras. The other women will read blank since they possess no powers, but these Deliphits ... how will we explain the extra auras they will exude?"

"We will spirit them away to the other side of the planet," Dane said. "Far from Burlorek's reach."

"Their auras will linger. He'll know they were here."

Dane frowned. His fingertips began rubbing against the pad of his thumb. The possible repercussions presented more than he wished to dwell on at the moment.

"I did not come here to be lectured to. I came here for answers concerning my father's death. Now that I have some of those answers, I plan to take my three *datons* of solitude to grieve. In the meantime, you will plan my coronation ceremony. Four *datons* from now, I will become your Zanitor. At that time, I will present my plan for retaliating against Zan Burlorek."

\* \* \* \*

*Courage and faith.*

The words flowed like a turbulent stream through Chelian's mind while she awaited Fen Dane. The men had formed a circle around the ceremonial platform. The women had been placed behind the men, all except Chelian. She stood alone, slightly forward within the circle of men. There she waited as did the rest for Fen Dane to appear. When a hush fell over the crowd, she turned to see what arrested their attention.

A path opened. Fen Dane approached, his saunter fluid, full of purpose. As the dim light of the moon bathed his form, she gasped. He stood before his people completely nude. Sleek muscles moved with a grace that belied his size. His attention riveted upon the stone idol within the circle.

Three stones from the idol, he fell to his knees and lifted his arms in supplication. Silence, eerie and demanding, enveloped the community of men and women who gathered to witness their prince become a king. Chelian's heart beat furiously against her chest. She knew not what to expect, yet she knew somehow she would soon be involved in the proceedings.

The air brought an expectancy. She smelled a musty odor unlike anything she'd detected before. The odor grew stronger, permeating her nostrils. A screech rent the silence. The women sucked in lungfuls of air, their whimpering an unwelcome intrusion to the silence. The men stood statue still while Fen Dane continued to meditate before the idol.

Chelian tore her gaze from Fen Dane to watch the sky. A furious slapping noise followed the screech.

Something large and dangerous approached. A bitter blend of musk and *arabeck* root permeated the air, the odor overwhelming. Her eyes widened and her heart continued to race. A creature of grand proportions approached with frenzied speed, its large wings stirring the stillness with erratic winds. Chelian clasped her costume closer to her body, sure the fragile *mestik* would be ripped from her skin.

The creature swooped down, grasping Fen Dane with sharp talons. Chelian screamed as a dragon the size of a *skazer* swept her mate into the darkness of the night. She squeezed her eyes tight, not wishing to see the life blood drained from one so full of vitality, one who had yet to show her the magic of his touch.

"To Draccus we give our prince!" Del Geod's voice roared over the dragon's beating wings. "Make him worthy of your might and your courage. Give to our humble people a king! Give us our Celestial Dragon! Give us the Zanitor of Drake!"

*The King of Dragons*. Chelian's eyes flew open. The Verside had planned this travesty. They sacrificed their prince to an icon for a false religion. She murmured a quick prayer to Orius, the true God. Did they plan to sacrifice her next?

The great beast shrieked again. It hovered, dangling Fen Dane from its claws. Fear clutched her to its breast and held her immobile within the circle. Her eyes locked upon the struggling figure above her. Her mind reached out. No connection. Fen Dane was lost to her. No, he'd never been hers to begin with. Sadness claimed her.

Of a sudden, the dragon calmed. Fen Dane crawled along its leg to mount himself upon the dragon's back. Cradled upon the boney spine, Fen Dane leaned forward, stroking the dragon's neck. Again, silence seized the Verside and the women who stood behind them.

"Call your beasts!"

Fen Dane's command sounded down to the Verside. With a triumphant roar, the men stepped back from the circle.

"What happens now?" Sialys asked, coming to stand five stones from Chelian.

"I don't know. I thought for sure Fen Dane would be killed—ripped to shreds by that monster."

"*Selt*. I have no understanding for these barbaric proceedings. Already I long for the serenity of Bastia."

"It does no good to wish for things that can't be," Chelian said. "We must make the best of this. Listen, do you hear? It sounds like the thundering of a thousand *hersia* hooves. More are coming."

Sialys pointed to the sky. "The night fills with the beat of dragon wings. There must be a hundred."

The women watched in awe. The dragons descended, lighting upon the land like locus demons. Chelian covered her ears with her hands to drown out the sound of flapping wings and screeching dragons. One by one, each of the Verside mounted a beast. With what appeared to be well-practiced maneuvers, the men guided their animals toward Fen Dane. Falling into formation, the swarm of riders and dragons swept over the remaining women and flew off into the night.

Cari turned beseeching eyes toward Chelian. "I want to go home."

"We are home, Cari. It just doesn't feel like it yet."

The Verside circled the ceremonial platform three times. On the fourth pass, they reined in and brought the dragons into a hovering formation just above the great Idol of Draccus.

*Come, Chelian. Come and meet your king.*

Chelian shook her head to clear it of the unwanted thought. She wrapped her arms about herself to ward off a sudden chill. Training her eyes upon her mate, she questioned her sanity.

*'Tis time to come to me, fiol'ston. 'Tis time to claim your right as my queen.*

He brought the dragon closer. Its yellowed teeth gleamed in the subtle light. Thick *augrid* scales rippled with each movement directed by Fen Dane as though beast and man had melded into one entity. Somehow, Fen Dane had conquered the most feared of all creatures. Did he think to conquer Chelian as well? She shivered, the cold air a cape for her worries. He brought the beast closer still, so close she could feel its breath upon her skin. The scent of *arabeck* root smothered her, and a drop of saliva fell at her feet.

Fen Dane turned the animal, placing himself directly before her. He reached out a hand, a gesture that stunned her with its ill-placed timing. He meant to touch her now in a public setting when her fear rode high? There was no way to know for sure what harm she might do the mighty warrior. She'd hoped for a private moment when first they touched.

"Nock! Not here, not now!" she cried.

"Yea, *fiol'ston*. Here and now. I command it. You must conquer the dragon's mate to be accepted as queen. Take my hand, Chelian."

Conquer the dragon's mate? A screech sounded in the far distance. Another dragon approached the den. Chelian's eyes watered with emotion. She hid her hands beneath folded arms.

"You ask too much!"

"'Tis the first phase of our coupling, Chelian. Trust. You must trust me in all things. Do you trust me?"

Her heart lurched. The dragon's eye gleamed with menace. Her gaze followed Fen Dane's naked arm to his bulging shoulder muscles and onward to his emphatic face. Their gazes collided and locked. His force of will proved indomitable.

*Trust me, fiol'ston.*

She unfolded her hands. *I wanted our first touching to be special, pure of outside influences.*

*I can think of nothing more special than earning the respect and acceptance of my people—of your people.* "As my princess, you must partake in this ceremony. You must come to the altar cloaked in purity. Do you accept your role as princess to the Verside?"

Her eyes swept over those assembled. This heavy responsibility seemed so unlikely for a Deliphit, yet here was her chance to prove her worth, to gain acceptance. Her feet moved her forward as if to take the decision from her.

*Remove the layer of pride that covers your body, Chelian. Come to me whole and unfettered.*

Her gaze settled on his naked flesh while her fingers flew to the fastening at her neck and clutched the fragile fabric. Did he not understand how the cold bit into her flesh?

"You've nothing to fear. Slow your breathing and come to me." The gentle rumble of his baritone voice soothed her.

Caught by the promise in his eyes, her body warmed. Slowly, her fingers began to work the fastening at her neck. Trance-like, she peeled a layer of *mestik* from her body. It floated to the ground. Layer upon layer mounded beside her feet. She was unaware of the women who watched in fascination or the men who hovered above, waiting to greet their queen. Her will had been stripped and her body bared. For the moment, only Fen Dane existed.

Again, he held out his hand. Her stomach quivered with anticipation, and her skin prickled with heat. She stared at his beckoning palm, the gentle invitation she'd waited her whole life to receive. Winds nipped at her skin, brushing her legs with tickling fingers. The dragon snorted, its warm breath colliding with the cooler breeze.

As if in a dream, she lifted her arm. Their fingers brushed, a light, tantalizing pledge of faith and trust. Her stomach burned and clenched with uncertainty. He clasped her hand more fully. Caught. Her conscious thought became aware once more of her surreal surroundings, and with awareness came acute embarrassment.

But she was given no time to react to such feelings. Her arm socket tightened painfully as Fen Dane lifted her off the ground and pulled her up in front of him. Rough scales bit into the tender insides of her thighs as she perched upon the dragon's back. One muscled arm wrapped around her waist drawing her to him.

"Rest easy, *fiol'ston*. You have nothing to fear except your own perceived limitations."

Now ... now her powers would erupt. With his touch, he'd unleashed a monster. She growled low in her throat, urging the blood to pound faster, harder within her veins. She waited to feel the Deliphit magic seize her body. She waited ... for nothing.

*Lies, all lies.*

All her life had been a sham. Her head fell back against Fen Dane. His touch had literally stripped her of everything she held to be true.

"Consider this your rebirth, Chelian. You have conquered your greatest fear this *evetide*. You have touched and been touched with nothing untoward happening to mar its beauty. Now you must conquer yet another foe. The dragon's mate must come to you and must succumb to your influence. Only then will you be worthy of the throne."

"How?"

"Reach out with your mind. With your heart."

"I can't. I have no powers. I'm not Deliphit."

"You misinterpret what has happened. You were meant to be my soul mate. When we touch, I am immune to your powers of telepathy. When we pull away, you will be able to delve into my most cherished thoughts, and I yours. The closer we are, the stronger our connection—until we touch and our minds can rest. 'Twas how I knew you were to be mine. I could feel your thoughts from the very first."

She tried to turn in his arms, to read his face. "You knew this all along, yet you let me believe the worst? Let me fear this very day?"

"You were not ready to believe."

"You didn't trust me enough to try, yet you ask for my blind faith? Is trust not a shared gift?"

His arm tightened about her waist, pulling her closer to his warmth. He must not have liked her question. She frowned as a hardness pushed against her back, its heat searing her skin. The tip of his dragon's sword pressed firmly against her body, making her well aware that she'd yet to be touched as a man touches a woman. The dragon's sword stabbed at her back. She could think of his male part in no other terms, the mythical story of Vexalt filling her thoughts with ironic images.

"Trust is earned, Chelian. As for sharing, there is much yet I would share with you."

Her skin tingled with new awareness. "I can't share my most inner self until you open fully for me."

"I am your mate—your king. You withhold nothing from me once I command it."

"*Nock*. You can't command trust, and you can't command love."

His large hands spanned her waist while he controlled the beast beneath them with his knees. With strength born of many hours exercising, he lifted her away from him. Her arms fell forward, grasping the dragon's neck for balance. His hands dropped from her body, leaving her cold and strangely wanting.

"The dragon's mate, Chelian. You must summon her with your mind, control her with your thoughts."

Impossible. He asked too much.

*Reach out, Chelian. Concentrate. You must do this to earn the respect of your people.*

"They're not my people."

"They will be as soon as you conquer the dragon. Do you not wish to be accepted, to walk normal among your peers? Do as I ask, and your greatest wish will be fulfilled."

"I can't!"

"You can and you will! I command it of you."

She balked at his words. Vexalt had conquered the dragon with his sword. She had nothing but her mind to use against the fierce beast.

*Vexalt*. "Tis a fitting name for my beast, and we shall call his mate Sirenica for the Sirens of the mythical sea."

Fen Dane's even tone could not dispel her fear. She trembled atop Vexalt, her mind a jetty of swirling emotion. A shriek ripped through the night. The moment had come.

Chelian turned toward the sound. A dragon with scales the color of pale *ferlai* bore down upon them, her fury evident in the erratic dance she displayed. Vexalt reared his head, catching the female scent of Sirenica. Unless Chelian did as requested, Fen Dane's mental hold upon the beast would fade, and they would both die.

*Focus, fiol'ston. In this I trust you with my life.*

Inhaling deeply, Chelian closed her eyes. She visualized the dragon's mate, felt the creature's life force as she drew near. *Calm, my sweet. Calm*. All her energy focused on one outcome. Sirenica balked at Chelian's control and cried out. The male beast beneath them struggled against Fen Dane's hold, agitated by the siren's call. Chelian lurched forward, thrown against the scaly neck.

"Quickly, Chelian! You must concentrate harder!"



"Help me, Dane!"

"In this you must go alone."

Tears streaked her cheeks. Tension caused her neck muscles to knot. The strong scent of *arabeck* root filled her lungs. Sirenia dove for them, her great flapping wings stirring the wind to greater currents. All about, Chelian's long hair whipped out around them. As the dragon prepared for another pass, Chelian reached deep within to grasp an inner calm. She let go of Vexalt's neck and stretched her arms wide.

*Come to me, my lady. Come, Sirenia. Come feel my touch—my breath. Relinquish your anger and your fear.*

She felt a nudge at her hand, a touch so light she thought she'd imagined it. Afraid to let go of her mental control, she kept her eyes closed, her mental energies alert. Fen Dane's hands settled around her waist once again. Cool air tickled the back side of her thighs as she was lifted from the male dragon's back.

The sensation of floating made her smile. She felt as free as a *tarken* soaring over the *cerubic* fields back home. Ever so gently, Dane lowered her upon the back of the female. Instinct made her tighten her knees about the dragon's body and lean forward to take hold of Sirenia's neck.

"Open your eyes, Chelian."

She didn't want to comply. She didn't want to give up her first real taste of freedom.

"Open your eyes and behold your kingdom, my Zelton."

His queen. At his gentle prodding, her eyes opened. Below them, the faint glow of *mintored* crystals illuminated their people. Power. The heady emotion claimed her as she began to comprehend her new status. The great dragon's sides expanded and contracted with each breath, its body alive and warm beneath Chelian's.

"I did it." With awe, she accepted her accomplishment. She'd proven her worth before the Verside. Even the Satobik women would have to grant her respect after her display of courage. Her mouth stretched into a smile before throwing back her head and laughing.

"Yea, *fiol'ston*. You did it. You've conquered the beast and your fear."

She sobered immediately. *Nock*. She'd only conquered the dragon. Moisture gathered between her thighs as she considered what was yet to come.

"*Nock*. I still have you to conquer, Zan Dane."

"You've already conquered me, my Zelton. Come, we will make one more pass for our people before dismounting and allowing the dragons to return to their caverns."

"And then?"

"And then we conquer the rest of your fears, *fiol'ston*."

## Fifteen

Dane had promised to conquer her fears.

Chelian stared at his back, struck anew by how *bratek* he appeared clothed once more in the tight leggings that caressed his well-defined muscles. The *truscan* tunic accentuated his powerful frame. Flawless skin, bronzed by the sun and lightly furred, marked him as a warrior of skill. She recalled his aversion to scars, claiming such imperfections showed an enemy his weaknesses. So far, she knew of no weakness save one: he feared opening his heart.

She sighed. The man had become king. Every mannerism, every word spoken defined her mate. He was a masterful leader, an enigmatic force. She felt awed to be mated to one such as he. And fearful. He'd promised to alleviate her concerns, yet he had no idea what she feared. She had no fear of Zan Dane. *Nock*, he'd been more than kind and patient with her. If anything, she feared herself.

Chelian forced her attention to the large room and the people gathered there—a reprieve. She stared at the banquet of food with a small measure of frustration. Her mate had promised many things this night, but food had not been one of them. She'd hoped to have the mystery of their bonding well behind her by now. But, alas, Zan Dane's coronation was cause for celebration.

*Zan Dane*. She was now mated to a king, and she in turn had become queen. The concept felt too new, too enormous to grasp. She wanted to find a quiet place where she could absorb her new station. But, as queen, she must entertain her guests. She found herself shying away from the crowd, uncomfortable with so many around her. As much as she desired the camaraderie of many, she had not been bred for this type of activity.

"A toast!" Del Geod lifted a tankard of *fromt*, a strong drink for which Chelian discovered she had no stomach. "To our new king, Zan Dane. May he rule with the same strength as his father before him."

"To Zan Dane!"

"And to our new queen!" Del Geod added. "May she add a softer touch to Zan Dane's rule."

"Yea!" A rumble of bass and baritone reverberated against the walls in agreement.

Chelian noted with unease that the women remained strangely mute. She worked her way to the edge of the gathering, having no wish to be the center of attention.

Katrin stepped forward as she raised her own glass high. "*Selt*, to our new queen! May she rule with wisdom and kindness."

Strong arms encircled Chelian from behind. Warm breath caressed her ear. A heady sensation settled in her abdomen.

"They accept you, *fiol'ston*. Even the women want to accept you."

She leaned into his embrace, relishing his touch. "*Nock*. Katrin is brave to come forward with her toast, but the other women hang back, afraid I'll cast an evil eye their way."

"Give them time, Chelian. They will come to know you and respect you, but you will have to be patient. They have seen us touch now, and nothing bad has happened. It cannot be long before they drop their guard."

*Nothing bad has happened.* She savored the feel of his arms about her. She had yet to test her true powers now that they'd touched, but she dared not try with Zan Dane as witness. In private she would verify the rumors, the myths she'd heard since her budding. In the meantime, she'd enjoy Zan Dane's belief in her almost-normal persona.

She expelled a puff of air. "And how will I accomplish this? How will I prove myself to them? I don't even know what you expect of me. We arrived to a well-tuned machine. Your society leaves no duties for the women. Every man has a task they bring to the community, a talent that contributes to each man's existence. What do you mean for the women to provide?" She paused for just a *none* and turned in his arms to eye him suspiciously. "And if you say we're only here to breed children, I'll ... I'll read your innermost thoughts when your guard is down and bandy your secrets about for the gossips to feed upon."

She regretted her words as soon as they'd left her lips. It had been immature and ill-thought.

His fierce growl told her he had no way of knowing she teased him. His hands wrapped around her upper arms and squeezed. "Do not even suggest such a thing. I know you have little knowledge of our laws, but 'tis illegal to delve into the thoughts of one of our own without prior permission."

"But, if that's the case, why have you allowed me to read yours in the past?"

He gentled his voice. "You did not read my thoughts, *fiol'ston*."

"But I did. I heard your thoughts most clear in my mind."

"Nay. I sent you my thoughts. 'Tis quite acceptable to send thoughts. I can communicate telepathically. Likewise, your powers as a Deliphit allow you to send your thoughts to me. I think your powers differ from mine in that you must touch the person to whom you wish to communicate before you're able to do so."

"Except with you."

"Except with me." He paused. "'Tis what makes our union special."

"And the others? The men in the Verside?"

"For us, we can send our thoughts to anyone. All of the men in the Verside have this capability."

She twisted her fist around the fabric of her gown. "To anyone? Can you control a person's decisions in this manner?"

"Only if the person is susceptible to such control and is weak in their own abilities to make decisions."

She yanked herself free from his grasp. "Did you ... did you control the Council of Twelve by these means? Don't deny it. I can see it in your eyes. You controlled my father. It all makes sense now. I thought it odd how easily they all gave into your proposition. Why? Why was it necessary to practice this deceit?"

His arms dropped to his side, and he took a step back. "Deceit is such an ugly word. Careful how you use it."

"What would you call it?"

"Survival."

The word hung heavy in the air between them. He'd manipulated her people, bartered for women to act

as breeders. He'd used his powers and his wealth to seduce her father into agreeing to the Verside's barbaric plan. How could she have ever felt anything for this man?

"I won't be used."

"Used? I know not how you can think such a thing." *Your blood runs as hot for me as mine does for you.*

She pressed her palm against her temple. "Don't send me your thoughts. Speak to me plainly. I can better tell your mood when I can hear your tone."

He smiled, a predator savoring the last moment before the trap is sprung. He tilted his head. "Then know that I want you. I want you as a man wants a woman."

"*Selt*. You want to fill my belly with your seed."

"Yea. I'll not deny that to be the ultimate goal. Look around you. Without children, our society will die. Until the women came, only men inhabited this planet. Do you not see? We need to insure our longevity. Is it wrong to want immortality through our children?"

"No, but it's wrong to force this dream upon others."

His hand wrapped around the nape of her neck while his finger caressed the edge of her jaw. "Force is a matter of perspective. I do not recall clapping you in chains and dragging you aboard our vessel."

"I ... I won't argue such a trivial issue. You know as well as I that the women had little choice in the matter."

He brought his face closer. "Do you not want children?"

Children? The concept struck her dead-center like the electric shock of an *abion tork*. As a Deliphit, she'd accepted early on that she would never be granted the privilege of offspring. Children? She studied Zan Dane with new insight, wondering what jewels they would produce together. *Selt*, she could not deny her desire to experience the joy of motherhood.

"Well ... *selt*, but—"

"Then we agree upon something."

"You're missing the point entirely." Would he ever see her as more than a mother for children who hadn't even been conceived?

"Am I?" His large hands settled upon her shoulders. He tugged her toward him. She resisted, frustrated by his shortsightedness.

"Don't."

The warmth of his hands seeped through the thin fabric. He gazed at her with knowing eyes. "You are very indecisive, Chelian. From the moment we met, you sent me thoughts of how you longed for my touch. Now that I've touched you, you resist further efforts on my part. Yet I can feel the tremors that claim you when I lay my hands upon your flesh."

He sighed, the gentle breath stirring the fine hairs at her temple.

"I suspect you still worry over what is yet to come, *fiol'ston*. Set aside your fears. I intend to be most

gentle."

He bent his head. Would she now feel his lips upon hers? A delicate shiver ran the length of her spine. He seemed to know her too well. She vacillated between wanting Zan Dane fully and completely to wishing she could reverse time and return to the House of Kel where she had understood better her position in society.

Zan Dane didn't frighten her, but wanting Zan Dane did. She'd always associated the act of mating with love. How could she want him so fiercely without love? She'd read the books hidden in her father's private library, knew the mechanics of coupling, but she'd also seen firsthand how love cemented the relationship and made the giving of bodies more potent.

"Fen Dane!" Cari rushed toward them, her arms outstretched to receive Dane's embrace.

He pulled away from Chelian, his intent thwarted by the exuberant child.

"Carione," Chelian admonished, frustrated by Cari's poor timing. "Young maidens don't rush toward their new king. And you must now address him as Zan Dane."

"Is this true?" Cari turned questioning eyes toward Zan Dane.

He smiled. "Yea, Cari. I am now Zanitor. The appropriate title would be Zan."

"That's going to be hard to get used to," Cari said. "Tell me, how come the men were able to mount and control their dragons so easy when you had to fight with yours? I was so scared when that dragon snatched you up."

"We steal the dragon eggs and nurse them until they hatch," Dane replied. "We teach the dragons from birth. 'Tis the only beast upon this planet capable of providing transportation. But my dragon was left free, a wild stallion wishing to become king of the brood."

"How come you just don't use your *skazers*?"

Chelian marveled at Cari's intuitive questions. She'd never thought about it before, but now that Cari mentioned it, there were a lot of questions about this society that plagued her.

"We have our reasons."

"You just don't want to tell me," Cari said.

Chelian thought Cari had accepted his explanation far more easily than she would have. She intended to ask that particular question again when she and Dane were alone.

"I wish I weren't so young," Cari went on. "I'm the only one here my age, and no one wants to talk to me. I wish I was back on Satobik."

Zan Dane frowned. "No one would have talked to you there either, Cari. They would have condemned you for being Deliphit."

"Pah. I don't feel different from other people. And you touched Chelian tonight and nothing happened. You touch me all the time and nothing happens. I think being Deliphit is just something people made up so they could have someone to pick on."

"When you finish your full budding cycle, you'll feel differently." Chelian didn't feel inclined to make light of the affliction. Cari needed to know she would indeed be different.

"How long until I have all my powers?"

"Another yon or two," Chelian replied. "It differs with each person."

"Do you feel different?"

"*Selt*."

When Dane had first touched her, Chelian had thought her powers a myth, but away from him, her strange powers eddied and flowed, flooding her system with urges best left alone. Fully testing her gift would have to wait until she was alone. She had no wish to frighten anyone.

"How different?" Cari asked.

"I just do."

"Can you read Zan Dane's thoughts? Can you—"

"Cari, you and I will have a long talk later about how we are affected by touch. In the meantime, I think it best we enjoy the festivities."

Cari's bottom lip jutted forward. "Fine. You both want to keep secrets. This really irks."

Cari left, her frustration clear in the droop of her shoulders. She had a point, though, and Chelian could sympathize with the loneliness that claimed her.

"What do you have planned for Cari?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"There is no one here close to her age. No one who will make a suitable mate when she comes of age."

Dane's eyes wore a strange light. "Do you always think of others first? Rest your concerns, Chelian. Cari has passed eight *yons*. Our youngest male has passed fourteen *yons*. The difference in their ages is vast now, but when she is of mating age, the difference won't seem so great."

"You had this planned when first you took her?"

"Yea. I'll not deny I purposefully looked for someone we could gift to Darnet. When the time comes, Cari will be well-pleased."

Her heart fell. Again she was reminded of the reason they were there. Such cold-hearted planning left little room for warmer emotions. He leaned his face close to hers, and the stubble on his shaven skin brushed against her cheek.

Warm lips found her brow, and he kissed her lightly. "I must make my rounds. You must also mingle, let the people know you." It was not a request; it was an order.

He left her standing alone. She studied the mass of milling guests, and a shudder presaged her ingress into the tangle of human bodies. She penetrated the invisible boundaries slowly, knowing there were still some who feared the very air she breathed. Her shoulder brushed against someone, and the woman spun around then froze. Chelian gazed into the startled face of Deliah.

"Chelian, you're to be congratulated." Deliah's chin lifted, and her voice held little respect. "A queen. Does Zan Dane know how you manipulated his thoughts? How you used your evil to secure this high

position for yourself?"

Behind her, Chelian heard a gasp. Such gossip must not be allowed to spread. She straightened her shoulders, hoping she was right about how to deal with this type of insubordination.

"You've no right to address your new queen in this manner, Deliah."

"And what evil will you practice on me for daring to voice my animosity?"

Chelian was trapped, and they both knew it. To brush off the comment would mean giving in to Deliah and allowing her the power to control and manipulate. To assign retribution would lend credence to Deliah's accusations. Indecision tugged on the fringes of Chelian's thoughts, then her eye caught movement behind Deliah. A counteraction was taken from her as Tark hemmed Deliah in, pushing her closer toward Chelian. Chelian wanted to back away from the threat of contact, but Tark shook his head.

"Perhaps you should counter with a threat of your own." Tark placed his hands upon his mate's shoulders, forcing Deliah even closer to Chelian. "Touch her, Zel Chelian. She needs to know you have no poison within your fingertips."

Chelian lifted her hand as if to caress Deliah's cheek. She reared back, eyes wide and pulse beating against the stretched skin of her neck. Chelian curled her fingers, disliking the need to force the issue.

Tark issued the order again. "Touch her. Make Deliah understand you present no threat."

Deliah whimpered. "Tark, please. You've no idea." The whispered plea fell on deaf ears as Tark reached for Chelian's hand.

Tark's eyes met hers with question. "May I, my Zel?"

Chelian shook her head. Tark meant well in wanting to force both women to his will, but Chelian had conquered a dragon this evening. She reached deep within for the courage to proceed. This she would do without Tark's assistance. Understanding flooded his features, and he dropped his hands from Deliah's shoulders.

Chelian cupped Deliah's cheek, wrapping fingers tightly around the nape of her neck. "I wish no evil upon you, Deliah. You're but a recalcitrant child in need of teaching. Feel the warmth of my touch—a Deliphit's touch. Do you feel any different from having experienced such?"

"*Nock*. But later ... later, you will steal my soul."

"I don't want your soul, just your loyalty. Being queen is as new for me as the idea of serving a Deliphit is for you. Can we not come to terms with our new positions?"

Deliah's eyes squeezed tight. "Please."

Chelian dropped her hand. "*Selt*. It's done. I can't retract the touching."

Deliah turned accusing eyes upon Tark, her demeanor harsh and rigid once more. "Mark my words, Tark. You will regret this day. One day soon, I'll come to you in another form, and you'll not recognize me. This is but one of the ways she will use her powers to manipulate us. You've no idea the monster you've unleashed."

Chelian watched Deliah depart, her thoughts deeply troubled. She glanced at Tark. His frown must surely

match her own.

"My Zel," he said, "might I offer a bit of wisdom?"

"*Selt*, I give you leave to speak freely."

"Deliah is jealous of your status. She is a strong woman, an opinionated woman. The others tend to follow her lead. Very few will stand up to her. I fear the key to soliciting the loyalty of the women lies in befriending my mate. The taming will not be easy, yet I know you to be capable.

Chelian nodded. She feared he was right. Deliah would be the key to gaining the trust of all the women. She would give it serious thought. "Thank you, Tark."

"Courage is a mind set. You conquered a dragon this eve—not an easy task."

*Selt*. She'd conquered a dragon. In the aftermath of such heady emotion, the incident felt surreal. Across the room, her eyes caught and held those of Zan Dane. Would the dragon's master conquer as easily?

As if her powers reached out to pull him to her, he plowed through the congested room, his intent obvious in the smoldering of his *ebonharde* eyes. The time had come. She felt it in the primal way his nostrils flared, searching for her scent.

"Come, my Zelton. I would escort you to our home."

"Cari?"

"Has long since been abed as I saw her home a *kleur* hence. You did so well circulating among your people, I saw no need to interrupt. But it grows late, and I can think of a way to better spend our time."

He held out his hand, an invitation for more than an escort home. The juncture between her legs tingled with primitive need, her body's betrayal a thorn of contention. She stared at his hand. Tiny fingers of desire crept along her rib cage, urging her to accept, yet her mind balked at giving in so readily.

"You stare at my hand as if it were a feral beast, Chelian. I have no wish to ravage you. I only mean to claim that which is mine."

His words failed to reassure.

"I'm not a possession."

"Nay. You are a very desirable woman—my woman, my mate. I would have you know what it means to be the mate of the Zanitor of Drake."

She took his hand. A shudder claimed her before she could mask her apprehension. "And I would have you know what it means to share more than my body. I would know the extent of your full regard."

"Do we again talk of love?"

"*Selt*."

Strong arms pulled her close, making her aware of the rigid evidence of his regard even through the layers of thick fabric. She closed her eyes against the heady feel of his body wedged against hers. *You make me want to lose control, Dane.*

"Don't fight your emotions, *fiol'ston*. Come to me with all the passion I felt you use against the dragon."



Warm lips claimed hers, startling her with the intensity of his passion. He pulled her deeper into his embrace, promising her a night filled with more than just touching.

Around them, the den quieted. Space and time blended into a sphere of pure feeling. He swept her into his arms and bore her away from the celebration, carrying her toward a new horizon in their relationship. She floated on air. He tore his mouth from hers and smiled gently into her stunned face. They stood before his home—their home. Without another thought, he carried her through the portal and straight toward his bedroom.

## Sixteen

The darkness invaded his senses, washing his mind clear from thoughts of loyalty. He embraced the feeling, knowing that to do otherwise would fill him with such guilt that he would slit his own throat. He touched the dragon idol, gaining strength of purpose from its aura. Zan Burlorek should be well pleased with his latest efforts. The Miois ruler had been most upset with his failed attempts to kill Zan Dane, but his latest endeavors would redeem him in Zan Burlorek's eyes. Zan Kione had died by his hand and soon—very soon—the Verside would tremble in fear. He shuddered at his own cunning. Zan Dane would rue the day he'd thought to bring war against the Burdven empire.

\* \* \* \*

Dane set her gently upon the bed. Chelian felt the soft padding beneath her weight. The indirect lighting from the *mintored* crystals softened the harsh planes of Dane's face. He stood back, gazing upon her with such intense regard that she averted her eyes. She sat stiff and nervous upon the coverlet, awaiting his pleasure with a mixture of unease and anticipation.

In her culture, the woman undressed the man, rubbing potent, aphrodisiac oils into his skin. Based on her readings, the first mating took on a ritualistic quality. Scented candles were set in a circle around the couple, providing years of good fortune. Yet here, no such oils existed. There were no candles. She gazed at her hands, at a loss as to how Dane expected her to proceed.

*You tempt me with your innocence.*

Her head snapped up to look at him. He continued to gaze upon her without moving. She shifted restlessly, the soft coverlet tousled about her feet. No counter to his telepathic expression of desire came to mind.

Finally, he smiled. He turned and walked the length of the room to pour a tumbler full of *fromt* that he brought back to her. "Take a sip. 'Twill take the edge from your nervousness."

"I don't care for it. It sours my stomach."

He twirled the liquid in his cup. "Yea. I can see where you would have to develop a taste for such strong spirits." He drank deeply, eyeing her over the brim. When he withdrew the cup, droplets of *fromt* clung to his lips.

Against her will, her mouth opened. He set the tumbler down and tilted his head. "Remove your covering. I would feast my eyes once more upon your natural beauty."

He had seen her nakedness before. She'd felt no embarrassment at the coronation, drugged by some emotion she had no name for. But this felt different, too intimate, too intimidating. She clutched the *mestik* at her throat and shook her head.

*I have seen all there is to see. Peel away the fabric, Chelian.*

He stood at the foot of the bed, his arms akimbo and feet spread. By his very stance, he dominated the room—dominated her. A dozen *telsi*-flies danced within the lining of her stomach. Tonight he would plant the seed for Pelicosia's future; tomorrow he would forget she existed.

*Where is the princess who tamed the dragon? Where is your courage?*

He taunted her, goaded her. Trembling fingers worked the fastening at her neck. The *mestik* fell from her shoulders. The tip of his tongue lapped at his *fromt*-moistened lips. She worked another fastening, her

fingers brushing the swell of her breast. His eyes narrowed, his breathing stalled. The *mestik* fell lower about her arms. One fastening remained.

She held her breath. Her stomach knotted. Her eyes closed as the last fastener released and her gown pooled around her waist. Seated as she was with her knees curled under, she doubted he could see little but the full splendor of her breasts. Yet she felt fully exposed. Vulnerable.

"I have a gift for you," he said.

A burst of cold touched her skin as he placed the medallion around her neck. Her eyes opened to glance at the dragon nestled between her breasts. "You had the stone replaced."

"Yea."

"Thank you." Her words seemed inadequate.

He pulled back, a satisfied gleam in his eye. Slowly, sensuously, he began to remove his own clothing. His tunic of soft *truscan* leather rustled provocatively as it slid down his body. The spicy scent of man and *truscan* tantalized her senses. Her breathing became reedy. Her heart pounded within her chest. An eternity passed before he stood completely naked before her.

"Stand, *fiol'ston*."

The endearment did little to comfort her, but she allowed her legs to slide out from under her as she placed her feet on the cold floor. She held out a hand, indicating he should pull her up, but he shook his head and stepped back. Did he not want to touch her? Had he changed his mind? She dropped her hand. Once again, she felt the taint of her affliction. She blinked away the sudden burn of tears. She mustn't allow him to see how his slight had wounded her. Frowning, she pulled herself to a standing position with the bed lightly touching the back of her knees.

His gaze speared her with intense regard. "Now 'tis time to feel the full potency of a Deliphit's powers."

She peered at him in bewilderment, her brow arched in question. He stretched out his palms.

"Hold up your hands against mine, but without touching."

She wanted to refuse, but his manner held no disrespect. The moment her hands were in place, she could feel the current pass between them. Tiny electric waves of pulsating fingers emerged. Her eyes widened. It was like two magnets fighting the pull of attraction, resisting the sexual tension between them. Heightened awareness dawned. Why hadn't she felt these electric currents when they came together on top of the dragon?

*Sweep your hand along my body without touching, fiol'ston. Feel the power of your touch. See the power you have over me.*

Almost timidly, she did as he requested. Changing colors of *aultid*, *vraed*, and even *nezarine* glowed between them. His head fell back and he groaned, the sound resonating his desire. Tiny currents began to spark. Her hands hovered over the dragon's sword. She watched as it unsheathed itself, growing, expanding to full proportions. A gasp escaped her parted lips. Doubt and apprehension caused her eyes to widen. He seemed to understand her misgivings, for he opened his eyes and swept his hands along her body.

The sparks ignited nerve endings, setting her body on fire and pushing away any qualms she had. Warmth radiated from his fingertips, sending pulsating waves of vibration along her skin. With each newly

heightened sense, she forgot her apprehension, her inhibitions. His hand paused over the juncture between her legs. Moisture, hot and seeking, spread through her loins. She tried to step closer, wanted to feel his fingers upon her skin, but he reared back, unwilling to give in to her silent demand.

"Not yet. Not yet, *fiol'ston*. We have all night. Lie back down upon the bed and spread your legs for me. I would awaken you there."

She groaned. Those nerve endings were already awake—awake and ready to explode. She didn't think her body could take much more, but she did as he requested. She lay still and expectant, her body throbbing for more. He stepped back, removing the pulsating currents that had awakened her passion. A questioning look begged for his return.

"Your skin glows *aultid*. When the aura changes to *vraed*, I will know your body is ready to accept our joining."

"I want ... I think I want you now, Dane. I ache with need, but I don't know what will put out this fire of longing. Please..."

"Shh, *fiol'ston*. Soon."

The bed sagged with his weight as he knelt over her. His hand passed over the apex of her longing, causing her back to arch. Wave after wave of pulsations tickled her innermost core. The sweet torture of his electric assault made her fingers dig into the mattress, clutching at the coverlet beneath them.

Warm breath caressed her cheek as he whispered against her ear. "That's it. Glow *vraed* for me. Make ready our joining."

"Please, Dane."

His weight shifted as he straddled her, his knees on either side, but still not touching. Their eyes met. She glanced between them. The tip of his dragon's sword hovered above her welcoming warmth.

He placed his hands on top of hers, holding her prisoner. Immediately, with the joining of skin upon skin, the pulsating currents ceased. He pushed her thighs apart and positioned himself between her legs. Confused, she tried to push away from him. He held her fast, the hard length of him pushing for entrance.

Large hands slid down her arms. New feelings grew within, spiraling toward the threshold of her womanhood. Rough, calloused hands caressed her breasts. She gasped. The tips of her nipples hardened of their own accord. A burning pressure began to build.

Where the electric currents had stimulated her imagination, had warmed her body, this new invasion threatened to make her body explode with sensation. His lips nibbled on her neck as his weight settled on top of her. A deep moan escaped her lips.

"I know naught how to prepare you further, *fiol'ston*. You humble me with this gift."

Without warning, he drove into her, tearing the thin membrane that proclaimed her untouched. A cry of surprise and pain ripped through the quiet of the *evetide*, then strong arms gathered her to him.

"Shh, I am told the pain will not last."

As he held her, the pain indeed began to diminish. She opened her eyes to discover glistening moisture gathered in the corners of his eyes. He began to pull away, but her arms tightened about him, pulling him against her breast. Strands of dark hair brushed against her cheek. She reached up and tugged at the

loosened binding that held his thick mane. Glorious, *ebonharde* locks spilled out from their confines.

She reached up and intertwined her fingers in his hair, gently pulling his head down toward hers. At her invitation, his lips claimed hers, kissing away the last of her misgivings. He tasted of tangy, bittersweet *fromt*, a flavor she could grow to like as it mixed with the heady, unique taste of him. He deepened the kiss, ravaging her mouth with his tongue. The invasion felt strange, uplifting. She inhaled his rare scent and the intoxicating aroma of *fromt* and *truscan*, enjoying the feel of his body as she held him tight.

When she shifted her hips, the slight movement ignited his passion once more and he began to move. Slowly he pulled out, then he pushed in. She gasped. Tendrils of feeling swept from her very core. He tore his mouth from hers to rain kisses along the inner curve of her neck, and she moaned. His hands stroked her skin while his lips nipped and pecked, tugging here and there with just the right amount of pleasure and gentle pain. Her hips arched, inviting him deeper. Her body seemed to have a mind of its own as she lost full control from the sensations he invoked.

Powerful muscles rippled beneath her fingertips as he began to increase his tempo. She clutched him tight, and a pressure built slowly inside, pushing, climbing, accelerating. Intuitively, her hips gyrated, matching his cadence stroke for stroke, measure by measure.

"Dane?"

"Just keep climbing with me, *fiol'ston*. Climb higher."

"Dane!"

Sweet perspiration clung to their bodies. His neck muscles corded with sensual tension. Her legs wrapped around his waist. His hips moved faster, the tempo increasing. The dragon pendant nestled between her breasts bit into her skin. Dane lifted his head, his muscles tense. An avalanche of feeling exploded between her loins. She cried out, unable to silence the depth of emotion.

Once spent, Dane collapsed beside her. The heavy weight of his arm enveloped her in a comforting embrace. Nothing could have prepared her for such a satisfying blending of souls. No other explanation could verify what had just occurred. She brushed the damp locks from his forehead and gazed in wonder at the man cradled beside her. How could he not love her?

He lifted his head at her touch. "I never imagined our coupling would be so intense. Did I hurt you?"

"*Nock*. How could something so wondrous hurt?"

The corners of his mouth lifted. "Yea. 'Twas wondrous. The Elders never fully prepared me for such a fulfilling outcome."

Her brows gathered in a frown. "This was the first you've ever..."

"Yea. The Verside have been marooned on this planet since I passed seven *yons*. There have been no women since for any of the men."

He was as untouched as she—until now. By the ease in which he'd taken her, she would never have suspected. She smiled, more satisfied than she thought possible with the news. On her planet, it was customary for slave women to teach the young men the art of lovemaking, so by the time a man claimed his mate, he was well-versed in ways to give his untried lady pleasure. The women were taught to submit graciously to their mate's needs. Some found enjoyment with their mates, while rumors suggested that others did not. She was most glad she'd found pleasure in Dane's arms.

"Will it always be like that?"

"I know not. I only know what the Elders have told me. Yet I believe our unique gifts allow us to feel heightened sensations. None of the other women will have experienced the currents of electrical pleasure we experienced unless blessed by the spark of awareness, a rare phenomenon among my people. In this, Draccus has truly blessed us."

"*Selt*. Orius has blessed us as well, else I wouldn't have found a loving mate."

Stillness claimed him, and he went rigid in her arms. After a moment's pause he rolled from her body. She lifted herself on one elbow and peered at him in question.

"Dane? Have I said something wrong?"

"Do not mistake passion for love, Chelian. What we shared is powerful, but it is nothing more than primal necessity."

"But—"

"Nay. I'll hear no more words of love."

A flood of hurt and pain gored her heart. How could he be so cruel after sharing such uninhibited passion? A bitter cold crept over her skin like Gronsel Winds after the first blanket of snow. She grabbed her gown and covered her nakedness from his sight. Averting her moist eyes, she stood and headed for the other room.

"Chelian?"

"You got what you wanted. I've no doubt I carry your seed. As virile and commanding as you are, a babe would be foolish not to make an appearance ten *myons* from now."

He sat up in bed and turned his expression to stone. "Come back to bed, Chelian."

"*Nock*. Since I've fulfilled my purpose in coming here, I see no need to couple again." Her lips trembled and, for a *secton*, he thought she might cry.

"Chelian..."

"I need more than lust between us, Dane. I need you to care, to truly care about me. I refuse to settle for less." A tear cascaded down her cheek.

Regret pricked at his conscience. She left him then, her bearing rigid with pride. Love? She asked too much. She asked what he could not give. Tared's ghost rose up in his mind, squeezing his heart with pain. Knowing what he'd done, he knew he wasn't worthy of love.

He stared at his bed where her scent lingered. Lust made him want to call her back, give her the lie she sought, but pride won out. He silently seethed and his mood turned angry. Obligation must be his only love.

He could not risk falling in love with Chelian. To do so would jeopardize his mission and his pledge to avenge his father and the Verside—to honor Tared. Already, Chelian's presence threatened to weaken his determination. He needed his full wits to best his enemy.

He walked toward the door. Resting his forearms upon the archway, he leaned his full weight into the entry and saw the glow of light from the room next to his. He would allow Chelian this concession. It was

for the best. Already, he could feel the sharp talons of possession claim his soul when he thought of his mate. She would be like an intoxicating drug, an addiction. It was best to set her aside now and concentrate on his preparations for war. He could not afford to lose. He had enough guilt shrouding his heart. When Zan Burlorek was defeated and the Verside installed once again on Mioisiad, then he could claim his due from Chelian. Yea, this was for the best.

*Sleep well, Chelian. May your dreams be restful. I fear mine will be full of regret.*

## Seventeen

Dane gave the dragon its lead, letting it swoop dangerously close to the zeel pits. The dragon, newly trained to carry a man's weight, still had enough fight in him to pull a few tricks. Of a sudden, the dragon turned on its side in an attempt to alleviate himself of Dane's weight.

"Zan Dane!" Del Geod called.

Dane clutched the dragon's neck tighter and tugged on its ear. Fire and smoke bellowed from the beast's throat. Nearby, he heard the crack and fall of zeel. With the expertise of a man accustomed to having his own way, he guided the dragon away from danger.

"Zan Dane! Have you lost your mind?" Del Geod came up behind him, his expression fierce with worry. If it had been any other, Dane would not have allowed these liberties.

He laughed. "You worry like an old man, Del Geod."

"Something haunts you this break-day else you would not take a spirited mount on this dangerous route."

Dane narrowed his eyes, squinting against the brightness of the sun at Del Geod's back. "And you overstep our friendship."

"Did you not find comfort in Chelian's arms last *evetide*?"

"Geod." The warning note in Dane's voice was meant to show his displeasure.

Del Geod smiled. "Sialys was more than I could have wished for. The Elders failed to tell us much in regards to the mating process."

Dane sighed. "Yea. Like how to please the woman when 'tis over."

At that, Del Geod roared with laughter. Dane gave Geod a hard look, but the silent message only made Geod laugh harder.

"Geod, if you were not my closest friend, you would find yourself falling into a pit." The moment the words left his mouth, an awkward silence ensued. He felt flushed as deep pain sliced into his heart.

Geod leaned forward on his mount. "Dane, do not allow guilt to ruin this day."

"I should never have said such a thing."

"Yea, but the fact that you spoke in jest means you are healing. Tared's death was tragic, but no one could have foreseen his fall into the pits."

"I should not have ordered him to cut the zeel. His inexperience caused his careless fall. He had not the practice necessary to attempt a cut."

"He had as much practice as any of us, Dane. His status as your brother did not give him special permission to shirk his duty. You gave him an order as you would have given any man. You did not kill Tared."

"Nay, this I know. Yet the pain of his death catches me unaware when small things stir my memory." Dane's chest rose and fell with the deep breath he took. "Other matters weigh heavy on my mind as well."



"Zan Burlorek?"

"Yea, and Chelian."

"Chelian has captured your notice more strongly than you intended." Geod's lips again curved into a smile.

Leave it to Geod to see the truth. "I have matters that require my full attention, yet I have difficulty concentrating. Chelian has sapped my manhood, muddled my thoughts."

Del Geod turned away from Dane, his attention riveted on the zeel fields. Dane followed his line of sight. Today, they supervised the harvesting of zeel. They needed the crystal for their coming journey.

*Zeel.* The crystal had been their salvation in more ways than one. Zan Burlorek had sent them toward this planet with just enough fuel to get them here, his intention to strand them forever. Zan Burlorek had failed to take into account the great minds within the Verside. It didn't take them long to discover zeel and to adapt its powerful properties for their needs.

Each yon since, Zan Burlorek sent an envoy to determine the Verside's subjugated status, but the Verside were clever men. They hid all evidence of their technological advances toward the time when their sons would have enough skill and power to overtake the Burdven regime. Now that time drew near. Dane had set things in motion, and the day of reckoning was at hand.

It had been Dane's idea to find the women first, to provide mates for his men. He'd wanted to insure the Versidian lineage before sending men to their deaths. A heaviness pushed against his heart. He knew what they planned meant certain danger and that men would die, but his fate remained predestined. He'd been groomed for this duty since arriving on Pelicosia. To halt proceedings now meant failure.

A pair of *nezarine* eyes invaded his thoughts. Even now, far away from Chelian, she had the power to distract him from his purpose. She'd refused his bed, preferring the solitude of another chamber. He could have forced the issue, yet he could not find it in him to be so cruel. They both needed time.

"*Holodag!*"

The shout signaled the cutter to pull back. A slow building crackle prefaced the falling of another zeel tip. The crystal snapped. Four men sat astride their dragons, each holding one end of a net. They waited, eager for the zeel to drop.

Dane smiled, well pleased by this break-day's work. Already they'd harvested enough zeel to support their mission to Mioisiad and back. Suddenly, a modicum of apprehension slithered along the nape of his neck. He tensed, honing his senses, stretching out his mind.

Evil. It filtered through the noise, through the action to land softly on his shoulder. He shuddered and whipped his head around to look behind him. Nothing. He glanced to the right then to the left. Nothing.

"You sensed it too?" Geod stared into the mists.

"Yea," Dane replied. "'Tis gone as quickly as it came, but the hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention."

Sharp pain sliced into his hand. He'd tugged too hard on the dragon's ear, and its sharp scale had cut his palm. He swore. Truly he must get a handle on his emotions. Chelian must not be allowed to take any more of his time or his thoughts.

He brought the injured hand to his mouth and tasted the tangy flavor of blood. He pulled his injured palm from his lips to note the razor cut that marred his skin. Not serious enough to require attention, but painful enough to garner his aggravation. At least there would be no scar to indicate his inattentiveness.

"Tark, take over here," Dane commanded. "Del Geod and I have business elsewhere."

Tark gave him a nod. "By your lead."

"Come, Geod. The men are almost finished here. I would discuss the matter of Zan Burlorek more fully in private."

He didn't wait to see if Geod followed but steered the dragon toward the Everalk Canyon and the set of caves located there. The dragon screeched as Dane urged it to fly faster. Half a *daton's* ride would see them to the canyon where he thought to hide the women when the time came.

\* \* \* \*

Chelian meandered through the vast corridors that swept through the belly of Pelicosia. The cold dampness of her new environment matched her mood. She pushed thoughts of Dane to the far corners of her mind, seeking solace in the beauty of these dwellings. The caves seemed to stretch on forever. At various intervals, maps had been artfully drawn and etched into the surface of the walls, so she entertained no fear of losing herself among the twists and turns.

Someone had taken time and effort in laying out the floor plan, in adding dividing walls to lend privacy to personal living quarters. Dane lived in quarters apart from the rest of the populace. The great hall and meeting room divided his suite of rooms from the other men's. A passage from the great hall led to what she termed working rooms. There she found a tailor's shop, the kitchen, a carpenter's shop, and a host of other necessary trades. Their society was built on communism where every man gave to the good of the community.

The concept seemed too foreign for her to grasp, and yet, she'd seen evidence of its ability to work. Her own society used a commercialized system where the commoners traded for goods and slaves pampered the nobility. With the exception of Zan Dane and the Elders, this community didn't boast a caste system. There were no slaves and no commoners, only a king, his officers, and the Elders. Everyone else existed on the same level. How would things change now that the women were there?

Surely they didn't expect the women to do nothing. She frowned. Back home, the women sewed, read, played hostess when the need arose, and they gardened. A sigh escaped her lips. She missed the fresh air, the smell of new blooms and the soft caress of the wind. She hated being buried so deep beneath the surface where the air smelled stale and the only sounds were those of voices echoing off stone walls.

Though beautiful, this environment seemed artificial. Chelian trailed her hand along the carved relief on one of the entryways. Such skill, such patience. She marveled anew at the artistry, yet her heart cried for the natural wonders of the outdoors. Still absorbed in her thoughts, she backed away, turned, and ran into solid form.

"Watch where you're going."

"Forgive me, Deliah. I was enamored with the carvings and didn't see you there."

"I'm ... I'm glad to have this opportunity to speak with you without the prying ears of others."

Chelian stiffened. She wondered again how to handle Deliah's antagonism. "My door will always be open to my people."

Deliah tensed visibly at the subtle reminder of Chelian's status. "That's most gracious of you, my Zelton."

"Your tone does not match your words. Careful, Deliah. I've not yet learned how the Verside deals with insolence, but it's bound to be unpleasant."

Deliah's hand automatically went to her length of hair. "I have no wish to incur your wrath. Tark has warned me most harshly."

"Tark seems very authoritative, much like my own mate. Did you fare well last eve?"

She meant the question in a kind way but could see by Deliah's expression that she'd pried into private matters.

Deliah shuddered before answering. "All is well, and you?"

Did she dare open up to Deliah? Could this be the secret to earning her trust? Chelian considered it, but in the end she decided it best not to divulge her own state of affairs. She didn't need to feed the gossips, and she knew from past experience that Deliah was the worst at spreading rumors.

"Quite well." Chelian paused before continuing. "You wanted to speak privately?"

"*Nock*. I've changed my mind. I bid you pleasant thoughts as you journey forth."

Deliah's words lacked sincerity, but at least she hadn't attacked Chelian with verbal swords. Perhaps she'd made progress after all where Deliah was concerned.

Chelian meandered back to the great hall in time for the *evetide* meal. The men boasted of their success in extracting zeal while the women feasted upon their mates in dreamy displays. Chelian's eyes scanned the ensemble for Dane, but he was strangely absent. Sialys sidled up next to her.

"Have you seen Del Geod?"

"*Nock*," Chelian replied, "and Zan Dane is absent as well."

Tark startled them both when he broke into their conversation. "Both Zan Dane and Del Geod will be gone this *evetide*. Community concerns have garnered their attention elsewhere. They should return on the morrow."

"My thanks, Tark," Chelian said.

"In keeping with meal etiquette, perhaps you and Sialys could share a plate," he suggested.

"It would be an honor, my Zelton." Sialys smiled with bright eyes and a dimpled cheek.

Chelian nodded, her mind distracted by thoughts of Dane. She shouldn't have been so harsh. He must still be angered to have left without informing her of his intent. Whatever could she have been thinking to push Dane from her bed?

The food arrived, but she barely glanced at the lavish display of meats and vegetables. Her appetite fled as she continued to stew over last night's scene. She'd managed all day without dwelling on her mate, but now that *evetide* fell, desolation claimed her mood. Even Cari's enthusiasm for the meal couldn't lift Chelian from her dejected state. And the worst was yet to come. She still had an empty room to face and memories that promised to haunt her dreams.

After the meal, she suffered through the *evetide* entertainment, a tedious affair of readings and music.

Usually she found the gathering of interest and welcomed the diversity of talent, but her mind kept drifting to other matters. Finally, Tark signaled an end to the entourage of performers and bid all present a peaceful sleep. It was time to adjourn.

Chelian spent the walk back in quiet reflection. Even Cari sensed her melancholy. The child gave no protest when Chelian suggested she go to bed early. Alone again, Chelian wandered into Dane's room. Images attacked her with mixed emotions. Her eyes gazed upon the bed, her concentration riveted by memories of the sights and sounds of Dane's lovemaking.

"Fool," she admonished herself. "It's my own fault Dane chose to sleep elsewhere this *evetide*. I challenged a king."

What had she been thinking? True, at the time she'd felt justified, but in issuing her ultimatum, she'd hurt her own chances for a normal relationship. She'd wanted to fit in, to belong, to be like the rest of the women. Yet she'd dared confront a king. She'd dared to withhold her body from her mate.

She caught sight of herself in the reflecting crystal and groaned. She sauntered closer and berated herself for the dark circles forming beneath swollen eyes. Dane. She couldn't get the man out of her mind. Even while absent, his presence surrounded her. His scent, his clothing, his masculinity pulsed within this room, making her yearn for his touch.

Her fingertips reached out to graze the reflecting glass. "Do I dare try? Do I dare test my powers?"

Dane would be gone until the break-day. What better time than now to explore her abilities? She took a deep breath and thought through the consequences. None presented enough reason not to try.

Quickly, before she could change her mind, she stripped out of her clothing. Naked, she stood before the reflecting glass. The muscles in her calves tightened as she crouched. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the task she'd chosen.

She started with her feet, her hands gliding over toes, ankles, calves and upward along her thighs. Heat poured from skin that stretched taught over bulging muscle. Hair follicles exploded with new growth. Bone thickened beneath changing tendons and expanding cartilage. Her hands continued to touch, sculpting her body into something different with each new exploration. Upward they roamed, changing, molding. Pain flowed through her veins, making her teeth clench. She dared not cry out for fear of waking Cari, yet she dared not stop what she'd begun.

With eyes still closed, she ran her fingers across her face. All her concentration merged toward one outcome. Cheekbones lifted, eyebrows thickened, and jaw expanded. Spent, she stood before the reflecting crystal and slowly opened her eyes.

Dane.

She'd become the very image of her mate, of her king. She drank in his naked form and smiled at the truth of her affliction. Once she'd touched a person, a Deliphit could assume that person's image. She'd become Dane.

Laughing, she rushed to his closet and gathered a tunic and leggings. With haste, she donned the costume and preened before the reflecting crystal. She cleared her throat then spoke.

"By my lead."

To her ears, the voice sounded deeper, more masculine, but did it sound like Dane's? She pulled back her long hair and bound it until it lay tight against her scalp. Still the same length as her own, the *silveresk*

tresses had turned *ebonharde*. Save for the length of hair, she was now the spitting image of Zan Dane, newly appointed leader of the Verside.

"Zan Dane?"

Chelian whirled at the sound, hiding her length of hair, the only evidence that marked her as an imposter. Cari stood in the doorway, her hands rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Chelian swallowed hard. She hadn't meant to be caught in this illusion.

"Zan Dane," Cari said, "I didn't think you were coming home this *evetide*. Chelian said you had stuff to do."

Chelian coughed to hide her nervousness. "I managed to return earlier than I'd thought."

Cari tilted her head and gave Chelian a baffled stare. "You sound different. Not as stiff as you usually do."

Chelian blinked. She'd forgotten to mimic Dane's speech inflections. She smiled. "A sign that you and Chelian are beginning to influence me somewhat. Now then, should you not be in bed?"

"I was sleeping, but then I heard noise. I'm glad you're back. Chelian missed you."

"And I her, but I am not staying. I only came to retrieve my sword before going back out again. 'Twill be late break-day before I return. In the meantime, sleep well."

"Thank you, Zan Dane." Cari started to leave then turned. "Where's Chelian? Shouldn't she be here with you also?"

"She sleeps in the room next to this one. Now off to bed, Cari."

"Fair *evetide*, Zan Dane."

"Fair *evetide* to you, Cari."

When Cari left, Chelian sagged against the wall. Her image change had fooled Cari. Her cheeks lifted with the smile she wore. She now knew for true what Bastian citizens feared. With this ability, a Deliphit could become anyone—a person of nobility, a person with political power. In this manner, Deliphits of old had once taken over the Bastian government. She would have to cut her hair, but she could become Zan Dane with no one the wiser.

It was a good thing she had no such desire. For now, it was enough to know the rumors proved true and she possessed this rare gift, but aside from this one night, she suspected she'd never again use these talents. The painful transformation would cause her to resist further experiments.

Zan Dane's reflection gazed back at her, accusing her of betraying a trust. She frowned. Dane would be most displeased should he ever learn of this night's weakness. She'd taken advantage by assuming his image, even if only for a short while. With great reverence, she touched her cheek—Dane's cheek—and sighed.

"May Orius guide you this *evetide*, Zan Dane."

Her whispered words did little to assuage her guilt. She needed to return to her own form and quickly, lest someone else happen upon her. The *truscan* tunic fell at her feet while the leggings slid along her limbs. She gazed once more in appreciation of the naked splendor she might not see for some time. After

drinking her fill, she closed her eyes and began the arduous task of reversal. For a moment in time, she'd had Zan Dane all to herself. Yet even as these thoughts invaded her mind, she knew them to be false. Zan Dane's image had been as deceptive as the lies she'd told herself.

*Selt.* She'd convinced herself she could make Dane love her. Naively, she'd thought to ensnare him as thoroughly as he'd ensnared her. Last *evetide*, he'd breached her force field, invading her emotions and taking her heart captive. And in the aftermath of his sensual assault, she'd discovered the truth: she'd fallen in love with Zan Dane.

## Eighteen

"There exists among us a traitor!"

Silence claimed the Verside at Dane's announcement.

"I know not yet who among you would dare scheme against us, but know this: I *will* discover the informant who thinks to destroy all our hard work."

Heads snapped back and forth, scanning the assembly for the guilty party. *Good*. Dane wanted each man thinking of the crime, concentrating on the grievous situation. Del Geod melted into the crowd, unobtrusive in his search. Ever so often, his head would dip as he peeked at the object in his hand. Dane smiled. Soon they would know who'd betrayed them. Soon they would have answers.

"On Satobik, someone dared control the minds of two Bastian mercenaries. Del Geod and I were attacked, and I've no doubt they meant to kill us."

Murmurs broke out. Dane gave them time to discuss the matter before raising his hand for their silence.

"En route, someone sabotaged the *Cressis*. If not for the resourcefulness of some of the men, we would not have made it home."

Dane's eyes continued to follow Geod's progress among the men. For their plan to work, he needed to keep the men's attention on the possibility of a traitor. Finally, Del Geod paused. He glanced up at Dane and gave him a discernable nod—Kurig. They had found Zan Burlorek's man.

Raw pain sliced through Dane's heart. Blood raged through his veins, heating his skin. A blood vessel ticked furiously against his temple. Kurig had killed his father. He opened his mouth to make the accusation then closed it. Kurig was an Elder. For him to have caused the problems aboard the *Cressis* or on Satobik, he would have had to have an accomplice.

Dane's gaze settled on Kurig with intense anger. "Yea. All of these things occurred as I explained them. But the most serious crime of all was my father's murder."

The low murmuring grew in volume, erupting with the shock of this latest announcement. None had expected foul play to be the cause of Zan Kione's death. Geod paused and gave Dane a puzzled look. Dane nodded, indicating Geod should continue his search.

"This *daton*, we begin to train in earnest. At the end of the *myon*, we journey to Mioisiad to claim our rightful inheritances. I have no wish to alert Zan Burlorek of our plans. We've come too far and worked too hard for this moment."

He kept his eyes trained on Kurig. Beads of sweat had formed on the Elder's forehead, and his skin paled. The man knew it was only a matter of time, but he had no idea how short that time would be. Dane narrowed his eyes. What hold did Zan Burlorek have over Kurig to cause such a wise and noble man to turn against his friends and his family?

Dane glanced at Del Geod—nothing. He'd swept the room with the Stone of Arznan and found no one else to lay the blame on.

"Tark," Dane said. "Lead the men to the training ground above. We begin preparing for our assault."

Tark bowed slightly. "By your lead."

When the Verside filed out, only the Elders and half a dozen domestic workmen remained. Del Geod approached and handed Dane the stone.

"You were most wise in taking this stone from Satobik, Zan Dane."

"I did not take it. I traded for it at a very high price. Sire Kar confided that only four exist on the entire planet of Satobik, and Bastia possessed three of them."

"You waited a long time in putting it to use. Why did you not use it aboard the *Cressis* or when you first discovered your father had been murdered?"

Dane flinched because he'd been too obsessed with Chelian to give the stone much thought until now. He'd attained the article as an afterthought, thinking it might come in handy in their dealings with Burlorek.

"I have no excuse for not using it earlier. My mind was occupied with other matters, and things aboard the *Cressis* escalated so quickly there did not seem time. Quite frankly, I forgot I had the stone until this morn when I completed my unpacking."

"I can see where thoughts of Chelian would keep you unfocused." Geod's smirk made Dane's teeth grind. He must have noticed Dane's displeasure for he continued on a different line of questioning. "Might I ask what you had to give for the stone if not more zeal?"

"A *skazer*."

"Ah, that explains why some of the *skazers* were overcrowded when we transported the women to the *Cressis*. So how will you use your knowledge?"

"I know not," Dane replied. "Kurig could not have acted alone. Either his accomplice saw the stone and became aware of our intent to find him, or he was not here. If he saw the stone, he could have easily masked his thoughts, buried his feelings of guilt."

"Kurig must be brought to task."

"Yea." Dane said no more as he began walking toward Kurig.

"Zan Dane, do not be hasty in your accusation. Remember, the stone only hints at a person's knowledge of the crime. It does not necessarily reflect guilt."

Dane stopped and turned. "You need not tell me how to do my job, Del Geod."

"I would never presume such, my Zanitor."

"Forgive my hasty rebuke. I know you mean well. I am bitter and angry at the thought that Kurig might be guilty of my father's murder. I find I want him to be guilty so I will have someone I can lay blame on. But I will heed your words, Del Geod. I will not abuse the power given to me by my people."

A comforting hand settled upon his shoulder, and Geod gave him a reassuring nod. "I, too, feel your pain. 'Tis time we had answers."

Dane smiled at Geod before turning a hard glare toward Kurig. "Kurig—Kurig Marsten! I summon you to answer to the accusation of high treason. Present yourself!"

Kurig stumbled and halted. Head bowed, he turned. He made no move to close the gap between himself and his accusers. His stance indicated defeat as he awaited Dane and Del Geod.



Del Geod glared at the small crowd left milling about. "The rest of you have leave to tend to your own business. What we do here is none of your concern for the present."

One of the other Elders started to protest, but Geod ordered them all to vacate the area. Dane was thankful for Geod's foresight. At the moment, all he could think about was Kurig and the evil that festered inside him. Dane stopped a stone's length away from the man, knowing that if he stood any closer he would likely wrap his hands about the man's neck.

"What knowledge do you have of my father's death?"

Kurig lifted his head, his eyes blinking away tears. "He was a good man, a true friend."

"Yet you participated in his death."

"Nay, nay."

"Do you deny your guilt?"

Kurig's shoulders sagged, making his long cloak scrape the floor. "I had no choice."

"Tell me. Make me understand this heinous crime." Dane's voice cracked on the last as he choked on his own grief.

"Zan Dane." Chelian's voice interrupted his interview with Kurig. "Tell me what you mean by making the women move."

He clenched his teeth, took a deep breath and turned toward his mate. "Now is not the time, Chelian. I will address your question later."

She came closer, close enough to entice him with her scent. Thoughts of his father's death were diverted by Chelian's poorly timed visit.

"I think now is a perfect time." Her voice rose, giving him a clear indication of her anger.

He turned toward Del Geod. "Escort my mate to our quarters while I deal with Kurig."

With his attention redirected, Dane did not see Kurig take a step back. With swift movements, Kurig twirled his cloak away from his body and drew his dagger. In a move that belied his advanced years, he grabbed Dane's arm and pulled. Caught off guard by the flowing cloak, Dane stumbled forward and found himself locked in Kurig's deadly embrace. The dagger tip pricked the skin just above a main artery in his neck.

"Dane!" Chelian grabbed Kurig's arm, her features twisted with worry.

Kurig shook off Chelian's hold. "Try that again and I will slit his throat. Stand back, my Zelton. My business is with the Zanitor and no one else."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dane saw Chelian smile. She replied with confidence, "I don't think so."

Chelian's gaze dropped to Kurig's arm and settled there. Unblinking, she stared, her concentration focused just below his wrist. Kurig's arm began to shake, and Dane felt the tip of the dagger waver dangerously close to his jugular vein. The smell of singed flesh irritated his nostrils. He tried to turn his head, but Kurig tightened his hold.

"Stop!" Kurig's voice shook with pain. "What are you doing?"

Dane had no idea to what Kurig referred. All he could see were Del Geod and Chelian. Neither had moved since Kurig had admonished Chelian. The dagger continued to waver, and Kurig's teeth made an awful grinding sound. A deep moan escaped Kurig's lips, growing in volume as if some silent agony claimed him.

"*Cruent!*"

The knife fell to the ground with a resounding clatter. Dane stumbled from the force of Kurig's shove. He spun around to find Kurig holding an arm that appeared bright *vraed* with heat. Del Geod stooped and picked up the discarded dagger.

"My arm!" Kurig bent double. "Something has burned my arm. Call Liorxton to tend me!"

"Tell me what I wish to know and I will see your pain relieved," Dane said.

"Anything, just make the pain go away!"

"Why did you kill my father? Why kill your king?"

Chelian gasped, but Dane managed to keep his eyes trained on Kurig. He'd made the mistake once of allowing Chelian to claim his attention while dealing with the traitor. He wouldn't do so again.

"He ... was not ... my king."

"You were planted here by the Burlorek regime to keep tabs on us, weren't you?" Dane demanded. "Do they know of the women? Do they know we plan an attack?"

Kurig laughed, a bitter sound that grated on Dane's nerves. "Del Geod, take this Elder and place him in his rooms under guard." They had no prison since they had never needed one before.

"But my hand..."

"Tell me who your accomplice is, and I'll send Liorxton to your chambers."

Kurig's eyes gleamed with menace. "May the Great Dragon burn you to a crisp."

"Del Geod!"

"By your lead, Zan Dane."

Geod escorted Kurig from the room, leaving Dane alone with Chelian. He stared at nothing in particular while he waited for Del Geod and Kurig to exit, then he turned with slow purpose toward Chelian. She had not moved from her stance, her bearing regal and just a bit overconfident.

"Have you knowledge of Kurig's sudden difficulties?" Dane asked.

"*Selt.*"

"How?"

"I touched him. I grabbed his arm. It was the link I needed to make him feel pain."

"You controlled his mind? 'Tis not possible. A member of the Verside has the ability to block such machinations, and Kurig is an Elder."

"I did not control his mind, Dane."

"Then how?"

"I was able to lock onto his body with my thoughts. It's different from connecting through telepathy. It's more like telekinesis. I projected my thoughts onto his skin, burning him with concentrated fire."

A talent he knew nothing of. What other hidden abilities did she possess? He knew the other women had feared the Deliphits, but he'd brushed it off as exaggerated rumors. Telepathy was often misunderstood, and he'd attributed their fear to the Deliphit's telepathic powers. Now he would have to reassess his original opinion on the matter.

"You will have to explain this gift more fully to me, but at a later time. For now, know that I thank you."

She crossed her arms. "You don't sound thankful. You sound bitter."

"'Tis because I should have been able to untangle myself without a woman's help. One part of me wants to throttle you for your unsolicited interference; the other is grateful for the peaceful outcome."

Chelian tilted her head, her expression pensive. "I could do nothing else, Dane. I could not see you hurt while knowing I had the ability to render aid."

Her admission made him uncomfortable. Without words, she'd shown him how much she'd grown to care for him. "My thanks, but in the future, I would have you refrain from similar actions. I do not wish to see you hurt at my expense. What you did could have resulted in negative consequences."

"How? I didn't get anywhere near him except when I first caught hold of his arm, and I only did that so I would have the ability to target his body as I did."

He narrowed his eyes. "He could have cut you when you touched him. You were lucky. Now give me your word you will do nothing in the future that puts you at risk."

"*Nock*. I won't make any such promise, because I don't know what the future will bring. No one does."

"I will not have you hurt."

The corners of her eyes wrinkled with pleasure, her smile contagious for its sincerity. "You do care. You care for me but won't admit it."

He stiffened. He would not—could not—put such into words.

"You are my mate, Chelian. Members of the Verside mate for life. There will be no other for me, no other chance at continuing my line."

Her smile faded, and she placed a hand upon her stomach. "There is no child, Dane. Your seed did not take. And, by your own orders, the women leave this very mid-*daton* for new quarters away from the men."

Dane growled and pulled him to her, crushing her against his chest. "The women must leave for their own safety, but 'tis only for a short time. You will return after Burlorek's envoy has made their inspections. And when you do, we will correct your failure to conceive."

She struggled against his hold. "My failure to conceive? How dare you! Perhaps it was your failure to impregnate fertile ground."

His hand wrapped around her neck, pulling her closer. He bent his head low, his lips close to her ear as he closed his eyes and inhaled her fresh scent. "It matters not. I want you. I but look for an excuse to

hold you close once more."

Her struggles quieted, and she melted into his embrace. "You don't need an excuse, Dane. I will gladly submit to your lovemaking."

"And no more talk of love?"

"I ... I am more content now to take one *daton* at a time, and I will accept whatever feelings you wish to impart upon me. I was naive to think a king could love one with tainted blood."

"Nay. I will hear no such words. You are most worthy. 'Tis I who am at fault. I am not capable of strong emotions for a woman when duty pulls me in another direction."

He gazed down into her hooded eyes. He wanted to kiss her, to taste her lips, to feel desire claim his body. His nostrils expanded as he breathed deep the clean, delicate scent unique to Chelian. Without further thought of reasons why he shouldn't, he captured her mouth with his.

The kiss communicated his need—his desires and aspirations for their future. All of these things he poured into this one kiss. He wanted to show her all the feelings he dared not tell her.

"Zan Dane, I—"

Dane pulled away at Del Geod's interruption. "Del Geod, your timing is exceptional."

Del Geod smiled. "Yea, so Sialys always tells me. Nevertheless, Kurig is confined to his quarters with a guard. Foyst has finished preparations for the women's journey and requests all the women be gathered in the great hall."

Dane nodded. Placing both hands upon Chelian's shoulders, he gave her a gentle kiss upon the brow. "'Tis only for a short time, *fiol'ston*. Go help Foyst gather the women."

"Will you visit?" she asked.

"Nay. 'Tis too dangerous. You will be in charge of the women until 'tis safe for all of you to return. Just know I trust you with the future of Pelicosia."

"You will have no worries on our account, Zan Dane. I ... I will miss you."

Dane compressed his lips into a fine line. He had no comment to give her. A response in kind would only make things more difficult in the end. Instead, he pulled away from her and pushed her gently toward the exit. Foyst awaited her and needed her help in preparing for the move.

"Be safe, Chelian."

When she was gone, Del Geod commented, "Chelian will do well in overseeing the women."

"Yea. I am pleased," Dane replied.

"You don't sound pleased."

How could he explain to Del Geod his deep disappointment? He'd pinned his hopes on getting her with child on the first *evetide* and did not want to tell Del Geod of his failure. Draccus must have his reasons for not blessing their union. He would yield to the wisdom of Draccus, the Great Dragon.

"I but worry over Zan Burlorek's visit, Geod. Foyst has everything prepared. The women leave this

*evetide* for the Everark Canyon."

"This *evetide*? I thought they journeyed three *datons* hence. Surely 'tis not necessary to move them so soon."

Dane lifted an eyebrow. Del Geod's expression indicated distress. Did Sialys have anything to do with his reaction?

"I told you of my plans a tri-*myon* ago," Dane said. "Did you forget?"

"Nay, not exactly. I just did not expect it to be so soon. I wanted more time to..."

"To enjoy your mate?"

"Yea. After all, what if Sialys is not pregnant? We've only had the one tri-*myon* to..."

Dane tried not to think of his own failure and chuckled. "You have had plenty of time to plant your seed, Geod. You need not worry so."

"You are either very naive or extremely optimistic."

Great guffaws of laughter erupted from Dane's chest. Perhaps he was overly confident in his men's abilities. Out of ninety-five women, surely some now carried the future of Pelicosia within their wombs.

He sighed. "You will miss Sialys?"

"Yea," Geod replied. "Very much so, as much as you will miss Chelian."

He frowned. "Nay. In fact, I will welcome Chelian's absence. She has proven to be a great distraction for me. This forced separation will allow me time to finish preparations for our attack on Zan Burlorek's stronghold."

Geod gave him a mocking smirk. "For her to be such a distraction, she must fill your thoughts, and for her to fill your thoughts, you must feel something for her."

"Because you are my friend, I am going to forget your impudence."

"Impudence?"

"Yea. What do you call it when a friend tries to analyze your life without leave to do so?"

Geod's lip curled in a bright smile. "But you cannot deny the truth of my words."

Dane would not answer such blatant rudeness. He did not need nor want Geod's interference in his relationship with Chelian. It was enough that he had to deal with Chelian's feelings. Originally he hadn't planned on taking a mate, but he had wanted Chelian from the first, knowing there would be magic in her touch. He hadn't bargained for the complications associated with their union.

"The sooner we move the Deliphits to the new location, the better," Dane said.

"And while they are gone?"

"We prepare for battle."

\* \* \* \*

"You have done well in hiding all evidence of your illegal activities from this inspection, Zan Dane."

Dane bristled at Fen Carben's snide remark. It wasn't the words so much as the tone that attacked Dane's nerves. He slanted his head and gave Fen Carben an irritated scowl.

"Were you hoping for a different outcome?"

Fen Carben threw back his head and laughed. "Nay, Zan Dane. In truth, I meant no disrespect. I am most impressed by your ability to deceive my father's men. I but compliment you for your continued successes."

Dane relaxed. "I suppose I should now thank you for your continued help toward that end."

"It pleases me greatly to mislead my father in this manner. I will always be indebted to Zan Kione for taking me under his wing and showing me a different way to live."

Though Fen Carben spoke of his respect for Dane's father, his voice appeared to lack warmth. Dane needed Fen Carben's help, but an ounce of doubt kept him from revealing everything to him.

"Perhaps you can tell me what you know of a spy among us," Dane said.

"A spy?"

"Yea. Someone conspired with one of our Elders. My father is dead from Kurig's hand, yet I cannot believe he acted alone."

"Do you accuse me?" Fen Carben asked.

"Nay, but if they acted with Zan Burlorek's blessing, it stands to reason that you would have knowledge of the situation."

Fen Carben rubbed his stubbled chin. "I know nothing of a traitor among you, but I'll see what I can find out."

"Your help is always welcome," Dane said. "Now tell me what news you bring from Mioisiad and the Burdven Empire. Has Zan Burlorek complete control over Mioisiad, or are there sects still rebelling against his reign?"

Fen Carben turned his back, shielding his expression from Dane's penetrating gaze. The man poured a tumbler full of *fromt*, yet his timing seemed uncanny. He had a way of hiding his emotions when pressed for information concerning the Burdven Empire.

"The moment you have anticipated arrives sooner than expected," Fen Carben replied. "Rebels from the Marsh sect dared to attack my father's kingdom. He plans to retaliate. On that day, I will schedule the lenses to be cleaned for the protective shields. Your men will be able to penetrate Mioisiad air space. With the Burd guards engaged elsewhere, my father's estate will be left vulnerable to your attack."

Fen Carben turned then and lifted his glass in salute. Dane stared at the man, trying to glean if he spoke true, or if he dangled bait for a trap.

"You risk much in betraying your own father."

Fen Carben shrugged. "Our goals are intertwined."

"You covet the throne?"

"Yea, as much as you covet revenge."

"Revenge is a harsh, ugly word," Dane said. "I covet justice. I covet freedom for the women your father enslaves."

The right brow above Fen Carben's *autilid* eye rose. "Your mother is dead. What you do to Zan Burlorek will not bring her back."

"Our mother," Dane corrected.

"Yea, our mother, though I did not know her as such in her later years, Zan Dane. My memories of her gentle touch are cloaked by my father's treatment of her once the Verside were exiled. Though I tried to retain our relationship, she succumbed to my father's cruelty. She became a stranger to me."

Dane shook his head. "You blame her for events she could not control?"

"She should have been stronger."

For a brief moment, Fen Carben's eyes glittered with pain and anger before his features went blank of any expression. Dane felt little liking for his half-brother, yet he would use him to see his goals met.

"You see her acquiescence as a weakness, Fen Carben. I see it as the most courageous thing she could have done. Without her cooperation, my father would have been executed for treason and most of the Verside alongside him." Dane lifted his glass. "A toast to a very brave woman."

Once he'd intoned the words, he couldn't help but think of Chelian and her own courage. She'd traveled galaxies to live on foreign soil with a man she knew little about. Her tenacity reminded him of his mother. From this comparison, he discovered a wealth of respect for the woman who'd become his mate.

Fen Carben did not lift his glass in salute to the woman but drank until very little remained. With but a drop left, he held his glass high. "To the Verside. May they liberate all of Mioisiad from tyranny."

Dane stiffened. Fen Carben's words sounded as empty as his glass. Dane's father would have berated him for a fool, claiming Fen Carben untrustworthy. He wondered anew if he followed the right path, yet, in all honesty, he could do little else. The information Fen Carben provided would see the Verside successful in their plans to overthrow Zan Burlorek's regime.

## Nineteen

The long stay in the Everark Canyon proved a trial in patience for Chelian, yet in the end she found she had achieved a certain amount of success. Being in charge of women who'd grown up fearing the very ground she traversed had challenged her creativity. With the help of Sialys, Cari, and Katrin, Chelian had won the loyalty of most of the women. Deliah still demonstrated an adversity toward the Deliphits, but she no longer vocalized her objections.

A *finpy* circled overhead as the parade of women journeyed back, and Chelian mused that they must look a tasty treat to the large, carnivorous bird. She continued the walk, wondering anew why Dane hadn't sent the men on dragons to fetch the women. For that matter, with Burlorek's men gone, they could have brought the *skazers* instead of subjecting the women to this arduous walk.

"I'm looking forward to being home," Sialys commented from behind.

"Home," Chelian said. "Hard to believe we've been here long enough to call underground caves our home."

"I would call anywhere Del Geod resides my home. I think I've fallen in love with the man."

"I'm happy for you then."

"Don't you feel the same for Zan Dane?"

Chelian kicked at a small rock with the toe of her shoe. She could not voice her feelings of love to Sialys before confiding them to her mate. "All I know for sure is he confuses me greatly. Beyond that, I can't say what my feelings are."

"I think I would feel the same in your position," Sialys said. "Zan Dane intimidates me with his confidence. I'm most glad he did not choose me for mate."

Chelian sighed. "He is *bratek*, isn't he?"

"*Selt*, a fine specimen of a man. No matter what you feel for him, he is most pleasant to look upon."

Chelian laughed, her mood lighter. "Most pleasant indeed."

Her thoughts gravitated toward the coming *evetide*, and her pulse quickened. Dane had all but told her they would spend their time together enjoying the physical pleasures associated with lovemaking. Chelian's eyes rolled upward. The *violle* sky matched the color of the linen on which she had lost her maidenhead. She saw them entwined upon the bedcovers, his warm flesh blanketed over her own. Her thighs tingled with longing, the image vivid within her mind. This *evetide*, she would gaze upon his naked perfection, feel his electrifying presence, and taste the musky flavor of his lips. She would once again feel the pleasures only he could give.

"Chelian, look." Cari pointed toward a bright glare just over the horizon.

They crested the rise and Chelian stopped abruptly. Her eyes narrowed as she puzzled over the object in their path. "What is the *Cressis* doing out of its hanger?"

"I don't know," Sialys said. "It looks as if the Verside is preparing for a trip. Do you think they mean to retrieve more women? Over two hundred men still don't have mates."



"*Nock*. Don't you hear that noise?" Chelian lifted her skirts and began to step forward. "They're loading dragons into the hold. A man riding a dragon would scare a perspective mate; frighten her so badly that her father would have to refuse any request."

She stared hard at the *Cressis*, walking more briskly toward the activity. All around, men gathered about the large vessel, their movements full of purpose. Their expressions ranged from grim to buoyant. Crates littered the ground, and the disgruntled cries of dragons irritated her eardrums. An open crate caught her eye and she gasped. *Terments*. The deadly weapons looked harmless in the crate, yet she knew the destruction these weapons could deliver after seeing them demonstrated in the practice yard.

Satobik. Chelian's heart stopped. Surely Dane didn't mean to return to Satobik. He'd left a fortune in zeal as if it were of little consequence. Could he have planned such deceit all along? She hurried her pace, intent on finding the truth. As she gained ground, anger replaced her worry. Her mouth compressed into a thin line.

"*Nock*. Wherever they mean to go, they go well-armed. They go to strike fear on unsuspecting people. Come, Sialys, we must make haste. I would know firsthand what they mean to do."

\* \* \* \*

"I do *not* have to answer to you, woman!"

Dane's fury grew with each question Chelian threw his way. The *Cressis* was his business and not that of his mate.

"If you mean to do something dangerous," Chelian said, "I think it's most certainly my business."

Her skin glowed with anger. By the holy sword of Draccus, she looked alluring, her eyes alight with fire. Yet Dane had no time to waste fantasizing over his mate.

"Since when have you found the courage to question my motives, Chelian?"

"I have always questioned your motives."

"Yea, with regard to our relationship or the women, but never have you broached a subject concerning other matters. So I ask you again; from whence do you gain such courage?"

Her voice trembled with emotion. "Since you put me in charge of the women for almost a *myon*."

His temper melted at her answer. "The experience has changed you, made you more confident in your bearing. I am most proud of your newfound abilities."

"I thank you for the compliment, but your observation won't sway me from my purpose. I mean to know what you're about. The men have been most secretive about your destination. Please, Dane. As your mate, I've a right to know if what you plan will bring you danger."

She'd struck a nerve again. His knuckles burned as he clenched his hands into tight fists, and guilt heightened his fury. He need not answer to this woman as if he were some disobedient child in need of direction. She was not his mother.

"Rights?" he said. "You are here for one purpose and one purpose only. You forget your place if you think otherwise."

"I ... I was right. You plan to attack Satobik." Her skin paled to the color of Shelican, the desolate desert he remembered from his youth.

"What are you talking about, Chelian?"

"Satobik. I can't believe I trusted you."

"Where did you get this outlandish notion?"

"What other destination would you think needed to be kept secret? I should have known you couldn't bear the idea of leaving behind all that zeal. Greed will cause the most honorable of men to act villainous. I hate you! Do you hear me?"

He scratched his chin. "All of Pelicosia can hear you, Chelian. You are being childish, and I have not the time to deal with such immature behavior. Take the women and go." His arm swept wide.

She clutched his arm, her touch warm and confident. "*Nock*. I won't let you go. I won't let you destroy our homelands. I have a duty to these women, a duty to see your plans foiled."

He placed his hand upon hers. "Your only duty is in giving me an heir. Any other matters that concern me do *not* concern you."

Her eyes widened and her lower lip dropped. He knew he had been callous with his words. He could easily have set her straight, but her accusations had stirred his temper. It rankled that she had so little faith in him or his word.

"Forgive me, Zan Dane. I imagined my role as queen meant more than just wearing the title." She peeled his hand from her arm and stepped back.

The bite of sarcasm made his jaw drop. He opened his mouth to retort and found he had no reply for her blunt remark.

"Zan Dane!"

His attention shifted to the *Cressis*. Vexalt roared his displeasure, his great body thrashing against the hands that restrained him. Dane tore himself away from Chelian to lend assistance. The great dragon would not be loaded easily into the hold.

"Tark, Feon!" Dane shouted. "Hurry, Siercession needs help!"

The men rushed forward just as Vexalt yanked free from Siercession's hold. Dane froze. He needed to get a mental handle on Vexalt before any of his men suffered a physical injury.

*Calm yourself, Vexalt. There is nothing to fear.*

The dragon snorted. Dane moved closer, holding out his hand toward the beast. Another presence came up behind him, tugging at his concentration. Chelian's anger toward him proved every bit as intense as Vexalt's. Dane swore beneath his breath.

"Back away, Chelian. Ease your mind with the knowledge that I do not make war on Satobik."

"Then where? Where do you go so heavily armed?"

"You need not worry."

"But—"

The dragon turned abruptly, its great tail sweeping an arc through the crowd of men. With a cry of pain,

Siercession flew through the air, suspended on the dragon's tail. The warrior hung upon the thick tail, clinging tightly as Vexalt flung him from side to side.

Dane rushed forward, intent on grabbing the reins. Chelian's hand settled on his shoulder, a worrisome gnat of foreboding. He shrugged it off, paying no mind to her fretful pleas. He needed full command of his faculties if he meant to control this situation.

The dragon whipped its head toward him, its feral fangs gleaming in the bright sun. Dane made a grab for the dangling reins, and hot saliva dripped on his skin. His arm came close to being yanked from the socket when the dragon tossed its head back with the reins clutched tightly in Dane's fist. Dane growled, low and fierce before pulling the reins taut. Vexalt's rancid breath blanketed his face, and its *ebonharde* eyes darkened to the color of endless space.

Dane placed his free hand upon the dragon's snout and blew gently into its nostrils. His warm breath mixed with Vexalt's, calming the fierce beast. *That's it. Feel my life force, Vexalt. Know your master has gained control.*

"Tark, see to Siercession. I refuse to lose a man before our fight has even begun." Dane's whispered command sent Tark to do his bidding while he kept Vexalt from lashing out again. He stroked the dragon's nose, calming it with gentle words. When Siercession had been safely extracted, Dane turned toward Feon.

"Why has this occurred? What spurred the dragon to react so violently?"

"We thought it best to leave Sirenia in her lair when we discovered her upon a nest of eggs. Vexalt did not react well to being separated from his mate."

Over Vexalt's head, Dane caught Chelian's gaze. Her expression told him she'd noted Feon's implication. Did she expect the same undying devotion from him? Did she compare their relationship to that of Vexalt and Sirenia?

Dane tugged on the dragon's halter, bringing the beast's snout even closer to his face. He issued a challenge by staring hard into Vexalt's eyes. The dragon's nostrils flared wide, but Dane would not be denied its cooperation. *You belong to me—mine to command. You will succumb to my hand no matter the cost to yourself.*

"Vexalt will learn that duty comes first," Dane said. "Together, he and I will soar o'er our enemy's land. Feon, see to the other dragons. I take it upon myself to load Vexalt on board the *Cressis*."

"Dane?"

"Stay clear, Chelian. I know not how Vexalt will react once I have him sequestered in the hold. Once he realizes his surroundings, he will become agitated again."

He did not wait to see if she followed his directions but began pulling Vexalt toward the gaping entrance of his ship. The dragon strained against the reins but did not exhibit the same frenzied rebellion as before.

However, when he'd managed to get Vexalt as far as the makeshift stables in the hold, the dragon again began to demonstrate its fury. Behind stall doors, the other dragons screeched and moaned as if warning Vexalt of his impending captivity.

"*Cruent!*" Dane wrapped his fist more firmly around the reins. "Come on, you stubborn beast. 'Tis no use fighting me on this. My will is stronger than yours."

Vexalt snorted but appeared calmed by Dane's voice. Dane chuckled and led Vexalt to his pen. If only Chelian could be so easily subdued. The door closed and the locking pin fell into place. Vexalt screeched, the sound plaintive, a mournful cry for release. Dane leaned against the stall, feeling the dragon's rage at its inability to steer its own destiny.

"Rest easy, my dragon king. I have need of your savage temperament. Together, you and I will make a fearsome duo."

He smiled then. Come the morrow, he and his men would traverse space to claim their rightful place upon Mioisiad soil. He gave Vexalt one last quelling look before exiting. He'd soothed the dragon, but he had yet to face the tempest awaiting him outside.

He heaved a giant sigh. Chelian wanted answers he wasn't prepared to give. She sought to fetter him, stable him as he'd done Vexalt. *Cruent!* He was no animal to be led by the halter. He'd taken her for mate with only one thought in mind. Anything more tampered with his goals. Frustration propelled his steps as he cleared the ship and made his way toward the women and Chelian.

"Zan Dane!" She rushed forward, grasping his forearm. "You are unscathed?"

He yanked free. The gesture made her eyes widen, her hurt magnified by the moisture gathered there. He steeled his heart against her wounded feelings.

"Your interference here almost caused great mishap. In the future, you will restrain yourself from making your presence known during such a tense moment."

"But—"

"No buts, Chelian. Henceforth, you will refrain from military matters." He settled his palms upon her shoulders, feeling the warmth of her skin through the *darsk* fabric.

"Military matters? Then it's true. You're preparing for war. Where? Whom do you fight?"

"Where we go and what we do are of no concern to you."

"You can't mean that, Dane."

"Take the women and make your way toward the village caves."

"Do you care so little for me that you would belittle me with your orders?"

He stroked her shoulders. *You seek to undermine my authority, Chelian. Why should I not undermine yours?*

*How so? How do I undermine your leadership?*

"You make no sense."

The last was spoken on the wings of a whisper. He closed his eyes against her obvious hurt. The woman had been gone for two tri-*myons*, long enough for Dane to search his mind and heart for answers without the constant temptation of his mate. She sapped his strength and his resolve with just one look. Her deep *nezarine* eyes beseeched him to care.

He'd sworn a blood oath to avenge the Verside and the injustices done to those men under his father's command. Chelian made him question his own goals, his purpose for living. On the morrow, the *Cressis* would soar through space toward destiny. They'd prepared for this reckoning since finding themselves

marooned on Pelicosia. He'd given his word, his pledge.

He stared at Chelian, loathing the feelings she'd awakened. Honor forced him to continue on this path he'd set for himself. Without honor, his whole world would collapse.

"Zan Dane," Feon said, "the dragons are loaded as well as the zeel, the weapons, and the food rations. The *Cressis* has been overhauled to your specifications and is now ready for flight. The men await your command."

Dane tore his gaze from Chelian's wounded expression to address Feon. "The men have this one night to enjoy their mates. The *Cressis* will launch one *kleur* past sunup."

"All of the men will go?" Chelian reclaimed his attention.

"Nay, not all."

"Then who do you leave behind?"

"Have no fear, Chelian. We do not leave the women unprotected. The Elders remain behind as well as a retinue of guards."

"Then I would make a small request."

"You may ask. I will not know if 'tis possible to grant your request until it is voiced."

"Give me the authority to have your guards train the women."

"Train the women?" He dropped his hands from her shoulders and took a step back.

"*Selt*. I want the women to have enough skill to defend themselves when you and your men fail to return."

A shiver crept along the curve of his back and lifted the hairs along his nape. She'd put to voice the one worry that plagued his conscience. Once said, would her words prove an omen? Would the *Cressis* take them on a journey of no return?

"I will do this," he said, "but you must do something for me in return."

"What is it you desire?"

"You." He lifted his hand, this time allowing the pulsing electricity to charge between them as his fingers stroked the air close to her cheek. "It would please me greatly if you would sleep in my bed this eve."

He watched her skin pale, but she nodded. She would do as requested because anything less might anger a king. He frowned because it wasn't the way he wanted her. He would rather she come willingly with no reservations, but this *evetide* might be his last chance to beget an heir. He was as bound by duty as she was by his order. Come what may, this eve he would ease his frustrations upon her supple body.

## Twenty

Dane stared at the glistening walls. When had his goals—his duties—become so tangled with his emotions?

He tugged at the *siplen* clip that fastened the front of his belt and tossed both onto the bed. He had come back to the great hall to find Chelian absent. She had skipped the meal and the festivities that followed. Too stubborn to give in to the temptation to drag her out of hiding, Dane had sulked behind a façade of false merriment.

To make matters worse, the Elders' attempts at extracting information from Kurig had failed. The thought probe, unanimously voted upon by the Elders, had damaged Kurig's fragile state of mind. Dane shook his head. Such a waste. Now Kurig sat in a state of euphoric oblivion, rocking back and forth and uttering *Melici returns. My son returns. He protects us all.*

Melici had been one of the children lost when first they came upon the zeel fields. He'd died falling into a pit, and Kurig hallucinated to think his son would return. Uneasiness made Dane's stomach churn, and the half-eaten meal of roasted *perkinette* rested heavy in his gut.

"Cruent!"

This should have been a night of celebration, a night of raucous revelry to bolster the men's eagerness for war. Dane should be overcome with joy, knowing all their efforts would come to a climax in less than a *myon*. The *Cressis* would fly her last mission on the morrow. If Draccus flew with them, they would be able to command a newer vessel on their return to Pelicosia.

And if they failed?

Dane plopped down on the bed and tugged furiously at the laces of his boots. The Verside had to be successful, yet a smidgen of doubt plagued him. They had not found Kurig's accomplice, if indeed one existed. If there did exist an accomplice, Zan Burlorek would know of their pending attack.

Dane counted on the element of surprise to help offset their numbers. Otherwise, his two-hundred forty-seven warriors didn't stand a chance against the Burdven Empire and their vast armies. Fen Carben assured him the Verside would be victorious, yet no matter what reasons Carben gave for betraying the Burdven Empire, the man was still Zan Burlorek's firstborn son.

Even knowing the dangers they faced, Dane planned to carry through with their plans. Honor could not be denied. He squeezed his eyes tight against the sudden pain, but the bitter thought of defeat could not be squelched. The men depended upon him, trusted him to lead them to victory. They had planned too long and too hard for anything less than total success.

He glared at the wall separating him from Chelian. His hand curled around a fistful of bedcover, and his bare toes dug into the soft *truscal* pelt that warmed the stone floor. He needed a diversion from his troubled thoughts. He needed Chelian.

"Nay! I do not *need* her. I want her. There's a difference."

He pushed himself up from the bed. Her place was here, not hiding away in the room next to his. He crossed the room in two strides, intent on rectifying the situation. He had all but commanded her presence in his bed earlier. Had she forgotten so soon the reason he'd brought her here? The reason he'd taken her for mate?

The immobile rigidity of the wall bruised his hand where he slammed it with so much force that tiny droplets of moisture released their hold upon the ceiling. It was he who had forgotten the purpose in securing a mate. He should never have allowed her to vacate their bed, to run away from her duties as queen.

"Chelian!"

Silence. He braced his hands against the doorway frame and gazed around the dividing wall. Darkness claimed the room. He frowned. Had she fallen asleep so early in the eve?

"Chelian?"

He crept into her chamber, slowly adjusting his eyes to the dim interior, and he promptly stumbled on a discarded garment. This little bit of poor housekeeping made her seem less queenly and more human. His gaze focused upon the bed, trying hard to discover the shape beneath the covers. His brow gathered in a frown as he placed his hand upon the wrinkled bedspread. Flat. Chelian did not await him as he'd ordered.

His anger simmered. He stood in indecision, knowing he dared not approach her with his temper near explosion. He glared at Chelian's discarded garment. Her things belonged in his room. *She* belonged in his room. He snatched up the dress and began moving her things to his chambers. Perhaps the task would give him time to calm his temper.

"Dane? What are you doing?"

He dropped a load of Chelian's clothing upon his bed and turned to face Cari. At her bright smile, his anger cooled. How could anyone not care for this child? She'd come to mean a great deal to him in the short time she'd been there.

"Cari, are you not supposed to be abed?"

"You were making too much noise."

"I was getting things ready for Chelian. You wouldn't happen to know where she is, would you?"

Cari nodded, her *silveresk* curls bouncing against her shoulders. "She said she was going to sit awhile in the garden. She wanted time alone I think, because she wouldn't let me come with her."

"She went topside?" Everything inside him froze.

"*Selt*. Can you tell me a story?"

He grabbed Cari about the shoulders with undo force. "Exactly where topside, Cari? This is important."

Cari's face scrunched up and tears gathered in her eyes. "You're hurting me."

Dane immediately released his grip on her arms and pulled her into a warming embrace. "I apologize, but Chelian could be in danger. I need to know where to find her."

"She likes that sitting area in the Terionk Forest."

Dane gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead and sent her to bed. The thought of Chelian in the forest caused his anger to resurface, multiplying to grand proportions. If she had gone to the forest this time of *evetide*, the woman faced grave danger. With haste, he threw on his clothes and tugged on his boots.

Chelian had often expressed her love of the outdoors. She'd gone topside where peril lurked in the most serene of settings.

\* \* \* \*

Chelian gazed at the stars, beacons for dreamers and adventurers. Satobik seemed so small compared to its glittering neighbors. Small and insignificant when one considered the vast universe. She'd been so naive to think she and the rest of the humans on Satobik were the only life forms in space. How she longed for the familiarity of her old life. As lonely as she'd been at Kel, she felt even lonelier here.

Satobik was but a pinpoint in a vast sea of darkness. A tear escaped the corner of her eye, and she allowed the weakness. She'd pinned such hopes on Dane. Without realizing it, she'd given her love to a man whose heart belonged to another. Zan Dane's first love—his only love—belonged to his people. How could she ever hope to compete with such a mistress?

Was it selfish of her to want his absolute devotion? She had no right to expect so much of him. Was it then wrong to at least expect a small portion of his keen regard? She took another step down the worn path toward the Terionk forest. On the edge of the grove of *dangerines*, the Verside had erected a small sitting area. The peaceful alcove promised a place where she could be alone with her troubled thoughts.

Taking a seat upon one of the stone benches, she inhaled deeply. The fresh scent of *chesliny* buds brought memories of home. Their fragrant blossoms held a scent similar to Satobik's abundant *bennetor* blooms. Here, she'd discovered an inner peace, a place where she could heal her wounded heart. A place where she could dream.

A slight breeze chilled her skin, and she wrapped her arms around herself. She should have grabbed a cloak before venturing topside. The leaves rustled above her head. The cold would drive her back inside before long, but for now, she planned to savor the seclusion.

*Coward.* The word hung heavy in her heart. She'd come here to avoid Dane this eve. He'd demanded her presence in his bed, a command she would gladly obey just to feel the electrifying touch of his fingers upon her skin.

And thus the reason for her hiding. She wanted him too much, wanted to feel the hot rush of desire only he could evoke. Her weakness shamed her. She wanted a man who cared nothing for her save the use of her body. He wanted only one thing from her—an heir. A child to carry on his lineage. Other than that, she meant nothing to the great king.

She'd been an invisible walker on Satobik, a woman with no hope of living a normal existence. She'd left the security of Kel hoping—wishing—things to be different for herself, but nothing had changed. Not really. She'd discovered that physical touch did not exactly denote acceptance. The people no longer kept their distance from her physically, but they kept themselves from her on a higher plane. As their queen, they placed her on a pedestal. By the very nature of her new status, they placed a barrier between themselves and her.

And Dane? He kept her at arm's length as well, refusing to embrace the intelligent woman trapped within a Deliphit's skin. To him, she was nothing but a means to an end. How could she make him see her true self? How could she make him want more than just her body?

She shivered, though this time not from the chill. How would he react when he didn't find her waiting and willing? Would he sulk? Would he rage? Would he even bother looking for her? She smiled at the prospect. Maybe she secretly yearned for such a response. Maybe she wanted him to seek her out and display more than his cold and brooding commands.



Distracted, she paid little attention to the sudden stillness around her and spoke aloud to herself. "You are so indecisive, Chelian. No wonder he finds you lacking. You don't even know your own mind. You think of your desire and want him fiercely, then you think of his desire and despair that he wants nothing more. You run away only to decide you want him to find you. You are a silly woman. A foolish woman."

Only the sound of her voice broke the silence. Her gaze swept over the softly lit hollow. The wind had died. Her retreat was quiet—too quiet. And something moved just beyond the trail. She was not alone.

"Who's there?"

A laugh was her only answer. She shifted with unease and grimaced when the rough stone scraped the back of her shin. The soft glow of a half moon illuminated a face she'd never set eyes upon before. Without fear, she moved to greet the man, then a cloud passed over the moon and darkness shrouded her haven. She stared hard into the shadowed recesses of the forest. When the moon became free to shine again upon the land, her visitor had disappeared.

Had she dreamed him? Was her imagination conjuring people with whom she could identify? Shivers took hold of her body. Perhaps she'd been gone long enough. As much as she wanted Dane to exhibit an emotion other than authoritative control, she had no real wish to incur his anger.

The leaves rustled, and she shifted her attention. Her imagination sprouted and bloomed. Her eyes strained against the *svarkened* sky, looking once more for her nocturnal visitor. Nothing. She sighed.

Then the leaves rustled again. Slight movement presaged an eerie ending to her outing. She stood, knowing she'd stayed far too long. If Dane's anger didn't seize her, an overactive imagination would. She stepped onto the path.

A large *stockray remetor* dropped from the limb above, suspended before her in terrorizing reality. The slimy creature blocked her way. She screamed as sharp, razor teeth gleamed with menacing intent. The *remetor* bared its fangs, and Chelian took a step back. Her heart hammered within her chest. Too late, she recalled Dane's warning: danger lurked behind the most beguiling of serene settings.

Dare she try to run? The long, reptilian body hung from the tree branch, its muscles straining to inch closer. Any minute it could strike, ripping into her tender flesh with deadly purpose. She tried to swallow the dry lump of fear, but her saliva stuck in her throat. She took another step back. The *remetor* hissed and reared back its diamond-shaped head. A rancid smell permeated the air.

She screamed again, knowing death approached. Her eyes clenched tight against the dreadful sight of impending doom. The whoosh of a sword slicing through space and thick muscle made her eyes fly open. Blood spewed from the severed body that now hung limp against the *dangerine* tree. Chelian squealed at the gory image and turned away her head.

A rough hand grabbed the back of her neck, forcing her to face the dead creature. "Nay. You will look upon your foolishness, woman."

"Stop! You're hurting me."

Dane shoved her from him. "Hurt you? Yea, I want to throttle you soundly for your childishness. Cari has more sense than you. You run away only to find yourself in perilous surroundings with naught but the sound of your screams for protection."

"I didn't run away," she said, knowing full well he accused her justly.

Silence fell heavy between them. The leaves rustled again, and Chelian's eyes rounded. The forest came

alive with unknown dangers. She whimpered. Her refuge had become a nightmare.

"Do you find more comfort with the creatures of the *evetide* than you do with me?"

"Nock."

"Then why? Why did you not await me as requested?"

She gave a start. Did she detect a note of hurt in his voice? Nonsense. She must have imagined it. If only she could read his mind, search the guarded recesses to discover his true feelings. But to do so would mean sure punishment, for hadn't he told her the telepathic reading of thoughts without permission was against the law?

"Requested?" she said. "Demanded you mean."

Her eyes darted from side to side, searching the darkness for more danger. His chest lifted and fell with the deep breath he took.

"Interpret my words any way you wish, *fiol'ston*. You have a duty to fulfill. Come, we should return lest more creatures decide to make a snack of our persons."

She fell in step behind him, her concentration snagged by his arrogant comments. As much as she wanted to feel his strong arms about her body, she had no wish to give in to his commands. Desire warred with duty. *Duty*—such a blunt word for a beautiful and natural occurrence. Duty failed to describe the intoxicating pleasure of his lovemaking. Something slimy slithered next to her leg and she froze.

"Dane?"

Another *remetor* wrapped itself around her calf. Her vocal chords vented her surprise and fear. Dane whirled around, sword drawn. With fluid movements best used to describe an acrobat, Dane brought the sword down upon the creature. Chelian let go the breath she held, and Dane yanked her behind him. Menacing eyes glittered in the *svarkened* forest. More reptilian bodies crept closer. Rancid odor from an army of *remetors* made her gag. Fear clutched her body, binding it with rigid constraint.

They were surrounded. Dane's sword seemed to take on a mind of its own. Slice, parry, lunge. Each move brought death to another creature. Chelian's eyes widened at the skillful way he dispatched each *remetor*. Death screams punctured the stillness of the eve as she watched his muscles expand and contract with unerring precision. Each step he took demonstrated the well-choreographed movements of his warrior's dance. Never had she seen such ferocity, such violence, such grace.

In that moment, she understood the man behind the king. Zan Dane was a warrior, but his skill did not come naturally. He trained and practiced daily. He prepared for war. On the morrow, the *Cressis* would take him far away from her.

*War*. The word sent chills along her spine. A warrior fought to win or died in the process. A sinister laugh unlike anything she'd ever heard crescendoed above the *remetors'* macabre song. Something or someone besides the *remetors* hid within the forest.

"Chelian, run!"

Her head snapped toward Dane. She heard his demand but still she stood, her eyes riveted to the power he displayed with his bold confidence. Her heart beat so fast that pain crept up her chest and settled in her neck just behind her ears. Curiosity battled with fear. Was he as frightened as she? Did blood explode through his veins, making his body ache with tension as it did hers?

Strong arms commanded the sword with deadly accuracy. Dane stabbed toward the ground, catching another *remetor* with the point of his sharpened blade. Without breaking stride, he whirled around and caught Chelian by the waist. Air escaped her lungs as his arm tightened about her middle. Her feet flew off the ground when he ran from the forest and the converging *remetors* that flooded the area with terror.

Fleet of foot, Dane managed to outrun the *remetor* threat. When Chelian realized they were no longer at risk, she struggled to free herself. In answer, Dane tightened his grip, squeezing her ribs with uncomfortable pressure, but he slowed his pace.

"Be still. I have had enough trouble for one *evetide*. I have no wish to hunt you down again."

"Please, Dane. You're cutting off my circulation with your hold. I promise not to run."

"Shall I take the word of a liar?"

"When have I lied? I've strived to be forthright with you at all times."

He stopped at the entrance of the caves and set her down with more gentleness than she expected. "I will not argue the point with you, Chelian. Not tonight. Tonight we have other things we must accomplish."

A *child*. She no longer balked at the idea of succumbing to his touch. On the morrow, he might be going to his death. She closed her eyes against the sudden pain these thoughts evoked. When she opened them again, she saw more clearly than she had in the past. Dane was a man born to lead. He'd sharpened his teeth on the field of honor, strengthened his pride on a practice yard, and honed his command on a ship full of eager followers. He expected blind obedience from everyone, including her, and somehow she'd failed him.

"Tell me whom you fight, Dane."

His body tensed. He pushed past the guards at the entrance of the caverns, and she thought he meant to ignore her question.

After a long silence, he replied, "We go to reclaim our heritage, our birthright. 'Tis a vow I must fulfill, a commitment to our Verside." In halting tones, he confided in her, telling her of Zan Burlorek's treachery.

"And the women? You brought us here in the event you weren't successful, didn't you?"

"Yea." He wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I had thought—*hoped*—things would turn out differently. What fools we are, and how ridiculous we must all appear to the men. Every one of those women expected to find homes on Pelicosia. They did not come here to assuage your need for immortality."

His head snapped up. "You fail to understand your importance to the Verside."

"Importance? If we were so important, you wouldn't be leaving on the morrow. You wouldn't be traveling toward your death. How can there be any other conclusion to such madness? I can count, Dane. You have beneath your command less than three hundred warriors. How many men do you fight? How many will meet your warriors on the field of battle?"

He gave her a fierce scowl, one clearly meant to let her know she'd overstepped the boundaries of his good humor. "Shall I add impudence to your list of crimes this *evetide*?"

Something dark hovered between them. A shiver of apprehension crawled along her skin. Of what else

did he accuse her? He thought she'd run away from him. What other misconduct did he assume her guilty of?

"I didn't run away, Dane. You were occupied in the great hall and I needed solitude, time to unravel my troubled thoughts."

"Running from your duty as my mate is a personal offense, something we must work on together. However, that is not the offense of which I speak. You disobeyed a direct order from your king. This concerns me greatly."

"I don't recall breaking any laws."

"Do you not remember when I told the entire group of women not to go beyond the caverns at night? That dangers of great magnitude roamed the surrounding land when the sun sets?"

She searched her memory. Her eyes rounded when she recalled the moment just after Dane had rescued Cari from the pits. She'd been so worried for Cari that she hadn't really paid all that much attention to what he'd said. Would he now expect retribution? Her fingers curled around a length of hair, and she lifted it slowly. They now stood just inside their dwelling.

"How many inches shall I cut?"

The agony of cutting her hair for all to see sat heavy on her heart. Yet she knew she was guilty and deserved no less. At Kel, she'd managed to escape such punishment by keeping to herself and religiously following the rules. She hated censure of any kind. Her affliction made her feel unworthy enough.

He laughed, the sound of little comfort to her frazzled nerves. "The Verside does not cut hair as a form of punishment. In fact, when I left Mioisiad, most of the women sported short hairstyles more appropriate to the warm climate there. No, *fiol'ston*, we do not punish our women or children thusly."

Relief flooded her features, then she recalled the violent way he'd reacted to Cari's bit of defiance. Did they use a barbaric form of punishment? Would he beat her? She almost stumbled when they reached his bedroom, so great was the fear that suddenly claimed her.

*Calm yourself, Chelian. I only want one thing from you this eve and naught else.*

*But I'm guilty, my Zanitor. Do I not deserve your wrath?*

Though relieved, she didn't understand his willingness to forgive her so readily. The men on Satobik wouldn't have let a similar slight pass without retribution. She'd expected no less from this fierce man.

He pulled her to him and lowered his head. Warm breath caressed her cheek as he replied, "Do you wish to be punished, Chelian? I've been told some consider pain enriches pleasure. Shall we test it?"

*Nock*, she did not wish to experience pain, but the way in which he offered her the mental image seemed erotic in some way. The teasing thought stirred her desires. Fear turned to anticipation. She pushed away from his embrace, uncomfortable with the direction of her thoughts.

"*Nock*, Dane. I ... I have no wish to feel pain."

She turned toward her own room, needing to retrieve some of her personal items, but his hand caught her elbow.

"Nay, there will be no more separate bedrooms. I allowed pride to get in the way of duty, but no more."

Regardless of how you feel or do not feel toward me, your place is here in my bed."

"I ... I only wanted to get my things."

"Your things have already been moved. I kept myself busy in your absence."

She stared at the room. His room—no, their room. A pile of her garments lay heaped on the bed. The opened closet revealed the rest of her clothing. Her comb rested beside his in front of the reflecting crystal. Even her favored doll, Bertil, had been given a place of honor on the bedside table. His thoughtfulness caused her to look upon him differently. Perhaps in this manner he meant to show her that he cared. She may never hear the words, but in her heart she wanted to believe he felt more for her than he would admit.

"I give you my thanks."

"You owe me more than meager words," he said. "I played the maid to defuse my anger. But now ... now you must show me your gratitude, for I have waited a long time to sate my thirst for you."

"Is your anger gone?"

"Nay, Chelian. 'Tis not gone, but I will not bring my anger to our bed unless you wish differently. The Verside has a code of honor that includes reverence toward the mating process. When we couple, we do so in honor of our gods. If we honor Draccus in this manner, he will honor us with a fruitful union."

His admission gave her courage to voice her concerns. "But you'll *take* me whether I want it or not. Is this not a violence of sorts?"

His eyebrows converged in a deep frown. "Do you deny me, woman?"

An angry flush suffused his face. She'd pushed him too far once again. Would she ever learn to hold her tongue?

"Nock, Dane. I ... I deny you nothing."

His voice softened. "Then remove your clothing, Chelian. I would savor your beauty, a vision to carry me through the days ahead." He stood waiting, his head slightly tilted to one side. Without taking her eyes from his, she peeled away the layers, baring her body as well as her soul. She loved him. Were she not a coward, she would confess her feelings. When she stood nude before him, he beckoned her closer.

"Will you do me the honor of removing my own coverings, Chelian? Of baring my body for your pleasure?"

His request took her by surprise, and her heart rate accelerated. With trembling fingers, she unfastened the *siplen* clip that held his belt in place. With reverent awe, she pulled the clothing from his hard body and brushed his warm skin with her fingers. Pleasure, rich and full, swept through her.

At her touch, he pulled her to him, seizing her lips in a possessive kiss. Her nipples hardened with sensitive delight as they nestled against his furred chest. Whatever restraint he held in check vanished in that moment, and he pulled her into his arms. With a backward sweep of his hand, he cleared the bed of her rumpled clothes. The soft cushioning of the bed met her back when he bore her down upon the thick, fur coverlet. With urgent need, he rained kisses upon her inflamed skin. There would be no electrifying foreplay this eve, yet she found little need. Her body cried for his touch.

His mouth clamped down upon a breast, sucking hard upon her enlarged nipple and making her gasp.

The gentle pain of his teeth mixed with the warmth of his tongue made her skin tingle with new awareness. What had he said? Some find pain a complement to pleasure?

His mouth moved upward to claim her lips again, his movements frenzied with lust. Her stomach clenched as if the sharp talons of a *finpy* tightened around her waist. He dominated her with his passion, forcing her body to respond with uninhibited desire. Vaguely, she noted her aura glowed *vraed* with very little stoking. He settled on top of her, taking her swiftly to new heights. Her eyes filled with tears at the desperation she felt in his movements. Without words, he told her goodbye.

She loved him. He wanted her. For now, that was enough. She would ask for no more.

\* \* \* \*

Chelian awoke from a restless slumber to find herself nestled close to the warmth of Dane's body. Her nostrils filled with his scent, and she loved the way it felt to be held. When had anyone last held her? She vaguely recalled the years prior to her budding, but the memories proved hazy, obscured by her time living in seclusion.

How could she bear to lose this man? Granted, he did not love her, but she sensed he cared in his own fashion. She turned in his arms and stared hard at his shadowed features. Soft light from a *mintored* crystal caused the planes of his face to appear harsher than usual. A strand of hair fell across his troubled brow. Did he also suffer from a bad dream?

A soft moan escaped his parted lips. She wanted to ease his pain, vanquish his demons as he'd slain the *remetors* for her. Trembling fingers lifted toward his brow and stopped. He would not appreciate the gesture if perchance her touch awakened him.

She should tell him her feelings, tell him she loved him before he left. If she didn't, she would never forgive herself should he not come back. Pain, sharp and acute, tore through her heart. Her eyes squeezed tight. She could not bear to see him go knowing he might not return.

*I love you.*

The wrinkle in his brow softened. Had his subconscious mind heard her? She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She could go to the geyser wells and soak her tense body, but he would likely think she'd run again should he awaken to find her gone. She blinked as a hair of an idea began to form. Dare she take the chance? Indecision played havoc with her thoughts.

Again, she turned to look at Dane. The vision became as clear as the Diamione Lake back home. A plan took root, growing solid with every scenario she devised. One fact remained, giving her the courage to go through with her plan. On the morrow, Dane left to fight a war that might kill him. If he went to his death, he would never know her love for him and they would never have a chance to explore the full facets of their budding relationship.

*Selt.* For once, there was only one decision she could make. For once, she knew her mind without being plagued by endless questions and insecurities. On the morrow, she would follow her heart.

*Forgive me, Dane. I can't bear to lose you. Though I fear your anger, I fear never seeing you again more.*

## Twenty-one

Dane leaned forward, resting his full weight on his hands. He hated the doubt that plagued his mood. He gazed with pensive disposition at the endless space that flooded the viewing screen. Pelicosia was no longer visible and hadn't been for ten *datons*. They'd left the Lennitere galaxy far behind. The Phanine galaxy and Mioisiad loomed ever closer.

"Your melancholy is contagious."

Dane continued to stare out the viewing window, ignoring Geod's comment. All he could see were Chelian's eyes when he'd said goodbye. He would have been content with her anger, relieved by her censure. Even tears would have been preferable to her gentle acceptance of his leaving. The sympathy reflected in her eyes had unmanned him.

He'd been so sure of his duty. He'd lived his whole life preparing for this one moment, but her unwavering belief in him made him question this mission. And the feeling that she remained close puzzled him. He could feel her essence, yet he knew this to be impossible.

"Dane, the men grow restless," Geod said. "They sense your unease."

Dane turned. "You tell me nothing I do not already know."

"The traitor?"

"In part. With no more incidences, I want to believe he does not travel to Mioisiad with us, yet to give in to such thoughts will leave us wide open to betrayal. He is here. He waits in the shadows, biding his time."

"And yet we still proceed as planned?"

Dane gripped the railing in front of the window. "I will not allow one man to ruin years of planning."

"You have no need to snarl at me, Dane." Geod leaned his own weight on the railing next to him. "More weighs upon your mind than just the traitor. Lie to me if you wish, but do not lie to yourself."

Dane leaned further and pressed his forehead against the cold glass. He felt silly confiding his feelings to Geod, yet he needed to lift the heaviness from his heart. He sighed and turned to face his friend.

"I cannot seem to shake the feeling that Chelian is close. 'Tis an unrealistic belief. Every man has been accounted for. The ship shows no extra life forms aboard, and yet..."

"Could it be you have deeper feelings for the woman than you thought? I know Sialys fills my every waking thought. I have never feared war. I believe in this cause, yet now I have something more than vengeance to live for. I have Sialys. I have my unborn child."

Dane's eyes narrowed. Sudden anger made him push Geod up against the window. He needed no cowards going into battle.

"Do you regret this decision, Geod? Do you regret being here? Do you disagree with my command?"

Geod gritted his teeth. "Nay. I am just telling you that I now have more at stake than a just cause."

Dane gave him a rough shove before backing away. Angry strides carried him to the instrument panel where he pretended interest in the readings. The rest of the men on deck plainly tried to hide their worry

concerning the tension between their king and Geod. Unable to concentrate, Dane slammed his hands on the counter. How dare Geod put into words his own misgivings. Stubborn pride kept him from admitting the truth. Instead, he reiterated the vow he'd made to the Verside, stating firmly that they had little choice but to follow through with their plans. He would grapple with his conscience later.

"Yea, Dane," Geod said. "I agree. We have little choice in the matter, yet we should be clear on our reasons for doing this. Before the women came into our lives, we orchestrated this day to avenge our fathers and assuage our pride. Now we attack the Burdven Empire to reclaim our heritage for our sons, to protect the future we build. This, if nothing else, should lift your spirits and make you see the worthiness of our mission."

Dane looked up from the panel and focused on the pinpoint of light that designated Mioisiad. Geod had a way of making things more clear.

"Tis a wonder you are still my friend, Geod, but I'm grateful for your loyalty. You have helped put this whole thing into perspective. I can now fight our enemies with a clear conscience."

"Good, then you can join me for a glass of *fromt* and a night of humorous stories."

Dane groaned. "Not the same stories you told the eve before our departure? Surely I do not deserve such torture."

"Yea, but I've devised better endings. You'll be most entertained I'll warrant."

Dane clapped him on the shoulder and turned with the intention of following Geod from the main deck, but the rest of the men caught his attention. They'd all put in long hours, and he really didn't need all of them topside for this stretch of their journey. In much better spirits, he gave a quick assessment of those on duty. He'd call upon Tark to take over while the rest partook in a bit of recreation.

*Tark*

*Yea, my Zanitor?*

Make your presence known on deck. I give you command of the helm for the next ten kleurs. Round up your crew and relieve us in half a kleur.

*By your lead.*

Tark would arrive presently to give them relief. Dane smiled, well-pleased by his decision. He turned and addressed the men on deck.

"As soon as Tark arrives with his crew, you men are free to join Del Geod and myself for drinks in the recreation area. Geod has convinced me to celebrate our good fortune."

Foyst, Feon, and Tronien immediately turned and gave Dane a nod of approval, but Siercesson remained oblivious to the invitation. Dane frowned. He and Geod exchanged questioning looks. Geod shrugged, but Dane could not shake the uneasy feeling that something was amiss.

"Have you no desire to enjoy some time off?" he asked to Siercesson's back.

Again, the man remained unresponsive to Dane's words. Dane sauntered closer to him. From behind, he watched the man work the controls for the communications systems. Fingers rested lightly upon the lighted buttons but made no move to actually work the settings. He pretended knowledge of the board and nothing more.



"Siercesson?"

He whirled around, his hand clasped above his heart. "Zan Dane. You gave me a start."

Again Dane frowned. Since leaving Pelicosia, he and his men had spoken nothing but the Daramile dialect of Miois, practicing the almost forgotten language for when they would land on Mioisiad. Siercesson had spoken the Saramid dialect, and a rather stilted version of that.

Dane knew not what to make of it. He tilted his head, his thoughts focused on the subtle differences between the man standing before them and Siercesson. Did they deal with an imposter? And, if so, how had Zan Burlorek been able to pull off this elaborate disguise for his spy? Had they found their traitor?

"Why do you not speak the Daramile dialect? Did I not give a direct order that all of the Verside would speak nothing but the preferred language of Zan Burlorek?"

The man stared blankly at Dane. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead. The man plucked at the folds of his tunic, an uncharacteristic gesture. Dane reached out to grasp the man's face for a closer look but paused. An electric current shot from his fingertips to Siercesson's cheek. Dane immediately pulled back his hand, scorched by an undeniable possibility.

"I thought you and Del Geod would already be in the recreation area by the time I arrived," Tark said, stepping onto the deck.

Dane kept his eyes trained on Siercesson. "And I also, but I have been delayed by a puzzling phenomenon. This man looks to be Siercesson, but I believe he might be an imposter." He continued to study the man before him.

"Imposter?" Tark walked up for a closer look. Siercesson's gaze darted from one officer to the next, his expression that of a caged *finpy*.

"Who could pull off such a disguise?" Geod asked. "The man is clearly Siercesson, though I have no answer for his failure to speak the correct dialect. I think you have become paranoid, Zan Dane."

Tark looked from Del Geod to Dane and back to Siercesson before throwing back his head and laughing. The sound did little to relieve the tension of the moment. Siercesson stared at the floor, an odd flush to his swarthy skin. Tark grabbed Siercesson's chin and tilted it up.

"By Draccus, I did not believe her, but Deliah did not lie. When first she told me the rumors, I scoffed, but here stands the proof."

"Perhaps you'd like to enlighten the rest of us," Dane said.

"Close your eyes, Zan Dane, and reach out with your senses. If you did not know better, who would you think stands before you?" Tark dropped his hand from Siercesson's face and stepped back, allowing Dane room to heed his words.

Confused but sure he already knew the answer, Dane shut his eyelids and concentrated. He shivered. He could feel her. He could sense her. She surrounded his thoughts. He held out his hand again, his fingers close but not touching. Electricity flowed from Siercesson's body to his. Only one person had the capability of transmitting and receiving such bolts of electric charge.

But how? When he reopened his eyes, he stared at Siercesson with hard, unrelenting determination. He would get to the bottom of this.

"Foyst, take Siercesson to my quarters and place a guard outside the door."

Siercesson's head snapped up when Foyst clamped a hand upon his shoulder. "Zan Dane, might I ask what I've done?"

Dane answered in terse Fendabor. "'Tis not what you have done that has given you away. 'Tis what you have not done. You do not understand Daramile because I instructed Liorxton not to teach this particular dialect to the women, else you might have gotten away with your deceit."

"I meant no harm."

Nostrils flared. "No harm? That remains to be seen."

She tried to beguile him with innocent eyes. "But Dane—"

"Foyst, take this imposter to my chambers posthaste before I lose what little temper I have left. The rest of you are dismissed. Tark, you will tell me all you have heard from Deliah on the matter. I would know what I am dealing with."

Tark nodded, the humor gone from his continence. "Perhaps 'twould be best to do so in private."

Dane mulled over the suggestion for a brief moment before realizing Tark had a point. If what he suspected proved true, he had no wish for the rest of his crew to be privy to the details. He would be embarrassed enough with Tark's knowledge of the situation.

*Cruent*. How could she have done this? How was it possible for Chelian to be there aboard the *Cressis*? Somehow she had possessed poor Siercesson's body, but to what end? Had her anger with him caused her to betray him in some way? Pain knifed through his gut. A traitor close to the Verside sought to bring them to ruin, and now this.

Coincidence? Nay, his heart balked at the thoughts racing through his mind, yet the lives of his men forced him to acknowledge the possibilities. Could Chelian have arranged for assassins to attack him on Satobik? Could she have tampered with the *Cressis*? Was she that good an actress? She had motive and opportunity. And their troubles had begun when he'd arrived on Satobik to claim the women.

He awaited Tark just outside the main deck. Tark might be able to tell him the how, but only Chelian could tell him the why. He dared not approach her now while his anger festered within him. Nay, he would garner the information from Tark then ply himself with drink. When his enraged senses no longer threatened to make him violent, he would seek out his mate.

\* \* \* \*

"*Nock*. I don't want Chelian to tend me. Can't you see I'm in pain?" Deliah cried out as Thorman helped place her upon a table. A large splinter protruded from her leg.

"What happened?" Sialys asked.

"She was gathering herbs topside when she tripped and fell upon a *giniette* bush. I didn't know what to do for her, Zel Chelian, since Liorxton travels with the men."

"I didn't trip, you fool," Deliah said. "I was shoved."

Well-known as she was for her theatrics and her exaggeration of the truth, Deliah's accusation fell on deaf ears.

"You did well, Thorman," Sialys said. "Zan Dane and Tark would be most pleased with your wisdom in handling her accident."

Thorman turned a pleasant shade of *vraed* at her compliment. Zan Dane had left the young man behind to help the women because he hadn't wanted to lose one so young to war. Thorman had been pleased to be given such responsibility.

Deliah brushed away hands that reached for her. "*Nock*, don't touch me, Chelian. I'll not have a Deliphit lay hands upon me."

"Be reasonable. No one else possesses the knowledge to heal your wound."

Deliah leaned on her elbows, her head tossed back as she gazed intently upon those gathered around. Her eyes squeezed shut and her lips compressed in a thin line. "I don't want to be in your debt. I can't like you."

The words were said with such pain there was little doubt she meant them. Sialys laid a hand upon Deliah's brow but withdrew it quickly when she flinched.

"Just relax, Deliah. All will be well."

Sialys inspected the wound without touching it. The splinter was imbedded deep into Deliah's flesh. Her hatred for Chelian seemed to run deeper than prejudice against a Deliphit. Sialys suspected Deliah had wanted Zan Dane for her own and sought to hurt Chelian out of spite. And Chelian had been too stubborn to mend the breach this petty resentment had caused. Sialys smiled, pleased with an opportunity to ameliorate their fragile relationship.

"Thorman, stay with Deliah while I fetch my medicines."

She didn't wait for Thorman's reply, confident the young man would adhere to her instructions. She hurried through the tunnels, a light spring to her step. Once in her rooms, she found the bag with the needed supplies and turned to leave. As she did so, her eyes caught sight of her reflection in the mirror.

It was uncanny how well she'd pulled off being Chelian. No one had questioned the subtle differences in personality. For now, she was Zel Chelian and, for the moment, she was in command of this small outpost of people. What a heady experience to be able to portray another, to act upon suppressed desires, and to push inhibitions aside. No one had missed the shy and introverted Sialys, although she'd made it a point to make an appearance every other *daton*.

Sudden worry for Chelian caused a sigh to escape. Chelian's decision to board the *Cressis* would likely prove more dangerous than the game Sialys played. She said a quick prayer to Orius to keep Chelian safe. If discovered, Chelian risked Zan Dane's anger and, in turn, Sialys would have to suffer Geod's displeasure. A shiver cascaded down her back. She had no wish to incur her mate's temper.

She tore herself from the reflecting crystals and rushed back to Deliah. With a confidence she was only now discovering, she took charge of the moment.

\* \* \* \*

"What have you done with Siercession?"

The barked question had the guards looking at Dane with bewildered expressions. "We have done nothing, Zan Dane. Siercession is still inside."

"Then where is he, I ask you? Is he a ghost who has blended into the walls? The room is empty."

"Nay. No one but you has left these quarters."

"I left these quarters? When was this? How?"

But Dane suspected he already knew the answer. *Cruent*! Did her betrayal know no end? She'd stolen first Siercesson's image, and now his.

"Run a scan on all auras," Dane commanded. "I would know the whereabouts of each and every man aboard."

He would find the minx. It might take a *daton* or it might take a *myon*, but he would find her. And when he did...

## Twenty-two

Heavy footfalls pounded the floor outside. The locking mechanism rattled. Someone tried to gain entrance. It held, but for how long?

*Chelian, I know you hide behind this door. Open it. Now.*

The telepathic command caused her head to ache. Dane had found her. She huddled on the bed, her eyes glued to the closed door. How long before she faced his fury? She'd known this day would come, had dreaded the outcome each night as she crept to her hiding place. No matter what came of her unwelcome presence aboard the *Cressis*, she harbored no regrets save one: she'd traded his trust for the chance to be with him once more.

She needed to open the door. In this manner, she might begin to heal the chasm she'd created between them. Resigned to face his wrath straight on, she pulled herself off the bed and unlocked the door.

He stood in the doorway, his features devoid of expression. She caught a lung full of air and held it. She'd prefer he yell. His eyes blazed fathomless and dark. At his side, his fingers rubbed furiously against his thumbs. *Selt*. His anger simmered deep.

Her heart pounded within her chest, and her muscles clenched. Tension became a living, breathing thing. He took a step inside and began to close the door behind him. Her eyes rounded. The day of reckoning had come.

"Siercesson was most displeased to find you had used his image. He feels somewhat responsible for *your* crime."

"I ... I became many different members of the Verside in my attempts to remain undetected."

"You have much to answer for, Chelian."

The door latched behind him with a click. The quietly spoken words could not mask his bitter disappointment in her, and she shuddered.

*"Selt."*

"Why? Why have you betrayed me in this manner?"

Was that pain she detected in his voice? "Betrayed? *Nock*, I never sought to betray you, Dane. Whatever you think, know I had noble reasons for boarding the *Cressis*."

"Noble reasons? What can be noble about stealing a man's image?"

Her mouth clamped tight. How could she answer his accusations? He would never understand her need to be with him. She scrambled back onto the bed, needing the softness of the cushions. A step brought him closer to her. The mattress wouldn't provide a soft haven of comfort from his anger after all. She scooted back until her back pressed against the wall. The bedcovers became a tangled mess beneath her folded legs.

"You ... you have every right to seek retribution, my Zanitor."

"Yea. I do."

"I will accept such as my due."

"I think you want me to punish you, to absolve you of guilt through painful methods. All those years of feeling unworthy has caught up with you."

Her heart fluttered. Was he right? Had she been trying to obtain a negative reaction from him all along because of repressed feelings of unworthiness. She held her tongue. He'd spent their short time together trying to make her understand her importance to community and to him, yet the manner in which she'd been raised had left deep scars.

Was it too late to mend the torn fabric of their relationship? Had she gone too far? She'd betrayed his faith in her. At the time, her actions had seemed justified, but now, looking into his pain-filled eyes, she knew differently. Losing his trust was a high price for seeking his company on this foolhardy mission.

He sighed. "The truth is, I know not what to do with you."

Her shoulders sagged. He was forever surprising her with his patience. "I apologize for causing you trouble, Dane."

His nostrils flared. "Nay. You will address me as Zan Dane for the remainder of your time onboard. I want no reminders of the intimacy we shared. *Cruent!* I cannot believe the treachery you practice. You used your gift unfairly and without thought of the consequences. I demand an accounting of your reasons. Make me believe you innocent of high treason. You owe me this much."

She scrambled off the bed and stood to face him once more. Whatever it took, she would make him proud of her once more. Her fist closed around a length of her hair and she shook the ends at him.

"I will gladly cut it all off to undo the pain I've caused. But please, Dane, you can't mean to turn your back on me—on us. I can withstand anything you do to me, but not that."

"Then tell me what I wish to know. Tell me why, Chelian."

She dropped her gaze to the floor. He hadn't asked how. He must already know of her abilities. He'd only asked why. She dared not tell him that she loved him, that she feared never seeing him again. He would likely laugh at such disclosure. But what could she reveal that he would believe?

Lights began to blink *vraed* and alarms sounded. The *Cressis* rested in neutral, a silent predator awaiting its chance to attack. They sat on the edge of Mioisiad's outer gravitational perimeter. Dane growled, obviously frustrated by the timing, but relief flooded Chelian. Obligated to tend his ship and crew, she knew he needed to return to the deck. Their personal confrontation would have to wait. She started to follow him from the room, but he turned abruptly.

"Nay, I will not have a traitor dodging my heels. You will remain confined to this room. You have bested me more than once this trip, and you will not do so again. Guards will be posted with strict instructions. You will not find escape so easy this time, Chelian."

"You need not go to so much trouble, Dane. I give you my word I will not interfere with your mission."

"Zan Dane," he reiterated. "And your word means nothing to me."

Her throat tightened. He rejected her, but what had she expected? She longed to see his eyes darken with passion and not the hard anger he now portrayed. She wanted to see his mouth soften with laughter. She wanted to feel his arms around her as if she meant the world to him, but she feared she would never do so again.

\* \* \* \*

Two *datons* later found the *Cressis* still perched on the outer edge of Mioisiad airspace, her warheads primed and ready. Dane would not use the *Cressis* to attack. He needed her for their escape should things go awry. He bent over a map of the inner city, making last-minute preparations for their surprise attack. He lifted his head as Geod came up beside him.

"I contacted Pelicosia," Geod said. "My father informs me that Chelian has tended her people well in your absence."

"'Tis not possible. Chelian remains locked inside her chambers, as well you know. How could this be?" Dane paused until he realized what must have taken place. "Sialys. Sialys used her Deliphit skills to perpetuate the lie. I am sorry, Geod. Your mate has betrayed your confidence as well."

"She must have had her reasons, Dane. I refuse to believe Sialys did so for a nefarious purpose."

The thin parchment crinkled beneath Dane's clenched fingers. "Then you are a fool."

"And you are blind, Zan Dane. Chelian cares deeply for you. I cannot but think 'tis the reason behind her actions."

"What do you know of the matter?"

"Have you looked in on her at all?" At Dane's negative shake of the head, Geod continued. "I thought not. She's been locked away for two *datons* now. She appears gaunt, and her eyes are swollen from shedding tears. She mourns the loss of your respect. In a *kleur*, we descend upon the Burdven Empire. If your heart holds a smidgen of care, you will make your peace with Chelian before going into battle."

"Your words do not give me confidence, Del Geod. Have you predetermined our failure?"

"We have yet to find the traitor. Already he makes known our intentions to our enemies. We will not have the element of surprise to aid in our success."

"Our traitor remains behind locked doors."

"Nay, I refuse to believe Chelian capable of such deceit."

"And you think I want to believe the worst of her? Who else had the opportunity? I have tortured myself with the task of finding another solution, but I can find none that makes sense." Dane didn't even try to mask the pain in his voice. Geod knew him too well for such subterfuge.

"What proof have you?" Geod remained relentless in his pursuit of the truth.

"Proof? She snuck aboard the *Cressis*. She used her powers to disguise herself. What other proof do you require?"

"Again, your quick assumptions may cost our men their lives, Dane. You want Chelian to be guilty. With the traitor in captivity, there is less risk of Zan Burlorek discovering our plans. What happens when you discover Chelian to be innocent of these crimes? What happens when you discover her only guilt is in wanting to be near you?"

Geod had a point. Without a confession, Dane could not rely on Chelian's contrition. He would need to prepare his men in the event things went awry.

"I find no comfort in what you say, Geod."

"I think only of Chelian and of you."

"Then I suggest you put your energies to a more productive cause," Dane said. "I would have you oversee the unloading of the dragons. Feon is in charge of taking us in at the right moment. If the information he gleaned is correct, the Burds turn off their force fields for half a *kleur* to clean the lenses. They will be unprepared for our entry. The fools think themselves invincible, but we will prove them wrong. Once we are past their shields, the dragons will carry us undetected toward Burd." He paused. There was more, but Geod didn't need to know everything. "You are dismissed to take care of business, Del Geod."

"By your lead."

"Your sarcastic inflections will not sway me. Even if I believed Chelian innocent, I could not bring more grief to her by telling her goodbye." Dane spoke the words in earnest, sincerely believing he would do more harm than good in approaching her now. He'd been so furious, so quick to pass judgment that he hadn't really given her an opportunity to explain.

He'd mishandled the situation, but at the time it had been all he could do to refrain from reacting with physical violence. His desire to lash out at her had given him a fair amount of guilt. Why couldn't life be simpler? Why couldn't he have chosen an obedient woman with less penchant for trouble?

Because Chelian had caught his eye from the very beginning. The spark of awareness had marked her as his. Her treachery, for he could think of her actions in no other way, had driven a spike through his carefully constructed armor. He'd never expected to feel such pain, such disappointment. The strength of his emotions hinted at feelings he could not name, feelings he'd hoped to suppress. He struggled to push Chelian from his mind if not his heart. She had no place beside him on a field of battle.

"Tark, call all hands to their stations," Dane commanded. "We breach the Mioisiad force fields in less than ten *mones*."

"By your lead, Zan Dane."

*Yea, by my lead.* Dane stared at the map, committing each detail to memory.

"For you, Father."

\* \* \* \*

Dane's knees clamped down hard against Vexalt's scaly sides. Restless, the dragon strained against Dane's hold. He controlled the beast with expert ease, keeping a slow and steady pace as they approached the skyline of Burd.

Not one word was uttered as the men got their first view of their home city since being exiled so many *yons* past. First awe then anger filled Dane's heart. Awe for the wondrous view of his homeland, and anger that he'd been denied his birthright.

Just within the city limits, Dane's eyes zeroed in on Burd Manor, the guarded home of Zan Burlorek. The metallic castle spanned three *teyards* of ground, a veritable fortress of grand proportions. Adrenaline surged forth. The moment he'd dreamed of approached.

A humming filled his ears. *Skazers* zoomed in and out of alleyways on three different levels of sky space, but the hectic pace of the Burdven Empire did not sway the Pelicosian warriors from their purpose. Dragons had long been extinct upon Mioisiad. Dane was banking on the disturbance the sudden reappearance of these creatures would have upon the otherworld society.

Dane extended his arm forward and pointed. The Burd Manor loomed just ahead, its outer walls



protected by Zan Burlorek's elite guards.

"Now!" Dane leaned forward, his cheek plastered against Vexalt's neck. The dragon responded with very little prompting. Three hundred screeching dragons with armed riders descended upon Zan Burlorek's fortress.

*Breathe fire, Vexalt!*

Hot flames spewed from the dragon's lungs. Men screamed. Singed flesh assaulted Dane's nostrils. Men spilled forth from the soot-covered metallic building. The buzz of *skazer* engines came from the outer perimeter, signaling the arrival of more of Zan Burlorek's guards.

Dane targeted a man with his *terment* and fired. The magnetic weapon sent a death volley of electrical shockwaves straight for the man's heart. Dane didn't wait to see the enemy fall. He found another target and fired.

"Zan Dane, behind you!"

Dane whirled just in time to counter a *terment* shot with one of his own. The two electrical charges exploded just shy of his kneecap. Vexalt screeched. Fire exploded from the dragon's lungs, vanquishing the immediate threat to Dane's life.

Dane pulled back on the reins, guiding Vexalt higher. He sought out Del Geod and found him among the fray. Dane smiled to see that Geod still lived as did Tark, Feon, and Siercesson. Yet he knew others had died. In a flash, he saw the *augrid* bodies that littered the ground below—dragons who'd carried their masters bravely into danger. And beside the fallen dragons rested the bodies of courageous men, men who'd died for the right to return to their home planet. With a mighty war cry, Dane guided Vexalt headlong into the heart of the melee.

*Dane! More come. We are outnumbered.*

"Cruent!" Dane had known they would have a difficult time, yet he'd thought they stood a chance by attacking quickly when it was least expected. But this? It was as if the Burdven warriors had prior knowledge of the Verside's arrival. For every man they managed to kill, three took his place. Had Fen Carben betrayed them all, or did another seek their destruction?

Pain, sharp and intense, caused Dane to drop his *terment* weapon. He'd been hit. The smell of seared flesh made him gag. He glanced down at his wounded arm. With gritted teeth, he pushed the pain aside and drew his scabbard. The whirl of engines crescendoed. One of the Burd warriors leapt upon Vexalt and pointed a *terment* at Dane's head. He raised his hands high. Deadly intent sparkled in his opponent's eyes. With a gentle squeeze to Vexalt's sides, Dane forced the dragon to roll to the left. His assailant lost footing and fell to his death. Dane stared down at the fallen man, feeling little regret for the loss of life.

The hum of engines caught his attention once more. He glanced left then right. Slowly, he lifted his head skyward. His eyes bulged and his heart pounded furiously within his sweat-drenched chest. The Verside was cocooned in a sea of *skazers*, surrounded by Zan Burlorek's army. The dragons wailed as the *skazers* forced their descent to the ground. Hemmed in as they were, Dane could do nothing but comply. The Verside were defeated.

Dane motioned the men to follow his lead, and they set the dragons down upon the ground. His men had made a valiant effort against so many, but now he could do nothing but surrender. Three *skazers* landed with them, hovering in front like an *abion tork* waiting to feed. Dane silently cursed the lot of them.

"Dismount from your beasts." The muffled voice held the ring of command.

"Do as he says," Dane told his men. "I think we have little choice but to comply with their orders." He dismounted first and watched as the Verside bravely followed his example.

Del Geod stood at his side, his face devoid of expression. *They took us much too quickly.*

Dane swallowed. *Yea. We were betrayed.*

*Who? It could not have been Chelian. Someone else among us has seen to our defeat.*

*I know not what to believe, Geod. I only know 'twas my own folly that brought us ruin.*

Dane did not have the heart to discuss his relationship to Fen Carben with Geod. He knew not who'd betrayed them. To believe in Chelian's innocence, he must shift blame to his own brother. Likewise, to continue his faith in Fen Carben, he must believe Chelian guilty. His arm throbbed while his heart shattered at the possibility of Chelian's involvement in their demise. He must focus all his energy on not showing the Burdven warriors his pain. He would hide both his physical and mental wounds, for to show even a hint of pain would display weakness, and he had to remain strong for the Verside.

One of the enemy left the *skazer* and walked toward Dane and his men. A helmet covered the man's features, but there was something vaguely familiar in the man's stride. Dane stiffened.

*Welcome back to Mioisiad and the Burdven Empire, Dane.*

Telepathic? Only members of the Verside had these abilities. Who approached with such evil calm? Dane made no move to answer the greeting. He stood stiff and unresponsive to the soldier's intimidating posture. The man stopped three stones from Dane and lifted the protective helmet from his head.

A gasp left the lips of every member of the Verside. Dane stumbled backward a step, unable to mask his surprise. His mouth fell open, and the pain in his heart grew tenfold. The *terment* blast to his arm hadn't hurt nearly as bad as the shock he'd just been dealt.

"What is it, Dane? Have you no greeting for your own flesh and blood?"

"Tared?"

"You appear pale, brother. Do you not believe in ghosts?"

Dane struggled to collect his thoughts. This man could not be Tared. Perhaps the Burds had found a way to clone an image in the same manner Chelian had. Nothing else made sense, because he'd seen Tared die.

## Twenty-three

Pain ripped at Chelian's chest, sharp and piercing. She clutched the dragon pendant to her breast before falling to the ground, gasping for breath. How could she feel his pain when Dane was so far away? Did love strengthen her bond to him?

"Zel Chelian?" Liorxton set the food tray beside the bed. The task of seeing her fed had fallen on his shoulders since the majority of the men had left the *Cressis* to fight.

She peered up at him through strands of matted hair. Another stabbing pain caught her off guard. She clutched her stomach and cried out.

Liorxton rushed to her side and knelt beside her. "Zel Chelian, please tell me what ails you!"

The worry in his voice broke through her fog of agony. With stilted breath, she tried to air her concerns. "Dane ... they ... they have captured Dane and the Verside."

"Tis not possible, my Zelton. Zane Dane will be victorious this day. I've heard naught to the contrary."

"Nock. They couldn't have won against so many. I wouldn't feel this pain if Dane were still in control. I fear he has fallen into enemy hands."

Strong arms grasped her upper arms. "Come. Let me help you to your feet."

Chelian gritted her teeth and allowed the meditech to assist her. The pain subsided, replaced by such forlorn dejection that she could do nothing but cry. Tears fell freely upon her cheeks.

"They hold him prisoner, Liorxton. He will die."

"Hush, Zel Chelian. Zane Dane will return soon, along with his men. I refuse to believe otherwise."

Alarms sounded throughout the corridors. Chelian's head snapped toward the closed door. Someone entered the ship through the loading bay.

Liorxton patted her hand. "There, you see? The men return. Besides Zane Dane, only Del Geod and Tark can gain access to the ship from the outside. The security system scans their auras for a preprogrammed match. Have no fear. The Verside must have been victorious."

Chelian could only shake her head to the contrary. She knew differently. She didn't know how she knew, just that her connection to Dane made it possible for her to sense the moment he had lost his freedom. She took a deep breath and the pain disappeared completely, but not her despair. Dane remained in trouble.

"Can you find out for sure who enters, Liorxton? I'll feel much better knowing I'm wrong."

"Of course, Zel Chelian."

Liorxton left her chamber, his empathetic eyes branded in her mind. He thought her delusional. She sighed and hoped she was. Solitude had a way of playing with one's thoughts. She heard the click of the locking mechanism and knew she was alone once more in a prison of her own making.

\* \* \* \*

The cold, metal wall bit into Dane's naked back. His wounded arm throbbed. If he didn't get medical attention soon, it would turn putrid. Bruises from his previous interrogation episode made sitting

uncomfortable, yet he was too weary to stand. Impatiently he waited for the Burdven ruler to come for him again. He shifted his weight and grimaced when pain garnered his immediate attention.

Because he was without clothing, the cold, drafty cell inflamed his sore muscles. Flexing his arms and legs only caused his crusted wounds to seep. He stared at the ugly gash on his arm, bemoaning the scar that was sure to appear if left unattended much longer. Such marks had no place upon the body of a king. He groaned at the thought that he was no longer a king but a captive with little say over his destiny.

He allowed the icy wall to support his head as he stared at the ceiling with absent regard. He'd never before felt such lack of strength and weary regret. It wasn't enough that they held him prisoner. They sought to degrade him, to strip him of his pride. The Verside had fought and lost. He and his men would pay a heavy price for their defeat.

"You do look a bit uncomfortable."

Dane lifted heavy eyelids to peer at his brother. He hadn't even heard Tared remove the force field from around his cell. Had he drifted asleep for a short time?

"No reply?"

"May Draccus burn you alive." Dane allowed bitterness to seep into his words.

Tared threw back his head and laughed. "He already has, Dane. Yea, the zeel pit I tumbled into made my skin feel as if a thousand *teimiene* needles pierced my thick hide. You think you feel pain now? You know nothing of real pain, Dane. And you left me there."

"I watched you die. I shed tears for your passing."

"Nay. Not dead. Falling into the pit was a living death that seemed to go on forever at first. But I finally reached an end, and the belly of the dragon spit me out."

Dane's blood stirred. "There was another opening? A way out of the pit?"

"Yea. As you can see, I'm alive and well."

*Not well*, Dane thought. The man showed signs of a sick mind, a conscience tormented by many demons. This was not the brother he'd once known. This man differed greatly from his memories of Tared. Changed—yea. This man displayed psychotic tendencies of an evil nature.

Tared circled in front of him, pacing as if he expected a different reaction. "No comment? I would think you'd have a lot to say to the brother you betrayed."

*Chelian*. Dane had said the same words to her. Had she felt as he did now; lost, confused, unable to defend herself against his accusations?

"Betrayed? How have I betrayed you, Tared?"

Tared became agitated, his heavy footfalls echoing as he continued to pace the floor. "You just forgot about me. You failed to find me and restore me to my rightful place amid the Verside. I waited and waited."

"I know naught of what you speak. I thought you dead and gone." Dane yielded to his fatigue and let his head rest upon folded forearms, his mind too weary to contemplate Tared's changed personality.

"No matter. Zan Burlorek's men took care of me and nurtured me back to health. I am grateful I now

have the means to thank them for their courtesies. Now that we have control of the Verside, your men will yield the zeal that will make Mioisiad rich again."

Dane let the comment drop. He refused to let Tared bait him. "How is it Zan Burlorek found you? If another opening to the zeal pits existed, the Verside should have come upon and rescued the lost souls within its grip."

"By the time I survived the tortures of the pit, I had no desire to seek your aid. Nay, after suffering, I took great delight in plotting your demise. 'Twas I who sought out Burlorek's men."

Dane's eyes drifted closed at his brother's obvious insanity. He could not bear to look upon this man whom he'd once loved, but a ripping pain made his eyes fly open.

Tared's fist wrapped tighter around Dane's hair, and he yanked his head back to glare at him with lethal malevolence. "I will see you die for crimes against these people, Zan Dane. Where is your throne now, Good King? Where are the men who follow in your destructive path? What, the floor is your throne? Your men have abandoned you?"

Tared laughed, the sound harsh and abrasive against Dane's bruised soul. Had Tared always been this jealous, this callous? Confusion made his brow wrinkle.

"You have what you want, Tared. Why bait me further?"

Tared let go of his hair, and Dane's head fell forward. He hadn't the strength to keep his head tucked back where he could look Tared in the eye. He stared at the bloodstained floor beneath him. His blood. With Tared's taunts, he became numb to physical pain.

Tared crouched low. "I once looked up at you with adoration and blind worship. Look at you now. Your body bears the scars of your stupidity. You can no longer claim the strength of a warrior. And do you know the full irony of your capture?"

Dane tried to lift his head to look at him as Tared continued, his voice deceptive with hushed tones.

"The Verside was banished to a planet Zan Burlorek deemed barely inhabitable, yet the Verside found the zeal and found a way to harvest the precious gem. And it is the zeal that perpetuates your defeat."

"You aren't making sense."

"The pits, Dane! Those men who fell into the pits did not die as you thought. Those tortured souls survived as I did to roam the planet with aimless purpose. I gathered them, taught them, organized them. I gave them purpose, and I have become the leader you never thought me capable of becoming."

Dane found the strength to glare at Tared. "Father...?"

"He found out about us. Knew what we had planned."

"You ... you killed our father?"

"Nay. Kurig's son Melici managed to persuade his father of our rightful cause. 'Twasn't difficult to convince him to take an active role in our endeavors."

*Melici returns. My son returns. He protects us all.* Kurig's words now made sense to Dane. Melici must have become as mentally unstable as Tared. Kurig had been beside himself with grief when he'd thought his son dead. Dane could see how Melici could turn the Elder against the Verside with ease.

Dane's head pounded at the effort to make sense of everything Tared relayed. It took a heavy toll upon Dane's spirits.

"What of the others, Tared? The men affected by the pits? What has become of them?"

"Those lucky enough to fall under my command now serve the Burdven empire. Unfortunately, there were a few that were too tortured by inner demons to prove of any worth to my needs. They still roam the forests of Pelicosia, imprisoned by their madness."

"And you think yourself sane?"

Tared's mouth curved into a brittle smile. "Sane enough to plot my revenge."

"My men?"

"Ah, the Verside."

"Do they fare well in prison?"

Tared folded strong arms across his chest. "Better than you, I'll warrant. You have the zeal to thank for their emancipated status."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It got your attention, I see. If not for the zeal, you would be dead, brother. And though he wishes for your execution, Zan Carben is a practical man."

"Zan Carben?"

"Yea. Our half-brother has also done well for himself. He has acted as ruler for the past ten years, and he's even more ambitious than his father."

Dane had suspected Carben of duplicity, but he'd hoped to be proven wrong. He pushed the truth to one side to concentrate on the future.

"You say I'm not to die, Tared?"

"Zan Carben traded your life for zeal. The Verside is to return to Pelicosia where they have instructions to harvest a full load of zeal. You will remain alive yet imprisoned for however long the zeal continues to arrive here at the Burdven Empire."

"My men will never agree."

"Yea, they already prepare for the journey home."

Dane relaxed against the wall. They might go back to Pelicosia, but they would never turn over the zeal. His men had their orders. They would destroy the zeal before giving such power to Zan Carben.

Tared laughed. "Your expression gives you away, Dane. Your men will indeed hand over the zeal. My spy will make sure of it."

It took a moment for Dane to grasp the meaning of Tared's last statement. The traitor still roamed free aboard the *Cressis*. Dane's eyes squeezed shut against the torment his brother's words had caused, yet he couldn't help feeling some relief to know Chelian was innocent of treason. She hadn't been on Pelicosia long enough to form a bond with Tared. He and his followers must have embarked on a journey

to Mioisiad after one of Zan Carben's inspection trips. It was the only thing that made sense.

Tared continued to taunt him. "I wonder if you are worth the sacrifice the Verside makes in your honor."

Dane's eyes snapped open. "Nay! I freely forfeit my life. I will not have my men fund Zan Carben's evil endeavors."

"You have no choice, Dane. As I stated before, already your men board the *Cressis* to begin the journey back home."

Home? Regret stirred within Dane's chest. He'd been so wrong, so naive. He'd thought they could just take back Mioisiad and reclaim their ancestral homes, but he'd deceived himself. Mioisiad held little memories for him. As if blinders had been lifted, Dane saw Pelicosia as the home he'd always dreamed of. It had been there before his eyes though he'd refused to see. And Chelian? Did he not owe her more than a possessive claim to her body? Could she forgive him for his stubborn refusal to make more of their union? Would she ever have the chance?

"Your words defeat me, Tared. Leave so I may mourn my loss in peace."

"Your humility gives me little pleasure, Dane. I would rather see you dead and be done with it. Only then will I find my own peace."

Tared smiled and continued wordlessly. *Rest easy, brother. I will rule Pelicosia well in your absence, and I will care for Chelian as if she were my own.*

Dane struggled to his feet and glared at the brother he'd once loved. *Leave Chelian alone, Tared, or I will haunt you for all eternity!*

Tared threw back his head and laughed, the sound fading in the distance upon his exit. The sliding door signaled the finality of his visit. More importantly, it signaled the end to all Dane's dreams and hopes for the future. Caught in a prison of cruel irony, he had only himself to blame.

## Twenty-four

Chelian nibbled on a torn fingernail and contemplated the progression of events that had caused her incarceration within the belly of the *Cressis*. Three *myons* had passed since leaving the relative safety of Pelicosia. Numerous *datons* had crept by since Dane had been taken prisoner. She sensed his strength ebbing with each passing *kleur*. Her mental connection to Dane weakened, leaving her bereft. When the Verside had returned to the ship, hope had bloomed within her breast that Dane would surely return soon. Yet each day without Dane made it difficult to sustain her wishful dream.

She pulled her finger from her mouth and worried the folds of her frayed garment. How could she live knowing she would never hold Dane again, never know the warmth of his smile? The love she held prisoner within her heart struggled for release. How could she brave life knowing she'd never told Dane the truth of why she'd boarded the *Cressis* or why she'd disobeyed his wishes?

She stamped her foot, frustrated with her inability to vent her full fury as she desired. An empty room couldn't listen, couldn't respond to her tirade. An empty room couldn't give her answers. She sank down on the bed. As if her thoughts had conjured company for her, the metal door slid open. Chelian stood to greet her visitor and frowned when Del Geod entered, his facial expression grim. In all her time there, the only visitor to enter this room had been Liorxton.

"I'm honored by this visit, Del Geod," she said.

Purposeful strides carried him toward her. "I have not come to enjoy your company, my Zelton."

"Ah, you have news of Dane. I'm pleased you have managed to put aside your fear of me to venture forth." She forced her hands to her sides. He need not know how worried she'd become.

"I have never feared you." He tilted his head, and his expression held question. After a brief moment, he said, "You are peeved with me."

The skin between her eyes wrinkled with displeasure. "Del Geod, I've been locked away for almost a *myon*. Liorxton comes twice a day to deliver my meals. He can't or won't impart any information on Dane. It's as if all of you have forgotten my association to the man. By my faith in Orius, you forget I'm his mate and your queen."

"Nay, my Zelton. I forget nothing. I was too ashamed to face you when first we arrived back on board."

"Ashamed?"

"Yea. 'Tis disheartening to know we failed in our mission, but to lose our king in the process is crushing to the spirit. Dane lives only because Zan Carben forces our return to Pelicosia so that we may harvest zeal for the Burdven Empire."

Chelian's heart lurched. Dane lived, but only because Del Geod had a task to fulfill. And when the task was complete, what then?

"Then why haven't we set a course for Pelicosia? Why do we linger in Mioisiad's space?"

"Because we dare not deliver that much zeal to Zan Carben," Del Geod replied. "The gem is far too powerful. When he discovers the stone's full potential, all of Mioisiad will be doomed. Worse still, he will spread his evil to neighboring planets and distant galaxies. I have no wish to sacrifice my king and my friend, yet I cannot justify gifting Zan Carben with such power. When we attacked, we thought we fought our old enemy Zan Burlorek, but upon arrival we discovered his son in power. And Zan Carben is far



more cruel than his father."

Tears welled in her eyes. "You ... you came here to tell me you plan to allow Dane's death?"

"Nay!"

"But—"

"I have allowed the *Cressis* to linger here while I brooded, planned, and schemed. I think I have found a way to save both Dane and the zeel. In fact, I may have come up with a plan to free Mioisiad from Zan Carben's rule, but I need your help."

"Of course. Anything."

He averted his eyes from hers. "You agree too quickly, my Zelton. The mark of a good warrior is his ability to hear the information, dissemble the facts, and act reasonably upon his conclusions."

"I'm not a warrior, Del Geod. Your correlation does not apply."

"Nay, not a warrior. You are a queen—a leader. A woman who made the mistake of falling in love with a stubborn man."

She sat on the bed. "Am I that transparent?"

"Not to Dane—a man both stubborn and obtuse. I think he is blind to the evidence before him, but everyone else can see how you feel. 'Tis why you took drastic measures to travel with us."

Chelian's chest contracted and expanded with heavy breath. She wished Dane could see things as clearly as Del Geod. "Thank you for not believing the worst in me. I never meant to cause anyone harm with my plan."

"This I know, but Dane thinks you betrayed more than his trust. He went to battle thinking you'd betrayed all of us. I know not how the Burds found out about the attack, but I do not believe you guilty of the treason. Someone else is responsible for the troubles we now face."

"And he is still among you?"

"Yea. We have been directed to return home for the zeel, and I have no doubt the traitor will report our activities to Zan Carben."

"And you have no idea whom it might be?"

He shook his head. "'Tis why I now seek your help."

She blinked. When his meaning became clear, she jumped off the bed and shook her head, fearing that she knew what he would ask of her.

"You ... you wish me to use my powers?"

"Chelian, you have a gift. I can think of no better use for your abilities than to set Dane free."

She took a step back, then another. "Nay, you ask too much. I promised Dane I would never again practice such deceptions."

"I think he would understand in this case."

"*Nock*. Dane admires honesty above all else. I would lose his trust forever should I go against his wishes."

"You will lose the man himself forever if you do not."

She turned her back on his accusing eyes. How could she betray Dane again? Her heart cried for her absent mate. How could she not betray him for the chance to save his life? Her shoulders sagged and her chin dropped to her chest.

"Tell me what you would have me do."

Del Geod's hand settled upon her shoulder. "Dane will see the wisdom behind your choice."

She straightened her spine. From this moment on, she would live up to her title. She would become a strong queen. "Just tell me what must be done."

She took a seat as Del Geod began a long summation of what he wanted. She listened with attentive regard, committing every faction of his plan to memory. Everything made sense. Adrenaline pumped energy through her veins. Excitement made it difficult to sit still. Dane could be home on the morrow if all went well, and she had no reason to believe it would not. When he finished, a broad smile lit his face. He clearly felt as confident as she in the plan's ability to work.

Chelian took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "When do we meet this Zan Carben?"

"Meet him? Nay, 'tis not possible. Why would you wish it? I will show you a recorded image of the man so you can change into his likeness, and from there, we rescue Dane."

Her eyebrows angled toward her nose. "*Nock*. That won't work. I can't become someone without first touching them. When my finger connects with their body, my brain records their image map and stores it for later use. Without the map, I can't become that person. In this manner, I stole Siercesson's image."

Del Geod's smile faded. "Then all is lost. 'Tis too risky for you to meet Zan Carben. Zan Dane would likely kill me if he knew I put you in danger."

"You dangled hope in front of me and now you mean to take it away? *Nock*, it's my choice. I have no wish to live life without Dane. He showed me what it meant to be respected and accepted as a member of society, not some pariah that people feared. I won't lose that. I won't lose him."

Del Geod nodded. "Fine. Somehow we must get you past the guards and presented to Zan Carben. And we must do this without our phantom traitor learning of our plans."

Chelian's fingers gripped the folds of her skirt. "I think I've an idea." She lifted hopeful eyes to his, and he inclined his head, indicating his willingness to listen. "I am queen, ruler when Dane is not present. It this not policy?"

Del Geod smirked. "If that were so, you could have commanded your release at any time."

"Then I order you to release me. If I'm no longer a prisoner, my command would be restored."

"I think your logic twisted, but I am willing to play along for the moment." He smiled. "Consider yourself free to roam the *Cressis* at will."

"You'll escort me to Zan Carben. You'll demand an audience whereby you'll explain my position. Tell him you can't follow his orders until my own dictates are satisfied. We'll tell the Burdven king that I refuse to

allow the Verside to return to Pelicosia until I've seen Dane."

Del Geod shook his head, the amusement vanishing from his features. "Nay. You will find yourself imprisoned along with Dane. I will not allow it."

"Del Geod, I know it can work," she insisted. "From what you've told me of Zan Carben, he holds little regard for women. He will grant my request because it will amuse him to do so."

"If he is anything like his father, you are right that he has little respect for women. 'Tis one of the many reasons the Verside sought his defeat. The Burd enslaves women, and the men are not allowed to live with the women they love. Male children are raised in dormitories with very little contact with their fathers. Daughters are sold as slaves as soon as they are born. There is no family unit within the Burdven Empire."

"Then how—"

"How did the Verside form? How were we able to live with our fathers and our mothers?"

She nodded, her curiosity aroused by this new information.

"Kione was not always a king, but he thought like a king always. He was a natural leader. Before mating with Raina, he'd already shown signs of a rebellious heart. To placate the young warrior, Zan Burlorek gifted him with a woman before the recognized age. Kione had only passed sixteen *yons*, and he fell in love with her on sight. Burdven laws are very specific. A man is given a woman for one *myon*. In that time, he is expected to impregnate her. She is isolated until her pregnancy is confirmed. If his seed does not take, he is given another *myon* to achieve this goal. Kione didn't hold with Zan Burlorek's treatment of women or his treatment of the men for that matter, but these practices had been in place long before Zan Burlorek came into power. Kione spoke out against these traditions, demanding reform.

"When Zan Burlorek laughed at his youthful ideals, Kione made sure his seed did not take. He used his extra time with Raina to plot their escape. In the meantime, he also garnered support from a small group of men with similar beliefs. They left the Burdven Empire and made their home in a remote part of the planet. There they lived for several years until it became apparent Zan Burlorek had not forgotten their defection. Burlorek might have forgotten Kione, but Kione continued to gain supporters. Then he did something that made Zan Burlorek burn with anger." Del Geod paused, allowing suspense to build. "Kione stole Raina's first son from the dormitory."

"Zan Carben?"

Del Geod nodded.

"What about the rest of the planet?" Chelian asked. "Are there other cultures besides the Burds?"

"Yea, but the rest of the planet is not as advanced. Zan Carben has been absorbing small factions, promising them knowledge in technology for their blind faith in the system. As far as we can tell, Zan Carben now rules over seventy-five percent of the population."

"How did Dane ever expect to fight and win?"

Del Geod had no answer for her. From his silence, she understood more than she wanted to. Dane hadn't expected to win. He'd gone with the sole purpose of opening the eyes of others inclined to fight against Zan Carben's tyranny. His promise to his father had been more important than his promise to her. For this reason, he'd kept himself aloof, immune to any emotional attachments he might have entertained. Anger caused her nose to flare and her blood to pound. Men could be so shortsighted when it came to

the things that really mattered.

"Zel Chelian, you're wrong to think Zan Dane attacked without any hope of winning."

Had he read her mind?

"Am I?"

"Granted, we took great risks, but we had inside information that gave us a smidgen of hope."

"Your smidgen of hope proved to be less than enough," she said.

"We did not count on the resurrection of Dane's brother Tared and his betrayal of the Verside."

"Tared?"

Chelian gasped. Things became more complicated with every breath she took. Her resolve to help Dane became stronger, and her shoulders straightened with determination.

"Del Geod, send Tark and Feon to the bridge. I would meet with all Dane's officers. If we are to pull this off, I'll need help. We begin by having one of you teach me all dialects of Miois. I need lessons on their culture and their history. I can't become Zan Carben without the complete information necessary for me to make this work."

"Nay, my Zelton. You forget the traitor. We can trust no one. I will teach you what you wish to know. You should assume command as we discussed before, but none must know you plan to seek out Zan Carben. Word would get to him of your abilities, and this we do not want. When you feel confident speaking the Daramile dialect of Miois, you and I will travel to Zan Carben's home with none the wiser."

"I concede to your wisdom, Del Geod. Dane is fortunate to have you as a friend." She gave him a bright smile. "Then lead the way. I am eager to assume control."

"By your lead, my Zelton."

"And, Del Geod, one more thing."

He raised a brow in question but made no comment.

"Bring me a pair of clippers. I will need to cut my hair a length similar to that worn by Zan Carben."

\* \* \* \*

The hair upon Chelian's skin stood on end, and the sensation of a thousand *holimes* crawled up her spine as Zan Carben's eyes roamed her body with lustful enthusiasm. She might as well be naked for his visual pleasure. She knew Del Geod tensed beside her, his manner wary and watchful.

Zan Carben's tone was mocking. "Am I to believe you take orders from a woman, Del Geod?"

"Yea, my Zanitor. She is Dane's mate—his queen. Our laws require our obedience to her wishes when Dane is absent from his duties."

"And if she is absent from her duties, will this power then fall upon your shoulders?"

Del Geod's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. Chelian forced herself to stand rigid and proud beneath Zan Carben's inspection.

"Yea, my Zanitor."

Beefy fingers grasped Chelian's chin. Thick nails bit into tender skin as he forced her head back, but she found the inner strength to remain stiff beneath such abuse. The old Chelian would have quaked before this cruel leader. Del Geod had not lied—the man before her was a monster, a beast. He meant to subdue her with fear. Pushing aside her contempt, she took advantage of his proximity to lay her hand upon his wrist. He would rue the day he dared touch her.

"I am king here, woman. In my kingdom, there is no room for a female of worth. You come to see Dane? Then see him you shall." He released her with such force she stumbled backward. "Guard, enslave her!"

"Nay," Del Geod objected. "You cannot take her hostage. The Verside will balk at your poor treatment of their queen."

Rough hands pulled Chelian toward the door. *Don't worry for me, Geod. I have all I need to steal his image.*

Del Geod's eyes were full of regret, and she knew he must blame himself for this current turn of events. She tried to smile and assure him through body language and telepathy.

*I promise, Del Geod. All will be well.*

His fingers knotted into fists. *Give me your word you will be careful. I would hate to see you killed for your efforts or worse.*

Zan Carben stole Del Geod's attention with his words. "She is no longer your concern. The Verside will learn I will not be manipulated."

"You had best keep her safe."

"You dare tell me what I can and cannot do? Return to your vessel, Del Geod. If the *Cressis* does not set course for Pelicosia within ten *kleurs*, I will have Dane and his mate executed. I require the first delivery of zeel three *myons* hence."

Zan Carben's voice faded as Chelian was pushed through the doorway. The empty hall beckoned her to act with haste. She reached out and touched the guard's arm with gentle pressure. He growled, clearly unused to such behavior from a captive. She dropped her hand and concentrated her thoughts upon the guard's legs.

His pace slowed, and a grimace of pain spread across his features. Chelian continued her mental assault. His hand dropped from her arm, and he cried out before crumpling to the floor, the muscles in his legs visibly knotted with cramps. While he writhed in pain, Chelian pulled the *terment* from his belt and fired at him. He convulsed once before going still.

She knelt beside his prone body and searched for a pulse. The man lived. Glancing right and left, she noted an empty room to which she dragged the body. Though the scenario had not occurred as she'd envisioned, the important thing was she'd managed to touch the king. Even though Del Geod no longer stood beside her to lend assistance, she couldn't pass up this opportunity to free Dane.

She stripped from her clothing and unstrapped the uniform she'd hidden beneath her clothing. She would don the official garb of Zan Carben once she completed her image mapping of him. With little time to reflect upon her course of action, Chelian became Zan Carben's duplicate.

She pulled a vial from a pocket. If she hurried, she expected she would find Zan Carben still cloistered in

his rooms alone. He should be so shocked to see himself approaching that he wouldn't be able to call for the guards until too late. Chelian worried the fabric of her tunic then caught herself. She must exude only mannerisms characteristic of Zan Carben.

She inhaled deeply and hoped the sleeping potion she clutched in her hand would see Zan Carben taken care of for a long while, at least long enough to see Dane freed. She crept from the room and straightened her back. With a mental shake of her head, she assumed the persona of the dreaded king. She walked with purpose down the long hall, stopping only long enough to gain courage.

Her hand pressed against the keypad that opened the door. Even with all the technology available to these people, they did not utilize aura scans and still mapped hand prints. A scant moment later, the door slid wide. She entered with quick strides, and her eyes swept the room for the king's presence. A frown gathered between her brows.

Zan Carben had disappeared.

## Twenty-five

The door mechanism squealed, announcing the need for lubrication. Dane lifted his head not even a fraction. He cared not who came to visit. It only meant more degradation at the hands of his warden.

Dane saw a guard's boots followed by the feet of another. Dane kept his eyes trained on the man's elaborate shoes. Someone of power visited, but Dane didn't feel inclined to grant even the slightest of courtesies. Fever raged through his body, a byproduct of his untreated wounds. It drained him of all energy. He would keep his gaze downcast until forced otherwise.

"Drag the cur to his feet. I would look upon the man who dared attack my home."

Dane groaned, and a wrenching pain caught his attention. The guard used undo force in granting Zan Carben's wishes. The king—his half-brother. Dane tried to hold back a sneer. He had little love and no respect left for the man who stood before him. Yet to show his contempt outright might goad the man into more atrocities upon his person, and Dane had no desire to feel more pain at the hands of this evil man.

Zan Carben placed his hands behind his back and rocked on the balls of his feet. "Not so confident now, are you, Dane?"

"I doubt you came to exchange pleasantries, brother. Say what you will and leave me be."

"I had a rare visit from someone of importance to you."

The guard pulled Dane's head back, forcing him to acknowledge the king's comment. Dane glared to show his hatred of the man who'd ruined his family.

"Del Geod brought me your mate," Zan Carben said. "I've enslaved her to insure further cooperation from your Verside."

Dane found a sudden burst of strength and launched himself at Zan Carben, surprising the guard enough that he failed to restrain him, and Dane managed to grab for Zan Carben's arm. Before he could latch on to the ruler, an electric shock seared his fingers, and he stumbled backward. His eyes grew wide with dismay. *Chelian?*

Zan Carben sneered. "Escort the prisoner to my chambers. I would goad him with a view of his mate."

The guard frowned at the odd request but hastened to please his sovereign. He placed a metal band around Dane's neck to assure his cooperation and motioned for him to follow Zan Carben out the door. When Dane hesitated, the guard pushed a button on a remote that caused a spiral of pain to explode at the base of his neck and make him fall to his knees.

*Dane!*

Through a fog of pain, he heard Chelian call out to him with her mind. She *was* there. He hadn't imagined her presence. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw her reach out, and his heart lurched with dread.

*Nay! You must show no concern for me!*

He stumbled to his feet, his weakened muscles made strong with the knowledge that Chelian stood before him. And on the heels of such a thought, another took root. She had placed herself in imminent danger, had broken her solemn oath to him. Confused emotions kept him company on the long trek to

Zan Carben's chambers. Questions ran amuck inside his head. Chelian had no right to interfere in his affairs, yet he was inordinately pleased that she'd come for him.

Dane stumbled along the lengthy walkway until at last they halted before an ornate door. Zan Carben—no, not Carben, *Chelian*—fit her palm to the keypad, and the door slid open.

She turned and addressed the guard. “Give me the neckband controls and leave us. I relish having the prisoner for my exclusive pleasures.”

Her imperial tone allowed no argument. She'd adjusted well to the role of Zan Carben. The guard smiled and backed away after dropping the controls into Chelian's outstretched hand. She stared at the door until it closed. With haste, she turned toward Dane. He froze and waited to see what she had planned next.

“What has that monster done to you, Dane?” Her fingers trembled as she reached out to him.

He flinched. She'd touched a fresh bruise with less than a gentle touch. She used the control to release his collar, and the metal fell to the floor with a resounding ring. Dane touched a sore spot at the base of his neck and settled his gaze upon Chelian.

“You should not have come,” he said.

She gave a start at his harsh rebuke. He hadn't meant to sound so uncharitable, yet, by the Great Dragon's sword, she shouldn't have embroiled herself in this mess. She did so at great danger to herself.

She gave him a brittle smile. “And a fine greeting to you as well.”

He gritted his teeth against her cynicism. “You used your gift when I expressed my desire that you never do so again. By what right do you disobey my orders?”

She reached for the wounded arm. “By my right as queen. Your absence gave me all the authority I needed.”

He closed his eyes against the sudden sting of tears. Emotion had no place in his life, yet her sacrifice proved his undoing.

“Dane?”

He opened moist eyes to gaze upon Zan Carben's image. He'd give anything to pull her into his arms and confess long-suppressed feelings, yet the thought of holding Zan Carben to his breast made him go cold. Now was not the time.

Chelian continued to examine his arm, then she touched a cool hand to his brow. “This needs immediate attention, Dane. It begins to fester, and your skin burns with fever.”

He pulled away from her grasp. “Later. I know not what you have planned, but I imagine haste is required if we plan to leave this place. What have you done with the real king?”

“Nothing.”

He blinked the moisture from his eyes. “What do you mean nothing?”

“I mean I don't know where Zan Carben is. I had to summon a guard to lead me to your cell. With each step, I worried that he would discover me, yet he never did.” She rummaged through Zan Carben's clothing. “We must see you clothed. I can't bear to look upon your wounds.”



"Do they repulse you?"

Her gaze drifted to his while she continued to search Zan Carben's closet. "Nay. You could never repulse me. I but cry inside for the pain they cause you and ... I am distracted from my purpose."

Dane groaned. They were stuck in Zan Carben's room with no knowledge of where the ruler might be. How they'd managed to arrive without detection continued to baffle him. Chelian must be blessed with the good fortune of Draccus to have accomplished the impossible.

He accepted a tunic and leggings from her, then he sank onto the bed and tried to put on the clothing. "This is madness. Though I am grateful to be free, you had no right to attempt such a daring rescue. I hold Del Geod accountable for bringing you here. *Cruent!*"

"Here, let me." She guided his arm through the sleeve.

He wanted to refuse her help, ashamed of his weakness, but he could not. He simply did not have the strength to see the deed done. She had just finished fastening the tunic when footfalls sounded outside the door, preventing further discussion.

Chelian tossed Dane the *terment* she'd found in the king's quarters and motioned him behind the screen, but he frowned at her directive. Taking orders from his mate did not sit well. The door slid open, and Dane continued to sit upon the bed in plain view once Zan Carben approached. Chelian allowed her distress to show, and Dane knew she wanted him safe and out of harm's way. Did she not understand that he needed to face his nemesis, his brother?

Zan Carben took a step inside and froze. "How did you escape?"

"I am very resourceful," Dane replied. "You should remember this about me, if nothing else."

Carben's expression soured. "Mmm, you've managed to free yourself from prison, but you will never make it past the guards to leave the compound."

Dane struggled to his feet. He needed to show Carben a confident stance. "It matters not. I only want the chance to even things between us. I would know why you lied to me and led me to believe you were still the same person my father helped raise."

"Your father was weak. My father knew this, and our mother was not very bright. She came to me and told me of her plans to take me with her. I told my father, and he ordered me to accompany our mother to make my home with the Verside. He wanted to glean your secrets. He wanted to know how others could become telepathic."

Dane tried to smile, but a cracked lip made it difficult. "I imagine Zan Burlorek became disappointed when you could tell him nothing."

"Yea, and most angered that my views began to resemble those of the Verside, so he made sure I had a change of heart. He promised a safe haven for our mother if I betrayed the whereabouts and activities of the Verside. I agreed, and after the Verside was exiled, he forced me to watch our mother die."

Dane closed his eyes. He did not care to hear any more of his mother's demise. He wanted to remember her alive and full of vigor. He opened them again to see Chelian stirring behind Zan Carben.

*Nay! Make no move toward him, Chelian. I will not have you hurt.*

She halted but not before Zan Carben turned in her direction. His face blanched white upon seeing his

own image.

"Who?"

The corners of her lips lifted, but her eyes blazed with determination. "I behold an imposter in my room. Have you anything to say in your defense?"

Zan Carben's hands fisted at his sides. "This is an outrage!"

"Nay, my brother. This is justice."

Zan Carben called for a guard, his voice laden with fury. Chelian remained calm and in control. Dane felt a surge of pride for his mate. She had changed. No longer did she cower in fear of those around her, and her strength became contagious. He pushed aside his physical pain, forcing himself to face Zan Carben's evil head-on.

The door swung wide, and Tared stood within the threshold, his *terment* drawn and ready. "What goes on here?"

Chelian turned and, in a voice charged with command, she said, "Arrest this imposter! He seeks to bring harm to myself and the empire."

Tared gaped at both Zan Carbens and hesitated to obey Chelian's command. Instead, he turned his attention toward Dane. "What devilry do you practice, Dane? How is it possible you are here with Zan Carben's imposter when I myself checked on your status but a *mone* ago?"

"The tables have turned, Tared," Dane replied. "The Burdven Empire will fall this day."

"Nay!" Tared turned. His attention vacillated between all three kings.

Zan Carben made a harsh noise deep in his throat. "Del Tared, you will take care of this mess *now*. I was amused at first, but I am now ready to see an end to this farce."

Dane grinned. *Can you not tell which is our own brother, Tared?*

Confusion made Tared careless. His *terment* lowered.

*Dane! Chelian's mind called to him. I can take care of Zan Carben with my thoughts, but I will be unable to do the same with Tared since I have never laid hands upon him.*

Dane shook his head against the telepathic message. He did not want Chelian's help, yet he was too weak to subdue both men on his own. He would have to accept his mate's aid or they might both perish.

*Do what needs be done, Chelian.*

She gave a discernable nod before concentrating her gaze on Zan Carben. With great effort, Dane pulled himself erect, poised to exude power. A bead of perspiration trickled down his neck, but he set his discomfort aside. A show of strength would gain them the upper hand. Tared's gaze settled on him, and Dane addressed his brother.

"The zeal pits are to blame for your mental state, Tared, but it need not be this way. Fight the madness. Take Zan Carben prisoner, and I would welcome you once more into the Verside."

Tared shook his head. "Nay. 'Tis too late, brother. I have made my choices. My support of Zan Carben has given me a place within the Burdven regime. My birthright has been restored."

Zan Carben cried out, clutching his stomach.

Chelian narrowed her eyes. "The imposter grows ill. He is unable to sustain his masquerade for long. Act quickly, Del Tared, while he writhes in pain."

Tared needed no further prompting, clearly assuming the real Zan Carben would never show any weakness. He placed a metal collar around the ruler's neck.

"And Dane?" Tared asked. "Shall I now take him under control as well?"

Chelian smiled. "Give me the remote for this imposter's restraint while you deal with our fallen Pelicosian ruler."

As soon as Tared placed the controls in Chelian's right hand, she laid her left hand on his arm.

"You will be well rewarded for your devotion to the Burdven Empire, Del Tared."

Chelian stepped back, and Dane could see her mind close toward outside stimuli. She now had the means to make Tared cave in with pain as she had Zan Carben.

Indeed, just as Tared approached Dane, his legs buckled, and he fell to the ground. Surprise rendered him speechless, and Chelian tossed the controls for Zan Carben's neckband to Dane. He caught them with his left hand while his right arm dangled uselessly at his side.

"What now, my Zanitor?" Chelian turned to Dane for instruction, and her continued faith in his rule made him proud.

"Zan Carben is the key to making the Burdven rule collapse," Dane replied. "The government is based upon dictatorship, where Zan Carben makes all the rules for everyone to follow. It might take a *myon* or more, but if done right, the people will believe whatever Zan Carben tells them."

"Are you suggesting that I stay here and change the customs that have been in place for kilo-*yons*?"

"Nay, my Zelton, I am suggesting that *we* stay here. Together we can effect changes in the laws for the betterment of all Burd subjects. The women will be freed, and family units will be promoted."

Dane bent to place a band around Tared's neck while Chelian still had him subdued upon the floor. He fumbled with the locking mechanism but managed to secure the collar around his brother's neck. Once Tared no longer posed a threat, Dane arose and gazed at his mate.

"You do not look pleased with my suggestion."

"I ... I'm not sure I'm capable of leading a nation as large as this."

He sank down upon the bed, drained. "I have faith in your abilities. You have proven yourself worthy in more ways than one. You've changed all but a few of the Kelton attitudes toward Deliphits, and you charged into a dangerous situation to free me. Those are the marks of a leader."

"But, Dane—"

"And I will be beside you the whole way, guiding you to make well-informed decisions."

"What will you do with your brothers?"

Dane frowned. Her question forced him to consider painful decisions.

"I know not. We share blood, but I believe Carben to be lost to us. The evil in him runs too deep. Tared is another matter. He changed because of something that occurred while trapped in the zeel pits. I want Liorxton to look at him and ascertain if this illness is reversible."

"And for now?"

He gave her a wink. "I think Zan Carben can summon a guard to escort these two to the holding pens. They might actually find prison to their liking."

Her eyes crinkled with pleasure. "*Selt*. I'll see to it posthaste, my *tri'gorn*."

*Tri'gorn*? Her heartmate. Chelian had professed her deep feelings with those words. Before, Dane might have rebuffed her deep admiration, but today he opened his heart and his mind to all that she was, all that she'd become.

Once Tared and Zan Carben were removed from the room and hauled off to prison, Dane sat down on the bed again. His body ached from abuse, but his mind relished the outcome of the day's events. Chelian had proven her worth in more ways than one. He gazed in awe at the strength that radiated from her eyes.

"I want nothing more than to gaze upon your beauty, Chelian, but I fear detection from Burd guards. You will have to remain in disguise until the *evetide* comes, and we can be assured of our privacy."

"I must see to it that you are returned to the *Cressis*," she said. "Liorxton must tend your wounds."

"Nay. I'll not leave you here alone."

"You have no say in it, Dane. I am Zan Carben, and I will be obeyed."

He started to argue but clamped his mouth shut. Her words held wisdom, and his body ached for Liorxton's tender care. Though he hated the idea of Chelian staying here without him, he admired her desire to do so.

"Chelian..."

"*Selt*?"

"Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For doubting you, and for refusing to listen. You were wise in wanting our relationship to be more. And ... and I was wrong to think you were mine for only one purpose."

"You had a cause, Dane. A just cause. I see now why you had to attack even when you were so outnumbered. Zan Carben planned to subjugate other planets, including Pelicosia. The Verside had a duty to protect their interests."

He reached for her hand and felt her gentle essence within her disguised fingers. "Yea, in this you are right, but there is no excuse for my behavior toward you. I was raised in the shadow of the Burdven Empire. Though my father and the Verside broke away to give women a chance at more than slavery, the Verside men were influenced by years of customs and traditions. Yea, the women were no longer slaves, but the men were still masters of their homes, and women answered only to the men."

"The same is true of my own home-world, Dane. Satobik women obey their fathers, and later they must

obey their mates. Our men had the final say in all matters, and if the woman disagreed, she would suffer retribution by cutting her hair."

Dane smiled. "That's why you always expected the worst of me. Your willing acceptance of retribution caused me grief. I could not find it in myself to act as my forefathers had. I could not hurt you no matter how much I felt you deserved punishment. To do so would make me no better than Zan Carben and his followers."

"You could never be like your brother, Dane. Your kindness showed through your actions. In the way you handled Cari and your treatment of your men. Your willingness to touch a Deliphit when no one else would dare. I love you, Dane."

Tears pooled behind his hooded lids. Her words affected him, and long-suppressed emotion floated to the surface. He'd been without a female's touch for seventeen *yons*. Her softness cloaked him like the blanket of a thousand stars, and warmth seeped into his soul.

"I do not deserve your love, *fiol'ston*, but I will cherish it always."

She knelt before him, her own eyes bright with unshed tears. "I can't see baring my soul while shrouded in the image of Zan Carben."

Within *mones*, she lifted her head as Chelian again. Dane drank in her beauty. Save for the shorter hair, she appeared to him as he remembered her, *silveresk* tresses brushing the slope of her shoulders and *nezarine* eyes gazing at him with adoration.

His heart swelled. "My Zelton."

"My Zanitor of Drake. You are my celestial dragon."

His hand reached out for her cheek, allowing the electric current to pass between them. She shivered as he cupped her cheek.

"I love you, Chelian. I never thought to say these words, but you are my heart, my strength. Together we will conquer Mioisiad and secure it for our children. Together we will slay demons and conquer dragons. I will never want another."

"Nor I, Zan Dane. Nor I."

\* \* \* \*

Chelian dropped into the chair, exhausted from her first *tri-myon* as Zan Carben. True to his word, Dane had remained on Mioisiad against her better judgment. Her first edict had been to order that the royal meditech render medical aid to Dane. Though stiff, he continued to heal. His wounds faded with each moon's passing. He would have few if any scars to mar his perfect body.

She sighed. Her life upon Satobik seemed like a distant dream. She now ruled a nation, no longer an invisible walker.

"You did well this *daton*," Dane said, drawing her notice.

"*Selt*."

"You have not yet changed into your own image." There was just a hint of impatience to his words.

"I was too weary to perform the metamorphosis. Give me a *mone* to catch my breath, then I will become

Chelian once more."

A loud buzzing sound claimed their attention. Dane strode to the communications panel. "The *Cressis* hails you at an odd hour."

Chelian was already making her way to the controls. She programmed in the frequency and took a step back. The viewing screen focused, and Siercesson's image appeared. She was puzzled but answered as Zan Carben would.

"Siercesson, you have news for me?"

She peered at Dane. His eyes had narrowed to thoughtful slits. He was of the same opinion as she. They might have found their traitor.

"Yea, Zan Carben. The *Cressis* approaches Pelicosia, but from what I have observed, the men have no intention of gathering the requested zeel. They mean to allow Zan Dane's execution."

*Ask him what he thinks needs to be done to force the issue.*

Chelian nodded at Dane's telepathic message and leaned forward to speak into the system. "What makes you think they will not comply with my orders?"

"They whisper among themselves. They plot and plan."

"Do they suspect you of spying on them?"

"Nay, I have been most discreet."

Chelian smiled. "Yea, you have done well in aiding the Burdven Empire, and you will be well-rewarded for your efforts. What do you suggest we do to help secure the Verside's cooperation?"

There was a pause. "You will have to send a fleet to Pelicosia to contain the problem. You will have to fight for the zeel."

Chelian shrugged her shoulders at Dane. How should she answer? She put to thought the questions running rampant in her mind. *Why didn't Carben attack Pelicosia in the first place, Dane? Why go through the trouble of waiting for the Verside to come to Mioisiad?*

Dane rubbed the bridge of his nose. *The zeel crystals are very fragile in their native environment. War would damage the ecosystem that allows the crystals to flourish.*

*Does Siercesson not know this?*

*He is young and foolish, and quite eager to please. He has not yet been trained to harvest the zeel. He may not be privy to the fact.*

Chelian turned to the screen. "Siercesson, a battle on the surface of Pelicosia would devastate the zeel gardens. If what you say is true, then I must send an envoy immediately to destroy the *Cressis* before it lands."

Chelian almost laughed at the man's stricken expression. He had to know he would perish alongside the Verside in such an attack.

His face paled. "Nay, my Zanitor. 'Tis not advisable. You forget that none of your men have the skills necessary to harvest the zeel. Without the Verside and such knowledge, you gain nothing."

"Yea, you are most wise. I will consult my staff and advise you on the morrow. Continue as you were."

A heavy sigh prefaced his reply. "By your lead, my Zanitor."

When the screen went blank, Chelian stood. She needed to be herself again. Acting the part of Zan Carben had left an acid taste in her mouth, one she needed removed immediately.

"You did well." Dane's deep baritone broke the silence that followed.

She allowed the uniform to drop at her feet. "Too well. I am tired of the role I play, yet I know the people of Mioisiad will benefit greatly in the end."

Dane tilted his head, his mood pensive. "You will be hailed as a great figure in all the history books. My respect for you grows with each passing *daton*."

Chelian closed her eyes, allowing the change to glide over her body while she knew Dane feasted his gaze upon her. Neck muscles strained, and flesh shrank. Pain crept from each nerve ending.

Dane reached out a hand and ran it along the length of her body without touching. A current of electricity flowed from his fingers, relieving the agony of her metamorphosis. When at last she was free of all traces of Zan Carben's image, she opened her eyes. Dane met her gaze, his own full of heated desire.

"Your ability fascinates me."

"I was so afraid you would be repulsed. That you would not want me."

"Nay, your gift will be used in only a helpful manner. This you have promised, and I trust you to keep your word." He paused. "Never doubt my desire for you, Chelian."

"Your faith means so much to me, Dane." She reached out to stroke his tawny cheek. "What will we do about Siercesson?"

"When Del Geod makes his break-day report, you will apprise him of the situation. He will take care of our traitor." He pulled her closer.

"But Siercesson is so young," she said. "And he must have been influenced by the zeal pits in some way, else he would not have betrayed the Verside. Won't you allow him to be cured of his illness in the same manner you'll have Tared treated?"

Dane tucked a short strand of hair behind her ear and allowed his hand to stroke the side of her neck. "I regret the loss of your long tresses, *fiol'ston*."

Her pulse quickened. "You haven't answered my ... my question."

He bent his head and trailed kisses along her shoulder. "What question would that be?"

"Dane..."

Her breath became shallow as she struggled to maintain her senses. But when the rough pad of his thumb grazed the peak of her breast, words failed her and her head fell back to allow him better access to her throat and chest.

"We have all of the morrow to figure out how to deal with Siercesson," Dane said. "This *evetide*, I would deal with more pressing issues."

"Pressing issues?" She managed to gasp.

He swept her up into strong arms and bore her to the bed. "I have yet to show you how much I admire you. How much I love you."

The soft mattress gave beneath her weight. Dane removed his clothing, and the fluid grace of each movement tantalized her desires. Until now, there had been little time in which to relish such pleasures, and Dane's injuries had made it difficult for them to indulge in carnal delights. *Selt*, there would be time on the morrow to deal with Siercesson's traitorous activities. This *evetide* belonged to just the two of them.

"You give me courage to be myself, Dane. Come, my celestial dragon. Come vanquish all my fears and doubts. Make me whole."

"With great pleasure, *fiol'ston*. With great pleasure."



Sneak Preview of *A Noble Sacrifice*

Coming to Champagne Books April 2007

*On the Planet of Pelicosia, 3024*

Tared Charst grabbed at the restraint collar around his neck. Ahead, the mists of hell loomed, tempting and foreboding. This forgotten planet hid many dangers behind a veil of lush greenery and the promise of rich zeal.

He stalled, not wanting to move forward. Acute, numbing pain shot through his veins. His teeth clamped together, and he arched his back. The pain from the collar brought him to his knees. Crystallized rocks tore into his flesh. Whooshing wind and flapping wings caused him to look up. A dragon bore down on him, framed against a *nezarine* sky.

No hope.

Sharp talons punctured his skin. He cried out, his voice lost amid the dragon's angry bellow. Yanked from the ground, Tared's muscles stretched taut. His toes scraped the ground. He bit his lip, tasting tangy blood. Then he saw it—the thing he feared most. The zeal pits, the crystallized rock rising up from the dark hole like bony fingers.

The dragon's claws retracted.

Tared thrashed, his body fighting the gravitational pull toward a deep abyss. Warm mists reached out to embrace him, drawing him closer, pulling at his hair and limbs. He closed his eyes, dreading the pain.

*Betrayed.* Once more, his own brother had betrayed him.

Confusion gave way to sorrow. His brother's men, the Verside, had doomed him to relive the torment and torture of the zeal pits. The band around his hair loosened, and long tendrils whipped around his face. He tried to relax, because he knew fighting would prove useless. He allowed the gravitational pull to carry him farther into the belly of Pelicosia, into a hell no man should suffer.

His eyes jarred open when he landed upon a pillow of air. He swallowed, his throat parched. Beneath his feet, the floor bounced, not allowing him the dignity of standing erect. Crawling, he inched forward. An acidic odor burned his nostrils and his abdomen cramped. Fear clutched him tight to her breast.

Ahead, a bright light shone. It seduced and beckoned. Tared crawled toward it, seeking release yet knowing none would be found. He should have killed his brother when he'd had the chance. With Dane dead, the horror of this moment wouldn't be real.

Tears ran down his cheeks. *Tears?* By the god Draccus, the zeal pits reduced a man to a whining child. With great effort, Tared lifted his hand to wipe the dampness from his skin. Already the effects of this hell had zapped his strength.

The light. The light promised the way home. And when he returned to the surface, he'd claim his due from Dane. Hatred festered, creating a dark place in his soul. Madness, pure madness to hate one's own flesh and blood to the point of murder.

*Ah, Draccus, if you have any love in your heart, save me from this emotional turmoil.*

As if Draccus had heard his plea, a dark spot opened ahead. Another way out? The craving for light grew stronger. Tared forced his gaze from the light and fought against its magnetic pull with all the strength he possessed. Knowing what horrors lay behind the glow, he strained toward the darkness. The darkness might prove more grievous, yet he had to take the chance that something different awaited him there. He crawled forward. The closer he came, the farther the darkness appeared. A cry escaped his lips. The black abyss shrank.

He must hurry or lose the opportunity forever.

\* \* \* \*

Joyella Denué stared at the windowed chamber, her gaze fastened upon Normden. Her eyes followed the strong curve of his spine. His muscles flexed, and she admired his graceful form, the wide shoulders and trim waist. What woman wouldn't admire this handsome man? He had his back to her, unaware of her fervent regard. By Yutenk's soul, she could no longer summon the desire to own such a man.

Joyella frowned. Soon her mother would be forced to acknowledge Joyella's bid for a life-mate. How could she withdraw such a request? Her mother would never understand, and shame kept her from explaining.

"Joyella!" Shole rounded the corner, cheeks flushed and expression alight with joy. "You'll never guess!"

Joyella smiled at her friend. Shole forever exaggerated one tale or another. "I won't have to guess, Shole. You'll tell me anyway."

Without stopping for breath, Shole grabbed Joyella's hands and spun her around. "I'm to receive the Blessing of Yutenk. I'm to choose my life-mate."

Although happy for her friend, Joyella's heart shattered at her own status. Shole's good fortune put Joyella one step closer to the same fate.

"I'm pleased, Shole. You're most deserving," she said, but her voice betrayed her misgivings.

Shole clasped a hand to her mouth. "Forgive me, Joyella. I ... I didn't think. I should never have—"

Had Shole assumed Joyella's disheartened attitude reflected her impatience to select a life-mate? Nothing could be further from the truth.

"No, Shole. You have every right to share your joy. I'm sure my mother has her reasons for overlooking my application."

"You don't hate me?"

Joyella pursed her lips. "Of course not. How could you even think of such? So tell me, whom will you choose?"

A spark of devilment danced in Shole's eyes, and she looked up at Normden. By now he'd turned, and he sauntered near the window to place a hand against the glass. "I hear you have good news to share, Shole," he said.

Shole giggled. "I've been granted the Blessing of Yutenk. Tomorrow I choose my life-mate."

"And ... will you choose me?"

A knifing pain should have torn at Joyella's heart. She and Normden had spoken often of the possibility

of their fated companionship. Yet only sadness prevailed, followed by a deep sense of loss.

"I favor Cheltar," Shole replied, "yet I would be well-pleased with Vorne. I hate that we aren't able to see your faces during the ceremony, but I think I could recognize the body shape of either of them."

"You tease me, Shole," Normden said. "Am I not pleasing to the eye? Do I not tempt you in any way?" Although he spoke to Shole, he settled his intense gaze upon Joyella.

Shole laughed. "You're right. I do tease. You know good and well that Yutenk will do as she pleases. None of us have a real say in whom we select for mate."

She spoke the truth. The process consisted of the women gathering prospective candidates for life-mate and positioning them about the Sacred Sphere of Azna. With their heads to the floor and their bodies tucked close, they would bow to Yutenk. One female circled the males until harmonious light from the sphere illuminated the man most likely to offer the best companionship. While technically a woman had to abide by Yutenk's decision, the goddess often kept the woman's wishes in mind when selecting a life-mate.

"My words need not hurt you, Normden," Shole said. "Joyella would choose you if given the chance."

He pressed a hand against the transparent wall. "A *myon* ago, I would believe this for true, but Joyella has changed. She no longer wants our union. I think her naiveté has her fearing the worst."

An uninvited memory made Joyella's stomach knot. He thought her naïve in the ways of men and women. Oh, how she wished that were the case. A shadow fell between them, and Joyella whirled to greet her other friend.

"Asa, have you come to wish Shole congratulations?"

Asa gave them both an impish grin. "And for what should she be congratulated?"

Shole danced around the woman, her curly hair bouncing about her jubilant features. "Kormion accepted my application. On the morrow, I shall receive the Blessing of Yutenk."

Asa smiled. "This is good news. You deserve nothing but the best in a mate." She turned to Joyella, and her smile faded. "Kormion bade me summon you to the Great Common."

Joyella stiffened. "Why?"

"Kormion felt another ripple in the Common. She wishes you to read the stones to discover the source of our trouble."

Joyella already knew the source. "Did she say naught else? Did she mention my rite of passage?"

"No, *sweeting*. Kormion cannot be rushed. She fails to see how you've grown."

Kormion couldn't see how Joyella had grown, but a stranger had. A stranger had stolen her youth. A stranger had taken her most precious gift, perpetuating the change to come upon her before the blessing of Yutenk. Like Shole, Joyella knew Asa thought her disappointed. She smiled, greatly relieved.

"I don't understand why she stalls," Asa said. "Waiting must be torture. Others your age have had the blessing bestowed upon them. Even Shole receives the honor, and she is five *yons* younger than you. I fail to understand your mother's reasons."

Joyella nodded, pretending agreement. "She must think I'm not ready."

Asa put a comforting arm about her shoulders. "You're her daughter. She doesn't wish to lose you. Already the men pay tribute to your beauty. She wants her only child to select only the finest for mate."

A shudder ran through Joyella. Another had damaged her fragile core. Custom would force her to take a mate, yet if it were up to her, she would live without the Blessing of Yutenk.

Asa's arms fell away. "Come, you tarry for no reason."

Joyella tarried with good reason, but Shole and Asa need not know what it was.

"Go with Asa, Joyella," Shole said. "I plan to walk the cubicles and admire my choices before adhering to the Sphere's edict."

"But Yutenk absorbs what is in your heart," Joyella replied. "You are blessed, Shole, to have this moment draw near. I would give anything to trade places with you, but, alas, I must await my mother's whim." The lie rolled easily off her tongue, and in that moment, she hated the woman she'd become.

Shole reached out, and the two friends exchanged the touch of passing. Her fingers brushed Shole's with light pressure before turning on her heel. Joyella hurried to keep pace with Asa. There was no use in angering Kormion further. Her mother ruled Yalfar with a firm hand. She placed a restraining hand upon Asa's shoulder.

"We must stop here so I may retrieve the stones from my room."

Joyella gathered the box of stones and returned to motion Asa to continue into the Common Temple. They entered a cavernous opening lined with protruding crystals. In the center, a large sphere shone bright. Within the translucent globe, a hologram projected the essence of the first Queen of Yalfar.

Yet Yutenk was so much more. She presented the spiritual heart and soul of each of the Temi people combined. With her functioning brain programmed into the main computer and her energy fueled by recycled zeal, she passed judgment and gave wise council.

Incense burned around the sacred globe. The sweet aroma of *jerene* moss caused Joyella's stomach to curl. She tamped down the nausea that had plagued her of late, fearing Kormion would think her weak.

Joyella moved forward. They had built the sacred altar nine generations ago when the Temi tribe had first come to live beneath the planet's surface. She went down on bended knees and placed the box before her, then she raised her arms wide. With eyes closed, she hummed. Internal peace claimed her. Soft vibrations radiated from the sphere. The Common welcomed her, cradling her spirit with harmonious warmth. The vibrations ceased, and her eyelids lifted.

Kormion approached with an impatient stride. "Rise, my daughter."

Joyella stood, her hands crossed over her chest in reverent greeting. "You summoned me?"

Kormion's *cameolle* garment swayed between her legs. "I have need of your gift. The Common blazed a vivid red this morn. I would know why."

Joyella dropped her hands to her side. "Red? A stranger enters the *votrem*. The Sphere records pain. The meaning of its color holds no secret."

"But this time a low-pitched wail sounded from its core," Kormion said. "A plaintive cry unlike any I've heard. Something disturbs the peace of the Common, something other than a mere stranger trapped in the *votrem*."

Joyella shivered. She hated the idea behind the *votrem*. The force field protected them from discovery, but at what price? The poor souls who lived through the *votrem's* cruel effects suffered permanent damage to their neuro-stems. Electro-waves short-circuited areas of the brain, causing the victim to live the rest of their lives with schizophrenic tendencies or neurotic impulses.

"And you think the stones will tell you what troubles the Common?" Joyella asked.

"Kormion, come quick!" Pem and Gesstine rushed into the room, their sides heaving with exertion.

"You dare disturb a private audience?"

"It's important," Pem said. "The intruder ... he has breached our outer defenses."

"What?" Kormion's face lost color. "It can't be."

No, it couldn't be. Joyella cringed. She'd patched the rip. She'd been so careful to repair the gaping hole in the *votrem's* lining. Was there another way around Yalfar's force fields? Surely her actions had not caused another to invade their private sanctuary.

"What should we do, Kormion?" Gesstine asked.

"Send Daphid and Mort to apprehend the intruder," she replied. "We cannot have him running loose within our fortress. Have him brought here at once. I would know what danger he poses."

Joyella pressed her fingers to her lips, willing the queasiness to subside. "Kormion, do you still wish a reading?"

"No. I believe we've already discovered the cause. Perhaps you should leave. This business is sure to become ... distressful."

"I'd rather stay. As your only daughter, I'll someday rule in your stead, and I'll need to know how best to handle these types of situations."

Kormion gazed down her thin nose, her manner full of condemnation. "You're not yet old enough to concern yourself with such matters. And I have no plans of dying anytime soon. Leave."

Joyella gasped, dazed by her mother's thoughtless words. "You're wrong. You're always wrong where I'm concerned."

"I will not argue the point, Joyella."

"Then at least let me read the stones. They might tell you something different, or they might tell you something more."

Joyella needed to know if she were at fault. Kormion's eyes turned stormy.

"Read the stones then, Joyella. We need to be amused while we wait."

Her mother turned away, dismissing her to attend other matters. Amused? *Amused?* Blood pounded in Joyella's veins. Her mother sought to belittle her when she was the one who had requested Joyella's reading.

Asa hurried forward. "Let me help you arrange them, Joyella."

"No, Asa. Thank you for offering, but I think the task will help soothe my nerves." Her fingers trembled

as she reached for the sacred box.

Asa dipped her head and murmured, "She is ruled by jealousy."

Joyella's fingers stilled. "Jealousy? Of what is there to be jealous?"

"Have you looked in a mirror lately? You are young and beautiful. She envies your silky auburn hair and flawless skin. Your mother's beauty fades. The young males no longer look upon her with lustful eyes. She craves their absolute devotion, but now she must compete with others more beautiful than she."

Joyella smiled. "Thank you. You always find a way to defuse my temper."

"You think I jest?"

She might be serious, but Asa had it all wrong. Joyella knew her mother better than anyone, and nothing could be farther from the truth. No, Kormion wasn't jealous. She was merely cautious. And she enjoyed being in control.

Joyella gave Asa a gentle nod. "Leave me. You make it difficult to concentrate, but I thank you for the compliment. And you're wrong. Kormion still radiates a youthful appearance. Nary a wrinkle mars her skin, and her dark hair betrays little gray. She still turns heads."

"Yes, but her hair lacks the striations of gold that mark you as unique," Asa insisted. "And, unlike your green eyes, hers have a cloudy haze. She shows her age, Joyella. It won't be long before she must abdicate her throne to your council. You'd best start seeing the truth of the situation and prepare yourself. Yalfar requires a strong leader, not a woman who thinks so little of herself."

Joyella frowned. Kormion's constant criticism made it difficult to see herself in a favorable light, but Asa's words held wisdom.

Asa stepped back to give her room to work. Joyella placed the *meernsier* box upon the sacred altar. Her finger glided over the container with reverence. Looking at the plain box, a stranger to their customs would not realize the treasure hidden within.

Joyella closed her eyes and intoned the ritual words. "Fair of right, word of might, collect thy thoughts that I might seek wisdom and knowledge." She inhaled deeply and opened the lid. Within the velvety *sesnal*-lined box rested a treasure more valuable than zeal. "Behold, the five stones of Asnar."

With forefinger and thumb, she lifted the first stone, a translucent gem that radiated a soft amber glow.

"Unoke holds the secrets of memory."

She set Unoke beside the box where a carved notch allowed it to rest. Next she pulled out a brilliant red stone of similar size and shape and placed it beside Unoke.

"Duexite holds the secrets of the future."

In similar fashion, she retrieved a polished yellow stone with iridescent flecks of orange, then a rough stone with sharp, angular planes of black glass, and a blue stone peppered with orange striations.

"Yorellite holds the secrets of the Common. Fauxite holds the mysteries surrounding the past, and Nazerite tempers the other four stones with balance."

Joyella picked up Duexite and clutched it to her breast, then she turned and walked to the sphere where she held the stone aloft. Upon her palm, the stone quivered, releasing a variety of colors. The *jerene*

moss overwhelmed the room with a sweet aroma.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kormion approach. Silence claimed her audience as curious eyes awaited her findings. In a trancelike state, Joyella peered into the heart of the stone and whimpered. Guilt made the images blur, so she blinked away her uncertainties and tried again.

Heat radiated from the gem. Visions of turbulent water collided with scenes of stark, barren wasteland. Frantic, chaotic views of exploding lights and battle-angry men vied for attention. The stone burned, a passionate bid to release all of its secrets. Joyella juggled the warm rock between her trembling hands.

The heat intensified until, with a yelp, Joyella dropped the stone. It rolled to a stop at Kormion's feet. Dazed, Joyella fell to her knees, and Asa rushed to her side.

"You will tell us what you saw," Kormion commanded.

"Give her time, my Queen." Asa patted Joyella's back.

"Joyella, answer me."

As if from a distance, she heard her mother's voice and felt Asa's soothing touch. She swallowed, her throat dry and tense. "I saw chaos. I saw the Temi tribe clawing its way through water. I saw a man, a large man with bronzed skin and dark eyes. He—"

"Enough theatrics, Joyella," Kormion said. "Tell us."

But she dared not. She stared at the symmetrical pattern created by inlaid *ditrite* stones. The safety of Yalfar rested upon her shoulders, yet she imparted information at great risk to herself.

"He will assume command of the Temi Tribe."

Pain ripped through her scalp. Her eyes flew wide, and she clutched at the fingers entwined in her hair as Kormion yanked back her head.

"You lie! No man will ever rule Yalfar!"

Tears blurred Joyella's vision. "I know only what the stone showed me, Mother."

Kormion released her with an exaggerated flourish and began to pace. Moments later, Daphid and Mort returned to report their failure in finding the stranger. Kormion was not pleased.

"I cannot believe with our advanced technology, we haven't the means of locating one stranger!"

"We have never needed this ability, my Queen," Daphid replied.

"Yet we have the ability to detect this stranger's entrance into our refuge?" Kormion said. "How can this be?"

Daphid frowned. "An alarm sounded the moment he ventured through the inner layer of the *votrem*. Our ancestors did not think past setting up an alarm system."

"Then set the engineering team to devising a means to track our intruder. This situation will not ruin my day." Kormion allowed her gaze to sweep over those present. "Tomorrow we proceed as usual. We will conduct the Blessing of Yutenk as planned and celebrate Shole's good fortune. By then, they will have apprehended the intruder, or you will all answer to me. Do I make myself clear?"

Daphid and Mort both nodded while Asa stared wide-eyed at her queen. Joyella stood on shaky legs. She'd never seen Kormion so angered.

"You are all dismissed!"

Joyella and Asa crossed their arms over their breasts and bowed slightly. Joyella retrieved the stones and replaced them in the box before leaving the Common. When they had cleared the room, she turned to Asa, the *meernsier* box clutched to her chest.

"You didn't tell your mother everything, did you?" Asa asked with unerring insight.

Joyella stared off into space. She dare not confide all she'd seen, all she knew. She still couldn't believe the consequences of her foolhardy deed. If only she weren't so restless, so inquisitive.

"You don't have to tell me," Asa said, "but I do want to hear more about the man you saw. Yalfar has never had a visitor. Not since we came to be here more than two hundred *yons* ago. What did he look like?"

"Tall," Joyella replied. "Taller than our men, and solemn. He looked as if he trained often, for his muscles strained against the costume he wore. His eyes were like dark, shadowed caves drawing me in."

Asa exaggerated a shiver of disgust. "You describe a man that would be hard on the eyes. I am glad I've already chosen my life-mate. If they catch this man, Kormion will make a slave of him. Some unfortunate soul will own such a specimen, but not I."

Joyella agreed, but not for the same reasons Asa gave. The stranger's eyes reminded her of another's. Was this man from the same tribe as the man who'd attacked her? Save for the angular shape of his nose, she would have thought him the same.

Deep foreboding gripped her. The man in her vision had commanded more than her people. She shivered as she remembered how his dark eyes had claimed hers as if she were there. She had been powerless to evade his interest. His passion had dominated her, imprisoned her with overwhelming desire.

She kept the vision locked within. If Kormion had any inkling of the stranger's importance to her people, she might have him killed on sight. The Sacred Covenant forbade the coupling of a woman to a man without the Blessing of the Yutenk, and the Common would never sanction the union of a non-Temi to the queen's daughter.

But, by Yutenk's glow, Joyella had seen herself mated to the dark stranger. With every breath in her body, she must fight the truth of this vision. Kormion might disown her for her breach against Temi law, but to take this man for mate would ostracize her from her tribe forever.

"How do you think the stranger breeched our defenses?" Asa asked.

Joyella squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't know."

The lie lay heavy upon her chest. She knew all too well how it was possible. She knew because she was responsible for the unforgivable act. May the Common forgive her, for it would be a long time before she forgave herself.



### **About Ciara**

**Ciara Gold hails from Texas and has the twang to prove it. The product of a renaissance upbringing, she was introduced to ballet, piano, guitar, and voice lessons. When she wasn't enjoying the arts, she camped and hiked all over Texas. She's as comfortable cooking over the open fire as she is sewing a wedding dress. And through it all, she wove magical stories of fantasies that stretched across universes. Married to her soul-mate for twenty years, they share two wonderful children, a wire-haired mutt, and a calico cat. For Ciara, the romance is still alive. Only now, she shares her magical world with fans.**

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