

Wages of Justice

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THE WAGES OF JUSTICE

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Book 1 of the Wages Trilogy

Dedication: To Herman and Barbara, and my paternal grandfather.

Many thanks to Piers Anthony, Ellen Larson, Jamie Engle and Steve Lazarowitz, Tom Ventimiglia, my son Nick for his beautiful artwork and my son Dever for his knowledge, Leslie Cholowsky, all the guys on Crmoneytalks, (you know who you are), and last but not least, all my loyal readers.

Prologue

"All rise for His Grace, the Archon!"

In total blackness and not sure which way to face, Cassius signed, "Where are you?"

Finally came the Major Domo's reassuring touch. As the Major Domo guided Cassius' gloved hands toward the silver hammer and the golden knife that were the symbols of his office, the voice sounded again. "Be seated! The Archon's court is now in session!"

The movements and breathing of those already present and the snick of the lock on the witness room door were the only sounds he heard. A whisper, instantly hushed, was followed by a faint click from a

guard's weapon. He'd evidently turned to frown in the direction of the offender.

Blindfolded as always when he presided over the court, Cassius saw the prosecutor and advocate for the accused in his mind's eye. They'd be waiting nervously at their respective tables, and behind them, two rows of spectators, knowing better than to cough or even fidget. At the rear of the lofty oak-paneled courtroom, a pair of motionless blue-armored sentinels maintained order and guarded the immense brass-plated doors.

The scent of fear polluting the already breathless air just below his throne could only be the defendant's.

Understandable, reflected Cassius. His demeanor had to be terrifying at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

When he saw the faceless apparition loom above him on the Archon's throne, the knees of the accused turned to water. The printed guidelines given him by his advocate rustled in his sweaty hands and nothing in his twenty-seven years had prepared him for this.

With his entire face and head concealed by a close-fitting silken mask and clad in plain gray robes of some soft wool material, the Archon must have been close to eight feet tall. When he moved his hands to sign to his scarlet-robed Major Domo, the massive emerald on his gloved left forefinger seemed to emit an eerie light of its own.

On that fateful night, while they were all still drinking in the tavern, Damon Veniston's companions had described Nublis' mysterious Archon as a living lie detector. He'd just laughed and dismissed their gibbering as empty bar talk. Then he'd noticed the girl in the corner and, attracted by her quiet good looks, had instantly homed in on her. They'd left the tavern together and the rest was history.

Now, alone in the arena and dependent on this anonymous judge's fabled instinct for the truth, his friends' warnings didn't seem quite so funny.

What if they were right?

Damon pulled himself together. Behind the forbidding mask and all that folderol breathed an ordinary man. As for his supposed super-hearing, that was a laugh. A superstitious Nublian might fall for such theatrics but he was hardly that. Damon hadn't been raised by the most successful jurist in the InterPlanetary Synod for nothing, and he could recognize a number when he saw one.

When that old fussbudget of an advocate told him he'd have to do all his own talking in court, the young man just grinned. He'd weaseled his way out of tighter spots than this, although right now, he couldn't think of a single one. His gift of gab and natural charm had never failed him yet, and in the unlikely event he was convicted, what were these people going to do to him anyway? His father was the InterPlanetary's Synod's Chief Justice and if push came to shove, Dad would just have to buy him out of it again. With his money and connections, Augustus Veniston could find anyone's price and the nonentities in charge of this piddling little backwater planet would be no exception. Take that weasel-faced prosecutor for instance, in his threadbare robe and down-at-heel shoes. The man looked as if he'd never had a decent haircut or two extra cents to rub together and this so-called advocate they'd given him was a joke. By his own admission, the man didn't even know what a plea bargain was, and when Damon asked how much he was going to charge, the old goat looked blank.

So he'd squeezed the bitch's throat a little too hard. Big deal! She'd only been a streetwalker and around this city, such whores were a dime a dozen. All he had to do now was convince this Archon, or judge or whatever he was, that it had been a regrettable accident. Of course, he'd have to say it with a convincing break in his voice. Hell, he might even manage a tear. Ah, now he had it! The woman's

heart had been weak. Had he known, he would never have gotten so rough with her, but she hadn't told him. She'd done just the opposite and actually egged him on. He was an innocent babe in the woods and all the kinky suggestions had come from her.

Damon stopped for a moment, rehearsing his new defense and trying it on for size. It might just work. The way he'd tell it, that little prostitute been so hot for his money she'd have done just about anything. Actually, it hadn't been that way at all. But who was to know? The girl was safely dead, and he could slant his story any way he wanted.

Her eyes wide with fear, she'd actually ordered him to leave. "I've changed my mind," she'd said.

Turned on by her resistance, he'd just laughed. "Well, I haven't!" Then he'd proceeded to show her who was boss. While she fought like a wildcat, it was only when she bit him that he really saw red. The nerve of her! She'd drawn blood too! He was perfectly justified in doing what he did next, but he'd no more intended to kill her than he had any of the others. All he wanted was to teach her a lesson. She resisted and he'd squeezed a little too hard.

Fortunately, they'd been alone. The four walls in her tacky little house weren't going to talk and now it was just his word about the rough sex. That was the way it had always gone before and who was going to contradict him now? Certainly not a dead whore.

The more Damon considered his argument the better he liked it and now he was sure he could make the sale. But in the unlikely event this masked judge didn't buy his story, there'd still be plenty of time to straighten things out. Wouldn't there?

True, they'd brought him to trial much faster than he'd expected. In a matter of days, to be precise. Anywhere else, there'd have been the usual months of preparation, endless press coverage, and an inevitable public airing of the victim's dirty linen. With his baby face and disingenuous manner, he'd have garnered plenty of public sympathy for being led astray by a loose woman. Especially when he lowered his curly blond head and promised tearfully, with all the sincerity he could muster, to mend his wandering ways. But when he'd suggested that, the stupid advocate hadn't seemed to understand.

Damon's boyish features and gentle manner had served him well in the past and his angelic appearance had swayed more than one verdict in his favor. But on Nublis, it seemed they took the concept of blind justice literally. The advocate told him the Archon had no idea who he was and wouldn't even be able to see his face. Damon had been hoping to make an impression with his innocent demeanor and good looks, and that had been a blow.

Now he'd come up with a decent defense, he felt more confident. He looked toward his advocate for reassurance but the man's expression was grim. As the arresting officer came forward to testify, Damon cleared his throat. He checked the instructions on the sheet and prepared for his first question.

On the throne above Damon, the Archon leaned forward slightly. As the afternoon wore on and he listened to the accused's pleasant tenor voice reel off one lie after another about the woman he'd killed, a blackness descended on Cassius' spirit. Whoever he was, the man was not a native Nublian, though he spoke the language well. To distract himself from his depression, Cassius tried to place the accent. Andromedan perhaps? No. That planet's language was much too harsh. With those soft syllables and inflections, he had to have come from much further out.

Then he had it. Aretz, of course. In pre-colonization days, the beautiful blue planet had been known as Terra or Earth. Even now in the Fifth Millennium, the natives still called the place by its old name. A

fabled citadel of learning and the cradle of modern civilization, Aretz lay a full week's journey from Nublis in the Alpha Centauri system. In addition to the finest medical and law schools in the universe, Aretz's ancient capital, Parisia, was home to the InterPlanetary Synod's Assembly as well as its High Courts. The Trade League, an all-powerful private intergalactic association of wealthy merchants and shippers, also had its headquarters there

When they'd been in their twenties, Cassius and his brother Julian had spent some of their happiest days as law students in Parisia. Like the Imperial Princes they were, rich, arrogant and heedless, they'd lived life to the fullest, expecting those golden days to last forever. One day, they'd ended, in the blink of an eye.

As the newly designated Archon, Cassius' first official duty had been to preside over his own funeral. When Julian attempted to give his brother's eulogy and then broke down, he'd had no way of knowing that the very one he mourned so bitterly stood less than six feet away from him. With his face hidden behind the Archon's silken mask and forbidden to speak, Cassius had matched every tear with one of his own, and to this day, his brother had no idea he still lived.

Unless this accused Aretzan managed to come up with a miracle, he'd become a ghost soon enough, and pitying the prisoner's hapless advocate, Cassius imagined the smile on the prosecutor's face.

When the trial ended four hours later, Damon simply stood there numb. The Archon ordered his shackles removed and he was conducted to a stone-walled room far larger than the cell he'd been in before. The amenities included a polished wooden table, a pair of matching chairs, an interactive viewscreen, a rug on the floor and a full bathroom. And the window was a real window, albeit barred.

As soon as they were alone, Damon took the advocate by the shoulders. "He can't just condemn me like that! What do you mean, there's no appeal? There has to be!"

The old man gently disengaged himself. "As I've been trying to explain, this is Nublis. Here the punishment is matched to the crime and what you heard is what shall happen. Now, is there anything I can get for you?"

"My father—"

"Left Aretz a week ago. He should be here first thing in the morning."

Damon shivered with relief. *Whoof! Talk about a wake-up call!* His drinking buddies had been right. These people didn't screw around.

When the Archon handed down that ridiculous sentence, he'd almost lost it, but not quite. Knowing his father, the wheels must already be in motion. As the Synod's Chief Justice, Augustus Veniston's calls were always returned. If his ship was anywhere within calling range, he was probably straightening out the Nublian Emperor and his masked judge right now. One of his hired flunkies should be turning up anytime to hold Damon's hand, and by noon tomorrow, they should be on their way home.

Anticipating the verbal flaying he was about to get, the young man winced. This time, he resolved he would neither defend himself nor argue. Having honestly learned his lesson, he'd swallow whatever the old man chose to dish out. He'd even marry that whey-faced debutante his Ma was so taken with if that's what it took to make up for all the times he'd hassled them. After that, he would meekly put his nose to the family grindstone and never ever go near those fleshpots again.

Well, almost never, but next time, he'd be a damn sight more careful.

It sure as hell wouldn't be on Nublis again. No matter what kind of a deal Dad worked out, the Nublians would be throwing him off this planet for good, which was perfectly all right with Damon. If he never saw this miserable backwater again it would be too soon.

Seeing the poor old advocate was taking the Archon's verdict so hard, he decided to be gracious. As he set his battered briefcase on the table, the man's thin hands were shaking and his red-rimmed eyes looked sadder than a hound dog's. One thing about him and the prosecutor puzzled Damon. Everywhere else in the Synod, the lawyers were rich. Here on Nublis, they seemed to be poor and he wondered why.

Flashing his perfect teeth, he favored the pitiful creature with his most winning smile. "I know you did your best, sir, and I appreciate your concern. Tell me, do they have anything decent to eat in this joint?"

The graybeard's relief was almost pitiful. "You're certainly taking this better than I'd expected. The commissary's food is excellent, and they're open around the clock. Order anything you like. If they don't have it on hand, they'll get it for you. After all, it is going to be your last meal."

Even though he was certain that last remark would prove to be untrue, Damon couldn't quite shake his unease. Out of sheer mischief, he decided to test the man's patience. After reflecting for a minute, he proceeded to reel off a lengthy list of the most outrageous, expensive and exotic delicacies he could think of. Including honey marinated roast duck, sweet scallops from Seira's southern oceans, purple Kestor root in ginger sauce, the tiny pickled fish of Lodebar and a large bowl of authentic Illyrian shepherd stew.

As he'd hoped, the advocate blanched slightly. "Well, er, some of that's a little unusual. Let me see what I can do."

Damon hid his smile with difficulty. "Take your time. The night's still young and I sure as hell ain't goin' anywhere."

Somewhat to his surprise, he got everything he asked for. Including the out-of-season golden strawberries and Aeolian squids' eyes. In jig time too. A couple of hours later, he sat ruminating over a rare Siriun liqueur extracted from Diantha blossoms when the cell door opened.

Somewhere in his mid-thirties and taller than average, the visitor's appearance surprised him. With his silver-threaded dark curls, aquiline features and aristocratic bearing, this man was a definite cut above Augustus Veniston's usual hirelings. Was he a local nobleman down on his luck, perhaps?

His dark eyes brimming with intelligence and humor, the newcomer extended his hand. Damon ignored the gesture. "It took you long enough to get here. The advocate left hours ago and I certainly expected you before this."

Nothing loath, the visitor set his gold-trimmed briefcase on the table. Like everything else about him, Damon noted it was of the first quality. "May I sit?" As the young man nodded, the visitor cast an eye over the half-filled dishes. "Was dinner not to your liking?"

"Er, I wasn't as hungry as I thought."

"Mmm. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"Just your company. I'm sick of talking to the walls but listening to that doom-and-gloom advocate was worse than being alone."

The Nublian smiled. "Master Ludlow's not noted for his sense of humor."

"Or his sparkling repartee. Tell me, are you actually a native of this penny-ante backwater?"

"Nublian, born and bred. I'll admit we're a bit out of the way, but I have done some traveling here and there."

"Well, then, what's with this mysterious Archon and that scarlet fancy-dress Major Domo of his? Surely, they can't be serious. I mean there has to be an appeal or something."

The visitor frowned slightly. "Nublis' legal system was established over a thousand years ago and the Archon is our chief judge. To ensure his incorruptibility, his identity remains a mystery by law. Blindfolded when he presides over the court, he knows nothing of the circumstances or background of any case before him. Only after he's rendered his verdict, does he learn the identity of the accused and the circumstances leading to the trial. Other than that, he has no contact with the outside world and he never speaks. Save for the Emperor Julian, his assistant the Major Domo is the only living person who ever sees the Archon's face. Some say he's over a thousand years old and others speculate that he belongs to a different species. Who he really is is anyone's guess."

Damon was intrigued. "He's a prisoner?"

The visitor shrugged. "Perhaps. No one really knows." He tapped his wrist communicator. "Since it's going to be a long night, how about a fresh bottle of brandy and another glass?"

Damon didn't care much for history lessons but the Nublian's stories about his native planet fascinated him. As they talked through the night, he found himself telling things to the older man that he'd never said to anyone else. Self-absorbed as always, he never once thought to ask his companion's name, nor did he notice that he was the only one drinking.

When bars of color began to lighten the star-filled sky outside the barred window, Damon stretched and yawned. "Dad should be here soon."

Snapping open his briefcase, the visitor took out a knotted cord and a set of handcuffs.

Damon's blue eyes widened. "You do work for my father, don't you?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"But I thought... say, who in the hell are you? And what d'ju put in that ber-brer-brandy?"

"Just a sedative to make your passing easier."

Head heavy and his legs leaden, Damon staggered to his feet. Catching him in his arms, the visitor eased him onto the bunk. He flipped him onto his face, and held him there with one knee.

Damon struggled weakly.

With an ease born of long practice, his captor cuffed the young man's wrists behind his back.

"But who...?"

"You still don't know?"

"I never saw you before in my life."

"Oh, yes, you have. Outside the Emperor and my Major Domo, you're the only living soul to behold my face."

Tears soaking into the mattress and his slim body quivering, Damon's voice was very small. "P-please!"

His dark eyes solemn now, the Archon's slender fingers caressed the golden curls. "No matter how horrendous the crime, a death sentence should be mercifully swift. But we Nublians consider execution by a faceless stranger to be totally barbaric. Just as the midwife eases a soul's painful entry into the world, so must her counterpart lovingly assist that same spirit on its terrifying journey back from whence it came. Such a deeply personal transition shouldn't be endured alone and here on Nublis, it never is. As is my custom with all those I've condemned to die, I came to keep you company during your final hours."

"N-no-o!"

"Hush now! Surrender to the drug's embrace and let it take you into the dark."

Kneeling above his subject, the Archon waited. As the prisoner sank into sleep, his breathing slowed and deepened. The Archon sensed his nerves uncoil and his muscles relax, and only when he was certain Damon Veniston had moved beyond all caring, did he give him the ritual kiss and slip the knotted cord around his throat.

When the deed was done, he removed the cuffs and cord. Turning the young man's body over, he covered the discolored face with a blanket. Snapping the briefcase shut, he picked it up along with the extra brandy glass. After glancing round the room to make sure he hadn't overlooked anything, he took a control from his pocket and aimed it at the wall next to the bunk. A stone section pivoted to reveal a lighted passageway, which he entered without a backward glance.

The wall closed again as the prisoner's father entered the cell.

Chapter 1...Homecoming

The applause was deafening as Julian reappeared and bowed. He spotted his agent in the wings and pointed at the keyboards as if with a question.

The audience rose to its feet cheering. His agent gave him a thumbs-up sign and he bent over the keys.

The first note echoed into the darkened auditorium and the audience hushed.

The video producer was enthralled. "Are you sure he won't reconsider? He's perfect for the part and the money men love him. He can even write his own ticket. As they say in the trade, he's a dreamboat. Look at him. The women are falling all over him."

The agent sighed, because Julian was the perfect client. His concerts were a sellout, his recordings consistently at the top of the charts and his songs had been picked up by the most stellar names in the industry. But he'd already turned down this video deal once and he was dragging his feet on doing another tour.

"I can ask him but he already said 'no.'"

"Up the ante. He can have anything he wants, even artistic control."

The agent whistled softly. "They must really want him bad. I'll try again but I can already tell you the answer."

At the post-concert party, the video producer watched Julian circulate among his guests. Slender and fine-boned with a mane of silver-gilt hair, the golden skin and high cheekbones typical of his race and extraordinarily expressive silver gray eyes, there was definitely something about him. Determinedly pursued by some of the most beautiful and powerful women in the industry, he had studiously avoided marriage or any permanent entanglements, and that left her wondering.

When she queried the agent, the other woman laughed. "That has to do where he comes from. Julian adores women in all shapes, sizes and colors, but there's a law about who he can marry. He'll be told when and where, and when it comes to the who, he'll have nothing to say."

"He puts up with that? Why?"

"You have to know Julian. I only found out when one of the tabloids ran a story about some bimbo he'd taken to an awards dinner. She claimed they were secretly married and expecting a child. When he told me to quash the story, he explained why. We sued and the tabloid settled out of court."

One of the caterers tapped Julian on the shoulder and handed him a communicator. As he listened, he beckoned his agent over and the two of them left the room. She returned a few minutes later. "All deals are off because Julian's father was just killed in an accident. A cruiser's waiting at the spaceport and I've got to get him over there right now."

"He'll be back, won't he?"

"Considering who his father was, I doubt it."

"Who was his father?"

"The Emperor of Nublis. Julian's his heir."

* * *

There was a knock on his stateroom door and Julian called, "Come in."

It was the battlecruiser Commander. The Emperor smiled and pointed to a chair. "You have an answer to my message, I gather."

"The Empress sends her regards, Your Majesty. She's looking forward to seeing you."

"Hmmf! I'm not looking forward to seeing her. Are we on schedule?"

"A little ahead actually. With the pirates loose in the shipping lanes, I didn't want to take any chances. We've been travelling at warp speed ever since we got out of Alpha Centauri and we'll be entering Mare Serenissima at least three hours sooner than expected. We should be picking up another armed escort any time."

"The pirates are that bad?"

"They're raising hell all over the Synod. They've got the Judiciary in their pockets and the prosecutors can do nothing. Whenever a pirate ship is captured, the judges turn the bastards loose before the ink's even dry on the charges."

"It seems to me I heard something about that. They're operating out of Sirius aren't they?"

"Yeah. Sirius doesn't recognize anybody else's rights, but so far they've left our ships alone."

"Probably because our justice is a mite different from the Synod's."

"Aye, that it is. Our Archon doesn't put up with any of that hairsplitting nonsense and money and influence don't mean a blessed thing to His Grace! If he finds the bastards guilty, they're history and good riddance! Too bad the Synod doesn't see it our way."

"You may have a point. The legal system on Aretz is a mess and the Synod's about as bad. That shouldn't concern us though. We aren't members of the Synod or the League."

"More's the pity. With all due respect to Your Majesty, I get around enough to know it's doing us more harm than good. We have a beautiful planet and we're missing out on a lot of tourist credits. We're tariffed to a fare thee well by every port we visit, communications are a nightmare, and the red tape has to be seen to be believed. Synod members don't have to put up with that kind of nonsense."

"Try telling that to the mossbacks in Parliament. Even Eos and that miserable Andromeda are members and they're right in our own system."

"Well there are certainly enough of us out there. The entertainment industry would be a whole lot poorer without us and you're an excellent example of that, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, but that's all behind me now. Had it been up to my father, I wouldn't have been a professional musician in the first place and I can hear the old bats in Parliament huffing at the very thought."

"Something tells me our politics are about to get lively."

"We definitely need to do something about our trade position. What keeps us going is our role as the Synod's bankers and the fact that so many corporations headquarter with us. But that's only because our legal costs are lower than anyone else's."

"So's the red tape. I have it on good authority the Trade League would like to see Nublis join and they'd give us their backing for Synod Assembly membership."

"You do?"

"The Trade League's upset with the Synod Judiciary's attitude toward the piracy and I was recently approached by a member of their executive committee. If the piracy continues and the judiciary keeps turning 'em loose after they're arrested, the League's contemplating a shutdown of all merchant shipping until further notice. They can do it too."

Julian whistled. "What's the Synod's response?"

"Military action against the League. There's been talk that League battlecruisers are carrying death squads. When they catch a pirate, they execute the crew and claim the ship as abandoned salvage."

"Mmm, this is worse than I thought. Up to now, I was under the impression it was just a piracy problem but we're looking at civil war. Whether Nublis is a member of the Synod or not, there's no way it won't affect us. Thanks for bringing this to my attention. Would you be willing to tell a Parliamentary committee what you just told me?"

"Certainly, Your Majesty. In fact, I was rather hoping you'd say that. Fortunately, there's an element in Parliament which is as concerned as I am, and public opinion's in favor of Synod and Trade League membership."

Julian cocked an eyebrow at him. "Did you plan this, Commander? I have a feeling I've just been very skillfully lobbied."

"Every officer in the fleet feels the same, Your Majesty. Even before your father's death, we'd been debating how to approach you. We're out there in other systems all the time and we're the only intelligence force Nublis has. Because you're familiar with the Synod, we thought you'd have a better understanding of the situation."

"Let me think on it. You've discussed this as a group?"

"I can assure Your Majesty this is in no way a conspiracy."

"Keep it that way. I'll get back with you after I've had a chance to sleep on it."

Recognizing a clear note of dismissal, the Commander rose to his feet. "I'll bid you goodnight, Your Majesty. What time would you like breakfast?"

"I generally rise at five. Coffee, pastries, and fruit will be fine."

"I'll notify your Steward. Do you need him to attend you now?"

"I don't think so. We'll be hitting Nublis' time zone in a couple of hours, so I'd best be turning in. Good night, Commander."

"Good night, Your Majesty."

When he reached the passageway outside the Emperor's stateroom, the Commander heaved a sigh of relief, then wiped the sweat from his brow.

His executive officer waited with a question in his eyes.

"Notify the rest of the fleet that I've talked with Julian and he understands. We've got an Emperor we can rely on at long last and not a moment too soon."

"Amen to that. They'll have the word before we even reach the Mare Serenissima." The exec turned and saluted the Emperor's door. "Welcome home, Julian!"

"Welcome home, Julian," echoed the Commander, "and long may you reign."

The Emperor opened the set of keyboards he'd brought with him. He sat on the bench and thought for a few moments, then he hit the first note. After playing a couple of passages, he stopped and closed the keyboards again. Restless and out of sorts, he went over to the small bar and poured himself a brandy. Then he returned to the easy chair and snapped on the viewscreen. He was checking through the various channels when a newscast caught his attention.

"...Vicki LaMotta with InterPlanetary News Flash. The Aretzen cruiser 'Arcturus' was attacked and destroyed by Siriun pirates two days ago. There were no survivors. A combined Synod and Trade

League battle force in the area engaged two of the corsairs, which were boarded and captured. The rest fled to Siriun air space. Now back to our regular programming."

As Julian snapped off the viewscreen, there was a knock on his door. "Who is it?"

"The executive officer, Your Majesty. We've just gone to Condition Red and the Commander requests your presence on the bridge."

Julian grabbed the sidearm he always carried and opened the door.

The exec held out an armored jacket and helmet.

Julian smiled his thanks and put them on.

"There's pirate activity in this quadrant and the Commander suggests it might be better to be safe than sorry. I understand you're a flyer, Your Majesty."

"Not recently. One of the things I have to do is bump up my flying hours. I've barely got enough to stay qualified for my license."

When they reached the bridge, the Commander pointed to the exec's chair and Julian took it. He looked at the screens in front of him. "The shields are up and we're in Condition Red. There's an unidentified craft in the left upper quadrant and we're signaling it now."

Julian glanced over at the communications officer, who was talking into his headset. As the communications officer gave a thumbs-up signal, the Commander heaved a sigh of relief. "False alarm. She's a Trade Leaguer out of Betelgeuse hauling a load of Astralugian spices to Aretz. When she heard the warnings, she skipped into our sector and she says she's mighty glad to see us." He turned on the public address system. "This is an all-clear. Go to Condition Blue."

"How often does this happen?"

"Virtually every run we make. So far, we've managed to avoid any direct confrontations, but sooner or later our luck's gonna run out. Reportedly, the pirates just elected a new leader, and he's a whole lot of the current problem. They say he hates the Trade League and the Synod with a passion, and the most recent attacks have certainly been bolder and more vicious. But that's not the worst of it. The Synod just took two of the pirate ships, but I'll lay you money they'll both be back to their old tricks before the day is out."

"Why are you so sure?"

The Commander rose from his chair. "Why don't you join me for a nightcap and I'll tell you." He beckoned to the exec. "Notify me as soon as we reach Nublian orbit. I'll be in my quarters."

"Well?" said Julian when they were comfortably settled in the Commander's palatial stateroom.

The Commander sighed. "The Chief Justice is hand in glove with the pirates. He's not only on their payroll, but he's getting a cut of every highjacked cargo. He's a slick politician from Andromeda who's forgotten more moves than you or I will ever know."

"Why don't they nail him?"

"The Synod's movers and shakers?"

"Yes."

"They're all getting a piece of the action. If the chief justice goes down, he's liable to take a lot of people with him. There are an awful lot of lawyers and judges getting fat off this deal, and they're not about to give up their gravy without a fight. The Synod Prosecutor's office is underfunded and understaffed, and the pirates' legal eagles know every loophole and trick in the book. This business with the 'Arcturus' is going to be the last straw for Aretz and the Trade League. My guess is they'll have all shipping shut down within the week, and then we could be looking at civil war."

"Unless someone does something. Tell me, Commander, who's your contact at the Trade League?"

The Commander picked up his interphone and punched in a number. "His name's Clint Ardmore and he's the president. Here, Your Majesty, why don't you talk with him yourself?"

Outside the fact that Julian's empire had enjoyed the same stable system of government for over three thousand years, the Synod actually didn't know much about Nublis. Since the planet was outside the major trade lanes and of little strategic importance, it had been left alone to flourish as a sleepy backwater. Over three millennia without war, famine or pestilence had gifted the Nublians with an almost unparalleled standard of living. Bountifully blessed with a temperate climate, warm seas and an amiable disposition, they had little interest in trade or conquest, but they were far from indolent. Every adult citizen, no matter how wealthy or highly placed, was required by law to work for three hours daily at a productive trade or profession. The empire's wealth stemmed from its liberal tax, banking and corporate laws which made it a safe haven for large depositors and investors unwilling to tolerate the scrutiny that prevailed elsewhere.

Nublis enjoyed a stable government and one of the lowest crime rates in the universe and its court system was justly renowned for its incorruptibility and cost effectiveness. Until Julian's accession to the throne, the planet had been kept closed to all but a favored few by its traditionalist rulers. Despite their rulers' resistance to membership in the Synod and lack of interest in trade, the Nublian nobility traveled extensively. They enjoyed considerable success in the entertainment and media industries because of their neutrality and command of languages and, because of their physical beauty and charm, were generally considered lightweights.

Julian had studied law at one of Aretz's most distinguished universities and graduated with honors. As a student, he'd been struck by the stark contrast between what was taught in school and the actual state of the judicial system, which fascinated and repelled him at the same time. In his personal opinion, the written body of law governing the Synod and its member planets was more than adequate. The clear and concise language of its constitution's many provisions reflected the eons of wisdom and consensus of thought from which they were distilled. The last thing needed was more legislation. So that, of course, was the first thing the Synod proposed.

Even though Julian felt that Nublis' solution might be the only workable answer to the current dilemma, he could foresee the Trade League's and the Synod's reaction if he were to propose that in those terms. Especially if he was required to describe the workings of Nublis's legal system in its entirety. Few outside his home planet knew the history of how it all came about, and he didn't think that it would be politic to enlighten them. Nublis' corrupt lawyers and judges hadn't gone willingly, and despite the elegance of his ancestors' solution, their method of disposal would be far too draconian for his squeamish political peers in the Synod.

Julian had a rare gift. From the first day that he took up the reins of government, he was to prove again and again how skillfully he could manipulate people and situations around to his way of thinking. By the time he was done shuttling between the Trade League and the Synod, both organizations agreed the situation between the Synod Judiciary and the pirates could not continue. By then, virtually every economy in the universe had come to a standstill.

At Julian's behest, the Synod agreed to convene a group of legal scholars to study the situation and come up with a solution. The Trade League gave the Synod six months to accomplish their goal. Failing that, they would take matters into their own hands. Translated, that meant a military solution and martial law.

In the face of increasing unrest among its membership, the Synod put out a call for a constitutional convention, and without any apparent input from Julian, the capital city of Nublis was unanimously chosen as the site. The reason given was that Nublis' legal system worked better than anyone else's and was worthy of study.

But that was all in the future.

* * *

The Imperial family was seated around the breakfast table. Deeply engrossed in a juicy tabloid story, Empress Irina failed to notice her son pinching her stepdaughter beneath the table. The infuriated Eliane shoved Hero away bodily and he fell off his chair. As he picked himself up, Hero swore at her under his breath.

Only then did Irina look up. "Eliane! That is no way for an Imperial Princess to behave. If you can't conduct yourself with proper decorum, you will leave this table and go to your room."

The Princess was almost in tears. "He started it. Instead of ragging on me, why don't you tell that miserable son of yours to keep his filthy paws to himself!"

"That's enough! I will not have such language at this table and your disrespectful attitude is simply not to be borne. Despite their overtures of friendship, you've displayed nothing but hostility toward my sons, and you've never said so much as a kind word to either of them since they came into this house!"

"Overtures of friendship? For your information, your precious Hero's nothing but a filthy pervert! The first time we met, he tried to put his tongue down my throat and he's never had his grubby hands off me since!"

Irina pounded on the table so hard, her cup jumped from its saucer and broke. Her normally pale features crimsoned with rage and for a moment she couldn't even speak. "Why you vulgar little slut! You'd best remember who I am, missy! I'm the regent of this empire and if I hear one more word, I'll call the guard and have them put you a Temple cell. In shackles, I might add! Maybe a few nights in solitary and a few lashes at the whipping post will cool down that hot temper. Goodness knows, nothing else has!"

"Hah! I just dare you! My brother's gonna be here soon and he hates Hero as much as I do."

"*Half*-brother! And how would you know how Julian feels about Hero or any of my children? You haven't had so much as a word from him in four years! Oh, he cares about you all right. For your information, all your precious brother ever does is chase women. He has no interest in anything else, least of a sniveling brat like you. The man's old enough to be your father and I doubt he even knows you're alive! If I sent you away right now, he probably wouldn't even notice you were gone."

Irina noticed the Palace Steward bowing and scraping at her elbow. "Yes, Magnus. What is it?"

"A message, Your Majesty. From Prince - er - Emperor Julian."

Irina plucked the message from the Steward's silver tray and her delicate eyebrows rose. "Well, it's about time he answered. His ship's due in late tonight. He doesn't want anyone coming to the spaceport and he's ordering that his father's quarters be prepared. Magnus, see to it."

The Steward bowed again. "I'll notify Your Majesty as soon as the Emperor arrives."

Irina smiled faintly and patted her blonde curls. "Thank you, Magnus. You may go."

As the Steward backed out of the dining room, bowing all the way, she gestured to one of the footmen. "Clean that up. As for you, missy, get up to your room. Dinner's at seven thirty and I expect to see you properly dressed. Oh, and one more thing. Before you go, you will apologize to Hero."

"Oh, this is too much! I won't apologize to that... that... if you put me on bread and water for the rest of my days!"

Eliane fled from the dining room and they could hear her wailing all the way up the stairs. Irina's four-year-old daughter Myra started to cry and her other son Gaius took his sister in his arms. "It's all right, Myra. Nobody's mad at you. Momma, why don't I take her outside?"

"Thank you, dear. Hero, my pet, I know how taken you are with Ellie's charms, but you need to be a bit more subtle in your advances. Despite her sordid inclinations, she's still the heir to the throne, and you can't treat her like some kitchen maid, even if she does deserve it. Give me a kiss and I'll see you later."

* * *

"Thank you, Irina. This all looks fine, but there was no need for you to wait up. My needs are simple and I had dinner on the ship."

"Are you sure there's nothing you need?"

"If there is, I'll let you know. Good night!" Resisting a strong urge to shove her out into the hall, Julian waited with folded arms for his stepmother to leave.

Finally she sighed and turned away with a swish of her silken skirts. "If you're sure--"

"Don't expect me for breakfast either. I'll take mine here."

Unable to think of anything else, the Empress left.

A soft knock sounded on the door. "I thought I told you"

"Your Majesty, it's a message from the Archon."

Julian opened the door to reveal a scarlet-liveried servant with a silver tray. He unfolded the note and read it through.

"Tell the Major Domo I'll meet him in his office first thing in the morning."

The servant bowed low and left.

His father's funeral was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, and given the Temple staff's customary

efficiency, there was nothing Julian need do except show up. The Coronation would be another matter and he wasn't looking forward to it in the least. He'd need an administrative assistant as soon as possible and he wondered if Galia Alazne still worked in the complex. That was probably too much to expect, but it was worth a try. Ah, she was probably married with a couple of kids by now. Still...

Julian's hand hovered over the intercom. "Do you have a Temple directory?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Who were you wishing to speak with?"

"Alazne. Galia Alazne."

"Er, she's not in her office at this hour, Your Majesty. Do you require her home number?"

She was still there, and with the same last name too.

"No, I don't think so. Who's she working for these days?"

"Magistrate Cato I believe. Her title is "

"I don't care about her title, dammit! What's her office code?" He noted the number on his wrist communicator. "Leave her a message that I wish to speak with her at her earliest convenience."

"Certainly, Your Majesty, and er, welcome back."

"Thank you."

"Will there be anything else?"

"That'll be all."

Already missing his elegantly appointed house on Aretz and his agent's unobtrusive ways, Julian looked impatiently around the vast bedroom that had been his father's. Not that Janus spent many nights here. By all accounts, he'd been no more faithful to Irina than his first two wives and his mistresses had reportedly been legion.

His plants and equipment should arrive within the month, and he added a note to have the servants to clean and repair the rooftop Conservatory. Thinking about the roof and its half-dozen landing sites, he wondered what kind of shape the flyers were in. The Imperial mechanics were notoriously lazy and Janus hadn't been much of a pilot. Ah, well, there wasn't much he could do about any of it tonight and the Coronation was going to be taxing enough.

* * *

With the servant's help, Julian put on the magnificent regalia every Nublian Emperor wore to his crowning. A long tunic woven from shimmering crimson native silk with a floor-length, gold brocade surcoat edged in sable over it, the whole thing was belted at the waist with gold and multi-colored enamel plaques bearing the Imperial seal of a hammer and a sword. Completing the outfit were soft leather crimson boots with jeweled toes and gauntleted gold-embroidered white gloves. On the first finger of his left hand, he wore his father's ring, an enormous square cut ruby in a bezel of hammered gold. He'd be

inflicted with the foot high gem-crusted miter soon enough. Weighing almost ten pounds, he'd tried it on already and the damn thing had given him a headache. In its place, he would henceforth wear a coronet of his own devising. Formed from the same delicate gold and multi-colored plaques as the royal belt, the coronet weighed almost nothing and he was usually able to forget he had it on.

Two magnificently garbed pages assisted him into the royal coach where his stepmother waited. Once he was safely inside, the pages jumped on to the back where they stood side by side like colorful statues. A second carriage contained Julian's younger sister, Princess Eliane, the Empress's two sons by her first marriage, Hero and Gaius, and Princess Myra, her five-year-old daughter by her marriage to the late Emperor. Irina was decked out in black velvet in deference to her widowed status and literally dripping with diamond-studded necklaces and rings. She had topped it off with the Empress's gem encrusted miter and she frowned when she noted her stepson's light coronet.

For his part, Julian raised an eyebrow and thought with considerable satisfaction about the splitting headache she'd have later. After Irina nodded to him, she put on her public smile which always made him think she was about to take a bite right out of the air.

He gravely nodded back. Then he put on his own smile and turned to wave at the cheering crowds lined up on every side of the carriage.

With outriders before and behind, the Imperial procession then set off across the square in front of the Palace for the short ride to the Temple.

* * *

"Ready?"

Cassius nodded and pulled on his mask. He picked up the great emerald from the table and slid it on to his gloved forefinger. "I wonder what he'll say."

In a swirl of scarlet silk, the Major Domo headed for the fireplace at the other end of the room and pressed one of its carvings. "Whatever you say to a ghost. That's what you are, aren't you?"

"I suppose. Knowing Julian, he'll come up with something."

The wall swung silently open revealing a lighted passageway and the Major Domo beckoned. "After you."

Emerging behind the altar on the sanctuary's high dais, Cassius was assailed by the scent of candles, incense and lilies. Only a few days ago, he'd presided over his father's funeral on this same dais.

Julian had stood by totally impassive.

When the floor in front of the altar slid open and Janus's coffin slid into the flames below, Irina suddenly wailed aloud. Then she proceeded to sink dramatically into the soothing arms of a couple of her ladies in waiting.

Seeing Julian's disgusted look, he'd had all he could do not to laugh. The Major Domo had given him a sharp pinch and that had brought him to his senses.

Well, at least today's occasion should be happier.

In response to a hidden signal, a triumphal paean of praise issued from the choir, and the assembled company turned as one toward the gem studded sanctuary doors. As they swung slowly open, the Emperor's scarlet and gold figure stood there alone.

When he saw the waiting Archon, Julian fell to his knees. "Your Grace, I beg your august leave to enter this hallowed house."

The Archon raised his hands in a gesture of welcome.

"You have my leave!" intoned the Major Domo. "Come hither and take your rightful place."

Two pages approached the kneeling Emperor and raised him to his feet. One offered him a shining golden sword and the other a silver hammer.

"These are the symbols of your office," continued the Major Domo. "The sword stands for justice, the hammer for mercy. Use them well."

Crossing the hammer and sword across his chest, Julian advanced slowly up the sanctuary aisle. As he came, the weight of his ancestors bowed him down. Seeing the Archon waiting with the jeweled miter between his gloved hands, he suddenly wanted nothing more than to turn and flee.

When he reached the altar, he ascended the steps and again fell to his knees. After this, nothing would ever be the same again and as all of his predecessors had done before him, Julian bowed his head and accepted his fate.

Placing the miter on his brother's head, the Archon sensed how he felt. Life on an Imperial throne was a lonely business at best and Julian's life was already more so than most.

The unwanted son of a loveless marriage, his childhood would have been bleak indeed had it not been for Cassius.

After he lost Cassius, it was little wonder he'd sought the company of so many women. At least with them, he could find some small measure of comfort. Certainly there was none within the bosom of his family. Only in his music had Julian's tormented spirit found any release and now that had been taken from him too.

At long last, the interminable day was over. The ball and reception had finally come to an end, the guests had left and Julian could finally be alone.

Due to her recently widowed status, Irina was barred from dancing and he'd been mercifully spared the opening ceremonial waltz.

Yawning, he emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his waist and more or less felt his way through the shadows to the waiting bed. "What in the hell?"

"Oh, my love, I've waited so long. Now you're finally here, all those lonely years will be nothing but... Julian! What are you doing?"

"I don't know how you got in here, you miserable bitch, but you're leaving!"

"Julian! I love you!"

"Out!"

"Pleeeese!"

Grabbing the protesting Irina by the hair, Julian yanked her from the bed. Picking her up in his arms, he flung open his bedroom door and threw her, naked and screeching, out into the hall.

Seeing the guard's startled face, he snarled, "Get this creature back where she belongs and don't let her near me again!"

Belatedly, Julian saw the towel was gone from around his waist.

The guard pretended not to notice. Ignoring the sobbing Irina, he was speaking quietly into his communicator when the Emperor slammed the bedroom shut.

* * *

Following the Major Domo's scarlet-robed figure across the deserted Temple foyer, Julian sensed his bodyguard's silent presence behind him. His father had never discussed his relationship with the Archon and his Major Domo, and until now, Julian had never given them much thought. Janus alone had known their identities and like his predecessors, he'd taken that mystery to his grave.

Now it was his son's turn. Of all the chores relating to the Coronation, this morning after courtesy call was the one he'd been dreading the most.

As the nail studded doors swung slowly open and the Major Domo beckoned him inside, Julian wanted nothing more than to turn and flee.

When the doors closed again, leaving his bodyguard outside, he stood in the entryway, uncertain. Who or what was the Archon anyway? Was he really from another species and had he actually ruled as the Dark Emperor, as some claimed, for a thousand years?

Stained glass panes cast jewels of light on the black marble floor and a pair of French doors at the apartment's far end opened onto a sunlit balcony. Rich tapestries and multi-colored rugs softened the ancient stone's chill harshness, with a heavy wooden trapdoor set into one of the corners the only jarring note. Silhouetted in the light streaming from the multicolored windows at the opposite end of the vast stone-walled room, a tall figure waited and on a nearby carved table, amid glittering silver and crystal, a sumptuous repast had been laid out.

"Come, Your Majesty," said the Major Domo. "His Grace is anxious to meet you."

The Emperor bowed formally. "As I am to meet His Grace."

"For pity's sake, Julian, will you quit dithering! I just spent the last couple of hours slaving over a hot stove and your frigging breakfast is getting cold!"

"*Cassius?*"

The Archon strode across the room to put a supporting arm around his stunned brother. Then he led

him, unresisting, to a chair. "Here, you'd best sit before you fall. Major Domo, give him a brandy. And pour a couple for us while you're at it."

"But you're...."

"Dead? I know. Legally dead, anyway."

"Then you were...."

"Close enough to touch you when you gave my eulogy. Or tried to."

"I-I...."

The Archon grinned. "I do believe, little brother, that you're actually speechless. And ain't that a first."

The Emperor slowly shook his head. "I never believed in ghosts before, but now.... If you're the Archon, then who....?"

The Major Domo removed his mask to reveal a heavily jeweled, ruddy face topped with graying red curls and shrewd blue eyes that belied his otherwise pleasant expression. Shrugging off his loose silk robes to reveal a buff-colored homespun tunic and pants and a burly soldier's body just beginning to run to fat, he chuckled at Julian's expression. "You needn't look so shocked, dammit! I've been around the pair of you since you were born and know you better than anyone else. Why do you think your father selected me, Julian? When Cassius was designated the new Archon, it hit Janus every bit as hard as it did you. After all, he was his son too and it's only by an accident of birth that he's not the Emperor today instead of you."

He caught the Archon's look of surprise. "Janus loved my sister Marjolaine dearly and would have married her if he could. He even considered giving up the throne for her sake. Only the fact that he had you kept him from going totally insane after she died. I was still young then and hadn't yet become Captain of the Guard. After he lost Marjolaine, your father would often take me up to the rooftop with him for company. He'd sit there for hours, gazing into the darkness and saying nothing. Fortunately, Julian's mother was wise beyond her years. Loving Janus as little as he did her, they managed to reach an accommodation of sorts and, eventually, a certain degree of happiness. It was Lyria who offered to raise the two of you together and the Palace was never quiet after that. Had she lived...."

He paused for a moment, remembering the cool silver-haired Empress. "She didn't, more's the pity, and it was after his second marriage that your father became easy prey for someone like Irina. Poor little Ellie never understood why Janus divorced her mother and left her to the care of the servants. After you left for the university, there was no one left to pay any attention to her. I used to take her fishing on my days off and falconing up in the hills. As young as she was, I taught her to ride and stalk wild game. Even after I became Major Domo, I tried to keep an eye on her, but it was difficult. Janus married Irina, hoping to recreate the family life he'd had with Lyria and the two of you. Her boys were supposed to be company for Ellie, but it was not to be. Irina was so much younger than he and he realized much too late what she really was. Unfortunately, that was long after the day he came on her and Julian in the Conservatory."

The Emperor pounded his fist on the table so hard, the cups jumped from their saucers. "She was my father's wife! I tried to tell him, but Father wasn't about to listen to me! How was I to know Irina had been taunting him with Myra's parentage or that she'd called him an aging impotent fool who was nothing in bed compared to me? I swear to God I never touched her until the night she cornered me in the Conservatory! Even then, I had no idea what was going on."

The Major Domo put a restraining hand on Julian's arm, but he shook it off. "Last night, right after the Coronation Ball, that whoring bitch had the nerve to come to my room and try it again! Luckily, I was awake, but I still don't know how I restrained myself from killing her. I heaved her into the hall, screeching loud enough to wake the dead and stark naked besides!"

The Major Domo bit back his smile. "You'll make headlines in all the tabloids and the entire Synod will talk of nothing else for weeks. Even the Archon's heard about it, although not from me."

"My super-hearing's good for something besides the courtroom. When they say I can pick up a whisper within a half mile radius, they're not far wrong."

The Major Domo grunted. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

"Well, I don't break down like that in public any more. Any tears I shed now are strictly private. I've been mourning you for the past eleven years, and now..." The Emperor swallowed the brandy glass' contents in one gulp. "My father's dead, isn't he?"

"If he wasn't, you wouldn't be here."

Julian looked from the one to the other. "What's your relationship?"

Cassius shrugged. "This apartment is my home and my prison. I'm a nameless branded slave and the Major Domo's my keeper. After I was first brought here, he kept me shackled until I learned the futility of trying to escape. He enhances my senses with addictive mindbending drugs and he keeps me sequestered from all knowledge of the outside world." He waved at the trapdoor in the opposite corner. "There's my escape. One of these days, my body'll drop through it and be washed out to sea like those of all my nameless predecessors. And no one will ever know."

"I'll know because you're hardly nameless to me. You're still my brother and the best friend I ever had." The Emperor sighed and looked at the Major Domo. "At the university, they called us the 'heavenly twins.' We competed in everything: chased the same women, tried to outdo each other at sports. One time, we even tried to drink each other under the table."

"Once was all it took! I was never so sick in my entire life. Raw eggs and beer indeed! Julian, I still don't know how you choked down that last one. I was so nauseous by that time, I was happy to let you win. I couldn't look at a cooked egg for months after that, let alone raw."

"Yeah, but you didn't see me throwing up later, and you got even, you rat! When you beat me out in the finals, I had a terrible time explaining it to Father. Then you were called home, right after graduation. When we said goodbye at the spaceport..." Julian broke off and turned away.

"I know." Cassius winced slightly as he sat.

"What is it?"

"You may as well know the rest. The drugs he gives me have side-effects. One is addiction. Another is seizures."

The Emperor frowned at the Major Domo. "Is that true?"

The Major Domo looked coolly back. "Yes, unfortunately."

"What about medical care?"

"He gets that regularly. What do you think I am, a monster?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

The Archon sighed. "It happens every time I perform an execution."

"That tourist? The Chief Justice's son? You were the one who executed him!"

"It was only two weeks ago and the after-effects tend to linger."

"And Father was killed the following day. Between that and the Coronation, the Chief Justice must have left for Aretz without seeing anyone."

The Archon tapped his fingers on the table. "Swearing vengeance on all of us, no doubt. But enough of that. Julian, I outdid myself for you. You may not be hungry, but I am."

The Emperor smiled. "Then, by all means, let's eat."

As reunions went, that was one for the record books. The brothers talked all night long and halfway through the next day. Since the Archon had no trials scheduled that week and Julian was still officially in mourning, the Major Domo was able to leave them in peace and get some much-needed rest.

Despite his horror, Julian made a valiant effort to come to terms with the Archon's situation and the Major Domo was thankful when the Emperor's initial hostility toward him as Cassius' jailer eventually disappeared.

Chapter 2...A Promotion and a Reprimand

Six months after the Coronation, a young Palace servant tapped gently on the Nublian Emperor's door. Hearing no answer, he opened it, but could barely make out the sleeping form in the vast bed. As the Steward had directed, he set down the tray and pulled back the heavy velvet curtains.

The Emperor groaned, shielding his eyes from the sudden burst of light. He turned over and buried his face in the pillows.

"Your Majesty, it's eight o'clock and you have an appointment in two hours."

Julian blinked. Resigned to the inevitable, he knuckled his eyes and yawned. "What, what? Oh, yes, right. Thank you."

The servant placed the tray next to the bed. Small and thin, with light green eyes and pale angular features, the Emperor hadn't seen him before. "What's your name?"

The young man flushed and bobbed his sandy head. The humblest of the kitchen help, until today he'd only seen the Emperor in the distance. He'd been hustled into a suit of scarlet livery and sent upstairs because everyone else was busy with tonight's reception preparations.

"Jonah, Your Majesty. Er, I have coffee right here and your bath's ready. Her Majesty sends greetings and asks if you have plans for this evening."

Julian sat up and put his arms in the proffered robe. "A banquet appearance after the reception. Her Majesty's welcome to join me on the dais but I suspect she'll find the proceedings extremely dull. Outside of that, I have an appointment with the Archon and a custody hearing at noon. If I can find the time, I want to get in a couple of hours in the Conservatory after lunch." As the servant started to withdraw, he had a thought. "Wait! Is the Archon planning to attend this evening's reception?"

"I believe he is. But I'll find out immediately, Your Majesty."

The Emperor reached for his coffee when his seventeen-year-old half-sister ran in with her black kitten in her arms. Darker by far than her brother's silver-gilt mane, Eliane's mass of yellow curls glistened reddish in direct sunlight, and along with her typical Nublian amber skin, high cheekbones and catlike features, she'd inherited their father's stocky build, boisterous disposition, and sapphire eyes.

Julian's, on the other hand, were the silver of his maternal forebears. His most expressive feature and the downfall of innumerable female hearts, their color would change within seconds from storm-cloud gray to the glittering pale of an arctic ice chip. Slender and fine-boned as his mother, he lacked her height, but the Emperor's cool glance and regal bearing more than compensated for his lack of stature.

Eliane's eyes met those of the young servant, and she flushed.

The Emperor noticed. "Jonah, go give the Archon my message. What is it, Ellie?"

"Is it true Titus is coming back and you want us to get married?"

"I've been giving it some thought. How do you feel about it?"

"I love Titus. But I don't think he loves me back."

"That's true. But given the right circumstances, that could change. For people of our station, love and marriage don't have much to do with each other anyway. I must choose a husband for you very soon, just as Parliament's in the process of selecting a bride for me. No one gives two hoots how she and I feel, but I care very much about you." Julian looked searchingly at his sister. "I won't knowingly send you into an unhappy marriage. Titus will be kind and I know you'll be good to him. Our father wasn't in love with any of his wives, you know. He came the closest to caring for Irina. But she was his favorite mistress for years before he married her."

"Do you have a mistress?" Her voice was deceptively casual.

"Who've you been talking to, Ellie?"

Her tone became more insistent. "Well, do you?"

"Er, in a way. Actually, I have more than one."

Her voice had become downright demanding. "How come you're allowed mistresses, but I can't have a lover?"

"Good question. It's just the way things are."

Eliane proceeded to drop her bomb. "Irina wants to marry me to her son, Hero."

Julian almost dropped his cup. "WHAT did you say?"

"That's why I thought I'd better come, talk to you. If you were around more, you'd know these things."

"Ellie, there's no way I'd permit such a thing and you can tell Irina I said so. For all that he's such a hulk, Hero's barely fifteen and a commoner to boot! But quite apart from that, I can't stand him! Not only does that boy have the disposition of a lowland garbage weasel, but he's as ugly as sin."

Ellie sniffed. "Irina says there's been gossip and that I'll be lucky to find anyone who'll have me."

"Oh, does she indeed?" The Emperor's voice was dangerously quiet. "On second thought, I don't want you saying a word to anyone about this. Especially our esteemed stepmother."

Setting down his cup, he swung his bare legs over the edge of the bed. "Just keep a stiff upper lip, little one. I'll be back this afternoon and I'll talk to you then."

Dropping a kiss on top of her golden head, he gave her a quick hug, then caressed the kitten in her arms.

"Go feed little Titus. He looks hungry."

She offered him a tremulous smile in return and left.

* * *

Jonah hastened across the great stone square separating the Imperial Palace from the brooding Temple complex. Dominated on one side by the white marble walls and gilded colonnades of the building he'd just left and on the other by the looming mass of the Archon's domain, Cyrenia's busy plaza teemed with people. On his left, a broad causeway stretched to the crescent-shaped harbor and spaceport, and over to his right, he could make out an assortment of glittering upscale shops and bustling sidewalk cafes.

In contrast to the brilliance outside, the Temple's shadowed interior hung coolly silent. Flaming torches backlit the huge stone figures in the tomblike marble foyer, their incessant flicker brightening the guards' blue armor on their ceaseless patrols.

One of a pair of immense nail-studded doors opened, bringing the guard to immediate attention. The Major Domo's scarlet-robed figure emerged, his face and head covered by a silken mask. Raising a gloved hand, he acknowledged the guard's salute. "I need to send a message to the Emperor at once! Please inform His Majesty—"

Jonah stood adjusting to the change in light and when he saw the Major Domo, he almost jumped out of his skin. Collecting himself, he bowed low from the waist. "My lord. I have a message from His Majesty about tonight's reception."

The Major Domo turned, as if surprised. "Your timing's excellent. His Grace will attend the reception between seven and eight. And he would appreciate His Majesty's company for a late dinner at ten."

Jonah bowed again. "I'll be back directly with His Majesty's answer. Is there anything further your lordship wishes of me?"

"That'll do for now. Advise the guard when you return and I'll see if His Grace wishes to speak with you himself at that time."

The Major Domo re-entered the Archon's quarters in a swirl of scarlet silk and Jonah bowed again. Then he hurried out, muttering to himself, "Speak to the Archon personally? Not if I can help it! Bad enough dealing with his spooky assistant! Brrr!"

Jonah's only encounter with the Archon had been when he was ten, and once had been more than enough. He'd been caught stealing a loaf of bread in the marketplace, and when the Temple guards had tried to shackle him, they'd found his wrists too small. So they'd tied his hands instead and then literally drug him into the Archon's courtroom, screaming, struggling and crying every step of the way.

At the sight of the gray-robed faceless figure looming above him on the Archon's jeweled throne, Jonah's bowels let go noisily.

The Archon said nothing. He made signs with his gloved fingers and his scarlet-clad Major Domo asked all the questions.

The aggrieved merchant accused him of being an habitual thief but that wasn't true. Homeless since his parents' deaths, Jonah had survived for the better part of a year by begging, scavenging for scraps and taking whatever menial jobs he could find. He knew there were easier ways to live but was unable to bring himself to dishonor his parents' memory by stealing purses or selling himself to the furtive-faced men who whispered to him on the street. When he was caught with the bread, he hadn't eaten for three days and he'd only taken it out of sheer desperation.

The merchant finished his accusations and the Archon pointed to Jonah.

The Major Domo's voice was surprisingly mild. "What did you do and why? Tell His Grace your side of it."

By that time, Jonah's tears began to flow in earnest. "It was right on the edge of the stall and I couldn't stand it any more! But I'm not a thief! Really I'm not! He's lying! I never stole anything before. Not from him, not from anybody! I would have paid if I could! I would have worked! Run errands! Anything! Please believe me! I'm not a thief!" Choking on his tears and unable to say more, Jonah blinked up at the great figure looking down on him.

If the Archon raised his right hand, containing the silver hammer, he'd be acquitted. The glittering golden knife in his left would find him guilty. Both hands would mean the case was not proven; the Archon might still consider him guilty but he'd go free. Jonah had known this, as all Nublian children knew, from the stories their mothers told them at bedtime.

Waiting for the Archon's verdict, he prayed desperately to his mother, wherever she was, to come save him.

The courtroom was deathly still.

The Archon's head moved. He signaled to his Major Domo and whispered something in his ear. Then he raised the golden knife and brought it down with a thud.

"We find you guilty as charged!" intoned the Major Domo. "The court will now pronounce sentence!"

Imagining the branding iron's scorch against his face and the crunch of the Archon's blade parting his right hand from his wrist, Jonah gasped. He would have fallen had the guards not been holding him up. The courtroom spun dizzily and the floor disappeared under his feet, dropping him into nothing.

A splash of water in his face shocked Jonah back to consciousness, soaked, shirtless, and facing a black wooden post, to which he was firmly tied. Coughing and spitting, he blinked away the water dripping into his eyes and wondered where he was.

This must be the prison courtyard.

Behind him, a gruff voice said, "You've been sentenced to two lashes and a night in one of His Grace's luxury suites. Now you're awake, let's get on with it!" Whistling through the air behind Jonah's head, the whip burned into his bare skin. Before he had a chance to cry out, it cracked again. "A perfect X and one of my better efforts, if I say so myself. All right, laddie, let's get you down."

His hands freed, Jonah clung to the wooden post. Nauseous and retching, he tried to vomit, but his

stomach held nothing to expel. Finally, he slid to the ground in a miserable shivering heap.

A hand yanked him to his feet. "Come on, young feller. Let's get you cleaned up."

When they reached the showers, the guard handed Jonah a ragged towel and some soap. Then he left him to revel in the steaming water, which felt absolutely wonderful.

Stepping out, Jonah toweled off gingerly, wincing as the rough fabric touched his back. His reeking garments were nowhere in sight, but a pair of oversized blue cotton pants and an equally voluminous top awaited him on a nearby stool. Fortunately, the pants had an elastic waist; otherwise, they would never have stayed up.

Once he was dressed, the guard escorted Jonah to a private cell, and there he fed him a steaming bowl of thick vegetable soup and a chunk of homemade bread. When he'd eaten his fill, the man ordered him to get some sleep.

For as long as he lived, Jonah knew he would never again taste anything as delicious as that simple prison meal, and the hard bunk felt softer than a featherbed. He hadn't felt this warm and safe since his parents died. He drifted off to sleep, dreading the morning and his return to the dubious freedom of the streets.

Morning brought a soft-spoken middle-aged man to Jonah's cell. Resplendent in the Archon's distinctive emerald and silver livery, his mouth had a merry tilt, and his blue eyes held a twinkle. "Come with me," he said, and led the way outside to the great stone square.

Jonah followed him, wide-eyed.

"Are you hungry?" Without waiting for an answer, the man purchased a couple of savory stuffed pies from a nearby street vendor and handed one to Jonah, who instantly wolfed it down. Far from being offended, the man actually seemed amused. Seeing Jonah was still hungry, he gave him the second pie. Then he bought another for himself. Between bites, he explained who he was and where they were going.

"After His Grace sentences a prisoner, he writes a follow-up recommendation. If you're returned to the streets now, you'll be back in his courtroom in no time at all, probably on a more serious charge. That's assuming you even survive."

For the first time since he'd been arrested, Jonah actually dared to hope.

"Since His Grace has no wish to see you before him again, he's placed you in my care. As soon as we're done here, I'm taking you to a farm outside the city to live with other boys like yourself. There you'll receive clothes, food, shelter, and a decent education, and you can stay for just as long as you need to. All I ask in return is that you stay out of trouble."

As good as his word, the man took Jonah to a pleasant rambling farmhouse just outside the city limits, and there he remained until his eighteenth birthday when he'd been apprenticed to the Emperor's household Steward.

Jonah had lived and worked in the Imperial kitchens for the past two years. Knowing he dared not defend himself, the Dowager Empress Irina's two teenaged sons, Hero and Gaius, baited him incessantly. Then to add to his woes, he fell hopelessly in love with Princess Eliane.

Investigating an odd sound in the garden one night, he found the little Princess crying her eyes out.

Eliane sobbed that she'd lost her heart to her brother's newly adopted ward, Titus, the orphaned Lord of the Northern Shore. But the young prince only had eyes for her flirtatious stepmother Irina.

The little Princess soon convinced the sympathetic Jonah that he was her only friend, and the two of them began meeting secretly after his day's work was done. He'd bring her special treats from the kitchen and when the kitchen cat littered, he presented her with one of the kittens.

Eliane loved the tiny creature dearly and, to Jonah's chagrin, promptly dubbed it Titus.

Abruptly awaking from his reverie Jonah saw he'd reached the Emperor's half-open door.

His bath completed, Julian sat with his feet up in an easy chair by the window. "Come over here. I want to talk to you."

Seeing the young man's hesitation, the Emperor smiled. "How would you like to move upstairs and look after me?"

"Oh, Your Majesty! Do you really mean it?"

"I'm in need of a body servant and you seem to handle yourself quite well."

Jonah flushed at the unexpected compliment. "Er, Your Majesty's very kind. His, er, Grace will be at the reception between seven and eight and he invites you to dine with him at ten."

Julian fished a silver coin from his pocket. "This makes it official. Tell His Grace I accept, and inform the Steward of your change in status as soon as you return. Move your belongings into the small room two doors down from this one, and come back here at five. Oh, and Jonah?"

"Your Majesty?"

"I need help with my plants and I might as well start training you in. But you're to discuss what we do up there with absolutely no one. My project could have far-reaching implications for Nublis, and our competitors would like to get their hands on it if they could."

"I understand, Your Majesty. You can count on me."

"I'll see you around five, then."

The door flew open with a bang and, blonde curls flying, Eliane literally bounced into the room. "Oh Julian! Is it true you got Jonah out of the kitchen, and he's going to live up here from now on?"

Her brother's eyes narrowed as he took in the white cotton shirt straining across his sister's breasts and her tight-fitting blue pants. "You were eavesdropping again, weren't you?" Then he sighed. "Yes, small fry, it's true. But from now on, Jonah's going to be much too busy to be foraging for you in the kitchen or bringing you presents. As for your midnight trysts in the garden, there'll be no more of those!"

When their mouths fell open, Julian had trouble containing his smile. Choking down the laughter bubbling into his throat, he continued in as stern a tone as he could manage. "Don't you realize I know everything that goes on in this place? The very walls here have ears, and your moonlight sessions have been no secret from me! Jonah, I know how you feel, but it won't work. I'm satisfied that your friendship's been harmless up to now, but everyone doesn't see it that way. There have been whispers, and this relationship simply cannot continue. Ellie's not only an Imperialprincess but she's the heir to the throne.

Since it's my duty to find her a suitable husband, I've decided to speak with Titus when he returns." He frowned. "Do I make myself clear?"

Seeing Jonah's stricken face, Julian's voice softened. "It's just the way things are, son. And I'll be the first to agree that life is most certainly not fair."

Flushed scarlet, the young servant looked fixedly at the floor as if hoping it would open up and swallow him whole.

When the Princess's eyes welled up with tears, Julian rounded on her. "That's enough, Ellie! Kindly remember your position and dry your eyes. Now, get out of here, and for pity's sake, find something more suitable to wear!"

The Princess fled and they could hear her pitiful wailing all the way down the hall.

Jonah started to follow but Julian held him back. "I'm not done with you yet."

The Emperor touched the servant's shaking shoulders, then turned the young man's face up toward his. "I know you've done nothing wrong. Believe me, if you had, you'd be looking at the gallows through a barred window in the Archon's prison right now."

Jonah gulped and tried to lower his gaze but Julian held his chin firmly. "You have more friends than you know, son. It was one such who brought this business with Ellie to my attention and suggested I bring you upstairs to take care of me. But I'm warning you! You must stay away from each other from now on. If you're ever caught alone with her again, I'll have no choice but to turn you over to the Archon. Do you understand?"

When Julian finally released him, Jonah drew in a deep breath.

"I-I-I don't know what to say. Except thank you, Your... Your Mmm --"

"You're most welcome. Now, if I'm not to be late, how about finding me something to wear?"

Hardly believing his good fortune, the young servant returned to the Temple in a daze. Happily, only the guard was around and he hightailed it back to the Palace as fast as his legs would carry him. When the Steward grumbled he was short-handed because of the upcoming reception, Jonah ignored the man's complaints. After gathering his meager possessions from the kitchen alcove where he slept, he raced upstairs to settle into his new room.

* * *

Later that morning, the Archon poured his guest a second cup of coffee. Simply dressed in a tan cotton shirt and matching pants, he was much taller than Julian. Though they were the same age, Cassius' silver-threaded hair, lined face and deep-set dark eyes displayed the weariness of someone much older.

"Hey, this is good! Every time I come over here, I say you've outdone yourself. This time, you really have."

The Archon acknowledged the compliment with a smile. He was a first-class chef, and in his travels, Julian would constantly seek out new recipes and foods for him to try.

"Wait until you see what I've come up with for dinner tonight. It's a recipe from an old Aretzan cookbook called supreme de vollaille. You'll like it, I think."

"If it's as good as you say, I'll spring it on the Palace chef. It'll give his tiny mind something to work on besides that junk Irina has the nerve to call food!"

"You have such a happy family over there, I don't know how you stand it. Speaking of which, did you get that lad out of Irina's clutches before she forced me to hang him from the prison gallows?"

"Thanks to your warning, I did. Then I put the fear of God into him and Ellie both. He's so terrified of you, it didn't take much."

"Poor little sod! I should hate to think I went to all that trouble to get him off the streets just to end up executing him for falling in love with the wrong girl."

"He'll get over it. I'm sending him out on the tiles tonight, and with any luck, he'll find some buxom young thing to take his mind off his troubles. Speaking of which, I'd like your thoughts on a domestic problem."

Putting his head in his hands, Cassius groaned. "If I had a gold piece for every time you've said that... I still couldn't get out of here, could I? How many more years of this are there? And why, in heavens name, did they pick me?"

For once the Emperor was at a loss for words. "I honestly don't know. But even if I did, it wouldn't help." Taking his brother by the chin, he looked into his eyes. "It happened again, didn't it? Damn! I told the Major Domo to send for me!"

"I asked him not to. There were only a couple of seizures and I weathered them. It was probably the strain of this latest execution. He knifed his victim when she demanded her money up front. Then he raped her as she lay dying. He was a batterer too, like that kid from Aretz."

"Don't remind me! Incidentally, Damon Veniston was a really bad apple: rapes, drugs, vandalism, you name it. Even so, his father's screaming human rights violations and trying to get us kicked out of the Interplanetary Synod Assembly and the Trade League both, and that's just for starters. On the other hand, the Trade League not only wants to give you a medal, but they're trying to figure out a way to ship us the rest of the Synod's delinquents. Oh, and the Assembly Vice-President sends his personal congratulations. It seems the little bastard beat up his niece, then got away with it after his old man pulled strings with the local judge. Incidentally, is the Major Domo getting in a second doctor to look at you?"

"He already did, yesterday. Under the impression I was just another felon with a habit, the new doc was plenty blunt. After the usual tests, he came up with the same old conclusion: it's side-effects from the drugs, and if I keep it up, I'm not going to make old bones."

"So how long did he give you?"

"A year or two, at most. After a stern lecture, he handed me a stack of pamphlets about some program he runs and told me that I could live another twenty years if I'd just straighten myself out. The Major Domo wouldn't even look me in the eye after he left. And no, Julian, there's not a damn thing you can do. If I object, he'll just tie me down and shoot the stuff in anyway because that's his job. But that's not why you're here, old buddy. What did you really come to ask me?"

The Emperor told him what Ellie had said.

"Hmm. Now things are coming clearer. That Irina would try to marry Ellie to one of her sons comes as no surprise to me. She's nothing, if not ambitious, and you're in more danger than you know. Fortunately

for us, she's showed her hand too soon." Then he looked almost angry. "Don't you realize Irina would become Regent if anything were to happen to you? Young Titus is next in line after Ellie and he's no more of a match for that witch than your sister! You haven't been taking her seriously enough and that's a bad mistake on your part. Irina wants to stay on the throne so badly she can taste it and you're standing in her way."

The Emperor started to say something but the Archon held up his hand. "Let me finish! The day your father cut Irina's daughter out of the succession, he asked my help in dissolving their marriage. That he hadn't done so sooner was because he was under the impression you were Myra's father. He finally got around to looking at her genetic test and found she wasn't sired by either of you."

Julian sat speechless with his mouth open.

"Since the divorce was just a matter of filing paperwork with the lower court, Janus saw no problem in having me prepare it. He was planning to order you home the moment it was filed. I should have insisted he do it sooner because it was on the following morning that he broke his neck."

"I wish you had."

The Archon nodded. "Things are moving faster than I expected and you must act now."

"What am I to do?"

"Speed up your marriage and get yourself an heir. Your designated bride is from a powerful family. They'll brook no nonsense from Irina if anything happens to you."

"As long as you're telling me all this, who is my bride?"

The apartment's outside door opened before the Archon could reply.

"Julian. I had no idea you were already here."

The Emperor's tone was very soft. "Tell me, Major Domo, are you my friend or my enemy?"

The Archon interrupted. "He's your friend. But protecting you is not part of his job."

"What of the guards?"

"They're loyal too. It's within your own household you must look, my friend, and the false face you see will not necessarily be the one you expect."

Cassius rose from his chair, wincing a little. The Major Domo moved to help him, but he impatiently waved him away.

Julian frowned. "Is it worse?"

"It comes and goes but the heat aggravates the pain. Julian, I swear, if you don't do something about the air-conditioning in that rat trap of yours... I'll probably lose five pounds tonight just walking between the door and the throne."

Julian glanced at the padded gray robes on a nearby stand and the monstrous stilt-like boots beside them. "I have but it's pretty well overwhelmed by the crowd. A thousand people throw off a lot of body heat, you know." He looked pointedly around the antique-filled room. "And kindly refrain from referring to my place as a rat trap. After all, look at where you live! I've seen dog-kennels with more style. Yecch!"

Evidently accustomed to such banter, the Major Domo pulled up a chair and poured himself a cup of coffee without comment.

Julian glanced at him and their eyes met. "I hear you got in another doctor."

Cassius snorted. "Who said the usual! A chronic condition peculiar to addicts and Archons. And the reason none of us live very long, if you can call this a life!"

The Major Domo looked at the clock on the wall. "You're due in court in a few minutes, Julian. And Your Grace, you have cases to read up on before this afternoon."

Along with his other duties, the Emperor functioned as a magistrate, arbitrating land and custody disputes, reviewing criminal indictments, and ruling on referrals to the Archon's court. He extended his hand and the Archon held it for a moment. "You've given me a lot to think about."

Julian embraced him. "You need your rest before this afternoon's session. Major Domo, a word with you." Outside the door, he frowned. "If he has another seizure, you're to send for me at once! And I appreciate your getting a second medical opinion."

"You know how I feel. As his jailer, I'm supposed to shackle him at night, but I don't. There are those who would say I'm taking a chance he'll commit suicide or try to escape, but he's given me his word he won't do either."

"He'll keep it and I appreciate your consideration. There's no need for him to suffer any more than he does already."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I'll keep that in mind."

As the Major Domo slipped back inside the apartment, Julian waved at his waiting bodyguard and together they headed for his office at the other end of the complex.

At five that evening, Jonah knocked gently on the Emperor's door. Hearing no answer, he cautiously opened it, but the room was empty. After hanging Julian's brocaded silk robe in the ornate antique clothes press, he took out the brilliantly enameled coronet and its matching belt with the intention of polishing them for tonight's reception. Inspecting the jewel-toed boots and gauntleted gold-embroidered gloves, he decided they were clean enough and blowing on the Emperor's great ruby ring, he carefully shone it up with his sleeve. Finally, he climbed the stairs to the rooftop Conservatory where he found Julian absorbed with his plants.

"It's after five, Your Majesty."

Setting down his tools and brush, the Emperor wiped his hands on his dusty cotton pants. "Oh. Right. I hadn't realized it was quite so late, and I can't host a reception dressed like this, can I? See what you can find for me to wear while I take a bath."

Julian's tone was deceptively casual when they entered the vast bedroom. "Did you get moved into your room all right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve you."

"You're welcome. From now on, Jonah, your job will be to keep people like my dear stepmother and her bratty children away from me, remind me of my appointments and keep your mouth shut about my

personal affairs. If you can do all that, you'll be worth your weight in gold."

A couple of hours later, the Imperial Steward rapped his silver-headed staff against the marble floor. All conversation and music ceased, and every head turned toward the veiled figure standing in the entrance to the glittering ballroom. Topping his scarlet-clad Major Domo by at least a full head, the gray-robed Archon was so massive as to make the largest man present look small. Beside him, the slightly built Nublians looked like children.

"Your Majesties!" intoned the Steward, "His Grace, the Archon of Nublis!"

Julian slipped in a side door at the ballroom's far end. He was clad in a black velvet tunic, silk twill pants and matching soft boots, and his only touches of color were his brilliantly enameled coronet, its matching belt and the enormous ruby adorning his left hand.

In marked contrast to her Imperial stepson, Her Majesty had as usual overdone the jewelry. Between the ruby diadem atop her elaborate blond curls, the blaze of diamonds cascading around her throat and dangling from her ears, and the assortment of priceless baubles encrusting her dimpled arms and every available finger, the Empress resembled a store window mannequin whose dresser had gone berserk.

Cut so low as to cause gasps among the ladies and keep male attention firmly riveted on her all night, Irina's décolletage definitely erred on the side of vulgarity. Dutifully kissing his stepmother's outstretched hand, Julian speculated idly about what was keeping those creamy mounds from popping out altogether.

When Irina's hard blue gaze met his, he remembered the Archon's warning and wondered, not for the first time, what his father could possibly have seen in her.

Sweeping back her ebony silk skirts, the Empress returned his bow with a graceful curtsy. Much to Julian's relief, if not that of the anxiously watching courtiers, her abundant bosom remained firmly anchored within bounds.

Straight-faced, he offered her his left arm, and the two of them advanced in stately fashion to greet their guest.

At the ballroom's entrance, the Emperor released his stepmother, then he bowed and kissed the enormous emerald on the Archon's left hand. The Empress followed suit, as did Princess Eliane, elegant in simple white organdy and pearls.

Being commoners, Hero and Gaius stood aside.

Flanked by his Major Domo and the Imperial family, the Archon proceeded slowly through the crowd toward three ornate thrones set against the far wall. While the Nublian ladies curtsied and their men bowed, the visitors merely gaped. Once the Archon was seated, the Emperor took the throne to his right and the Empress to his left.

His Grace signaled to the Major Domo, who translated, "Please continue with the reception."

An hour later, after the Archon had left, the Emperor was bidding his stepmother a courteous goodnight at the foot of the stairs.

Watching him hand his coronet, belt and ring to a nearby servant, Irina flared with anger. She'd just seen one of the Emperor's favorite whispering in his ear, and she knew the slut's wealthy husband was conveniently off-planet.

"Aren't you dining with us?"

Fearing her stepson's uncertain temper, she said nothing more.

Julian's silver eyes mocked her. "My regrets, ma'am, but I have other plans."

His banquet appearance had been canceled, leaving him an hour to kill before his appointment with the Archon.

Noting Irina's scowl, he decided to take the luscious little Countess up on her offer. Beckoning to a scarlet-armored guard, he strolled down the Palace steps and out into the starlit night.

It was a little after nine and the Palace roof was deserted. Fitful moonlight silvered the red-tiled floor and the plant-crowded benches in the deserted Conservatory. As Ellie tiptoed inside, only the rustle of the leaves on the big plants near the entrance and the sigh of the wind disturbed the heavy silence.

"Jonah? I got your message! Jonah? Are you there?" Hearing a sound, she looked over her shoulder. "You're not Jonah! Where is –"

Something dropped over her head, muffling her shrieks. With her lungs starving for air and her heart about to come out of her chest, Ellie flailed her arms blindly. She tried to run, but a hand around her ankle brought her crashing to the marble floor. Rough fingers ripped her dress from throat to waist, exposing her breasts to the night chill. Scrabbling, they scratched her skin as they forced her legs apart.

A sharp hiss penetrated the silence. "Here! I'll hold her for you."

Vaguely she heard someone yell, a thunderous report, then the weight holding her down was suddenly gone. Hands freed her from the smothering cloth, and she looked up into Jonah's worried face.

Gasping and choking, she struggled to get up, and he put a steadying arm around her shoulders. "It's all right, Ellie! It's all right!"

Too late, she saw the upraised arm between his head and the sky. When it crashed down, Jonah's head impacted her chest, knocking her breathless. He slumped and lay still, while two more reports shattered the silence.

She dimly recognized them as shots.

Something thudded to the ground beside her and running feet pounded away.

Then she found her voice. She kept screaming, even after the guards arrived, until her voice was completely gone.

Suddenly, Julian was there.

He took her in his arms without a word. His breath warmed her face and Ellie drew in the scent of his light cologne like a benediction. As he carried her down the stairs, she grabbed him tightly around the neck, burrowing her head into his comforting shoulder.

In the darkness of his bedroom, he wrapped her in a soft blanket, then held her close, stroking her hair, murmuring endearments and rocking and soothing her like an infant for what seemed like hours. Only when he felt her trembling cease, did he finally lay her down.

"You may come in now."

As he turned on a light, she gave a tiny moan and closed her eyes.

"Sweetheart. Can you hear me?"

Throat sore, she was barely able to whisper, "Yes."

"The doctor's here, hon. He needs to examine you."

"Stay with me."

His cool touch brushed her fingers. "Take my hand."

She gulped, struggling, and he put his ear against her mouth. "You're asking about Jonah?"

Mutely, she nodded.

"Jonah's all right, love. What we need to do now is worry about you."

As the blanket was pulled away, she curled into a ball, hugging herself and whimpering.

"Ellie, the doctor's just trying to help."

When she still resisted, voices murmured. Softness enfolded her, something jabbed her arm and she fell a long, long way into nothing.

Three hours after the attack on Ellie, the Major Domo's voice crackled over the prison's speakers. "Get the doctor! And notify the Emperor!"

As yet another seizure racked the Archon's body, he started an intravenous line, eyeing the wall monitors all the while. Scrabbling around on the table next to the bed, he located a needle gun. Then he placed it against his gasping charge's neck and fired.

Almost instantly, the blood pressure and heart indicators dropped back into their normal ranges, the spasms and rigidity subsided and the Archon began breathing normally again.

The Major Domo was removing the clear plastic mask when the cell door opened.

The doctor looked over his shoulder and grunted. "This must be a very important inmate to demand your personal attention twice in one day. What did he take this time?"

"He's very important and I'm not sure."

The doctor took a skin scrape and checked it on his portable toximeter. "Oh, my! This is a potent nerve poison and it's not his first time. Tremendously powerful stuff. Sharpens the senses and does who knows what to the brain. Very big with the intellectual set." After passing a small device up and down Cassius' body, he shone a light into each of his eyes. "He'll live this time. The gases have normalized and he seems over the worst. It's a damn shame when someone this young starts throwing their life away. Did he look at the pamphlets I gave him? I can get him into the program in a minute if he shows any interest."

A guard whispered something to the Major Domo and he proffered his hand. "Thanks for coming so

promptly. In answer to your question, he threw the pamphlets away, but after this, we might persuade him to reconsider. Do you have any instructions?"

"Just keep him quiet. He should be back to normal in a couple of days. Your prompt action saved his life and he doesn't need any further medication."

Shortly after the doctor left, Julian entered the cell. "Bad reaction? Or was the reception too much?"

"A combination, probably. The toxicity range for the drugs is extremely narrow, and the fact that he had to wear those heavy robes for so long didn't help matters. When we get him back to his quarters, I'll see what I can do to make him more comfortable."

"When did he collapse?"

"About twenty minutes ago. He was talking to me and just fell to the floor."

As the Archon stirred, then lapsed into unconsciousness again, Julian looked down at him thoughtfully. "What did the doctor say?"

"He's stable and should be up and about in a couple of days."

"Do you need help taking him back?"

"No, I have it under control."

The Major Domo pressed a button on a device in his hand, and the cell's back wall rolled aside to reveal the Archon's quarters. He guided the bed with its sleeping occupant into the other room, and once they were safely inside, the wall closed again.

"Very convenient," said the Emperor.

"Isn't it? Your late father was a fine engineer, and he and I worked it out together. We did a lot of work on this place, and it has secrets you wouldn't believe."

The Major Domo gestured through a nearby archway toward a gleaming kitchen. "Your father set that up for him when he was first designated. He spent a lot of time fiddling with it and adding new gadgets as he came across them. There isn't a battle cruiser in the entire Synod that has one any better."

"I had no idea."

"Your father spent a great deal of time with the Archon during those four years after you left to live on Aretz. Many an evening, the Archon would cook for us. Then the two of them would play chess with your music in the background. Irina thought Janus was with one of his mistresses but he was usually over here."

Pulling off his mask, the Major Domo sighed. "Since your father's death, the Archon's been unusually depressed. He never used to complain the way he does now and his seizures are becoming much more frequent and severe. This last doctor gave me something to control them and I'm going to start administering it regularly. When the sedatives failed, I administered a bolus and it did the trick. The trouble is the stuff's got its own set of side effects and some of them are quite unpleasant. But if it gives him some relief and helps him tolerate the heat, it'll be worth a try. The doctor thinks it could extend his life and he's had considerable success with it in his detox program. It's still experimental which is why I hadn't come across it before."

The Major Domo hooked up the bedside monitors and checked them. "The new literature will help me fine tune the dosages and mitigate the side-effects. Of course, the doctor had no idea why I wanted it."

Julian was impressed. "You seem to know a great deal about the subject."

"I've always had an interest in pharmacology, and your father arranged for me to take some courses. But neither of us ever anticipated this. We just thought it would be a useful skill for the Captain of the Guard and it helped me with my productive work requirement. The Archon's already lived longer than most of his predecessors and my skills may have had something to do with that."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

The Major Domo shook his head.

The Emperor looked at the clock. "The investigators are waiting. Can you let them know I'm on my way?"

The Major Domo pressed another button and spoke into an intercom that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"Does the Archon know about that?" The Emperor's tone was all innocence.

"No, he doesn't! And you're not going to tell him either. Now, get out of here. After you're done with the investigators, go get some sleep. You'd best go out by way of the cell or the guard's gonna think you can walk through walls."

Chapter 3--The Bride

"Core-e-y! Core-e-y! Where are you?"

Glancing up from her book, the young girl took another munch from the cake in her hand and hunkered down again.

The voice insisted. "Corre-e-y! Your father's here! Wherever you are, please come here!"

Pushing her companion off her stomach where he'd been settled in perfect happiness, she looked around in frustration. "Oh, I suppose!"

The little gray cat squeaked a protest.

"Sorry, Mingus, but I'd best go see what's got Marta in such an uproar. If Father's here, it must be important." Oblivious to the cat's grumbles, Corey scrambled to her feet, picked him up by the scruff of his neck and swung one-handed down the barn loft ladder.

At the kitchen door of the rambling manor-house, Marta took one despairing look at her sunburned charge's ragged shorts, bare feet, and the straw sprigs tangling her auburn hair. "Where've you been? Your father's just come from the capital with a group of important gentlemen. I'm to get you into your

best dress immediately, but how we're to make you presentable in this short a time, I don't know. Come on! We'll have to do the best we can. Oh, and from now on, we're to refer to you as Lady Cornelia. His lordship says Corey ain't dignified."

After chivvying her upstairs to be bathed and curled, Marta laced Corey into an elaborate formal gown her father had given her the previous year. Until today, she'd never worn it and once Marta was finished, she faced her full-length mirror and assessed the result. With her chestnut hair piled on top of her head, a green ribbon threaded through it, and long dangly emerald earrings to match her eyes, she found the reflection interesting, to say the least. But it didn't look a bit like her.

As for this ridiculous gown! In a futile attempt to make them look bigger, the bodice's boning pushed up her small... correction, very small... breasts almost beyond the limits of decency and yanking at it didn't help.

She felt a pulling at the full skirt's hem and looked down at Mingus flexing his claws. With a sense of something ending, Corey swept the little cat into her arms. She kissed the top of his head and suddenly felt afraid.

The bedroom door opened and in bustled Marta. "Now, Corey... Lady Cornelia... remember what your dancing teacher said about walkin' gracefully."

Corey kicked the door shut, blocked it with a chair and straddled it with her hands on her small hips. "Not until you tell me what's going on!"

With her double chins wobbling and her gray hair askew, Marta's pale blue eyes darted around the small bedroom. "Oh, dear, this is all very distressin'!"

Corey's growl grew ominous. "Well? Are we going to stay here forever? Or what?"

A sharp rap startled her off the chair. "Cornelia. This is your father."

She debated for all of one second. Marta might be one thing but her father was quite another. Swinging the chair toward her mother's prized marble-topped dresser with its silver-trimmed triple mirror and inlaid porcelain medallions, she slipped the lock.

Resplendent in royal blue velvet robes, with the Parliamentary chain of office gleaming on his substantial chest and a faint trace of gray dusting his sleek black curls, the redoubtable Lord Rollo looked every inch the political leader he was.

His apparent amiability and smiling blue eyes worried Corey far more than his customary displeasure. After looking her over like one of his prize livestock, his lordship grunted his approval and proffered an arm. She took a deep breath and bunching up her long green skirts in one hand, she gave her father the other.

Together they advanced down the polished wooden staircase.

When they reached the dark-paneled hall below, he released her.

Remembering to keep one knee firmly locked behind the other and trying not to wobble as she rose, Corey swept the waiting company a deep curtsy. Gentlemen of obvious distinction, they wore the same robes of office as her father, and were either gray-haired or balding.

Lord Rollo led her forward. "Cornelia, may I present the leaders of our Houses of Parliament."

A corpulent white-haired individual in brown velvet bowed in reply. "I am Crispin Colvert, the Speaker for the Lower House. The Emperor Julian has informed us that he wishes to marry and you've been selected to be his bride. We're to have the honor of escorting you to the capital, my lady."

Oh, no! The Emperor's old! I'm barely eighteen and he's got to be thirty at least! Oh, please! This has to be a mistake! Maybe it's the stuff of dreams in books but this is real life. It isn't in the least bit romantic! It's awful! She blurted out the first thing that came into her head. "Can I take Mingus?"

Her father's rumble broke the stunned silence. "And who, may I ask, is Mingus?"

Her black skirts crackling, Marta curtsied. "My lord, he's Lady Cornelia's pet cat. She's very attached to 'im."

Crispin Colvert's hazel eyes twinkled down into Corey's green ones. "We can certainly take Mingus, my lady."

"Marta, find some sort of basket to carry him in, and get a couple of the maids to pack her things."

"Marta's going too?"

"Of course, my dear. Since you're without a mother, having no chaperone would be improper. We're expected in the capital tonight and you're to be the Archon's guest in the Temple until the wedding. There's a state funeral tomorrow for a member of the Imperial Family and that'll give you and Marta a chance to settle in and see some of the sights. You're to be formally presented to His Majesty and the Court on the following morning."

"As to the wedding date," interjected the Parliamentary leader, "that will have to wait until the Archon's recovered from his illness. I've been informed that should be quite soon. The delay, my lady, will give you a chance to become acquainted with your future husband not generally accorded Imperial brides. The Emperor Julian is a charming person and he has a younger sister who's almost your age."

Corey barely heard him. Her stomach was clenching and unclenching and she felt faint.

Noting her distress, her father led her to a chair.

"I know this is a shock, Cornelia, but I saw no reason to tell you your name had been submitted. The Emperor had originally planned to wait the statutory two years and it never occurred to me you'd be considered. Just this morning, His Majesty notified Parliament he wished to marry immediately. Your name was drawn and the law is the law."

When Corey awoke in the Temple on the following morning, none of the furniture looked familiar. Especially the gold and crimson hangings on the enormous carved bed.

She wondered where she was, when a familiar scratching came from the direction of the door.

"All right, Mingus. I'm coming. There's a beautiful garden out there and it should do."

As she rummaged through the enormous mirrored closet for a cotton shirt and pants, the scratching grew more urgent and she decided she could manage without shoes. It was early yet, and by the time Mingus

had done his business, they should be back in the apartment again with no one the wiser. Marta was still happily sawing logs at the other end of the hall and she saw no reason to wake her.

Once in the garden, Corey reckoned without her cat's curiosity. Ignoring his mistress's pleas, he leapt onto a low balcony on its opposite side. With a flick of his tail, he disappeared inside.

"Mingus! Come back! You can't go in there! Oh, dear." She hesitated for a moment and decided she'd better go after him. She had an idea the rooms on that side of the garden were offices. It was early yet and, with any luck, there'd be no one around.

After slipping over the balcony railing, she stood for a moment, wondering what to do. Save for the room's tall windows, there was no other place Mingus could have gone.

"Where did you spring from? And just what do you think you're doing on my desk?"

Corey knew Mingus' extreme fondness for playing with papers only too well. Not to mention his habit of chewing them up. *Now we're in trouble. Well, I might as well get it over with.*

After politely rapping on the side of the window, she stepped inside the room.

As her vision adjusted to the interior dimness, the voice spoke again. "And just who might you be?"

Corey blinked. With his silver-blond hair, golden skin and gray eyes, the man at the huge carved desk was actually quite handsome. He looked kind too.

To her horror, Mingus was flopped in the middle of his papers. While the man caressed him almost absently, the little renegade just lay there purring, waving his paws in the air and begging for more.

"Er. Oh. We just arrived last night. I'm so sorry. I didn't think. He needed to go out and he got away from me. My name's Corey – er Rollo."

"And this is?"

"Mingus. He's a he."

"So I noticed. Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Rollo, and – er Mingus. My name's J – er Jon de Raven, and as you can see, I work here."

"Well, aren't you a mite early? I mean it's only five. I thought the office people didn't get here until seven at least."

"That's true, but I got behind on my work and sneaked in to catch it up. I was about to order breakfast. As long as you're here, would you and Mingus care for some?"

"I'm not going to get you in trouble, am I?"

He smiled. "I should hardly think so. What do you and Mingus like to eat?" After she told him, he pressed a button on the intercom. When he'd given his order, he asked, "Aren't they going to miss you, the people you're staying with?"

"There's only Marta and I left her snoring. She's good for another couple of hours, at least, and she'll never know I was gone."

In answer to a knock on the door, the man opened it, then maneuvered a wheeled cart through the doorway and over to the window. Mingus jumped to the floor and followed him, keeping a close eye on

the cart. Their host started lifting silver covers from the steaming dishes and Corey's mouth began to water.

The office's outer door opened and a scarlet-robed masked figure hurried in. "Julian, I –" He saw Corey and stopped in mid-sentence.

With a gulp, she recognized the Archon's Major Domo, and he evidently recognized her too. Oh, dear, here she was, already in trouble and she hadn't even been here a day. If she kept it up, Parliament would probably pick someone else and what her father would do then, she didn't even care to contemplate. Then it hit her. "Julian? He said his name was Jon de Raven!"

The Major Domo bowed. "My Lady Cornelia, this is His Majesty, the Emperor Julian. De Raven is his family name. Why he should say his name is Jon is a mystery that perhaps he would care to explain."

They turned to look at the Emperor who, for once in his life, couldn't think of a thing to say.

Mingus jumped on the cart. He knocked over one of the dishes with a clatter and the awkward moment passed.

Julian was obviously relieved. "What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"The problem's solved. Lady Cornelia's chaperone awoke a short time ago and found her gone. She's quite agitated. We've been looking for you all over the complex, my lady."

The Emperor pressed the intercom and spoke into it. "I'll send someone to let her know the Lady Cornelia is having breakfast here."

"She shouldn't be here without a chaperone!"

Julian picked up the little cat and rubbed his ears. "Ah, but she has one. His name's Mingus. And now you're here, Major Domo. What could be more proper than that?"

"You're incorrigible," said the Major Domo, after Corey had been hurried away by her distraught chaperone, "but perhaps this is going to make things easier all around."

"She's quite charming," reflected the Emperor, "and I'm not sure married life is going to be so bad after all. What's the news on Jonah?"

"He's finally awake. We've obtained legal counsel for him as you requested. I was waiting to question him until you got there."

"Has he been charged?"

"Attempted rape and murder. There's some question about the rape but the murder will probably stick. Magistrate Cato is preparing the indictments and they should be ready to go to the Archon any time. The press is descending from all over the Synod and I doubt there's a room to be had between here and the Northern Shore."

"That's why I was hiding out here. They haven't figured out how to get past Temple security but the Palace Guard is pretty lax. Half my household staff is on the payroll of some tabloid or other and I can't go to the Conservatory because the investigators are still working."

"Speaking of which, what's the situation with Ellie?"

"The doctors examined her while she was still under..." Words failed Julian, and he clenched and unclenched his fists several times. Then he swallowed hard. "There's no DNA evidence because the rape was incomplete."

"What about Irina?"

"The doctor have had her sedated. I never thought I'd feel sorry for her, but I do. Right now, she's trying to pull herself together for the funeral. I've been trying to write the eulogy and can't think of one positive thing to say about that boy, except that he was murdered. If my suspicions are correct, Jonah should be getting a medal instead of lying shackled in a prison cell awaiting his death sentence from the Archon."

"The Archon may be our only hope. His instinct for the truth is absolute and with all this publicity, his is probably the only Court in the Synod capable of an impartial trial."

The Major Domo opened the office door and stood aside. "After you."

When they reached the prison, Julian frowned at the doctor. "How bad is it?"

"He's still critical, Your Majesty. We did emergency surgery to relieve the pressure on his brain. Barring complications, he should be all right."

Julian glanced at the Major Domo. "We haven't been able to get a thing out of Ellie. She's still sedated and it's going to be a while before she can be questioned. I have meetings for most of the day and two banquets to attend. My secretary has a copy of my agenda." He rubbed his burning eyes. "Titus called. He's on his way back to the capital and the funeral's scheduled for the day after tomorrow. I don't imagine the Archon's going to be back on his feet by then so I'll have to officiate in his place. Considering all the complications, it would probably be better if he knew nothing about this at all."

"The Archon's better, Your Majesty. He's been asking for you."

Julian's sharp tone conveyed his irritation. "You'll just have to put him off! Since this whole mess is liable to wind up in his court and I'm personally involved, you understand why I have to distance myself, don't you? There's something about this... I can't put my finger on it. He told me to look within my own household and that the false face I would see might not be the one I expected. I know the answer's there, if I can just figure it out."

"Did Your Majesty get any sleep at all?"

"No! I got some adrenaline from the prison doctor to get me through today and cleared tomorrow's appointments so that I can get some rest before the funeral."

From the way he was buzzing, it occurred to the Major Domo that Julian must already be on the adrenaline. He started to say something, thought better of it, and decided instead to have a quiet chat with the head of Archon Security.

A medical attendant came out of the cell and spoke urgently to the doctor. He beckoned. "Come, Your Majesty. You'll want to hear this."

Jonah's eyes were wide open, and he struggled so hard against the restraints it took all the attendants' strength to hold him down.

"Get away from her! Ellie! Ellie! It's all right, Ellie. Ellie... it's... all... right. You'll be... they...." His voice trailed off and he lay still.

The doctor glanced at the monitors. "This is not at unusual. His brain patterns and vital functions are within normal ranges and his level of consciousness is fairly high. He knows Your Majesty's voice and might respond better than he would to mine."

The Emperor's tone was authoritative. "Jonah, can you hear me? Jonah!"

The young man's eyelids flickered, his hand twitched, and he muttered something unintelligible.

"I think that's all we're going to get for now."

"If there's any change, notify the Major Domo. He'll know where to find me."

As they were leaving, the Major Domo said, "Since we don't want to take any chances of his hearing something he shouldn't, I've administered a chemical neural block to the Archon. It causes temporary deafness." He saw Julian's horrified look. "The block's perfectly harmless...and reversible. How acute his hearing really is, I don't know, but I've suspected for some time that the drugs have a cumulative effect. He said as much the other night. Right now, he's sleeping most of the time, so all it will do is help him to rest better."

"I hope you explained why you gave him that neural block. Otherwise, I suspect he'd be out of his mind by now."

"I had to write it out. He's totally deaf, and you don't even want to know what he said back. He has an incredible command of sign language and he certainly used it on me. He sends his regards, by the way, and is looking forward to seeing your bride. What time's the funeral?"

"Three. Between now and then, I have to dodge the press, return to the Palace, pay my respects and get ready to officiate."

"I have some spare robes and a mask you can borrow. I'll stay out of sight until you're safely away."

When they returned three hours later, Jonah's peaked face under the bandage looked even thinner than usual. The shackle on his wrist rattled as he plucked at the sheet. Julian nodded to the gray-haired man near the bed. "I'm glad you're here, Master Ludlow."

At the sight of the Major Domo's scarlet robes and masked face, Jonah gasped and shrank back. As his advocate put out a reassuring hand, the Major Domo spoke. "The doctor tells me that the prisoner's well enough to be questioned and His Majesty's asked to be present in an unofficial capacity. Is this acceptable to you?"

"As long as he's not to be called as a witness."

"Since His Majesty's well-known to the Archon and can contribute nothing of any material value, he's been excused from these proceedings. He's recused himself as a lower court judge and from taking any part in the prosecution or the defense"

"In that case," said the advocate, "His Majesty may remain. Now Jonah, you've been charged with some serious crimes, which carry the death penalty. But you're considered innocent until the prosecutor furnishes absolute proof of your guilt. Until you appear before the Archon, and it's not at all certain you

will, you don't have to say anything. The Major Domo can ask all the questions he wants but you don't have to answer. However, if you do, everything will be recorded on that camera. It can be played in court and used against you."

Jonah looked hopefully up at Julian but the Emperor's face remained expressionless. "I'll answer his questions, sir. I haven't done anything wrong and I didn't do what they say I did."

"All right, Jonah," said the Major Domo. "I want you to tell me, step by step, exactly what you remember."

The young man started to speak but the advocate put out a warning hand. "Don't answer! Major Domo, you know better than that. Henceforth, please refrain from fishing expeditions, and confine yourself to specific questions based on what you have. But before you begin, there's something Jonah needs to see."

While Julian understood the Major Domo's frustration, he appreciated the advocate's skilful protection of Jonah's rights and was thankful he'd insisted on his presence.

The guard placed a small viewscreen at the foot of the bed and when he saw himself appear, Jonah started.

"This is all that they know at present," continued the advocate, "and it's hardly an admission of any guilt. But even if it was, it's still the prosecution's job to furnish proof. Without that, you couldn't be convicted no matter what you confessed. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Jonah took a deep breath. "I think so. And I'm ready to answer your questions, Major Domo."

* * *

The Archon looked up from his book in response to the Major Domo's touch on his shoulder. He started signing, remembered Julian couldn't understand, and reached for the slate instead.

"Welcome, stranger," he wrote. "What do you want this time?"

Julian gasped. "You haven't taken his powers of speech as well!"

"Unfortunately, yes. This type of neural block also paralyzes the vocal cords. Which is why I don't use it any more than I have to."

Obviously impatient, Cassius erased the slate and wrote again, "Well?"

Julian took it from him and wrote in his turn, "I just came by to say hello."

The Archon signed to the Major Domo who translated, "That's a likely story."

He signed again and the Major Domo continued. "The bride. Is she pretty or is she a... warthog? I hope she's a warthog...because that's...what a rat like you deserves."

Julian thought for a minute. "Tell him she's...beautiful. No, don't translate that. Just tell him she's pretty."

The Archon shook his head.

"There's no justice," translated the Major Domo. "Would you care to have dinner with me tonight? The Major Domo's a bore and I'm sick of his company. How about a game of chess afterward? If you still...have the brains to play."

"Tell him I can still beat him with one hand tied behind my back."

Julian was overcome by a wave of such sadness, he dropped his head to keep the Archon from seeing his eyes.

A hand tapped his shoulder and he looked up.

Cassius held out the slate. "What is it, old friend?"

Julian smiled wryly. He wiped the slate and wrote, "How did you know?"

The Archon replied, "I know you." Then he signed rapidly.

The Major Domo said, "There's something you're not telling me. What's happened?"

"Tell him... I don't know what to tell him." Sinking into a chair, Julian put his head in his hands, and the tears he'd been holding back for so long broke through. He felt a touch on his arm, and looked up to see the Archon again holding out the slate.

"I understand."

He rubbed his hands over his face. "Tell him I'll be back around ten for that dinner, and it had better be good. Tell him—"

The Major Domo sighed. "I know exactly what to tell him. And right now, I'm not sure which one of you needs the other more."

Mindful of the press infesting the great square, Julian decided to return to the Palace via one of the service tunnels. He looked around for his customary escort, then remembered that, for once in his life, he hadn't thought to bring one. Until he entered the echoing stone passageway, he hadn't realized it was quite so lonely and he shivered slightly. Much cooler than the summer air outside, the tunnel's silence was absolute and he felt isolated after the bustle of the Temple complex.

Halfway between the Palace and the Temple, Julian heard footsteps behind him.

When he turned to look, a blow glanced against his head from the opposite direction.

Instinctively, the Emperor ducked. Then he whirled sharply, kicking back and upward with his right foot at the same time. His toe connected with a crack and he heard a sharp grunt.

The assailant threw up his arms, thudding to the dusty ground like a sack of potatoes.

A shot cracked from behind them, and Julian whirled again, just in time to see a second body hit the ground.

A slender youth with smooth black hair and brown eyes came walking out of the shadows.

He was a stranger to Julian, who instantly assumed a fighting stance.

The young man raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. Once Julian relaxed, he stooped and picked up a knife near one of the bodies. He held it up to the light. "Do you see this discoloration? All he needed to do was to nick you."

Julian recovered his breath. "Who in the hell are you?"

"Archon Security on special assignment for His Grace. I've been shadowing you for some time." Pulling a small device from his sleeve, the agent spoke rapidly into it. "Don't worry about the bodies. We'll take care of them."

Bodies? wondered Julian. Belatedly realizing that his head was at an odd angle, he glanced down at the still form of the man he had just kicked. When he looked up again, he was all alone.

As soon as he reached the Palace, Julian went straight to Ellie's room.

He was just raising his hand to knock when the door opened and the motherly medical attendant curtsied. "Oh, Your Majesty! My lady's been asking for you."

"Would you be good enough to get the Princess and me some tea? Then you can leave us alone."

As the attendant bustled off, the Emperor drew up a chair. The kitten's small black form was curled up on the bed next to his mistress and when she saw her brother, Ellie began to cry.

He held her until her sobs subsided and finally she lifted her head from his shoulder.

"Oh, Julian! Your shirt's all wet!"

"That it is! But I've plenty more shirts and only one Ellie. Look! Here's our tea and some good-looking cakes as well." He made a gesture of dismissal. "Thank you. I'll call you in a little while."

As he poured her a cup, Ellie frowned. "Have you seen Jonah? I keep asking, but no one will tell me anything! They just give me funny looks."

The steaming tea soothed Julian's parched throat and he sat for a moment savoring it. "You can blame me for that. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner, sweetheart, but I've had a lot to do."

Her brow wrinkled. "Something's happened to Jonah! I just know it. Where is he? Why doesn't he come?"

He laid a finger across her mouth. "If you'll just hush, I'll tell you. Jonah hasn't come because he's not all right. In fact, he needs our help desperately."

"I knew it! Something terrible has happened to him. I didn't dream it, did I?"

"No, you didn't. Sweetheart, I want you to do something for Jonah and me, and you must listen carefully without interrupting."

Desperately tired after the attack in the tunnel, Julian wished he could lie down next to Ellie and just go to sleep.

Instead, he sat straighter in the chair, took a deep breath and stretched his arms. "Ellie, some people are coming in here to ask you some questions and they'll be recording everything you say. Starting with why you went to the Conservatory in the first place, you must tell them exactly what happened, what you saw

and heard...and physically felt. They'll let you take your time. I'll be right over there but you aren't to address me or even so much as look in my direction. Do you understand?"

"Is this going to help Jonah?"

"I think so. Can you do it?"

"Of course. Jonah saved me from those men and I'll do anything in my power to help him."

Satisfied, Julian opened the door. "You may come in now. She's ready for you."

When the Emperor returned to the Archon's quarters later that night, the Major Domo met him at the door with a grin. "You were right! Something doesn't add up and the Archon spotted it in less than two seconds. He kicked the indictment back to Magistrate Cato after covering it with slashing notations and he's ordered him to redo the whole thing if he wants a trial date. Cato isn't happy but Master Ludlow seems quite pleased."

Julian smiled in return. "He's going to be even more pleased when he reviews Ellie's testimony."

The Major Domo looked at him sharply. "He also threw out the rape charge and wrote some salty comments Magistrate Cato won't soon forget."

"Ha! I won our bet then! You can pay up any time. How is he otherwise?"

"Resigned to the deafness. In fact, he says it even has its advantages. Now if he doesn't want to pay attention to me, all he has to do is close his eyes. And believe me, he does just that."

Seeing Julian's lips twitch, the Major Domo sighed. "I think he's actually enjoying the fact that there's at least one small aspect of his life I don't control."

"There's always going to be something, Major Domo, and your constant battle of wills is why he hasn't gone insane or killed himself by now. If he really wanted to end it all, you know he'd find a way. Much as I hate to say it, the old Archon knew what he was doing when he designated him. So did my father when he designated you."

"Thank you. I think. Incidentally, what's this I hear about an attack in the tunnel?"

"As if you didn't know! Well, at least all of your martial arts lessons paid off. You've drilled me so well I still work out every day, no matter what."

"So does he. Every morning."

"Whose idea was it to shadow me?"

"His. He's had someone on you for months."

Julian shivered. "If he hadn't... do you have any idea who attacked me?"

"Professionals, and it wasn't random. One scratch from that knife and there's no way we could have saved you."

"I don't think there was anything random about the attack on Ellie either. But we're just going to have let that one play itself out and see where it goes. I'd originally thought Hero's death unintended. Now I'm no

longer even sure about that."

"What does Prince Titus think of all this?"

"We haven't discussed it. As a matter of fact, I haven't told anyone in the family because I'm just not sure who's who any more."

Sounds of activity issued from the kitchen and the Major Domo smiled. "He's been cooking ever since you left. And his food's so hard to resist, I'm gaining weight."

Julian shouted with laughter. "I told you he'd find a way to get at you. He has, hasn't he?"

The Major Domo looked chagrined. "As well as I know him, I never thought of that."

The Emperor put a sympathetic arm around his shoulders. "Told ya!"

Chapter 4...Cross-currents

In her apartment on the other side of the Temple complex, Corey surreptitiously lifted her right foot to rub it against her left shin. She wobbled and almost fell off the table.

Dropping her scissors with an exclamation, the dressmaker stepped on Mingus' tail.

An outraged squall issued from beneath the tablecloth's fringe and when Corey turned to look, a pin stuck her in the side.

Marta shrieked, "Be careful!"

Corey burst into a storm of tears while her old nurse and the dressmaker looked at each other helplessly. "That's it! I don't want to be presented! I don't want to be married! I wanna go ho-o-ome!"

"Can I help?"

A lady stood in the open doorway. The height of elegance in a steel-blue velvet jumpsuit, she carried a matching coat over her arm and a briefcase in her hand. With green eyes a shade deeper than Corey's and a cloud of copper hair whose brightness challenged the dimming light, her delicately classic features could have graced any antique painting.

The lady's husky, almost musical voice matched her looks. "I was just passing and wondered if there was something I could do."

While Corey sniffled and Marta and the dressmaker stood open-mouthed like the silly geese they were, the lady offered a hand to help her down. "My name's Galia Alazne and I work for His Majesty. You're the Lady Cornelia, aren't you?" Then she turned to Marta. "This child's exhausted! Why don't I get us all something to drink from the commissary? Then we can sit for a moment and give her a breathing spell."

Galia Alazne was Julian's long-time court secretary and she'd just been transferred to the Major Domo's jurisdiction to help him deal with the influx of press during Jonah's upcoming murder trial.

She was glad to be away from the Emperor in his present mood. Something was troubling him and he was quite unlike his usual pleasant self.

Along with the rest of the Temple staff, she knew all about Cornelia and Mingus' early morning escapade, and she'd been glad for Julian. He desperately needed relief and from what she'd heard, they'd certainly provided it.

Galia hadn't expected to like the Major Domo whose slave-driving reputation was well-deserved.

To her surprise, she did.

He'd let her get on with the organization of her new office without interference or officious suggestions. She'd been impressed with his equanimity and good humor as he juggled an awesome range of responsibilities and at one point during the day, she'd actually found herself speculating as to what really lay under those red robes and whether her new boss was bound by the same rules of celibacy as the Archon.

Galia and Julian had once been lovers and their monogamous affair had lasted for four happy sun-filled years.

Her world had come crashing down the night he'd departed for Aretz without a word of explanation. After her initial grief subsided, Galia vowed that no man would ever hurt her like that again, and then determinedly moved on with her life.

When she'd returned to work for the Emperor after his coronation, the Temple staff assumed their affair had started up again. But contrary to the gossip, her relationship with Julian remained strictly platonic. While they never discussed it, she knew that was far more her doing than his, because it was obvious Julian still loved her.

Being the kind of person he was, he never pushed it, and had he even tried to explain or ask her forgiveness, things might have been different.

But he never did.

Although she retained more feelings for him than she cared to admit, Galia's stubborn pride wouldn't permit her to ask. In the face of Julian's continued silence, her refusal to give him what he so obviously wanted had become a matter of self-respect. Even so, there were nights when her resolve would weaken and she'd have all she could do not to call his private number. Then she'd remember the terrible night he left her and her heart would harden again.

By the time Galia returned with the promised drinks, the atmosphere in the apartment had calmed considerably.

Corey was curled up in the big chair, with her knees drawn up and Mingus nestled on her stomach while Marta and the dressmaker commiserated with one another at the table.

Handing out the refreshments, Galia asked briskly, "What are we trying to accomplish here?"

In no time at all, she had Corey up on the table again and the dressmaker back to her measuring and pinning.

When the now-beaming Marta displayed her charge's limited wardrobe, she shook her head. While Julian might care little or nothing about fashion, the lacquered ladies of the Imperial Court were something else again. They'd be looking for any excuse to make his young bride miserable and they could do it too. If the Lady Cornelia was going to be any match for them, let alone the formidable Irina, something had to be done about her clothes.

Galia frowned at the elaborate green silk dress. "This absolutely won't do."

Marta's chin wobbled in agitation. "What's she to wear to the presentation then? This is all we've got."

Galia pointed to a long-sleeved tunic of thin white Aretzan silk. "Show me that again."

"But it's so plain."

By way of an answer, Galia looked inquiringly at the dressmaker. "What do you have with you?" Ruffling through the stack of fabrics, she chose a bolt of blue-gray velvet. "Now let me see your designs. Marta? Show me her shoes and jewelry."

She rapidly leafed through the dressmaker's patterns. "How long would it take you to run up this cape?"

"Oh, not long, Miss Galia. It's simple and I've already got the measurements."

"Let's do it, then."

While the dressmaker snipped and pinned and worked her magic, Galia searched through the remainder of Corey's modest wardrobe. Finally she selected a pair of flat-heeled white shoes, sapphire beads on a chain so fine as to be almost invisible, and delicate earrings shaped like snowflakes.

When the dressmaker finally announced she was done, Galia helped Corey down from the table. "Now, let's see how this looks."

Marta fussed around them. "Aren't we going to curl her hair?"

Galia shook her head. "It's perfect just the way it is."

By the time they were finished, the antique clock on the wall was striking midnight.

When she saw herself in the mirror, Corey gasped, "I'm beautiful!"

Galia's eyes met hers in the glass. "That you are, little one. And don't you ever forget it."

Overcome with emotion, Corey flung her arms around the older woman's neck. "How can I ever thank you!"

Tears filling her eyes, Galia swallowed hard. "Sweetheart! You just did!"

The Emperor had just finished dressing on the following morning, when he heard a knock on his bedroom door. A scarlet-liveried servant poked in his head. "There's a lady asking to see you, Your Majesty."

She says her name's Galia Alazne and that it's urgent."

Julian frowned.

Galia? In all the years they'd known each other, she had never come here, and what this particular visit was in aid of, he couldn't begin to imagine.

Figuring he might as well find out, he told the servant mildly, "Please show the lady up. While you're at it, remove this tray and bring a fresh one."

Galia's smile never failed to uplift Julian's spirits and today was no exception.

He returned it and looked at her inquiringly.

Her answer wasn't long in coming. "I'll come right to the point, Your Majesty! I just spent half the night putting your new bride together for the presentation and she needs help."

Julian raised an eyebrow. "Ah! You do come right to the point. And just what do you suggest I do?"

Aware she was on dangerous ground, Galia nevertheless ploughed on. "The Lady Cornelia has no mother. The only people she has to care for her are a half-witted elderly chaperone, a father who's never there, and a small cat called Mingus. They were going to dress her, excuse my language, like a marketplace whore and –"

"You want to help her?"

"Well, I...already did. At least for today's ceremony."

"Thank you." The Emperor's tone was dry.

His reaction flustered Galia. "Oh, dear! This is all wrong! I shouldn't have come! It's just that the poor little thing was in tears and she really has no one.... I apologize for having disturbed you, Your Majesty! I'd better go! Maybe the Empress Irina...after you're married...."

Julian pointed to a chair. "Stay! Because you're absolutely right. The Lady Cornelia is going to need help and I appreciate your bringing it to my attention. But the last thing I want is for the Empress Irina to become involved. She's cost me far too much already." He took her hands in his. "Oh Galia! She cost me you! I loved you so much! When I left for Aretz that night, I couldn't tell anyone why. I wanted you to join me in the worst way but it just wasn't possible! After I came back, I hoped...but you'd moved on. And who's to blame you? Oh, why is it that everyone I love is taken away from me?"

Galia had never seen such desolation and she certainly hadn't expected it of Julian. Without quite knowing why, she asked, "Does this have anything to do with the Archon?"

He was obviously startled. "What?"

"Well, does it?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Something about the Archon's troubling you. It's troubling the Major Domo too."

"Is anyone else saying this?"

"Why, no, Your Majesty. It was just a thought I had. It all started at about the time of that tourist's trial

and execution and it's continued ever since. And I'll be honest with you, you've changed so much in the past few days, I was seriously considering taking another position."

"Why didn't you?"

She smiled. "I like working with the Major Domo."

"You prefer him to me?"

"Er – yes, I do."

Well, score one for the Major Domo. "Don't you want to come back to work for me?"

"I'm not sure. Why don't we wait and see?"

The Emperor smiled. "Galia, I really appreciate you bringing this business with the Lady Cornelia to my attention...and for helping her prepare for the presentation. With everything else that's been on my mind, I hadn't stopped to think what it must be like for her. If you can help her, please do. In fact, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have looking after her right now. Thank you."

On an impulse, Galia put her arms around him. She felt his arousal, but when he started to reciprocate she pulled away.

After she was gone, Julian stood looking after her for a long time. Then he collected himself, because there was something he needed to do. Unpleasant though it was, he figured he'd better get it over with as soon as possible.

Irina's dramatic sob echoed through the sudden silence.

"Well, I hardly think that's reasonable."

Resplendent in a high-necked ebony chiffon house-gown with her blond curls veiled in jet-trimmed black lace, the Empress was artfully arranged in a rose brocade wing chair with her feet on a matching hassock and a mountain sable wrap across her knees. She trailed a black bordered silk handkerchief from one delicate hand.

Lavishly embroidered with the Imperial arms of the hammer and the sword, Julian hadn't seen it before.

As darkly handsome as his brother Hero had been ugly, Irina's twelve-year-old son, Gaius, scowled from one corner of the lavishly furnished room and Irina's young lover, Titus, hovered solicitously next to her chair.

As she dabbed at her eyes, the Prince took her other hand in his.

Julian frowned at the gesture. "This is a difficult time for all of us, but the fact remains these are the Empress's apartments! As such, they must be prepared for my bride! The wedding's to take place just as soon as the Archon's up to performing the ceremony and I've just been advised he's feeling much better."

"But this is my home! It's where my daughter was born and..." Catching sight of the Emperor's thunderous expression, Irina's voice trailed off.

The Prince rose to his feet. "Isn't there some way –"

To the young man's surprise, Julian turned on him in an absolute fury. "Stay out of this, Titus, or you'll live to regret it! I'm just about to the end of my patience with you!" Out of the tail of his eye, he saw Gaius move in his direction. "Don't even think it!"

Titus made as if to speak.

"For the last time, sit down and butt out! Irina, this is a very large Palace with plenty of room for everyone! I've ordered the east wing opened and the decorators are on their way! They're to work overtime if need be and you can do anything you want. But you absolutely have to be out of here by the end of the week! If you're not gone by then, I'll have you forcibly removed! Understood?"

Titus started up again but Julian shoved him back. "Don't tempt me!"

Hearing the noise, five-year-old Myra came running – from the other room. Dark-haired and hazel-eyed like her brother, when she saw the Emperor, she started to wail.

Julian's voice softened. "It's all right, Myra. You haven't done anything wrong. Now go to your mother."

As the little girl fled across the room to bury her face in Irina's voluminous black skirts, the Empress cried, "Julian, how can you be so cruel? Can't you see we're still in mourning? And what about Eliane? Isn't her room part of the Empress's suite too? Or are you going to play favorites and let the slut stay?"

The Emperor's fist came up and she gasped and shrank back. Dropping his hand at the last second, Julian stood there, breathing hard.

"So help me, Irina, if you ever say anything like that again, I'll kill you! And as long as we're on the subject of moving, there's one more thing! Someone will be here this afternoon to collect the Imperial jewels! If so much as one stone comes up missing, you'd better be prepared to account for it!"

Titus jumped to his feet, shouting, "This is outrageous!"

The Emperor gave him a disgusted look. "Titus! In my room!"

The young man hesitated.

"NOW!"

Julian sketched a perfunctory bow, then turned on his heel. "Madam, I'll wish you good day."

As the apartment's outer door closed behind the Emperor, Titus looked uncertainly at Irina.

Still holding the handkerchief to her eyes, she waved him away.

Handsome even by Nublian standards, but none too bright, the blond blue-eyed Prince Titus had been orphaned very young. Raised by a pair of over-indulgent grandparents, he'd inherited their vast fortune and even vaster estates with no restrictions while still in his teens and by the time Julian returned to Nublis five years later, the young profligate had managed to make a sizeable dent in his inheritance.

Fortunately, there'd been plenty left and the new Emperor had taken the erring scamp firmly in hand before he could dissipate the rest. Seeing how much the prince loved the sea and sailing, Julian had apprenticed him to the Imperial ocean fleet. As apparently sweet-natured as he was handsome, the lad

had done whatever his new guardian had told him.

The trouble had arisen during the Coronation.

Fresh from her humiliation at Julian's hands, Irina's eye had almost instantly lighted on the unwitting Titus. One of Nublis' most eligible bachelors and almost as valuable a trophy as the Emperor himself, the young Prince of the Northern Shore had been far from unwilling and it had taken Irina less than twenty-four hours to reel him in.

As he opened the Emperor's bedroom door, Titus heard Julian's voice. "Come on in."

Indicating a chair near the window, the Emperor took the one opposite. Then he busied himself with the tray between them. "Coffee?"

Titus shook his head.

"Well, I think I'll have some, and one of these delicious-looking rolls too." Julian poured himself a cup and took his time selecting a pastry. He broke it into small pieces and took a bite. "Delicious! You know, I've hardly seen you since you got back. How was the fishing?"

Titus opened his mouth and closed it again. Then he gathered his courage. "You shouldn't talk to your stepmother like that. It's not right."

"Oh?" Taking his time, Julian buttered a second piece of pastry and popped it in his mouth. He chewed for a moment, then swallowed. "How should I talk to her, pray tell?"

"You should treat her with more respect. After all, she's...."

"She's what?"

"Well, she's the Empress. Your father's widow. She's – er –"

When the Emperor laughed, Titus didn't care for the sound at all.

"Let's call her what she is, Cousin. A common whore! No, sit down! You really aren't good enough to take me. Although I rather wish you'd try. When the tabloids reported that Irina tried to get into my bed the night of the Coronation, they were telling the truth! But that's not all."

Julian's eyes were twin ice-chips. "Five and a half years ago, I was working alone one night in my Conservatory. Without any warning, Irina flung herself into my arms and gave me a passionate kiss on the lips. My father was right behind her. Convinced we were secret lovers, he wouldn't believe anything I said. That was the real reason I left for Aretz and refused to come back for five years. But until a couple of days ago, I had no idea my father believed Myra was my child. It was only years later when he learned she was sired by neither of us that he cut Myra out of the succession. He was preparing to divorce Irina on the very day he was killed."

While the young Prince sat in stunned silence, Julian began to pace.

"After what that witch has done, you expect me to treat her with respect? Oh, she's a piece of work, all right! On the heels of her fiasco with me, she went straight to your bed without missing a beat! Granted my stepmother's a clever, fascinating woman and you're little more than a boy, the only possible excuse for your conduct is that you're naive and newly come into this family. Hell, she even managed to ensnare

my father! When he took Irina for his mistress, he'd had plenty of experience and was nobody's fool. Yet, she persuaded him to wed her after her divorce, wasn't in the Palace a week before she began pursuing me, and managed to lead him around by the nose for over five years! Under other circumstances, I might even have succumbed, but it just so happened I had a gorgeous mistress of my own. I loved her dearly and for whatever it's worth, Irina cost me that relationship too! Well, Titus? Have you nothing more to say? Then this conversation's at an end. Kindly close the door on your way out."

With his handsome face expressionless and his full mouth set in an uncharacteristically tight line, the Prince rose to his feet. As he opened the door to leave, Ellie came in. She looked curiously up at him but he brushed past her without a word.

"Julian, can we talk?"

Seeing the kitten in her arms, the Emperor couldn't help himself. "Only if you change the name of that damn cat!"

"What are you talking about?"

"His Highness is not one of my favorite people at the moment and I'd just as soon you didn't have a cat that was his namesake."

"Well, I'm not in love with Titus as much as I thought and I'd just as soon not marry him if you don't mind. I think I prefer Jonah."

Julian put his head in his hands and groaned. "It's way, way too early in the morning for this! What do you want, Ellie?"

She giggled. "I don't know what you said to Irina but there's a huge flap going on. She claims you're sticking her in some hovel in the courtyard to make way for your bride. Is that true?"

"I wish! Unfortunately, it's not. I've assigned her the apartments in the east wing that used to belong to our grandmother. When our father married for the first time, his stepmother had to move out too, you know."

"Well, am I going to have to go too? I like my room and I don't want to be at the other end of the Palace with Irina."

"Well, if you do have to move, sweetheart, I promise you it won't be to the east wing."

He thought for a minute. "Did you know that you and the Lady Cornelia are just about the same age? And that she likes cats too?" Then it hit him. Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to Julian that Corey might consider him old. But there was that seventeen-year difference. When he was fifty, she would be... *good grief! She's only eighteen! Is this what it was like for my father?*

The clock's chime interrupted his thoughts. If he wasn't to be late, he'd better get ready for the presentation of his bride.

"...of a stunning simplicity," burred the announcer, "the Lady Cornelia's simple hair style and elegant blue and white ensemble were a utterly refreshing change from the elaborate fashions currently prevailing at the Imperial Court."

The camera zoomed from an overhead shot to a close-up. "The Emperor is shown greeting the Lady Cornelia and her Temple escort at the top of the Palace steps. After kissing the hand of his bride-to-be, he led her inside to be presented to the dowager Empress, the Imperial Family, members of the Court and various Nublian and foreign dignitaries.

"Leaving the Palace, the couple then entered the royal coach. Smiling and waving to cheering crowds, they proceeded to the Parliament's Upper House, where they were met by the bride's father, Lord Rollo, the powerful Minister of Finance. During a special joint session, they received a standing ovation and then attended a luncheon hosted by Parliament and city leaders. Following a triumphal tour of the city, the radiant couple returned to the Temple, where the Lady Cornelia is staying as a guest of the Archon. The Emperor Julian then bade his bride goodnight. Because the Imperial Family is still in mourning for the Empress Irina's elder son, Count Hero du Mercier, the remainder of the festivities have been cancelled."

Let's be thankful for small mercies. Hero was actually good for something after all!

When Corey stumbled on the top step that morning, Julian caught her hand to steady her. As they'd touched his, her fingers had been ice-cold and trembling. Stammering her thanks, his designated bride raised her huge green eyes to his, and when he looked into them, he was lost.

Nothing in Julian's experience had prepared him for this.

Every love song he'd ever heard took on a whole new meaning. Suddenly, he understood Jonah's anguish over Ellie and his father's bottomless grief when Cassius' mother died, and he ached to the depths of his being for both of them.

To his intense frustration, he and Corey would never be permitted to be alone with one another until after the wedding. She was being guarded like the state treasure and there'd be no more escapades like yesterday's.

How his bride-elect felt about him, Julian had no idea, but if she didn't love him in return, he didn't think he could bear it.

He snapped off the viewscreen and stretched. Then he walked, yawning, over to the window. He must have made a believer out of Irina, he reflected, because lights burned in the east wing and distant hammering echoed across the night-scented garden.

Hearing a light tap on the bedroom door, he opened it to find the Steward standing there.

With him was one of the Palace's scarlet-liveried servants and a luggage cart piled high with an assortment of gilded, leather, and carved wooden boxes.

"Here are the jewels you requested, Your Majesty. Where would you like them?"

"Over by the window will be fine. Incidentally, I have something for you."

Curious, the Steward followed the Emperor to a small inlaid desk in the corner, where Julian took a cash card from one of the drawers. "This is in appreciation from myself and the rest of the family,"

Unable to believe his eyes, the Steward looked again. Then he counted the zeroes. "Oh, Your Majesty! This is far too much!"

"I don't think so. But it's more than the Synod's Chief Justice is paying you, I suspect. All of a sudden, you don't look very well. Would you care to sit?"

With a muttered epithet, the Steward raised his hand. Before he could strike, the servant behind him caught his arm. As he twisted it up behind the Steward's back, a knife fell to the carpet and lay glinting in the lamplight. Julian bent to look when the servant snapped, "Don't touch that! It's probably poisoned too."

Startled, the Emperor recognized the young man from the tunnel. Gingerly retrieving the knife, he took it over to the light. "You're right. It's got the same discoloration on the blade." Then he smiled sweetly. "Why don't we find out for sure?"

The horrified Steward began to struggle.

As he opened his mouth to yell, the agent clamped his hand over it. "Quick! Find something to tie him with!"

Between the contents of Julian's closet and the bathroom, they soon had the prisoner secured. Then the Emperor went outside, and spoke to the guard in the hall. "The Steward will be unavailable for a while. We'll be going over the jewel inventory and after that, I don't wish to be disturbed until morning." Closing the door again, he remarked, "That's two I owe you. Tell me, sir, do you have a name?"

"I have many names, Your Majesty. Asa is as good as any."

Julian looked down at the hapless Steward. "I understand. Well, Asa, the night isn't getting any younger and I imagine you have work to do."

The agent pulled a black briefcase from the bottom of the cart. He removed a small package, which he shook it out into a silvery sheet of some waterproof material. Carefully spreading it over the brocade bedspread, he smoothed it out. Then he took several other items from the case and set them on a nearby table.

The Steward strained, but couldn't see what they were.

Julian watched the agent complete his preparations. "Are we ready?"

"As we'll ever be."

Julian frowned at the Steward. "When I untie you, you'll go straight over to the bed and lie down. If you try anything...." He held the knife close to the captive's face.

His brown eyes wide with apprehension, the Steward nodded vigorously as Julian sliced through his bonds. Then the Emperor followed his prisoner across the room, knife at the ready.

As soon as he was stretched out on the bed, Asa strapped the prisoner's wrists to the headboard. Then he wound a cord around his knees and ankles. "Comfortable?"

Taking a small instrument from the table, he passed it back and forth over the Steward's body and spoke into a device on his wrist. "Have you all got that? I'll be hooking up the monitor and line in a few minutes."

"That's amazing," marveled Julian.

Asa shrugged. "The Temple equipment's better. But on site, one has to make do."

Taking up a glittering surgical scalpel, he bent over his captive.

His screams muffled by the gag, the petrified Steward could only gurgle in his throat. Eyes bulging, he

bucked frantically, thrashing his head from side to side.

The Emperor raised an eyebrow. "Oh, my! He does seem a mite upset doesn't he? Would it help if I held him down?"

"I'd appreciate it, Your Majesty. I really don't want to cut him any more than I have to."

Julian cheerfully climbed on the bed. "Glad to be of service!"

With the prisoner subdued, the agent slit the embroidered silk tunic from collar to waist and laid his subject's chest bare. He found a vein, deftly inserted a needle and hooked it to a line running from the bag he'd hung above the headboard. After adjusting a tiny valve, he watched carefully as the bag's contents began to drip. Satisfied, he taped the needle in place, and dropped a small instrument onto the Steward's bare skin. Then he said mildly, "Stay very, very still now or I really will cut you."

Feeling his captive relax, Julian let go and stood up.

Asa peeled back one of the Steward's eyelids. "He's passed out. At this stage, they normally do. It'll take a while for the stuff to get into his system, so why don't you settle down in that chair and get some rest? I'll wake you when he's ready."

The Steward came to, blinking. Then he heard the Emperor's voice. "I'm taking this off now and you aren't going to make a sound. Understand?"

As Julian removed the towel from the prisoner's mouth, the agent passed the instrument over his body. He took a skin scrape for a toximeter reading and nodded. "He's all yours."

Four hours later, Julian stretched his arms and walked over to the window. A few birds sleepily chirped early morning greetings and the sky had lightened to a faint rose. "It's going to be a clear day."

Yawning, Asa stirred in his chair. "I'll get us some coffee. You look as if you need a break and I know I do."

Julian glanced at the still figure on the bed. "That sounds like a good idea. Certainly, he's not going to give us any more trouble. Why don't you stop by his room and pick up a spare tunic while you're at it?"

"Good thought. There'll be fewer questions that way."

A short while later, Asa returned with a loaded tray. After setting it down, he disassembled the drug apparatus and removed the monitor from the Steward's chest. Then he freed him from his bonds and tossed him a fresh tunic. "Put this on! We don't have a lot of time."

Sitting up on the edge of the bed and rubbing his aching wrists, the Steward looked from one of them to the other in surprise. "You aren't going to kill me?"

Asa grunted. "It's a thought. But, no. Not at the moment."

Julian poured a cup of coffee and set it on the nightstand. "You'd better drink this! But don't look so relieved, because we're not done with you yet. Fortunately, I'm law-abiding, which is why you're not dead right now or worse. But from this point on, you're going to be working for me. Your former employer won't know that, and you're not going to tell him. That way, he won't keep shopping for new

assassins until he finds one who succeeds. You'll keep reporting to him just as you always have, and you're going to maintain your other contacts as well. In other words, it'll be business as usual."

The Steward made as if to say something, but Julian shook his head. "I'm not finished. Do you feel a sore spot at the base of your neck?"

He guided the man's hand. "Right there! Now can you feel it? Good! While you were asleep, this gentleman gave you an implant which not only monitors all your conversations, but also contains a capsule filled with one of the more interesting poisons."

The Emperor's smile reminded the Steward of a cat playing with a mouse. "Asa's not nearly as law-abiding as I am. If you do or say anything he doesn't like, he'll trigger that capsule and give you a painful, messy death." Then he set the cash card on the bed. "This is more than your present master is paying, and I don't expect you for work for nothing. Now you and I need to go over those jewels."

"The Emperor's sent you something. What do you think it is?"

Corey looked curiously at the package in Marta's hand. Setting aside her breakfast plate, she tore off the gilded paper to reveal a flat, faded crimson velvet box. After fumbling with the antique catch, she pushed back the satin-lined lid to reveal a pool of green flame.

Nestled in its bed of ivory satin, the ancient necklace's heavy golden settings gleamed as if newly-minted, and in the heart of each of its massive water-clear gems shimmered a vivid coruscating fire.

Marta's breath caught in her throat. "Why these are the Imperial emeralds! Oh, Corey! They're as old as Nublis itself! And here's a card."

The plain ivory square read simply, "To match your eyes." It was signed "J."

Corey sat speechless because she really had no idea if the Emperor liked her or not. He had scarcely looked at her when he'd bidden her good night and while he'd smiled at her from time to time throughout the day, it had been with the courtesy of a stranger.

But there had been that one moment when she'd stumbled on the steps. Julian had caught her hand to steady her and she'd seen something in his eyes. But the moment passed and she'd wondered later if she'd only imagined it.

The Empress Irina was supposed to be such a beauty but her blond curls had looked artificial to Corey. The older woman's dark blue eyes had a hard expression in them and for just for a moment, Irina had looked at her in a way that actually scared her. When she'd bent to greet little Princess Myra, the child had shrunk away and her older brother had just scowled.

Princess Eliane, on the other hand, had seemed genuinely happy to see her. When Corey shyly offered her hand, she'd given her a hug and whispered, "You're pretty! And we're going to have so much fun!"

Corey had expected the Emperor to frown at this, but instead he'd just smiled.

Galia had been as good as her word. She'd asked permission to help Corey and the Emperor had said yes. The dressmaker was in Galia's office right now, going over some designs and they'd be by later to show her what they'd come up with.

"What with this big murder trial and all, they've postponed the wedding," Marta said happily, "and that

gives us more time."

At the thought of the dressmaker, Corey looked at her wedding gown on its mannequin in the corner. Part of the official coronation regalia, the glittering dress had been worn to the altar by countless Imperial brides.

So stiff it could almost stand up by itself, the gown was so encrusted with re-embroidered lace, gold thread and jewels as to render the underlying silk almost invisible. When Marta and the dressmaker had slipped it over her head the previous night, the wedding dress had been so heavy, she'd almost staggered.

"That's not all my lady," the dressmaker had told her. "There's still the cloak, the gloves, the jewels, and the miter. Well, you won't have to worry about the miter until the end of the ceremony, and there'll be pages to carry the train and help you in and out of the carriage."

She'd unfurled the Imperial cloak and clipped it to the gown's shoulders.

Brilliant scarlet silk and lined in dazzling white, the twenty-foot train glittered with jeweled embroideries depicting the Imperial seal of the hammer and the sword.

When it dropped around her ankles, Corey realized instantly that she wouldn't be able to move unless someone was holding the damn thing up. And heaven help her if the pages ever dropped it. It would probably pull her over backwards and she'd fall flat on her...

Apparently oblivious, the dressmaker continued. "You'll have new gloves made to fit and the rubies and diamonds will be delivered under guard on the morning of the wedding. There'll be a coronet, a necklace, two bracelets, a ring and a brooch for each shoulder of the cloak. The Temple attendants will bring the miter over the day before and adjust it to your head size. After the ceremony, the Emperor will remove your veil and coronet. Then you'll kneel before the Archon and he'll crown you with the miter."

Corey had blinked then and wondered how she was even going to be able to stand up, let alone walk. As for kneeling! Surely, they had to be joking!

Reassured by Julian's words, she took the emeralds from their case. As she ran them through her fingers, the ancient stones felt like water and they seemed to pulse with a warmth of their own.

"There are many legends about these emeralds," said Marta. "Supposedly, they came from the heart of a volcano, and Nublis's first Emperor gave them to his bride three thousand years ago. From what I hear, the Empress Irina didn't want to give them up."

Corey held the stones up to the light, turning them this way and that. Then she dropped the necklace in its case and pushed her chair away from the table. "Mingus needs to go out and so do I."

Marta followed her into the other room. "While you find his leash, I'll get the guard."

Out in the garden, Corey waited patiently while Mingus poked around in the bushes. She noticed a balcony she hadn't seen before, and half in the shadows, she saw the figure of a man. He was looking down at her and it gave her an odd feeling.

She asked the guard, "What's that?"

"Oh, them's the Archon's quarters, my lady. No one's permitted in while he's there save for the Major Domo and His Majesty."

"No one? Then who's that on the balcony?"

The guard took a look. "I don't know, my lady. I sure don't see anyone. The light must have been playing tricks on your eyes."

The Major Domo observed his charge. Lost in thought, he was watching Corey in the garden below.

Sensing his keeper's presence, the Archon turned around and in response to the frown and beckoning finger, he sighed and left the balcony. Resignedly, he went over to the waiting bed and lay down.

After the Major Domo had him secured in the restraints, he put a finger under Cassius' chin and turned his face toward him. "I'm putting you under to remove the neural block and I'll administer the drugs at the same time. Do you understand?"

While he was placing a clear plastic mask over the Archon's face, Julian came in. "Is this a bad time?"

The Major Domo finished adjusting the mask. Then he checked the dials and fiddled with a couple of controls. "No, it's not. In fact, you can help me if you would. Wash your hands and put on those gloves." Laying out a selection of instruments, he remarked, "I gather you had a busy night."

"You could say that. Actually, I came to thank you both for your help but it looks as if I'm too late to talk to him."

The Major Domo glanced at the monitors. "No, he's still awake."

When he removed the mask and gently tapped him on the cheek, the Archon's dark eyes opened.

Julian took the slate and wrote, "Good morning."

Pointedly, Cassius looked at the restraints on his hands.

"Tell him I came to thank him and that he was right."

"He already knows."

"Tell him anyway."

As the Major Domo signed to him, the Archon smiled.

"Now, that needs no translation," said the Emperor.

The Major Domo signed to the Archon again, who nodded wearily. Then he put the mask over his patient's face and adjusted it once more.

Julian was curious. "What are you doing?"

"Putting him to sleep. As soon as he's under, I'll reverse the neural block. This is a very delicate procedure for which he has to be absolutely still, and it needs to be done while he's under. I'll administer the drugs at the same time. To mitigate the side effects, I give them as slowly as possible over a twenty-four-hour period, and to keep him from hearing anything he shouldn't, I plan to keep him under until the trial."

"Good," said Julian, "Because he may be the only chance Jonah's got. The publicity's become a

nightmare and it's getting worse. Every InterPlanetary channel last night had something about it. Most of the media's tried and convicted him already, and all they're arguing about now is the method of execution. Hanging, strangulation and the knife are the current hot favorites and the official odds on conviction are a hundred to one. If you can believe it, one of the tabloids is actually offering one million Synod credits for the first picture of Jonah's dead body! As for Irina's interviews about her martyred son... well, the less said about them the better. Even the advocate's gotten caught up in it. He's still doing a good job of preparing Jonah, but the boy has me worried. He's terrified of the Archon because he keeps flashing back to his first appearance before him. And he doesn't remember what happened."

While Julian was talking, the Major Domo had connected the Archon to the monitors and hooked up an intravenous line. He listened to his breathing, made an adjustment and removed the mask. "I'm ready to reverse the block now, and here's where I can use your help. Just turn his head to one side. Yes, like that. Hold it absolutely still. Perfect. Now, here we go."

The Major Domo took a tiny instrument and gently inserted it into the skin just behind the Archon's ear. He did something, but exactly what Julian couldn't see. Then he straightened up with a sigh of relief. "It's done. Now I'll start the drugs. It's a long slow process, and there's not much to do except wait. Let's go over there and get comfortable. Then you can tell me all about last night."

"Did you train that agent?"

"As a matter of fact, I did, and he's one of our best. I gather everything went satisfactorily, including the implant."

"Except for my not getting any sleep. We squeezed the Steward dry and some of it was totally unexpected."

"Such as?"

"Myra's parentage for one. He's Myra's father and quite proud of it. It seems our Irina and her faithful Steward have been lovers for a long time. Hero and Gaius were probably his get as well. The attack on Ellie was Irina's idea, because one way or another, she was going to get her out of the succession to clear the way for Titus. Irina planned to marry Titus, who would then be first in line for the throne."

Julian smiled his thanks as the Major Domo handed him a drink, then he continued. "The degree of Titus' involvement is a fair question and the Steward said nothing that would tie him into this."

"Go on."

"Hero's death appears to have been unintended. After he strangled Ellie, he was supposed to shoot Jonah and then claim he came too late to save the Princess. But the plan went wrong when he decided to rape her first. It threw off the assassins' timetable and Jonah arrived sooner than expected. When Jonah yelled 'Get off her!' Hero's accomplice fled, and the two of them were struggling for the gun when it went off. Jonah was bending over Ellie to help her when someone hit him from behind. The accomplice apparently returned and shot Hero where he lay on the ground. But he apparently didn't have a chance to kill Ellie and Jonah because the guards were already coming up the stairs. An eyewitness claims he saw Jonah standing over Hero and firing into his body. According to Ellie, there's no way he could have done that because Jonah was unconscious and on top of her when the second set of shots was fired."

"What's the problem then?"

"Nothing we got out of the Steward is admissible. Jonah himself thinks he may be guilty and his

fingerprints are the only ones on the gun. The prosecution says Ellie's biased and that undue influence was brought to bear on her before she testified. They haven't actually accused me, but they've come damn close. Jonah never stood a chance with the lower court because he doesn't remember what happened and there's no evidence of any second accomplice. I think the eyewitness is lying and I'm equally certain Ellie's telling the truth. It's all going to hinge on the Archon and it's hard telling what he's going to hear and sense when Jonah testifies."

The Emperor leaned back in the chair and there was real discouragement in his voice. "I'm afraid I've failed. The Archon may have been right in the past but there's always a first time. By telling Jonah to put his trust in him, I may have helped send the boy to his death. We're relying on blind justice here and maybe it's too blind."

The Major Domo shook his head. "You're tired, Julian, and you're not thinking straight. You've survived two attempts on your life in the past forty-eight hours and you're operating without sleep. Right now, you have appointments to keep and after that, I strongly advise you to get some rest."

"You're probably right, and now I do have to go." On his way out, Julian stopped by the bed and looked down at the sleeping Archon. "Take good care of him. Jonah's life depends on it."

The Major Domo sighed. "Believe me, I know."

It was early evening, and Jonah was slumped on the edge of the bunk with his head in his hands.

Master Ludlow sighed. "The trial is two days from now, and I'll be honest with you, Jonah, it doesn't look good. Probably the best we can hope for is the third verdict."

"What's that?"

"Guilty but not proven. While it's not as good as an acquittal, the effect is the same. Are you absolutely certain you can't remember?"

The young man began pacing the floor as far as the shackles on his ankles would let him. "I've tried and tried! There's something just out of reach. I almost had it, but it's no use! It just won't come!"

Master Ludlow frowned. "Well, there is something I can do. The trouble is, I need the Archon's permission, and he's reportedly unavailable from now until the trial. However, it's worth a try! I'll have to hurry though because we don't have much time."

Just as he was preparing to call the guard, the cell door opened to admit the Emperor.

The advocate stepped aside. "If Your Majesty will excuse me, there's something I need to do. If I succeed, it could make all the difference."

"By all means, Master Ludlow. Don't let me keep you."

Jonah was curious. "What is it you want to do?"

"I don't want to get your hopes up until I'm sure. And now, I really must go."

Julian followed the advocate outside. "Surely you can tell me. Maybe I can help."

"Maybe you can at that. I want to try hypnosis. But without the Archon's permission, there's a good chance he won't admit the result into evidence."

"Hmm. Too bad you didn't think of it sooner. I have it on good authority that the first shot was accidental, the other two were fired by someone other than Jonah and that everything happened exactly as the Princess said. Unfortunately, you can't use it because this information wasn't exactly obtained –"

The advocate raised his eyebrows. "You came by it illegally?"

"Something like that."

"Ah. Would you care to divulge your source?"

"I would not. But I can tell you this much. Princess Eliane and Jonah were victims of a conspiracy and she was the real target. Since she owes Jonah her life, it would be poor repayment on my part to allow him to be condemned and executed without a fight. While I can't do anything directly, I may be able to get a postponement for a day or two. Would that help?"

"It most certainly would, Your Majesty! That boy is innocent and I'm doing everything in my power to save him."

"I know, and believe me, I appreciate it."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Now I really must go!"

The advocate hurried off, and Julian re-entered the cell.

Jonah had slumped down again and was staring at the floor. As he sat next to him, the Emperor noted that the bandage on his head was smaller and that his color looked better.

"Jonah, Ellie sends her love."

"Huh? Your Majesty! What are you saying?"

"I'm saying...but I'm not promising, mind you...if you get out of this, something can possibly be worked out between you and Ellie. She owes you her life and for what it's worth, she's even renamed her damn cat after you!"

Jonah blinked. "Your Majesty, I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything. Incidentally, your friends from the orphanage have been asking about you. What do you want me to tell them?"

Jonah gave him a half-smile. "Tell them, when I get out, I want the biggest party this town's ever seen!"

"That's a deal!" said Julian. "I'll furnish the food and entertainment and you can have it in the square. Incidentally, I'm getting married and I need you back as soon as possible to look after things."

"I'll still be your body servant? After this?"

"Why not? The problem is, you've now become so famous your old job might not be good enough any more."

Jonah's thin face lit up with a wide smile, and Julian recalled the Archon's eerily prophetic words. "I should hate to think I went to all that trouble to get him off the streets, just to end up executing him for

falling in love with the wrong girl."

Merciful heavens, he thought, Please don't let it be true!

Aloud he said, "Jonah, I have to go see the Archon." He gave the young man a pat on the shoulder and signaled to the guard. "If you need anything, let me know. In the meantime, you'd better start planning that party."

"No, Julian!" snapped the Major Domo, "I will not wake him. Nor will I postpone the trial."

Muttering a couple of epithets under his breath, the Emperor turned sharply on his heel and started out of the Archon's apartment.

"However...." the Major Domo's voice was sharp.

With his hand on the door, Julian stopped and looked back.

"However," repeated the Major Domo, "the Archon was way ahead of you. He prepared this last night."

He held out a document.

The note read, "Your interest in this case is transparently obvious, and the defendant's memory loss needs to be addressed. Go to it."

Attached to the note was a signed order authorizing the hypnosis.

"Aren't you working a little late?"

Galia jumped and the papers she was carrying scattered all over the floor. Falling to her knees, she gathered the muddled pile into some sort of order. "Oh! Your Majesty, you startled me."

He assisted her to her feet and their eyes met.

"Julian! What's the matter? Is there something I can do?"

The Emperor turned away without answering and started toward his office.

On an impulse, she followed him inside and found him standing on the balcony.

He had his hands on the railing and was looking into the moonlit garden.

Dropping the papers onto the corner of the desk, Galia went to join him. She touched his hand and Julian opened his arms. As they went around her, he gave a great shuddering sigh, and just as she used to do whenever he was depressed, she gently ran her fingers up and down his spine.

"Julian?"

"Oh, Galia. Just keep doing that. It helps. You don't know how much it helps."

He bent his head as if to kiss her, but then dropped his arms and turned away.

Whatever had been between them was irrevocably gone.

After a first faint pang of regret, Galia felt utter relief as a burden she had been carrying for too long finally dropped away.

She followed his gaze toward the garden's opposite end and suddenly realized... "Oh, Julian! You're in love with her!"

He actually looked embarrassed. "Ironic, isn't it? Me, of all people! One of the greatest cocksmen in the Synod, felled by the green eyes of an eighteen-year-old girl who hardly knows I exist! Oh Galia, she's so young! I don't know what to say to her! I don't even know how to approach her! I can hardly eat or sleep for thinking about her and I ache from wanting to be with her! But I can't even get near her until after the wedding and with the way things are going, who knows when that will be? And when we finally are married... what if she loves me no more than my mother did my father? What if she doesn't love me back?"

Galia didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Oh, Julian! Don't you know how easy you are to love? You're one of the most romantic men I've ever known and I doubt there's a woman anywhere in the entire Synod who can resist you. But you need to spend time with Corey before the wedding and you deserve a break from whatever's been wearing you down."

He suddenly remembered the Archon's note. "Speaking of which, there's something I must do! It'll only take a minute but it's important. Will you wait here until I get back?"

"I'll do better than that. Meet me by the fountain in half an hour."

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

Galia gave him a gentle push. "If you know what's good for you, just be there!"

At that moment, they heard a knock on the office's outer door. "Your Majesty, are you there?" It was the advocate.

Julian switched on a light and Galia hid herself in a corner of the balcony.

Master Ludlow stood uncertainly by the desk. "Your Majesty, I apologize for disturbing you, but I've just come from the Major Domo. He says he gave you the Archon's order."

"Yes, advocate. I have it right here." Detaching the note, Julian handed him the document.

The advocate glanced at it and opened his briefcase. "I'll set it up first thing in the morning. Right now, I'm going back to his cell to give him the good news. Maybe it'll help him sleep." Then he looked at the document again. "But this is dated yesterday!"

"Yes, it is. The Archon had come to the same conclusion and it was there waiting, already signed. Unfortunately, I couldn't get the postponement."

"Well, this may be enough. And now I'll bid Your Majesty goodnight. I'll close the door on my way out."

Julian shook his head as Galia came in from the balcony. "He could smell your perfume and thinks he interrupted an assignation."

She sniffed. "Why should that surprise you? He works here after all and your richly deserved reputation is hardly a secret around the Complex. Now I must go. I'll see you later in the garden."

"Oh, Miss Galia," cried Marta, "are those the designs?"

"I think the Lady Cornelia will like them. Where is she, by the way?"

"She's in the bedroom trying on the emeralds the Emperor sent her. She's wondering what to wear with them that would please him. Do you have any ideas?"

Galia had a very good idea what would please Julian but having no wish to shock Marta, she thought it wiser not to reply. Instead, she handed her the dressmaker's designs.

"Why don't you look through these and see what you think? In the meantime, the Lady Cornelia and I will take Mingus for a walk."

Marta fluttered. "Oh, Miss Galia, you're so kind. I'll find his leash and tell the guard."

"Don't bother him. There's a full moon. The garden's very secure and I won't let Lady Cornelia out of my sight."

As she was latching the garden door, Corey said, "The Emperor scares me a little. Do you think he likes me?"

"He's right over there so why don't you ask him? Go on now and don't look so nervous. Julian only wants to talk to you and believe me, he's very nice."

"Hello, Corey," said the Emperor. "Why don't you come sit with me?"

She hesitated, then joined him on the rim of the fountain.

He sat trailing his fingers through the moonlit water. "The fish in this fountain are sacred to the Archon. They're colored like jewels and live to be almost a hundred. Each one has a name, comes when it's called and is hand-fed by the keeper every day. According to the legend, these sacred fish were given to the first Archon a thousand years ago and they've been here ever since. They're found nowhere else on Nublis and no one knows exactly where they came from. There, do you see?"

A foot-long graceful shape was following the Emperor's fingers back and forth in the water.

"Here, you try it."

Corey put her hand next to Julian's and moved it back and forth in the same manner. She felt a faint touch, like a thrill, and something bumped gently against her fingers.

"There! You've made a friend. If I'm not mistaken, that's Doria. You can't see her color in the moonlight but she's the most incredible shade of blue. They say the Temple guards' armor was copied from it. Incidentally, the Archon's fish are fed at seven every morning and believe me, it's quite a sight."

"Oh! I'll be sure to be here! Would Mingus bother them do you think?"

The Emperor smiled. "I doubt it. They're just about as big as he is and I think it's more of a case of would they bother him."

As her eyes followed the movements of the fish nibbling at her hand, Julian looked down at Corey. He

wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms, but he didn't touch her.

She smiled up at him, and he could resist no longer.

As he moved toward her, something splashed and a spray of water hit them both. *Damn!* he thought, *Even the fish are against me!*

"That's Doria. She has a tendency to do that when she thinks she's being neglected."

Corey looked around. "Oh, here come Galia and Mingus! Marta's going to be wondering what's taking us so long and it's way past my bedtime. Thank you so much for telling me about the fish."

Once she was gone, Galia sighed. "After all the trouble I went to, you talked about fish? Oh, Julian, what am I going to do with you?"

"Well," he said, somewhat sheepishly, "she was so damn nervous. She's scared to death of me and I don't know quite what to do about it." Then he sighed. "Heaven only knows what's going to happen on our wedding night, and it's no wonder our Imperial brides care so little for their husbands. The whole damn thing's barbaric, and I'll have no more choice in the matter than my father did. She's not prepared! None of them ever are! All they'll tell her is that she has to submit and she really has no idea."

"Would you like me to talk to her? She has no mother or female relatives and I can't think of anyone in your family who would be of the slightest help."

"Now is when I wish my mother was still alive. Or even my grandmother. They went through it and they could at least give her some warning. Ellie's mother never forgave our father and it finally drove her mad. But it wasn't his fault! It was the damnable law! Oh, Galia, if you only would. But I don't know how even you can get her to understand it's not my doing."

She put her hand on his arm. "Well, Julian, at least she's had a chance to see and talk with you before the wedding. And who knows? She may fall in love with you yet."

"Even if she does, how are we ever going to get past it? Why did I have to go and fall in love with her? If I didn't care about her it would at least be easier to have her hate me the next morning! Now it'll be unbearable."

"Well, I'll try," she said. "Good night, Julian."

The Emperor nodded and, without looking back, walked slowly toward his office at the other end of the moonlit garden.

"Julian, don't! Please don't! I'm right here beside you. I'm not really dead! Oh, no, please! Don't!"

The Major Domo left the balcony and hurried inside. He checked the restraints, repositioned the pillow under his charge's head, looked at the monitors, and made a note in his belt computer.

The door opened and Julian came in. "I heard him. Is it always like this?"

"Yes. He always dreams. One of the drugs is a powerful hallucinogen that produces mystic visions. The old priests used it in their religious ceremonies and it's considered to have special powers. The Archon's dreams are his link to Nublis's past and the key to his understanding of its present. They tell him why the sacrifice of his life and freedom was necessary and he learns from them to accept the fate chosen for

him. He's the dark Emperor and it's always been thus since the first Archon.

"There's always one dream which comes just before he wakes. He's standing in an underground cavern with a river running through it. The same river that runs under the trapdoor in the corner of this room. He follows a passageway from the cave and emerges into a brilliantly illuminated crystal hall. All the Archons are there on their thrones. One throne, his, is vacant. He stands before them on a bridge he may not cross until the old Archons give him the name of his successor.

"They've told him that the survival of the Archon system, and possibly even Nublis itself, may depend on the case he's about to try. The defendant's in the eye of a storm of incredible evil involving not just Nublis but the entire Synod. You and the Archon himself are part of a tiny band of defenders holding back this storm. Together the defenders will prevail, separately, they cannot.

"The old ones told him you were in danger and from whom. Even with the neural block and no contact with the outside world, he knew all of these things!

"I don't pretend to understand it, but I have to believe they gave him the name of your bride, because he told me who she was long before Parliament made its selection."

Recalling Cassius' words, Julian sank into a chair.

"The bride picked out for you by Parliament is from a powerful family who will brook no nonsense from Irina if something were to happen to you."

But her name hadn't even been drawn because Julian had yet to notify Parliament that he was ready to marry.

The Archon had not only told the Emperor to watch out for his enemies but he'd known better than Julian who they were.

"It is within your own household you must look, and the false face you see will not be the one you expect."

When he heard Cassius' voice from the bed, the Emperor started.

"Julian?"

He started to answer but the Major Domo motioned him back. Then he put a finger to his lips.

"Julian! She's beautiful and you did right to give her the emeralds. She'll wear them like the first Empress and they'll protect her from harm. There's a shadow...there's a shadow watching her. Stay between her and the shadow, whatever you do." The Archon's voice died away into silence.

But I never told him about the emeralds. I never told anyone and there's no way he could possibly have known.

The weariness Julian had been fighting off all day overcame him.

As the Emperor's head dropped forward, the Major Domo lifted his sleeping form from the chair. He laid him on a couch near the Archon's bed and covered him with a blanket.

The only sound to be heard for the rest of that night was the fountain's gentle splash and in the garden below, the Archon's sacred fish swam back and forth like living jewels in the moonlight.

"It never occurred to me the Steward's implant might actually be entertaining," said Julian.

He and the Major Domo were in the Emperor's comfortable book-lined office, listening to a recording from the previous afternoon.

A door opened and footsteps tapped across the parquet floor.

"Oh, Magnus dear."

The voice was Irina's.

Julian cocked an eyebrow. "Magnus dear?"

"Would you come in here and hook me up?"

Something rustled.

"Why love-bug! What's the matter? Give me a kiss. There's no one around and we just have time for a quickie! Oh, come here, sweet baby. I want you so badly. Why are you looking around like that? Magnus, honey. Come back here!"

Feet ran across the wooden floor and the door closed, cutting off Irina's voice.

Julian howled with laughter. "Turn it off because I can't stand it! I just hope the Archon's agent has a sense of humor."

"Oh, he does, which is why he thought you'd enjoy this. It occurred to him at the time he put in the implant that you might find the Steward's dilemma amusing."

Julian wiped his eyes. "Oh, indeed I do. The question is, what are we going to do about it? Magnus dear, indeed!"

"Well, the tabloids do pay dearly for that sort of thing. But more importantly, what are you going to do about Irina? She's been giving a lot of impassioned interviews about her martyred son, the low-class little rapist who shot him down in cold blood, and her arrogant stepson using his wealth and influence to purchase an acquittal for his murderer. She told one interviewer you made her homeless, another that you stripped her of her wardrobe and personal jewels, a third that you and Jonah are in a perverted relationship and a fourth that your affection for Ellie is incestuous."

Julian shot up in his chair. "She said WHAT?"

"If you'd been paying attention, you'd have heard it. Certainly, everyone else has."

"That's IT!" yelled Julian. "She's finally gone too far!"

The Major Domo smiled to himself. "Well, in my humble opinion, Your Majesty, Irina did that quite some time ago. Your patience with her has been nothing short of remarkable, and I must confess that until you evicted her and repossessed the Imperial jewels I was beginning to think you'd become the Palace doormat."

"Doormat? Major Domo, you're skating on very thin ice!"

Julian thought yearningly about some of the exotic penalties available to his ancestors. They'd had a remarkably low tolerance for contentious Empresses in those days and had dealt with them in some surprisingly imaginative ways.

"The Steward is the father of Irina's children. Correct?"

"Well, of Myra, certainly. Julian, you have that look in your eye."

"Major Domo, do me a favor. Get me a genetic test on Gaius. Since Irina's first husband was a member of the nobility, his test as Gaius' putative father should be on record. Then get me one on the Steward."

"We already have one on the Steward, Your Majesty. The Archon's agent did it when you and he were having your little tete-a-tete the other night. In anticipation of your request, a minor accident was arranged for Gaius last night. I have the result in my office. It doesn't match Irina's first husband, but his genetic pattern matches the Steward's."

"Ah!" said the Emperor.

From long experience, the Major Domo knew where that expression of benign innocence on Julian's face was liable to lead and gave a fleeting prayer of thanks that his former partner in mayhem was safely out of the picture until the following morning. He was under no illusions that age and maturity had dimmed the Emperor's capacity for mischief. All that growing older had ever done for Julian was to make him even more imaginative and devious than he already was.

The Major Domo thought of his friend Janus and the pride he'd taken in his two sons, the one so dark and sensitive and the other pure quicksilver. But Janus, being Janus, couldn't tell them how much he really loved them, even though they'd been the center of his life and the joy of his existence and only the Major Domo had known the personal cost to him of that terrible day when Julian had left for Aretz.

Even when he'd understood the wrong he'd done him, the late Emperor's stiff-necked pride wouldn't allow him to ask his son's forgiveness. Instead, he'd agonized in silence, waited until it was too late... then died too soon.

All because of Irina.

The Major Domo said, "Whatever you have in mind, count me in." Then he breathed a silent prayer, *Janus, old friend, wherever you are, this one's for you.*

Jonah watched nervously as the hypno-therapist set up her equipment. The advocate had explained what was about to happen, but he still felt as if it was some kind of magical procedure with little relation to reality. At the therapist's request, the guard had unlocked and removed the shackles on his wrists and ankles and whenever he moved his hands, his arms felt unnaturally light.

The hypno-therapist was slight and blond, and Jonah guessed her to be about thirty. She wore a sober dark dress with no jewelry and moved about the cell in an efficient professional way, checking the lights and the recording camera over the door. She assessed the bunk, which was the cell's only furniture, and frowned. Then she rapped on the door.

"Guard! Is it possible to put two chairs and a small table in here? If not, perhaps there's a room we can use with more space."

The guard moved off down the hall, grumbling to himself. He came back with an attendant and opened the cell door. Together, they dragged in the table and two chairs she'd requested.

As required by prison rules whenever a cell door was open, Jonah spread-eagled himself facedown on the bunk.

"Is that necessary?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Especially when a prisoner's charged with a violent crime. Are you sure you want his shackles off? Although I must say he hasn't given me a bit of trouble. In fact, I wish all of them were as well-behaved. He's a kind of a favorite around here, he is. Well, he goes to trial tomorrow morning, and one way or another, he's going to be gone. If I don't see you again, young feller, I'll wish you all the best, because you'll be in court by the time I come back on duty. We've got a pool going in this section of the jail, and I've bet you're going to get off."

The guard patted Jonah clumsily on the shoulder and went outside, locking the door behind him.

A few moments later, he opened it again to admit the advocate and the Major Domo.

Master Ludlow looked around the cell. "It's a bit crowded in here, isn't it?"

The Major Domo turned to the hypno-therapist. "How long will this procedure take? If it's not too long, I think we can manage."

"It shouldn't be more than an hour," she replied, and motioned to Jonah to sit at the table. The advocate made himself comfortable on the edge of the bunk while the Major Domo chose to stand against the wall.

The hypno-therapist signaled to the guard to turn on the camera. A short time later, she tapped Jonah lightly on the cheek and passed her hand back and forth in front of his eyes.

"He's under and I've regressed him back to the night of the murder. You can begin your questions now."

"Jonah," said the advocate, "you have a message to go up to the Conservatory. Who gave it to you?"

"One of the servants from downstairs. It's odd, because he's tight with the Steward, and he never did me any favors before."

"What is the message?"

"The Emperor wants to see me. I'm kind of surprised."

"Why?"

"Because the Emperor told me he'd be gone all evening. When I asked the servant about that, he said His Majesty had come back early, seemed upset about something, and wanted me to come up to the Conservatory right away."

"What time is it?"

"Around nine-thirty."

"Can you identify the servant?"

"Yes, his name is Micah. He works in the reception area downstairs."

The advocate made a note. "All right, Jonah. Now, you're coming up the stairs to the Conservatory. What do you hear?"

"Nothing."

"Don't you find that odd?"

"No. The Conservatory's usually pretty quiet. That's the way the Emperor likes it."

"Now, Jonah, you're at the top of the stairs. What do you see?"

"Well, the first thing is that there are no lights on. If the Emperor's here, there should be lights. But I don't see him. He isn't here! What's going on?"

"What do you see, Jonah?"

"I see something near the entrance. There's something... oh, someone on the ground and two... two people bending down over them. It's a girl! Her dress is torn and I can't see her face. They're doing something. One of them's kneeling, holding her down. The other has his pants... he's raping her! Hey, you! Get off of her! Get away from her, you son of a bitch! One of them's running away! He looks familiar but I can't see his face. The other's trying to, but his pants are down. It's Hero! That filthy bastard! There's something in his hand. He's pointing it at me. I've knocked him down. I'm grabbing his glove. It's a gun! He's got a gun! We're wrestling on the ground. I'm trying to twist it away but he's holding on. There's a noise. He's gone quiet... he's lying still. The poor girl! She's struggling, trying to sit up. She sounds like she's choking... can't breathe. I unwind the cloth and pull it away from her face. Oh, my god, it's Ellie! Ellie! Ellie, it's all right! Ellie. I'm here! I'm —"

Jonah's head fell forward and he slumped onto the table.

Master Ludlow cleared his throat. "Ma'am."

"Yes, Advocate?"

"Is there any way you can get him to recall this when you bring him back?"

"I can try, but there are no guarantees. This type of injury can be tricky, and it all depends on the cause of his amnesia."

"Would it help if he were to view the recording?"

"It might."

"May I ask him a question?"

"Certainly. Just a minute."

Gently she raised Jonah's head. "You're going back now to where you see them bending over the girl."

Jonah sat up, his eyes wide open.

"Please bring him forward to where Hero is shot."

"I'm taking you forward to where the gun went off."

"All right."

"Go ahead, Advocate."

"Jonah," said the advocate, "how many shots were there?"

"One. I had the gun in my hand and dropped it next to Hero."

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm going to help the girl."

"Please bring him forward to just after he spoke with her."

"Jonah, you've seen it's Ellie. Now tell us what's happening."

"Ow! Oh! My head's exploded. I'm falling. It's all going black. Ellie, I—"

Jonah's head fell forward, and again he slumped to the table.

"Ma'am, can you give him a command to remember this?"

"I'll try."

"You can bring him out now, because I believe we have everything we need. If he still can't remember, the Archon's ruled this session is admissible and may be counted as his testimony, suitably edited of course."

Marta hurried into the bedroom. "Oh, Corey, look! It's an invitation from the Emperor to spend the day with him tomorrow. He says to dress informally and bring your riding clothes. There's a big murder trial and they're closing all of the Temple offices and the commissary. Everyone except essential staff and the people at the trial has to be off the premises first thing in the morning. That includes us. The girl who brought our breakfast told me it has to do with the Archon. She said the best thing about it is the press will finally be out of the commissary, and that we're lucky we haven't been bothered here. Well, the guards see to that, don't they?"

She looked at the letter again. "Galia will be here at seven sharp to take us over to the Palace, and we'll be going through one of the tunnels to avoid the press. My, isn't this exciting?"

Corey held out her hand. "Let me see that. But what about Mingus?"

"Oh, that's all arranged. The Archon's fish-keeper will be here. Apparently, he's quite taken with him and he said he'd be glad to look after him. When Mingus started batting the water with his paw and that big blue one splashed him, the keeper said he never saw anything so funny in his whole life. Especially when he fell in."

"Well, Mingus didn't think it was a bit funny. Did you sweetie?"

Corey picked up the little cat and nuzzled the top of his head, but he protested and squirmed so much, she let him go. As spacious and beautiful as their rooms were, she was beginning to feel like a prisoner. At home...and all of a sudden it hit her that it wasn't home any more...she had run free all her life. She had spent most of her time over at the barns housing her father's pride and joy, his prize livestock.

Justly famous for his herd, Lord Rollo had studied animal genetics and the great beautiful beasts were better housed and cared for than most people.

Marta had told her once that he could have become rich just on them alone.

Motherless for most of her young life, Corey preferred the company of animals to people, and she had

planned to take up veterinary medicine before her selection as the Imperial bride. Even as the Empress, she wouldn't be immune from the law requiring every adult Nublian to work with their hands at a productive task for three hours every day. She'd still need a profession in order to meet her work requirement and tomorrow, she decided, would be as good a time as any to broach the subject to Julian.

She frowned at his letter. "When he says dress informally, do you think he means pants?"

"Well, he did say to bring riding clothes, but until you change, a dress would probably be more suitable. As long as His Majesty gave them to you, I think you should wear the emeralds. This green dress certainly would set them off but the settings are so plain, they'll look well with just about anything. You can keep them on with the white silk shirt in your riding outfit, then you won't have to worry about leaving them somewhere."

Taking the heavy necklace from its case, Corey slipped it over her head. The huge stones felt silky against her skin and almost seemed to glow. For the first time since her mother died, she felt warm and loved and safe, almost as if a pair of great wings was enfolding her. The emeralds seemed so natural when she looked at herself in the mirror, they might have been made for her, and when she went to take them off again, she decided not to.

"Would be all right if I kept on wearing them? You know, just to get used to them."

"That's part of the legend, Corey. It says that once you put on the Imperial emeralds, you'll never want to remove them. These stones are supposed to have magical properties that protect the wearer against evil and they look so beautiful on you, dear, I don't see any harm in it."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door.

It was Galia, and when she saw the necklace, her eyes widened. "Oh, Corey! I've heard about the Imperial emeralds all of my life, but until today, I've never seen them. They're beautiful and they look as if you and they belong together. There's a wonderful legend about these stones and the first Empress. Would you like to hear it?"

"Oh, tell me! Marta, why don't you stop fussing with that and come over here and listen?"

Marta sat in the rocking chair and took up her sewing while Corey settled on the window seat with Mingus in her lap, and Galia began.

"Three thousand years ago, there was a terrible civil war on Nublis that had gone on for almost a hundred years. It had ripped the planet and its people apart, but one day, it was over. On the site of the final battle, the high priests crowned the victorious general Nublis' first Emperor and decreed that he should take a bride immediately and produce an heir."

"Well, nothing much has changed there," muttered Corey.

As Marta shushed her, Galia smiled and continued. "The surviving rebel leaders had been captured and brought before the new Emperor. He was just about to pronounce sentence on them when an old, old priest from the North came forward and asked if he would hear what he had to say. Since the Emperor was well-brought up and naturally courteous to his elders—"

"Like Julian," murmured Corey.

"Ssh!" hissed Marta.

With another smile, Galia repeated, "Since the Emperor was well-brought up and courteous to his elders,

he beckoned to the priest and asked what he had to say.

"The old priest stood in the center of the camp and cried out in a loud voice, 'There's been enough killing! Nublis needs no more of the fire and the axe, and the deaths of these few men will contribute nothing to the general good! It's time to heal the wounds of our suffering people, bring them together as one and forge tools instead of swords!'

"What would you have me do?' asked the Emperor.

"Spare them!' cried the priest. 'Spare their lives! But you must do even more than that, Your Majesty! Free these men to return to their homes, and give them whatever they need in order to rebuild their shattered lives.'

"And if I do all that, old man,' asked the Emperor, who was nobody's fool and did not believe in doing something for nothing, 'what will you give me in return?'

"The old priest held up a necklace of great green stones like clear water. When he turned it in the light, the Emperor could see that each gem possessed, within its core, a glistening, shifting fire.

"This, Your Majesty! These jewels come from a volcano in the North, and are the children of the planet's heart. They possess healing properties and the power to protect their wearer from harm. If you show mercy to these men today, Nublis will know nothing but peace from this day forward.'

"Since the Emperor was sick of war and death, he gladly accepted the priest's offer. After freeing the rebels, he gave them generous amounts of food and money, and told them to return to their homes. In payment for his mercy, the old priest gave the Emperor the necklace. Then he left the camp and was never seen again.

"The rebel chief prostrated himself before the Emperor and said, 'In thanks for my life and those of my men, Your Majesty, I will give you the hand of my only daughter for your bride.'

"Now, the rebel chief's daughter was beautiful and spirited... not unlike you, Corey... and she wanted no part of the Emperor.

"For as far back as she could remember, she had lived, marched and fought with her father's army. She owned a great black horse on which she would race like the wind, and two snow-white hounds that ran beside it. And she liked nothing better than to ride with them up to the mountains and camp out beneath the stars.

"When her father informed his proud daughter that she was to be the Emperor's bride, she cried, 'No!' She would sooner die! But she loved her father and their people. After he convinced her that her marriage to the Emperor was the price for their freedom, she agreed to do as he asked, albeit with a heavy heart.

"As she waited in her father's tent for the Emperor's men to come for her, the rebel chief's beautiful daughter wept bitterly for the loss of all her hopes and dreams. Then she heard a sound at the tent's entrance.

"She looked up and saw a young man standing there. Meanly dressed and walking with the aid of a stick, he was nonetheless very fair of face. Thinking he was a rebel soldier who had managed to evade capture, she brought him into the tent and hid him there. Then she began weeping again as if her heart would break.

"The young man asked her what was the matter. When she didn't answer and continued to weep, he

took her in his arms, stroked her hair and comforted her. Then he bent her head back and gently kissed her on the mouth.

"The rebel chief's daughter had never been touched by a man before and this was a new and wonderful sensation to her.

"The young man took her in his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her down and proceeded to make passionate love to her through the rest of the night. They awakened shortly before the dawn and he reached over to where his clothes were lying.

"In the darkness, the rebel chief's daughter felt him press something into her hand. 'This is my gift to you,' he said softly. 'It will keep you safe from harm and remind you always how much I love you.'

"She began to weep again. 'But what of the Emperor? His men are coming for me, and I have no choice but to go with them for my father's sake.'

"He took her in his arms and soothed her. 'Go to the Emperor because you must. But to show that you love me, will you wear my necklace for all to see?'

"Oh, I will!' she breathed. 'And I'll wear it all the days of my life.'

"The young man kissed her good-bye, then left the tent as quietly as he had come.

"When the Emperor's men came in the morning to fetch the rebel chief's daughter, she went out to them with her proud head held high and one of her snow-white hounds on either side of her. But when they brought her before the Emperor on his high throne, she kept her eyes downcast and kneeled before him in humble submission.

"The Emperor asked sharply, 'What is that necklace?'

"It was a gift, Your Majesty, from the man I love. I promised him I would wear it all the days of my life. Despite anything you choose to do to me, I will keep my word.'

With her hand on the necklace and tears running down her face, the chief's daughter bowed her head and waited for her punishment.

"A dead silence fell over the camp.

"Then the Emperor spoke. 'Lift your head and look at me.'

He came down from his high throne and raised her to her feet. When she saw his face, she gasped.

"The Emperor smiled. 'Because I had no intention of taking you against your will, I came to you last night as an ordinary man. These are magic emeralds born from the planet's fiery heart, and even though you might die for it, you've proved your love for me by wearing them as I asked.'

"He married the rebel chief's daughter that very day and crowned her his Empress. True to her word, she wore the emeralds for the rest of her life and from that day forward, Nublis has been at peace just as the old priest prophesied."

"Oh, Galia!" breathed Corey. "Is that why Julian gave me these emeralds? Was he saying he likes me? That I actually please him?"

Galia smiled. "Oh, there's no question about that, sweetheart. In fact, it's safe to say that you please him very much."

Chapter 5...Second Thoughts

"Julian! Have you come to apologize?"

The Emperor's smile was disarmingly benign. "Perhaps, madam. You've had a great loss, after all, and the whole family's been under terrible stress. People often say things at such a time that they later regret. Is Titus here?"

"Why, no. Ever since he had that talk with you, he hasn't been around much. Right now, he's gone fishing with the Captain of the guard. He seems to be fishing or hunting or some such thing all the time now, and I hardly see him anymore."

"What of Myra and Gaius?"

"Gaius is with his tutor; he's having so much trouble with mathematics. And I sent Myra to stay with my mother on Silver Island. She sees so little of her grandchildren and she's very upset about Hero's death." Gulping and sobbing, Irina reached for her handkerchief...and dropped it.

Julian retrieved it. "May I sit?"

"Why, certainly. Would you like some refreshment?"

"That would be very nice."

Irina pressed the intercom next to her chair. "Please bring up some cold drinks." Then her tone grew suspicious. "Julian. why are you really here?"

His gray eyes were totally guileless. "Do I have to have a reason to come and see you, Irina? Let's just say I've been concerned about you, and wanted to see how you are. By the way, what is the progress on your new apartments? Are they going to be ready in time?"

"Er, yes, they're going to be ready. The workers have been putting in a lot of overtime. They'll be quite nice, and I think I will be comfortable there."

Julian, who had seen some of the decorating bills, thought that was quite an understatement.

As if she'd read his mind, Irina said somewhat tensely, "Well, you did say to spare no expense, that I could do anything I wanted...."

Her voice died away when the Steward came in with a tray of drinks. As he placed it on the table next to them, Julian nodded to him.

When they were alone again, he remarked in a casual tone, "The Steward...he's been with you a long time. You brought him with you when you first came here, did you not? Wasn't he your first husband's Steward too?"

"Well, yes," she hesitated. "Yes, he was."

"Hmm. Irina?"

She played with her handkerchief. "Yes?"

"Would you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"No. If I don't like it, I just won't answer."

"Fair enough. How old were you when you married for the first time?"

"Almost fifteen. My father had run into some financial trouble and Count du Mercier made an arrangement with him."

That caught Julian's interest. "How old was the Count?"

Irina looked at him sharply. "Julian, what is this about?"

"Please bear with me, Irina. How old was this Count who bought you when you were only fourteen?"

She looked down at her hands and took a deep breath. "Garamond Du Mercier was sixty-two. H-he liked very young girls. Boys too. S-sometimes he liked them both together."

"Did you know that when you married him?"

"I f-found out on our wedding night. There was a party and...and I..." She sighed. "I was the main attraction. The guests, they...well, they shared me. All night."

"Was that when you met the Steward?" Julian's voice was very gentle.

Irina drew in a deep shuddering breath. "Yes...n-no. Well, I mean...he wasn't the Steward then. He was just a house servant and he came upon me the next morning, after the...er, party. The Count and his guests had all passed out. I was in the corner. M-my dress was torn and I was crying. I didn't even know where my bedroom was and there was no one to ask. He...he took care of me."

Julian took Irina's hands in his and looked deep into her eyes. "I see. Exactly when did he become your Steward?"

Obviously uncomfortable, she tried to pull her hands away. "Why are you asking me all these questions?"

The Emperor held them firmly. "Answer me! When did he become your Steward?"

She looked back at him almost defiantly. "Wh-when Hero was born. Garamond was so pleased he had a son, he told me I could run the whole household from then on. When Gaius was born, he presented me with ten strands of diamonds and a carriage of my own."

"Then you met my father?"

She nodded. "It wasn't long after Gaius. We were at a Palace ball and Garamond was in another room...probably molesting one of the pages. I was sitting alone in a corner and Janus invited me to dance."

Julian's voice was not unkind. "Then you became his mistress. When did my father decide to marry you?"

Irina looked straight at him. "After he was divorced from Ellie's mother, Janus made some kind of financial arrangement with Garamond to let me go. But it took quite a while for them to come to an agreement."

"My father *bought* you from Count du Mercier?"

Irina dropped her eyes again and Julian let go of her hands. "Well, I never quite thought of it that way. But, yes, I suppose he did."

The Emperor sat thinking. Whatever he'd expected, it was surely not this! Then he stood up and formally kissed her hand. "There are some things I need to consider and for right now, I'll bid you a very good day. Tomorrow evening after you're settled in your new apartments, may I call on you?"

"Er, yes, Julian, certainly. Incidentally, these apartments will be available to you tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you, Irina. I'll be in touch."

"Come in, Steward. You can set the tray over there. No, please stay. In fact, I want you to come over here and sit."

As the Steward took the chair opposite him, Julian realized that he had never really looked at him at all. Not as a human being... and certainly not as a man.

The Steward wasn't much older than his stepmother. Slightly built with smooth dark brown hair, hazel eyes, and skin that had almost an olive sheen to it, this man was the father of Irina's three children. As a mere house servant, he'd risked everything to comfort a terrified and abused fourteen-year-old girl to the best of his limited ability and the two of them had forged a lasting relationship. With nothing going for them but their wits, they'd managed to outfox two powerful men, one of whom was an Emperor, and together with their children they'd risen to the highest possible social pinnacle.

Had he been in their shoes, Julian wondered if he could even have done half as well.

The Steward seemed to have gone beyond fear. His gold-flecked eyes calm, he seemed resigned to whatever fate had in store for him.

"Magnus? That is your name, isn't it?"

The Steward nodded.

"You're wondering if I know about the conversation between you and my stepmother yesterday afternoon?"

The Steward looked down at the table as if seeking an answer that would satisfy the Emperor.

"The answer is yes. Every waking moment, you remember that I hold your life in my hands. I hear everything you say, everything that's said to you and know all there is to know. You're like a mouse being played with by a cat-and I'm the cat. Correct?"

Julian lifted the Steward's chin and forced him to look into his eyes. "Am I correct?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. You're correct."

"Right now, the only other choice you have is to die. But for the sake of your children and their mother, you've decided to live and try to find a way out of this. Am I right?"

The Steward straightened in his chair and looked steadily back. "Yes, Your Majesty. Believe me, it would be far easier to die than to continue to live like this. I've thought a hundred times of just ending it because, heaven knows, it would be simple enough. What stops me each time is the thought of what would happen to my children and Irina. Irina and I, we did what we did and if need be, we should suffer for it. But we have a son and daughter who had no part in our crimes. If we're gone and our names are disgraced, what's to become of them?"

"What indeed? Magnus...may I call you that? I have a problem. You do see that, don't you?"

"Y-yes, Your Majesty, I think so."

"There's a young man who means a great deal to me. He goes to trial tomorrow in the Archon's court because he's accused of killing your son. You're the prosecution's chief eyewitness, and even though I'm the Emperor, I can say and do nothing that might in any way influence your testimony. I won't be there tomorrow but you know my agent will be watching you, and you're expecting me to tell you what to say. You're convinced that if you don't say what I want, you'll die. The problem is, you'll be testifying before the Archon and he'll spot it if you lie. All this has you on the horns of a terrible dilemma. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

Julian smiled faintly. "I thought so. But I'm not going to tell you what to say. I expect you to go into that courtroom and stick to your story. In fact, you're to tell it exactly as you have up to now. In this one matter, I have to trust the Archon's instinct for the truth. After you testify, your fate will be in the Archon's hands, not mine."

"You mean...."

"Yes, Magnus, that's exactly what I mean. It's not the Archon's business to ferret out what actually happened and his only purpose in this is to judge the defendant's innocence or guilt. Once he's heard the testimony, he'll either condemn the accused or let him go, and it's unlikely he'll do anything to you. If I were to interfere with your testimony at this point, I'd be putting myself on your level and Irina's and that would render our system of law utterly meaningless. So what I'm telling you is this. You have my solemn word that your testimony in tomorrow's trial will not result in your death. But when it comes to our little cat-and-mouse game, I strongly suggest that you let it continue, if only for the sake of Irina and your children. If you try to end it prematurely, I promise you they will suffer. You've been doing very well so far and I have no complaints. In the meantime, I'm going to give you something to think about. If I can bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion, I'll let you, Irina, and your children go free to make whatever you can out of the rest of your lives."

"Your Majesty, are you saying...?"

"Exactly. I'm giving you a chance to escape the trap you're in and if I were you, Magnus, I'd go for it. But you need to know this. Until a very short time ago, I wasn't prepared to show either you or my stepmother the slightest mercy."

"What changed your mind?"

"You did, Magnus. You and Irina."

"Your Majesty, whatever do you mean?"

"That's for me to know and for you to find out. Now our conversation is at an end. You need to tend to your duties and I have things to do. Good day."

Julian waved at them to enter and Corey breathed in the fragrances near the Conservatory doorway.

"This is where I work on my plants. Would you care to see them?"

She followed him to his work table. "What are those? They're absolutely beautiful."

Julian held up one of his specimens for her to examine. "These are native wild silk plants. Since they grow naturally in many different colors, the fabric made from them doesn't have to be dyed. Unfortunately, they're so rare and fragile in their wild state, their production is very limited."

He handed her a burnished deep blue square. "This is the final product."

Corey stroked the delicate material against her cheek. "This is so soft! It's absolutely beautiful."

"It is, isn't it? Because of their extreme rarity, the output of these plants has always been strictly reserved for royal and ceremonial robes. Your wedding gown, veil and cloak, for instance, are all Nublian wild silk. What I'm attempting to do is cross-breed these plants with their cotton cousins in order to make them sturdier and easier to grow, but all I've achieved so far are cotton plants in different colors. While that still has a certain commercial value, it's not what I'm looking for. However, I'm getting a finer and finer texture all the time and eventually I'll succeed. But this kind of work requires infinite patience. I've been working on this project for ten years now and am still nowhere near a breakthrough."

When Corey started to return the scarf, he brushed her hand aside. "Keep it! The color goes well with your hair."

He led them toward a flowered terrace where an elaborate buffet had been set up. "Ladies, I don't know about you but I've been up since five and I'm starving. Unfortunately, Princess Ellie couldn't be here. She's stuck over at the Temple and they weren't certain when she would be called."

Despite his apparent good cheer, Julian's face was drawn and his eyes were shadowed. He'd deliberately distanced himself from Jonah's trial but Galia guessed that he would fret about it all day. She resolved to find a portable interphone before they left, so that she could check on the proceedings.

She smiled at him. "Well, it's nice to have a day off, Your Majesty, and I appreciate the invitation."

"Oh, I had an ulterior motive. Marta doesn't ride and you do."

"Well, it's been a while. But I did bring my riding clothes as you suggested."

Corey looked up at him shyly. "Your Majesty. I want you to know how much I love the emeralds. Galia told us the story of the first Empress and I can see why she wore them all the time."

Julian thought of the Archon's words, and shivered. "Is that what you want to do? Unfortunately, it's too late for me to come to you in disguise. You're wearing them now, I see, and they suit you very well."

A shadow fell across Corey's chair, and he looked up.

Titus was standing between her and the sun.

Jumping up, Julian set Corey's plate aside and drew her to her feet. "Cornelia! Go into the Conservatory! There's something I want you to see."

As she obediently moved away, he remarked in a casual tone, "Why hello, cousin. We're going up to the farm for a picnic and a ride in the hills. Would you care to join us?"

In all the years she'd known him, Galia had never seen Julian behave like this. Looking at Titus, his expression had been almost fearful and it seemed as if he'd deliberately moved Corey away from him. And when the young man declined his invitation, the Emperor had actually seemed relieved.

Why should Julian be afraid of his young ward?

There's more going on here than meets the eye, she thought, and wondered what it was.

The Major Domo looked down at Cassius' face, and in it, he saw the features of his dead mother. Watching her son sleep, he remembered his sister's dark beauty and the calming effect she'd always had on her beloved, mercurial Emperor. The doctors had warned Marjolaine repeatedly about the dangers of trying to have a child, and to this day, he bitterly regretted keeping his promise to her never to tell Janus. But they'd all been so young then... and full of hope. When he'd seen the happiness on Janus' face and Marjolaine's quiet joy over her pregnancy, he'd managed to persuade himself the doctors were wrong, and kept right on telling himself that, all the way up until the agonizing night Cassius was born.

Julian's birth a few weeks later did little to assuage the Emperor's massive tearing grief. For fear he would harm himself, the Major Domo watched him closely, especially at night. But with a superhuman effort, Janus managed to bring his emotions under control and get his life back on an even keel.

Seeing her husband's disinterest in his newborn heir, the cool silver-haired Empress Lyria had displayed a wisdom beyond her years. Knowing where Janus's heart really lay, she'd adopted Marjolaine's son and raised the two boys together. She had loved Cassius fully as much as she did Julian, and for the next fifteen years, the Palace had been a happy, albeit noisy, place.

Recalling the boys' endless mischief and how one of them would invariably cover for the other, the Major Domo smiled to himself. Their angelic expressions had been a consistent barometer of their countless misdeeds and most of his gray hairs had come from trying to keep them out of trouble during their turbulent teen years.

When the Empress died suddenly in their fifteenth year, he'd been touched by the way the boys had supported each other in their grief. Even Janus mourned his first wife's passing and the Major Domo shared the family's loss in full measure.

By that time, he himself had been promoted to Captain of the Guard. He'd met and loved his share of women, any one of whom would have been glad to have him as a husband, but he'd long since concluded that married life was not for him. Julian and Cassius had been all the family he'd needed and Janus was the older brother he'd never had.

A couple of years after Lyria's death, the Emperor had taken a sweet, shy Princess from one of the islands in Nublis's southern ocean for his second wife. Deeply traumatized by their wedding night, the new Empress fell into a severe depression. Her illness escalated into madness after Ellie's birth and fearing for the baby's safety, Janus had finally sent his wife back to her family. Then he'd divorced her with a heavy heart.

When the old Archon had designated his son Cassius to be his successor, the distraught Emperor had begged Aaron to be his Major Domo. The previous Archon had been cruelly maltreated by his keeper and he wanted to take no chances of such a thing happening again.

In the eleven years since, the Major Domo had done his best to mitigate the more brutal requirements of his job, and he and the Archon had eventually achieved a degree of mutual respect.

Then Janus had been killed and Julian had returned home.

A knock on the apartment's outer door interrupted his thoughts. It was a Temple guard to tell him the witnesses were assembled and that all was in readiness for Jonah's trial. The time had come to prepare his charge for court and he couldn't put it off any longer.

As the Major Domo unlocked the restraints, he saw the Archon's eyes were open and wondered how long he had been awake. "Good morning."

"Why's the Temple so quiet? The prisoners are locked down and even the commissary is closed. Well, the fish are in the fountain, at least, and their keeper's still here."

Long accustomed to the extraordinary acuteness of the Archon's hearing after the administration of the drugs, the Major Domo was unsurprised.

"Except for essential staff, we've cleared everyone out of the Temple complex, including the bride. The witnesses are sequestered in a soundproof room, the observers are under strict orders to maintain total silence and the press has been told to remain quiet under pains of being ejected from the planet. You're probably the only person in the entire Synod who has no knowledge of what has become an extremely sensational case and we aim to keep it that way."

The Archon gave a wry smile. "The way Julian's been behaving, I'd surmised as much. Where is he, by the way?"

"I told him to make himself scarce and suggested this might be a good day for a picnic and a ride in the country. He's off in the hills with his bride and her chaperone."

Cassius sighed. "Lucky Julian."

"Maybe not. He's fallen madly in love with his designated bride and the thought of the wedding night..."

"Uh-oh. Maybe he's not so fortunate, at that."

The Major Domo helped his charge sit up, then handed him some documents. "You'd best read these while I get your bath ready. These are Magistrate Cato's amended pleadings and here's the report on the defendant's hypnotherapy session."

"Julian did ask for it, then."

"He sure did. After I gave him your signed order, he apologized for what he said when I refused to wake you."

The Archon grinned. "Our Julian actually lost his temper, then had to pick crow feathers out of his teeth? That I should like to have seen."

"Well, for Julian, he lost his temper. Most people wouldn't have thought twice about it. He came back later that same night, went to sleep in the chair and stayed here until morning."

"They told me. Then they instructed me to warn him...something about the new Empress."

"Do you remember the warning?"

"Oddly enough, I don't. Should I?"

The Major Domo patted him on the shoulder. "You don't remember because you already gave it to him that same night. But for a moment there, I thought you were awake, so did he. And now, my friend, we'd best get you ready for Court."

"Ma'am?"

Galia started guiltily and shoved the interphone into her purse. She'd managed to reach Master Ludlow and he'd promised to contact her whenever there was a break in the proceedings.

The pilot was holding the door and she could see the others were already inside.

Unlike the small five-seater Julian used for his personal trips out of the city, this transport was a large luxury model with a full galley and a couple of servants aboard. Marta was up front talking to one of the attendants, while Julian and Corey had settled for a pair of opulent armchairs at the rear of the spacious cabin. As soon as Galia was safely seated, the pilot raised the steps. Then he swung himself aboard and gave a thumbs-up sign to Julian.

The electric motors started with a hiss, and they listened to the pilot proceed through his preflight checks. The spaceport's clearance signal chimed and with a whoosh from the powerful thrusters, they were airborne.

The transport's shadow raced over the city below. They reached the silver ribbon of the river and the pilot turned north. As the city fell away behind them, Galia looked affectionately down at the farm country where she'd been raised. She dozed for the remainder of the three-hour trip and woke abruptly as the transport settled to the ground.

Taking Corey by the hand, Julian went toward the slowly opening door. He caught Galia's shiver through her thin dress and motioned to one of the attendants. The man offered her a fleecy jacket which she gratefully hugged around herself.

The Emperor called over his shoulder, "Don't worry about your bag, Galia! They'll bring it up later. Come on, Corey! Let's go see the horses."

The two of them took off for the stables like a couple of kids let out of school and Galia started walking toward the rambling stone house.

Marta stood for a moment, uncertain.

"Miss Galia, don't you think..."

"Let them go! Corey couldn't be in safer hands and neither the pilot nor I is going to tell on you. Now, why don't we go sit by a nice warm fire until they get back?"

"All rise for His Grace, the Archon!"

In total blackness, Cassius waited for the Major Domo to tell him which way he should face. Feeling utterly helpless, he signed, "Where are you?" At last, he felt the reassuring touch.

As the Major Domo guided his hands toward the hammer and knife, the guard spoke again. "Be seated! The Archon's court is now in session!"

He could hear the movements and breathing of those already in the courtroom and the 'snick' of the lock on the witness room door. A faint whisper, instantly hushed, was followed by the rustle of the guard's clothing, and Cassius heard his weapon's click as he looked sternly in the direction of the offender.

"Call witness number one for the prosecution!"

The Archon sensed them coming.

They reached the front of the courtroom and stood nervously, trying not to move or even breathe, and he could smell their fear.

"Prosecution witness number one will make his opening argument!"

In the open space in front of the Archon's throne, Jonah made ready to fight for his life. The massive gray form loomed above him on the dais, with the Major Domo's scarlet form to his right.

Behind him, the audience was ranged in two rows of about twenty each. In front of them stood two plain wooden tables and four chairs, with Magistrate Cato at one and Master Ludlow at the other. At the courtroom's rear, a pair of blue-armored Temple guards stood at attention in front of the enormous double doors.

As the Steward concluded his opening statement, Jonah glanced up at the Archon. But he sat still as a statue and made no sign. The print on the page shook slightly as Jonah cleared his throat and Master Ludlow gave him an encouraging nod. Moisture trickling down his spine, he cleared his throat again and pulled himself together.

"Witness number one. When you came up the stairs, just exactly what did you see and hear?"

Sweat beaded the Steward's brow. "I heard what sounded like shots from the direction of the upper floor...er...roof. I shouted for help and ran up the stairs. The moon was up and the scene was very clear. Something lay on the ground. As I came closer, I saw a body with someone bending over it. Another lay nearby. Seeing the first one alive and struggling, I picked up a candleholder and hit the assailant as hard as I could. Then I ran downstairs, shouting for help."

Jonah frowned. "You said you heard shots when you were at the bottom of the stairs. How many?"

"At least one."

"Did you hear more shots after you ran back down."

"There was a lot of noise. The guards were coming. I don't think so. I'm not sure."

Despite the fact that he was telling the truth, the Archon could smell the prosecution witness's fear.

"Were you acquainted with any of the people on the roof?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"The body I saw struggling was the daughter of the household. The body lying a short way away was a son of the household. The assailant –"

The advocate signaled to Jonah and he interrupted. "Objection!"

The Archon held up his hand. He whispered to the Major Domo who asked, "What is your objection?"

Jonah swallowed hard. "Your Grace, I object to the term 'assailant.' The witness had no knowledge that the person that he hit was the one who'd committed the assault. He only assumed he had."

The Archon signed again and the Major Domo translated. "Your objection is upheld. The witness will kindly rephrase."

The advocate smiled at Jonah and signaled, "Yes."

Jonah turned back to the Steward. "You were about to identify the person you hit."

"I hit the defendant. He was a household servant."

"Did you observe the defendant shoot the son of the house?"

"No."

"Did you see what the defendant was doing to the daughter of the house when she was struggling on the ground?"

"No."

"Might the defendant have been trying to assist the girl rather than assaulting her?"

"I don't know."

"Did you see or hear anyone else on the roof at the time you hit the defendant?"

"No."

"Did you see anything on the ground near the defendant and girl at the time you struck him?"

"No."

"Do you have any knowledge of the defendant's relationship with either the daughter or the son that might constitute a motive for an assault on either of them?"

"Yes. I had witnessed the son and the defendant in an altercation shortly before the assault. It had to do with the daughter of the house."

The Archon held up his hand and began signing to the Major Domo, who asked, "Was there a relationship between the defendant and the daughter of the house?"

"Yes."

"Was it friendly?"

"Yes."

"Did the son object to this relationship?"

"Yes."

"Was this the only altercation between the son and the defendant?"

"No."

"Would you say there was bad blood between the son and the defendant?"

"Definitely."

"What was the relationship between the daughter and the son?"

"Familial or personal, Your Grace?"

"Either."

"The daughter and the son were not physically related through their parents. They issued from marriages by their parents to others."

"And personally?"

"The daughter did not like the son."

"Was there inappropriate behavior on the part of the defendant toward the daughter of the house?"

"I don't know."

"Was there inappropriate behavior on the part of the son toward the daughter of the house?"

"Er... no. Not that I'm aware of."

The Archon sensed the last two answers were lies and caught a sudden increase in the prosecution witness's fear level. He beckoned to the Major Domo and whispered in his ear.

"Witness number one," continued the Major Domo, "do you have any reason to believe there might have been someone else on the roof when you hit the defendant?"

"Er... no. It's possible, but I didn't see anyone."

Again the Archon signed to the Major Domo, who said, "I will repeat the question, do you have any reason to believe there might have been someone else on the roof?"

Puzzled, Jonah looked over at the advocate. The advocate held up his hands and shook his head.

"Er... no."

The Archon lowered his head as if deliberating. The prosecution witness was definitely lying, and his fear had become outright terror.

Cassius signed to the Major Domo again. "Witness number one, you are excused."

The interphone buzzed. After looking around to see if anyone was there, Galia answered it. "Yes, Advocate? How's it going?"

"They just adjourned for an hour because the Archon wants to review the pleadings. Something about the Steward's testimony bothered him."

"What was it?"

"He asked him twice if he had any reason to believe there was a second assailant. The Steward said no both times, and the Archon excused him. He questioned Princess Eliane repeatedly about the number of shots and exactly when the gun was thrown on the ground. He also questioned Jonah about the number of shots. Since Jonah couldn't remember anything, we played the audio of his hypnosis session in place of his testimony. It was powerful stuff. Oh, there's the guard! I have to go. I'll call you back just as soon as I can."

"Thanks, Advocate."

Galia looked up just as Julian walked in.

He looked inquiringly at the interphone. "What's that about?"

"Well... knowing you were worried about the trial, I arranged for the advocate to call me whenever there was a break."

"Did you, now? And have there been any developments?"

When Galia told him what the advocate had said, Julian looked thoughtful. "Did he say what bothered the Archon about the Steward's testimony?"

"He asked him twice about the second assailant. That's all I know."

"Interesting. I always thought the Steward was the second assailant. Maybe he's not. But he probably knows who it was. Was there anything more?"

"No. Did I do right?"

"What? Oh, er... yes, Galia, you did."

She looked around. "Your Majesty, where's Corey?"

He shrugged. "Down at the stables. She got into a longwinded discussion with the head groom about eugenics. Since it's not one of my favorite subjects, I left."

Galia made a move toward the door.

"Don't bother! Marta's already gone down there. The cook told me lunch is ready. We can have her pack it up and ride to the lake for a picnic."

Remembering certain idyllic afternoons in the past, a look of affection passed between them. "It was good, wasn't it, Galia?"

"Yes, Julian, it was."

He put a finger under her chin and looked into her eyes. "No regrets?"

She looked steadily back. "None."

Watching Corey approach the house with Marta, Julian's cheerful mood evaporated. Turning away from the window, he went over to the fire and stood warming his hands. "If the trial keeps going the way it has so far, they may have it all wrapped up by tonight. Then we can set the date. Have you had a chance to talk to Corey?"

"I've tried...but she keeps cutting me off. She says she grew up on a farm and relations between men and women are no mystery to her. She also says she trusts you and isn't afraid."

He sighed. "You've obviously done your best and there's no more to be said."

The transport leveled out and as it headed south through the darkening sky, Galia approached Julian with the interphone in her hand. "Your Majesty, it's Master Ludlow. For you."

The Emperor put the phone to his ear. "He came in with a verdict already? Yes, I agree, that is a... Right. Would you do me a favor and put Jonah on?" He listened again. "Yes, Jonah, I understand and I'll be there as soon as I can. Let me talk to the advocate again."

By now, Corey had woken from her nap.

Galia, on tenterhooks, shifted from one foot to the other.

Julian ignored her distress. "Keep the press away from him, whatever you do. Yes, thank you, I appreciate everything you've done and I'll come as soon I can. No, that's all right. Just stay with him until I get there. Are his friends... That's good. Princess Eliane said what? No, that's perfectly all right. If she wants to see him, she has my permission. Be sure to tell him that."

As he snapped the interphone shut, Julian closed his eyes for a moment.

Fear lanced through Galia. "What's happened? It's not..."

He opened them again and sighed. "The best the advocate had hoped for was guilty but not proven. But the Archon did better than that! He's acquitted him! Right now, the press has the Temple under siege and they've discovered the service tunnels. Too bad Jonah's not as big as the Major Domo! If he was, we could borrow his extra robes and spirit him out that way. Well, we'll think of something."

Noting Corey's puzzled expression, he patted her hand. "We can talk about this later. Right now, we have a wedding to plan."

Chapter 5...Wedding Night

"Come, Your Majesty," said Marta. "They're waiting for you."

Corey looked up at Julian where he sat next to her at the high table but he turned his head away. Throughout the banquet, he'd eaten little or nothing and as the evening proceeded, his face grew progressively darker. Now he seemed almost angry with her but she couldn't figure out why.

Wondering what she'd done wrong, Corey went over the whole day in her mind.

After the Archon placed the miter on her head, there was that moment when she'd tried to stand up. She'd staggered and would have fallen had Julian not wrapped a surprisingly strong arm around her waist. As he'd lifted her to her feet, he'd looked down into her eyes. Then he'd smiled in a way that made her feel deliciously warm all over.

Taking her in his arms, he'd held her so close, she could feel his heart beating against hers. Then he'd given her a long deep kiss.

When she'd felt Julian's questing tongue between her lips, Corey had responded instantly. Moved by the surprise and delight she saw in his eyes, she'd flung her arms around her bridegroom's neck, almost knocking the Imperial miter from his head in the process. Then she'd opened her mouth and kissed him back hard.

With the Temple bells booming overhead, the wedding guests rose to their feet, their applause and cheers almost drowning out the chorus's hymn of exultation.

After what seemed like an eternity, Julian released her, and the two of them stood for a few moments catching their breath. He'd turned her to face the people, whose cheering grew even wilder, and finally they'd faced the altar again.

Then the Archon bound her left wrist to Julian's right with a golden cord.

"This joins your souls forever," intoned the Major Domo, "and it will link you together throughout this life until one of you is dead. Now my beautiful children, go forth in peace and prosper."

With flowers raining down on them from every direction, Julian and Corey had proceeded slowly down the sanctuary aisle and out through its massive jeweled doors.

Only at the end of the magnificent eight-course banquet was the Archon's golden cord finally severed.

Corey pleaded, "Julian, what is it?" But he continued to look away.

She saw her attendants approaching and her voice broke. "Can't I stay just a little longer?"

Julian turned his head in response to her tears, but his tone was chillier than a winter night. "It's time. Take her."

"I don't want to leave you! Please Julian. Not like this!"

"Cornelia! You must! I order you!"

"What is it? Oh, my love, please tell me. What have I done to offend you so?"

The Emperor's gray eyes softened. "You've done nothing, my sweet. How could you when you're such an innocent? But you're the Imperial bride, and it's our wedding night." Then his voice broke in turn. "Please, Corey! Just... go!"

As he sat at the high table looking after her, they came for him. He saw his honor guard waiting and sighed. Then he stood and held out his hands. "You may take me now"

After the Emperor left, the Archon motioned for silence.

Lifting a great jeweled cup, he poured it out as the Major Domo said, "Gentlemen! Ladies! A libation! May tonight be a fruitful harbinger of yet another three thousand years of peace. To Nublis!"

"To Nublis!" replied the assembled company.

The Archon turned the empty cup down on the table.

"The night is still young," said the Major Domo, "and the wine is plentiful. The Imperial couple thanks you for your company and begs you to continue with the celebration."

Instead of taking her to her new apartments as she'd expected, Corey's escort of scarlet-armored guards and maidens left the Palace and proceeded across the moonlit square to the Temple's brooding mass. Footsteps echoing in the silence, they led her down an ancient stone passageway. Stopping at the iron-banded door at its far end, they knocked.

It silently opened and they ushered her into a room she'd never seen before.

When she took Corey in her arms, tears shone in Galia's eyes. Letting her go, she kissed her on the forehead. "Just remember," she whispered, "he really does love you." Then she gestured to Corey's escort.

As the guards saluted, the maidens flushed, refusing to meet her eyes. Then they turned as one, leaving her alone in the candlelit room.

A velvet-draped bed loomed in the center of the stone-flagged floor, each of its carved and gilded posters the thickness of a man's arm. An intricate depiction of the Garden of Life in every color of the rainbow, the silken coverlet's design seemed to move in the flickering light. For as long as she lived, Corey would see those pictures in her mind's eye as clearly as though it were yesterday.

Through the tall open windows, she could hear the boom of the sea. Outside a couple of straight-backed chairs, an ornately carved wooden chest and a few shelves, the room contained no other furniture.

A group of white-swathed hooded figures awaited her near the bed.

When she saw them, Corey gulped. She stood uncertain, wondering what to do next when one of them beckoned. His voice was colder than winter frost. "Come, Your Majesty. We must prepare you for the Emperor."

As Corey stood trembling, they silently removed her miter, cloak, gloves, jewels, wedding dress, shift and underclothes and placed them in the chest. Then they bathed and dried her. Finally they led her, naked and shivering, to the great bed. After removing the coverlet, they placed her carefully in its center among the icy linen sheets and arranged the pillows around her. Then they ranged themselves against one of the stone walls.

Corey was afraid to move.

After what seemed an interminable wait, the door opened. Wrapped in a great crimson cloak and surrounded by scarlet-armored guards, the Emperor entered the room. Then he stood with his head bowed.

After his escort saluted and left, one of the hooded figures opened the Emperor's cloak. The crimson fabric dropped to the floor to reveal that Julian was as naked as she. With his head still bowed, he remained silent, his finely muscled body a gilded statue in the candlelight.

Her assurances to Galia notwithstanding, Corey had never seen a nude man before. She saw his erection

and gasped aloud, and Julian raised his head. Breathing heavily, his eyes glowed red in the fitful light. He looked at her as though she was a stranger and his voice was harsh and thick.

"Madam, we're here to make an heir and won't be permitted to leave this room until we've succeeded."

Corey unsuccessfully tried to keep the tremor from hers. "Aren't they going to leave us alone?"

"No. By law, the guardians must observe us couple, note the moment of conception and report the heir is truly mine."

He took a step toward her. She shrank away and made a small sound in her throat.

"Madam! If you'll just submit, it'll be easier for both of us!"

Julian climbed on the bed, then shoving her legs apart, he thrust himself into her without any further preamble.

Throughout that seemingly endless night, he penetrated her again and again. Periodically, the watchers would stop him, give him something to drink and he would fall instantly into a deep sleep.

While he slept, they would examine Corey, draw blood from them both and pass an instrument with colored readouts on it over their bodies. Then they'd take her into the bathroom, give her something to drink and place her back on the bed. After that, they would waken Julian, give him another injection, and it would all begin again.

As the sea continued its relentless booming, the dawn came up. The hours passed and Corey watched the sun set through the open windows, and still the nightmare continued.

Halfway through the second night, one of the watchers held up a white-gloved hand. "You can stop now. She's positive!"

Chest heaving, and with his legs shuddering, Julian instantly moved away. He tried to stand, then fell like a stone.

Just before he hit the floor, two of the watchers caught him in their arms. Wrapping him in his great crimson cloak, they lowered him gently to the bed beside Corey. One of them went to the door and opened it to admit a pair of blue-garbed medical attendants and a wheeled stretcher. Without looking at her, the attendants transferred Julian's limp body to a stretcher and covered it with a blanket. Then they left as silently as they'd come.

Marta and Galia hurried into the room.

While Galia brought a basin of steaming water and towels, her old nurse put a comforting arm around Corey's shaking shoulders, clucking all the while like an agitated mother hen. The two of them sponged and dried her, then wrapped her in a fleecy robe they'd brought with them and slipped soft shoes onto her feet.

When they were finally done, one of the hooded watchers approached with a steaming silver tankard. Corey held it for a moment, savoring its fragrant warmth. Then she took a sip. "This is good! What is it?"

"An infusion of rare mountain herbs and wild honey, Your Majesty. You must drink it every morning until your child is born." He made as if to join the others.

"Who are you? Will I see you again?"

"We're the Guardians, Your Majesty. When the heir's ready to be born, we'll come again. Then the circle will be complete." Taking her hand in his, he opened her palm and placed something within it. "This is for you, my lady, from the Archon." He closed her fingers around it and hurried after his departing colleagues.

As the door closed behind them, Corey opened her hand to see an exquisitely enameled fish with jeweled eyes and scales of brilliant blue. The pendant hung on a handwrought golden chain and as she gazed at it, she heard a man's voice in her ear. "Cornelia. Remember the fountain."

Startled, she looked around. "Who's here?"

Galia looked at her, puzzled. "Just us."

"Well, who was that, then?"

"Who was what?"

"That man! Didn't you what hear he said?"

"I didn't hear anyone. Did you, Marta?" Her tone softened. "Corey, hon, you're exhausted. You've just been through a terrible ordeal and you've had no sleep. You must have imagined it."

"No, I didn't! And why did no one warn me?"

"I tried, but even I had no idea.... Oh, Corey, I'm so sorry. Julian had to do it. Now you're pregnant, you won't have to.... You do understand, don't you? Please say you do."

Marta began to cry.

Corey stood up from the bed and took a tentative step. Then she winced. "No one ever told me it would be like this."

"It isn't, hon. At least not for ordinary folk. Oh, Corey, you must forgive him! He loves you dearly. He really does."

Corey slowly made her way to the open window and stood looking out at the moonlit sea. "They drugged him to keep him potent and they made him go on and on until I was successfully bred. It's what they do to my father's champion bulls. I've seen it so many times and never once stopped to think what it must be like for them. Well, now I know! That's all we are! Pedigreed Imperial livestock! Oh, I understand it all very well!"

"But how do you feel about him?" Galia's eyes were anxious.

Looking down at the Archon's gift, an image of Julian by the fountain came unbidden into Corey's mind. "This wasn't the man who kissed me in the sanctuary. He was a total stranger."

"But can you love him, after this?"

Corey's small brow wrinkled. "I don't know. And I won't know how I feel until I see him again...and he touches me."

"Then you will see him again? And let him...touch you?"

Her green eyes flashing, the new Empress lifted her tiny chin. "Kindly inform His Imperial Majesty that he's to call on me the moment he's on his feet! Under the circumstances, that's the very least he can do!"

Galia's cheeks glistened with tears. "Oh, Corey! You're truly wonderful!"

"I know! And now if you don't mind, I'd just as soon go to my new home. I haven't had any sleep for two days. I want a proper bath, and I'm hungry!"

* * *

The doctor slammed his medical pack against the table.

"I respect our ancient rites as much as the next man, but this is criminal! Those fools brought him to the point of death, and for what? A three-thousand-year-old tradition?" He checked the monitors over the bed again. "With all our wisdom and technology, you'd think they could have come up with something less barbaric by now! Well, as a matter of fact they did, and even the Archon supports it from what I hear. But those damn traditionalists in Parliament want no part of it! Every time the change is proposed, the fundamentalists go into an absolute frenzy. It's against nature, they say. As if this barbarism was natural! To hear them tell it, the morals of the young, the survival of our species and who knows what else, depend on things being done just the way they always were. If it was good enough for our ancestors, it should be good enough for us. Well, then, why didn't they just finish the job and slash his throat with a golden scythe the way they used to do in the old days? Then they could burn his heart on the sanctuary altar, scatter his blood over the new crops and bury whatever's left at the foot of the sacred mountain under a full moon! After all, that's what they used to do! Or would that particular part of the ceremony be too uncivilized?"

As he spat the words out, the doctor noticed Jonah's expression. "I'm sorry. But when I see some stupidity like this, I get so wound up I don't know when to stop!"

The young man smiled. "As a matter of fact, I agree with you one hundred percent. Do you have any instructions for me?"

"Well, he finally seems to be stable. But while his breathing's much better, he's still extremely weak. I've rehydrated him and given him something for the pain. Even so, it'll take at least two days for those stimulants to clear out of his system. The next twenty-four hours will be especially critical because seizures are quite common with this class of drugs. In Julian's current state, a seizure would be especially dangerous. He's so physically depressed, we daren't sedate him. If the seizures didn't kill him, the sedatives would."

The doctor held up an amber vial. "The Major Domo gave me this to use in the event of an emergency but I don't want to unless I absolutely have to. The Major's had a lot of experience with overdoses at the prison and my colleagues speak highly of him. He says he'll come if we need him, but I pray we won't. Did the medics show you how to use the equipment and adjust the gases?"

Jonah nodded and the doctor continued. "If he gets into the slightest difficulty, apply the mask before you even call me. If he fights, just hold it until he settles down. He's probably too weak to give you any trouble. Here's a list of symptoms to watch for. If any one of them occurs, no matter how slight, call me. I'd rather answer a false alarm than take any chances. These levels should tell you if anything's wrong before any physical symptoms occur. Right now, his readings are all in the normal range, his vitals are good and he seems to be doing fine. Oh, and I've arranged for someone to relieve you in about four hours."

Just as he was leaving, the doctor turned. "Oh, and there's one more thing. I looked in on the Empress a while ago. For all she's so tiny, that's a strong girl. Right now, she seems to be in a whole lot better shape than he is. If Julian wakes, tell him she'd like to see him as soon as he's better. That should cheer him up. And now, I'm going to try to get some sleep."

Jonah quietly closed the door and took up his station by the bed. He could see the monitors clearly and the breathing mask and intercom were within easy reach.

When Ellie tiptoed into the room a few hours later, the sky outside the window was just beginning to turn pink.

Jonah put a finger to his lips.

"How is he?" she whispered.

"Very, very sick. But if he makes it through the next twenty-four hours, he'll be all right. The doctor finally went to get some sleep."

The voice from the bed was so faint, Jonah thought at first he'd imagined it. "Ellie? Is that you?"

When Julian began coughing uncontrollably, he punched the intercom with one hand and shoved the mask over his face with the other. By the time the doctor arrived, the coughing had subsided and the Emperor's breathing was normal again.

The doctor removed the mask and his eyes were stern. "Don't talk! Your lungs aren't up to it and once you really start coughing, you may not be able to stop. I'm going to give you something that'll help, but you absolutely must not talk." As he took a needle gun from his pack and shot something into Julian's neck, he muttered to Jonah, "This was the other thing I was worried about." Then he frowned at the Emperor. "The Princess can only stay if you behave. And that means no talking. Do you understand?"

Julian smiled faintly and moved his head on the pillow.

"I'll take that as a yes. And now, if you don't mind, I'm going back to sleep."

Ellie eyed her brother speculatively. "We can say whatever we like and he can't talk back?"

The doctor half-smiled. "Within reason, but I don't want him getting upset."

The Princess looked pensive and it suddenly occurred to Julian there was more of their father in her than he'd previously thought.

As if he'd read Julian's mind, Jonah pointed out, "On the other hand, His Majesty's condition isn't going to last and he does have a very long memory."

Ellie sighed. "You're right. I suppose I shouldn't say anything I might regret later."

Watching them smile blissfully at one other, Julian recalled his promise to Jonah before the trial. *She's an Imperial Princess and he's only a house servant. What in the hell am I going to do?*

Out of nowhere, an image of Corey invaded his mind. Remembering how he'd last seen her, the Emperor closed his eyes and wept.

* * *

"What are you two whispering about?"

Galia started and looked around. Corey's eyes were open and Marta hastened to help her sit up.

After plumping up and rearranging the pillows, she hurried for another blanket, and smoothed it over the bed.

"Oh, Marta, will you quit fussing! I'm not sick!"

The old nurse burst into tears. "It's the Emperor! Oh, it's just terrible!"

Corey grabbed her by the wrist. "What's terrible? You tell me this instant! Or so help me, I'll break your arm!"

She can do it too, thought Galia. "Let go of Marta and I'll tell you. Julian's very sick."

"You mean he could die? Why didn't the doctor say anything?"

"He was concerned about you. We'd just brought you back from the Temple and he wasn't sure about your state of mind."

"My mind's just fine! Now, what's all this about Julian?"

"The drugs the guardians used on him are dangerous and they may have given him too much. If Julian goes into a seizure, he could die. He's awake but he's not allowed to talk."

Corey promptly swung her legs out of bed. "Marta, find me something besides this stupid nightgown! I have a few things to say to my husband and I don't want him dying on me before I've had the chance!"

Oh, my! thought Galia, *and he can't talk back! I wouldn't miss this for the world.*

When she knocked on Julian's door a few moments later, Ellie opened it.

"Corey! Should you be up?"

"I'm just fine, Ellie. Now, what's this I hear about Julian? Ah, you must be Jonah. He's told me a lot about you." Taking Julian's hand in hers, Corey inspected the medical paraphernalia. "What's all this?"

The Emperor started to open his mouth. Then he saw Jonah pick up the breathing mask and closed it again.

Corey sniffed. "Oh, that's right. You not supposed to talk. Well, I can and there are a few things I have to say to you."

When he saw Galia, Julian closed his eyes and sighed. He should have guessed there'd be a damn audience. What were they doing, for pity's sake? Selling tickets? Why didn't they get the whole friggin' city up here while they were at it? He opened his eyes again. *That's funny, why's the light changing like that?*

Jonah took one look at the monitors. Shoving the startled Corey aside, he punched the intercom, and then he jammed the breathing mask over Julian's face. "Doctor! Something's happening!"

The doctor raced in, ripping open his medical pack as he came. "Get back and give me some room!" He loaded the needle gun, and injected Julian in the side of his neck. "Galia, call the Major Domo because he's starting to seizure! Ellie, keep that mask on! Jonah, help me hold him! God, even now,

he's strong!"

"I shouldn't have come!" wailed Corey. "It's all my fault. I did this!"

Her call finished, Galia put an arm around her and led her to a chair. "No, sweetheart. You didn't. Julian's going to be all right. They know what they're doing." Watching the doctor work, she prayed her words were true.

When the Major Domo arrived, everything was quiet.

"What happened? When I got the call, Galia didn't say much."

The doctor met him outside the Emperor's door and closed it behind him. "Let's talk here. Incidentally, that young man should consider going into medicine because he's a natural. At one point, Julian looked as if he might arrest but your medication stopped it cold. He's asleep, finally. The Empress was here. I gave her a mild sedative and she's back in her own bed. But she made one thing very clear before she left. If he doesn't pull through, she's going to have my head. And do you know something? There may be hope for that marriage yet."

* * *

Corey was so absorbed with the fish nibbling at her hand, she failed to hear Julian's approach.

He watched her for a while, appreciating the setting sun's lights in her hair, the brush of her lashes against her cheek and the way she caught her lower lip between her teeth when she was concentrating.

As if in greeting, a second fish rose to join the first and Corey looked up. Forgetting all about the fish, she abruptly stumbled to her feet and backed away.

Her obvious shock and distress twisted Julian's heart. At a loss for words, he dropped his hands to his sides and just stood there. Finally, he found his voice. "Cornelia. I—"

"There's nothing you can possibly.... Dammit, why didn't you warn me? Surely you could have said something. Here, I thought you loved me!" Dissolving into tears, she turned away. "Well, you got what you wanted, Your Majesty. Your precious succession is secure and now if you don't mind —"

"I do mind and I haven't given you leave to go."

"I need your permission now?"

"Yes. No. Of course not. It's just that I couldn't.... You have to understand. Protocol dictates that the Imperial bride know nothing. A blameless sacrifice to Nublis's future, she must be a total innocent. Outside of the formal presentation, I wasn't supposed to see you before the wedding, let alone kiss you. Had they known what I intended, the Guardians would have stationed soldiers in the sanctuary to prevent me from taking you in my arms."

Her mouth dropped open. "They would have done *that*?"

"Certainly. Love has no place in the first Imperial coupling and physical affection is forbidden until after

the deed is done."

"But why?"

"It has been ever thus and maybe it would have been better if I had followed the rules. My ancestors were wiser than I knew and I realize now that I should have followed their example. Without love, there is no pain, and in a marriage such as ours...." He broke off and stood looking into the water. With an obvious effort, he continued. "Of course you may go. In fact, I wish you would. Outside of formal functions, you don't ever have to see or talk with me again. Within reason, you're free to live as you wish and associate with whomever you please." His shoulders slumping, Julian sank to the fountain's rim and trailed his hand in the water. "Please, Corey. Just... go."

Her voice was so soft, he could barely make out the words. "What do you mean, without love there can be no pain? Are you saying you love me?"

"What does it matter? Ours was an arranged marriage in which you had even less choice than I and there's no reason for both of us to be miserable. You've done all that was required of you and more. Once the heir is safely born, I'll set you free. That is my promise to you."

"You'll give me a divorce?"

He gritted his teeth. "Yes."

Corey fell to her knees and took his hand in both of hers. "What if I don't want it?"

"You would still be the Empress with everything that implies."

"Julian. Look at me. Do you think I give a fig about being the Empress?"

"But isn't that—"

"For a so-called man of the world, you're not very bright."

Afraid to hope, he turned his head and looked into her eyes. "What are you saying?"

"Are we allowed to love each other now? If you embrace me, will the guards come to separate us?"

"Only if they don't value their lives."

Her arms slid around his neck and she pulled his face down toward hers. "Can we do this?"

Julian abandoned the fish and tumbled to the grass beside Corey. Thankful for the gathering darkness, he enfolded her in his arms and began covering her eyes, nose and mouth with increasingly urgent kisses. "And this. And this."

When they finally came up for air, she asked softly, "Are you well enough? I mean it's only been a few days."

His teeth flashed in the darkness. "We de Ravens are a hardy breed. Otherwise, we'd never survive the wedding night. But if you want to give me some help, I wouldn't say no."

"Here?"

"My office is just beyond those trees. It has a great big couch and it seems to me you've climbed my balcony before. "

She giggled. "Only this time I don't need my cat as an excuse."

Julian growled and buried his face in her hair. "No chaperone's going to rescue you either."

"Mmm. If you want some help, you'll have to show me what to do. I'm a total innocent, remember."

"Not for long, you won't be. By the time I'm through with you, my dear, you'll be a total, shameless slut."

Wriggling herself around to a more comfortable position, Corey wound her arms around his neck. "What are you waiting for? My permission?" She pressed herself against him. "I don't think you need much help. Or have the Guardians been dosing you again?"

"That is not only lese majeste, it's a baseless slur. Such disrespect, Madame, is about to be punished severely and I'm not sure it can wait until we reach my office."

She jumped away from him with a squeal. "You'll have to catch me first!"

"Dammit, Corey!" Julian took off after her through the trees and caught up with her as she reached his balcony.

Without giving him a chance to catch his breath, she was over the railing and through the half-opened windows. "Ooh, it's dark in here! Now, where's this famous couch you keep telling me about?"

Julian vaulted the balcony rail and joined her. "I know my way around here in the dark, and that's when it's the most fun. You've never undressed a man before, have you?"

"Of course not."

As he took her hands and guided them to the top of his shirt, he felt for the couch with his foot. When he reached it, he fell backward, pulling her down on top of him. "I'm suddenly feeling very tired and unable to do a thing for myself."

Corey sniffed. "Likely story. All right, I'll play your silly game. Ooh, that tickles. I... um. What, may I ask, do you think you're doing?"

"Unlike you, I have undressed a partner before. While you're figuring out how to remove my shirt, why don't I demonstrate the proper technique?"

"It's not your shirt I'm worried about," muttered Corey.

Suddenly, they were skin on skin without her quite knowing how they got there and Julian was demonstrating to her complete satisfaction that the de Ravens were, indeed, a hardy breed. Obviously in no need of either her help or the Guardians' drugs, he still took his time and approached her with all the gentle tenderness that had been lacking on their wedding night.

"If this hurts you," he whispered, "tell me immediately and I'll stop."

With a sigh, she opened herself to him and he slipped inside her and possessed her completely.

Finally at one with Julian and not knowing where he ended and she began, Corey hung in some formless void. A nameless star, utterly at peace and knowing that, for as long as he lived, she'd never be alone again.

* * *

"Twins?" shrieked Irina, "What do you mean, twins? Isn't that overdoing it a little, even for Julian?"

"Well, that's what I heard," said the Steward. "She's going to have twins. And the two of them have been mooning around here like a couple of lovebirds ever since he got back on his feet."

"A nice girl would have been thoroughly upset and not let him near her again after what he did! She must have a taste for rough sex, the slut! Magnus, why are you shushing me? It isn't as if anyone's listening!"

Julian grinned as the Major Domo switched off the machine.

"I think it's time for the Steward to let Irina in our little secret, don't you?"

The Emperor disagreed. "We still need to find that second assailant and I don't think it's the Steward. He wouldn't have stood over his own son and pumped bullets into him. I think he honestly believed Jonah did it, but he also knows something he's not telling."

"Should the agent have another chat with him?"

"No. But I think it's time for another heart to heart with Irina. What's the Archon's take on all this?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" said the Major Domo as Cassius emerged from the bathroom, yawning and stretching.

"Ask me what? I'm making myself some breakfast. Do you want some?"

"No thanks."

"Oh, I forgot! You're living on love these days. Twins indeed! No wonder it took you twice as long as anybody else. Major Domo, do you want something?"

"Just some coffee, thank you."

"Incidentally, Julian, the Synod's Chief Justice is still after you for the execution of his son. He's just filed an official protest against you, and now he's demanding a motion of censure by the Synod. I reviewed my post-trial analysis again and drafted a formal answer yesterday."

"So that's what that was. When I saw my name on it, I pleaded conflict of interest and tossed it to Magistrate Cato."

The Archon was irritated. "You know Julian, if you do that to Cato one more time, he's going to file a nonfeasance complaint against you. He's already called my office twice. The Major Domo told him I'd speak to you."

"And?"

"Consider yourself spoken to! The Major Domo told Cato that even though you're probably the laziest son of a bitch he's ever seen, he should blame your current dereliction of duty on possible brain damage from your wedding night!"

"Now, wait just a dadblamed minute! That's not exactly what I said."

"Well, what did you say...exactly?"

"That you've had a lot on your mind lately and are still on your honeymoon."

The Emperor grinned. "What did Cato say?"

"He snorted something about twins being no excuse. He said he's got three daughters and two sons at home and still does his share of the work. And that furthermore, he gets his in on time."

"Well, I suppose I have been a bit lax lately. I assume this is a reprimand."

"You're damn right, it is! Magistrate Cato's a good man even if his sense of humor is a mite warped. He's still smarting over Jonah and he's convinced you influenced me on that rape charge. He isn't about to forgive either of us any time soon and I don't want to go through all the nonsense of a formal complaint and a hearing. Especially when I think Cato's right. So do me a favor and catch up your paperwork. And the next time you get a mad impulse to shove one of your cases onto him, clear it with me first."

"Ouch! Was he that bad?"

"He certainly was!"

The Archon continued in a milder tone, "Look, Julian, if you want to spend time with Corey...and I can't blame you for that...bring her over here. She likes the garden and the fish, and I'm sure we can find her something to do. Now, what was it you wanted to ask me?"

Julian told him his theory about the Steward.

"I agree. Most of the time, he was telling the truth, but not about the second assailant. The problem is, no one saw the man except Jonah and he doesn't remember. There's someone we're overlooking here because we're too close to it. I have an idea who he might be, but I want you to figure it out for yourself. Incidentally, I have someone on Corey all the time now. She's one of my best operatives. And no, she's not Galia."

Chapter 6...The Bargain

"Aaargh! There's another one! I think it's time." Corey held her swollen abdomen, rocking slightly back and forth.

Julian reached for the intercom. "How long between them?"

"Ooof! There's another one. About three minutes apart. No, that one came faster. They're not stopping! Juliaaaan!"

"Doctor, please get in here! The medics are on their way but something isn't right. Here, Corey, let's get you back on the bed. I'll put these pillows under you. Does that help? Put the mask over your face the way they showed you. Good girl. Now take a deep breath. Hold it. Let it out. Now breathe in again. And start counting. Corey? Corey! Breathe! Please breathe!"

Someone shoved him aside. "Julian, go over there and sit! Galia? You see that emergency pack? Give me the monitor. And the needle. Now hold her! I'm putting this in her chest, and she's going to jump! Corey! Do you hear me? Come on, Corey. Good girl! You see that indicator, Galia? Tell me if it goes over the red. As long as it's between these two lines... right, that's where I want it."

As two Temple medics came in with a stretcher, the doctor looked up. "There isn't time to take her. We're going to have to do it here."

"But the Guardians...."

"Screw the Guardians! If they want to observe their friggin' ritual, they can get their friggin' asses over here! What equipment have you got?"

One of the medics grabbed a pack from the stretcher.

The doctor glanced at it. "Start prepping her! I want to start in ten minutes!"

While the medics worked on Corey, the doctor sat opposite Julian and looked straight into his eyes. "Your Majesty, it's a toxemia so rare I've only seen it once before. The only chance she and the babies have is if we take them now. Right now, she's breathing normally and the babies' vitals are good. But any of her major organs could shut down at any minute and I don't know what her chances are if they do. As soon as the babies are out, the toxemia should subside. But just as long as they're in there, it's going to keep on and she's liable to start convulsing. Don't you think it would be better if you went into another room? "

Julian shook his head. "I'm staying right here." Then he continued in a low monotone, "I'm not leaving. Go do what you have to! I'll be –" His voice caught. Then he cleared his throat. "I'll be all right."

Rising from the bed, Corey hovered for a moment, watching the doctor and the medics at their work. Then she went to the tall windows and stepped onto the balcony. The Archons waited patiently below, in the moonlit garden. Looking back over her shoulder, she recalled a fountain where colored fish swam back and forth in the moonlight and her eyes filled with tears.

She went over to Julian, where he sat alone with his head bowed. Putting her face close to his, she whispered, "Good-bye. I'll always love you."

Julian looked up, and his gaze was steady. "I need you too much. You can't go."

Corey stood for a moment, uncertain. Then she turned away.

The doctor beckoned to Julian. "The surgery was successful but she won't waken. While we've done all we can, there's one thing left to try. Call her name and keep calling her. It might bring her back."

Corey was through the balcony door and halfway down the stairs when she heard Julian's voice. His tone was so insistent, it compelled her to answer.

Deciding that the Archons would just have to wait, she opened her eyes.

"Can't you see I'm busy? Honey, what is it? Why are you looking at me like that?"

With one of her hands in both of his, Julian knelt by the bed. His face streaked with tears, he was repeating her name over and over like a litany, until the doctor told him to stop.

Out of habit, Corey pressed her other hand against her stomach. She felt a bandage, then it hit her. "I'm flat!" Flailing and fighting, she spiraled into a complete panic. She fell back yelping, her chest aflame with a violent tearing pain. "My babies! What have you done with my babies?"

As Julian's fingers interlaced with hers and squeezed, a deep voice overrode the dimness above her head. "Corey, I'm your doctor. We took the babies –"

Then she really lost it. She leapt up from the bed, fell back panting...and sensed movements next to her followed by a tiny squeak and faint sucking noises. Julian's mouth brushed her ear. "Look, sweetheart. Our son and daughter. They're beautiful." Raising her hands to his lips, he kissed each one of them in turn. "Oh Corey, my love! Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The doctor cleared his throat. "I hate to break up this tender scene, Your Majesty, but we have to move the Empress and the babies. The Temple's facilities are better and we need to get them over there."

"Oh, no!" shrilled Corey, "Not until I've seen my babies! Give them to me! Please!"

Julian shrugged helplessly. "You'd better do what she wants"

The doctor resigned himself to the inevitable. "All right! Corey, bend your knees. Put this pillow under her shoulders and that one under her arm. You've got exactly five minutes, then we're taking you out of here. Your Majesty, you take this one...."

As he handed her the first baby, Corey meekly fluttered her lashes and Julian choked down a laugh. Then she unwrapped the blanket to inspect her red, wrinkled son.

Arms and legs waving in protest when the air's coolness reached his skin, the baby closed his eyes and mewed. He thrust a minute fist in his mouth and commenced sucking on it vigorously.

Ignoring her son's outraged squawks, Corey removed the fist and counted his fingers and toes. She carefully examined the rest and rewrapped him in his blanket. "He's a boy all right! And he looks exactly like you, dear. Especially the –"

The Emperor's voice was sharp. "Corey! There are people here!"

She was unabashed. "Well, it does! Now give me his sister."

While she looked at their daughter, Julian held his baby son for a moment.

As he reluctantly handed him over to the attendants, the doctor said "Time's up!" Then he looked at the Emperor more closely. "Galia, get him to bed before he collapses! One patient at a time is quite enough, thank you. And between you and me and the gatepost, this has been a very long night!"

* * *

Now what? wondered Julian, as the doctor hurried out the door of Corey's room. Inside, he could hear his wife's raised voice. When the doctor saw Julian, he stopped.

"Your Majesty! I almost knocked you down."

"I can see you have something on your mind. Obviously, you and the Empress are having a disagreement. What's going on?"

"She's a fine woman...."

"But?"

"She's as stubborn and contrary as a...."

"An Aretzan mule? I know all about it. Corey's strong-willed all right but I can usually talk her around."

"Strong-willed is an understatement! She's even got the Guardians upset!"

"Now, that I'd like to see. Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind upsetting them myself. What's up?"

"It's about the feeding, Your Majesty! Your wife's very small, and the twins are big healthy babies. She wants to breastfeed them but I don't think she's up to it. I've obtained an excellent wet nurse but she won't let the woman anywhere near her or the twins. She actually threw a bedpan at me! Fortunately, she missed."

Being painfully familiar with Corey's perfect aim, Julian controlled his smile with some difficulty. "Are you going to be around for a while?"

"I came out here to cool off before I said something I would regret."

When Julian opened the door, he could see Corey was in tears.

The white-robed Guardians were trying to soothe her, unsuccessfully.

"Oh, Julian!" she wailed. "They won't even let me hold them!"

Taking his wife in his arms, the Emperor looked up at the Guardians. "Is that true?"

"Well, Your Majesty --"

"You won't even let her hold them?"

"Well, the ritual requires --"

Gently setting Corey down, Julian stood up. He looked so menacing, the Guardian backed away in terror.

When the Emperor spoke, his voice was very quiet. "You don't want to know what I think of your damn ritual. This is my wife and these are my children! And you can take your friggin' ritual and shove it! Now, get out before I throw you out. Doctor! Please come in here!"

As the doctor entered, the Emperor continued. "The guardians are leaving! Please arrange for some qualified, pleasant attendants for my wife. And one more thing! I want her and the children back in the Palace just as soon as it can be arranged. Do I make myself clear?"

Even Corey was respectful. "Julian! I thought --"

The Emperor set his son next to her. "Here's one baby for you."

Then he picked up his daughter.

The baby's small damp head was covered with fine chestnut curls and her fearless eyes gazed steadily up into his. Fringed with impossibly long dark curling lashes, they were the same deep clear green as her mother's. When her tiny hand curled around one of his fingers like a miniature rose-colored shell, Julian fell helplessly in love for the second time.

Corey's voice interrupted his reverie. "Is something wrong?"

Reluctantly, he tore his eyes away from his daughter's face. "Oh, no! I just hadn't realized she was quite so beautiful."

"Well, beautiful or not, she's probably wet! In case you hadn't noticed, my dear husband, you just threw everyone out of the room! Are you going to change her?"

"I think I will. You'll have to tell me what to do but I'm sure I'll catch on fast."

Just as Julian was finishing, the door opened and there stood Galia. "Do I see what I think I'm seeing? Julian, is that actually you? Oh, I don't believe it!"

Rewrapping the blanket, the Emperor set his daughter next to her mother. "I have more talents than you can possibly imagine. Now, what can we do for you?"

"I don't know what you said to the Guardians, but it's all over the news that you refused to let them perform their ritual. The tabloids are having a field day"

He shrugged. "Let 'em! Where are those attendants?"

"They'll be here in a few minutes. I don't know what you said to the doctor but he seems to have a whole new respect for you."

"Good," said Julian. Then he turned to Corey. "Now tell me about the feeding."

When things had settled down, Julian beckoned to the doctor. "Can we have a word?"

The doctor followed him into the hall. "Well?"

"I think we have a compromise and on this I defer to my wife's considerable knowledge of livestock breeding. Corey wants the babies to have the benefit of her first milk and the wet nurse's product is not the same. She knows she can't sustain the twins by herself and is willing to accept the nurse for that. But on the first milk, she's adamant. I'm aware her chest is still terribly bruised and that it's going to be uncomfortable. But I also know Corey. She's determined to do it and I think you'd be wise to let her."

The doctor nodded. "We have a few hours before her milk comes in and I'll make her as comfortable as I can. Thank you, Your Majesty."

As he turned to leave, Julian remarked over his shoulder, "By the way, Doctor, if Corey missed you with that bedpan, she did so on purpose. I happen to know from personal experience that Her Majesty has an absolutely perfect aim."

* * *

"Go on out there," said the Major Domo. "He's waiting for you."

His hands on the balcony railing, the Archon stood looking into the moonlit garden. "Major Domo, would you leave us?"

When they were alone, Cassius took Julian's hand. He pressed a button and a section of the balcony wall slid aside to reveal a set of stairs. As they descended, the Archon took a deep breath, savoring the night fragrances. Then he went over to the fountain and sat on its rim.

Trailing a hand in the water, he said softly, "She was prepared to go when you called her back but they've agreed to let me cross the bridge in her stead. All that remains to me now is to designate my successor."

Julian looked at him in horror. "There has to be some other way! I can't bear to lose you twice!"

Cassius smiled as if he hadn't heard. "Do you know the legend of this fountain?"

Mutely, Julian shook his head.

"These fish were given to the first Archon after he was blinded to ease his grief for all that he had lost. Night after night throughout his long imprisonment, his Major Domo would undo his shackles and bring him to the garden. When he trailed his fingers in the moonlit water, the fish would come to kiss his hands and comfort him. Here he would stay until dawn, breathing the perfumes of the night and feeling the soft breezes on his skin. For a thousand years since, every one of his successors has done the same.

"When the first Archon was designated, the Emperor took a new bride. Despite the rigors of the wedding night, they loved each other more than life itself and she gave him a son. He soon tired of her and turned to other women. But she continued to love him faithfully. One day, when her heart was particularly heavy, the Empress was visiting the Temple and she wandered out to the garden. She came to the fountain and began trailing her fingers in the water. The biggest and oldest of the sacred fish came to be with her. His scales were pure gold, his eyes glowed the color of rubies, and his name was Pharos. As the Empress's tears dropped into the water, Pharos tasted them and fell madly in love with her. 'That sad world is no place for such as you,' he said. 'Come to me and I'll comfort you.'

"Later that night, the Emperor went to visit his wife in her apartments and found her gone. He searched everywhere, calling her name. Finally, he came to the garden. Looking down into the water, he saw her face, and he suddenly understood what he had lost. 'Come back,' he pleaded. 'Come back to me, please.'

"Sadly, she shook her head. 'Your sad world is not for such as I. But I still hold you in my heart and I'll always be here for you.'

"The Emperor mourned her bitterly for the rest of his days. When he died, his servants took out his heart and buried it next to the fountain so that he could always be with her. After I cross the bridge, this is where I'll be for as long as you need me."

The breeze died, the fountain's splashing froze in mid-air and the Archon looked up. "Do you see them, Julian? They're all around us."

In the sudden silence, the Emperor saw the shining forms of the Archon's predecessors, and felt their terrible patience. "Why are you doing this to me?" he cried. "Why do you exact this terrible price?"

Cassius answered, "Because you are the Emperor and you have so much. If you can justify calling Corey back, they'll let me go. If not, I must cross the bridge that same night."

"I accept their offer, but I need time to prepare."

"You have one month from today."

The air around them changed and the fountain splashed once more.

"They're gone!"

The Archon smiled. "I know, and they've put an end to my sentence. One month is all I have left to serve, then my long incarceration will be over. One month from tonight, you'll open the trapdoor, put the golden weights upon my feet and release me to the river."

"And I'll be free to be a man again," said the Major Domo as he came up behind them. "Don't look so startled, Julian. Did you never stop to think that I'm his prisoner too? Holding the key to the Archon's chains does not make me his master. I'm his subject fully as much as he's mine and, for eleven long years, we've been bound together in the same yoke. His mother Marjolaine was my sister and your father, Janus, was the brother I never had. The thought of losing either of you is enough to tear my heart out and if you were my own sons, I couldn't love you more. I heard the Archons' offer. One month. That's how long they've given you. If you prevail, you'll be extending our captivity. If you lose, we go free, he to the river and I to the world outside. Unless you can find some other way."

"Then I'll find another way! And I have one month in which to do it!"

Chapter 7...The Shadow Falls

It was after midnight and Julian sat alone in his Conservatory. Looking at the calendar, he saw the Archon's smile in his mind's eye.

"One month from today, you'll open the trapdoor and let me go. Unless you can find some other way."

As Cassius' words rang in Julian's head, he remembered something else. The Major Domo had recounted one of the Archon's dreams. "You and the Archon himself are part of a tiny band of defenders holding back this storm. Together the defenders will prevail, but separately, they cannot."

A small band of defenders? But who?

"The survival of the Archon system, and possibly Nublis itself, depend on the case he's about to try. The defendant's standing in the eye of a storm of incredible evil involving not just Nublis but the entire Synod."

Jonah! Jonah's in the eye of the storm.

"You and the Archon are part of a very small band of defenders."

A band? Jonah, Corey, Ellie, Galia. Add to them, the Major Domo, the Archon and me. Are we

the defenders? Is that what the Archons are trying to tell me?

Hearing a sound, he turned.

Standing there in the moonlit Conservatory, with her soft hair falling over her shoulders, Corey was a vision in white. "Whatever it is, my love, you don't have to go through it alone. I'm here and there are others who will stand with you. All you need to do is reach out your hand."

"Corey, is that really you? Or am I dreaming?"

"It's really me. Take my hand."

Julian took Corey in his arms. Crushing her to him, he held her so close he felt her fluttering heartbeat against his. Fastening his mouth on hers, he gave her a long hungry kiss and they stood like that, seemingly forever.

His arms loosened slightly. "Come sit with me in this chair. I ache for you but it's much too soon."

She chuckled in her throat. "I know. But it won't be long now. I'm healthy and I asked the doctor, just to be sure."

He laughed softly. "Are you not a nice girl, Corey? How can you let me near you after what I did?"

She played with a button on his shirt. "Why, Julian, you know I'm nothing but a slut! In a week or so, I'll be yours for the taking, then you can do anything you like with me."

She took his face between her hands and looked into his eyes. "Something's going on you're not telling me about and I can see you're carrying some terrible burden. You have friends, my love, and there's no need for you to shoulder it alone. You've always been there for others. Let them be there for you. If you need someone to share your load, all you need to do is ask."

"A band of defenders," he murmured, half to himself. "A small band of defenders holding back the storm." He said the names again as if reciting a litany, "Jonah, Corey, Ellie, Galia, the Major Domo, the Archon and me. Together we will prevail. Separately, we cannot."

"Julian, what's going on? Does this have anything to do with calling me back?"

"Yes, Corey, it does. The Archons summoned you and I interfered. There's a price to pay unless I can persuade them otherwise."

"Oh, no, Julian! Not the babies!"

"Hush, my love. The babies are safe. You're safe. Someone's agreed to take your place and unless I can persuade them I did right to call you back, the Archons will take him as they planned to take you. They've given me a month, but two weeks of that are already gone. I said I'd find some other way to save him but I can't see any!"

"Maybe there is. You said something about a band of defenders, then recited our names. That must mean something."

"I don't know, Corey! I just don't know!"

"What does the Archon say? Have you asked him?"

"It was he who made them the offer and I who persuaded them to wait. And the old ones have said,

together we will prevail, separately we cannot."

"That's it, Julian! That's what they meant! You can't do anything as long as you're alone. Together, that's another matter." She looked thoughtful. "The one who's to go in my place. It's someone you love, isn't it? That's why you've been looking so haunted and have been coming up here night after night. Well, we'll just have to think of something and between all of us, we will."

As Julian put his arms around her again, Corey ran her fingers up and down his spine. She felt the tension in his body relax and reached in the pocket of her robe. "Julian, take this. It's the reason I'm here now and why I turned back when you called my name. After they took you away that night, one of the guardians gave it to me. He told me it came from the Archon. Then I heard a man say 'Cornelia. Remember the fountain.' And I did remember! I thought of the moonlight and the fish following my hand in the water, the expression in your eyes, your smile and our kiss in the sanctuary. And that's when I knew I had to give us another chance."

As Julian opened his hand and looked at the enameled fish, Corey took it from him. She unclasped the handworked chain and looped it around his neck. "I think the Archon intended it for you all along. I have my emeralds and now you have this fish. Come, my love. We still have two weeks left and tomorrow is another day. You're exhausted and you need to sleep."

Obediently, Julian followed Cornelia down the stairs, and somehow he knew he would.

The following morning, the Emperor decided to take his small flyer and go up into the hills because he could always think better there. He left a note for his sleeping bodyguard, telling him where he was going and when he planned to be back. Then before anyone else was awake, he stole up to the rooftop.

Just as he was fastening his seat harness and preparing for takeoff, Titus came pounding across the roof. "Ho! Julian! Take me with you!"

The Emperor reached for the lever next to his seat and opened the door.

The Prince threw in his hunting gear, and swung himself up into the cabin, panting.

Julian nodded briefly and pointed to the co-pilot's seat. He switched on the motors and started his pre-flight checks. The moment the spaceport's clearance signal chimed, he took the small craft into a sharp climb. Then he leveled off and wheeled sharply away from the Palace roof.

Titus's ruddy complexion had taken on a slightly green cast. "Whooo! You do like fast takeoffs, don't you?"

"I assume you had the wits to fasten your seat-harness, Cousin! That's what it's for, you know! And yes, I do like to take off fast! I'm not sightseeing, and I want to get where I'm going! If you don't like the way I fly, you can always use the Empress's transport!"

As the river came in sight, Julian made his course correction and turned north. After switching on the autopilot, he unbuckled his harness, stretched a couple of times, and headed for the small galley in the rear. He was turning his head to offer Titus some coffee, when the world exploded and everything went black.

Julian came to lying on the ground, his head aching and unable see or move. He tried to open his eyes and realized he was tightly blindfolded. His hands were bound behind his back. He tried to move his feet and something tightened around his throat.

A lightly accented voice came from somewhere above him. "You might as well quit struggling because you'll only strangle yourself. It's an old Aretzan trick, and very effective for someone like you."

"Who are you?" gasped Julian. "And where in the hell am I? Titus?"

The Prince chuckled. "I'm right here, Cousin! This gentleman works for the Synod's Chief Justice and he's been after you for a very long time."

"That I have," said the first voice, "and oh, my, but you're a slippery one. You've given us no end of trouble and my master doesn't like you at all. You and your bloody Archon system! Besides his son, you killed two of my best men and for that, I owe you. If it were up to me, you Imperial son of a bitch, I'd cut your throat right now. But my deal with the Prince here is that your precious blood not be shed. Something to do with your Imperial succession and a curse."

"What do you mean, succession?"

"Why the throne, dear cousin, and everything else that goes with it! It's too bad you had yourself that nice little family because now that's something else I have to clear out of my way. She's a pretty little thing, your Cornelia. Spirited too! It's too bad about the babies after all she went through. Maybe I'll have her first, after I've convinced her that'll save 'em. Once I've had my fun, I'll drown 'em like kittens while she watches. Then I'll drown her too! That should amuse Irina."

Julian's fists clenched and he struggled against his bonds. The cord around his throat tightened and he started choking again.

"Don't do that!" admonished the spy. "It's not time yet."

Titus prodded the Emperor with his boot. "That rooftop caper should have worked! You thought I was on the Northern Shore that night, but I wasn't. When I called you the next morning, I was actually in the city and never once did you suspect I was the second assailant. The timing was perfect until that dumb bastard, Hero, decided to have himself some action. His mother's still convinced Jonah killed him and I've never told her different. Why I went along with that stupid rape, I'll never know. But it was my mistake. Now I'll just have to marry your little sister instead."

Julian went cold all over. *Oh no! This can't be. I've got to get out of this somehow. I've got to keep him talking while I think. Come on, dammit! Think!*

He heard footsteps and something thumped to the ground beside him.

"Well, here he is! Actually he's one of ours but you wanted him, Your Highness, and my orders are to accommodate you. He's pretty well outlived his usefulness to us anyway."

The prince snorted. "Irina's sick to death of him and so am I. He's only a servant and besides having nothing to offer, he could become a future embarrassment. I promised her I'd take care of this particular problem at the same time I dispose of good old Julian here. My perfect, oh so Imperial cousin! I'd love to shed your regal blood, Your Majesty. Oh, you don't know how much. But I daren't because of that friggin' curse."

Julian heard a groan.

The Steward! The implant! By now, the Archon's listening post must have heard everything. They'll have his position triangulated and Temple security should be arriving any time. Silently he urged Titus. Keep talking, you misbegotten braggart! Whatever you do, Titus, just keep on talking.

Almost as he read the Emperor's mind, the Prince's tone waxed petulant. "You're awfully quiet all of a sudden! Why aren't you pleading with me? At the very least, you could beg for your children's lives! Say something, dammit!"

Julian replied with a coolness he didn't feel. "I've been listening. Besides what is there to left to say? The way you've been running off at the mouth, you lippy bastard, I couldn't have gotten a blip in edgewise, anyway!"

Julian's head exploded in pain from a sudden flurry of kicks. Involuntarily, he struggled and began choking again.

"Dammit! How can you possibly be so calm? What it's gonna take to make you finally lose it? You got ice water in those veins or something?"

Stifling his gasps, Julian kept his tone even. "Since you've already taken everything I have, I can't imagine what more you could possibly want from me. But if you expect me to give you some sort of rush by groveling and begging for mercy, you can think again, you stupid ball-bearing c...."

Merciful heavens, there they were!

"Ah, no!" screamed Titus. "This can't be! There's no way in hell they could have found us! Well, blood curse or no, Cousin, you're sure as hell not getting out of this! If I go, you're friggin' well going with me!"

Julian heard a click. It was followed by a sharp report and something rammed into his chest like a hammer. His feet jerked, cutting off his breath, then there was nothing.

* * *

A pirate ship skulked in orbit over Nublis.

A tall graying man in his late forties, Lord Ethan of Sirius gazed down at the wreath of clouds ringing the planet's face. Thanks to his ship's sophisticated cloaking devices, the Black Wolf's Commander had managed to avoid the planet's defensive probes, but he knew his time was running out.

"My lord, there's a message from the surface."

Without turning, the pirate chief held out his hand. His lieutenant was about to leave the observation deck when Lord Ethan erupted with a string of oaths.

He turned back. "Is there anything I can do, my lord?"

As he perused the message screen, Ethan continued to curse. "Get me the Chief Justice on his private band. It seems that our guest isn't coming after all."

"I thought they already grabbed him? The signal said they did!"

"Oh, they had him all right and I sent the shuttle immediately. According to this, they'd gotten a little rough

but you can't be too careful with a Nublian. When it comes to martial arts, Nublians are among the deadliest fighters in the Synod and, contrary to popular belief, not all that amiable. He'd already killed two agents and the Justice's men were taking no chances. His transport was far away, they had him well-secured and there was no beacon on him. His people shouldn't have been able to find him in a million years but they beat us to the pickup site by less than a couple of minutes! Luckily, our crew veered off without being spotted. But I don't understand it! The rehearsal went perfectly and we have our guinea pig to prove it. So, what in the hell went wrong?"

The lieutenant started to say something. He thought better of it as the Commander continued. "It gets worse! He was shot during the rescue and our agent was taken alive. The assassination attempt on his wife and the heirs failed and now the entire friggin' Synod's in an uproar."

As they reached the bridge, the communications officer held up a hand. "My lord, I have His Honor for you now."

The Commander sank into his chair. "Put him on the PA! Then you can all appreciate how much trouble we're in."

The officer hit a switch and a harsh voice crackled from the speaker. "Ethan? Are you there? What in the bloody hell happened?"

The Commander winced. "The screw-up was on the ground and his people beat our crew to the punch. How, we don't know."

A violent expletive erupted from the speaker, then nothing.

The communications officer began hitting switches. "He's hung up and we'd best get off the air ourselves. The Nublians have started double-probing for transmissions, their defenses have gone on full alert and there's a fully rigged battle cruiser in the area."

"We're outta here!" snapped the Commander. "Lieutenant! Go to Condition Red, and prepare for a triple skip. As soon as we're clear, set course for Alpha Centauri."

The Commander pulled up a starmap and started plotting coordinates. As he fed them to the navigator, the executive officer issued a string of orders into his headset.

A console operator on Nubli's surface picked up the pirate cruiser's blip but when he went to scramble the fighters, the intruder's image winked off the screens. Hoping to pick up a scent, the operator notified a hovering Trade League cruiser of an interloper over Nubli's northeastern quadrant. But the canny pirate chief had covered his tracks well. By the time the cruiser picked up a trace, the trail was cold.

Once the Black Wolf was safely clear, Ethan leaned back in his chair and yawned. "I think I'll go have a chat with our guinea pig. Being Archon Intelligence, he probably knows something. If I can pry it out of him, this won't have been a total loss."

"Good luck on that, boss. He's an officer in their elite security force and those birds are tough. You'll have about as much chance as –"

"That'll do, Lieutenant." Ethan glanced at his executive officer. "Take over for me. I'll be in the forward cabin on the observation deck. We've dodged the Leaguer for now but you never know. Keep a weather eye out for strays. Otherwise, we're clear."

When Ethan reached the observation cabin door on the upper deck, the guard saluted and stepped aside.

Ethan turned off the miniature forcefield, and released the lock. As the door slid open, he said, "Stay directly behind me with your weapon cocked. If he makes the slightest move, disable him. Don't shoot to kill. I need this one alive."

A slight figure in a steel-blue uniform was in one of a pair of luxurious chairs next to the cabin's glass wall. He saw the Commander enter out of the tail of his eye and proceeded to gaze pointedly at the panorama outside.

Ethan took the other chair and sat watching the spectacle while the Nublian continued to ignore him. Then he glanced at the manacles holding his prisoner's wrists to his chair's arms.

"Sorry about those but you people have a reputation and you've certainly made a believer out of me! You put two of my men in the infirmary and killed a third, and that was after we relieved you of your armor. To put it mildly, sir, you weren't easy to bring in."

The Nublian swiveled around. He half smiled at the pirate, then turned back to the window again. The guard's weapon clicked but Ethan motioned "No."

He continued, mildly, "From your insignias, I gather you're a deputy Captain in the Archon's elite guard. Am I correct?"

The Nublian continued to look silently out the window.

"According to the orders in your transport, you were on your way up to the mountains and won't be missed until tonight. Halfway there, you responded to an emergency appeal for help and landed to investigate. Your wrecked transport will be found many miles from where we picked you up. There was a beacon on it but none on you."

Ethan sat in silence for a moment, contemplating the prisoner. "Do you know why we kidnapped you?"

His green eyes expressionless, the Nublian swiveled to face him. "No, Commander, I don't. But I'm sure you're about to tell me."

The pirate smiled. "Ah, so you do have a voice. That's good because I hate one-way conversations." He looked around the luxuriously appointed cabin. "These quarters were set up for a very special guest who's unfortunately not here. Since he didn't make it, I've given them to you. Your kidnapping was actually a rehearsal. Like yours, his went exactly as planned. It was only after we had him secured at the pickup point that something went wrong. When we took him, he was alone. He had no beacon on him, any more than you did. Yet your forces reached him less than two minutes before our shuttle arrived. They shouldn't have been able to find him, and perhaps you can enlighten me as to how they did."

"Perhaps. But then again, probably not. Who was he anyway?"

"'Was' may be the operative word. He was shot during the rescue and may not have survived. Our target was your Emperor Julian. Ah! That startled you, I see."

"What was he doing alone? He's never supposed to go anywhere without his security."

Ethan snorted. "For reasons best known to himself, Julian ducked his bodyguard and decided to take an unscheduled trip to your northern mountains. But he wasn't alone. Prince Titus of the Northern Shore was with him. Julian underestimated his cousin's jealousy and he had no idea how badly he wanted the

throne. Titus has been an agent of ours for quite some time and the Emperor played right into his hands. Unfortunately, the Prince is no longer with us."

"He's dead?"

Ethan nodded and the Nublian continued. "Commander, I have no reason to lie to you. You can give me all the drugs you want and you'll find I'm telling the simple truth. I haven't the slightest idea how Temple Security found the Emperor."

"We did have another prisoner. But he was in no shape to tell anybody anything."

"Who was he?"

"The Emperor's household Steward, Magnus. We'd agreed to take him with us as a favor to the prince. Though the man was soft and no fighter, someone...not us...had tortured and then beaten him to a pulp. Aside from a fractured cheekbone and a few contusions, you're in a whole lot better shape than he was, and that's despite the fact you gave us so much trouble."

The Nublian's eyes flashed and he looked away. But not quickly enough to fool the Commander.

"Aha! You do know something! Now, how are we going to do this? Your choice."

The young man looked calmly back. "No, my lord. Yours."

Ethan sighed. "I don't suppose I could persuade you to come work for me? You'd be a tremendous asset to my fleet and you could enrich yourself beyond your wildest dreams. You Nublians are the only race in the Synod not represented on any of my crews. Would you care to break with tradition and be the first?"

His prisoner laughed. "Thank you, Commander, but I don't think so."

"Pity. I don't suppose torture would work either, so it'll have to be the drugs. I've got a new one. The trouble is, by the time we're done using it, you won't have a brain left or much of anything else. Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"I can't tell you what I don't know. You'll find that out when you use the drugs."

As the Commander reached for the intercom, the Nublian lifted the chair's arms with his manacled hands. Then he hurled himself forward.

The guard's weapon barked twice.

The prisoner's chest bloomed scarlet and the chair skidded backwards. It came to rest against the glass wall. Held to the chair by the manacles, the Nublian's body slumped forward and was still.

Ethan checked the silent body and found no pulse or any other sign of life. Then he loosed off a entire catalog of oaths. "I told you not to kill him! There's no way he could have hurt me, you moronic son of a...Get some medics in here on the double!" Gently, he closed the sightless green eyes. "I gotta hand it to you, you son of a bitch! You knew something and got away the only way you could. What a damnable waste. I wouldn't really have used that drug on you. You were much too valuable. Besides that, you interested me. Actually, I was planning to take you back to my base and study you at my leisure. But the lieutenant was right. I had no chance of getting anything out of you. One of these days, I'm going to take another one and next time I'll keep him alive. Damn Nublians! Smartest race in the Synod and I still haven't figured how to get them to work for me! But I'll find their price yet! Everybody

has one! And then we'll see!"

In a sub-basement far below the Temple, an Archon Intelligence officer frowned at his screen. "Major Domo, look at this. A tourist ship just spotted the deputy Captain's transport. It's way up in the hills, but there's no sign of him. No body, nothing. The crash must have happened three or four days ago. But no one knew he was missing because he wasn't due back until tonight."

The Major Domo glanced at a calendar. "Before the Emperor's kidnapping and virtually, word for word, the same story. Interesting. Keep searching, Lieutenant. He's got a brand-new wife and a baby on the way and I don't look forward to facing her if we don't find him. See what was in orbit at the time and if there were any odd transmissions."

A week later, Augustus Veniston met the pirate in his private office. Located at the end of one of the back corridors of the sprawling Interplanetary Synod Assembly complex in Aretz's capital city, Parisia, the anonymous suite was a convenient hideaway and the Chief Justice's true home.

"Well, Ethan. You may as well come in and take a load off. You look like the wrath of God. Your Nublian die without telling you anything?"

"He died all right and I got nothing out of him. I gave him a funeral with full military honors and shuttled his body to Nublis's surface under safe conduct. No one started shooting until we were out of orbit again."

The Chief Justice's sumptuous surroundings left Ethan with his usual sense of suffocation. There was just too damn much of everything. Too much gilt, too much paneling. And too damn many dead eyes staring down from the walls. His friend Augustus was a doughty hunter and autographed pictures showing His Honor on safari with dignitaries, celebrities, captains of industry, politicians and sports stars took up every available space on three of the oak-paneled walls. On the fourth, behind the judge's enormous antique desk, paraded dozens of elaborately framed diplomas.

"What'll you have?"

"Just fruit juice, thanks"

"Why? Are you on the wagon or something?"

Ethan stretched his arms and sighed. "Just tired. I've been dodging Trade League and Aretzen battle cruisers for seven days straight. Thanks to the current uproar, they're out in force all over the Synod and I'm not too keen about being arrested right now. The League's got a stiff price on my head and some of their ships are carrying death squads. For such a small place, Your Honor, Nublis has become one colossal headache. Revenues are down all over because we can't hijack any cargoes and most of our drug customers are either laying low or on a reform kick. Human nature being what it is, this state of affairs won't last. In the meantime, my expenses and payrolls are draining me dry. If my revenues are down, Your Honor, yours will be too. If any of my crews get arrested, the attorney fees alone will break me, let alone the payoffs. And if the death squads take so much as one of my ships and kill its crew, I can't afford to replace either."

Augustus paced back and forth in front of the desk, then rounded on the pirate lord. "It's all your fault, Ethan! You and that screwed-up kidnapping! That's why the Synod and the friggin' Trade League are

behaving as if they actually have balls. So what are you going to do, my lord? Are you gonna let a bunch of fat-assed merchants and wimpy politicians run you off the map? Or do you plan to shove 'em back where they belong?"

Dropping into a chair, Ethan hoisted his booted feet onto the judge's elaborate antique desk. "What do you mean 'me,' Your Honor? Lest you forget, you and I are in this together. Without my commissions, you might actually have to live on that pittance you call a salary. And if the Synod ever catches on to our partnership, you'll be lucky if you can get a job emptying the courthouse trash bins. That's assuming you manage to stay out of jail. Hell, you might even have to eat your friggin' trophies instead of mounting them on the walls! Come to think of it, I might have to make an honest living too. You're right, Augustus. We have to do something, and we have to do it now!"

"I'm way ahead of you. I've just called in a bunch of favors from a coalition of businessmen, political leaders and trade associations called the Sons of Isis. For their own reasons, these particular pillars of society have no more love for the reformers than we do. It took some arm-twisting on my part but they've come up with this." Augustus handed the pirate a cash card. "That should keep you going for a while."

Ethan whistled. "What did you do? Blackmail 'em? This is serious money!"

"We're in a serious situation and this state of affairs cannot continue! Come on, Ethan! You're the strategist. Think man! Think!"

The pirate turned the card in his fingers and chuckled. "Oh, I already have. All I've been lacking is the money and you just took care of that. I've been needing a new base for some time. Something out of the way with a solid financial and civic structure. A pleasant planet with a good climate that's easy to defend. And a place the League and the Synod wouldn't want to blow up on a bet because of all their investments there."

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

For the first time in that interminable week, Ethan felt like smiling. "That's right, Your Honor. I'm about to put an end to our Nublis problem once and for all. At the same I'll teach those Trade League pissants a lesson they won't soon forget. Death squads, my ass! How soon can you get the rest of the lords together?"

The Chief Justice looked down at a picture on his desk.

Filled with all the innocence and promise of a future that would remain forever untold, his son Damon's blue eyes smiled out from the jeweled frame.

"They're already here. All I ask in return is that you deliver the Archon of Nublis to me. Alive and in one piece."

* * *

Swimming upward through layers and layers of murky green water, he never stopped to wonder how he could breathe. He just kept going up and up and up.

Then he heard something.

Distant and vague at first, the muffled murmuring grew clearer and finally became distinguishable words. "The bullet's out of his lung but we've left the one near his heart. One millimeter further over and that would have been it. We took him off the respirator a couple of hours ago and he's breathing on his own. Try talking to him. Even when they're unconscious, they can still hear. Say anything. Talk about the weather, your children, whatever."

The murky green color had changed to white and the water had become...air? Then it was all white and much, much brighter. What was that hissing? A snake? No, snakes don't sound like that.

He felt coolness on his skin, then a sharp sting. His arm was dropped again.

"Julian? It's Corey. Can you hear me?"

"Corey! Listen to me! Titus is the one! Don't believe anything he says! He's going to drown them anyway. Security's coming. Hold on...gotta keep him talking. Keep talking. I put it on autopilot. Was getting coffee. Titus? No! Ah! That hurts!"

"Doctor! He moved! He's saying something."

Hands touched his face and peeled an eyelid back. The flash was so brilliant, he flinched.

"Hmm. Level of consciousness has come up, I see. Good."

Corey's voice sounded in his ear. "Julian. If you can hear me, squeeze my hand."

He tried but his hand wouldn't cooperate. He could move his finger, so that's what he did. Trying to get away from the pressure on his chest, he groaned and opened his eyes.

A pink blurry shape swam in the air. As he blinked, the shape took form and became Corey's face.

"Why are you crying? I just sneaked off for an early morning flight to the farm." Then he remembered. "Titus! The agent! They're going to kill you and the babies. Drown the babies! The Steward! What happened to the Steward? Where am I?"

Hands pushed him down and a patch of red appeared. He blinked again and recognized the Major Domo.

"Dammit, Julian! Whatever possessed you? They had someone watching in the Palace, and that's how they got Titus up to the roof so fast. A couple of them were following you in another transport. A pirate shuttle was on its way to retrieve you, and who knows where they were going to take you after that? We'd never have found you if they hadn't taken the Steward! Maybe this'll teach you, once and for all, never to duck your bodyguard again!"

Julian closed his eyes for a moment, taking it all in.

"Titus was killed trying to shoot it out with Temple security. And good riddance! The kidnapper's in custody, with your bodyguard working on him. The Steward's in the next room and we've arrested Irina."

Julian moved his head slightly and opened his eyes.

The Major Domo looked down at him with real concern. "As soon as I realized what was happening, I administered a neural block to the Archon. Because he has to try that...that...!" For a moment, words failed him. Then he continued. "The press is in a feeding frenzy and the Archon suspects you had something to do with it. He keeps asking when he's going to see you. I've told him your transport

crashed and that you sustained some pretty bad injuries. Which is true enough, I suppose."

Corey started to say something but the Major Domo held up his hand. "Let me finish! Someone tried to get at the twins. Their nursery attendant was one of the Archon's operatives and she broke the assassin's neck. Corey wants to give her a medal. I've told Her Majesty a simple 'thank you' will suffice."

Julian sighed his relief and smiled faintly up at his wife.

"All right," said the doctor. "That's enough! Major Domo, Corey, I want you both to clear out. Julian needs to rest, and I'll let you know when you can come back."

"What's wrong with me?" asked the Emperor when they were alone. Then he coughed. "Ouch!"

The doctor checked him over. "Be quiet. As to what's wrong with you, you took two bullets in the chest, one of which is still in there. Along with that, you have a collapsed lung, several broken ribs and a large assortment of colorful bruises and contusions. You look as if you've been run over by a herd of wild horses and between being concussed, strangled and shot, you're lucky to have survived at all. Right now, I'm about to tell the press you're going to live."

"Rather you than me," said Julian faintly, then coughed again.

"I thought I just told you to shut up! Now, get some sleep, dammit! I'll be back in a little while."

"Two minds with but a single thought, I see," said the Major Domo two mornings later. "And how are you today?"

Corey looked distracted. "Oh, very well and the babies are thriving. The doctor told me not to stay last night. He promised he'd call if there were any changes."

The Major Domo reassured her. "The chest tube came out this morning and he's been upgraded from critical to serious. They're going to get him up today and walk him around the room."

She smiled. "I know he's better because his list of complaints is already a mile long. He says his tone's flabby because he can't work out. He hates the food, is bored silly with being in bed, and is sick to death of the clinic decor. If he never sees another CyberSpace game, it'll be too soon, and he wants to go home. But this'll teach him not to duck his bodyguard. He was getting very careless and I'd already told him about it several times. Now he just looks sheepish and says, 'Yes, ma'am, no ma'am. Anything you say ma'am.'"

The Major Domo shuddered. "When Julian starts behaving like that, he's up to something, and I know only too well what he's capable of when he's bored. If he has to stay here much longer, I don't even care to imagine what he'll do."

"Well, I'd best get him home, then. Is it true they decided to leave the other bullet?"

"It'd be riskier to try to take it out. At this stage, the doctors would rather not cut on him any more than they have to.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Only if it moves and the doctors say that's unlikely. But they'll keep an eye on it anyway."

"How's the Steward?"

"About the same. He's conscious and we got a statement from him early this morning. But it's unlikely he'll make it into court. Besides the broken bones, he's got all kinds of internal damage, and he'll probably never walk again. I've seen some atrocities in my time but never anything quite this vicious. Titus and Irina tortured him for who knows how long, just for their own amusement, apparently. To get rid of him, they gave him to the kidnappers. And saved Julian's life in the process." The Major Domo sighed. "Titus was every bit as bad as Irina and they fed on each other's corruption. It started when he was very young and inherited all that money. He fell into bad company and there were few vices he hadn't tried. Julian thought he could straighten the kid out, but Titus was too far gone by the time he got to him."

"Speaking of Irina, what's her status?"

"We've moved her to a VIP cell and the trial's tomorrow morning. Your Majesty had so little contact with her, you won't be required to testify. Even before your marriage, Julian ordered Irina not to come anywhere near you. He can be very forceful when he wants to be and he certainly made a believer out of her."

Corey vividly recalled the episode with the Guardians. Then she hesitated. "Major Domo? There's something I want to talk over with you after we've visited Julian, and I need your help."

"I want to thank you for coming," said the Empress, a few days later. She told the hovering servants, "That will be all, thank you. We'll serve ourselves, and I'll ring if I need you."

They bowed and withdrew, closing the dining-room door behind them.

"How is he?" asked Galia.

Corey sighed. "When they brought him in, they weren't even sure he would live. By the time Temple Security got there, he was breathing so faintly they thought he was dead. He'd been shot in the right lung, was bleeding from his mouth, and the second bullet had just barely missed his heart. He'd also been clubbed on the back of the head and kicked in the face..." Recalling the sight of Julian on the stretcher, with his chest a mass of blood and bruises and cuts all over his face and throat, Corey shuddered. She took a deep breath and continued. "Security had brought a MedEvac transport and the emergency medical team began working on him immediately. He lost so much blood, they ran out of plasma and had to do a live transfusion before they reached the Temple."

As she stopped speaking and closed her eyes, Julian's bodyguard, Asa, took up the story. "According to a witness at the scene, he refused to plead for mercy or cry or beg for his life, even when he was ordered to. Interestingly, the Chief Justice's orders were to kidnap but not physically harm him and the strangulation and shooting were not part of the original plan. The kidnappers were waiting for a pirate shuttle when the rescuers arrived. But it got away before they could intercept it. Apparently, he was supposed to simply disappear and never be found."

"I can see why," reflected the Major Domo. "To be accused of a terrorist act against a popular Emperor and his attractive family is the last thing the Chief Justice would want. On the other hand, Julian's mysterious disappearance would have fueled endless speculation. With due respect to Your Majesty, when it comes to women, the Emperor's reputation is nothing short of legendary, and he's made no secret of his distaste for the Imperial trappings and the never-ending publicity and gossip that go with them. He's never alone and he no longer has time for his music or the work he really prefers. Your husband had already left this life once to live as a private citizen and only returned to Nublis under duress. Since he'd done his duty and secured the succession, he might very well have chosen to go back to the simpler

life he preferred. Such a disappearance would have been very believable, especially to anyone who doesn't know His Majesty as we do. The lords of the Siriun pirate fleets and the powers that be at the Interplanetary Judiciary are no fools. Rather than killing him, Julian's kidnappers had probably planned to lock him up on some asteroid and throw away the key. If he were still alive, the Chief Justice and his cronies would then have a means of controlling his successor. Dead, he would have been of no value to them."

Corey nodded her agreement and indicated that the Major Domo should continue.

"The attack on Your Majesty and the children was another matter entirely and I believe that was part of the plan. The Chief Justice and his cronies needed you out of the way, Your Majesty, because you would most certainly have been named Imperial Regent until your son's majority. Not only are you as popular as your husband but you come from an extremely powerful family and you would have had strong backing from the Parliament. The Chief Justice sent one of his other assassins rather than use Titus because of the severe strictures against any heir who sheds so much as one drop of a reigning sovereign's blood!"

Ellie gasped and Corey gave her a reassuring smile.

The Major Domo went on. "With you and the twins gone, Irina would have been named temporary Regent. The attack on Ellie was part of their original plan because she was next in line to succeed Julian. But this time, instead of killing the Princess, Titus planned to marry her. Ellie's death would have been occurred soon after her Coronation, and the way would then have been clear for Titus and Irina to wed."

"Major Domo," said Corey, "I see why Julian has so much respect for you. Now I know I did right to ask you to come."

Ellie spoke up. "Why did you invite us here today?"

Corey told them what Julian had said in the Conservatory. "And that's what it's about," she concluded. "He repeated our names over and over like a litany. Then he added his own, the Major Domo's and the Archon's. He's been so strong for all of us and he's been trying to carry this terrible burden on his own. Nublis is an ancient, haunted place with more mysteries than anyone can count and this is only one of them. Someone Julian loves dearly has volunteered to go to the old ones in my place, but you tell me it's none of you. He's been agonizing over it and that was why he decided to go to the mountains that morning. To think. Julian says he can come up with no argument to persuade the old ones not to take his friend. But I have and he shouldn't be left to face them alone. There's been a dream of a coming storm that threatens not only Nublis but the entire Synod and he said Jonah's standing in its eye. He spoke of a small band of defenders to hold back the storm. His final words to me were, 'Together they will prevail. Separately they cannot.'"

As Corey paused, Galia spoke. "Is it cold in here or is it just me?"

A cloud had passed over the sun and the room was frigid. The candles on the table dimmed, flared, then dimmed again. A sudden stillness descended, oppressive and heavy.

"Quickly!" cried Corey, "join hands all of you! Form a circle and hold on!"

The dining room windows blew open and behind the swirling wind streaked a ball of fire. The unlit chandelier blazed sudden brilliance on their pale upturned faces and darkened again. Then everything fell quiet.

Corey's gentle voice broke the silence. "Are you with me?"

Letting go of each other's hands, they looked first at her and then each other. And one by one, the defenders spoke. "Until death, my lady, and beyond."

* * *

Isolated in his well of silence without even the solace of the fountain's splashing water, the Archon was utterly alone. The Major Domo's hand touched his shoulder and he put his own over it, holding it there for a moment. Then he looked up and signed. "Why can't he just let me go? I'm so tired. All I want to do is to fall asleep and never wake again."

The Major Domo replied in kind. "He took his transport and went alone to the mountains. It crashed and he's badly hurt. Can't you persuade them to postpone?"

The Archon shook his head. "I don't know. I can try. The old ones say the defenders are coming together. But I don't know who the defenders are or what that means. They told me Julian stood between the Empress and the shadow. It fell on him instead of her and now he lies close to death. Is that why he needs more time?"

The Major Domo's fingers flashed. "Julian needs you right now as he never has before. We must help him prepare his argument to the old ones even if it means we cannot go free."

The Archon's heart turned to lead and his shoulders slumped. "I'll do what I can. But I wish he'd let me go." He glanced at the stack of documents on the table. After studying them all morning, he'd just set them aside.

The defendant was a woman. If he convicted her, the penalty would most certainly be death. After the trial was over, she'd be the only living person on Nublis, besides the Major Domo and the Emperor, to ever see his face or hear his voice.

As was his custom, he'd sit with her throughout her final night, unmasked and unidentified. During those last lonely hours, he'd encourage her to talk out her fears and furnish whatever comfort he could. Only when the final moment came, would he tell her, as gently as he knew how, that he was her executioner. Like all the others, she'd storm and cry and plead. Then he'd offer her the drugs, hoping she wouldn't refuse. During the final preparation, he'd soothe her and wipe away her tears. When she was ready, he'd look deep into her eyes, give her the ritual kiss and carry out the sentence.

Once imposed, a death sentence should be mercifully swift. He considered any delay of the inevitable with endless, futile appeals to be utter and senseless cruelty to victim and condemned alike. Besides being an outright offense to justice.

It wasn't lost on the Archon how few of the rich and powerful elsewhere in the Synod ever reached the executioner's chair. Especially in comparison to the disproportionate number of the poor and disadvantaged who did.

In the case of this particular accused, Magistrate Cato's pleadings were faultless and he could find no flaws in the indictment. He made a final notation and signed to the Major Domo. "This case is ready for trial. Go ahead and schedule it."

The Major Domo nodded. "I already have, for the day after tomorrow. Now I must put you to sleep to remove the neural block. This time I'm going to administer the drugs over a longer period of time."

The Archon signed back. "Tell Julian I'll help him. But even if he prevails, he has to let me go."

The Major Domo locked the restraints on his charge's wrists. "I'll tell him, I promise. Now here comes the mask. Don't fight it."

The Archon nodded wearily. Then he closed his eyes and thought about the river.

Three mornings later, a scarlet-clad figure rapped on the door to the Archon's quarters.

The Major Domo opened it from the inside. "How did it go?"

Cassius pulled off the silken mask and robes. "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

When he came out of the bathroom, his pale forehead shone with perspiration. He sank into the easy chair and the Major Domo brought him a cup of herb tea.

He sipped it gratefully. "It never gets any easier! For most of the night, she was so calm she must have believed she was going to be rescued. She accepted the drugs, but the real trouble started when I showed her the axe. As soon as she saw it, she went berserk, and she struggled and screamed so much I was forced to knock her out and gag her. Once I had her prepared, I woke her for the ritual kiss. After that, it was mercifully quick."

He drained the cup and the Major Domo refilled it. "Of all the methods we use, beheading's got to be the worst. This was only my second and I hope it'll be the last. Her mother was waiting and she's taken the body back to Silver Island for burial. Poor Irina! Was she a monster or a victim? I still can't make up my mind."

"A bit of both. Julian's told me her history and the Steward's. Incidentally, he died this morning at just about the same time you executed her. It was as if he wanted to go when she did, poor soul."

"Probably. The man really cared for Irina and their children. Did you know Julian was planning to let them go free?"

"That sounds like him. But even if he had, Irina wouldn't have stuck with the Steward. She liked being Empress too much." The Major Domo bent over the Archon and checked his pulse. "You don't look well and it's more than aftermath, isn't it? Do you want me to call the doctor?"

"I don't know. It's probably just side effects from the medication. I feel so tired all the time and now I'm having trouble getting my breath." He coughed a couple of times, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

The Major Domo checked his pulse. "I'm calling the doctor right now. Come, let's get you into bed. I'm moving you out into the cell."

The doctor completed his examination and beckoned. "Let's talk out there."

As the Major Domo followed him into the hallway, he saw the doctor was flushed and angry. "I don't know who this felon is or why he's so important to you and I'm not sure I want to. But I'm going to tell you something. Even though he's only in his thirties, this man's heart's starting to fail. That's why he's tired and having so much trouble getting his breath. He's coughing too, isn't he? It's a mystery to me why he's even messing with those drugs because he can't possibly be getting anything out of them. Even so,

he's lived longer than I ever thought he would. In fact, he's survived longer than any addict in my program. The only thing keeping him alive is the anti-seizure medication and I'm not sure why that is." He handed the Major Domo a green vial. "Inject this every morning with the anti-seizure medication. It'll help his breathing, raise his energy level and stop the nausea. But he needs an implant to regulate his heart function. Without it, he's not going to live long. Inserting the implant's a simple procedure and I can do it right here in the cell. First, I'll put in a miniature camera through a cannula so I can watch what I'm doing. Then I'll insert a smaller needle into the cannula and shoot in the implant. The device itself is quite tiny and the camera stays in there permanently. It's handy if we want to take another look which we probably will. He'll have a major bruise and a certain amount of discomfort for a few days, but that'll be all. A couple of my patients have had these implants for years and are still going strong. Shall we go ask him?"

"He'll tell you 'no' but I want you to go ahead anyway. He's been a ward of the state for years and all you need is my consent. If you wish to see the paperwork, it's in my office."

The cell door opened and footsteps approached the bed.

Cassius closed his eyes and turned his face toward the wall. "I heard you, Doctor, and the answer's 'no.' I don't want that friggin' implant and I won't cooperate. So leave me the hell alone!"

Ignoring the doctor's shocked protest, the Major Domo flipped the Archon onto his back and slapped him hard. "My job is to keep you alive! Whether we do this the hard way or not is up to you but you're getting that implant! Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," whispered the Archon.

"Are you going to cooperate? Answer me!"

Eyes still closed, the Archon breathed, "Yes."

"What's that? I didn't hear you! Look at me when I'm talking! Open your eyes, dammit, or so help me, I'll open them for you!"

Open wide now, Cassius' dark eyes flared with anger and shock. "All right! I'll cooperate! Are you satisfied now?" He began coughing and was unable to stop.

Muttering under his breath, the doctor grabbed his arm and jabbed it with a needlegun.

The coughing gradually subsided and the Major Domo snarled, "Apologize to the doctor!"

"Major Domo, I don't think --"

"Doctor! You put in that implant right now or I'll get someone who will! This case is classified but I can't explain because you don't have the right clearance! And in case you hadn't noticed, this man's suicidally depressed!" The Major Domo's voice softened. "If it eases your mind any, I've never struck him like that before and it's unlikely I ever will again. Now, let's do what we need to do."

The Major Domo locked the Archon's hands in the restraints on the sides of the bed, then laid his chest bare. Not ungently, he adjusted the pillow under his charge's head. Finally, he hooked him up to the waiting monitors and switched them on.

The Archon watched the doctor lay out his instruments. "Is this going to hurt?"

"Yes, it will. A lot."

Their eyes met and the doctor's were filled with pity. Then he nodded at the Major Domo. "You'd best hold him down."

As the needle plunged into his chest, the Archon's body jumped.

When he heard his charge's agonized scream, the Major Domo gave silent thanks his mask concealed the tears of shame and pity running down his face.

* * *

A few days later, Julian woke from a sound sleep with the Major Domo's hand over his mouth. "Sssh! Here are your robe and shoes. As soon as we're out of earshot of the attendant, I'll tell you what's going on."

As the Major Domo unlatched the garden door, he whispered, "The storm clouds are gathering and they've moved up your deadline. Julian, you must prevail tonight because you cannot release the Archon to the river."

The Emperor looked around him, puzzled. "What are they doing here?"

The Major Domo replied softly, "The Archon's just above us on his balcony. When you and I have joined the group, the band of defenders will be complete. The coming storm will break over Nublis first. If we fail to turn it back, a hail of destruction and death will rain across the entire Synod. But before the storm comes, there are certain things we must do and it's essential to act quickly."

Just a few feet from the fountain, the Emperor stopped in wonder.

Ranged in a great circle, the old ones stood before him. Shimmering in the moonlight, they waited patiently, rank upon rank.

The circle parted at his approach, then closed again.

When Julian reached its center, another hand took his and he looked down into Corey's sparkling eyes. Radiant in her wedding dress, with her chestnut hair streaming over her shoulders, the Empress's tiny figure glittered like some fantastic jewel from Nublis's shadowed past.

Myriad glistening bodies broke the water's mirrored surface and lay rolling in the moonlight. As if in answer to its cousins in the fountain, the Archon's enameled fish warmed against his skin, pulsing as if alive. Then, soft as a ruffling breeze, he heard his brother's voice. "I'm here, Julian, and I'll stay for just as long as you need me."

When Corey released his hand, utter silence fell and the air in the garden hung as still as death. As she stepped forward, Julian moved to stop her.

She shook her head. "This is something I and I alone must do."

The Empress opened her mouth to speak but the chief of the old ones held up a translucent hand. When he spoke, his voice was distant thunder. "Your Majesty need say nothing. It is thanks to you that the band of defenders is complete and your husband did right to call you back."

Suddenly the garden was empty save for the defenders. A slight breeze came up and the flowering trees again scented the night air. The water's surface was a black mirror once more and only the fountain's splashing disturbed the gentle silence.

Then Corey cried out. "They're gone! Oh, Julian, where did they go?"

Chapter 8...Invasion

A week later, the defenders sat in Julian's rooftop Conservatory, studying the lists the Major Domo had given them.

He rapped on the desk for attention. "Are we all clear on this? The Archon and I will be in the mountains. We'll take turns manning the listening post and maintaining communications with Aretz. Galia will remain on duty in her office in the Temple Complex, as will the magistrates and the rest of the staff. Jonah will coordinate communications from here. The Temple and Palace guards, security forces and the military have already dispersed into the general population. Their weapons are safely concealed and they'll remain in twenty-four-hour contact with Galia and the Archon. Our intelligence service is on full alert and will function as usual, and Parliament's key members have already left for Aretz to form a government in exile. With the exception of those belonging personally to the Emperor and Empress and a few essential emergency units, all ground, sea and air transports have been dispersed across the planet. The Imperial jewels and regalia are on their way to the sacred mountain and the Archon's fish have been moved to safety."

Then he turned to the two waiting agents. "A pair of Trade League battle cruisers and their escorts are waiting in orbit, one for the Prince and the other for the Princess. As soon as you're aboard, you're to proceed at warp speed to Aretz. The royal heirs will remain there under Trade League protection while our emissaries plead Nublis's case to the Synod Assembly. Julian, you will receive a surgical implant that will do two things. First, we'll always know where you are. And secondly, we'll be able to monitor all of your conversations."

The Major Domo sighed. "And yes, there'll be a mute button on the control as you requested. Just remember to turn it off when you're done. And Corey? Since you insist on staying, you'll receive an implant with the same features as Julian's. Ellie, you're to remain at the Palace with Julian and Corey and help entertain our unwanted guests. You'll also be the official messenger between the Temple and the Palace. Jonah, as Imperialsteward, you'll be in a position to watch and listen to everything. Therefore, you too will receive an implant. And now we must go. The transports await and speed is of the essence." Beckoning to their bodyguards, the Major Domo shepherded the gray-robed Archon toward one of the waiting flyers.

Julian gazed down into his daughter's eyes. Handing her over to Corey, he took his son from the waiting attendant and kissed the top of his head. "Goodbye, little Cassius. Take care of your baby sister."

"Goodbye, Deborah," breathed Corey. "Keep your big brother out of trouble."

One of the agents shifted impatiently, then took the tiny Prince from his mother. "Godspeed, Your

Majesties, until we meet again."

While Ellie cried quietly on Jonah's shoulder, Julian and Corey linked arms and watched from the roof's edge until the last of the transports disappeared over the horizon.

Galia coughed politely. "Your Majesties, Jonah, the doctors are waiting. Ellie, why don't you go see about breakfast? Then we'll all meet back here in two hours."

Leaving the remainder of the battle force to wait in nearby space, the heavily cloaked Black Wolf slipped stealthily into Nublis's orbit. Ethan's communications officer flipped his console switches and listened. "My lord, there's something odd down there."

"What do you mean odd?"

"There's no traffic, chatter, communications. Nothing!"

Ethan grabbed a spare headset. "Malfunction?"

The officer switched channels. "There's normal chatter everywhere else. Only Nublis is silent."

It was the executive officer's turn. "There's no ship traffic or surface activity either. And all of their defense shields are down."

"Make a pass over the spaceport! And try the tower!"

"Yes, my lord. Horizon Three calling Nublis tower. Horizon Three calling Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"Well?"

"Nothing, my lord. They're not answering."

"Make another pass and go to visual."

Pictures of the planet's surface rolled across the opposite wall.

"Zoom in!"

As the images grew larger, Ethan could plainly see there was nothing moving, either in the air or on the ground. "Is Nublis on normal time?"

The communications officer punched his keyboard. "Yes, my lord."

"Then, where the blazes is everyone? This is mid-morning on a workday! They don't know we're coming and they were plenty busy when we were here before. How about defenses? Weaponry? Anything?"

"No, my lord. Nothing."

"Tell Lord Micah to come in as back up and signal the rest of the fleet to stand by. We may as well land and see what's going on."

"The spaceport docks are empty, my lord. Which one would you prefer?"

"That one."

"That one it is, my lord."

"The moment the area's secured, tell the rest to come on in. And check for gases."

"I already did, my lord. It's negative."

"All right, then. Open the doors."

As Ethan stepped onto the sunlit dock, it swayed gently. Outside a few flags snapping in the breeze, the spaceport showed no sign of life. The gates stood wide-open but the complex was deserted.

Weapons at the ready and fanning out as they entered, Ethan's troopers followed him into the deserted building. As the pirate's eyes adjusted to the dimmer interior light, he spotted a slender tan-clad figure standing alone at the concourse's far end.

He tapped his communicator. "This area's secure. Tell Micah to come on in."

Coming closer, Ethan recognized a face he'd seen pictured countless times in the Synod's omni-present tabloids. A pair of cool gray eyes looked back into his and their owner calmly raised his hands in response to the hundred cocked weapons suddenly aimed at his chest.

"Stand down!" barked Ethan. Then he switched to Nublian. "You're the Emperor Julian, I presume. I'm pleased to make Your Majesty's acquaintance at long last."

The Emperor lowered his hands. "You must be Lord Ethan of Sirius. Thank you for returning my deputy Captain."

"He was a brave man, Your Majesty. I regret his death."

"Not nearly as much as I, my lord. Not to mention his young wife and unborn child. But enough of that. This is obviously not a social call, so why are you here?"

The pirate smiled. "Ah. You do come straight to the point, Your Majesty. I happen to be shopping for a new base and Nublis seems like an ideal location. However, as a longtime admirer of your planet and its people, I have no particular wish to damage either."

"That's good to know. Would you mind telling me just what your intentions are?"

"You've cost me and the other Siriun lords a great deal of money and we wish to be indemnified for our losses. And you yourself, Your Majesty, have personally caused me no end of trouble."

"Have I really? Lord Ethan, because of you, I took two bullets in the chest, one of which is still in there! I also suffered a concussion, lost an excellent deputy Captain, saw someone try to kill my wife and children, and now you're invading my planet! What do you call that, my lord? An inconvenience? And as long as we're on the subject of indemnification, your agents wrecked two expensive flyers, one of which happened to be my personal five-seater! Are you going to pay for them?"

"Hmm. I see your point. Is there some less public place where we can continue this conversation?"

"Certainly, my lord. My wife's expecting us for a late breakfast at the Palace. In the meantime, if you wish to make disposition for your men, my Steward will be happy to work with your officers on the arrangements. Until then, they can make themselves comfortable here or else remain on their ships. And now if you'll be so kind, please follow me to my transport. Since I'm driving myself today, there's room

for at least two of your men and their weapons."

As Julian pulled away from the curb, the pirate remarked, "You've obviously been expecting us. How did you know?"

"I have a good intelligence service."

When they entered the city of Cyrenia proper, Ethan looked around curiously. "I see everything's closed. Where is everybody? And why are the streets empty?"

"I declared a holiday and told them all to stay home. There's less chance of a mishap that way."

"Why's the spaceport deserted? Where's all the traffic?"

"We got everything out of here several days ago and notified our trading partners to stay away until further notice. We kicked the press out yesterday afternoon. They left on the last shuttle."

"Why did you not defend yourselves? You had plenty of weaponry when I was here before."

"We still do but not where you'll find it. We're a very small planet with absolutely no inclination toward war. Trying to withstand a force like yours would only have resulted in useless carnage and dead heroes. Whether we resisted or not, the end result would have been the same. Even if we have to put up with your unwanted company indefinitely, Lord Ethan, it's worth it to me to keep my people and their homes intact. I'd far rather do that than see them blown to bits for a hopeless cause. That's if you intend to leave them alone and not pillage the place."

"I may be a pirate but I'm not a vandal. Since I intend to make Nublis my home, I have no intention of despoiling your beautiful planet. I've admired your art and ancient culture for a very long time and I find the Nublian people truly fascinating. As I told your late deputy Captain, it irks me that of all the races in the Synod, yours is the brightest and the best, yet it's the only one not represented on any of my crews. When I offered him a commission, he laughed in my face. Then he, quite needlessly, provoked the guard into killing him. For whatever it's worth, Your Majesty, the man responsible has been severely disciplined. I didn't even want to hurt your deputy Captain, let alone kill him. In fact, I had every intention of giving him back to you in one piece. After I'd had a chance to study him for a while."

"Did you, now?" Julian spoke softly, almost to himself, and as long as Lord Ethan was doing all the talking, he decided to take the long way around.

They finally entered the great stone square, and drew up to the Palace steps. "Here we are. And there's my lovely wife waiting to greet us."

When Julian was followed out of the transport by a graying, heavyset man in his late forties, Corey's knees went weak with relief. She'd expected a black-skinned purple-eyed Siriun, but this man's skin was as golden as hers and she wondered from what freebooting ancestor he'd inherited his sapphire eyes. She looked anxiously up at her husband, but couldn't read his expression,

"Madam," he said noncommittally. "May I present Lord Ethan of Sirius."

"Your Majesty. I'm truly honored to make your acquaintance."

The pirate lord brushed his lips across her extended hand and Corey shuddered. "My lord, I wish I could say the same. Unfortunately, I can't." She looked up at Julian again, half-accusing. "You're late! What kept you?"

The pirate almost purred. "Oh, that's my fault, Your Majesty! I asked the Emperor to give us a brief tour of the city and he obliged. Later, if he'd be so kind, I'd like him to take me over to the Temple and introduce me to your legendary Archon. If that's not a problem."

Julian smiled lazily. "It might just be. His Grace isn't here."

"What do you mean, he's not here?"

"Well, it's like this. When His Grace heard you were coming, he left. Our chief judge is an extremely private individual and he considers your interest in him unseemly. As far as I know, he's off-planet somewhere."

Approaching the steps from the opposite side of the square, two of Lord Ethan's men caught the last of Julian's words. "It's true, my lord. We've just come from the Temple and the Archon's quarters are swept clean. We could find no guards or servants anywhere. Even the fish you told us to look for are gone. The clinic and commissary are open with a few regular staff on duty and one or two clerical people are working in the offices. Outside of that, the place is deserted."

"What about the jewels and regalia?"

"Gone, my lord."

"Air transports?"

"Except for a couple of MedEvac emergency units, they're gone too."

"Ground transports?"

"One, my lord. We took it."

Obviously displeased, Ethan took in a deep breath and let it out again. "Well, I have to hand it to Your Majesty. Would you care to enlighten us as to the whereabouts of your Imperial jewels, regalia, and the Archon's sacred fish?"

Julian smiled again, this time apologetically, and held up his hands. "As a matter of fact, I can't because I haven't the faintest idea where they are. The Archon made all those decisions before he left and he failed to share the information with me. He said my family and I would be better off not knowing."

"Speaking of your family, Your Majesty, I'd very much like to meet your beautiful twins. Are they here?"

"Regrettably, no, my lord."

"Are they with the Archon?"

"No, my lord." Julian squeezed his wife's hand and whispered in her ear, "The signal came through. They arrived safely."

Closing her eyes, Corey breathed a prayer of thanks.

"What was that, Your Majesty?" The pirate's voice was sharp.

Julian's gray eyes danced with mischief. "I put my tongue in Her Majesty's ear. She likes it, don't you, my love?"

Corey blushed to the roots of her hair. "Julian!"

This time, the Emperor's smile was all innocence. "His lordship asked a question and I answered it. Shall I do it again?"

Ethan noted his men's grins. *Score one for you, Emperor. Game, set and match.*

"Er, no, Your Majesty. That's not necessary. You said something about breakfast?"

Julian looked around. "Here comes my Steward now. After breakfast, perhaps you'd care to see my Conservatory and take a tour of the Palace. If you wish to stay here, it'll give you an opportunity to pick out your personal quarters and decide where to billet your men. With the Palace and Temple guard gone, there's plenty of room in the barracks."

Jonah's hand brushed Julian's and slipped something into it. The Emperor palmed it quickly. As the pirate lord and his men walked ahead of him into the Palace, he turned up his hand. The note read, "*The rabbit has ears,*" and he heaved a silent sigh of relief.

It meant the Archon's group was safe in their mountain refuge, the listening post and communications links with Aretz and the city were established, and everything else was proceeding according to plan.

It was the Siriuns' first meeting since the pirate fleets' arrival and a stunned silence fell around the table. "You want us to pay for everything instead of just taking it? You can't be serious?"

"Micah, I'm deadly serious. Since I'm planning to make my home here and use Nublis as a main base, I don't want to inflame the local populace any more than necessary because then I'll have to spend as much time defending my back as I will my perimeters. I'm issuing a special scrip in lieu of part of their pay to the troops and I strongly suggest you do the same. The crews are to use this scrip to pay for everything up to and including the pleasure palaces. The scrip will be submitted by the vendors to me. After taking my cut, I'll redeem the remainder in Nublian coin. Our war chest is ample and I plan to write all the scrip off against it as an expense. Plus my cut which I'll then collect twice."

"I must say that sounds very feasible," said Micah. "And now that you've explained, it makes sense. Especially the cut."

"It could eventually be as profitable as hijacking because I'll be getting a piece of almost every business here. Incidentally, the legal associations want to set up shop as soon as possible and I'll be getting a cut from them too. The Archon's unavailable and there's no one to police the streets or try Nublis's criminal or civil cases. Since we need a properly regulated society, we're going to bring in outside judges and set up a standard legal system, fees and all. Chief Justice Veniston is interviewing the eager candidates right now. Also, there's a lot of big money here. But just as long as we keep my hands off the major banks and outside corporations, it'll look the other way and stay put. The beauty part is that we can piously justify this invasion on the grounds we're transforming a former police state into a democracy. By the time our lobbyists and spin doctors are done, the entire Synod will be hailing us as liberators. Hell, they'll even be writing folk songs about how we freed the ancient empire of Nublis from the Archon's oppression. But we need to leave the Emperor and his family alone for now. They're the stuff of romance and we certainly don't want to create any martyrs. The official line will be that the cowardly thieving Archon abandoned the Emperor in his hour of need and looted the Imperial treasures and took them with him. The Emperor and Empress could have left too. Instead, they nobly chose to stay with their beloved people after sending their children to safety. Now, there's to be no rape either, Micah, and I'm counting on you and the other lords to keep the troops in line. Nublians take a dim view of rape and I see no point in stirring them up. With the amount of consensual sex around here, there's no need to be taking anyone by force. I'm getting on in years and I want to settle down. Nublis is a very pleasant place

and I may even become respectable."

"You, Ethan?" Micah shook his head.

"Yes, me! I'm giving serious thought to taking a wife and starting a family. In case you hadn't noticed, there are some really gorgeous women around here. Especially one particular redhead over at the Temple.

An aide tapped Ethan on the shoulder and handed him a note. "Ah! The Emperor's invited the five of us to dinner this evening. I hope he'll play afterwards. Julian's a fine musician and composer in his own right and he's made quite a few commercially successful recordings."

"Even I know that," said Micah. "But be that as it may, I still plan on bringing a food taster. For all their smooth ways, I don't trust these Nublians any further than I can throw them."

Ethan's laugh rumbled in his throat. "Oh, I already have mine all lined up. She's the Emperor's little sister."

Three months later, Galia Alazne's secretary knocked on her office door. "Look boss, more flowers! Rare ones too! This time it's air orchids from Sirius. Aren't they beautiful? They say you can put them anywhere and they'll live forever. Where do you want them?"

Frustrated, Galia surveyed her cramped office. Every flat surface already boasted an elaborate floral offering. "Dammit! This thing is way out of control! Here, Anya, put them on your desk and give me the card. If any more come, send them over to the Archon's maternity home. Just save the cards and write on them whatever they were."

She read the latest message. "I'll go to the ends of the universe and back just to see you smile." It was signed "E."

Ethan! I wish you would just die! Or at least go away and never come back.

Not since Julian had left her all those years ago, had Galia felt less like smiling and up until now she wouldn't have believed she had any tears left to shed.

When the invaders had set up the new legal system, they'd appointed her to head their Judicial Assistance Program. Whatever that was!

Every day found her dealing with a fresh tide of financial misery while she struggled to find affordable representation for those of her people unfortunate enough to become enmeshed in the new legalities. It wasn't that there weren't any lawyers available.

If anything, Nublis now boasted a surplus. Attracted by tales of vast fortunes and easy pickings, legal hucksters from all over the Synod flooded into Cyrenia like flies to a honey pot. Vast as it was, the Temple complex was actually beginning to run out of room. Every available space had long since been partitioned and some of the imports were operating two and three to a desk. The problem was finding a practitioner who was even remotely competent, let alone affordable.

The Siriun lords' guidelines and schedules had been posted above Galia's desk, right next to the rigid means test formula her applicants for assistance were required to meet. In her opinion, the new regime should have listed the bribe schedule as well. She'd heard the same litany so many times, she could recite it off the top of her head. Not only did she know the price of every verdict and service in the new system

but also how much each one was liable to vary.

As he fought his way through the crowds infesting every hallway, Julian would just shake his head. He'd take refuge in his quiet book-lined chambers, only emerging when it was time for him to go to Court. Those fortunate enough to come before his Court could always count on a fair hearing and appeals on his findings were rare. Occasionally, he'd plead a case for one of Galia's more desperate clients. But with his own schedule becoming more and more crowded, the Emperor had been finding it increasingly difficult to help her out.

Early on, he'd hired a couple of associates from the new crop to assist him with his workload. He'd fired them almost immediately in disgust and considered it richly ironic that the pirate lords would try to get their own cases assigned to his calendar rather than trust the imported judges. But whenever Ethan would make him yet another offer of untold millions to take him on as a client, Julian would give him the same answer. "If you'd please tell me what it is about the word 'no' you fail to understand, I'll be more than happy to clarify it for you."

Seemingly unoffended, the pirate just kept upping the ante to a point where it finally became a joke between Julian and Galia.

Galia looked at the card in her hand and the flowers all over her office. Then she sighed. The word 'no' didn't seem to be in Ethan's vocabulary.

As she dropped the card in the wastebasket, someone rapped on her door.

Julian's sister Ellie poked in her head. "How about having lunch with me by the fountain? Do you think Julian would care to join us?"

Galia nodded. "Why don't I call the commissary and order something?"

Mindful of the ever-present listening devices, Ellie smiled. "I'll go see if he's free and I'll be right back."

Ellie normally never came to Galia's office at this time of the day. 'By the fountain' was code for something urgent from Aretz and if Julian was included it had to be big. Galia's commissary order would confirm to her people that contact had been made and put Nublis's hidden army and weapons systems on immediate alert.

"Good news," said Julian. After relatching the garden door, he shepherded them over to the silent fountain. As Galia distributed the food, he continued. "According to Archon Intelligence, our emissaries did it! He doesn't know it yet but the Synod Assembly is about to refuse Ethan's request for diplomatic recognition. Not only have they declined to condemn the Archon but they're recognizing our government in exile! This gives us the status of an invaded realm and officially entitles us to Synod protection. Right now the Assembly's executive committee is debating how best to proceed. There's no point in sanctioning Ethan and the other lords because they're outlaws anyway. And the Synod forces don't want to mount a full invasion from outside because it would probably cause the planet to be blown up. Their military leaders think we should try to take Nublis from the inside, and I agree. Starting tonight, the Trade League will begin ferrying commando and intelligence units into the mountains. Once on the ground, they'll coordinate with the Archon's people. The guards here in Cyrenia are already on full alert and a combined Synod/Trade League fleet is under way. Their current ETA is the day after tomorrow and they'll stay cloaked and out of range until we signal. By that time, we should have all the key installations secured and the planet back under our control."

He paused as if turning something over in his mind. "This is where I need you, Galia. Ethan's been pursuing you for how long?"

"Three months and the man never lets up! It all started the night of that damnable dinner party! Food tasters! Can you imagine? Julian, the single worst thing you ever did to me in my life, bar none, was introduce me to that man. I've been wondering ever since what I could possibly have done to deserve such maltreatment."

"I had my reasons. As I rather hoped he would, Lord Ethan has fallen head over heels in love with you."

Galia couldn't believe her ears. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"Yes, Galia, I am. You're a sworn member of the defenders and I'm giving you a direct order. You're to say 'yes' to Lord Ethan this very afternoon and give him anything he wants. And I mean anything! We need to get him up to the farm and keep him distracted there until the day after tomorrow. I've already salted the mine and he's interested in seeing the place. Corey and I are going with you and I've checked the weather. It's going to be absolutely perfect for a couple of idyllic afternoons at the lake. Ethan will want to bring at least two of his men and we'll encourage him to take more. My bodyguard, Asa, will be piloting and the two female cabin attendants, who are physically gorgeous and won't be wearing much, will distract his guards. They're Archon agents like Asa."

The pain in his eyes smote Galia to the heart. "Ethan's only weakness is you. He's far and away the smartest of the Siriun lords, and if he's in the city, he'll catch on to what we're up to. Even now, he's suspicious and he's considering imprisoning me on his ship. For insurance, he says. He's liable to do it too, if we don't distract him. You're the only hope I have. Can you do it?"

Her response surprised him. "Yes, Julian, I can and I will! That murdered deputy Captain was one of my dearest friends and we loved each other like brother and sister. When he went missing, I kept vigil with his wife throughout that entire night. I'll never forget the sound she made when they told her he was dead. Thanks to that murdering son of a bitch, Galen never lived to see his child and his poor little widow will mourn him for the rest of her days! Oh, yes, Julian, I'll do it! I'll even kill him for you while he sleeps! All you need do is say the word!"

The Emperor's jaw tightened. "It may come to that. We'll see."

When Galia returned to her desk, an elaborately wrapped gift awaited her with a handwritten note. "I actually bought these instead of stealing them. Now will you talk to me? Please."

She opened the silk-covered box and gasped.

Rivaling the afternoon sun, an elaborate filigreed necklace set with diamonds and enormous Aretzan fire opals winked up at her from a black velvet bed. Like starlight in a midnight sky, each multi-colored stone blazed with its own internal flame.

Just as she reached for the phone, her secretary looked in. "There's a gentleman out here and he won't go away. I think he's the one who's been sending you the flowers."

"Show him in."

Galia extended her hand and he kissed it, then stood awkwardly in front of her desk. She sighed. "Please sit down, Lord Ethan. I was about to call you because we obviously need to talk." When she smiled, the expression in his eyes confirmed that she was having her usual effect. "As a respectable

woman, I don't normally accept expensive gifts from men. But this is...I don't know."

Ethan cleared his throat. "Up until now, I've always taken what I wanted by force. Now for the first time in my life, I can't. Not you and not these opals. That's why I felt it important that you know I didn't steal them. You probably wouldn't have accepted them if I had." He added, somewhat lamely, "I can even show you the receipt if you like."

"You're right, I wouldn't have. Tell me, did you buy all these flowers too?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Do you like them?"

"Yes. But as you can clearly see, I'm running out of space. Please don't send any more."

"You'll have to tell me what you'd like instead? Name it and it's yours."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, I do. Whatever you want, it's yours."

Galia looked down at her desk and frowned. "You don't really understand us Nublians at all, do you, Lord Ethan?"

"I'm trying to." He sounded a little anxious.

Galia looked at him through her lashes. "Like most Nublians, I have simple tastes. Time spent in the company of a good friend is just as precious to me as these opals. I like sunsets, birdsong, the wind in my hair. And I love to ride in the mountains, breathing that cold, clear air that tastes for all the world like fine crisp wine. Oh, I wish I was there now! I'm so weary of all of these people, this anthill city and the never-ending hustle bustle of the complex. I grew up in the country and there are times...you don't begin to know how I miss it!"

"Is that what you want? To be in the country and away from all these people? To ride in the mountains with the wind in your hair?"

"Of course! But I might as well wish for the three moons of Betelgeuse! It's just not possible. I mean, just look at this place and all the work I have to do!"

"Anything's possible! And just to prove it, my dear, I'm going to take you away from it all this very afternoon. You seem to forget, my lady, it is I who rule Nublis now and what I say goes. Now, give me that phone! Please."

Emerging from the elevator onto the Palace roof, Ethan saw Julian's white-gold hair glinting against the black steel side of the transport. The Emperor bent his head, and his wife turned her face up to his. Then they kissed.

Ethan suddenly had a sense of all he'd missed and felt a stab of envy.

Julian looked up. For just a second, the expression in his silver eyes chilled Ethan to the bone. A giant minotaur had looked at him like that once, its desire to kill to him bordering on lust. The Emperor smiled and Ethan could almost persuade himself he'd imagined it. Almost. But not quite.

Well, that was it, he decided. As soon as they returned, he'd confine Julian on the Black Wolf. In chains, if necessary. Henceforth, the Emperor would live in the special quarters that had been prepared

for him. Luxurious beyond belief, they included everything Julian could possibly need or want...except his wife, of course. With him standing out in space and her on the ground, he'd hold Julian and his beloved Empress as hostages to each other's good behavior. Once in a while, out of the goodness of his heart, he might allow them a connubial visit. Maybe. That'd teach Julian to say no to him!

The more Ethan rolled the idea around in his mind, the better he liked it. He only wished he'd thought of it sooner.

One of his captains had been eyeing the little blonde Princess. Ellie, that was her name. When he got back to the city, he'd award her to him in payment for his loyalty. She was a nice little thing and the man would treat her well. That particular Captain was generally good to his women, and if she played her cards right, he might even marry her.

Which brought him back to Galia, who stood patiently at his side. Well, he'd finally found her price and he was going to make damn sure she was worth it. Those opals had cost him a king's ransom and he was going to have one hell of a time expensing them against the war chest without the other lords finding out.

Ethan had decided to bring six men and one of his own armed transports on this trip, and they waited next to the Empress's craft.

Julian greeted him with a handshake and kissed Galia on the cheek. "Lord Ethan, I'm delighted you decided to come. Shall we get on board? This transport has room enough for everyone, but it's up to you."

Ethan considered for a moment. "No, we'll take both." He signaled to two of his men to take the fighter, and accompanied Galia up the steps and into the cabin. The Emperor and Empress came next, followed closely by the four remaining bodyguards. With a thumbs-up sign to Julian, the slim young pilot raised the steps. Then he went to his seat and began his preflight checks.

Ethan chose an opulent armchair toward the back of the cabin and Galia took the one next to him. The Emperor and Empress stayed up front with the guards nearby, their weapons at the ready.

Once they were all settled, the seatbelt sign chimed and changed color. The thrusters rumbled and the electric motor hissed. The spaceport's bell-like clearance signal chimed and they were off.

Walking his horse close to Julian's on the following morning, Ethan could hear his mounted bodyguards following close behind. "I have to say, Your Majesty, this place is everything you described. I can understand why you like to come up here so much. I would too." *And I will. But you won't. Ever again.*

He pointed his riding crop at a nearby peak. "What's that?"

"The sacred mountain. The most hallowed and haunted spot on Nublis. My ancestors used to practice human sacrifice there during the full moon. When you walk on its slopes, you can feel the weight of all the ages pressing down on you. The mountain holds the spirit of all the Archons in its heart. We call them the old ones, and they sit on golden thrones in a crystal cave. The river flowing into the cave has its source beneath the Archon's quarters in the Temple, and it empties into a great lake at the foot of the old ones' golden thrones. That lake is the great pool of life from which each Nublian soul comes at birth and to which they return after death."

"That's all very poetic, but how true is it?"

"You'd have to ask the Archon because he's the only one who really knows. But he's assured me that it's so."

"Have you heard from the Archon?"

"No, my lord. I haven't."

"Don't lie to me, Your Majesty. There's a glint in your eye when you talk about him that wasn't there before. From what I've heard, you and he were very close and it's obvious you miss him."

Julian looked amused. "And just how would you know that?"

Ethan ignored the question. "What's more, I don't believe the Archon was ever off-planet! I think he's here."

A voice sounded behind them. "You're right. He is here."

Ethan heard a click as if a weapon were being cocked. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw only the greenery through which he and Julian had just come. He turned to ask the Emperor about the voice but he wasn't there. Nor were his bodyguards.

Ethan's horse stamped its foot and switched its tail. He was suddenly aware of the forest's deep silence and the fact that he was all alone.

The click sounded again, then another and another. All at once, they were all around him.

"Get down and put up your hands!" ordered the voice. "If you don't, we'll shoot you right out of the saddle."

Ethan shifted angrily. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. We've been expecting you, my lord. Now, get down from there, or we'll shoot!"

Ethan dismounted. As he threw the reins over his horse's neck and raised his hands, a blue-clad figure emerged from the greenery behind him. Then another...and another. Each masked figure held a weapon and every one of them was trained on his heart.

Finally came a man in scarlet robes. He too was masked. "I'm the Archon's Major Domo. And you're right, Lord Ethan. He's here."

One of the blue figures lowered its weapon. "Cross your hands behind your back. Then go over to that tree and put your face against it."

After Ethan's wrists had been bound, he flexed his hands and tested the knot. It had obviously been tied by an expert. "Who are you?"

He heard a low chuckle. "Like the Major Domo, we work for the Archon. That's all you need to know."

"Follow me," ordered the Major Domo. "I'm taking you to meet His Grace. He doesn't like what you've been saying about him and he needs to decide what to do with you. Now I'm going to cover your eyes. My colleague here will put his hand on your shoulder and guide you."

"Where's Julian?"

He heard another low chuckle. "Julian, is that you?"

There was no answer. Then something was wound around his eyes and tied tightly.

As Ethan stepped forward, he tripped and stumbled. A firm hand guided him forward, and they walked for a while on a path that seemed to be going upward. Then they stopped.

When the blindfold was removed, Ethan found himself standing at the mouth of a firelit cave. A hand in the small of his back shoved him forward. As he fell to his knees, he looked up at a massive figure seated above him.

It had no face.

"Who... what are you?"

The Major Domo replied, "This is His Grace, the Archon, who is also known as the Dark Emperor of Nublis. He's glad to see you kneeling. It seems appropriate. He knows full well who sent you and he wants your foot removed from Nublis's neck. Then he wishes to see you and your rabble gone."

The figure raised a gloved hand and beckoned.

"Come closer," said the Major Domo. "His Grace has something to say to you."

His hands still tied behind him, Ethan scrambled awkwardly to his feet.

A hoarse whisper issued from the cave. "You've defiled my Temple! You've fouled my beautiful planet and you've violated my sacred laws! Even after you're gone, we still have to cleanse Nublis of the pestilence you brought with you just as we did a thousand years ago! Now begone from my presence! I'm weary of your face!"

"You're not going to kill me?"

"No!" whispered the Archon, "I have a use for you yet."

As the Major Domo was blindfolding him again, Ethan heard a scuffle behind him. They walked for what seemed like an hour, then the blindfold was removed.

"Against the tree!" hissed one of his captors.

Something sliced through his bonds and when he looked around, he was alone.

When Ethan finally found his way back to the trail, Julian was waiting with their horses. "Where in the hell have you been? I found this poor beast wandering around and your guards have been looking for you everywhere. If I may say so, my lord, you look absolutely terrible. We'd best get you back to the house."

"But you were there! You saw those masked figures and the Archon! You had to! You're part of it, dammit!"

Julian's gray eyes opened wide. "What are you talking about, my lord? Did you get bumped on the head when you fell off your horse perhaps? You sound for all the world as if you've been dreaming. With all due respect, I'll tell you once again. His Grace is off-planet and I haven't the faintest idea where he is."

When Ethan's bodyguards came crashing out of the greenery, the Emperor looked relieved. "There you are! You'd best tend to your master, gentlemen. He's taken a nasty fall from his horse and he's saying

some rather strange things."

Without giving them a chance to respond, Julian mounted. As he cantered away, he called over his shoulder, "I'll see you back at the house!"

* * *

Leaning on his elbow, Ethan looked down at Galia's sleeping face. He slowly traced the line of her cheek with his finger. As he bent to brush his lips against hers, she stirred. Then she said something, and turned on her side.

Listening to her quiet breathing, he wondered how he could stand to be in a world where she was not and, idly, he wondered how old she was. Late twenties? Early thirties? Young enough to bear children, certainly, and give him the son he'd never had. What was her history? And did he really care?

He thought back again to this morning's ride and its aftermath. Why had the Archon let him go? He'd whispered, "*I have a use for you yet.*" But what could that possibly be? Maybe Julian was right and he had indeed been dreaming. But that failed to explain the rope burn on his wrists, and he had surely not imagined that.

Yet his bodyguards had seen and heard nothing.

As soon as they'd reached the house, Ethan ordered up additional troops from the city. They'd searched the area thoroughly but to no avail.

Where Julian was concerned, he finally decided enough was enough. In the face of Corey's anguished protests, he angrily ordered the Emperor confined to the farmhouse's cellar, in chains and under heavy guard.

Dinner had been a silent awkward affair. He'd finally grown weary of Corey's accusing eyes and bidden the distraught Empress a mocking good night. Then he'd led an obviously reluctant Galia upstairs.

Alone in their opulently appointed suite, he talked softly to her as only he knew how, mendaciously assuring her no harm would come to the Emperor and that his imprisonment was only temporary.

Finally, she raised her huge green eyes to his. "Do you give me your solemn word on that?"

"Of course." Then he'd gentled and soothed her and led her over to the bed.

At first Galia was cold but Ethan had many skills. Despite his habit of taking what he wanted by force, there was little about the art of lovemaking he didn't know. It had taken him awhile but eventually his patience and skilful fingers had won out.

When she realized Ethan had no intention of forcing her, Galia's last barrier of resistance had fallen.

During their previous night's encounter, he'd found she was no virgin. Even so, her innocence surprised him. Obviously no whore, she'd known nothing of even the commonest tricks of the trade. When he asked her to do one particular thing that pleased him, she reacted with shocked amazement. Which meant that she was either the best actress he'd ever seen or her previous experience with men had been severely limited.

Now, watching her sleeping face, he realized he'd fallen in love with her.

As he rested beside Galia in the moonlit bedroom, life had never seemed sweeter to Ethan. He'd never known anyone quite like her and he was beginning to see things in a whole new light. What was it she'd said? *"Like most Nublians, I have simple tastes. Time spent in the company of a good friend is just as precious to me as these opals."*

All Ethan had ever known was brute force. First as a receiver and then as a giver.

Kidnapped at the age of eight, he'd been pressed into service on a Trade League battle cruiser as a cabin boy and plaything of the Captain. When the Captain tired of him, he'd been passed from hand to hand, dreaming hopelessly of the day when he'd be free. Then by some miracle, he'd escaped from his tormentors and become a homeless vagabond.

When he was fifteen, a Siriun pirate lord found him sleeping in an alley in some forgotten space town and took him home to his ship. Normally, Ethan would have declined the invitation but he was desperately cold and hungry and, despite his black skin, the man seemed kind.

After they'd bathed and eaten, the pirate opened a great carved chest and told him to pick out some clothes. Later that night, he'd shown him to an alcove in his spacious cabin, but he never touched him.

When Ethan asked why not, the pirate lord laughed. "I love women too much!" By way of explanation, he continued, "With no family of my own, I feel the chill of winter closing in. I need someone to talk with during the long nights when I can't sleep."

During the next eighteen years, the pirate taught Ethan his trade and eventually he'd made him his second-in-command. Along the way, he taught him to read and write and cipher and how to fight. Then, as only a Siriun knew how, he schooled him on how to love a woman.

Before the old pirate died, he named Ethan his successor and a worthy one he had been. His fleet was ten times larger than his mentor's and despite his light complexion he was the most feared and powerful of all the pirate lords. The Siriuns had just elected him their chief and now he owned a planet.

"Not for long," came a whisper from the window. "He wants your foot removed from Nublis's neck and you and your rabble gone!"

Ethan started. "Who's there?"

The only answer was Galia's quiet breathing in the darkness as she slept on.

Chapter 9...The Emperor Fights Back

"My lord, I show activity in the northwest quadrant."

Lord Micah walked over to the communications screen.

What looked like shuttles were going back and forth from the planet's surface.

"Go to visual and let's take a pass over it."

As pictures began rolling across the wall in front of him, Micah pointed. "Freeze that! Now zoom in." He grabbed a spare headset. "Timon? I show unauthorized traffic in the northwest quadrant. Air and ground. Confirm."

"Timon to Micah. Confirm, northwest quadrant. I see an Aretzan cruiser, third class, light armament, with troops and weapons on ground, and three shuttles."

"Horizon Two to Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower."

"We show unauthorized activity northwest quadrant. Raise shields and scramble fighters, stat! Repeat. Scramble fighters, stat!"

"This is Nublis tower. Sorry, we didn't get that. Say again, Horizon Two."

"Jonah to Archon. Jonah to Archon. The tower is secure. Repeat. The tower is secure. Moving to take concourse."

"Archon to Jonah. Rendezvous fifteen hundred hours. Repeat. Rendezvous fifteen hundred hours. Acknowledge."

"Jonah to Archon. Confirm fifteen hundred hours. Over and out."

"Nublis tower, this is Horizon Two. We show unauthorized activity in the northwest quadrant. Get those friggin' shields up and scramble the fighters, stat!"

"Horizon Two. This is Nublis tower. Say again. You're breaking up. Say again."

"Horizon Four to Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower, Horizon Four."

"Horizon Four to Nublis tower. This is an emergency! Scramble the fighters to the northwest quadrant, stat! Repeat. Scramble the fighters to the northwest quadrant, stat! Over."

"Horizon Four, this is Nublis tower. Say again. You're breaking up. Say again."

"Horizon One to Nublis tower. Give status. Repeat. Give status."

"Horizon One, this is Nublis tower. Horizons Two and Four have a comm malfunction. Tower status is clear. We show all quadrants clear. Repeat. We show all quadrants clear!"

"Horizon One to Horizon Two. Acknowledge."

"This is Horizon Two. I hear you loud and clear."

"Horizon One to Horizon Four. Acknowledge."

"Horizon Four to Horizon One. Aretzan cruiser, southeast quadrant. Repeat. Aretzan cruiser, southeast quadrant. Unauthorized activity, northwest quadrant! Air and ground! Acknowledge!"

"Horizon One to Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"Horizon One this is Nublis tower."

"Horizon One to Nublis tower. Give quadrant status."

"This is Nublis Tower. Say again, Horizon One."

Micah threw down the headset. "What in the blazes is going on down there? Where are the friggin' shields, and why aren't the fighters scrambling? And what in the hell's the matter with the tower?"

"They say they can't hear us, my lord."

The communications officer listened for a moment. "Horizons One and Four say the tower can't hear them either. Horizons Five and Three are docked. Shall I check with them?"

"Get me Lord Ezra at Horizon Five."

"Jonah to Archon. Acknowledge."

"Archon here."

"Jonah to Archon. Concourse is secure. Repeat. Concourse is secure. Moving to take docks. Repeat. Moving to take docks."

"Horizon Two to Horizon Five. Acknowledge."

"Horizon Two this is Five. What's up?"

"Horizon Five, this is Micah. Get Ezra, stat."

"Micah, this is Ezra. What's your problem?"

"Micah to Ezra. We can't raise the tower. Check tower status."

"Ezra to Micah –"

A burst of static came over the speaker. Then silence.

The communications officer began flipping switches. "They got cut off. I'm getting nothing."

"Try Horizon Three. Ethan should be there."

"Horizon Three, this is Horizon Two. Acknowledge."

"Horizon Two, this is Horizon Three. Over."

"Horizon Two, this is Micah. Get Ethan. Stat!"

"Horizon Three to Horizon Two. Sorry, no can do. Ethan's off-base. Repeat. Ethan's –"

Another burst of static was followed by silence.

"Jonah to Archon. Acknowledge."

"This is Archon."

"Jonah to Archon. The spaceport is secure. Repeat. Spaceport is secure."

"Horizon Two, this is Nublis tower."

"Horizon Two to Nublis tower. Give status. Repeat. Give status."

"This is Nublis tower. Say again, Horizon Two. We can't hear you. Repeat. Say again."

"Go to battle stations," ordered Micah, and he picked up the headset. "Timon, this is Micah. Red alert! Red alert!"

"Timon to Micah. Alert acknowledged. Have gone to battle stations. Aretzan cruiser at four o'clock. Repeat. Aretzen cruiser at four o'clock. Evading now!"

"Horizon Two, this is Aretz Four Ought Two. We have you in our sights. Repeat. We have you in our sights. Stand down!"

"Horizon Two to Aretz Four Ought Two. Message received and understood. We are standing down. Repeat. We are standing down."

"Aretz Four Ought Two to Horizon Two. Preparing to board. Open your docking bay. Repeat. Open your docking bay. Acknowledge."

"This is Horizon Two. Message received and understood. Docking bay is open. Repeat. Docking bay is open."

"Aretz Four Ought Two to Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower. Aretz Four Ought Two. Give status."

"Aretz Four Ought Two to Nublis tower. Horizon Two is secure. Lord Micah is in custody. Repeat. Horizon Two is secure. Lord Micah is in custody."

"This is Nublis tower. Come on in, Aretz Four Ought Two. Dock seventeen is clear. Dock eighteen is clear. Over."

"Aretz Four Ought Two to Nublis tower. We'll take seventeen. Horizon Two will take eighteen. We're coming in. Over."

"League Seventeen Hundred to Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower. Over."

"Nublis tower, this is League Seventeen Hundred. Horizon One is secure. Repeat. Horizon One is secure. Over."

"League Seventeen Hundred this is Nublis tower. Come on in. Repeat. Come on in. Docks nineteen and twenty are clear. Over."

"League Seventeen Hundred to Nublis tower. Message received. We're coming in. We'll take nineteen. Horizon One will take twenty. Over."

"Aretz Seven Two Four to Nublis tower. Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower. Over."

"Aretz Seven Two Four to Nublis tower. In pursuit of Horizon Four. Need assistance! Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower, Aretz Seven Two Four. Shields raised! Fighters scrambling now! League Ten Ought Three deploying now. Give status."

"Aretz Seven Two Four to Horizon Four. We have you in our sights. Stand down. Repeat. We have you in our sights. You have thirty seconds to stand down!"

"Horizon Four to Aretz Seven Two Four. Go piss up a rope!"

"Horizon Four. This is League Ten Ought Three. Maybe you ought to rethink that. We have you in our sights and are preparing to board. Repeat. We're preparing to board."

"Horizon Four to Aretz Seven Two Four. We're standing down. Repeat. We're standing down."

"Aretz Seven Two Four to Nublis tower. Horizon Four is secure. Lord Timon is in custody. We're coming in. Acknowledge."

"This is Nublis tower, Aretz Seven Two Four. Docks twenty-one and twenty-two are clear."

"League Ten Ought Three to Nublis tower. We're coming in. Acknowledge."

"League Ten Ought Three this is Nublis tower. Dock twenty-three is clear. Come on in."

"Jonah to Archon. Mission accomplished. Repeat. Mission accomplished. Over."

"Archon to Jonah. We'll see you at the rendezvous. Over and out."

* * *

Sunlight beamed through the open window and a chorus of birdsong greeted the new day.

Ethan rolled over and opened his eyes.

He didn't normally sleep this late but it felt good.

He smiled over at the other pillow but Galia wasn't there. Yawning and stretching, he sat up, and looked appreciatively around the luxurious room. Then he reached for the intercom.

"I'd like some coffee."

"Right away, my lord."

The door opened and to Ethan's amazement Julian came in carrying a tray. Setting it on the bedside table, he said, "Good morning, my lord. I trust you slept well."

The Emperor's tone was pleasant, but his eyes were cold.

The transport pilot followed Julian into the room. He was in uniform, and set his briefcase on the edge of the bed.

Ethan's hand moved toward his weapon but the pilot said quietly, "My lord, I wouldn't do that if I were you." A gun appeared in his hand, and he pointed it straight at Ethan's head.

"Hey! That's mine! What's going on here? Where's Galia? And where in the hell are my men?"

"Galia's on her way back to the city!" snapped Julian. "As for your men! The ones still alive are in my custody!" He continued in a milder tone, "It would seem, Lord Ethan, that I now have control of you. So why don't you have some coffee?" He poured a cup. "Here. You're going to need it."

Ethan knocked it out of his hand and the coffee splashed in Julian's face. "Tsk! That wasn't very polite. Where are your manners, Ethan? Now I'll have to go change. But before I do, we need to settle you down a little." He felt around in the briefcase and came up with a needle gun.

He appraised Ethan for a moment, and picked out a red cartridge. "If you so much as twitch while I'm doing this, Asa here will shoot first your right kneecap, then your left. Now, give me your arm."

As he jabbed him, Julian continued. "I wanted to kill you, but the Archon disagreed. Are you sleepy? Just lie down and relax. Asa, he's all yours. Here. I'll help you."

When he awoke, the first thing Ethan noticed was the silence.

He had never known the world to be so still. There was nothing, not so much a footstep, the chirp of a bird, his own breathing.... He couldn't even hear himself breathe?

He cried out, "What is this?" but heard no sound.

He was clad in a light blue cotton top and matching pants and lying on a cotton-covered mattress on a steel bunk. The cell was light and airy with a barred iron door and a camera mounted over it. A red light indicated it was on.

When Ethan felt a touch on his cheek, he looked up to see the transport pilot.

The dark eyes looking back were not unkind.

His visitor held out a slate for him to read. "My name's Asa. It's afternoon. You can't hear and you can't speak. Do you sign?"

The universal trade language of the Synod, Ethan used signing routinely with his multi-ethnic officers and crews. He wiped the slate and wrote, "Yes. Do you?"

Asa signed, "Yes, I do."

"Good. Now tell me what's going on? What did you do to me? And where am I?"

As Ethan moved his hands, he saw he was wearing shackles. A light chain led from each one to a ring set into the stone wall. The chains were just long enough to permit him ease of movement, but not to reach the door. He moved his feet and noted that they were shackled too.

"Which do you want to know first?"

"Where am I?"

"You're in the Temple, in the Archon's prison. This is a VIP cell. If you need anything, just ask for it?"

"My freedom?"

The young man smiled. "Besides that."

"What did you do to me?"

Asa wrote something and held it up. "We gave you a neural block."

"What in the hell is that?"

"A surgical procedure to deafen you and paralyze your vocal cords. It's temporary, harmless, and easily reversed."

"Why?"

"The Archon ordered it."

"What's going on?"

"You're under arrest. The night before last, the Allies dropped commando units into our northern mountains. They coordinated with our security forces in Cyrenia. Led by the Imperial steward, our guard units took all the key installations, starting with the spaceport tower. Once we controlled the tower, we could interfere with your communications. And believe me, we did. Then we took the spaceport, and all the docked ships. A combined Synod and Trade League fleet was waiting for our signal. By the time the Sirium lords realized what had happened, the big cruisers had them in their sights."

Just as Asa was finishing, the cell door opened to admit the Emperor. Resplendent in the crimson uniform of the Imperial cavalry, Julian carried a wicked-looking sidearm.

"Ah, I see he's awake. Tell him the Synod has denied his request for diplomatic status. The fleet's arrived, and we're currently under martial law."

As Asa signed, Ethan nodded his understanding.

"His officers and crews were brought before a military tribunal this morning and found guilty of an entire catalog of crimes against humanity. The four lords are to be hanged tomorrow morning in the great square, and the crews and officers received life sentences with no possibility of parole. They'll serve out their terms in remote asteroid mining colonies. The pirates' assets are being tabulated and they'll be used to indemnify their victims. I've already put in a claim for my late deputy Captain's family and compensation for the two transports his men wrecked."

"But what of me?"

"You're being hunted across the planet even as we speak. Your transport will be shot down and you won't survive."

"I'll be legally dead?"

"Yes."

"What about Galia?"

As Asa started signing, Julian stopped him. Instead, he started writing on the slate and when he was finished, he handed it to Ethan. His message read, "Galia was my agent. The deputy Captain you killed was her adopted brother."

Ethan leaned back against the wall and heaved a long sigh. "A honeytrap! The oldest trick in the book

and I fell for it. Julian got me out of the city deliberately, didn't he?"

"You were suspicious and he didn't want to take any chances. He says you were smarter than the others and would have caught on in time to stop us."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Yes."

"Why was I spared?"

"We don't know. It was on the Archon's orders."

The door opened to admit the Major Domo. "Oh, there you are. The Archon's bidden the defenders to dinner in his quarters tonight." Then he beckoned a young man into the cell.

At the sight of the Major Domo's masked face, Ethan shrank back slightly.

Asa spoke. "Since my work here is done, I'll bid you all good day." After saluting Julian, he turned on his heel and left the cell.

The Major Domo signed to Ethan. "I'm going to examine you now. Please lie down and keep still. This won't take long."

He took a skin scrape, read the toximeter and said something into the device on his wrist. He shone a small light into each of Ethan's eyes, palpated his neck and passed a small device with colored readouts on it back and forth across his body.

"Have you got all that? Those are his normal levels. Yes, they look good. He's in excellent shape, especially for a man his age. Now I'm going to give him a full physical."

The young man unlocked Ethan's shackles and removed them. Then he signed to him. "Stand up and strip."

Ethan had never received a more thorough physical in his life. By the time the Major Domo was finished, there wasn't an inch of his body, inside or out, that hadn't been pictured, poked or prodded. But even though some parts of the examination were painful, it was so impartially done he didn't feel violated. When he was dressed and the shackles had been replaced, he signed, "What is this about? This is surely not normal procedure."

The Major Domo signed back, "No, it's not. You'll learn the answer when the Archon wants you to know."

He gestured to the young man at his side. "This gentleman is one of the Archon's special agents, and for the sake of your continued good health, I suggest you follow his orders to the letter. He knows sign language and is a fine chess player, and as long as you don't upset him, you'll find him good company. We can bring in a viewscreen if you wish and some books to help you pass the time. All you need do is ask." He pointed at the camera over the door. "The guards are monitoring you on this. If you need anything, just tell your companion and he'll relay it to them. Is there anything else you want me to tell him, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, there is."

While the Major Domo translated, the Emperor glared at Ethan where he lay on the bunk, and his eyes

were savage. "He was absolutely right! I was there and it was I who bound his hands and shoved him to his knees in the cave! I also intended to slash his throat from ear to ear but the Archon caught my hand. It took all his men's strength to keep me quiet until I got myself under control again."

Ethan remembered the scuffle in the cave.

"He actually went berserk and they've got the bruises to prove it," added the Major Domo.

Julian continued. "From the moment you arrived on Nublis, Lord Ethan, your fate was sealed. The old ones warned us of your coming and told us what we were to do. You thought you could fathom our mysteries and not get burned. But the price of such knowledge is very high, and believe me, you're about to pay for your curiosity in full."

Hammering echoed across the crowded square. With the platform and traps already completed, carpenters swarmed over the gallows' upper framework. There would be plenty of time for the four Siriun lords to see the waiting nooses through the barred windows of their cells before darkness fell.

But there should be five! reflected Julian bitterly. *Why, oh, why, is he sparing him? After what that man has done....*

"Oh, Julian!" Corey raced down the Palace steps and launched herself into his arms.

When she barreled into him, something cracked in Julian's chest. He sank to the ground with an involuntary yelp of pain. Clutching at his chest, he tried to catch his breath. As he doubled over, he felt his escort's firm arms holding him up.

Jonah and two of the Palace servants came running and just as Julian scrambled to his feet, a couple of reporters raced across the square. One of them shoved a camera in his face.

A scarlet-armored Palace sentry had also seen the Emperor fall. He shoved the offending newshounds aside and the camera went clattering.

The Emperor recovered his breath. "Just give me a minute!" Collecting himself, he smiled up at the guard. "Oh, it's good to have you people back! You don't begin to know how much I've missed you."

Carefully maintaining his impassive expression, the guard saluted. "It's good to be back, Your Majesty. Three months of civilian life was all I could take."

Julian was curious. "Since you're all back in your barracks, where are they putting the Allied troops?"

Jonah spoke up. "I can answer that, Your Majesty. We've set up a temporary commissary at the spaceport and the troops are quartered on their ships. And now, we'd best get you inside and have the doctor take a look."

"For pity's sake, stop fussing!" huffed Julian. He allowed them to lead him inside and settle him on a sofa in one of the reception areas. "I'm just winded, that's all! Corey, get me a cold drink...and quit looking so damn stricken!"

After he'd examined the Emperor and shown him the image of his chest, the doctor said with a half-smile, "It seems Her Majesty broke one of your ribs. I knew she was a handful but I hadn't realized that you

relationship was that intense. You'll feel more comfortable after I tape it. Then if I were you, I'd get some rest for a couple of hours. Here, I want you to take this. It's a mild sedative. You've probably not had any more sleep than the rest of us."

"Speaking of which," asked the Emperor, "what's the casualty situation?"

"On our side, virtually nil. The opposition took some losses, mostly at the barracks and the spaceport and a couple of their transports were shot down. Including Lord Ethan's. Reportedly, he was killed."

"Good riddance!" said Julian. *I wish!*

"Well, I'm off to see the rest of my patients. And please tell Her Majesty to be a bit less enthusiastic in the future. You might know! Our side comes through with scarcely a scratch, and you wind up with a broken rib. Well, the tabloids will have fun with it, that's for sure."

"I know. A couple of them were right there when it happened and I think they even got a picture. Ah yes, I can see the headlines now! The battling Imperials! Julian and Corey On the Rocks! Julian a Marital War Casualty! And of course, Corey Ribs Julian! You know, Doctor, the only good thing about the occupation was no press. Knowing my beloved people as I do, their greatest deprivation was doing without their daily tabloid fix. Now they've got a whole three months of Imperial doings to catch up on. Ah, well, this is a good way to start the ball rolling, I suppose."

As the doctor left, Julian looked pointedly at the archway. "You might as well come in here, Corey! There's a mirror behind you and I can see you as plain as day. The doctor told me to go rest for a couple of hours and I think that's an excellent idea. Especially if you'll come with me to lay a gentle hand on my fevered brow and allow me to show you the proper way to greet a husband coming home from the war?"

Chapter 10...Victory

Galia initialized the last of the papers on her desk.

"Oh, come in, Major Domo. I wanted to get as much cleaned up as I could before –" She broke off. "Who do I think I'm fooling? That's not why I came in. I...I...I..."

As she started to sob helplessly, Galia felt the Major Domo's hand on her shoulder. Raising her to her feet, he took her in his arms. As he held her close to him, she felt his quiet strength and took comfort in it.

She rested her head on his silk-covered chest. "What kind of a person am I, that I could do such a horrible thing? I used that man's love for me to destroy him and how can that possibly be right? As long as I live, I'll never feel clean again!"

The Major Domo's voice was very gentle. "Yes, you will. You were following orders and by doing what you did, you helped save us all. But I understand only too well what this has cost you. In other circumstances, Ethan might have been a king and in his own way, he was. Like Julian, he was a born

leader, strong, ruthless and multifaceted. He had a formidable intelligence, tremendous drive and a real zest for living. Who knows what happened to make him a pirate lord? Or what he might have been had his circumstances been different? Because he loved you, Ethan showed you a gentler, more human aspect of himself. He took great care to hide that side from the rest of the world and for very good reason. For him to let his guard down as he did with you was the most dangerous thing he could have done and the greatest gift he could have given you. Because he loved and trusted you, he never saw you for what you really were. His enemy. Through the listening post, I watched him and Julian take each other's measure daily. Well-matched, they circled, each watching the other like a hawk and probing for any sign of weakness. In the end, it came down to which one would strike first. When Ethan hesitated, Julian took full advantage and he went in for the kill. You were Ethan's sole weakness and the only weapon Julian had. We were all in the palm of Ethan's hand and he could have crushed us at any time on a whim. You don't begin to know the history of his misdeeds and some of them are truly horrific. He would blow a planet like Nublis to smithereens without the slightest hesitation. In fact, he has. He wasn't used to anyone telling him 'no' and Julian's constant refusals irked him. Ethan was tiring of their constant battle of wills and he was about to imprison Julian permanently on his ship. After three months, his civilized veneer had worn dangerously thin and his true nature was about to emerge. To him, the universe is divided into prey and predators and believe me, he was the most savage of them all. For a man like Ethan, to be a helpless victim would be a fate infinitely more horrible than any death we could possibly have devised for him."

* * *

"Julian?"

Shifting against the pillows, the Emperor took one of Corey's auburn locks between his fingers, and began playing with it. "Yes, sweetheart. Which part of me do you want to attack now?"

"Be serious! When I saw you coming across the square...oh, Julian, he could have killed you! There was a gun right by his hand. Galia told me."

"I know. But he'd just awakened and his guard was down. He was so busy watching me with the tray he never noticed how close Asa was until he set the briefcase on the bed. By the time Ethan realized anything was amiss and reached for his gun, Asa already had it."

"Did I really break your rib?"

"Yes, my sweet child, you really, really did. It wasn't completely healed and you managed to hit me just right. Now the doctors want to take a look at the bullet. They say the blow might have shifted it, which means I'll have to go into the clinic for a couple of days. But I told them only on condition they give me a room with a lock on the door, a great big bed and unlimited visitation rights with you. They said, 'yes,' if that's what it would take to keep me happy."

"Well, Julian, they've hardly forgotten the last time you were there. Do you know they're still getting space porn on the security screens? And that was only one of the things you did. I mean, really!"

"I was bored silly and the guards loved it. Well, are you going to come with me this time and keep me out of mischief?"

"I suppose I'll have to. And knowing how you feel about the food, I'll have some sent over that you can

eat instead."

* * *

The nail studded doors to the Archon's quarters were standing wide open and as the Emperor's party came up the steps, the foyer blazed with lights. When they entered the foyer, a phalanx of Temple guards in glittering blue armor presented arms. The Emperor's scarlet-armored escort returned the courtesy. Then they wheeled around and marched out of the Temple in close formation.

The Emperor returned the Temple guards' salute. "At ease!"

The soldiers lowered their arms and stood at rest.

The Major Domo came through the doors with his hands outstretched. "Come in, come in! The Archon's been preparing all day and I think you'll enjoy what he has to offer."

As the others went ahead and the great doors began to swing shut, Julian drew the Major Domo aside. "How is he doing really?"

He caught the other's hesitation. "What is it? What are you not telling me?"

"He wants you to release him. Now it's over, he says you must let him go. His successor's been designated. In less than a month, he'll be ready to take his place."

"Who is the new Archon?"

"You'll learn in due time."

"You know, don't you?"

"Of course, because I have to assist with the transition. Face it, Julian. In less than a month, I'll put him to sleep for the last time. Then it will be your sad duty to open the trapdoor, put the weights on his feet and drop him in the river. You have to let him go! He's weary and he yearns to be free. You must release him. You owe him that much."

"And you too." The Emperor's voice was very quiet. "I've been thinking so much about him, I forgot you're a prisoner too. For that, you must forgive me, old friend. You extended your own captivity for my sake, just as he did. As you yourself once said, once he's gone to the river, you can return to the world and be a man again." He looked thoughtful. "I told you I'd find another way. I have almost a month in which to do it and this time, I will."

"What are you up to, Julian? You have that look in your eye."

"Never mind," said the Emperor. "And now we'd better go join the others."

The Archon smiled behind his mask as he watched his fellow defenders. When his dark eyes fell on Galia, he frowned. *How could you let such a thing happen? Was it because he reached out to you for comfort during that second night, like a child to its mother? Did you understand his fears? Or was it because you knew he was about to die? The old ones say this is something that was*

always meant to be. But I won't live to see you come to term, and he'll never know.

He looked next at Corey's animated face. *You're a child of the light, just I am of the dark. Along the way, you thawed an Emperor's frozen heart and taught him how to love again. You don't even know he's here, but I won't live to see your child either. After he comes, my spirit will live on in him, and he'll ease Julian's grief after I'm gone.*

Then he glanced at the Emperor himself. He stood in the corner, listening courteously to something his bodyguard was saying.

As he always did, Julian sensed the Archon's look and gazed straight back at him.

In response to the unspoken question in his brother's eyes, the Archon whispered, "Oh, no, Julian. Not this time. My successor's coming and I'm obliged to make way for him. You'll do your sworn duty because you must and you will, finally, have to let me go. Not even you can find a way out of this one."

The Emperor nodded as if he understood and turned back to his conversation again.

When the Major Domo's silk robes rustled beside him, the Archon looked up to see Jonah. He extended his hand to allow him to kiss his ring, then signed to the Major Domo, who translated. "Jonah, His Grace bids you welcome to his house. He says you're a credit to his program."

Jonah bowed and replied gravely, "Thank you, Your Grace,"

The Archon signed again. "Is there something you wish to ask me?"

By now, Ellie had joined them. As she took Jonah's hand, the Archon whispered something to the Major Domo. Then he rapidly moved his fingers.

"Ah, I see," continued the Major Domo. "Julian doesn't know what to do about you and Ellie and he told you to ask me. Would you excuse me for a moment? I need to talk with both of them in another room."

Rising to his feet, Cassius beckoned to Julian. He led them into his private office and closed the door. Dropping into the big chair behind his desk, the Archon pulled off his mask and gloves. Then he ran his fingers through his dark hair.

"It's hot out there! Major Domo, I need a long cold drink."

He pointed to a chair. "Julian. Sit. I have a couple of things I want to say to you."

As Julian silently complied, the Archon took a long swallow from the glass the Major Domo handed him. Then he set it down.

"That's better."

The Major Domo had also pulled off his mask. He sat in the other chair with his hands on his knees, and looked at them both quizzically.

"We have a few problems to resolve and you, Julian, are going to have to take most of the responsibility. Ellie and Jonah are one. Galia's another."

The Major Domo and Julian spoke at the same time. "Galia?"

"Yes, Galia. Her relationship with Lord Ethan, brief as it was, has had an entirely unanticipated result. She doesn't even know it herself but the old ones have told me."

Julian shot out of his chair. Leaning across the desk, he put his face close to the Archon's. "That can't possibly be true! Galia knows better than that. She'd never let such a thing happen!"

"Well, for some reason, she did. And, little brother, you can sit back down if you don't mind. I had nothing whatsoever to do with it."

"Well, it's easy enough to solve, isn't it? Especially if she doesn't know. All we have to do is make her an appointment at the clinic for a physical and they can take care of it."

"No. You can't do that. There's something very special about this child. When she finds out, she'll want to keep it. You have no right to take it from her without asking and she'll tell you 'no.'"

The Major Domo spoke. "I think I know why she did it. In his own way, Ethan was as royal as you. In fact, the two of you are not unlike. But there's something else about him you need to know. When we did Ethan's physical, we typed his genetic code. We thought he was from Sirius like the other pirate lords, but he's not. He's one hundred percent Nublian. While we still had him under, we took his history. Ethan was stolen when he was eight by a Trade League Commander who took a fancy to him. He doesn't remember where he's from, but under the drugs he told us. He was bought and sold several times and passed from hand to hand around the merchant fleets until he got big enough to resist. A Sirium pirate lord found him sleeping in an alley when he was fifteen and made him his adoptive son and heir. He has a burning hatred for the Trade League, his contempt for the Synod is absolute, and he considers the Assembly an organization of pitiful, vacillating weaklings. Only Aretz and Nublis have ever commanded his respect, and he has his doubts about Aretz."

"So that's why he was drawn to us," said Julian slowly. "This was his home. Is there any way to find out who he is?"

"We're checking that now. But it happened over thirty-seven years ago and that's a long way to go back. You two weren't even born then."

"Have you told him?"

"On my orders, he's been told nothing," said the Archon, "and for the time being, I want to keep it that way. Now, on to other business, because my guests are going to be wondering what's keeping us. As to Jonah and Ellie, Jonah acquitted himself so well through the occupation and again last night, no one will criticize you for promoting him to the highest possible office. Parliament's Upper House will be more than happy to grant him a title and Ellie's wealthy in her own right. Now you have the twins, she'll gladly step out of the succession. Would that resolve it, do you think?"

Julian nodded absently. He was still trying to absorb what the Archon had just said about Galia.

Cassius pushed himself back from the desk. "And now I'd better get back to my guests." He drew on his gloves, slid the great emerald over his left forefinger, replaced his mask and allowed the Major Domo to help him out of his chair.

After they left, Julian sat for a few minutes, lost in thought. Then he switched off the desk light and followed them out to the other room.

* * *

"Leave us!" said the Major Domo.

The Archon's agent closed the door behind him and the pirate looked up at his visitor's masked face. Still deafened by the neural chemical block, he could neither hear nor speak.

He signed, "Have you come to tell me my fate?"

"Not quite yet."

Before Ethan realized what he was doing, the Major Domo snapped his wrists into the padded restraints on each side of the bunk. Then he pulled a strap across his chest and straightened the pillow under his head. He took Ethan by the chin and turned his face toward him. "Now," he signed, "your education begins."

Without further ado, he took a bandage and covered Ethan's eyes.

The silence and blackness were absolute. Ethan pulled slightly and felt the restraints' resistance against his hands. He moved one of his feet and savored the tingle against his heel as he rubbed it on the mattress. Nerves began pricking against his skin and he ran his tongue over his lips in an effort to relieve its dryness. When something cold and wet trickled into his mouth, he accepted it gratefully.

"Don't give him more than that at any one time," ordered the Major Domo. "We don't want him to choke. Touch him once every hour, but no more, and keep monitoring him for signs of stress. If his levels begin to rise, notify me immediately. I'll be surprised if they do. He's been in his share of the Synod's prisons and tough as he is, I expect him to last the entire twenty-four hours and come out fighting. It'll take more than this to break him but at least we've made a start."

Twenty-six hours later, the Major Domo removed his mask. He accepted the drink Julian handed him and joined the other two at the table in the Archon's palatial apartment.

"As I predicted, it didn't phase our boy one bit. His stress levels went up slightly after the sixth hour but he lasted the entire time without even breaking a sweat. The moment his hands were free, he signed, 'Is that the best you can do?' I'd say he's feeling pretty cocky right now."

The Archon smiled faintly and ran slender fingers through his black hair. "Is that so? Well, in that case, Major Domo, I want you to remove the neural block. After he wakes, allow Ethan to dress in his own clothes and encourage him to exercise. Later this afternoon, move him to more spacious quarters and have the agent play chess and talk with him. Give him an interactive viewscreen, provide him with books and music and stimulate his senses as much as possible. Julian, I want you to visit him tonight. Have dinner with him and spend the evening. Just be your usual pleasant self. He'll be expecting it."

"Why? Won't you just be undoing whatever conditioning you've achieved from the neural block?"

"There isn't any to undo. Ethan's suffered this type of torture before and he knows full well he can beat it. The neural block was something new but he adjusted almost immediately. Especially after he learned it was only temporary. When we remove it, he'll feel even more reassured. Right now, he thinks this is just a game and he's won. Like most outsiders, he doesn't take Nublians seriously. "

"And tomorrow?"

"The tank, for as long as it takes."

"Would you please enlighten me? What in the hell is the tank?"

The Archon looked down at his hands for a moment and sighed. "The tank is an old device that was originally developed on Aretz to provide a means of total sensory deprivation. It fell into disuse because the experiments too often resulted in madness and death. In the tank, Ethan will be weightless and disoriented with no sense of time, touch, feeling, taste, smell, hearing or sight. Only his mind will be functioning. He'll be fully awake and alert and no matter how long the process takes he won't be permitted the relief of sleep. For Ethan, the experience should be especially excruciating because the effect increases in direct proportion to the subject's intelligence. The question is not whether the tank will break him but when and how badly. With the loss of his hearing and speech, Ethan still retained his sight. When we took his sight, he used his other senses to keep himself oriented. The return of his hearing and speech will make their loss infinitely worse tomorrow and that will increase the impact of the tank tenfold. It's like being buried alive! When they finally take him out, he'll do anything they say! Anything!"

Shuddering, the Archon stopped. Then he put his head in his hands.

"I should have guessed! You're not just describing this, are you? You're remembering! You know what it'll be like for Ethan because you've been there yourself. Is that why you wouldn't let me slash his throat?"

"No matter what you think, this isn't revenge. Have dinner with Ethan tonight. Tell him the legend of the fish and show him the garden. You can afford to be merciful, little brother. Tomorrow will be here soon enough."

Julian joined Ethan on the balcony and they stood looking at the darkening garden and red-streaked sky. "Well, my lord. You seem to have moved up in the world."

"Yes, Your Majesty, it would seem that I have. But something tells me life isn't that simple. There's another surprise in store for me tomorrow. Right?"

"Perhaps, and I think at this stage we can dispense with the titles. I'll call you Ethan and you may call me Julian. We're going to be seeing a great deal of each other and it gets wearisome after a while."

"You're not wearing a sidearm, I see."

"I know better than that around you. But my guard and the agent by the door are watching every move you make. They have orders not to kill, but they'll disable you painfully if you try anything."

"Point taken and understood. Now the civilities are out of the way, may I offer you a drink?"

Julian looked around the spacious apartment. "I see they've brought some things from your ship. The Archon thought they might make you feel more at home. I congratulate you on your taste, by the way. Those are some fine examples of our fifteenth century art." He picked up an antique pistol from a nearby table. "These inlays are exquisite. I've never seen anything quite like them."

"I did the inlays myself and you can have it if you like. It helped pass the time on long voyages. I came across an old slave who was a skilled goldsmith on a League merchant we hijacked. He taught me his trade in return for his freedom. Eventually, I set him up in his own little shop on Eos and he'd fence stuff for me from time to time. He was looking forward to your jewels and regalia with great anticipation. He's probably still there, come to think of it. But I don't think he's expecting me or the jewels anytime

soon."

"I suppose you had a buyer for the fish too."

"As a matter of fact, I did. A rare fauna collector on Andromeda. He told me to be sure and bring their keeper as well. He'd seen the fountain once and went to enormous expense to duplicate it and the Temple garden in detail. Now he's going to have to stock it with ordinary fish. He was extremely put out when I told him they were gone. When he demanded his downpayment back, I said 'no.' What was he gonna do? Sue me?"

"Well, the fish are back now and so is the regalia. The Archon was quite upset over your accusation that he'd absconded with them."

"Is this his way of evening the score? This cat-and-mouse game, with me in the role of the mouse? Am I going to be set in some sort of maze tomorrow and have to run through it for my life?"

"No. You're not going to have to run through a maze."

"But left to yourself, dining with me this evening is the last thing you would have done. Correct?"

"Left to myself? You're probably right. Oddly enough, I'm glad I came. As for tomorrow, let's not think about it. You invited me to dine, Ethan. So by all means, let's do just that."

After Julian left, Ethan sat for a long time on the balcony, listening to the fountain's splash, savoring the fragrances, and watching the leaves' dappled shadows in the moonlight. Before this night, he'd never understood the sheer pleasure of just being, or a feeling of physical connection to the sights and sounds and scents all around him. Remembering how it had been by the fountain, he smiled. When he'd felt the gentle bump of a living body against his hand and tiny nibbles, like faint kisses, against his fingertips, a wave of sheer pleasure had washed through every fiber of his being.

For a thousand years, these jewel-colored fish had been coming night after night to the imprisoned Archon, to be with him, to ease his aching loneliness and share his grief for all he had lost. It was as though the fountain's very spirit had opened and taken him deep into itself. With its present so firmly rooted in its past and the continuity of three thousand years of peace still unbroken, Nublis was indeed a magical place. He thought of the ancient Emperor's heart beneath their feet, still keeping vigil with his vanished Empress, and he understood how she might have preferred the gentle world of the fountain to her husband's infidelities and the cruelty of the world outside.

With a start, he saw a ghostly figure just below him and behind it others faintly shimmering. He felt their terrible patience and soft as the faintest breeze, he heard their voices.

"Ethan. You are now the least. But someday, you'll be the greatest of us all."

He knew he'd just seen Nublis's fabled old ones.

When he looked again, the garden was empty. As their words rang in his head, he wondered what they meant and somehow, he knew he was going to find out.

As a shaft of sunlight hit his face on the following morning, Ethan stirred and opened his eyes. For a moment, he wondered where he was.

Then it came to him.

The Archon's agent smiled down at him. "Good morning, my lord. You have an appointment and the Major Domo is waiting."

Ah! What have they planned for me this time?

Briefly, he considering resisting and the agent's eyes told him he understood. Slender and fine-boned his keeper might be, Ethan entertained no illusions about the deadliness of his skills or his willingness to use them.

The agent held out a short cotton robe. After he'd put it on, the door opened to admit two medical attendants wheeling a stretcher. The agent told him to lie down on it and he obeyed. The attendants put something over his face. Then they covered him with a blanket and fastened the straps. They wheeled him out the door and, from what he could tell, down a stone-floored hallway.

Suddenly they stopped. He heard the click of a weapon and the unmistakable chink of armor. Then he felt a rush of air as a door opened. They went through it and the stretcher stopped.

When the covering over his face was removed, he found himself looking up into the Major Domo's masked face. "Good morning, Lord Ethan. This is where we continue your education."

As the Major Domo undid the straps and helped him sit up, Ethan looked around. The porcelain-tiled room contained no furniture other than a huge gleaming steel tank. Next to it stood a wheeled frame from which hung four pulleys, each with a leather strap.

The Major Domo extended a gloved hand. "Your robe."

Obediently, Ethan slipped it off. Then he opened his mouth to ask him a question.

"Be quiet and lie down," said the Major Domo.

Ethan watched the attendants wheel the frame over to the stretcher. They lined up the pulleys and snapped the straps in place around his wrists and ankles. As they did so, the Major Domo turned Ethan's head to one side and put something in his ear. Then he did the same to the other. After placing a pair of small pads over his eyes, he wound a bandage around them several times and fastened it firmly.

The earplugs were every bit as effective as the neural block had been and the blackness and silence were absolute. When Ethan felt something being pushed into his nostrils and mouth, he started to panic until he realized he could still breathe. How, he didn't know. The straps tightened and lifted. He swayed in the air, feeling the frame move. Then the straps loosened and dropped away, leaving him suspended in...nothing.

How long Ethan hung in that black silence, he had no idea. With no sense of time or space, he was totally disoriented. Unable to move, speak, see, hear, smell or feel, everything coalesced into the pinpoint that was his mind.

Then came the voices. Millions of them, crying out from their dying planet as it exploded. And behind them, those of all the men, women and children he'd tormented and killed throughout the years.

The pale green eyes of Galia's murdered foster brother looked deep into his as his chest blossomed red. And like a death knell, the chair to which he was attached slammed backwards into the glass walled panorama again...and again. And again.

When he could bear it no longer, the tears Ethan had never shed welled up in one great flood. It spilled over and he began screaming helplessly into the void.

The Major Domo held the door. "Let's get him on the bed. The blanket belongs with the stretcher. Thank you and goodnight."

As the door closed, Julian stood up from his chair, yawning and stretching.

The Major Domo had turned on a light and was busy hooking up monitors and checking vital signs. Satisfied, he settled Ethan on the pillows, covered him and straightened the blankets.

"He's quiet now but you should have seen him earlier. We thought he'd never break. When he finally did, he poured out such a tidal wave of pure horror, even I couldn't bear to listen. Unless you want bad dreams for the rest of your life, you don't want to hear it either. The Archon was right. He'll anything to avoid going back in the tank."

While the Major Domo was speaking, Ethan opened his eyes. "You were right," he whispered. "It wasn't a maze."

"Be quiet!" snapped the Major Domo. "Close your eyes and rest."

"Yes, sir. Anything you say." Obediently turning on his side, Ethan curled up and went to sleep.

The door opened to admit the Archon's agent.

"He'll rest like that until morning," said the Major Domo. "Use the extra bed and notify me the moment he wakes."

The Emperor was puzzled. "What is this all about?"

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out by now. Ethan's the new Archon."

"WHAT?"

"Sssh, you'll wake him! Come. I'll let the Archon explain."

"Oh, he'd better! Of all the things I've ever heard, this has got to be far and away the most insane! First Galia...and now this?"

As the Emperor looked down at the sleeping pirate, the Major Domo spoke in his ear. "Don't even think it. He's only one part of a greater pattern working itself out and his fate's going to be worse than any death we could possibly have devised for him. You've seen what it's done to your brother and Ethan will suffer even more. Come...we'll talk further in the Archon's quarters. Then you can come back and see him in the morning."

"And that's it," said the Archon. "Ethan was designated before he ever invaded Nublis. The Major Domo can confirm that I gave him the name the day before the pirates invaded. And I have a message for you from the old ones."

"What is it?"

"It makes no sense to me. They said the river sometimes forks. Does that mean anything to you? And if

so, are you going to tell me?"

"Yes, Archon, it does. But I'm not about to tell you, and let that be a lesson for keeping secrets from me. It's not over yet and I said I'd find a way to get you out of this." Julian lifted his glass. "And now a toast! To freedom!"

The Archon looked over at the trapdoor sunk into the corner of his prison. Soon the Emperor would put the golden weights on his feet. Then he'd drop his body into the river below to be washed out to sea like all of his nameless predecessors. But even that escape was preferable to the hell of his current existence.

Touching his glass to Julian's, he echoed his words. "To freedom! And the river!"

* * *

"Jonah, I'm so glad you're here."

The young Steward set down the clean towels he was holding. "Your Majesty. I was checking to see if your new body servant was satisfactory."

"He's fine. But right now, I need to talk to you. Please come over here and sit."

As Jonah took the chair opposite him, Julian realized how much his former body servant had grown up and filled out during the past year. Since assuming the Steward's chain of office, Jonah's almost furtive manner had given way to an air of solid dignity. His light green eyes looked steadily into Julian's and his pale angular face was calm.

The Emperor poured two glasses of wine from the carafe. He took one, handed the other to Jonah and leaned back in his chair. "I won't mince words. You and Ellie have become a problem."

Jonah took a deep breath. Carefully setting his glass back on the tray, he stood up. "I understand perfectly, Your Majesty. And now, if you don't mind, I have things to attend to."

"Oh, for pity's sake, quit jumping to conclusions and sit! That's better. I assume the two of you want to get married. Or haven't you gotten around to discussing that yet? Because if you haven't, you'd damn well better. I know you've been meeting in the garden again and I expect you to do the right thing. This is an order! You, Jonah, will make an honest woman out of my sister as soon as possible."

"Your Majesty, do you mean –"

"Of course I do, you twit! And if you're to be my brother-in-law, there are one or two things we need to discuss. First of all, I'm firing you."

As Jonah started up again, Julian gestured him back. "Relax. It's not what you think. We need to find something more appropriate to your new station as Ellie's husband and a member of the Imperial Family. As you know, there's to be a big reception for the Allied troops next week. We're incorporating an awards ceremony and I'll hand out a bunch of medals and citations for contributions during the emergency. That's when I'll announce your title in recognition of services above and beyond the call of duty. If I know anything about our people, they'll instantly demand that I give you the Princess's hand in marriage and threaten to chase me off the planet if I don't. I rather enjoy the idea of the tabloids' spotlight being on your romance for a change instead of Corey and me, and our problem with you and

Ellie will be nicely resolved. Don't you agree?"

"Well...er—"

"I'll take that as a yes." Julian handed Jonah a cash card. "This is an advance to buy Ellie a betrothal gift and find yourself a suitable place to live. And now you'd better get out of here before the tabloids start speculating all over again about our perverted relationship."

After the door had closed and he was alone, Julian decided to go the Conservatory and work on his beloved plants. It would give him a chance to think about Galia and the new Archon, and do some further reflecting about the fork in the river.

* * *

Ethan finished reviewing the last document in the huge stack that was today's assignment and thankfully set it aside. If he had to decipher one more legal clause, he'd probably start seeing double.

As he got up and stretched, Julian smiled. "You've done well and that really is the last one. You'll find tomorrow's session more interesting because we'll be reviewing the Archon's trial videos and analyses. You might even enjoy them."

When the Major Domo had spoken of Ethan's education, he'd meant it literally. With Julian as his tutor, he'd first studied Interplanetary Synod law, then Nublis.' During the past two weeks, from sunup to sunset, he'd found himself wading through one legal tome after another until he was seeing them in his sleep.

"Criminal law is our main concern," Julian had told him, "so that's where we'll concentrate." When Ethan asked why, the Emperor ignored his question and simply told him to return to where they'd just left off.

Being a law professor was hard work, thought Julian, even with a student as mentally agile as Ethan.

But when it came to history, he'd been impressed by the pirate's encyclopedic knowledge of art and sculpture. Ethan had put together his collection of rare Nublian art objects over a period of many years and he'd bought and paid for most of the pieces rather than stealing them. However, he'd gone to great pains to ensure that none of his colleagues ever knew. If they'd ever found out, the consequences to their chief would have been serious, if not fatal.

To Julian's surprise, Ethan was also familiar with his music. He had most of Julian's commercial keyboard recordings, including the rare early ones the Emperor had made during his first sojourn on Aretz when he and his half-brother Cassius had been in law school.

At the thought of Cassius and all those heedless years, Julian suddenly found himself reliving the pain and horror of that moment at the spaceport on Aretz.

One by one, he'd watched the emergency workers bring the passengers and crew off the ship.

When they'd finally answered his unspoken question, he stood arguing that it was a mistake. Even after

they led him onto the ship and showed him the site of the explosion, he still said 'no.' And he kept right on saying 'no' up to the moment when he'd broken down during Cassius' eulogy. He'd been unable to continue and his father Janus finished for him. After that, Julian swore he would never again shed a tear or display any kind of private emotion in public.

He'd kept that vow ever since.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Ethan.

The Emperor shook himself out of his reverie. "Uh, no. Just something I was remembering."

The Archon's agent brought them a tray holding three tall glasses dripping icy rivulets of sweat.

Julian shook his head. "I have to be going. My children are beginning to forget what I look like and I promised I'd be there before their bedtime."

The Major Domo was just coming in and Julian waved at him as he left.

Ethan's eyes met those of his keeper and a cold chill went through him. *Oh, no. What now?*

Then he saw the Major Domo wasn't alone. He had a young boy with him, no more than nine or ten years old, and Ethan knew in his heart what was coming next.

As if he'd read his mind, the Major Domo said, "You're right. This is your final test. To ease your conscience, Ethan, assuming you have one, you won't be violating an innocent. This boy works in one of the pleasure palaces."

"I won't do it! Not this!"

"We'll see. You have until tomorrow morning to make up your mind! If you haven't passed the test by then... I think you know the consequences." He beckoned the boy forward. "This is Lord Ethan. If you please him, I'll give you a gold piece."

He turned in a swirl of scarlet silk and was gone.

Ethan went out to the balcony.

As the boy followed and timidly placed a hand on his arm, he turned in a fury and raised his hand. The child shrank back and when Ethan saw his terror, he lowered it again.

"You didn't choose this life, did you?"

"No one's ever asked me that before, but no, I didn't. You don't seem to like me, my lord. Am I doing something wrong?"

"No, you're not." Ethan sighed and echoed the words of his long-dead mentor, "I just like women too much."

Abruptly, he turned and went back into the room.

The boy followed close behind until Ethan hissed at him, "Leave me alone! Do you understand? Stay over there, look at the viewscreen...do anything, but leave me alone!"

The Archon's agent answered a knock on the door and returned with a food-laden tray. "I'll leave you alone now. Enjoy your evening and sleep well."

Ethan looked at the fare but nothing appealed to him. He beckoned to the boy. "Get yourself a plate and take whatever you want. After you've eaten, get a blanket and settle down in that chair until morning. I'll tell the Major Domo you pleased me. Then you'll get the gold piece he promised."

Returning to the balcony, he settled in the lounge chair. Listening to the fountain's splash and lulled by the sounds of the night, he began to doze. Finally he fell asleep.

Ethan didn't hear the boy get up from the table or when he went to the door and spoke to whoever was outside. Nor did he stir when the Major Domo came out to the balcony and stood watching him as he slept. He heard nothing at all, in fact, until he was awakened by birdsong and the early morning sun on his face.

Opening his eyes, he saw the Archon's agent and two of the Temple attendants standing over him. Resignedly, he got up from the lounge chair and followed them inside.

There he saw the waiting stretcher. The Major Domo stood beside it with his hand on the boy's shoulder. "My lord, are you sure you won't reconsider and spare yourself this agony?"

"I can't." He bowed his head and waited for his fate.

Instead, he felt a touch on his shoulder and saw the Major Domo pointing to a chair. As Ethan sat, he gestured to the two attendants.

They left, taking the stretcher with them.

The boy approached Ethan and bowed. "When they assured me I had nothing to fear from you, my lord, they were right."

As he turned to leave, the pirate said, "Wait! You don't really work in a pleasure palace, do you?"

The boy smiled. "Oh, no, my lord. That's not permitted here."

Ethan looked at the Major Domo. "What if I'd said yes?"

"You already know the answer to that. And now you've passed the final test, Lord Ethan, I'll tell you what this is about."

Julian asked somewhat impatiently, "Well, did he pass?"

"Of course. We read him exactly right. Ethan's preparation is virtually complete and he'll make an excellent Archon. When I told him his fate, he didn't seem surprised. He'd already guessed something of the sort and he said that now he understood the old ones' message. They said because he was the least, he'd someday be the greatest of them all."

"So, how long have we got?"

"At most, another week. Whatever you have in mind, you'd best start implementing it now. Oh, and while I'm on the subject, the Allied commanders have asked how much longer we wish to continue this state of martial law? The last of the prison ships is leaving today and they feel their work here is about done."

"We still have to purge our system of the corruption the pirates brought with them. But I'm not sure we want the Synod military as witnesses to that, do we?"

"No, we don't. Which is why we've let things continue as they have. Although I must say, it's getting more irksome every day."

* * *

Corey noticed that Galia was barely picking at her food. "Is something troubling you? You've been so quiet lately."

"What did you say? I was thinking about something else."

"Galia, you've been this way ever since we went to the mountains with Lord Ethan. You came to care for him didn't you? And you've hated yourself ever since for what you did. If you tell me, I won't repeat it to Julian or anyone else. But you have to talk to someone. You can't go through this alone."

"Corey, there was something about him during the second night. He woke me with a kiss and asked me to marry him. Then I used his love to send him to his death. The Major Domo was right when he said Ethan was not unlike Julian. They were two sides of the same coin. Who knows, under other circumstances, what Julian himself might have been?"

"That's true. I might even have been another Ethan."

Galia felt as if her heart would stop. "Julian! How long have you been standing there?"

The Emperor settled himself on the couch beside his wife. Then he gave her a kiss. "Corey doesn't know what's troubling you but I do. When did you find out for sure?"

"Find out what? Galia, what's he talking about?"

"Well? Do you want to tell her or shall I?"

"But how could you possibly know? I only confirmed it myself this morning and I've told no one."

"You didn't have to. The Archon told me weeks ago, on the night of the victory dinner."

"Oh, this is too much!" cried Corey. "Will you two please stop talking in riddles? Galia, he... Galia! Are you pregnant?"

"Yes, Corey, I am."

"Are you sure it's Lord Ethan's? Could it possibly be someone else?"

Galia carefully didn't look at Julian. "Corey, when I was no older than you, I fell passionately in love with a man and stayed with him for almost four years. Then he left me without a word of explanation. When he returned, my heart had healed and I found I no longer cared about him except as a friend. So, in answer to your question, it could only be Lord Ethan. There's been no one else since my first love."

"Why didn't he marry you?"

"He couldn't."

Corey looked from one of them to the other and it was written all over their faces. "Oh, how could I have not seen it? Everyone around here knew, didn't they? Everyone, that is, except me! Oh, I feel like such a fool!" Then she burst into tears.

Galia's eyes met Julian's. "Maybe I'd better leave."

"No, Galia, you stay!"

As Corey started to run from the room, he followed and restrained her. She struggled in his arms. "Julian! Dammit! Let me go!"

Without relaxing his grip, he guided Corey back to the couch and sat her down beside him. Then he released her and took her hands in his. "Corey, look at me! There's been no one else since the day you came into my life. But you must realize, sweetheart, I'm thirty-seven and almost twice your age. While you may not have been my first love, you're the last. Corey, I love you more than life itself and if you don't love me back, I don't think I can bear it." He wiped a tear from her cheek with his finger. "Don't cry. There's no need."

Then he looked at Galia as if seeing her for the first time. "You never told me. I'd assumed you'd moved on and there was someone else in your life."

"Not for want of asking, but none of them ever measured up to you. What Julian says is true, Corey. There's been no one else since the day he first set eyes on you, and all anyone around here knows is how much he loves you."

Corey took a couple of deep breaths. "I believe you. It's just that it was a shock. Now we have to talk about you, Galia, and what we're going to do about this."

"You mean my child?"

"Surely you don't mean to keep it!"

"It's all that I have left of Ethan. This child is an affirmation that, just once in his life, Ethan loved unconditionally and without reservation. Sending him to his death was bad enough. I can't destroy his child as well."

Julian remembered what the Archon had said. "There's something very special about this child. When she finds out, she'll want to keep it. You have no right to take it from her without asking, and she'll tell you 'no.'"

Corey's small face was thoughtful. "All right. I think I understand how you feel. You made the sacrifice that led to this for Nublis's sake. From this day forward, you're under our official protection and if anyone has anything to say about it, they'll answer to me!"

Julian smiled. "Bless you, Corey. I couldn't have put it better myself."

"Well, Julian," she said, a little shyly, "as long as we're on the subject of babies, there's something else we need to discuss."

Galia stood up. "Your Majesties, now I know I must be going. And you're right, I should have come to

talk to you before this. I should have known you'd understand. Corey, thank you for lunch and everything else. Julian, I'll see you later at your office." Then she was gone.

"What about babies, Corey? Is it something about the twins?"

"The twins are fine and don't you go disturbing them. They're napping."

He reached for her. "Well, in that case, how about you and me –"

There was a discreet knock on the door and he exclaimed, "Damn! Is there no privacy around here?"

After the servant cleared away the dishes, Julian looked at the clock. "I have a land dispute hearing in a half hour and a mountain of paperwork to get through. But before I go, what's this about babies?"

"Oh! Well, it seems Galia isn't the only one who got caught up in the spirit of the mountains. You and I –"

"You're pregnant too?"

"Well, the way we behave, it would be rather surprising if I wasn't."

"My love, what can I say? I'm helpless around you, putty in your hands. Unfortunately, now I really do have to go. My land dispute is waiting and I must pay attention to such things or the Archon will have my head." He gave her a deep, long kiss. "Consider that a downpayment. I'll be around later to take care of the balance."

* * *

Julian was going over his notes on the hearing that had just concluded when the Major Domo came into his office.

"Just let me finish this and I'll be right with you. You'd think it was a matter of a hundred thousand meters instead of one little strip hardly wider than a tablecloth. Well, this'll teach 'em not to move each other's line markers around! I think, even at our worst, Ethan and I were more civilized than these two. At one point, they got so bad I was ready to have the guards haul both them off and leave them cool their heels overnight in a cell." He made a final notation. "There, it's ready to be processed for my order. And now, Major Domo, you can tell His Grace that my paperwork's up to date. What can I do for you?"

"Ethan's asked to see you."

"Now?"

The Major Domo nodded.

"Well, my calendar's clear for the rest of the day. Is there any objection if I take Ethan with me for a quick trip up to the mountains? I'd like to get out of here for a few hours...and it might do him some good."

"Not as long as you take enough security. Did they deliver your new flyer yet?"

"That's why I want to go. It came this morning and I told them to have it fueled and ready. I'll bring it

over to the Temple in a half-hour. All Ethan has to do is go up the steps to the roof and he's right there. Just cover his eyes and keep him manacled until he's safely inside. There's no sense in giving him any more ideas about escaping than he already has. And you and I know perfectly well, tank or no tank, he'll try it if he's given half a chance."

"I agree. I'll have him ready when you get here."

Ethan looked around the cabin of Julian's custom five-seater. "Very nice. Did I buy this?"

"As a matter of fact, you did. The Synod's been processing the victim claims as fast as possible and mine was one of the early ones. Incidentally, I bought your ship when it went on the block, and I'm putting up a memorial plaque in the quarters where my deputy Captain died. His son was born yesterday, by the way, and he has his father's green eyes."

"You never will believe that was a stupid accident, will you? Or that I never intended for it to happen."

"The kidnapping shouldn't have happened. You told me once that you weren't a vandal, but that's just exactly what you were! All you ever did was vandalize other people's lives. My deputy Captain was an innocent, at war with no one. By your own admission, you only got your hands on him because he stopped to help someone in distress." Julian began flipping switches. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have to do my preflight checks with the tower."

You do have a way with words, thought Ethan as they waited for the spaceport's clearance signal.

When it came, Julian turned on the thrusters and hit the booster switch. As they rose steeply from the Temple roof and banked sharply towards the river, the Emperor remarked, "I like this flyer. It's even faster than my old one."

"Is that so?" remarked Ethan dryly. "Do our stomachs ever get to catch up? Or are they coming on a later flight?"

Julian laughed. "Oh, Ethan! You practically wrote the book on high-speed takeoffs and from what I hear, you'd make your passengers' ears bleed every time! If I didn't know better, I'd be tempted to let you give me a lesson right now."

Bitterly, Ethan looked down at the manacles on his wrists. "Is this an unsubtle reminder that my flying days are over? That I'll never again know the majestic measure of the planets or voyage through the blackness of deep space with its myriads of flaming stars. Because if that's what this is about, you're wasting your time. I live with it every hour of every day and will do so for the rest of my life. Where once I would leap from one glittering galaxy to the next on nothing more than a whim, my world will henceforth be a stone-walled room. And when my captivity finally ends, my body will be dropped through a trapdoor into the river and be washed out to sea."

Like all of his nameless predecessors, thought Julian.

"No, Ethan, that's not my purpose or intention. We're on our way to the sacred mountain so that you can see the eagles who guard it and walk upon its slopes before you go into your final prison. As I told you once, it's the most ancient and haunted spot on Nublis and within its depths, it holds the planet's heart. Each new Archon comes to the sacred mountain just before his initiation. When his captivity finally ends and he crosses the bridge to take his place with his predecessors, it's to the heart of the sacred mountain that he's brought by the river. And there he'll remain forever on a golden throne in a crystal cave, with

the waters of the great pool of life lapping at his feet."

"Once I mocked you when you said that, but never again. Tell me something, is that where the sacred fish come from? The great pool of life?"

"So they say, and they can't live anywhere else. The fountain's waters were brought with them when they were given to the first Archon. Which is why, on Andromeda, they would most certainly have died." Julian switched on the autopilot and unstrapped his harness. Then he stood up and stretched. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm hungry and I need a break. Ethan, to avoid temptation, please switch seats with the guard. Then we can take those things off."

As they changed seats, Julian went to the back of the cabin and started rummaging around. "We've got meat pies, I see. And some pretty decent fruit wine."

When Ethan caught the pie tossed to him by Julian and a small bottle of wine, he suddenly realized how hungry he was. Then he remembered he hadn't eaten since noon the previous day. His last meal had been no more than a light snack as between bites he'd doggedly worked his way through the stack of legal documents in front of him.

With a meat pie in one hand and a bottle of fruit wine in the other, Julian made his way back to his seat. Then he strapped himself in again and checked the communications screen. "You can switch seats again," he said to the guard, "and no, leave the manacles off. He's not going to give me any trouble, are you Ethan?"

He looked out at the looming mountain ranges. "Do you see that over there? The one with the pink summit. I'm going to manual and we'll be down in a few minutes. Then we'll go in on horseback." Circling the rosy peak, he leveled off and set the craft in the middle of a grassy meadow.

"Light as a feather," said Ethan. "You fly well. Who taught you?"

"My father's Captain of the guard, Aaron Fortier. He taught me and my brother both. Aaron died in a crash eleven years ago at just about the same time my brother was killed."

"I've heard of him. Wasn't he a martial arts champion?"

"He was, and he won the Synod Supreme Trophy so many times they finally barred him from competing."

Ethan grinned. "It seems to me he once cleaned out an entire bar with his bare hands."

"That was after my brother Cassius and I had gotten ourselves into trouble. We'd been propositioning some ladies. They seemed to like us well enough but the pirates to whom they belonged took a dim view of what we were doing. To make a long story short, they had us tied to a post in the center of the bar and were about to finish us off when the Captain came in."

"Ah, yes. I remember. I damn well should, because that happened to be one of my crews."

"Well, the Captain didn't quite do it alone. As soon as Cassius and I got loose, we helped."

"I heard. The mayhem had to be seen to be believed and the whole place was matchsticks by the time you were done. I was forced to replace the entire crew because the few who lived to tell about it were disabled for over a year. Until then, I'd considered Nublians as little more than amiable lightweights and it caused me to instantly revise my opinion of your people."

Julian grinned. "We usually are unless someone happens to upset us." He pulled the lever next to his seat and opened the door. "Our horses are waiting. Ethan, after you."

They were far above the tree line when Julian pulled up his mount and stopped. Then he pointed to a path leading up toward the summit. "Now we walk. The horses can stay here." He handed the reins to one of the waiting grooms and gestured to the Archon's agent to follow him.

His keeper nodded to Ethan. "Come. I'll be directly behind the Emperor. Then you, then the guard."

Ethan could tell that the air was thinner but not uncomfortably so.

By the time he began to follow his keeper up the slippery shale path, Julian was out of sight. He came to a turn in the path and suddenly he was standing near the Emperor, right at the summit.

Below them, in every direction, towered the mountain ranges, their sides clothed in soft green and their silvery tops wreathed in wisps of cloud. Off in the far distance, he could make out the distant sparkle of the sea.

"That's the Northern Shore," remarked Julian. "It was once Titus' principality. Remember my virulent cousin? The traitor who tried to take my throne?"

Ethan shaded his eyes and looked. "Oh, yes, I remember him. Not too bright, as I recall. And he had a nasty attitude, especially for a Nublian. He got killed, didn't he?"

"It's my sister Ellie's now. She's about to marry my former Steward, Jonah. He generated my troops the night we took Nublis back and was the center of our resistance all through the occupation. It was his idea to take the tower first and mess up your communications."

Ethan remembered the quiet Steward well. "You'll be telling me next that the cats and dogs were part of the resistance too."

Julian looked at him innocently. "I don't think so. But the cats wouldn't catch mice in the barracks after your men were quartered there and my wife's cat Mingus, who's normally friendly to everyone, would have nothing to do with you. It's a good thing she hid him after he scratched you. I think you would have killed him, otherwise."

"You've got that right. If I'd caught the little bastard, I was going to strangle him. For some reason, my hand became infected after your wife washed out the scratch. It took weeks to heal."

"Blame my wife for that. Luckily for us, you never had your surgeon check to see what she really used."

Ethan was stunned. "The Empress would do something like that?"

"Oh, yes. You have no idea what my wife can be like when she really gets going and she's absolute living proof that the female is deadlier than the male. I have the scars to prove it."

"I heard she broke one of your ribs. But I thought that was just a tabloid story."

"Oh, no, it's true. She really did."

"Are you saying she's actually dangerous?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about it. You'd have found out just how dangerous Corey can be if you'd

imprisoned me on your ship. There's a tiny mouselike creature on Aretz called a shrew. It's totally fearless, has a poisonous bite and, despite its size, has the rest of the animal kingdom thoroughly intimidated. Corey's like that shrew. Believe me, I have the greatest respect for her. You should too."

"Hmm. I was in a nest of vipers and never knew it. And Galia. What of her?"

Ethan stopped and looked up at the sky. A cry echoed overhead and something circled above them, higher and higher.

Julian pointed. "It's an eagle. And there's its mate. The nest must be somewhere close." The Emperor glanced at Ethan as he stood gazing up at the sky. Then he gestured to the guard and the Archon's agent. "Leave us."

When they were alone, he touched Ethan on the arm and beckoned. "Come over here. I've something to show you."

Ethan followed the Emperor to a cleft in the rock with some bushes growing around it. As Julian crouched down and parted the foliage, he knelt beside him and leaned forward.

"Take a look," whispered Julian.

Framed in a tiny glade lined with soft pale mosses and fed by a dripping spring, a small pool gleamed. Within its crystal depths, a fish with scales the color of pearls flicked its tail and swam back and forth.

On the shore, with the head of one resting on the neck of the other, lay a pair of exquisite miniature foxes with snow-white fur and the bluest eyes Ethan had ever seen. Just a short distance from away their parents, three tiny kits rolled on the ground, nipping at each other and playing and squeaking,

Julian carefully replaced the branches. As they stepped back, he said softly, "Snow foxes are the rarest creatures on Nublis. They're found on the summit of this sacred mountain and nowhere else."

He walked over to a flat rock nearby, heaved a deep sigh and gazed off into the distance. When Ethan joined him, he said, "There's something I have to tell you, but I'm not sure how to begin. You mentioned Galia earlier and I didn't answer. Now I will. It's true she was working for me and that she betrayed you. I'd put her in your way deliberately in the hopes you'd do exactly as you did. But Galia's anything but a whore. She loved only one man in her life before you. It was years ago, before she ever met you. It was he who left her, not the other way around, and she would never have come to your bed had I not ordered her to do so. At first, she wanted to avenge the death of her adopted brother and to that end she even offered to kill you in your sleep. Then something happened. For some inexplicable reason, she fell in love with you. No one knows why, least of all me. But the fact remains that she did. You bared your heart and soul to her during that second night and that's why she opened herself to you."

"Are you saying –"

The Emperor looked him straight in the eye. "Yes, Ethan, I am. Galia's not only pregnant but she's chosen to keep it. She said 'It's all that's left of Ethan. This is an affirmation that just once in his life, he loved unconditionally and without reservation. Sending him to his death was bad enough. I can't destroy his child as well.' This is the real reason I brought you here. You had a right to know."

Ethan sank down onto the rock. Then he drew in a deep shuddering breath and put his head in his hands.

Julian walked a short way away and gazed off into the distance.

After a while, he came back and touched him on the shoulder. "It's getting late and we should be going."

Ethan sat silent during the three-hour flight back. Looking out at the darkening sky, he thought about all that had happened that day. When they landed on the Temple roof, the Archon's agent went to replace the manacles, but Julian shook his head. He reached over to shake Ethan's hand, then closed the door.

Watching the Emperor's flyer rise and wheel over toward the Palace, the pirate smiled. "You were right," he said. "I did make their ears bleed. Every time."

* * *

It was a perfect day for the awards ceremony. Flags snapped in the light breeze, and the combined allied bands tuned their instruments amid sounds of dissonance. Officials hurried up and down the Palace steps, the VIP seats began to fill up and the festive crowd shifted back and forth behind the barricades in the great stone square.

A pretty news reporter began speaking into the camera. "This is Vicki Monata coming to you from the reception at the Palace for the commanders and troops of the combined forces that liberated the planet Nublis just two and one half weeks ago. The Archon has just left and the Emperor's party is moving from the ballroom to the outside dais at the top of the Palace steps for the awards ceremony --"

At a signal from the music director, the bands raised their instruments. They struck up the ancient hymn that was Nublis' national anthem and the assembled crowd began to sing. As the song concluded, the Imperial Family and their guests appeared at the top of the steps and from the other side of the square, the great Temple bell pealed twelve times. When they saw their Emperor and Empress, the crowd began to cheer and the occupants of the VIP seats rose to give them a standing ovation.

Julian raised his hands for silence. "Thank you, my friends. We are here today to --" He broke off, looked down at Corey for a moment as if puzzled about something, put his hand to his throat and whispered, "I can't breathe. Help me."

His knees buckled and Corey's father caught him as he fell.

"This is Vicki Monata. Something's happening on the dais! The Emperor started to speak and then stopped. He's on the ground. There are a couple Temple medics working on the Emperor. Now they're lifting him onto a stretcher."

She stopped and then continued. "They're rushing His Majesty to the Temple through one of the tunnels. Lord Rollo is making an announcement --"

Corey had taken off her high-heeled shoes and raced to keep up with the medics and the stretcher as they tore through the tunnel toward the Temple. Then she realized Jonah was running beside her.

"What happened?" she panted. "Do they know?"

"Something to do with the bullet in his chest," said Jonah, between breaths. "Apparently it shifted and is

blocking something in his heart."

Corey remembered what Julian had said when he broke his rib. The doctors had told him the bullet might have shifted and he was supposed to go into the clinic for a couple of days. But with all that had been happening since, he'd kept saying he felt fine and would go in as soon as he could find the time. Why, oh, why, hadn't she insisted?

As she and Jonah rounded the corner and headed up the ramp, Corey could see the medics disappearing through the double doors. They followed, and one of the doctors came to meet them.

"Your Majesty, the Major Domo's on his way over and they're prepping the Emperor for emergency surgery. He's in good hands and just as soon as we have the bullet out he should be all right."

A voice came over the paging system.

"That's for me," said the doctor and he hurried off.

Jonah guided Corey to a chair. When he saw the outer doors open to admit the press, he grabbed the arm of a passing attendant. "Find me a room where Her Majesty can have some privacy."

The Major Domo spoke from behind him. "Come with me! You can wait in Julian's office."

Julian watched the agitation from his vantage point above the square. The medics were doing something to his body as it lay at the top of the steps. They lifted onto the stretcher and raced toward the elevator. Corey was trying to keep up, with Jonah right beside her.

As they disappeared, he rose and wheeled away, first toward the river, then north. When he reached the sacred mountain's rosy peak, he dove right into it, then down and down and down through all the layers of rock to the crystal cave at its heart.

Just as he set foot on the bridge, he saw the old ones shining on the other side of the pool... and one empty waiting throne. "You may come no further!" cried a distant voice. "You're not the one we're waiting for."

He fell to his knees. "Please."

"You know your duty and you will do what you must do. But remember this. Though the river may temporarily fork, it will always return to us in the end."

Like a line tugging, Julian could hear someone calling his name.

Before leaving the mountain top, he danced with the eagles in the sky and swooped down to see the foxes in their mossy den. When he was no longer able to resist the pull of Corey's voice, he returned to the city and went down through the Temple roof and into the body on the bed.

Firm hands lifted Corey from where she kneeled by Julian's side. "Come, Your Majesty. You've done all you can. You must remember your condition and rest."

As she suffered herself to be led away, Corey kept looking back, repeating Julian's name over and over like a litany. Then she rushed back to the bed. "Get that thing out! Can't you see he's trying to talk?"

One of the doctors sighed. "We may as well do as she says. He seems to be breathing on his own now and he probably doesn't need it any more."

"Where am I?" asked Julian as soon the tube was out. "What became of the ceremony and all the people?" He saw Corey and tried to sit up. As the doctors pushed him down, his voice grew agitated. "What day is it? Please tell me. What day is it?"

"You've been here for two days," replied Corey. "It's Saturday afternoon."

"Corey, I can't stay here. Help me up, now! I have to go! Please, it's important! There are only a few hours left! I listened to you after the babies were born. Now, please! Please, my love! Return the favor and listen to me!"

When Corey saw one of the doctors pick up a needle gun, she stopped him. "Let me find out what he's talking about. I may be able to help."

"All right. But you have exactly five minutes. His stress levels are rising and we've got to get them down."

"Corey, tell them to leave us alone! And while you're at it, switch off those damn implants."

"Jonah's here. The Major Domo too. Do you want them to come in?"

"Tell Jonah to come in. But whatever you do, leave the Major Domo outside."

"...and as you can see, I had it all arranged. I was going to tell you on Friday... yesterday that is. But the time's run out and I'm stuck here. Do you think you can do it?"

Jonah smiled. "Of course we can. I'll get hold of Asa as soon as I leave. Don't worry, it's as good as done."

They heard a knock on the door. It opened and the Major Domo stood there.

"I don't know what you're up to, Julian, and I really don't care to guess. We need to talk privately about what's going to happen tonight and the listening post would appreciate it if you'd turn those implants back on. Jonah's too. They thought they were malfunctioning."

After Jonah and Corey left, he looked at the monitors. "Well, whatever it was, it's brought your levels back down. But you're not going anywhere. I'll have to fill in, and somehow, I'm going to have to explain why you're not there to say good-bye."

"Will you come see me after it's over?"

"Of course."

"Then what will you do?"

"I don't know. Go up into the hills perhaps and learn to be a man again."

* * *

Ethan looked up from his book. "Is it time?"

"There's been a change in plans. As you know, the Emperor can't be there. We're going to have to perform his part of the ritual. Are you ready?"

Ethan nodded.

"Hold out your hands."

He was startled by the shackles' weight. "These are solid gold!"

"They're so heavy, we only use them for the ritual. The regular ones are much lighter."

The Major Domo beckoned to the keeper. "Do you have everything?"

After inspecting the robes, sword, bowl and branding irons, the Major Domo took a small device from his pocket. A panel slid aside to reveal a lighted passageway. "Come. The Archon's waiting."

The three of them entered the great stone-walled room to find the gray-robed Archon standing alone in its center.

As Ethan bowed and kissed his ring, the Archon looked around, signing impatiently.

"Julian can't be here," replied the Major Domo. "He's not well enough."

Turning away, the Archon sighed. With his hands in an attitude of prayer, he bowed first to Ethan, then the agent and finally the Major Domo.

"Are you ready, Your Grace?"

The Archon spoke. "Yes. You may begin the ritual now."

The Major Domo raised the trapdoor. Then he returned to the Archon's side and beckoned to Ethan.

Silently, Ethan approached and bowed again. Then he removed the Archon's mask, ring, gloves, and finally his gray robes and boots.

Ethan surveyed the slim figure, standing naked as a sword blade in the lamplight.

So this is who you are! Well, His Honor is about to have his wish. Too bad I can't tell him.

The dark gaze met his, unwavering. Falling to his knees, the Archon crossed his hands behind his back and bowed his head.

Ethan raised the jeweled sword high. Whistling down in a great arc, the glittering blade stopped less than a millimeter from the waiting neck. The Archon never flinched.

"My part is done," said Ethan and he stepped back.

Putting an arm around his charge, the Major Domo gently raised him to his feet. Then he led him over to the bed and laid him down. As he pulled off his own mask and robes and tossed them aside for the last time, the dark eyes looked up into his, calm and unafraid.

"Cassius. Are you ready?"

"Oh, yes! This time, let me do it for myself."

A short time later, the Major Domo removed the mask from Cassius' face and listened to his breathing. When he was satisfied, he beckoned to Ethan. "Come! Help me."

After they laid him down by the trapdoor, the Major Domo fastened a golden weight around each of Cassius' ankles. He held him in his arms for a long moment, looking down into his face. Then he kissed him on the forehead...and dropped him.

He knelt for a while, looking down into the dark swirling waters. Finally, he collected himself and stood up. "Cassius is free now. As his designated successor, are you ready to take his place?"

Ethan raised his shackled hands in an attitude of prayer and bowed his assent.

"Since the Emperor's not here, I'll take his place. Is that agreeable to you?"

Again Ethan nodded.

"Let us begin, then."

The Major Domo beckoned to the Archon's agent and motioned for him to kneel. As the young man bowed his head, he touched the sword to the back of his neck. Raising him to his feet, he directed him to don the scarlet robes and the mask.

When the young man had done so, the Major Domo told him solemnly, "Your old life is dead and you no longer have a name. From this day forth, only His Grace the Archon or His Imperial Majesty the Emperor will ever see your face. On behalf of the Emperor Julian, I solemnly give the Archon of Nublis into your keeping. Do you solemnly swear that you will keep him sequestered at all times from the outside world, that you will care for him and no other, and that you will watch over him for every day, hour and minute until he's ready to take his place with his predecessors in the sacred mountain?"

"I do so swear."

The new Major Domo directed his predecessor to kneel and extend his hands. Then he lifted the sword and touched it to each of his wrists. "On the Emperor's behalf, I hereby release you from all your vows. Aaron Fortier, you've discharged your duty faithfully and well. You're free to go."

Ethan's mouth dropped open. "Aaron Fortier? *You* were the Captain of the Guard? Then the Archon must have been Julian's brother."

The Captain's blue eyes were sad. "When Cassius was designated, the Emperor Janus chose me to be his Major Domo. Julian never knew until he inherited the throne."

"It was you who wrecked that bar and disabled my crew?"

"Cassius and Julian had gotten into something way over their heads through their own damn stupidity. I made believers out of them as soon as I got them home."

"I can well imagine. You made a believer out of me too."

"And now, my lord, we must complete the ritual. Since the Emperor's not here, I'll have to stand in for him." Aaron showed Ethan Julian's huge ruby ring. "This is the symbol of the Emperor's authority, just as the emerald is the Archon's. This ruby belonged to Julian's father, Janus, to Janus's father before him and to each of his ancestors, beginning with Nublis's first Emperor three thousand years ago. The ruby, the

emerald and an enormous diamond were presented to the first Emperor at his coronation. Reportedly created at the time of the planet's birth, the ruby represents earth, fire and fertility, and the emerald, water and spirituality. Standing for air, life and love, the diamond belongs to the Empress. As its third ruler, she is the official mother of Nublis and the guardian of its heart."

The Captain removed the glittering shackles and let them drop. Then he ordered Ethan to strip and lie down on the bed. He took a sheet of parchment, wrote Ethan's name on it and showed it to him. "Is this your identity?"

"Yes, it is."

The Captain set the parchment on fire and dropped the ashes into the golden bowl. Mixing water with the ashes, he dropped the bowl with its contents through the open trapdoor. "Now you no longer exist. As nameless as your predecessors, you will, henceforth, obey every order given you by your keeper. Should you defy him, he may punish you in any way he sees fit. And from this moment on, no living creature, save your Major Domo, the Emperor or those you have condemned to die, will ever see your face or hear your voice until the day you're released to the river."

Ethan, who was no longer Ethan, closed his eyes and thought of what the old ones had said. Now certainly, he was the least of them all.

"Open your eyes and look at me," ordered the Captain.

As the new Archon did so, his Major Domo chained his wrists and ankles to the corners of the bed. Staked out and helpless, he watched the white-hot iron above him. When he tried to shrink away, the Major Domo's gloved hands gripped his head. Just as the burning tip began to scorch his face, the Captain withdrew it. Something hissed as though quenched and a bandage was placed over his eyes.

"You're now as blind as the justice you serve. Because you cannot see, you can no longer distinguish between rich and poor. Since all will stand equal before your court, you'll be able to judge them with perfect impartiality."

When the Captain uncovered his eyes, Ethan saw a red-hot branding iron in his hand. It plunged the symbol of the hammer and sword into his chest and he cried out.

"A branded nameless slave, you're now the least of all creatures in the universe. Understanding what it is to have no rights, you'll stringently guard the rights of others. Because you have nothing and have nothing to lose, you cannot be bribed or influenced. All on Nublis are subject to your law. As our chief judge, you hold the power of life and death in your august hands, control vast wealth and have countless minions at your beck and call. From now until the day of your release, you're the dark Emperor and second ruler of Nublis. On behalf of His Imperial Majesty and all his subjects, I hereby salute you, Your Grace, and bid you welcome to your new domain!"

As his keeper unfastened the chains holding his wrists and ankles and helped him sit up, the new Archon looked down at his chest and winced.

The Captain examined the brand. "You'll heal in a few days. In the meantime, your Major Domo will give you something for the pain."

The new Major Domo pulled off his mask and shrugged off the scarlet robes, and the Captain said with obvious relief, "Let's have a drink."

Wearing the plain blue uniform of a Temple official, the Captain slipped out of the Archon's quarters. When he reached the Emperor's room, he told the attendant on duty, "I'm Captain Fortier. His Majesty's expecting me."

The attendant looked puzzled. "Don't I know you? You seem familiar somehow."

"Since I just moved here, I should hardly think so. Would you please let the Emperor know I'm here?"

Julian's voice came from the other side of the half-opened door. "Let him in."

Propped in a half-sitting position on the bed, the Emperor was alone. He looked up from the tabloid he'd been perusing. "How did it go?"

"First of all, allow me to return your ring."

"Thanks. Can I order you something?"

"Thank you, no. I had a drink before I left. And as to how it went, Cassius could be pretty heartbreaking. He...." His eyes misting, the Captain stopped and took a deep breath.

"You miss him already, don't you?"

"I always will. Eleven years is a long time...and it wasn't all bad by any means."

Julian thought for a moment. "I'm in dire need of an administrator for Ellie's Northern Shore property. With your background, you wouldn't be overwhelmed or intimidated by the immensity of the principality's affairs. It would solve a problem for me, get you away from here, and still keep you connected to our family. Are you interested?"

The Captain was surprised and grateful. "Yes, I am. And thank you."

"No need. It is I who should be thanking you. Had it not been for you, Cassius' captivity would have been infinitely worse, and I seriously doubt that he would have survived as long or done as well under anyone else's care. Unlike Cassius', your sacrifice was voluntary, was it not?"

The Captain sighed. "When Cassius was designated, Janus became absolutely distraught. When he asked for my help, there was no way I could refuse. I failed to return from a hunting trip and the searchers discovered my wrecked flyer in the mountains. My body was never found. Since I had no family, there were few questions and I was soon forgotten."

"Not true. You were a member of my family and I certainly never forgot. And Captain, there's one more service you can perform for me, if you will."

"Name it."

Julian slipped the ruby from his forefinger. "Give this to my wife for safekeeping. I told her you're to be my new administrator for the Northern Shore and that you just arrived from the southern islands. She's expecting you."

"In that case, I'd better go. I'll be back first thing in the morning. Good night, Your Majesty."

"Good night, Captain," said Julian and he smiled to himself.

Alone once more, Julian returned to the story he'd been reading about Jonah and Ellie. The tabloid's entire center section was devoted to their biographies, complete with pictures. Public opinion was eighty

to one in favor of the star-crossed lovers and in the opinion of the story's author, if Julian didn't immediately grant Jonah the Princess's hand, he should be tarred and feathered and run off the planet.

Well, Corey, he reflected, it seems you and I are yesterday's news. And he laughed out loud.

The attendant came in with a needle gun. "Your Majesty, it's time you got some rest."

Julian obediently held up his arm. When he'd given him his shot, the attendant lowered the head of the bed and settled his patient under the covers. Smiling, the Emperor turned on his side and drifted peacefully off to sleep.

Over at the Palace, Corey smiled. "You seem so familiar. Yet you say you've never been here before."

"I must have a double then because you're the second person who's said that to me today. It's late and tomorrow will come soon enough, so with Your Majesty's permission, I'll bid you goodnight."

Corey opened the door and spoke to someone outside. "This is my sister-in-law's fiancé, Jonah. Since he's also staying in the east wing, you can walk over there together. Your bags arrived a short time ago and one of the servants has already unpacked for you."

What bags? wondered the Captain. *This has to be more of Julian's doing.*

When they reached the east wing, Jonah went to one of the bedroom doors and knocked. He opened it and gestured to the Captain. "Go on in. There's someone who wants to see you."

As Cassius came toward him with a smile, the Captain shook his head. "Why am I not surprised? So that's what Julian meant by a fork in the river. I should have remembered that a branch runs under the Palace too."

"Yes, it does. As to how I got here, Asa was waiting in the water. He caught me just as I went under, got me into a boat and brought me here. I woke a couple of hours later to Corey's smiling face. How did the rest of the ritual go?"

"Fine. Ethan seems more resigned than you ever were and his Major Domo should treat him well. They are two of a kind, after all."

"I agree. I'd just transferred his keeper to my special program and was trying to think of an appropriate way for him to serve out his sentence when Ethan was designated. They should deal well together."

The Captain nodded. "As a major dope dealer, there was little he didn't already know about pharmacology or martial arts. He'd been raised by criminals, and until we caught him, that was all he knew. He proved every bit as difficult to break as Ethan and was in the tank for just about as long. But he has a strong moral streak and he passed his final test with flying colors. They're well-matched. They'll be taking each other's measure every day and their battle of wills should continue until Ethan goes to the river."

"And what of Julian? How well do you think he'll deal with them?"

"Julian developed a real rapport with Ethan after he took him up to the sacred mountain. Something to do with fast takeoffs, he said."

"Hasn't he outgrown that yet? I would have thought he'd have long since given that up. I learned not to

eat breakfast on the days I'd be flying with him."

The Captain smiled. "Fortunately for Julian, Corey's never experienced one of his fast takeoffs. If she ever did, I guarantee you he'd never do another."

"Hmm. Do you think it could be arranged?"

"Now that, my boy, is what I call rank ingratitude. Besides, whenever Julian goes anywhere with the Empress, they take her transport and a full crew. I can already see what life around here is going to be like with the two of you on the loose again. Fortunately for me, I'm leaving soon and I'm just not going to worry about it. But I'll give you one word of advice. Corey's enough of a handful as it is and Julian will take a dim view of your putting any more ideas in her head."

"He would at that because he's very territorial where she's concerned. Where are you going, by the way?"

"To the Northern Shore. Julian needs a new administrator and he's offered me the post. And now, Cassius, while you've had some sleep, I haven't. So if you'll show me where my room is, I'm going to turn in. And do you know something? For the first time in years, I'm actually looking forward to getting up in the morning."

"Captain?" Something in Cassius' voice made him turn. Quickly, he took his former charge's arm. "Lie down." He looked around for the intercom and pressed the button. "Would you get me the clinic please?"

The doctor finally came on the line.

"How soon can you get here? He's about to start seizing and I've nothing here to give him. Yes, he's the same prisoner except he's home now. No, I have no sedatives here...nothing. The Palace's east wing...just as soon as fast as you can. Bring some medics and equipment. I won't be here but they'll be expecting you."

There was a knock on the door and the Captain called, "Enter."

It was Asa and Jonah. They looked from the Captain to Cassius and back again. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, there is. Is there any medical equipment around here?"

Asa thought for a moment. "The guard would know."

"Good thought." The Captain pressed the intercom. "Get me the duty officer. Stat."

"Lieutenant Abner here. What can I do for you?"

"We have a medical emergency in the east wing. A guest is having a seizure. Drugs, I think. There are medics and a doctor on their way but they might not get here in time. Do you have an emergency medical pack? Good. I'm just another guest but I've had some experience with this before."

"I'm on my way."

The Captain rolled up his sleeves. "Help me wrap the sheet around him as tightly as you can. It sometimes delays things. Now hold him."

As they waited for the lieutenant, he thought, *Cassius, you can't do this! Not after all you've been through.*

Aaron tried to remember when he'd given him his last dose. Since Cassius had had a court session only two days before, the stimulants must still be fizzing around in his system. But the medication had long since worn off.

The door opened and the lieutenant raced in, ripping open the medical pack as he came.

"Over here," said the Captain. "We need some class A sedatives and a stress monitor! Asa, hold him down!"

As the lieutenant shot the contents of the needle gun into Cassius' arm, the Captain assembled the portable intravenous kit and hung the bag. While the lieutenant held the breathing mask over Cassius' face, he attached the monitor. Then he deftly inserted the needle and hooked it up.

"I see you've done this before," remarked the lieutenant.

"I have a nephew with some addiction problems. He lives with me."

That's true enough, thought the Captain.

As Cassius moved his head restlessly, trying to fight off the mask, he eyed the stress monitor. It was still within normal limits but the level was climbing fast.

The doctor hurried in, followed by two medics with a stretcher. "Let's see what we've got. The Major Domo called but he said he wouldn't be here. Do you know anything about that?"

Jonah looked at the Captain sharply. When he started to speak, Aaron put a warning hand on his arm. "I'll explain later!"

Meanwhile, the doctor had given Cassius an injection. "Well, we got to him in time. I don't think we need transfer him at this point but I'll leave this set of monitors and another dose, just in case. You can return them any time. Frankly, I'm surprised he didn't bring any medication with him. Surely the Major Domo knew better than that. I'm leaving this and an anti-nausea drug. He needs to take one of each every day and I'll leave a standing order at the clinic." The doctor sighed. "Although I know it's an exercise in futility, here's the information about my program. Maybe one of these years, he won't throw it out. I assume he's a relative of the Emperor's."

The Captain nodded.

"Well, I have to be going. Lieutenant, if there are any changes, call me. And now, gentlemen, I'll wish you goodnight...what's left of it."

"Lieutenant, I want to thank you for your help," said the Captain.

"Glad to do it, sir. I'll send someone by tomorrow to pick up the pack and the monitors." The lieutenant saluted and was gone.

The Captain half-raised his hand and lowered it again.

"So you were the Major Domo," marveled Jonah. "I should have recognized your voice. You were the Captain of the Guard before that, weren't you? And your name is Aaron Fortier?"

"Correct."

"Prince Cassius was the Archon?"

"Correct again."

"When I was on trial, it was you and he —"

"While he had no idea who you were, something about the Steward's testimony troubled him. Even though Julian knew the whole story, there was no way he could help you. It was Ellie who clinched it. Without her testimony and your hypnosis session, I don't know what would have happened."

Jonah shuddered. "Don't remind me. I had bad dreams about my execution every night I was in that cell. In fact, I still do."

"Cassius was troubled by your case from the first and was looking for some legal precedent to avoid imposing the death penalty. Fortunately, the question didn't come up. And when he found out who you were, he wasn't surprised."

"It was that close?"

The Captain smiled. "Fortunately for your peace of mind, you didn't see the way Julian was gyrating. Cassius picked up on it because they always were closer than peas in a pod, and I'll give you fair warning. Just be thankful you're no longer working here in the Palace, because you're about to find out about their capacity for mischief. They once wired the passageway to the wine-cellar with electric fencing. The Steward was carrying a couple of bottles of the Emperor's favorite vintage when he brushed against the wall. He got a shock, dropped the bottles, and hit the other wall. The wine went flying and he bounced back and forth for who knows how long, yelling at the top of his lungs. When Cassius and Julian sneaked down to remove the wires, I was waiting."

"I think I should have liked to have known them then."

"Oh, they haven't changed all that much. It wasn't so long ago that Julian loosed a dozen white rats during one of Irina's receptions, and the last time he was in the clinic, they started getting nothing but space porn on the security screens. Then the water in the doctors' showers turned bright green."

A quiet voice came from the bed. "As long as you're telling tales out of school, do you remember the politician's wife who was supposedly deaf?"

"Vividly. Cassius and Julian were still quite young and the lady in question was a distant Imperial cousin. The family suspected that her endless complaints about her hearing problems were merely an attention-getting device and she had become something of a joke. The boys decided to find out if she was really deaf during one of the Empress's fancy teas. Balancing cups and plates in their laps, the guests were being entertained by the catawauling of some soprano while she, as usual, was nattering on a mile a minute about how she couldn't hear a thing. The first explosion brought us on the run. While we were checking, two more went off and the moment I saw those angelic expressions, I knew. Then I noticed Julian's mother. She had her napkin up to her face and was laughing so hard she couldn't stop."

Cassius chuckled. "We proved the lady wasn't deaf because her crockery was the first to go flying. And since Mama had bought the materials and put us up to it, that was one time you didn't get to discipline us."

* * *

Galia's secretary poked her head around the door. "I'm leaving now. Do you want me to tell the guard you're still here?"

"If you would. With all the unsavory characters roaming the halls these days, I'll feel better if he's close by. Thanks. And good night."

Galia went out to the small kitchen for some juice, brought it back to her desk... and just about jumped out of her skin. She grabbed for the intercom but the intruder got to it first. Then he switched off the light. As she whirled away from the desk and made for the balcony, he spoke. "Galia, don't you know me?"

At the sound of that all too familiar voice, she stopped dead in her tracks. "Major Domo? Is that you? They said you were gone, that something had happened to you."

"It's me, but I'm not the Major Domo any more. Now I'm just a man like any other."

"Turn on the light and let me see your face."

"I don't know if I want to do that. I'm not handsome like Ethan or Julian. All I am is an old battered soldier getting ready to go out to pasture. I'm leaving in a few days and just came to say good-bye."

"Hold me again the way you did the night you came and comforted me. You seemed to understand how I felt...almost as if you'd been there yourself."

"I have."

When she reached him, he put his arms around her and held her close. Resting her head on his chest, she listened to his breathing, felt his heart's steady beat and knew she'd come home to safe harbor. She traced the contours of his face and ruffled his hair.

Lightly brushing his lips with the tips of her fingers, she raised her face to his. As his arms tightened around her, his mouth found hers and her body responded to his arousal.

Much later, she remarked, "You don't seem all that battered to me."

He chuckled deep in his throat, and ran his fingers down her back. "You haven't seen my battle scars."

"Where are they? Show them to me."

He guided her hand across his chest and down toward his stomach. "That's one and there's another."

"Perhaps you are somewhat battered at that. What are they?"

"A couple of knife wounds. The knotty one's a bullet."

"Mmm. I just had a thought. Not only have I never seen your face, but I don't even know your name! Talk about not being properly introduced!"

As he started to laugh, they heard a knock on the door. It opened and the guard stood silhouetted in the light from the hallway.

"Miss Galia, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thank you. It's dark in here because I was taking a nap. I'll be out in just a few minutes."

The door closed again, leaving them in the dark.

"Galia, will you marry me?"

"I'm not going to answer that until I've seen your face and learned your name."

"Fair enough. My name's Aaron Fortier and I used to be the Captain of the Imperial Guard. I can take good care of you because Julian just appointed me his administrator of the Northern Shore."

As the Captain reached for his clothes, Galia walked to the other side of the room and turned on the overhead light. With her cloud of flaming hair, emerald eyes and ivory skin, he'd never seen a work of art as lovely as she.

She stood unembarrassed, acknowledging his open-mouthed admiration with a smile and letting his eyes rove where they would. He went to cover himself but she brushed his hand aside. Then she appraised him as frankly as he had her from the graying curls on his head to his muscular thighs and everything in between.

"You're handsome in your own way and maturity becomes you. I've often wondered what lay beneath those scarlet robes and now I know. But are you sure you want to marry me? I am carrying another man's child."

"It's your child, Galia. That's all that really counts."

"Of all the proposals I've ever received, this has to be the strangest. Yet it feels so right. Yes, Aaron, I'll marry you. Just tell me when and where."

EPILOGUE

Their reunion was a homecoming of a sort.

As Cassius glanced around his former prison, his eyes met Aaron's. He wondered how his successor was faring during the heavy days and lonely pain-filled nights, and his Major Domo was no better off.

When he'd still been Cassius' jailer, Aaron had once said, "Did you never stop to think I'm a prisoner as much as he? Holding the key to his chains does not make me his master. We're bound together in the same yoke and I'm his subject, just as he is mine."

Then he noticed the Archon signing to him. "Your throne still awaits you in the crystal cave. But you may not cross the bridge until your work is done. Julian's in your charge now. Guard him well."

Cassius replied in kind. "He guards me too."

Someday, Ethan's successor would legally die so that a new Archon could be born, and his grieving family would never know that, just a few feet away, their loved one would be matching every tear they

shed.

That's the price we pay, thought Cassius bitterly, and these are the wages of justice.

The End