

Of LOVERS UNTRUE

By C. J. Merle

Chapter 1

“It is possible,” the Emperor Hazdel Toneki conceded. “It could work.” He was silent for a long moment, considering the matter further. “Kill Eivaunee and get the Dorlan Estates.” There was satisfaction in his harsh-edged voice, as well as a thread of uneasiness.

“It will work,” Aman stated firmly.

“It is possible,” the Emperor repeated coldly, looking down at his lover who lay gracefully on the large, ornate Imperial bed, his sallow skin highlighted against red silk

“Eivaunee will never marry your daughter, and you have pushed him as far as you legally can without producing a rebellion,” Aman’s voice was languid, but edged in mockery at the Emperor’s failure. His eyes were half-closed, hiding a dangerous glint. “Treachery is the only answer. I wouldn’t think you’d mind that. Think of those fabulously wealthy Dorlan Estates. You need that wealth to build your ships of conquest.”

“And you?” the Emperor returned coldly. “You hope for a Consenti title, no doubt, and Eivaunee himself. Shackled, I presume, considering what happened the last time you tried to rape him.” The Emperor wasn’t the only one who had failed in his desires where Eivaunee Dorlan was involved.

Aman bit back a terse reply. “One night is all I want.” He caressed the Emperor lightly. “It’s vengeance, not desire.” He only partially lied. “And you would be getting far more out of this than I would. The monies to build new battleships without having to get the approval of a majority of Consenti families. Your dreams on conquest depend on those ships.” Aman’s slight smile was cold.

“I’ll think about it,” the Emperor repeated. He reached for his favorite lover. “It is a good idea,” he added softly.

A very good idea. Aman, Duc of Enghien, hid his widening smile. You don’t know quite how good it is. It brings me more than a Consenti title, my Imperial lover. I will have your throne.

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“You’re sure the voice print is a perfect match?” Baroness Yseu, Eivaunee Dorlan’s Official Mistress, asked. She tapped an expensively clad foot against fine marble flooring.

“It *is* Dorlan’s voice,” the fealty-bound retainer pointed out, looking up at Yseu’s classically beautiful face. “If it’s run through a sophisticated enough computer, the patching could be discovered. But it isn’t marked as a recording—that’s the important part. That’s what the Duke of Enghien said he wanted. The bigger problem is the lack of a signal code signet, but he said that wasn’t important.” The man spoke more bluntly than most of the Roythun retainers. He was one of Yseu’s lovers, and one of the few people more loyal to her than to the Baron.

“I wish I knew what Aman had in mind,” Yseu said with a sigh.

“The death of Eivaunee Dorlan I’d guess.”

“Yes, of course—but how?”

“He isn’t likely to say, Mistress. He’s paying a enough high price for the voice print.”

“Still, I wish I knew...”

“Would you tell Dorlan?”

Yseu’s laugh was brittle. “He hasn’t visited Haskin’s World in six months. I am expecting that soon I will be told officially that I no longer hold the title of his Official Mistress. There is no reason to protect him, but if I knew what Aman was planning, it would give me more leverage.”

“The Duc of Enghien is no fool, Mistress, nor is he a lover of women. I don’t see how you’re going to get any leverage with him.”

“Aman recently remarried,” Yseu pointed out, a speculative tone in her voice. “The daughter of a former Dorlan retainer. They say it was for the money.”

“It would have to be a great deal of money,” the retainer sniffed. “She was born into fealty to the Dorlans. Why would a Duc stoop so low...” Born into servitude himself, he was jealous of any who rose so far above their station.

“Considering the ‘accidental’ deaths of Aman’s last two wives, I’m surprised that anyone would take the risk—even for the title of Duchess.”

“You could bring the voice print to him personally,” the fealty-bound retainer returned to the more pertinent topic. “Even though he has no desire for women, you might be able to persuade him to tell you at least a little...”

“The Duc of Enghien said the voice print was to be sent by trusted courier. My appearance at Court would cause talk and Eivaunee would hear of it.” Not for the first time, Yseu regretted settling for marriage to a Provincial Baron; life at Court was so much more exciting. A moment later, a calculating look came into Yseu’s fine eyes. “As you say, though, Aman is no lover of women...”

The fealty-bound retainer waited to see if his Mistress would say anything more, but after a moment she simply nodded. “Yes, that is a possibility,” she said softly to herself. “That will be all,” she dismissed the young man.

Chapter 2

The Comveckt, flagship of the Klimar Empire, came out of the Jump precisely on target. Sitting in the center Command Chair, Eivaunee Dorlan looked at the two ships displayed on the large, forward viewing screen. A small trade ship and a larger pirate vessel. The Comveckt was responding to a distress call from the trade ship.

“Shields at full strength,” Zsar’t’lac, the alien warrior-messiah, said from his position as Weapons’ Officer. It had been five years since he had defected from the Norda Homelands. Five years that he had served Eivaunee Dorlan, the only human who knew the alien was the messiah of his people, and that he had defected from the Homelands to prevent interstellar war.

“A shuttle is leaving the trade ship,” Ques, the Scanner stated. “Good size one, probably from the pirate ship. Hold maybe ten people.”

“Validate exact number on board,” Eivaunee commanded.

“Yes, sir.” After a moment. “Six life forms on the ship. Pirate ship’s shields are at full now. They have us on their screens.”

“Ignore them for now,” Eivaunee commanded. “Status on the trade ship, Officer Sanqu? Any response to communications?”

“None, sir,” Devei Sanqu, the Communications Officer, and one of two fealty-bound Dorlan retainers on the ship, answered.

“The hull has just been breached, sir,” Ques spoke. “The trade ship is air blown.”

There was silence on the bridge. They all knew what that meant. No one left living on it. The last survivors would be on the shuttle.

“All right,” Eivaunee replied, his expressive mouth twisting down in disgust. “Destroy the pirate vessel, Officer Zsar’t’lac.”

The alien smiled at the command. “Fast or slow, my Commander?”

Eivaunee hated pirates, almost as much as his alien officer did. “Slow, Zsar’t’lac, destroy the ship slowly.”

Eivaunee Dorlan didn’t tell his Weapons’ Officer how to do his job. Zsar’t’lac was a Norda Hsassin; they were bred, raised, and trained to be the elite warriors of the Norda Homelands. When it came to weapons, or killing, or battle strategy, no human could match a Hsassin.

And Zsar’t’lac was more than just a Hsassin. He was the Hsassin Qtesark, the end result of twenty generations of breeding experiments to produce the ultimate Hsassin warrior, their

genetic messiah. He had defected from his native Norda Homelands to the Human Lands to avoid breeding for the scientist rulers of the Homelands, and to place the desperately desired Qtesark gene pool in the line of fire in any battle between Norda and the Human Lands. It was difficult to say which infuriated the rulers of the Homelands most, his refusing to breed, or his stopping the war they so desired.

Zsar't'lac had, for reasons of his own, chosen to serve with Eivaunee Dorlan, the wealthiest man in the Klimar Empire, and who was also, as his father had been before him, the Commissioner of the Provinces. Eivaunee Dorlan also commanded the Comveckt, the flagship of the Klimar Empire. The Emperor had been enraged when the Consenti family council had forced that on him.

Eivaunee watched as Zsar't'lac, bit by bit, destroyed the pirate vessel. He was careful to leave the command center of the ship intact. The pirate ship desperately returned fire, but the Comveckt's shields were more than adequate.

"Um, sir," Officer Sanqu spoke up suddenly. "They - uh - would like to surrender."

"Whatever for?" Eivaunee asked no one in particular. "I'll kill them there, or I'll kill them here. I don't let pirates live. Space is dangerous enough without their kind." A look of irritation passed over his handsome face. "Finish them off, Officer Zsar't'lac."

The alien's long three-fingered hands changed position on his command board. He fired a qzaser bank at the pirate ship's engine room and it exploded, a brief white ball of luminescence against the blackness of space.

"Put a grav beam on that shuttle, Officer Ques, and bring it in," Eivaunee commanded. "Any survivors from the trade ship will be on that shuttle. Pirates always transport human cargo last." He touched a button on his commsole. "Eivaunee Dorlan to Security. Teams One and Three to the shuttle bay. Team One to transport over to the disabled trade ship and check it out. Team Three to receive the shuttle craft coming in under grav beam."

"As you will, sir." The reply came back in standard form.

"Well, Officer Zsar't'lac, shall we go and see what we've got?"

The Hsassan stood, a graceful uncoiling of a hard and powerful body.

"You have CommCent control, Officer Con Noate," Eivaunee told his third-in-command. Eivaunee was tall and slender, with golden skin, pale blond hair, and cat-amber eyes. He was almost more beautiful than handsome.

"I appreciate your telling me about the pirates, Zsar," Eivaunee said as they walked down the wide white hallways of the large, star-class battleship. "More interesting than the report I was writing to the Emperor."

"When we got the distress signal, I thought you'd want to be in CommCent for this," the alien replied in his gentle voice.

"Right, as usual."

They entered the shuttle bay just as the shuttlecraft finished rotating through the airlock. The

woman who headed security Team Three fired a stationary blaster cannon. It hit just above the door of the shuttlecraft. The small vessel rocked under the attack and debris rattled to the floor inside.

A warning shot. Eivaunee doubted it was necessary.

“You can come out—or we can come in. It’s doesn’t matter to me.” The security officer’s voice was casual. Clearly, she liked shooting the blaster cannon and hoped she could shoot it again.

Eivaunee and Zsar’t’lac stood inside the entrance to the shuttle bay, watching.

After a long moment, the door to the shuttlecraft opened and six people stumbled out. A young man and a slightly older woman left the ship, half-running, obviously frightened. Then four men, their hands held high over their heads, stepped from the craft.

“The first two are from the trade vessel,” Zsar’t’lac said softly to Eivaunee. “I believe brother and sister. The other four are pirates.”

The large alien was an emotional empath. A useful trait in any culture. Very few people knew of this particular result of the Hsassan breeding experiments. And none, other than Eivaunee, were human. Zsar’t’lac had spent five standard years in the Klimar Empire; he was very good at interpreting human emotions. Brother and sister bonding was an easy emotional read.

“All right. Let’s go take a closer look.”

Eivaunee and Zsar’t’lac walked down the ramp to the small shuttlecraft. The security team was scanning the six people for weapons. Several weapons were removed from the pirates. When the security officer was satisfied, she turned and saluted Eivaunee.

He nodded rather than return the salute. Saluting represented the military aspect of his command in the Provinces. Eivaunee preferred his additional, and more time consuming position, as Commissioner for the Provinces, which comprised almost a third of the planets in the Klimar Empire. The third the Emperor had no interest in other than as a source of income.

“These two are from the trade vessel, sir,” one of the security people said, pointing to the two Zsar’t’lac had already identified. “Brother and sister. It was a family ship.”

Eivaunee looked at them. The woman was older than her brother by maybe ten years. Eivaunee guessed her age in the early forties. Medium build, with shoulder-length light brown hair, tied back at the nape of her neck. Her green eyes were open preternaturally wide, the effect of fear and shock. She kept glancing left and right, as though she expected another attack, or maybe she was just looking for a place to hide.

Her brother was taller, with dark brown hair. He had himself under better control. The effect of what he had been through, though, was clear in the wary way he stood, his hands clenched tightly into hard fists.

“Pirates, sir.” The security officer in charge pointed to the other four.

It was an unnecessary designation. The four had restrainers looped around their wrists and

ankles, and one of the security people had a hand blaster focused at them. Two of the pirates appeared to be brothers. They were both large, with similar facial features and dark brown skin. A third man was tall and lean; he catered to the latest style in shaved and tattooed skulls. The last pirate was the largest, taller than Eivaunee and more heavy-set. He had two long thick blond braids. The pirates stood in varying degrees of minor defiance, awaiting the execution they knew was coming.

Eivaunee turned away from them to the frightened woman. "You are safe now," he said gently. "You are on the Comveckt. I don't know if you saw it, but the pirate ship was destroyed."

The woman stopped glancing around the shuttle bay long enough to focus fully on Eivaunee. Tall and golden, his pale blond hair cut short, his mouth full and sensual. A prince out of a fairy tale. In truth, he was a prince of sorts. Born to the wealthiest of the Consenti families, he served now in the Provinces as his father had before him. Most people in the Provinces thought of the Dorlans as "their Princes." In particular, Eivaunee, whose mother had committed suicide, and who had been raised by the brutal Emperor while Tamsek Dorlan, his father, was forced to remain in the Provinces, was dear to the people of the Provinces. He was a prince, to her, and to all the Provinces. A powerful, but just man.

"You'll be all right," Eivaunee repeated, trying to reassure the woman.

"Thank you," she returned vaguely. She stopped seeing Eivaunee Dorlan as the events of the past couple hours crowded in on her. She shifted uneasily, side to side.

"What is the name of your ship?" Eivaunee asked. "What is your name?" The computer had the name of the ship that requested assistance, and the name of the owners, but Eivaunee knew that focusing on known quantities helped restore a sense of balance and security to victims of brutality.

The woman made no reply, her eyes returning to checking out the corners of the shuttle bay; her brother answered instead. "The ship is - was - *Talgar's Folly*. We're Franz and Saret Talgar."

"What about them?" Saret Talgar asked suddenly, pointing to the four men from the pirate vessel. "They killed our father and our brother."

"They'll be executed," Eivaunee answered, glad for her interest. "Would you like to decide how they die?"

"They took us because I'm a pilot and Franz is a navigator," the woman continued, oblivious to Eivaunee's question. "Maybe for other reasons as well," she added, knowing it to be true. She shivered.

"How would you like them to die?" Eivaunee asked again. Sometimes letting the victim decide the fate of the aggressor helped. It made them feel more in control again.

"Worse way to go, by most judgements, is 'spacing,'" he added. "Suit'em up and let them go with a hour or two of oxygen. Gives them a bit of time to think before they die. And the death itself is quite unpleasant."

The woman shuddered. “No. Just execute them. Make sure they can’t kill anyone else.”

“Any suggestions, Officer Zsar’t’lac?” Eivaunee turned to his second-in-command.

All of the new arrivals had been occasionally staring at the alien. Zsar’t’lac was used to it. The only Norda in the Human Lands, and a Hsassin at that, humans couldn’t help but stare at first.

Zsar’t’lac was humanoid, taller than Eivaunee by a dozen centimeters, with long arms and legs. He had three fingers and toes and a long double-jointed thumb, all ending in retractable claws. His face was more angular than a human’s with high cheekbones, and a long bony nose; his ears were round and had ridged edges. But it was the eyes that made humans stare. They were large, round, and totally black, except when emotion made them flicker and flare with various shades of red. The alien’s mouth was different too, larger, with sharp, predatory teeth. Zsar’t’lac’s skin was a dark, almost metallic, bronze. The tall body was heavy with powerful muscles.

“I could gut them,” he offered in his gentle voice.

The idea had merit. Blasters would be too quick and clean, and the woman didn’t want them spaced. Truthfully, Eivaunee had some problems with that as well, although for pirates... Considering Zsar’t’lac’s dislike for pirates, Eivaunee was sure the alien would not make the guttings quick. Overall, a reasonable compromise.

“Fine,” he decided.

The four men said nothing. There was little they could say. They had been caught in the act of piracy and the penalty for that was death. They were realistically grateful for not being spaced.

“Computer, Official Action Notification.”

“Official Action section open and recording,” the ship’s system replied.

“I, Eivaunee Dorlan, Commissioner for the Provinces, under Emperor Hazdel Toneki, do sentence these four men, taken in the act of piracy, to death by gutting. Their executions will be carried out by Officer Zsar’t’lac. End of record.”

“Record complete, session ended. Official Action section closed.”

“All right, Zsar’t’lac; take care of it. I’ll take Saret and Fransi Talgar to their quarters.”

“As my Commander wills,” the alien replied quietly. There was neither pleasure nor annoyance in his voice or his face. It was simply a command to be carried out. If it gave him more satisfaction than some, it wasn’t obvious.

Eivaunee could have turned over escorting Saret and Fransi to one of the security people, but he knew his presence was reassuring to people who were frightened, so he chose to take care of the matter himself.

“This way,” he pointed to the main exit out of the shuttle bay.

The woman nodded nervously, her eyes still looking around the shuttle bay. The young

man's hands released a little of their hard grip. As they started walking away, Saret turned to Eivaunee, her eyes still open wide. "What is going to happen to us? Where are you taking us? What about our ship?"

"The nearest settlement is on Askivera. We will take you there. Your ship is air blown, so it is subject to space treaty laws on salvage. Whoever salvages it first, it's theirs." Eivaunee's tone was gentle. "If there is something you need to retrieve from the ship, let me know now, and I'll have the security team bring it back."

"The pirates already took everything back to their ship. We were the last trip," the woman said softly.

"The pirate ship was destroyed, so everything on it is gone," Eivaunee pointed out, his tone continuing to be gentle.

"But *Talgar's Folly* is our ship!" the young man stated emphatically. "We need it!"

"It is air blown," Eivaunee repeated firmly.

"But can't you tow it? That's what a salvage company will do," Fransi asked.

"Askivera is a day away by Jump. We can't Jump with a ship in tow. Without Jumping, and with a ship in tow, it would take a month to make Askivera," Eivaunee pointed out the obvious.

"I understand," Saret said softly.

"But that isn't right! The pirates have taken away everything - our family - our livelihood!" Fransi was trying to salvage something out of the horror of the last hours.

"And they will die for it," Eivaunee replied firmly. "And your whole family isn't dead - you still have each other. You are alive; you have that."

"And our mother. She wasn't on the ship," Saret spoke as much to her brother and herself, as to Eivaunee. "How will we tell her?" she ended softly.

No one answered her. They finished the walk in silence.

Eivaunee pressed his palm against the door panel to release it. "Reset," he told the machine. "This will be your room, Saret," he told her. She said nothing, staring ahead. "You need to reset the lock," he pointed out gently. She placed her hand against the palm plate and waited for the soft tone that indicated the machinery had stored her palm print.

"You're in the next room," Eivaunee told Fransi. "I'll send Officer Watii, our Medic, to both of you."

"We don't need a Medic," Fransi stated for both of them.

"You will see him anyway," Eivaunee commanded flatly.

"Fransi, please," Saret said softly, placing her hand on her brother's arm.

The young, angry man made no reply.

Eivaunee walked with the young man to the next doorway, and saw that lock was reset as

well. After the two people entered their rooms, Eivaunee walked away. A short distance down the hall, he stopped and touched a communication console set in the wall. He ordered Officer Watii to attend the two young people. He paused for a moment after that. He knew what he wanted, but he wasn't sure how Zsar't'lac would feel about it. He decided it wouldn't hurt to ask.

"Officer Zsar't'lac," he told the machinery. He didn't know where Zsar't'lac had taken the men for execution, but the computer would find him.

"Officer Zsar't'lac here," the reply came back quickly.

"Zsar, have you finished killing the prisoners yet?"

"I have killed three of them."

"Would you mind if I watched you kill the last one?" Eivaunee asked, knowing that when Zsar't'lac killed like this, he normally didn't like an audience.

"No, my Commander, come and watch."

"Where are you?"

"Gymnasium 3B, Room 4."

One of the small gyms near the shuttle bay. "I'll be right there."

"As you will."

Eivaunee stopped just inside the door. The room reeked of blood, sweat, and fear mingled together. Weapons Technician Janus was standing to one side of the room. The center of the floor was slick with blood. The bodies of the three men Zsar't'lac had killed were pushed into a corner. Zsar't'lac had several cuts on his arms, nothing major. Hsassan had excellent regeneration abilities; the wounds would heal within an hour or so. The remaining pirate was the large, blond-braided man. Zsar't'lac's eyes were flaring a steady dark red, the color of killing.

Eivaunee stepped further into the room, allowing the automatic door to close. He felt uneasy. Was he reaching a point where he enjoyed watching killings?

"There is satisfaction in killing those who deserve to die," the alien said, answering Eivaunee's unspoken emotion. "You have ordered it—why not watch it?"

"It's a slippery road, Zsar," the Commissioner for the Provinces replied. "Deciding who 'deserves' death." "But you do decide, and there is no doubt with these, so what is the problem?"

Only with Zsar't'lac could he have such an intellectual debate over the emotional aspects of watching an execution. "Satisfaction is one thing, Zsar, but—"

There was a softening around the mouth of the alien, his form of a smile when he was in his more Hsassan aspect.

"Are you afraid you'll feel something more?" Zsar't'lac asked. "You've ordered executions and watched them before."

"Not like this," Eivaunee returned. "Not with you."

“No,” the alien agreed gently. “Normally, you execute people at the Emperor’s command, and the holo cameras are running. But frequently I am the executioner—or at least one of them.”

“This is different.”

“True,” the alien agreed. He picked up a long knife off the floor. “Smaller, more intimate, and more violent.”

“Exactly.”

The alien threw the long knife down on the floor by the tattooed pirate. “Don’t worry, my Commander, you are not the type to find pleasure stimulation in violent death, under any circumstances.” Zsar’t’lac’s black-bladed Hsassan knife was considerably shorter than the knife he’d thrown to his opponent. The alien’s claws were partially extended, digging into the black, organic hilt of the knife.

In their four years together, the alien had probed deep into Eivaunee’s emotions. Despite the many emotions Eivaunee had walled off, the alien understood him better than the golden human understood himself. They both knew this. Eivaunee accepted the alien’s judgement.

“Why give him a knife, Zsar?”

“I dislike killing anyone who is totally unarmed.”

Eivaunee nodded. He was a little surprised at the presence of Weapons Technician Janus, but recently Zsar’t’lac had taken a slight interest in teaching the young man, who so obviously hero-worshiped him, a little about the Hsassan way of life.

The last pirate reached down and picked up the long knife. His expression showed his thoughts: he had watched his companions die, and knew he had no chance against the Hsassan, but he could at least mark him. The pirate charged. Zsar’t’lac stepped to the side, knocking the long knife off target, and stabbing his shorter Hsassan knife hard into the man’s lower right abdomen. The man grunted in pain. Zsar’t’lac pushed him backwards, off his knife. The man stumbled a little, then turned, chopping downward. Zsar’t’lac turned away from the blow, but not quite far enough. The knife raked down his left arm. Zsar’t’lac ignored the wound and stabbed his opponent. This time in the lower left abdomen. The blond man gave a muted cry of pain and anger. The fight continued, close and brutal. Zsar’t’lac was cut twice more, once on his chest, once on his right arm. He ignored the wounds, as he ignored the earlier ones. He took care to place his knife exactly where he wanted, in deep stabbing wounds, exquisitely painful, but not immediately fatal. The large blond man stumbled and fell to his knees.

Zsar’t’lac grabbed the top of the pirate’s hair and pulled his head up. Turning towards his Commander, he asked, “Do you wish him to die now?”

“Yes. It is enough.”

Zsar’t’lac was right, Eivaunee thought; he felt no pleasure in this.

“As you wish,” the alien said gently, and quickly slit the man’s throat, dropping the body to the floor.

Eivaunee was watching the alien's eyes. They were still a deep dark red. There were no light iridescence or light reds—the colors of pleasure—dancing in them. That was reassuring.

The alien raised a thin eyebrow at Eivaunee. “Worried about me now?”

“A little,” Eivaunee replied honestly.

“Don't be.”

Eivaunee wanted to see the pirates die out of anger at what they had done. Saret and Fransi's lives had been brutally altered; they would bear the emotional scars all their lives. Watching violence follow violence, though, gave him no real satisfaction other than knowing that these pirates wouldn't kill again. It was something.

Eivaunee looked away from the gory mess. He wanted to return to something non-violent, something very mundane.

“Do you intend to eat at the first, or second, sitting, Zsar?” Eivaunee asked the most mundane question he could think of.

Zsar't'lac knelt to clean his knife on the dead man's clothing. “When were you planning to eat, Eivaun?” he asked in return, using the familiar diminutive of his Commander's name that he alone on the ship ever used.

“The first sitting, but if you can't get cleaned up in time ...”

“I should be able to.” The dark red was beginning to fade from his large round eyes.

Eivaunee stood a moment longer, uncertain. The men hadn't taken that long to die, he reminded himself; five minutes maybe. Their victims doubtless suffered longer. Eivaunee ended up wishing he had enjoyed watching the execution.

“I'll see you then,” he said, turning to leave the gym.

“Soft,” Weapons Technician Janus declared as the door closed behind his Commander.

“Soft?” Zsar't'lac questioned back. “I wonder if you are stupid?”

“Sir?”

“Killing is easy,” the alien replied. “Stopping the killing is far harder.”

“But you kill.”

“Yes, and there are times when I enjoy it,” Zsar't'lac returned. “But if Commander Dorlan doesn't like killing, it doesn't make him soft or weak. Especially if he doesn't like this type of killing; I find no pleasure in it either. There is no challenge in killing such as these. They have no strength—no honor.”

“The strength of your opponent gives you honor,” Janus repeated what Zsar't'lac had taught him.

“Exactly,” the alien agreed. “And there are many types of strength, physical strength is the least of them.”

“What a bloody mess,” a new voice commented.

Zsar’t’lac had already mentally noted the arrival of his yeoman, Tamreh.

“A bit, yes,” Zsar’t’lac agreed, turning to look at Tamreh. “You remembered to bring clean boots. You are a jewel.”

Tamreh smiled. He had served a variety of officers during his years in Fleet service, but none as pleasant as the large alien.

“Janus, call someone to help you clean up this mess. I need to get showering if I’m going to make the first dinner seating.”

Tamreh followed Zsar’t’lac into the shower room, carrying his change of clothes. Zsar’t’lac stripped off his blood soaked uniform, leaving it lying on the floor. “Dispose of the uniform, Tamreh. The boots, I’m afraid, will have to be cleaned.”

“If I get to them before the blood dries, it isn’t that bad.” He had experience cleaning blood off of the alien’s clothing. “Anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

The door closed behind Tamreh as Zsar’t’lac began washing. He didn’t like the smell of human blood. It had too warm a scent, a sweet, cloying smell. The scent of Norda blood was much better, cleaner and sharper, with a slight metallic edge.

Zsar’t’lac preferred to be alone at times like this—or at least have no humans around him. A few moments would be all he would need before going into dinner. Executing the four men concerned him not at all. It was something that needed to be done, and he had done it. He had left the large blond human until last because his emotional profile indicated he was the leader. There was also a sadistic aspect to his emotions. Zsar’t’lac wanted him to feel some of the pain he had given to others. The water fell over and around the alien, washing the human gore away. It felt good.

Zsar’t’lac stepped from the shower and toweled off quickly. He braided his long blue-black hair into a single thick braid in back. He paused for a moment more, settling his mind, before leaving the shower room and returning to a life surrounded by humans. They were a difficult species.

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Zsar’t’lac walked into the green and gold Officers’ Dining Room. Eivaunee sat in the center of the Commander’s table. The seat on his left was vacant, reserved for Zsar’t’lac, his second-in-command. On Eivaunee’s right, sat Fransi Talgar. The sister wasn’t present. Zsar’t’lac scanned Fransi’s emotions. Mainly, he was angry, with the usual human corollary, he wanted to find someone to blame. As Zsar’t’lac seated himself, Fransi was stating his point-of-view.

“The Provinces need more patrol ships. This wouldn’t have happened if there were more patrol ships. The Provinces are one third of the Empire, but have less patrol ships than any of the Inner Colony groups. I don’t under that.”

The Emperor's paranoia was part of the reason. "The whole Empire is short of money," Eivaunee responded with a much more politically correct answer. "I have petitioned the Emperor for more patrol craft." Small craft, useful for taking care of things like pirate ships. Small ships that would be realistically non-threatening to the Emperor, if it could be said that Hazdel Toneki could find anything non-threatening where Eivaunee Dorlan was involved.

"And when will we see these patrol ships? When the Emperor has no personal use for the credits?"

"You forget yourself," Eivaunee stated with cold hauteur.

Fransi froze. In his anger, he had forgotten that whatever might be assumed about Eivaunee Dorlan's personal opinions of the Emperor, the golden human always publicly supported him. He had to. Everyone in the Provinces knew that.

"I - it was - is - "

"—your grief speaking," Eivaunee finished the sentence for him. "A certain amount of anger is natural given what you have been through. Past a certain point, however, discretion is necessary."

Eivaunee, more than any other living human, knew that.

"How is your sister?" Zsar't'lac asked, pointedly changing the subject.

"My sister?" Fransi echoed uncertainly.

"Your sister," the alien repeated firmly, offering the subject as a support.

"The Medic gave her a sedative," Fransi replied. "He said she'll sleep until morning."

Morning being a convenient time reference for beings with diurnal biological cycles. Even after years in space, humans needed the concept of days and nights. The ship's lighting even dimmed a little at "nightfall." It was one of the few human customs Zsar't'lac liked.

Eivaunee steered the conversation towards more general concepts of space security and salvage laws. Fransi Talgar didn't like what Eivaunee said, but the Commissioner for the Provinces kept the conversation under tight control.

After dinner, Eivaunee suggested that Fransi discuss of the ship's recreational offerings with Officer Nque, who headed the recreational section.

Zsar't'lac returned to the bridge to set up for the Jump to Askivera. Eivaunee went back to his quarters to continue a report to the Emperor. He would add another - no doubt futile - request for more small craft to patrol the Provinces. The Emperor didn't care about pirates, only traitors and rebels; they might interrupt the income flow from the Provinces. There was a hard bitterness in Eivaunee.

* * * * *

It was late the next morning before Eivaunee got a chance to visit Saret Talgar. She was quiet, feeling the pain of her loss. Eivaunee repeated what he had told her brother the night

before, discussing the options involved in salvage laws. He wanted to give her something to think about beyond the deaths of her father and brother. Her responses were soft-spoken and honest. Their financial situation had not been good before the attack. Now, with their cargo gone, there was no money left to have their ship salvaged.

Eivaunee left Saret's room and went to one of the gyms to work out. He pushed his body hard, preferring physical stress to what he had in his mind and soul. He sent the ship's psychologist to both of the Talgars and had a meeting with Zsar't'lac on the status of the ship.

Saret Talgar, as well as Fransi, joined the Commander's table for dinner that night. Talk was general and subdued. At one point Zsar't'lac laid one of his long three-fingered hands over Saret's. It surprised her, but it also felt good. She left her hand under the alien's for the remainder of the meal. After dinner, the two guests retired back to their rooms to decide what to do when they got to Akivera.

Eivaunee returned to his office where a message from Jiti Dennyson, head of Military High Command, was waiting. Military Command was thinking of using the Comveckt in an exercise involving a new high-energy plasma cannon. The major problem was the Comveckt would have to go to the space docks at Asgar II to build in the cannon. The Comveckt would be out of commission for a couple of weeks. The final decision, one in which Eivaunee would have no say, would be made next month; Dennyson was just giving Eivaunee some warning.

Eivaunee appreciated Dennyson's advance notice. Jiti Dennyson was an entitled Consenti, and the hereditary Commissioner of the Military, the person in charge of all military actions in the Klimar Empire. Jiti had been a close friend of Eivaunee's father. Whenever possible, within the boundaries of his strict definition of neutrality, and his oath of fealty to the Emperor, Dennyson gave Eivaunee as much support as he could.

Eivaunee spent the next couple of hours reading the military files on this new plasma cannon. He routed the information to Zsar't'lac, who was far more a weapons expert than Eivaunee, and who, moreover, would be the person more closely involved in testing it.

The door sounded. "Identify," Eivaunee absent-mindedly. It was unlikely to be anyone but Zsar't'lac or Con Noate. Eivaunee didn't have many visitors. He preferred it that way.

"Am I - am I intruding?" a female voice asked.

Certainly not Zsar't'lac's or Con Noate's voice. "Identify," Eivaunee repeated.

"Saret Talgar."

"Come," Eivaunee released the door.

The small anteroom visitors entered when they first came into Eivaunee's quarters had two doorways, one to his office, the other to his living room.

The slender woman stood hesitantly in the anteroom, uncertain of which way to go. Eivaunee left his office and entered the anteroom gesturing towards the door to his living room. "Come in. I was thinking of taking a break."

"You're sure I'm not intruding?" Saret had a frightened, tired look. It was obvious she'd

been crying.

“You are not intruding,” Eivaunee said firmly. “I would enjoy some company. Would you like some wine—or something else?”

Saret was looking around the room. It seemed very strange for a battleship. She had never been in any house of the very wealthy, but she had seen holos. This was like one of their rooms, only smaller. The furniture was massive and made of real wood. The colors were strong, rich burgundy and dark blue, with real gold picking out the details of the carvings on the furniture. There were even carved moldings accentuating the tall ceiling. Across one of the wall there was a line of bookcases. She had heard of such things, but she had never seen a book except in a museum. No one she knew owned one; everyone had digital readers. The rug that covered the floor brought together all the colors in the room in an abstract, muted way. It was thick and soft and incredibly beautiful.

“The carpet is gorgeous,” she found herself saying. “This whole room is beautiful.”

Eivaunee looked down. He was used to the carpet now, but he remembered when it had first arrived, he had felt much the same way.

“Actually Zsar’t’lac designed it. This is his second attempt. The first was a little strong in color and the design was too complex for my taste, but we worked with it and he came up with this. I had it woven on one of my Estates.”

The idea of Eivaunee Dorlan, the wealthiest man in the Empire, and his alien warrior officer conferring over carpet design seemed more than a little unreal to Saret. Then so did much of the past two days. She wished—hoped—this was all some ghastly nightmare and that she would wake up soon and find herself safe in her sling bed on their little trading vessel. She wanted very much to believe that, but she couldn’t. Her father and her youngest brother were dead. Their ship lost to salvagers. And sometime in the near future she would have to tell her mother what happened. Her eyes began to fill with tears.

“Wine?” Eivaunee offered again.

Saret nodded, brushing away her tears.

“White, red, or blue?” he asked.

“White, please,” Saret answered. Then, looking for some safe conversation added: “I wouldn’t have thought you’d have blue.”

“My third-in-command, Con Noate, likes the instant manufactured stuff,” Eivaunee explained. “I keep some for him.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” Saret said quietly. Actually she was surprised at how different this low-key, considerate man was from his image on the news holos. There he always seemed proud and arrogant. Not surprising considering his wealth and that he was the second most powerful person in the Klimar Empire. A member of the Consenti he could do anything he wanted. Even kill at whim. Only the Emperor, or the Consenti Council, could discipline an entitled Consenti.

This person, though, wasn’t arrogant or proud. He was kind and considerate. She had heard

that he was, but she always thought that was something people just said to be nice.

“Con Noate has helped me out many times, beyond anything required by his position. I can at least store some wine for him.” Eivaunee opened two demi-bottles, one a light, golden amber, the other a dark red. He poured the wine into two cut crystal wineglasses. He handed Saret the one containing the sweet, amber wine. She took the glass a little hesitantly as though afraid of breaking the delicate glass.

“Would you like to sit down?” Eivaunee gestured at two richly upholstered chairs, between them was a small inlaid wood table.

Saret sat at the edge of one of the chairs. “Fransi is still very angry.”

“Many people react to tragedy that way. How are you managing?”

“All right,” Saret replied, a little shakily.

“Have you decided what you will do when you get to Askivera?”

Saret nodded. “We’re going to work passage back. I’m a pilot; Fransi’s a navigator. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

Eivaunee sipped his wine and nodded his agreement.

Saret continued. “We decided we have to tell Mom this in person. She and Dad were close. She was always worrying something like this would happen. And Telmen was her favorite, her youngest, you know.”

Eivaunee said nothing; he simply listened.

“Mom had plans for him. He wasn’t going to be a trader. No, not her youngest.” Saret’s eyes filled with tears again; they spilled down over her cheeks.

Eivaunee let her cry, releasing her grief. After a few moments, she sniffed noisily. Eivaunee got her something to blow her nose on.

“I’m sorry,” Saret said softly.

“It’s understandable,” Eivaunee replied gently.

“I’m cold. I keep feeling so very cold.” Saret hunched her shoulders as though against a wind.

“I know the feeling,” Eivaunee said. He went into his bedroom and came out with his long silk robe and a blanket. He put the blanket on the back of the couch and handed Saret the silk robe that was lined with kalla. Saret had been raised in a trader’s house; she touched the kalla lightly. She could only guess at the robe’s worth. She had seen kalla lined mittens, and even those only the very rich could afford. A whole robe lined with the soft, silken fibers! She slid the robe on and rubbed her cheek against the turned-over collar. “Nothing feels as good as kalla.”

Eivaunee smiled, glad the robe had momentarily distracted her. He stretched his long legs out in front of the massive chair.

Saret looked up at him. The expression in her face told him what was coming next. He

thought about how he wanted to handle the situation, then realized he had made the decision when he picked up the blanket in the bedroom. Female victims coming to his quarters for comfort was not particularly unusual.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight,” Saret said softly, wrapping the robe more closely around her. She was afraid and her brother’s anger didn’t help. This man, with his power and wealth, made her feel safe, and tonight she needed that. Needed that very much.

“The first couple of nights after a loss are always the worse,” Eivaunee said gently. “You never want to be alone.”

The very real compassion in his voice said he spoke from experience. Saret knew he did. He might not remember his mother’s suicide; he had only been three, but he had graduated from the Academy when his father’s ship blew up. Like most people, Saret had heard the rumors that the Emperor was responsible.

“You can stay here tonight,” Eivaunee said, shifting a little forward. “But there are two conditions.”

Eivaunee saw the slight increase in sadness in her face, and knew the reason for it. “The first condition is that there will be no sex; the second is that we talk about you, not me. I know about myself; I’d like to learn more about you.”

The first condition relieved Saret. She had thought he would say the reverse. Then she wondered, contrarily, if she wasn’t attractive enough to interest him. “Why no sex?”

Eivaunee raised a pale blonde eyebrow. “Do you really want that?”

“No,” Saret replied flatly. Any other time that answer would have been very different. He was the most attractive man she had ever seen, but this wasn’t any other time. “I just - wondered...”

Eivaunee smiled. This too was very common. “Shall I put it bluntly? The Comveckt hasn’t made planet fall in two months, and I have a rule against having lovers under my command, which includes everyone on this ship. Breathing and female would be sufficient for me just now.”

“Oh.”

“But I also have some compunctions about taking advantage of people.”

“Thank you,” Saret said softly, thinking he truly was like a prince from a fairy tale.

CHAPTER 3

The door sounded distantly in Eivaunee's sleep. He woke groggily and in some discomfort. There was a weight lying against him. The door sounded again. "Come," Eivaunee said irritably. It would be Zsar't'lac or Podi Blinet, his personal body servant, the only other person on the ship, besides Devei Sanqu, in personal fealty to him.

Eivaunee opened his eyes to view the weight on his chest. Saret. Now he remembered. They had talked for quite some time before falling asleep. Eivaunee's neck was stiff and sore. He tried rotating his head to ease the stiffness. Saret made a soft, sleepy sound.

"So the great man claims his reward," a voice stated bitterly.

Eivaunee turned his stiff neck to see Fransi standing in the doorway.

"No wonder there aren't more patrol vessels," the young man continued, his cold tone. "You don't want anyone sharing the gratitude of the survivors."

"Fransi! No!" Saret was wide awake now. "It isn't—"

"Be silent," Eivaunee commanded her curtly. They remained lying together on the couch, the blanket pulled over them.

"So your sense of honor is outraged." Eivaunee's voice had a dangerous softness, his amber eyes glittered angrily. He was stiff, tired, and sore. It made his temper distinctly shorter. "Just who do you think you are speaking to?" The arrogance, seen so often in holos, was clear now.

"No, please," Saret said softly.

The door sounded again.

"Admission denied," Eivaunee stated firmly. Whoever it was, they could damn well wait until he had settled this.

"Only so many allowances can be made for grief," Eivaunee continued. "A touch of a whip can teach you now, or it could be your life, or your sister's, later."

Eivaunee threw back the blanket. Saret sat up, her eyes wide with worry. Eivaunee was fully dressed; he hadn't even removed his Commander's overtunic.

"I—" Fransi began and then stopped; there was nothing he could say.

The outer door was heard to open and then the door to the living room. Zsar't'lac walked in with a pot of coffee.

Saret and Fransi stared dumbfounded as the tall alien walked over the small serving area set in the wall on one side.

"I said admission denied." Eivaunee's voice could have cut steel.

"Yes, I understood that when the door didn't open," the alien replied calmly.

"Would you like the flogging I was about to order?" Eivaunee was furious with his officer's action.

"Of course not," the alien replied calmly. He poured a cup of coffee and turned to his commander. "One spoon of sweetener, or would you like two—to improve your mood?"

Calm, black alien eyes met glittering angry human eyes. After a moment, Zsar't'lac's eyes shifted to flick over the two other humans in the room.

"I think you've frightened him quite sufficiently," the alien said. "But if you truly feel a flogging is necessary ... "

Eivaunee was far angrier with his alien officer now than with Fransi Talgar. His anger was made worse by knowing that was exactly what Zsar't'lac meant to do.

"Leave, both of you," Eivaunee commanded, his eyes not looking away from his officer's.

The two frightened guests needed no additional prompting. A conflict, of whatever variety, between the Commissioner for the Provinces and his tall, powerful alien officer was not something either wanted to witness. The door closed softly behind them.

"You go too far sometimes, Zsar't'lac," Eivaunee said coldly.

"Do I?" the alien questioned back, his tone unconcerned. He handed his commander the cup of coffee. He had only put one spoon of sweetener in it. He turned away to pour himself a cup.

"Do you think I would never order you flogged?" Eivaunee asked, still quite angry.

"No," the alien said gently. "But I doubt I would allow it."

"Floggings aren't allowed, they're endured."

"A human would have to endure it. I would have to allow it."

"Shall we find out?" Eivaunee asked coldly, his coffee still untouched.

"Why?" the alien challenged back. He picked up his coffee and walked over to sit in one of the large chairs. "I wouldn't think you are feeling that threatened by me. At least not at this point. Floggings between adult males are most often is an issue of dominance. I would think we have that settled enough between us."

"Do we?" Eivaunee countered. "I think you sometimes forget who is in command."

"No," the alien disagreed gently. "You command this ship, and as much as the Emperor will allow you, you rule the Provinces."

"Do I command you?"

The alien laughed softly, a gentle musical sound. "That is, of course, the crux of the matter.

For the most part, yes.”

Eivaunee made an exasperated sound, part annoyance, part surrender. “Someday, Zsar’t’lac, I may order that flogging.”

“If it comes to that, my Commander, wield the whip yourself.”

Eivaunee finally picked up the cup of coffee and took a long sip. The hot beverage eased his mood a little. “Why?” he asked, his anger continuing to fade. He enjoyed probing his alien officer’s psyche.

“If anyone else did, I’d have to kill them. A matter of honor.”

“If I order it—“ Eivaunee’s anger began to return.

“Then take the chance yourself on how I’ll react.”

Hard winning an argument against an alien messiah, Eivaunee decided for the hundredth time. He wasn’t the only one to feel that way, human or Norda. He took another long drink of his coffee. “Why did you care if I flogged the young idiot?”

“Because you would. Later.”

“I’d have ordered a light sentence,” Eivaunee pointed out. “I meant what I said about it being time he thought beyond his anger. Askivera’s a rough planet. If that young man doesn’t start controlling his temper better, he will get himself, or Saret, killed.”

“Quite possibly true,” the alien agreed without much concern. “But I think you scared enough to start him thinking in those directions.”

Eivaunee finished his coffee and handed the cup back to Zsar’t’lac, who considered the matter for a moment before getting up and pouring his commander a second cup. No sweetener this time. Eivaunee only liked that in his first cup of the day.

“What actually brought you here this morning?” Eivaunee asked as he accepted the cup. “It isn’t exactly your habit to bring me my morning coffee.”

“No, and Podi Blinet will doubtless complain to you about it.”

“No doubt.” Podi Blinet, Eivaunee’s long-term body-servant was more than a little xenophobic, as well as jealous of the alien officer.

“Fransi came to me first looking for his sister. She isn’t in the ship’s system. For the short time they were going to be on the ship, I didn’t think it would be necessary to implant an ID locator chip.”

“I agree. He came to you first because you were holding her hand last night?” Eivaunee’s tone made it a question.

“And because I was easier to find in CommCent.”

“And you told him she was likely with me?” That surprised Eivaunee.

“No. I told him that his sister wasn’t with me last night. He made the leap to you. I judged

how the situation was likely to play out and thought I'd stop by with some coffee."

"Probably best." Eivaunee conceded, although he disliked admitting the alien was right.

Zsar't'lac put his cup down and walked behind Eivaunee's chair. "Tilt your head down."

Eivaunee did. He knew what was coming. The alien's long hands massaged the tight muscles in Eivaunee's neck and then up under the soft, silken hair. "You normally don't react this strongly when I override the lock." With his touch, Zsar't'lac transmitted a feeling of gentle reassurance. His ability to transmit, as well as feel, emotions wasn't an ability Eivaunee knew about.

"I was already angry," Eivaunee explained, feeling the hard tension begin to relax. "And sore and tired. And frustrated with having a woman lay on top of me most of the night. That feels good. My neck is really stiff."

"Your neck I can help," the alien said softly. "For your sexual frustration, you should make one of your female officers happy. Most pray nightly for the opportunity."

"No," Eivaunee stated firmly. "Even if what you say is true. I could never be sure that they didn't feel coerced. Or weren't just looking for a promotion."

The alien stopped the massage.

"Thanks," Eivaunee said, standing up, feeling as though he should apologize to the alien. He didn't; he still wasn't in that good a mood. "I need to get some breakfast and a long hot shower. We'll meet later to discuss ship business."

"As you will," Zsar't'lac replied in standard form, his long, finger tracing down the side of Eivaunee's face.

His commander smiled. "What I need is a woman officer like you."

"To have as a lover?"

"Yes. Someone like you. I would never feel I could coerce them—and they would be too honest to seek a promotion in bed."

"I do not think my bearer would accept you as a lover," Zsar't'lac replied, his sharp predator's teeth flashing in a real smile. "And I truly cannot see her as one of your officers." Thinking of Conli, his bearer, brought light red flames to Zsar't'lac's black eyes. Conli was leading a revolution in the Homelands. Designed and executed from within the sheltered walls of the women's quarters. "And she is the only female I know who is at all like me."

Zsar't'lac knew Eivaunee never took male lovers. He was strictly what the humans called heterosexual. Zsar't'lac had no trouble with the concept of male lovers. His only beloved, Sing'm'li, was male. But he would never take a human male lover. That would be dishonor. Not only to himself, but to Sing'm'li. Human females were acceptable; the sexual relationship was different.

"Oh, go give someone else a difficult time, Zsar," Eivaunee dismissed him. "I want a shower and breakfast."

"As you will, my Commander."

Eivaunee ate his breakfast while checking his messages. He accessed his urgent file first—just two items. The first one was a disputed inheritance that the local Regional Authority referred to him. The two contestors, minor nobles with sizable groups of paid retainers, had rejected the Regional Governor's arbitration, and it looked as though the problem might escalate to armed conflict. Eivaunee scanned the pertinent documents. No easy answers there. He set them aside to deal with later.

The second item was an agricultural failure on one of the marginal worlds. Eivaunee checked the records. It had been recently settled by a group of religious fanatics; that was never good. It had a proper atmosphere, but very little water. Eivaunee shook his head. Now that the best worlds were settled, people were settling the more marginal ones. It was the second agricultural failure on that world in three years.

Eivaunee hesitated briefly before authorizing the release of food supplies from the central authority in the area. He also sent a short memo to the Regional Authority that she was to tell the inhabitants that if there was another agricultural failure in less than three years, he would order relocation.

With the urgent business temporarily settled, Eivaunee turned to something more personal. He accessed the ship's main library system and asked it to research a question for him. Then he contacted Henri Canby, the ship's Information Officer, who was a relative of Eivaunee's working his way through his Fleet apprenticeships. There was no love lost between the two men, but Officer Canby could be counted on to follow orders. That he would also report anything of interest to the Emperor was understood. Eivaunee told his relative what he wanted. The arrogant younger man sniffed in a way that said he knew exactly what Eivaunee had in mind and he didn't approve. Eivaunee didn't care about that. He returned his attention to the inheritance problem while the library system worked on his question. It didn't take the computer long. Henri Canby took a bit longer. When Eivaunee had the information from both sources, he smiled. Better than he expected. He authorized a line of credit from one of his business account and inserted a credit chit into the computer.

* * * * *

Saret Talgar standing by the shuttle craft looking worriedly towards the door to the main section of the ship. Her brother was standing by her, impatient with the delay. Saret smiled in relief when she saw Eivaunee finally come through the door. Zsar't'lac was standing to one side, by the pilot. He had orders that the two Talgars were not to leave until after Eivaunee arrived.

Eivaunee walked down the few steps into the shuttle bay. "I didn't forget you."

Saret's smile widened. "I wanted to say good-bye," she said softly. During their long talk the night before, she had been surprised at how he had listened to her talk of her life, her hopes and fears. Particularly the latter, now that their ship gone.

As Eivaunee walked up to her, he held out a credit chit. Saret hesitantly took it.

"There's enough on that to salvage your ship and get you something of a cargo," Eivaunee told her.

"I ... I don't know what it costs to salvage a ship in this area," she told him.

"Neither did I until this morning. The computer's library checked it out for me. Also on the chit is the name of the most reputable salvage company on the planet. One of the ship's personnel checked that out for me."

"I ... I don't know how I can repay this."

"When you show a profit, Dorlan Enterprises will take ten percent. This is strictly a business deal," Eivaunee told her. "One of my people will contact you later with a contract."

"But what if we don't make a profit?" Saret didn't want charity.

Eivaunee smiled. "I think you will. If not, well, all business has risks."

"Thank you," Saret said softly. "Actually for everything you've done, the words seem very small."

"Sir—" Fransi began.

Eivaunee gestured him to be silent. "It is very little to me, Saret. Take care of yourself and your family. They're worth far more than what's on that chit."

Saret's expression changed.

Zsar't'lac swore softly under his breath, and started to step forward. He stopped; there was nothing he could do. Not here—not this publicly.

Saret's face wore a look of sympathy, then worse, it changed to pity. "I'm so sorry. You have no family," Saret said.

Eivaunee silently cursed his stupidity. He spoke without thinking. His expression became distant and closed. He focused on blocking out the angry and useless emotions.

Saret stepped close to Eivaunee and wrapped her arms around his neck. Eivaunee held the woman close for a moment and then stepped back.

"Take care," he said with finality, including the young man with a sweep of his eyes. He nodded to the shuttle pilot who stepped forward. Eivaunee turned, and with Zsar't'lac behind him, left the shuttle bay.

They entered the ship's central corridor. For just a moment, it was deserted. Zsar't'lac was grateful for that. He set his mind for what he wanted and then slid his long three-fingered hands to each side of Eivaunee's neck, where flesh could touch against flesh; it worked best that way.

Eivaunee could feel, more strongly than ever before, a sense of reassurance, a sense of peace and tranquility. Eivaunee leaned back into the alien's hands and let the peace envelop him. His rage at the Emperor who had killed his family retreated. It was best thus; there was nothing he could do. Nothing that wouldn't give the Emperor exactly what he wanted: the Dorlan Estates. Eivaunee had sworn never to allow that.

The woman's pity, however well meant, served no useful purpose. It only triggered this futile anger. Eivaunee took a deep breath; he wanted to stay like this—held in a gentle, reassuring web of emotion. After a moment, there was the sound of soft-soled boots and Zsar't'lac released his Commander.

Eivaunee felt an emptiness, but the anger was gone. "Thank you," he said softly. The alien

made no reply. Eivaunee turned towards him. “Are you needed somewhere now, Zsar?”

“I’m on duty in CommCent soon,” the alien replied.

“I’d like to talk to you about what you just did. In my quarters. It shouldn’t take long.”

“As you wish.” Zsar’t’lac knew a question and answer session was coming, but it didn’t matter. He knew that sooner or later Eivaunee would figure out what he was doing. Given Eivaunee’s intelligence, Zsar’t’lac was surprised it had taken so long, but then the golden human never spent much time analyzing his emotions. They walked the short distance to Eivaunee’s quarters in silence.

The door closed behind them. Eivaunee walked over to the refreshment center. “Want anything to drink?”

“No.”

“That was interesting, Zsar, what you just did,” Eivaunee began. “In the past I’ve wondered if you can transmit emotions as well as feel them. You can, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you just did that with me.”

“Yes.” Zsar’t’lac sat down in one of the overlarge chairs, stretching his long legs out in front.

Eivaunee poured himself some coffee and continued to stand. “Want to talk about it?”

“What do you want to know?”

“What emotions can you transmit? And does it always work?”

“The only emotion I’ve ever trying transmitting with humans is a sort of reassurance. And that works, if the person wants to be reassured. If they don’t the reassurance, they break the contact.”

“Contact is necessary?” Eivaunee repeated.

“It works best that way.”

“And reassurance is the only emotion you can transmit?” That didn’t seem likely;

Zsar’t’lac’s
empathic abilities covered all emotions.

“It’s all I’ve ever tried with humans,” Zsar’t’lac reiterated. He paused before continuing, searching for the right human words. “Manipulating the emotions of intelligent beings...there is—should be—a question of honor involved.”

“But you don’t feel that’s a problem with ‘reassuring’ intelligent beings?”

“No, because as I said, if they don’t want to be reassured, the contact is broken.”

“You know this for a fact?”

“Yes,” the alien replied, smiling slightly. “You’ve pushed my hands away a number of times.”

Eivaunee sipped his coffee. There was silence as he considered his alien officer’s words. It was something he had learned to be careful of with the alien. He always spoke the truth, but you had to listen carefully. “What about with your own species?”

“As far as I can tell, any emotion I can feel, I can transmit under the right circumstances.”

“That being?”

“Physical contact helps, and I have to focus on the emotion—focus on transmitting it.”

“Theoretically you could transmit any emotion to a human then.”

“I don’t know. Emotions are, in part, culturally defined. Human and Norda cultures are very different, it is likely there are differences in how beings...people...perceive—and feel—emotions.”

“It could be useful—“

“No,” the alien said flatly. “Reassurance is the only emotion I will transmit to a human. I repeat: there is a question of honor involved.”

“But if you transmitted other emotions in the Homelands, why not here?”

“In the Homelands, I only tested sending emotions once. It was not something I ever did outside of the one set of trials, and the Hsassan I was transmitting the emotions to knew of my ability. There was no deception.”

Eivaunee leaned back against the top of the serving bar, obviously considering how to proceed. “All right, but what you’ve said is that if you feel an emotion strongly, and there is physical contact, you transmit the emotion. Is that correct?”

“If the emotion is strong enough, yes. Otherwise, I have to focus on transmitting the emotion. It takes an additional effort.”

“But you cannot control transmitting an emotion if you feel it strongly enough and if there is physical contact?” Eivaunee’s tone of voice made it a question.

“Correct,” the alien replied.

“What about desire, Zsar? What about when you’re with a woman?”

Zsar’t’lac leaned back in the uncomfortably soft chair. He still didn’t like sitting in human-designed chairs; he preferred the floor. He thought for a long moment before answering. Eivaunee rarely probed into any aspect of Zsar’t’lac’s personal relationships. There was that much restraint in his curiosity. A quiet statement of respecting personal privacy would end the matter, but Zsar’t’lac decided it was time for Eivaunee to begin learning more about Hsassan culture.

“If the desire was very strong, it would probably be transmitted,” the alien agreed gently. “But that is unlikely to happen.”

Eivaunee considered what the alien said. “I thought you liked human women?”

“It is pleasant having sex with them, but they are not my preference.”

Eivaunee nodded in an understanding way. “I imagine you prefer your own species.”

My own species and my own sex, the alien thought, but for now he had said enough. It was not that Eivaunee cared what his other officers’ sexual preferences were, but given the closeness of their relationship, his reaction might be different. And besides, within the context of human society, Eivaunee’s assumption of Zsar’t’lac’s sexual preference was correct: with humans his sexual preference would always be for females.

Zsar't'lac decided to change the subject. There would come a time when he would explain matters more fully to Eivaunee, but that time wasn't now.

"In your messages, Eivaun, you'll find a communication from Sui Lan. Their ship is taking shore leave in Gareth's Cluster. N'torba sent me a message suggesting we take a shore leave there together."

It took Eivaunee a moment to shift his thoughts. Sui Lan was the captain of a research vessel and spy ship from the United Councils. They had met when he had been working with Zsar't'lac on stopping a murderer on NeoCorda. An interesting woman, and not at all his usual type, but he liked her strong personality. It was also useful that one of Sui Lan's researchers, N'torba, and Zsar't'lac had some sort of relationship. An odd one in Eivaunee's opinion. Whenever the tall alien spent time with N'torba, he returned to the ship every night. Not his usual pattern.

"I'll think about it," Eivaunee replied, shifting to stand fully upright. "Any other talent, or abilities, you've forgotten to mention, my friend?"

The alien smiled in the open human way. "No," he replied, and then answered the more pertinent, unasked, question. "Since I will only transmit one emotion to humans, it isn't an ability you could have used," he explained why he had never spoken of this.

"I might have preferred to know—perhaps had the option, Zsar," Eivaunee returned, a coldness edging into his voice. "I also might have wanted to know when you were emotionally manipulating me."

"Perhaps," the alien returned unconcerned. "But reassurance is an emotion that humans frequently need."

Eivaunee's amber eyes turned cold. "An interesting analysis, coming from someone who isn't human."

"I'm not human, but I can feel human need," Zsar't'lac said, his own tone cool.

Eivaunee's eyes became even colder. He preferred to believe he had conquered most of his emotional needs. The Emperor had left him little choice.

"Both human and Norda have emotional needs, my Eivaun, they may change from one individual to another, but we all have them." The alien stood. He was due in CommCent.

The use of the familiar, affectionate, form of Eivaunee's name did not have the desired effect. The slender, golden human remained angry. He wasn't done with the conversation, particularly now that he was angry. "Then tell me yours, Zsar't'lac! You who tramp through my emotions constantly—tell me what you need—what you lack!"

"The company of my own people!" the alien returned sharply, finally rising to anger as well. He advanced on his much smaller Commander. "The sight, the sound, the smell of my own kind!"

Eivaunee's back was against the counter or he would have retreated before the angry red-flickering eyes of his officer. Zsar't'lac stopped directly in front of Eivaunee.

Eivaunee looked up, the red in the alien's eyes wasn't dark enough to be a killing red.

“Lonely?” he asked calmly.

“Extremely,” came the brief reply.

“Me, too,” Eivaunee answered softly, his amber eyes losing their cold look. “Sorry, Zsar.” As Saret’s words had brought up Eivaunee’s loss, so had Eivaunee reminded the alien of all he did not have.

“Do you want to find out what Hsassan loneliness feels like?” Zsar’t’lac asked, still angry at the confrontation Eivaunee had forced. “Shall we experiment and see if I can transmit this feeling to you? See how you like the feel of it?”

“I know what loneliness feels like, Zsar.”

“Not like this, my Commander,” the alien returned, his voice low and hissing slightly. “Norda are descended of pack hunters, we want the comfort of the pack.” His hands reached out to touch against each side of Eivaunee’s face.

A coldness engulfed Eivaunee’s mind, like a winter’s gale wind burning through his mind. It was nothing like human loneliness. He knocked the alien’s hands aside. Zsar’t’lac allowed it.

Eivaunee took a deep breath; contact with the alien’s emotions had frightened him. He fought and controlled his fear. “Humans want the comfort of a family, Zsar; I don’t have that. You don’t have your Hsassan pack.”

There was a pause, then the tall, powerful Hsassan stepped back, his eyes losing their red fire. “That is correct,” he answered in his usual gentle voice. “Perhaps that is the basis of the bond between us—loneliness.”

“Maybe.”

“Do you not have at least memories, Eivaun?” Zsar’t’lac felt a little guilty for subjecting Eivaunee to the outpouring of his loneliness.

“Memories of what, Zsar?” Eivaunee returned coldly. “A father I rarely saw, who lived in exile in the Provinces, or a mother who committed suicide when I was three?”

“You have said that you remember nothing of your mother, but you must at least remember her love.”

Eivaunee felt the sudden wash of fear, of helplessness that any mention of his mother brought. “I’ve told you that I remember nothing of her! Nothing!”

The alien stepped back. The force of Eivaunee’s emotion hurting his mind. Zsar’t’lac couldn’t understand why Eivaunee reacted so strongly to any suggestion that he might remember something of his mother. It could just be a culturally-defined reaction to a mother’s suicide. Maybe with humans it was appropriate for a child whose mother committed suicide to feel fear and helplessness. Zsar’t’lac didn’t know if that was the case. “I should go to CommCent,” he focused on the more pertinent situation.

Eivaunee said nothing as Zsar’t’lac turned away towards the door.

“Are you still angry with me?” Eivaunee asked. He didn’t like asking, but he needed the alien’s friendship. He had few friends and none as close as the alien. Until Zsar’t’lac arrived, Eivaunee would have said that he didn’t need friends. It was dangerous for anyone to be his friend. The only close friend he had as a child, the Emperor had killed.

Zsar't'lac looked back at Eivaunee. "For reasons that I do not entirely understand, I'm rarely angry with you. And on those occasions when I am, it never lasts. No, my friend, I am not still angry with you."

Eivaunee smiled, a good boyish smile. "Thanks. Do you want to do this shore leave, Zsar?" "Yes."

"Then we'll do it. I'll have Podi check some places out. It can't be long, but I could use a little time off."

"You haven't been to Haskin's World for a long time," Zsar't'lac pointed out.

"There are reasons for that, Zsar."

Chapter 4

Maui walked up to the door of the tall, magnificent house. He looked to his right, up the hill to the shimmering blue of the shields that encased the Imperial Palace grounds. There was blue shielding around this house, too; the sign of Imperial protection. But that was to be expected, the house belonged to Aman, the Duc of Enghien, the Emperor's Favorite.

Maui could have refused Yseu when she told him she wanted him to deliver something to the Duc of Enghien. In general it was difficult for a fealty bound retainer to refuse a direct command, but he could have refused because Yseu wanted him to stay—stay and please the Duc of Enghien. Maui understood that quite well, but no fealty bound retainer could be forced into sexual servitude. At least that was what the law said. It happened regularly on every great estate, including his own.

Maui had willingly served a number of guests at the Roythn Home Estate. Truthfully, most of the time he enjoyed himself. But there was a difference between serving a guest at one's estate, and being sent most of the way across the Empire to sexually serve a man known to be cruel. Maui could have refused to do that; the Baron would certainly have agreed with him. Maui didn't know what the Baron knew about Yseu's latest plans, but Maui was willing to bet the Baron didn't know she was sending one of his favorite retainers to serve the Duc of Enghien.

To the great and powerful that lived on the Imperial Planet, the Provinces were a backward, unimportant place, unworthy of thought, let alone consideration. No one who lived in the Provinces had any importance. Except Eivaunee Dorlan. In power, Eivaunee Dorlan was second only to the Emperor; in wealth, he exceeded him. And it was because of Eivaunee Dorlan that Maui had agreed to Yseu's demand.

For many years, Eivaunee had been an occasional visitor to the Roythn's Home Estate. Whenever his duties would allow it, the young Consenti would visit, and Maui would attend him

in the private quarters that were kept solely for the use of Commissioner of the Provinces. In all those years, Eivaunee had never struck him, or even raised his voice. He also didn't want Maui as a lover. Gossip in the Provinces said Eivaunee was only interested in women.

And his official mistress was the Yseu, Baroness Roythn. At least that was the case until Eivaunee's last visit. Little enough had been said afterwards, but there had been a fight, and Eivaunee had spent the night with one of the Roythn fealty bound retainers, a woman who wanted to buy her freedom. The young Master had given her enough credits for that, then he had asked her to spend the night with him as a free woman. That had moved Maui as nothing else ever had.

Yseu was involved in some plan against Eivaunee Dorlan, Maui guessed that much. As he suspected that what was carrying was part of that plot. He had considered taking it and running to some marginal world where he wouldn't be found. But he didn't think that would work. Yseu's attitude implied that what he carried wasn't unique; she could send it again with someone else. Maui didn't know what he carried; it was thumbprint locked. But maybe - just maybe - he could find out what he carried and warn Master Dorlan... Maui took a deep breath and touched the door announcer. After a moment, the door opened. The soft blue of the shielding stayed closed. Through the blue mist Maui could see the older, dignified retainer dressed in the Duc's livery of yellow and white.

"Yes?" the man asked, his tone haughty.

"My name is Maui. Yseu, Baroness Roythn, sent me."

"You are expected." The blue mist parted enough to allow him to enter. "This way." Maui followed the tall, older man through the middle of the house, to a small room done all in black.

"Wait here."

Maui looked around the room. It had no windows. The indirect lighting was soft, the corners were shadowed. There was a stone fireplace across one wall with a large holo above it depicting a war scene, the fall of a city. The soldiers were raping and killing everyone. The details were quite graphic.

"Lovely, isn't it?" a mocking voice asked.

Maui twitched around. He hadn't heard the door open. A tall slender man stood just inside the doorway. He had long, dark brown hair and his eyes were green. His skin was sallow, his stance arrogant and proud. He looked to be in his early thirties, but Maui knew the Duc of Enghien was in his middle forties. The rich could afford the technologies that prolonged a youthful appearance.

"Depends on what you like, your Grace," Maui replied, bowing low.

"Yes, of course," Aman answered. "I like violence. Yseu sent you?"

"Yes, your Grace."

"Give me what she sent."

"It is under a layer of pseudo-skin, over my ribs, your Grace," Maui told him. "I have to undress a little." That had been Yseu's idea, of course. A chance to show off his well-muscled body. Maui

was very good looking. Tall, well-muscled, dark complected, with fine bones.

The Duc waited impatiently as Maui took off the heavy, slashed satin overjacket and then his silk shirt. On Haskin's World, Maui had seldom worn anything beyond a short pleated skirt, but Yseu had ordered clothing similar to what was worn on the Imperial Planet. Maui didn't like the layers of heavy cloth swathing his body.

He peeled away the small area of pseudo-skin under his left pectoral and handed the thin package to the Duc. Aman had watched intently while Maui undressed. Now, his eyes moved more slowly over the younger man, from his dark, bare chest to the tight fitting pants. Maui had been looked over before, but seldom in such a way that he felt like animal being evaluated.

"Not bad," Aman decided. "Yseu says that she doesn't need you back in a hurry."

Maui said nothing. He didn't want to stay; he didn't like the painting over the fireplace, and he didn't like this man. There was little he could do about it now, however.

Perhaps Maui's eyes said too much. He had been told he had expressive eyes.

Aman hit him—hard. The blow, totally unexpected, knocked Maui off his feet. Aman took a quick step and kicked him brutally in the stomach. Maui gasped with pain and curled into a fetal position.

"As I said, I like violence," Aman mocked the man lying on the floor. "You're soft," he commented casually. "Well muscled, but soft inside."

Maui said nothing. He was afraid to say anything.

Aman laughed softly. "I like those kinds best. Enough strength to endure the pain, but always surprised by it. I think we'll have a lovely time." He turned and walked unhurriedly to the door where he stopped and turned around. "I will be back some time," he told Maui. "And when I do you'll spend some time screaming. I like that with sex." Aman smiled thinly. "Don't get any ideas of leaving, either. No one leaves this house without my express permission. And the shielding mutes the screams. Not that the neighbors would dare complain. You will wait here until I find some time for you. You might look at the paintings and I have some interesting statues as well. Maybe then you won't be quite so surprised."

Aman walked to the large room where he received more noble guests. The largest holo there was a landscape scene. If a person looked closely though, several small animals, their eyes wide with terror, were being eaten alive by larger animals. It was very subdued. Aman tapped the small, flat package against his wrist, then firmly placed his right thumb against the seal. He took the thin disc out. He considered whether he should play it now or later, but he couldn't wait. He wanted to hear that voice. He played it once and then twice. He laughed softly then packaged it up again, thumbprint locked it and put it in an inside pocket of his velvet jacket.

Saying nothing further to any of his staff, he left the house. He liked leaving them in a state of perpetual uncertainty. He decided to walk up the slight hill to the Palace. He whistled to summon his guards who waited by the gate. The exercise would be good for him, and besides he liked how people stepped aside for him. For a man who hadn't even been born to the nobility, it was deeply gratifying. Everything he had, he owed to the Emperor's favor. And now he was planning to kill the same man who had raised him to such heights.

It was such a delightful feeling. To betray and kill a man so well known for his own cunning and treachery. Hazdel thought this was all a plan to kill Eivaunee Dorlan, to gain the Dorlan Estates and a Consenti title. Well, that was certainly part of it. But Hazdel wouldn't live long enough to enjoy any income from the Dorlan Estates. No, he would die just before - or after - Eivaunee.

Aman hadn't decided which yet.

A brief period of chaos in the Palace during which Eivaunee Dorlan would be killed. And Hazdel. Aman chuckled; it was such a delightful plan. It would appear as though Eivaunee had killed the Emperor. No one would be surprised at that. And there would be no difficult inquiries when it was all over. No, not at all, because the Princess Royal, Moerit, would become Empress, and Aman would be her Consort.

Aman laughed as a man stepped backwards into a puddle. Aman wasn't laughing at the man; he didn't even see him. He was laughing at the thought of the expression on Hazdel's face when Aman killed him. So very delightful. And Moerit insisted that Aman do the actual killing. A minor point in conscience. Hazdel hadn't had any such compunctions when he poisoned *his* father. Maybe fratricide ran in the Toneki's blood. More likely it was impatient ambition. Aman could certainly understand that.

Aman was already Hazdel's favorite when they decided to kill Hazdel's father. It was much better to be an Emperor's Favorite than the Heir's favorite. But being Imperial Consort would be even better. Emperor was best of all, but Aman knew there were limits even to his ambition. All the Consenti families would join against him if he tried that. It would be tricky enough to get them to agreed to his being Consort. But with careful planning, and playing off of their jealousies of each other, it could be done.

The plan was entirely his, every part of it. Moerit had agreed to it. As Aman expected she would. She wanted to be Empress now, not at some uncertain distant future. And they had a good understanding of each other. She wouldn't interfere in any of his pleasures; he wouldn't interfere in hers. Hazdel hadn't yet agreed to the plan—as he knew it, but that was only a minor delay. Hazdel would agree to it. Aman was sure of that. It was truly a beautiful day.

* * * * *

"Will the Baroness Yseu be joining you?" Podi asked.

"No," Eivaunee answered his fealty-bound retainer.

"Another lady, Master?"

"Yes."

It wasn't that unusual. Eivaunee had never been faithful to Yseu, as she never pretended any fidelity to him. Still, since Eivaunee hadn't visited Haskell's World in many months, it seemed odd.

"Zsar't'lac will be with me as well," Eivaunee added. "He will be accompanied by a lady."

"Will two suites be sufficient?" Podi asked.

"I presume so," Eivaunee answered. "But reserve as much of the resort as you can. All of it if possible. You know I like my privacy."

"Yes, Master, I am aware of that," Podi's tone was irritatingly superior.

"Ask Zsar't'lac if he has any preferences on the type of resort," Eivaunee told his personal body servant, knowing how he disliked the alien.

"If you insist," Podi returned, his tone suddenly flat.

"I do."

Podi bowed slightly and left without a further word.

Eivaunee stared at his bodyservant's as he left, stiff-legged and irritated. The Blinets had served as fealty-bound body-servants to the Dorlans for generations. Eivaunee began to wonder if it was

time for that to end.

“Computer audio on,” he commanded.

“Audio on.”

“Where is Zsar’t’lac?”

“His quarters.”

“Put me through, audio only.”

“Yes, Commander?” Zsar’t’lac’s voice came back. There was the slightest edge to it.

“Am I intruding, Zsar?” The use of shortened form of the alien’s name signaled that Eivaunee was alone, and there was no need for formality.

“Not particularly.”

Which meant a little. “Ah, I was thinking of talking to you about this recreational leave. Can I come by?”

Zsar’t’lac had the freedom to come by Eivaunee’s quarters whenever he felt like it, but the alien had made it clear that the reverse was not the case. Eivaunee had to ask before visiting. If he didn’t, the alien was quite likely not to let him in. More of his alien arrogance.

There was a pause, then; “If you wish.”

“Yes or no, Zsar,” Eivaunee returned, his voice now edged with irritation.

“Come.”

The connection ended. Zsar’t’lac picked up his yselili again and began plucking its three strings, softly singing a song he had written long ago. A song of his love for Sing’m’li, his beautiful beloved left behind in the Homelands. Perhaps already mated. Sing’m’li had said he would wait, but Zsar’t’lac knew he couldn’t. No Hsassan could, not while surrounded by Hsassan, not with his mating genes constantly stimulated by the sight, smell, and touch of his own kind. No, Sing’m’li was already mated. Zsar’t’lac had to accept that. Still, Sing’m’li loved him; Sing’m’li would always love him. That would have to be enough.

The door sounded.

Zsar’t’lac put the yselili down. “Come.”

Eivaunee walked in, feeling that slight touch of honor he always felt when visiting Zsar’t’lac. The alien didn’t allow any other human in his quarters. Also here, in his quarters, away from humans, it was more clear what Zsar’t’lac was. A genetic messiah. In these rooms, their relationship was never that of a ship’s commander and his officer. Nor was it that of a messiah granting an audience. But it was closer to that than anything else.

The large alien gestured towards one of the two neutral-colored chairs pushed up against the wall.

“I can sit on the floor,” Eivaunee said, lowering himself to sit on one of the heavily embroidered pillows.

Zsar’t’lac was wearing Hsassan clothing, as he always did in his own rooms. A light brown, front-pleated skirt with a body-hugging, sleeveless, wrapped top. The top tied on the left, and the skirt closed on the right. The long, heavily muscled arms were bare of ornamentation, except for one heavy gold, pierce-worked armband pushed high on Zsar’t’lac’s right arm. Eivaunee had once asked Zsar’t’lac about the arm band and been told it was a parting gift. Zsar’t’lac didn’t say from whom, nor did his tone of voice invite further comment. But Zsar’t’lac wore it always, even under his regular fleet uniform.

The room’s decorations were no more alien than some of the other officers who came from

widely varying world types. On one wall was a floor to ceiling mural of a forest scene from Zsar't'lac's home world of Norda. The other walls were painted a soft green; the lighting was muted and the temperature of the room cooler than most humans found comfortable. Weapons of various cultures, mostly human, were displayed on the non-mural walls. Thick, embroidered cushions lay on the brown floor. The room had a slightly barbaric atmosphere to it, but the room wasn't important; the inhabitant was.

Eivaunee looked at Zsar't'lac's eyes; the alien's eyes reflected his emotional state. Dark iridescent sparks danced in the alien's large round black eyes, the colors of unhappiness, loneliness. Eivaunee was silent for a moment, wondering if there was something he could say that would help. But what does a person say to a creature, a being, so very alone? He decided to continue with his plan to talk about the recreational leave. Maybe that would help.

"I was wondering, Zsar, if you would prefer Podi to find some wilderness world for this rec leave?" Eivaunee offered. "We can work out some shelter for the women. You could get some hunting in."

"Shelter for you as well, Eivaun," the alien pointed out. "You don't like leaving your luxury behind."

"One of the larger shuttle craft would be adequate," Eivaunee suggested.

The alien shook his head in the human manner of denial. "That isn't necessary. Opportunities to kill are not what I lack."

"I know, but you like hunting. You get to eat fresh meat that way."

Zsar't'lac's cool, dry fingertips touched against Eivaunee's face. "Animal blood is not what I need, either." He drew his hand back.

"I can't bring any of your people here, Zsar," Eivaunee said, his voice sympathetic.

"I could," Zsar't'lac said. Then there was the slightest of sighs. "But I won't. Too risky—for both our species."

"Could you go back, Zsar?" Eivaunee asked. "For a quick visit?"

"That would be even riskier," the alien answered quietly. "What is, is. I have chosen this path, Eivaun. I will continue. It is my honor."

"All right, Zsar," Eivaunee said softly. "I just want to help if I can."

"I know, and I do appreciate it." Zsar't'lac thought for a moment. "I wonder if Podi can find a resort with some forest around—and water where I could fish."

"I've ever seen you fish, Zsar. How do you do it?"

The alien smiled in the human manner. "I'll show you when we are there."

Eivaunee smiled back. "We'll find some forest and good water, Zsar. I'll tell Podi." Eivaunee stood and walked to the door. "Actually I told Podi to talk to you himself, but I wasn't sure he would, so I came myself."

"Podi Blinet is more irritating than most humans," Zsar't'lac conceded. "I appreciate your consideration."

"I owe you a lot, Zsar, including my life a couple of times. I'll take a short walk for you. Actually I told Podi to talk to you mostly to irritate him. Then I realized he'd probably take it out on you."

"There may come a time when I show him why he shouldn't," the alien said softly.

"You're very tolerant of him."

"Only because he is your fealty-bound servant."

“The consideration works both ways,” Eivaunee pointed out.

“It is you who taught me about friendship, and its special considerations.”

The alien rose from his cross-legged sitting position in a sweet, graceful motion. He took the two steps to stand in front of his Commander. His cool fingertips again caressed the side of Eivaunee’s face and touched against his full lips. “Later I will come by your quarters and we can play ‘Quarry and Hunters.’

“You and your strategy games,” Eivaunee said smiling, enjoying the alien’s touch. “Still it probably is teaching me something. It takes you a little longer to beat me.”

“A little,” Zsar’t’lac agreed.

The door closed behind the human. Zsar’t’lac sighed. He needed one of his own kind so very much. Hsassan need to bond; it was bred into them. He couldn’t bond with a human, not really. His bond with Eivaunee was thin and shallow, like most human relationships. Humans didn’t know how to bond properly.

Chapter 5

“Why do you hesitate?” Aman asked the Emperor. “We can kill Eivaunee and prove treason. Think of all the income from the Dorlan Estates! Don’t you want that?”

“Be silent!” the Emperor commanded. Hazdel Toneki knew why he prevaricated. The answer was as simple and as complicated as the cause. Omani, Eivaunee’s mother. A woman it was said he drove to suicide. The only woman he had ever loved—loved to the point of madness. Hazdel never spoke of Omani, not even to this man who had been his lover since adolescence.

Thoughts of the tall, golden woman filled Hazdel’s mind, as they had so frequently during the past couple of months. Omani knew he plotted against her child. Although she was dead to others, Omani lived always in the Emperor’s mind. At the edge of madness. Omani had killed herself because of the Emperor; in part because of the violent rape he forced on her, but more out of fear for her beautiful golden child. She killed the only person Hazdel had ever loved, herself, and destroyed the one thing he could ever want more than her, a male heir. But Hazdel couldn’t think of that. He wouldn’t think of what she had done—the deed cut into her beautiful body; the act soaked in her blood.

He had to think of the future now, his dynasty’s survival. It was time, and more, that his daughter, the Princess Moerit, married. It would be the height of dynastic foolishness to wait any longer.

If only Eivaunee would rebel! The matter would be settled. Omani understood Hazdel had the right to defend his throne. But Eivaunee wouldn’t rebel—and wouldn’t marry Moerit. The Emperor paced back and forth, feeling Aman’s eyes watching him.

Omani was dead, the Emperor reminded himself, although he knew he would never fully accept that. He had underestimated her. In the end her cruelty had exceeded his own. Now, though, he had to think of the future of his dynasty.

“The Hsasan is a problem,” the Emperor pointed out one potential flaw in the plan.

“Obviously he can’t be left in charge of the Comveckt,” Aman replied, a touch of relief in his voice. It was as far as they had ever gotten in their discussions.

“It’s not just that,” Hazdel countered with irritation. “By all reports, the Hsasan is fond of Eivaunee. He could be difficult after Eivaunee is murdered. Based on reports in the Provinces, and the results of mock fleet battles, he could be a real problem.”

“I didn’t think we were planning on telling him that we murdered Eivaunee. If the young Dorlan dies in a failed palace revolt, that’s not murder, that’s self-defense.”

“Zsar’t’lac can’t help but be suspicious of Eivaunee dying in a palace revolt he never told his best ally about.”

“Once Eivaunee is dead, the alien will see where his best interests lie. He won’t be any trouble,” Aman stated firmly.

"You judge others too much by yourself, Aman," the Emperor said coolly. "Eivaunee risked his life after that friend of his died."

"And he paid for it dearly," Aman answered softly. Watching Eivaunee being flogged within an inch of his life was one of Aman's best memories.

"If he had died, I would have paid more dearly," Hazdel pointed out. "Would you have enjoyed that?" The Emperor's cold gray eyes hooded over.

Aman laughed softly. He rose off the couch where he had been sitting. "Don't be absurd. I love you." He walked over to where the Emperor stood.

"You love no one but yourself, Aman," the Emperor stated coldly.

"That isn't true," Aman replied, standing close to the Emperor. They were very much the same height. His hand slid down between the Emperor's legs. "Let me show you."

The Emperor's eyes lost none of their coolness. "Later," he commanded coldly. He stepped back from his lover. They rarely spoke of love; the language that defined their relationship was very different from such soft avowals. But there had never been any serious challenge to Aman's position of Imperial Favorite. That said more than any words could.

Aman decided to try another approach. A more dangerous one, that perhaps had a better chance of working. "Once Eivaunee is dead, the alien will have little choice in where he serves. This plan gives you everything you have always said you wanted: the Dorlan Estates, Eivaunee dead, and the alien serving your daughter. And all it takes is a little treachery. You used to enjoy that. Are you getting soft, Hazdel?"

A dangerous question. Aman's dark eyes glittered.

The Emperor responded as expected. He hit Aman, a hard back-handed blow. "Not too soft, no," Hazdel replied, smiling, obviously enjoying hitting his lover.

Aman smiled in return, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth with his fingers. He held out his blood-smeared fingers to the Emperor. "Then what will be your august decision in this, my Emperor?"

Hazdel gripped Aman's wrists, using the full force of his body, he forced his lover down to kneel in front of him. He held him there, the tension flowing between them. Tension born of power, violence, and sex. After several moments, Hazdel lifted Aman's hand and licked the blood from his fingertips.

"Later—maybe—I'll tell you," Hazdel said softly, his voice thickened by desire. "But now you will show me how much you love me." His grip on his lover's wrists tightened further, deliberately bruising.

Aman laughed softly. Truly, he would miss these times after Hazdel was dead.

Chapter 6

The shuttle settled lightly on the ground. The door opened and two women stepped down from it. Sui-lan came first. Petite and slender, with short blond hair and green eyes, she wasn't Eivaunee's usual preference in women. But the golden Commander was in one of his "fighter pilot" moods where women were concerned. He had tired of the adoring ones.

Sui-lan was a captain of a United Councils' research ship. She was also a spy. Eivaunee didn't mind her being a spy; he didn't intend to tell her anything of interest. His interest in her, as with most women, didn't extend very far beyond the bedroom. Sui-lan was aggressive, both in and out of bed. Eivaunee liked that. At least for now.

N'torba came next. Tall, with shoulder-length brown hair, she was attractive in her own way. Zsar't'lac smiled when he saw her. She was a scientist on the research vessel Sui-lan commanded. A niche geneticist. She studied how organisms fit into their environment, native or engineered. She had studied the two intelligent non-human species—the hive dwelling insects, the humans called the Riis, and space-faring, intelligent crystals, the Pyrri. N'torba was the only human Zsar't'lac had ever met whose emotions didn't define him as an alien. He enjoyed her company immensely, both because of her intelligence, and because her emotions didn't exclude him.

Eivaunee and Zsar't'lac had met the two women about six months earlier when they had been investigating a series of murders that turned out to be the work of a Hsassan sent from the Homelands to kill Zsar't'lac. The other Hsassan had taken N'torba captive to lure Zsar't'lac into a trap. Zsar't'lac had knowingly walked into the trap and killed the other Hsassan. N'torba's behavior during the process had increased his respect for her to the point that Zsar't'lac hesitated beginning an affair with her.

He wanted N'torba to be his friend; a long-term relationship while he lived in the Human Lands. He wasn't sure she could be his friend and his lover while he continued to have additional sexual partners. Humans didn't seem to handle that well. Zsar't'lac wanted her as a friend more than a lover, so they weren't lovers.

It clearly puzzled Eivaunee when Zsar't'lac had told him that N'torba and he would need two suites, but after a moment, he had just nodded. Eivaunee didn't want to get into any debates on sexual relationships with his officer. Zsar't'lac was openly critical of Eivaunee's casual, and sometimes callous, attitude towards the women he had sex with.

The women smiled as they walked up to the two males. Zsar't'lac took N'torba's hands, and lightly kissed them.

Eivaunee shook his head. "Don't expect me to imitate his gallantry," he warned Sui-lan.

"I don't need my hands kissed," she told him truthfully.

"Gallantry is an expression of romance," Zsar't'lac said as they turned to walk the short distance

to the resort entrance. The shuttle pilot, who had ferried the two women down to the planet, lifted off behind them. "You should try it some time."

"I have no interest in romance," the focus of many romantic thoughts answered.

"Romantic play can be quite pleasurable, my Commander. With or without sexual expression," Zsar't'lac added looking down at N'torba.

"I never thought of you as a romantic," Eivaunee said, looking at his tall officer. "It doesn't fit the image of a good warrior."

"All true warriors are romantics, Eivaunee. Either that or they're butchers."

Eivaunee shook his head again. "Your Hsassan philosophy is always interesting, Zsar."

They were on an isolated island, one of many that dotted the ocean that covered most of the small, dense planet. It hadn't been easy finding a resort with forests and good water, but Podi had managed. It had taken an additional day of travel to get to the resort, but Eivaunee was willing to indulge his alien officer. The resort had been mostly booked, but Podi had bribed the guests to go elsewhere. In such matters, Eivaunee's fealty-bound body-servant had an excellent touch.

"Did you really rent the whole resort?" Sui-lan asked with distinct pleasure.

"I like my privacy," Eivaunee answered. "I also paid for a full complement of staff, but specified that I only wanted half on duty. I don't like tripping over servants every time I turn around."

"It's not a problem I've ever had," N'torba spoke for both women. Truthfully, she was more than a little in awe of Eivaunee Dorlan. Somehow, that emotion didn't carry over to his large, powerful alien officer, who doubled as his bodyguard.

"It is irritating," Zsar't'lac agreed. He saw no reason for any sort of servants, but Eivaunee had been raised surrounded by them.

"Your luggage came ahead of you, so it should have arrived by now and been put away," Eivaunee told the women. "I've arranged for some food in the rooms. Something light, but if you want something more—"

"What I'm hungry for isn't going to be on a plate," Sui-lan stated grinning up at the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

Eivaunee looked down at Sui-lan, smiling at her words. Sex was exactly what he had in mind as well. "The food," he pointed out, "can wait."

"The image of you fishing seems odd," N'torba was saying to Zsar't'lac. "It's such a sedentary activity."

"Not the way my people fish. We hunt them in the water."

"I should have thought of that."

They walked into the front reception room. Several people came forward to offer help. Eivaunee shook his head and all four went into the main section of the resort.

"We are in the 'Commissioner's Suite,'" Eivaunee told Sui-lan.

"I expect it acquired that name immediately after you reserved it," Zsar't'lac said.

"I suspect you're right," Eivaunee agreed pleasantly. "Zsar and N'torba are just a few suites away," he told Sui-lan.

"Fine," Sui-lan said not caring at all where the others were.

Eivaunee turned towards his officer. "I expect I'll see you some time tomorrow."

"If you wish," the alien replied gently.

"Have a...pleasant...time," Eivaunee said, not sure what else to say. He took Sui-lan's arm to

steer her up the few stairs to the largest suite in the resort.

Zsar't'lac laughed softly.

"He certainly is—something," N'torba offered, uncertain what the correct word would be.

"Something, indeed," the large alien agreed. "Now, what would you like to do tonight?"

"I don't really care," N'torba replied. "I just like being with you."

Zsar't'lac smiled in the human manner. "As I enjoy being with you. How about walking by the ocean?"

"Sounds great."

The door closed behind Eivaunee and Sui-lan. She came into his arms. The kiss was rough; Eivaunee was impatient. He always was when he hadn't had any sex for a while. Sui-lan was almost as impatient. She still had trouble believing that Eivaunee Dorlan found her attractive. It wasn't that other men hadn't in the past, it was just seemed unbelievable that he did.

She fumbled with the many closures on his Commander's tunic. He pushed her away and undid his satin tunic while walking into the bedroom. The silk shirt, with its gold lace trim followed the tunic onto a chair, the half-boots were kicked off and the tight pants pulled off. Sui-lan sat on the bed and watched.

Eivaunee was used to that; women liked watching him undress. Eivaunee didn't care; he preferred undressing himself. He never thought about it, but the first time he had been undressed by someone else, was when he was raped. He never thought about that time; those memories were locked away in the darkest part of his mind. He only knew he preferred to undress himself.

"Beautiful," Sui-lan said softly of Eivaunee nude body.

She was beginning to irritate Eivaunee. He didn't want one of the adoring types. His hands were rough, pulling her clothes off. He pushed her down on the bed. He wasn't in the mood for play, or even for much consideration of her pleasure. Truthfully, he rarely cared about his partner's pleasure. Sexually, he was quite self-centered. Except with Anati Realt, his childhood friend and lover, but that was another time and place. And no other woman was like her.

The other women never seemed to mind his selfishness. Sui-lan didn't notice it now; she wanted him even more than he wanted her. Her sexual desire was quite focused on him. For Eivaunee, it was just sexual release. Who the partner was didn't matter all that much—providing the partner was female and attractive. His hands moving roughly across her body, he focused on satisfying himself. But Sui-lan had spent many spare hours day-dreaming about being with Eivaunee again, her orgasm came first.

Once Zsar't'lac changed out of the Imperial Fleet uniform he disliked and into his Hsasan clothing, he felt much more comfortable. He and N'torba ate a light dinner and then went walking along the shore of the ocean. The moon was large and blood-red, reflecting an old, dying sun. The brochure he had read on the world speculated about the old, worn ruins on the largest island. Had this world been inhabited by an intelligent species at some long distant past time? And if so, what had happened to them? Had they moved on? Did they die out? The answers weren't known. He and N'torba discussed the possibilities.

"Why did you choose a place this far away?" Sui-lan asked a little sharply. "Couldn't you find anything closer?"

Eivaunee's amber eyes were half-closed. He was pleasantly satiated. Sui-lan was not, by far, the most talented lover he'd ever had, but she was enthusiastic.

"Zsar wanted forests and good water to fish in," Eivaunee replied drowsily. "Worlds like that are hard to find."

"Very," Sui-lan replied tartly. "Do you always cater to his every desire?"

Eivaunee's eyes opened; he like her much better this way: sharp and edgy. "I owe him a great deal. Finding a world he would enjoy doesn't seem that much to me."

"Did you think of how long it took to get here? A day coming and a day going. We'll only have four days together."

Actually, Eivaunee had worried that might be too much. He shrugged in response, then smiling reached out for her again.

Two days passed without the two couples ever meeting. Eivaunee and Sui-lan didn't leave their suite. Food and wine were brought in. Zsar't'lac and N'torba explored the resort, the island, and the ruins.

Late on the evening of the second day, Eivaunee was drowsily looking at Sui-lan as they lay together on the bed. He had enjoyed their time together. He liked her caustic comments. For the time being, he was tired of adoring, submissive women. Sui-lan was intelligent and independent. It was a shame she was a United Councils' citizen. And a commoner. If she hadn't been, Eivaunee would have made her his official mistress. Sui-lan was, in many ways the complete opposite of Yseu. Both women were intelligent, but Sui-lan's interests were limited to military science and history. Sui-lan had a professional's knowledge of the workings of a star ship, but she completely lacked Yseu's cultural knowledge and refinement.

Sui-lan had once worried about being compared to the elegant Yseu, and put side-by-side, Yseu would have been the sun to Sui-lan's pale moon, but Eivaunee preferred Sui-lan. Her sharp wit and honesty was sweet to Eivaunee after Yseu's cultured manipulations.

The morning of the third day, Eivaunee emerged from his suite, wanting to go fishing with Zsar't'lac. The resort staff fitted Eivaunee with a rebreather. Because of Zsar't'lac lower body metabolism and larger lung capacity, he didn't need one. The four took a skimmer out onto the wide sea. Zsar't'lac had already taken N'torba fishing.

It worked out that the best way for Eivaunee to keep up with Zsar't'lac was to wrap his arms around the alien's neck and be pulled along. Laughter turned out to be the largest problem; rebreathers work best with even, regular breathing. Eivaunee ended up choking a couple of times on mouthfuls of water, amused with his officer's antics with the frighteningly large water dwelling creatures.

Zsar't'lac didn't kill anything. He said the creatures were all too defenseless. He played with them, and they played back. Considering their size it wasn't surprising the day ended with a couple of the bones in Zsar't'lac's hand getting broken. It wasn't any real problem. He reset them; they would heal within a day.

N'torba joined in the fun at times, but Sui-lan didn't care much for water sports. At one point she pointed into the clear water, wondering if the two men were kissing. N'torba pointed

out that Zsar't'lac was just sharing Eivaunee's rebreather; he had done that with her. When they finally went into shore, Sui-lan was annoyed at being ignored for most of the day. Eivaunee either didn't notice, or chose to ignore her irritation. He suggested they all have dinner together. Zsar't'lac asked N'torba how she felt about that. She didn't mind. Watching Eivaunee play with Zsar't'lac and the sea creatures had made the golden human a little more approachable—a little less a figure from the news holos.

Eivaunee didn't bother to ask Sui-lan how she felt. She was pointedly cool through the whole meal. Eivaunee was amusing and gracious, most of his attention focused on his officer, but he made a point of including the women in the discussions when he thought of it.

It was the first time N'torba had spent any time with both Zsar't'lac and Eivaunee. Their mutual respect and affection was obvious. Also N'torba realized that she had always judged Eivaunee by his rank and his money. Even though she was a citizen of the United Councils, she was aware of how very rich and powerful Eivaunee Dorlan was. And she knew the power came from his inherited rank as the most wealthy Consenti, and not from the incredibly powerful ship he commanded.

She watched Zsar't'lac as he debated an obscure historical point with Eivaunee. The alien was fascinating. A Norda Hsassan warrior, and an outcast from his society, a traitor to the land of his birth, it was said. That he was Eivaunee Dorlan's bodyguard when he wasn't being the second-in-command of the Comveckt had always seemed quite reasonable. The richest man in two empires should have the best possible bodyguard.

Watching them together altered her image of their relationship. It was not that of employer/employee, or even Commander and officer. It was much more the friendship of near equals. If there was any slight arrogance or superiority, it was Zsar't'lac, although it was clear that he worked to keep that in check. And Eivaunee Dorlan, rich, powerful, courted and pursued, accepted this.

That didn't come through on the news holos which always showed the Commissioner of the Provinces in complete command, and the alien, if shown at all, in a clearly subordinate role. The gossip columns spoke of their friendship. N'torba had always wondered if that was just something made up to make them both more 'human' to the common people. But it was clear now that it wasn't. She liked them both the better for it.

The night grew late, and still they sat and talked and drank. A small group of musicians played softly. N'torba was becoming a little drunk; Eivaunee was too. Zsar't'lac had switched to water after the first bottle of wine. Sui-lan wasn't drinking much either, just getting angrier. Finally Zsar't'lac said he was going to bed.

"Fine," Eivaunee said, leaning back in his chair, a lazy smile touching his lips. "I like having two women."

The alien laughed softly. "In your state, you'll be lucky to handle one."

"That sounds like a challenge. I'm not that drunk."

"It's not a challenge and I'm referring as much to fatigue as to the alcohol." Amber human eyes met black alien ones. The alien smiled. "Good night, my Commander." Zsar't'lac walked

away from the table with a sweet animal grace.

“Regrettably, he is correct,” Eivaunee said, standing. He swayed just a little. “Good night, N’torba. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Master Dorlan.” One meal wasn’t enough to allow for familiarity with such a man.

“You, my dear, have an expression that would cuddle some of the dairy products that Zsar’t’lac so studiously avoids,” Eivaunee commented, looking down at Sui-lan.

“With good reason,” Sui-lan replied coldly.

“I don’t really think dairy products are all that bad,” Eivaunee offered, and he turned to walk, just a little unsteadily, up the few stairs to the master suite.

N’torba found herself laughing. Sui-lan gave her a look that would cut a diamond. N’torba didn’t really care; she had a problem of her own to solve. She was glad she was a little drunk; it gave her some additional courage. Tonight she needed that; tonight she was going to have a talk with Zsar’t’lac.

The past few days had been among the most enjoyable of her life. Zsar’t’lac was courteous, amusing, and well-versed on so many topics that it seemed amazing. He was so different from anything she ever imagined. He was strong and he was gentle. A kind and considerate killer. And he did kill, she knew that. Still...

The time they had spent on NeoCorda had been pleasant; she had been surprised at how much she enjoyed Zsar’t’lac’s company, but this was even better. And he had surprised her with his correspondence after NeoCorda. His interests ranged from philosophy, to poetry, to history. N’torba was in love with him, and tonight she intended to tell him. She was glad for the wine.

She touched the door announcer outside his suite.

“Come.” The door opened.

N’torba walked in, relieved to see he was still dressed. “Am I intruding?”

“Not at all.” Zsar’t’lac knew what she wanted to say; had felt it in her emotions throughout dinner. He had waited for her to come, knowing that she would.

N’torba wasn’t sure how to start. She looked at Zsar’t’lac. He wasn’t attractive; she didn’t even think his own species would think so. His features were...well, rugged was the kindest way to put it. But what he looked like didn’t matter.

She stood awkwardly just inside the door. Zsar’t’lac didn’t say anything; he waited for her.

“I, um, well...love you,” N’torba blurted out clumsily. “I love you,” she repeated more firmly.

“Yes, I know,” the large alien said gently.

“Is it that obvious?”

“In some ways.”

There was a pause. Zsar’t’lac walked over to N’torba and caressed the side of her face. “I thank you for such a gift.”

N’torba wasn’t sure how to take that. “Well, it’s not really a gift,” she said, worried and

somehow reassured at the same time.

“With my people it is,” Zsar’t’lac’s voice was low, sweet, and gentle. His hand continued to caress N’torba’s face. “Love is a gift, what else could it be?”

A philosophical discussion was not what N’torba had in mind. “Do you —love me?” It was hard to ask.

“I’ve haven’t known you for very long, days only,” Zsar’t’lac replied. “For a Norda that is far too little time to come to love someone. But, more important, there is something I need to tell you.” His hand still touched against her cheek.

N’torba pushed his hand away, worried that she wasn’t going to like what he was going to say. “What?”

“On NeoCorda you asked me about the armlet I always wear, and I said it was a parting gift from someone in the Homelands. It is from my lover. I love *him* very much.”

It took time to sink in. “Him?”

“Him.”

“I didn’t think you—”

“I have no interest, or desire, for human males.”

“But you—ah—like human females.”

“Yes,” Zsar’t’lac said smiling. “I have shared pleasure with rather a few human females.”

“I don’t understand,” N’torba said bluntly.

“My primary sexual interest is for my own kind, meaning males of my own species and genetic class. Secondarily, I enjoy human females. I like sharing pleasure with human females, but it is definitely a secondary sexual interest.”

“I see,” N’torba said coolly.

“Perhaps a little,” Zsar’t’lac said gently. “I want you as a friend, N’torba. I want a long term relationship with you.” The sincerity was clear in Zsar’t’lac’s voice.

“I have friends already.”

“None like me,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

“No,” N’torba had to agree. “I don’t know—”

“It’s not easy, I know. I’m still trying to understand all that friendship means. There is no word in the Norda language for friend.”

“Then how...what makes you think—?”

“Eivaunee has taught me what it is to be friends, what friendship means.”

N’torba’s chin tilted up. She remembered watching Zsar’t’lac share Eivaunee’s rebreather. She knew why Sui-lan thought they were kissing; it was more like an embrace than when Zsar’t’lac had shared her rebreather.

“Do you love him?” she asked bluntly.

“No,” Zsar’t’lac replied firmly. “Nor do I desire him.”

“You said once—on NeoCorda—that you desired me.”

“I did and do.”

Actually that helped.

“You said on NeoCorda that you didn’t want to become lovers because you were concerned that I would be hurt by your continuing to have sex with other women.”

“Yes. That hasn’t changed.”

N’torba was confused and hurt now. “But even if you love this...other Norda...you live here now. You can’t go back. So what does it matter?”

“Regardless of where I live, he will always ‘matter.’”

“But if I’m willing to accept this—”

Zsar’t’lac said nothing for a long moment, trying to think of how best to phrase his answer. How to say what he felt in a way that wouldn’t hurt her too much—a way that would allow to remain friends.

“What are you willing to ‘accept’?” he said very gently. “I haven’t offered anything.”

He felt her pain at his words and took her into his arms. “What I’m trying to say, N’torba, is that I can’t offer you anything beyond friendship. I’m in service to Eivaunee. Even if you were to leave the United Councils, we would rarely be together.” He cradled her head gently against his shoulder. “For now, for the foreseeable future, the best relationship we can have is friendship. It is the one that will hurt you least.”

N’torba was crying softly. Zsar’t’lac nuzzled the top of her hair. “Stay here tonight,” he suggested.

“But—” N’torba lifted her head and looked up at him.

“Not for sex—for companionship,” Zsar’t’lac added. “I prefer sleeping on the floor.”

“No,” N’torba said softly. “I don’t need the sex, but I’d like you to sleep with me. I’d like to be close to you.”

“If that is what you want.”

“Yes.”

“Then that is what we’ll do.”

Chapter 7

Eivaunee dropped onto the bed fully clothed. After a moment he kicked off his shoes.

"I don't like being ignored," Sui-Lan stated, standing alongside the oversized bed, her hands closed into fists on her slender hips.

"It happens sometimes to all of us sometimes," Eivaunee replied indifferently.

Sui-Lan kicked the bed hard. Eivaunee chuckled. He wasn't sure quite why she was so angry. He gave her more attention than he gave most of his lovers. He thought for a moment of Baroness Yseu. Trying to remember if she had ever been in the same room with Zsar't'lac. He could remember only once. They had met by accident at the opening of a new opera. Zsar had said that he wanted the night off from being Eivaunee's bodyguard to take a woman somewhere. Eivaunee hadn't asked where. He just agreed and had taken Janus with him.

Eivaunee smiled remembering Zsar and Yseu having an intense discussion on the different forms of opera on various worlds. Eivaunee had never known that Zsar't'lac liked operas. Eivaunee didn't, but Yseu did, so he had agreed to accompany her to this opening. That time it was Eivaunee who had been ignored, having little to contribute, but he had enjoyed listening to the two of them debate opera forms.

"Do you think I'm some light-night girl you flip on her back and then ignore?" Sui-Lan demanded.

"No," Eivaunee said, his smile changing into a grin. "You, by the gods, are a ship's captain!"

His tone made a mockery of her accomplishment. He immediately regretted it. It wasn't a small thing, especially not for someone as young as she was. He sat up, intending to apologize.

She slapped him, hard.

He pulled her down on the bed next to him. She slapped him again and tried a third time but he caught her wrist. "Enough, I think."

She fought, trying to pull her wrist free. Eivaunee laughed, enjoying the struggle as it became something more. Clothing came off, who took what off wasn't clear. Sui-Lan was still angry, she bit him hard enough to draw blood; he slapped her. Not hard, he didn't want to hurt her.

"Damn you!" She was angry at his ability to sexually stimulate her, even when she didn't want to be.

Eivaunee was on top; the position he usually preferred. He flipped them both over. "Want to learn a little about technique, my fighter pilot lover?"

Sui-Lan swore, softly, graphically and with great feeling.

"I'll take that as a yes," Eivaunee said, half-laughing. He was lying on his back; she was on

top. He shifted her a little, almost sideways. "This way, my Consenti lovers tell me, is the position that gives the woman the most pleasure."

Odd perhaps, but other than with other Consenti, he rarely bothered to shift positions from what he enjoyed most.

"Shall we try it?" he asked, stimulated by the half fighting they had been doing.

She wanted him. She didn't care how.

As it turned out, he was right. It was very, very good.

When they were done, they lay silently side-by-side, letting the minutes pass, simply enjoying sharing the same bed. It was almost a half hour later when Eivaunee got up and went to the server area by the side of the room that was stocked with wines he had chosen. He poured a glass of very expensive, dark red wine and walked back to the bed.

Sui-Lan was lying on her back, her eyes half-closed. Eivaunee poured the wine over her body. "Let us play again," he said softly. "Sweet wine, sweet pleasure."

* * * * *

Eivaunee wasn't sure if it was day or night. He thought it likely that it was late morning, or maybe early afternoon. He could have looked at the clock, but it wasn't that important. The window coverings were drawn close so he couldn't see if it was light outside or not. Eivaunee had experience once with someone recording his, ah, pleasure. Zsar't'lac had talked to that fool.

Talked, and perhaps a little more. At any rate, the recording was destroyed and the man was vocal in his apologies for his intrusion in Eivaunee's personal life. Vocal on newscasts and gossip casts, not directly to Eivaunee as that might have encouraged others to follow his lead. Thinking about the previous few hours, Eivaunee smiled. A recording of that would be interesting, at the very least.

"We should eat," Sui-Lan said, stretching lazily. "I'm starving."

"I should say something poetic," Eivaunee said, a light finger tracing down the valley between Sui-Lan's breasts, "but I'm hungry as well. I'll have the chef bring us something. What do you want?"

"Those mushrooms he did that one dinner. And a cell-culture steak."

Eivaunee felt really good. It was a shame that Sui-Lan was common-born. Otherwise he would be making an announcement soon about a new Official Mistress. He wondered whether Sui-Lan would prefer diamonds, pearls, rubies or carnot crystals. He wanted to give her something outrageously expensive. Something that she could treasure. Something that would let her know how he felt about her. He was beginning to really care about her. Perhaps more than just beginning...

Ever since Anati married... Eivaunee didn't want to think about that. About how much he had once wanted—hoped—he could marry her. Such a foolish dream; the Emperor would never have allowed it. Now Anatis was married to someone else. Had two children. Two children that should have been his! Eivaunee shut off the pain. Anati hadn't wanted to marry anyone else. The Emperor and Princess had demanded it. Eivaunee had been told that Anati cried at her wedding. No one believed they were tears of joy.

"Why did you call me your 'fighter pilot lover'?" Sui-Lan asked, rolling over on her side and caressing a hand down Eivaunee's arm.

"Hmm," Eivaunee said vaguely, still lost in his own thoughts, then he focused on the current occupant of his bed. "That's what Zsar't'lac calls my lovers who are not adoring. It is his opinion that I only choose lovers that are either adoring or fight pilot types."

"And everything he says has to absolutely be correct, of course," Sui-Lan said sharply.

"He's right far more often than not." Eivaunee's thoughts turned again to what to give Sui-Lan as a gift. It had to be jewelry; jewels for a jewel, and it had to be something truly beautiful. On the Dorlan Home Estate there was a jewelry designer that was truly excellent. Eivaunee decided he would talk to the man about designing a necklace, bracelet and ring for Sui-Lan. Maybe with pearls, rubies and carnot crystals all together. That might look too garish, though.

"Are you going to order dinner?" Sui-Lan asked. "I'm going to shower."

"Sure," Eivaunee said, switching his thoughts over to food. A cell-culture steak would be good, with those orange vegetables that they were served that one night. He rolled over on his side and activated the Intercom as Sui-Lan pushed off the bed. He watched her walk to the large bathing room, then gave the chef their order, remembering that Sui-Lan hadn't liked the orange vegetables. He ordered a couple of other side dishes that he thought she would like instead. He got up and poured himself a glass of wine, then returned to half-lay on the bed, sipping the wine thinking that maybe the alien was right, maybe there was something to this romance thing. Other than with Anati, he had never been much into that.

Sui-Lan came out of the shower, a silk robe Eivaunee had bought her the previous day wrapped around her. "You see much of Baroness Yseu?" she asked casually.

Eivaunee knew the question was anything but casual. "No," he answered honestly. "Been quite some time since I have."

"I hadn't seen any pictures of the two of you together recently. Gossip newcasts are implying that you'll be naming a new Official Mistress soon."

"It is likely I will announce that Yseu is no longer my Official Mistress," Eivaunee agreed. He should shower, but he was feeling too lazy to.

"You won't have an Official Mistress?" Sui-Lan asked, surprised. All Consenti kept Official Mistress, even those so old it wasn't likely the title was anything more than a formality.

"Not right now," Eivaunee agreed. He paused for a long moment before adding. "You cannot be my Official Mistress."

"Common born, I know," Sui-Lan said coldly. "And a citizen of the United Councils."

"Being a citizen of the United Councils isn't that big of a problem."

"Since we don't believe in titles, it is."

"There is that," Eivaunee agree easily. "You wouldn't like it anyway. Newspeople would haunt you; the gossips casts would dig out everything from your past."

"I could get used to it," Sui-Lan offered.

"I doubt it. It isn't that easy. I grew up with it; Yseu loves it, and Zsar't'lac can handle it, but it takes a certain personality to manage having cameras stuck in your face on a regular basis.

Also you would have to attend some functions as my representative when I cannot. You haven't the training in protocol, at the very least."

"Zsar't'lac can handle anything! At least in your opinion," Sui-Lan snapped.

Eivaunee let the remark go by. It wasn't surprising that Sui-Lan was jealous of Zsar. No point in making it worse by defending the alien. Eivaunee was truly surprised at his growing feelings for Sui-Lan. He wanted to shelter her from the worse aspects of a relationship with him,

even though she didn't understand that.

"I've made a study of your Official Mistresses," Sui-Lan said, sitting down on the bed and toweling off her short hair.

"Shouldn't be hard," Eivaunee said. "There aren't that many of them and, as I said, the gossips cast dig up everything on them."

"Four Official Mistresses," Sui-Lan began. "Beginning when you were sixteen. They all have several traits in common."

"I could name the traits," Eivaunee said with a grin, enjoying the light banter with Sui-Lan.

"All have been mid-level nobility; all have been older than you, some by more than a decade," Sui-Lan began.

"Countess Verlof," Eivaunee said with a smile. "My first Official Mistress. She was older than I was by twelve years."

"And all have been married," Sui-Lan finished.

"Safer that way. The Emperor doesn't get worried."

"Well, I can't change my birth, which means I can't do anything about the first three traits," Sui-Lan said.

"I don't want you to change anything. I like you just the way you are," he said softly.

"Well, I could always get married?" Sui-Lan offered.

The sudden raging fury that overcame Eivaunee surprised even himself. The buried pain from Anati's marriage roared to the surface. A betrayal that was not a betrayal, but still left a wound that was like a knife cutting through him.

"If you marry, my dear, I will kill whoever you marry and have Zsar't'lac hold you and force you to watch it!" Eivaunee snarled. He could do nothing about Anati's marriage. He understood that, as he always knew she truly loved him; Anati had to marry. Eivaunee had to accept that, and he did, even sending a suitable marriage gift. Sui-Lan, however, was a very different matter. He meant exactly what he said.

Eivaunee couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. He wanted to lash out; to hurt her as she had hurt him. After a long moment he pulled his robe on.

"Eivaun!" Sui-Lan cried out. "I was only kidding!"

Eivaunee's eyes were cold. "I have never given you permission to use that name. There are only three people who call me that, and you are not one of them!" He turned towards the door, wanting to get away from the room, afraid of his violent anger.

He wasn't sure where he wanted to go as he left the room at a half run. By instinct he ended up outside of Zsar't'lac's room. He paused before hitting the announcer. What was going to say? What was he going to say? That Sui-Lan threatened to marry? Well, what of it? What if she did? He didn't care. Eivaunee's breathing began to return to normal. No. He didn't care. He thought he had so briefly, but that was just because he was in a good mood and on vacation.

He wasn't going to go back to that room, though.

The door to Zsar't'lac's room opened. The alien was standing there, wearing the skirt-like garment he called a scorit. Eivaunee could see N'torba in the background. "Sorry, Zsar. Didn't mean to intrude."

The alien said nothing at first, his expression unreadable. Eivaunee knew Zsar't'lac was evaluating his emotions; that it was his emotions that had brought the alien to the door in the first place.

"It's all right. I'm fine now," Eivaunee reassured him, feeling it at least partially the truth. He was getting his emotions under control. He really didn't care that much for Sui-Lan.

"I'll be back," the alien said briefly to N'torba as he left the room. "What's the matter?" he asked Eivaunee. "What happened?" He led them away from the residences towards the large open recreational area. The sky was a shade of burnt orange; a storm was coming in.

"You are dead wrong about the benefits of romance!" Eivaunee snarled, deciding to take out some of his anger on the one person most immune to it.

"Am I?" the alien asked rhetorically, drawing Eivaunee towards the larger swimming pool. "What happened?" he repeated as he sat down on one of the stone benches, straddling it. Eivaunee sat down, tailor-style, facing him.

"Nothing." Eivaunee didn't feel like explaining it all. "Nothing important."

The alien's long hand caressed the side of Eivaunee's face, then lightly traced down the opening in the front of the robe almost to his waist. "Why do you deny your hunger for affection?" he asked softly.

"Because I don't like pain," Eivaunee returned flatly. "I'm not like you."

"Do you think I like pain?"

"No, but you..." Eivaunee stopped not sure what to say. "What is your relationship with N'torba?"

"She is my friend," the alien responded. His hand curved around to rest against Eivaunee's bare waist. He transmitted just a little reassurance with his touch, not sure how his friend would react if he felt too strongly the alien was emotionally manipulating him.

"I am your friend, Zsar!" Eivaunee's hand rested on top of the alien's thick wrist as though he were seeking more emotional reassurance.

"You are, indeed, my commander." Zsar't'lac increased his transmission of reassurance as his hands wound around to encircle Eivaunee's bare waist. "I am trying to explain that N'torba and I are not lovers, but I very much like her company."

Eivaunee laughed, leaning back in the alien's arms, enjoying the hard feel of them. "I didn't mean to intrude on you and N'torba, although it seems I wasn't interrupting much."

"I was teaching her one of the strategy games we teach children on Norda."

Eivaunee ran his hands up the alien's bare arms. "We will be leaving tomorrow morning."

"As planned," the alien agreed. "What did Sui-Lan say?" he asked again.

"Nothing important, Zsar." The memory of how her words had hurt was still there, but it was fading, being covered over by a denial that he had ever cared for her. "She was comparing herself to my Official Mistress' and since they were all married, she offered to get married."

"I see," the alien said dryly. "She is very foolish sometimes. It was the exact wrong time to say something like that."

"Exact wrong time," Eivaunee agreed angrily. "I was thinking about maybe a new beginning. But I was wrong. I didn't—I don't care that much about her."

The alien tilted up Eivaunee's face. "My sweet Commander, lie to me if you wish, but don't lie to yourself."

"Why not?" Eivaunee challenged back. "It is useful sometimes, don't you think?"

"Perhaps, so long as you do know the truth."

"I am not sure that whatever the truth is that it matters. I have a ship to run and the Provinces to rule. She is a captain of a United Councils research vessel. I won't see much of her. So what

does the truth mean?" Eivaunee drew back from the alien's touch. "I'll sleep alone tonight or go into town and find a whore. You want one?"

For a moment, angry, dark red flared in the alien's eyes. "No." The alien's sharp claws came out. The very sharp tips of them touched against the human's cheek. "When I wish sexual pleasure, I am quite capable of finding what I want without any help from you. Choose a different battleground to attack me on."

Eivaunee shrugged. "Why, I doubt I'd win on any of them."

The sharp points withdrew from the side of the human's face; the angry red in the alien's eyes faded. The hard curved backs of the claws caressed slightly against Eivaunee's face before they slid back into their sheaths. "It is good that you realize that," the alien said arrogantly.

Eivaunee laughed. "I'm going to go check out those old ruins you told me about. Do you want to join me?"

"No. I will spend the day with N'torba."

"As you choose," Eivaunee said, wrapping his robe tightly around his slender body. There was a clothing store as part of the resort. He could get some clothing there to wear today. He didn't plan on going back to the room, and most likely he would sleep alone tonight. There were over a hundred rooms in the resort. He would use one of them.

Chapter 8

The sound of the door opening woke Zsar't'lac. He pushed N'torba behind him as he reached for his knife that rested on the table by the bed. Then he recognized the mind. He almost didn't. It was almost completely closed. There were no emotions to feel. Even Eivaunee was rarely that emotionally contained.

"What's wrong?" Zsar't'lac asked.

"What's going on?" N'torba wanted to know.

"I'm—we're—recalled," Eivaunee said, his voice low and hollow. "To the Imperial Planet, to Klimar Prime. I'm to stand trial for treason. Both of us," he emphasized, knowing that Zsar't'lac would understand. "And the Comveckt stays in the Provinces."

"What?" two voices asked in close unison, but only one really understood the significance of the words. If the Comveckt was being left in the Provinces and Zsar't'lac was coming with him to the Klimar Prime, it was not a bluff.

"Treason. A treason trial."

Zsar't'lac was out of bed. He was still wearing his scorit. "How can they try you for treason? You've committed no real treason."

"I don't know, Zsar. I don't know what's going on. I just got a message relayed to me from the Comveckt. From the Emperor directly. I'm to return to stand trial for treason."

"You're sure it's not a forgery," Zsar't'lac asked.

"I know the Emperor's voice," Eivaunee replied wearily. "Before I came here, though, I had the ship check the signet code. It's from Hazdel."

"What are you going to do?"

"We return to the ship. Immediately. I've told Sanqu to relay to the Emperor that we were some distance away on rec leave. We're supposed to rendezvous with an Imperial courier ship in three days. We can't make that. I've asked for five days."

"I'll be ready in a few minutes," Zsar't'lac told him.

"Don't go," a new voice said from the doorway. "Come to the United Councils. You'll be safe there." Sui-lan's eyes were wide with worry; tear streaks marked her face. She had waited in the room for Eivaunee to come back for hours; then she had gone looking for him. The hotel staff would tell her nothing. Eivaunee had told them not to tell her which room he was now in. They hadn't, so she had just sat down across from the alien's room. She knew eventually Eivaunee would come here. She never thought it would be for this.

"No, I can't." Eivaunee said bluntly. His anger at her dissipating.

"If you go to the Imperial Planet he'll kill you!" Even in the United Councils the Emperor's hatred of Eivaunee Dorlan was known.

"That's not the real problem," Eivaunee replied. He looked back at Zsar't'lac. "I'm not afraid of dying."

"I know."

"What? I don't understand." It irritated Sui-lan that there was so much the alien understood better than she.

"If I am found guilty of treason, the problem is not my death, but the Emperor gains control of the Dorlan Estates—and all the people who are in hereditary fealty to the Dorlans."

"If you go to the United Councils at least you will live," Sui-lan pointed out.

"If I defect, then I hand over the Dorlan Estates and betray my people," Eivaunee's voice was hard. "I have to go back and fight for them. And for the rest of the Klimar Empire. If Hazdel gains the Dorlan Estates—"

"You have committed no real treason, Eivaun," Zsar't'lac repeated.

"I know that," Eivaunee answered with cold hardness. "Hazdel knows that too. Something else is involved. He isn't a fool."

Zsar't'lac said nothing for a long moment; there seemed little to say. "I'll be packed in a few minutes," he repeated what he had said earlier.

"Pack what you need for a couple of days. The resort can send the rest later." Eivaunee walked past Sui-lan and back to his suite.

"Is there anything I can do?" N'torba asked.

"Go help Eivaunee," Zsar't'lac suggested. "Or at least distract Sui-lan."

"I'll try."

The shuttle's lights were on as the four walked up. Two pieces of baggage were put onboard. Zsar't'lac turned to N'torba and lightly touched the side of her face. "Take care of yourself. When time allows, I will correspond."

"I will too," she said softly.

"I'll be in touch if I find time," Eivaunee told Sui lan, their argument now unimportant.

"Don't expect much."

"You won't change your mind?"

"No," Eivaunee returned sharply. "Let's go, Zsar."

Zsar't'lac gave the two women a reassuring, human style smile and followed Eivaunee, who didn't look back, into the shuttle.

It didn't take much time to reach the transport ship that was waiting. Eivaunee went directly to his cabin. Zsar't'lac lingered awhile talking with the pilot and captain. He wanted to probe their emotions, make sure they didn't plan anything beyond transporting them to the Comveckt. Their strongest emotions were a feeling of honor at being chosen to transport the Commissioner

of the Provinces; they planned no treachery.

Zsar't'lac touched the announcer outside Eivaunee's cabin.

"Identify."

"Zsar't'lac."

The door opened. Zsar't'lac hadn't been sure it would. When Eivaunee was in one of his dark moods, he didn't like company. Zsar't'lac walked in the small, nondescript room feeling a kaleidoscope of emotions emanating from the intense, pacing human. At least now there were emotions. That was something positive. Maybe. Zsar't'lac could feel Eivaunee's fear, held in close check; also a deep anger, close to fury, directed at the Emperor. Another emotion—regret? Or loss? There were additional emotions and threads of feelings that Zsar't'lac couldn't easily define.

"Don't worry, Zsar, I'm sure you're safe from the Emperor," Eivaunee stated, his tone cold and nasty.

The alien walked across the room. "I know," he replied calmly. "I'm not worried about myself."

Eivaunee took a deep breath. "Sorry about that."

Zsar't'lac did a human style shrug. "The pilot and captain have nothing in mind beyond ferrying you to the Comveckt."

Eivaunee returned to pacing. "That wasn't likely, Zsar. The Emperor will want to see my face when he kills me."

"He loves you almost as much as he hates you," the alien pointed out softly.

"Desire is not love, Zsar," Eivaunee returned coldly.

"No," the alien agreed. "But love, especially human love, can be quite complicated."

"I don't need a lecture on human emotion right now."

"No," Zsar't'lac agreed. "We need to find out what Hazdel is planning. You have committed no outright treason, so he must have some plot in mind."

Eivaunee stopped pacing again. "I know. When we get to the Comveckt, I'll send out messages to everyone and see what comes back. That's part of why I asked for five days. It will only take us ten hours to get back to the Comveckt. We could make the rendezvous with the courier ship in three days, but if we go slower, I'll have one more day. Hopefully someone can get me some information in that time."

"I wonder who Hazdel plans to command the Comveckt."

"For an brief interim command, he can assign any qualified person. And the definition of qualified can be stretched."

"Canby?"

"Most likely. Hazdel will want one of his own people commanding the Comveckt while he is

I'm facing a trumped-up treason trial."

Zsar't'lac walked over to the slender human. "We will win, Eivaunee," he said and reached out a hand to caress the human's face.

Eivaunee pushed the alien's hand aside. "I'm not so sure, Zsar. Hazdel wouldn't try this unless he was very sure he would win. He has more power than you understand."

"His power only exists while he lives."

It took Eivaunee a moment to understand what Zsar't'lac was saying. "No!" he answered fiercely. "You will not risk your life in a futile attempt to kill him!"

"What about a successful attempt to kill him?" the alien asked with a touch of humor.

"No."

"It is the best answer," Zsar't'lac tried to persuade.

"The Princess? You think she's the best answer?"

"You will be on the Imperial Planet, Eivaunee. You could be Emperor."

The golden human turned his back on his friend. "Any such attempt would provide Hazdel with the grounds for treason."

"My own initiative?" the alien offered. "I doubt if most people believe you completely control me."

"They would be right," Eivaunee stated with a touch of asperity. "But in the eyes of a treason court, you serve me, so if you commit treason, I'm a traitor."

"But if I'm successful?"

"The chance can't be taken, Zsar. Too much is at risk. Not just my life. If that were all, I'd have gone for Hazdel's throat years ago. It's not even all the Dorlan Estates and the Dorlan retainers, although that is certainly a major factor. But if you die here, you've said the Hsassan will attack. Be reasonable, Zsar, my life isn't worth interstellar war."

Eivaunee was completely correct. Zsar't'lac knew that. Still, it wasn't completely for his friend's sake that Hazdel needed to die. "Your Emperor has no honor; he should die for the sake of human honor."

"The humans in the Klimar Empire are not willing to, en masse, risk their lives for your concept of honor, Zsar. Your death means interstellar war, and most likely slavery for humans. Honor and slavery do not go well together."

"Nothing is gained without risk," the alien answered.

"No," Eivaunee stated with finality.

Zsar't'lac gave up the argument for the time being. "What do you want to do? For your body, it's still the middle of the night. Do you want to sleep, or talk—what?"

"I couldn't sleep just now, Zsar. What's to talk about? We don't know enough to plan." He

thought for a minute. “Did you bring any of your strategy and tactics games?”

“I always have at least one with me.”

“It would give my mind something to do beyond run in circles.”

“My baggage was taken to my room. I’ll get the game and be back.”

“Thanks.”

Zsar’t’lac walked to his cabin, his mind continuing to probe out, scanning all the humans he passed. There was the usual xenophobe-reaction, and the curiosity he always brought out. But no strong, focused hostility aimed at himself or Eivaunee. For the time being, they were safe.

Returning a few minutes later, a folded wood board in his long hand, Zsar’t’lac paused outside Eivaunee’s door. A woman was in the room with Eivaunee now. Lightly touching their minds, it was clear that the female had hopes of sexual play, but Eivaunee wasn’t thinking along those lines. The alien touched the announcer.

“Zsar?” Eivaunee queried back.

“Yes.”

The door opened. Eivaunee smiled as the alien walked in. “Which one do you have?”

“Hunters and Prey.”

“Which do you want?”

“You’re better at being Prey,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

“I’ve had practice,” Eivaunee replied coolly. “Want some real coffee?” He pointed at the pot

and cups the woman had brought in.

“I’ll get it.” The female was clearly irritated at the alien’s presence. It had nothing to do with

xenophobia, the alien was an impediment to her plans.

Eivaunee began to set up the game as Zsar’t’lac poured himself a cup of coffee. The woman sat down on one of the small side chairs. Her emotions made it clear she intended to wait the alien out. If Eivaunee noticed her, he gave no indication. Zsar’t’lac didn’t care. Eivaunee didn’t feel like discussing the current situation, so whether the woman was there or not wasn’t important. Besides, Eivaunee might change his mind after the game and want sex.

The game board opened up to a long rectangle painted in reds and greens to simulate forest terrain. There were two dozen small round carved pieces that were the prey. The four hunter pieces were square and larger.

“Why wood?” the woman asked. “So archaic. Why not a vid display?”

Eivaunee made no reply, ignoring the woman and concentrating on the board, deciding where he would place his pieces.

“For the purposes of this game, wood works as well as a vid, and it’s more artistic,” Zsar’t’lac answered.

“I wouldn’t think so.”

"If you're going to stay, don't talk," Eivaunee commanded. The woman settled back in the chair, saying nothing.

It took four hours for the alien to capture all of Eivaunee's prey pieces, a little longer than usual. Eivaunee was pleased. He stretched. "Well, hopefully I'm learning something with all these strategy and tactics games with you."

"You should," the alien said gently. He lightly touched the side of Eivaunee's face. "You should get some sleep. That last mistake was because you're tired."

"True," Eivaunee agreed, leaning back.

Zsar't'lac packed up the pieces into their box and folded the game board. "We should meet the Comveckt in just under six hours. I'll see you then." The door closed behind him.

Eivaunee looked at the woman's hopeful face. She had been quiet. Eivaunee shrugged mentally. It would be awhile before he had another opportunity for sex.

"Want to?" he inquired indifferently.

"Yes, please."

Eivaunee lead the way into the small sleeping chamber.

The small shuttle docked in the outer airlock of the Comveckt with the slightest bump, then was rotated through to the inner airlock. It seemed to Eivaunee it took a longer than usual to repressurized the inner lock, but he knew he was just being impatient. He needed information and hated even a few minutes of extra delay. As soon as the tone sounded to indicate a properly pressured lock, he was out the door. He walked quickly towards the main ship entrance.

"Thank you," the alien said to the shuttle pilot, taking care of the minor social amenities that Eivaunee normally remembered.

Con Noate was walking towards Eivaunee, his face wearing an intense, worried expression. Zsar't'lac, with his long legs, caught up with Eivaunee before they met.

"Sir," Con Noate said officially. They were standing close to the main doors to the ship. "I've just received a message from Consenti Dennyson that I am to take command of the Comveckt."

"Did Dennyson say why?"

"No, sir."

Eivaunee considered what to say, but it didn't really matter. Sooner or later, everyone on the ship would know the situation. It was only fair that Con Noate be the first. "I'm recalled to the Imperial Planet," Eivaunee said softly. "To stand trial for treason."

Con Noate looked from Eivaunee to the tall alien. "He's recalled as well," Eivaunee answered the unspoken question. "Not to stand trial, just to be sure he isn't commanding this ship."

Con Noate made no immediate answer; his breathing became a little deeper. "Are you sure it

was the Emperor?” he asked after a moment.

“For once, his own voice, and the signet code was verified by the computer here.”

“Don’t go,” Con Noate said softly.

“Don’t be stupid,” Eivaunee replied coolly. “Of course I’m going. Now I need to contact some people. If you want to talk about this further, you can come to my office in an hour. Officer Zsar’t’lac, go over the status of the ship with him. I’ll see you later.”

“As you wish,” Zsar’t’lac replied in standard form.

Eivaunee walked past his two officers, up the short flight of stairs and into the main body of the ship.

“He’s going to die,” Con Noate said very softly. “The bastards are going to kill him.”

“Not if I can help it,” the alien spoke just as softly.

“Can you?”

“I don’t know,” came the unhelpful response. “Let’s go over ship business, and then we’ll both meet him in his office in an hour.”

“Fuck the god-damned ship,” Con Noate stated pithily.

“The mental image that invokes is, ah, interesting.”

“Fuck you as well,” Con Noate added coldly, not pleased with the alien’s levity.

“Ah, no, definitely not. Your office, or conference room A?”

“My office,” Con Noate answered. “I want to talk to your more about this.”

“I know little more than you,” Zsar’t’lac warned. “We’ll take care of the ship business first. Eivaunee will want a summary report when we meet with him.”

Con Noate nodded as they turned to go back into the ship. He knew Zsar’t’lac was right, but he just couldn’t care. Not now.

It was a just under an hour when the door to Eivaunee’s quarters sounded. It would have been far less than that if Con Noate had his way, but the alien insisted on giving Eivaunee almost all of the hour he wanted.

The door to Eivaunee’s quarters released without an identification request. Zsar’t’lac didn’t like that. Eivaunee came out from his office and saw the dark flickers in his eyes.

“Got the automatic ID on as well as visual. I knew who was there.”

“Good. Since it’s obvious the Emperor is on the attack, let’s not assume his only focus is the treason trial. It could just be a diversion.”

“Do you think so?” Con Noate asked. He hadn’t thought of that.

“A possibility, nothing more. But one that should be kept in mind.”

“Yes, Zsar, I know,” Eivaunee said a little wearily. He led the way into his living room. “Anything to drink—either of you?”

“No,” came from both. Eivaunee opened a demi-bottle of a red wine and poured himself a

glass.

“Anything from your informants?” Zsar’t’lac asked.

“Nothing immediate,” Eivaunee replied. “A couple of people have noticed an increase in security at the Palace. No surprise that, but nothing else. I’ve let it be known I’m willing to pay extremely well for any information about this.” He carried the glass of wine over to one of the large chairs and sat down a little heavily, placing the wine on the small serving table. Zsar’t’lac lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of him. Con Noate took the large chair on the other side of the small, inlaid wood serving table.

“What are you going to do?” Con Noate asked.

“Find out what Hazdel’s plan is and counter it. Somehow.” Eivaunee tried to sound optimistic, both for his own sake as well as Con Noate’s. He knew Zsar’t’lac could feel how unsure he was. He had very little time, days only, to find out Hazdel’s plan and figure out how to stop it. And Hazdel wouldn’t start this unless he wasn’t sure of winning. The fact that Eivaunee had not committed treason wasn’t important. Truth was a pawn in this game.

“You could stay in the Provinces,” Con Noate offered. “We’ve got the flagship and Zsar’t’lac.”

“One star-class battleship while Hazdel has twelve. Zsar is good, but those odds are impossible.”

Con Noate looked at the alien who was sitting on the floor. “Probably accurate,” Zsar’t’lac agreed. “We could play a gun and run strategy. A lot of space here in the Provinces, but the Emperor knows Eivaunee well enough to know how to solve that problem.”

Eivaunee nodded and sipped his wine.

“How?” Con Noate asked either of them.

“Hold a world hostage. Tell Eivaunee that he turns himself in or the world is destroyed. Or two worlds—or however many it takes.” It was Zsar’t’lac who answered. “To succeed at gun and run takes a level of ruthlessness our Commander does not possess.”

“The Provinces would fight for you!” Con Noate stated passionately. “The officers—the crew—every ship that isn’t pirate—!”

“Yes, I know, but that doesn’t change the basic set of odds,” Eivaunee answered, looking down at his blood-red wine. “There’s too few ships with any power in the Provinces and only one full size space dock. This sort of confrontation has always been in the background, my friend. It always loomed as a possibility. That’s why there are so few patrol ships. Hazdel wants to be sure he has the upper hand.”

Con Noate stared at the alien who was watching Eivaunee. “Can’t you change his mind? Aren’t you even going to try?”

“No,” Zsar’t’lac answered quietly. “Personally, I would enjoy the challenge of a civil war, and I have the requisite level of ruthlessness. But Eivaunee won’t buy his life at that price and nothing either of us can say will change that. He controls the situation.”

“And that’s it?”

“Not quite,” the alien answered. “I’m in favor of a coup d’etat on the Imperial Planet. Quick and relatively bloodless and Eivaunee moves into power immediately.”

Con Noate’s eyes shifted to look at his Commander. “Is that the plan?”

Eivaunee finally looked up from his contemplation of his wine. His eyes, amber-dark, looked lost. “I have no plan at this point. Zsar’t’lac has some wild ideas that I don’t agree with. And this situation will be resolved best if no one gets crazy.” The lost look faded a little from Eivaunee’s eyes. “This is a political fight—begun on the Imperial Planet—it will end there. And someone will die. The way this is set up, someone has to. But who that someone is will be decided in the political arena, not on a battleship.”

He was right. They had the Imperial flagship and it was worthless. Con Noate was angry, angrier than he had ever been in his life. It showed.

“Stop and think for a moment, my friend,” Eivaunee cautioned. “Think of your daughter in Imperial troopers hands. Don’t think that won’t be one of the first worlds they’ll hit. They know I’ve gone there; they know your daughter’s there. We’ve seen Imperial troopers in action. Think of your daughter—your grandson—in their control. That should slow you down.”

It should, maybe it did. But the unfairness of the whole situation burned.

“Actually I’m surprised you got control of the ship,” Eivaunee changed the subject a little. “I was sure it would be Canby.”

“Dennyson probably had some say in the matter,” Con Noate replied after a pause. “I’d rather go with you.”

“I’ve had one friend die for me. I don’t need another.”

“Who?” Zsar’t’lac asked. This was something he had no knowledge of.

“A young man named Darby,” Eivaunee answered. “I’ll tell you about it on our way to the Imperial Planet. A cautionary tale.”

Con Noate knew about Darby. When he had visited the Imperial Planet with Eivaunee years earlier, he had learned more than he wanted to about his Commander’s younger years.

“Now give me the ship’s status report, one of you. After that, I want you, Con Noate, to set up a meeting of all off-duty officers for four hours from now. I will explain the situation to them and later address the whole ship by video. Before that I will personally tell Sanqu and Podi Blinet of the recall.”

“There’s very little to report,” Con Noate began. “Everything is running fine.”

It was just over four hours later when Eivaunee Dorlan stood at the front of the largest conference room in the ship. Except for Zsar’t’lac and Con Noate, all off-duty officers were seated in front of him. Eivaunee chose to have his two closest officers stand by him. A visual image of solidarity he hoped would help. Maybe it did. Still, the officers didn’t take it well, they wanted to fight. Eivaunee had to remind them that what they wanted was unimportant; he

alone made the decisions, especially on such a matter as this. They still didn't like it, but they realized there was nothing they could do about it.

He would command them for four more days, regardless of any command-transfer decision by Jite Dennyson, then he and Zsar't'lac would board an Imperial courier ship. Eivaunee told them he might be back, or he might not. Most could guess which scenario was most likely. A low sound went through the large room, soft and unfocused, between a moan and a growl. They had to stand by and do nothing while the Emperor destroyed their beloved Commander.

Later, a couple of the officers would suggest imprisoning Eivaunee Dorlan and fighting for him whether he liked it or not, but wiser minds prevailed. To have any chance at all, they needed the alien on their side and if he had stood with the Commander, he wasn't liable to help.

The next four days passed both too slowly and far too quickly. Eivaunee was constantly waiting and hoping for some useful information from his informants, but he got nothing useful. News of his recall leaped through the Provinces and time and again he had to restrain over-eager supporters while trying to finish what work he could. He spent most of his time laying the groundwork for the governments to continue during what could be a long duration without any Commissioner for the Provinces. Zsar't'lac and Con Noate helped as much as they could. Zsar't'lac was far more useful, not just because he slept so little, but because he seemed to have a better understanding of what was needed. He understood the concepts of government.

On the morning of the third day, Zsar't'lac and Eivaunee were taking a shortcut through a recreational area enroute to CommCent when Eivaunee stopped abruptly.

"Look, Jase, you've got to increase the odds on the Commander. No one's covering the bets on his side."

Four enlisted men and one woman were gathered in a group. The man who was complaining had a loud voice, which was why Eivaunee stopped. The alien hissed. That brought everyone's attention around. The five people came to stiff attention.

"Sir!" the one who had been called Jase said. It was obvious he wanted to add something to that, but couldn't think of anything to say at first. "No disrespect meant, sir," he finally said.

Eivaunee considered the matter. "Yes, it is a problem when no one will cover the odds." His tone was ironic; his amber eyes glittered dangerously. Then he shrugged. "I will cover the odds on my side," he decided. "Zsar't'lac, if I don't return to the ship, make sure this debt is paid."

"Yes, Commander. In full." There was an additional promise in his tone, and in the dark red flickers in his eyes. Zsar't'lac and Eivaunee continued on their way. "I didn't want him to increase the odds against me, Zsar," Eivaunee explained as they walked away.

The fourth day was one of the longest in Eivaunee's memory. It began with the destruction of his personal files. Then there was the last, long tour of the ship with Zsar't'lac at his side. Dinner was a somber affair with little food actually eaten. After that, Eivaunee went to his quarters to read the many messages of farewell from the Provinces.

In less than two hours, the Comveckt would meet with the Imperial courier ship, the Tinzer, and Eivaunee would again become a political prisoner. He hated the idea. He had been a

political prisoner for so much of his life. He'd had a bare six years of relative freedom. Now he was ordered back to the Imperial Planet. He didn't want to go; he wanted very much to fight. Die fighting, if it came to that. Not die like a lamb lead to the slaughter. But he couldn't fight. Too many lives would pay if he did. Their lives demanded his sacrifice. He hated it; he burned under the restraint. But he would do it.

There was a gentle, cool, touch at the nape of his neck. Eivaunee had been staring at his commsole screen, not reading anything, just feeling anger. With the gentle touch came a feeling of reassurance.

"I know, Zsar, but I can't help but feel angry."

"Anger could be a very useful emotion—later."

"I won't let you risk your life, Zsar," Eivaunee stated firmly. "Anger isn't going to change that."

"We'll see," the alien replied gently.

Eivaunee shook his head and turned back to his commsole screen. Zsar't'lac stood watching his golden profile as Eivaunee read the messages, not just from off-ship Provincials, but also from the officers and crew. Many of them had shipped out with him. They had spent the last six years with this beautiful, demanding, arrogant, generous man. It would never be the same, or even close to it, without him. Zsar't'lac understood that. It was a dangerous thought for the Hsassan Qtesark. Zsar't'lac turned away from that thought. He alone could change the destiny of empires, and save this one man. But the price that would be paid would be too high, it couldn't be considered. His golden, human friend would have to die; Zsar't'lac wouldn't call his Hsassan to save him.

Eivaunee turned away from the screen. "I'm going to say a quick good-bye via vid commlink just before we leave. I'd like you to be at the pilot's console then. You'll at least pay some attention to the ship."

"As you will," Zsar't'lac stated.

Eivaunee turned back to read his screen.

Time passed, set alone in isolation. Ties that had bound for years were cut. Blood flowed, never seen, only felt. An ending without hope of a new beginning. The parting was a death without a corpse to mourn over.

The door sounded. Eivaunee took a deep breath, withdrawing from the emotional morass. He checked the visual and the palm print ID. Con Noate, as expected.

"Come," he released the door, and leaned back away from the screen. Enough.

"Sir." Con Noate walked into Eivaunee's office. He moved a little stiffly; his eyes opened a little too wide.

"Let's go where we can be more comfortable," Eivaunee suggested. He led the way into his living quarters and sat down on the wide sofa. Con Noate chose the nearest chair.

"I don't know what to say, sir," the older officer said softly.

Eivaunee leaned back against the sofa. "You might begin by calling me 'Eivaunee'," he suggested.

The older grey-haired man made no reply, he just shook his head.

"We've had a good run," Eivaunee said gently. "This was always in the background; it was always liable to come to this."

"That doesn't make it easier."

"I owe you more than I can ever repay—in any currency," Eivaunee said softly.

"Then let me go with you!"

"No." Eivaunee's tone was final. "You have a duty here," he paused for a moment, then added: "I've transferred a considerable sum of money to your personal account. By most people's estimate, you're now rich."

"I don't want—" Con Noate began, then fell silent, his voice strangled by emotion.

"What do you want—that I can give you?" Eivaunee asked, his voice soft and sweet.

It took several moments for Con Noate to regain control of his emotions. He shook his head. "Nothing, sir. The memories are enough."

"You love me," Eivaunee said. It was not a question.

"Yes, I love you. But not like the others...not..."

Eivaunee smiled. "I know. You don't want to have sex with me."

The smile was so sweet, it was impossible not to respond. Con Noate's mouth hurt to smile. "No, sir."

"Come and sit here by me," Eivaunee said patting the sofa.

Con Noate hesitated a moment, then stiffly walked the couple of feet to sit down beside his Commander.

Eivaunee lightly touched Con Noate's face. "Thank you for all you've done, and good-bye, my friend." Eivaunee leaned forward and kissed the older man, a gentle, tender kiss of affection. "For the memories," he said softly.

The door sounded. Eivaunee drew back. "Computer check ID."

"Podi Blinet," the machine responded.

Eivaunee hesitated, but there was nothing more to say that wouldn't be excessively maudlin. "I have to finish packing," he told Con Noate. "You can stay and watch, if you'd like. Boring... but if you want?" Eivaunee knew that Con Noate didn't want to leave him any sooner than he had to.

"Thank you, sir. I'll stay."

"Come," Eivaunee released the door.

Most of the next hour was spent finalizing what clothes to take, what to have sent to the Imperial Planet later—if there was a later—and what to store at the Dorlan Home Estate. Podi

was cool, efficient, and very business-like. It bothered Eivaunee a little that his fealty-bound retainer didn't offer to come with him to the Imperial Planet. He wouldn't be allowed to stay, of course, but he could make the journey with Eivaunee. He might even be useful. But Podi made no offers as he packed what was necessary.

Eivaunee could have ordered his retainer to come, but he wouldn't. He knew the source of the problem: the large alien, who was coming with him. Since Zsar't'lac's arrival on the Comveckt, Podi had grown more and more distant. He strongly disliked the alien. Their duties were enough distant that they could, for the most part, avoid each other. But that didn't matter to Podi, who was quite xenophobic, and Eivaunee didn't—wouldn't—disguise his friendship for the alien. That put an insurmountable barrier between them.

"That's it, Master," Podi stated as the last case was closed with a click.

Eivaunee turned to Con Noate. "You need to go back to CommCent. I'll transmit my farewell to the whole ship before I leave. I've told Zsar't'lac that I want him at the pilot's console."

"As you will, sir," Con Noate said softly, he stared a moment longer at Eivaunee's face, and then turned away. The door closed behind him.

"We could have done better than this, Podi," Eivaunee addressed his servant quietly.

"Not with the alien," Podi returned firmly.

There was silence. Then Podi turned away. He walked to the door and stopped. "Your father would have handled matters better. He would have known how to keep the alien in his place."

Podi had served only a few months with Tamsek Dorlan, but during the six years he had been with Eivaunee, too often he had compared the young man to his father. And never to Eivaunee's advantage.

"I'm not my father," Eivaunee pointed out the obvious. "And Zsar't'lac is my friend. I'm honored to have him as a friend."

Podi turned around to face the man he called 'Master.' His face was hard-set. "Your father would not have been 'honored' to call an animal a friend."

"Again, I'm not my father. I'm his child, who he left behind to be raised by his enemy. Like his wife. He left her behind to face Hazdel alone. To be attacked and destroyed by him. No, I'm not my father." Eivaunee had very ambivalent emotions where his father was concerned. Through the years he had ignored Podi's unflattering comparisons, but he wasn't in the mood to be tolerant.

"He had no choice!" Podi defended the hard and arrogant man he understood so much better than the enigmatic and arrogant son.

"I wonder? I really wonder how hard he ever tried?" Eivaunee asked, mostly to himself. He would never know. "You will accompany my clothing to the Dorlan Home Estate and place yourself under the Estate Agent's command."

“As you will—Master.”

Eivaunee turned away. It was time to go. “See that my luggage is put aboard the shuttle,” he said as he walked back into the living room. He looked around the large room, elegant and beautiful. He wondered who would occupy it next? Some other Consenti member, no doubt. Con Noate was just an interim Commander. But none of this was his concern any more. He left without a backward glance.

Chapter 9

The Comveckt slowed alongside the courier ship.

Zsar’t’lac was sitting at the pilot’s console. Most of the other CommCent officers were looking at him, focusing their anger on the only target available, however unjust.

“So, we’re supposed to just hand him over—without a fight?” It was gentle Hafva who said that. Gentle Hafva, who normally regarded the alien so highly, had scorn in her voice.

“I still say we turn around and head back to the Provinces,” Sanqu added. “We can hide out in the Provinces for years.”

“No,” Zsar’t’lac said firmly. “We meet with the Imperial courier craft and Commander Dorlan and I transfer over—without a fight.” He answered Hafva first. “Commander Dorlan has made it clear he will not instigate a civil war.”

“So we just send him off to that paranoid, half-crazed man who will kill him. We have to do this?” Corsi, the scanner, was as unhappy as any of them.

“I will be with Commander Dorlan on the Imperial Planet,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out. “And Commander Dorlan is correct in stating the matter is best handled there.”

“Yeah, well, I also remember that you get one third of the Dorlan Estates if he dies,” Corsi stated in an ugly tone of voice.

“Not if he’s convicted of treason,” the alien answered.

“Yeah, but he could always have an accident en route to the Imperial Planet,” Corsi pointed out. “Before he’s convicted of treason. Maybe that’s the Emperor’s plan. And you’re part of it.”

“No!” Con Noate, who was standing by Zsar’t’lac, answered before anyone else could.

Dark red flickered in the alien’s black eyes. “If I kill Eivaunee Dorlan, it will not be by accident. And if I have been suborned by the Emperor, Commander Dorlan is in as much danger

on this ship as on a courier craft.”

“That’s exactly true,” Con Noate concurred. “Besides Zsar’t’lac has risked his life to save the Commander’s on occasion. He’s not a traitor.”

“I’m just saying the alien has something to gain if the Commander dies, that’s all,” Corsi continued doggedly. “It should be remembered.”

From a Hsassan’s point of view, Corsi’s comments were a deadly insult. But from a human’s perspective, Officer Corsi was just trying to protect Eivaunee Dorlan.

“It is a valid point,” Zsar’t’lac finally conceded, trying to view matters from the human perspective. “If I wanted one third of the Dorlan Estates.”

It was hard to believe that anyone didn’t want that much money, but if anyone didn’t, it was the large alien.

“It is time you went to the conference room,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out. There was a quick shuffling as the on-duty officers left. Zsar’t’lac’s long fingers moved over his console, setting the other stations to visually read-out at the pilot’s console. It wasn’t exactly a safe situation. But for a short time, while the ship remained stationary in real space, it could be managed. Especially with Zsar’t’lac at the pilot’s console.

The door opened behind Zsar’t’lac. He could feel the bitter presence of Officer Henri Canby. “So they are all off to weep tears of despair for the beautiful victim,” he mocked.

“Take a station,” Zsar’t’lac suggested. “You’re trained in most of them. Be useful for a change.”

“It’s not my duty rotation any more,” Canby pointed out, a snide tone in his voice. “I’m the Information Officer now.”

The large front viewing screen shifted and Eivaunee Dorlan’s image appeared. Zsar’t’lac touched his console and the front viewing screen image shifted back to the Tinzer. Zsar’t’lac knew what Eivaunee looked like and he wanted to keep the Tinzer under observation. It wasn’t likely that such a small ship could cause any problems for the Comveckt, still Zsar’t’lac would monitor it. Zsar’t’lac put Eivaunee’s voice on the CommCent audio, though.

“What do I say?” Eivaunee’s voice began, his voice soft and gentle. “To so many who have served so well. Most of you shipped out with me six years ago. I got this command for the same reason I am now being recalled to the Imperial Planet: my name is Eivaunee Dorlan. This was my first full command, and it was the biggest killer of them all, the flagship of the Klimar Empire. But none of you were new to your positions, you had the experience I lacked.” There was silence for a moment. Zsar’t’lac could picture Eivaunee standing there a little awkwardly. He hated any leave taking.

“You were very tolerant of me,” the voice continued, a touch of humor running through it. “Not that you had much choice.” There was soft laughter from the room full of people at that. “What I want to say is that if we have done some good here in the Provinces—and I believe we have—then you, the officers and crew of this ship, deserve much of the credit. It was your

experience, your abilities that allowed it to happen. Often I have felt the best I could do was to stay the hell out of your way.” Again the laughter, but slightly different now. This was truly good-bye.

“I commend you, and thank you for all you have done.” Silence again, longer this time. Eivaunee would be shifting, straightening. “And you will not engage in any foolish, stupid actions on my behalf.” His voice was now cold, flat, and hard. “I know what I am doing here. I grew up on the Imperial Planet: Imperial politics are my field of expertise. I command you not to interfere.” That was the voice they never dared disobey. Zsar’t’lac could hear the slight sounds of bodies shifting uncomfortably.

“Good-bye. I wish you all well.”

Zsar’t’lac turned off the intercom.

“How they do love him, their golden Commander!” Canby jeered.

Zsar’t’lac could feel the angry, bitter jealous. And something else as well. Beneath the jealousy, there was a feeling of satisfaction, a triumph feeling. Well, it wasn’t surprising. Canby made no effort to hide his dislike of Eivaunee. It was one of the reasons for his unpopularity on the ship.

A few moments later, the CommCent officers returned. They stood in a semi-circle in front of Zsar’t’lac, with Con Noate directly in front of the large alien. Zsar’t’lac set the massive ship on automatic and met the circle of eyes.

“Save him!” Con Noate spoke for all of them.

“I will try,” Zsar’t’lac answered. He stood up, a graceful uncoiling of a long and powerful body.

“If you need us—if you want the Comveckt—call. We’ll come,” Con Noate promised. “And

god help anyone—or any thing—that stands in our way.”

Zsar’t’lac nodded; he had been understood from the beginning. “You should know that if I call, it will involve treasonous activity and I will command the Comveckt. And Hsassan don’t retreat, don’t surrender, and in full battle we spend lives quite freely.”

Con Noate looked at the being who had replaced him in more ways than one. “Call, Hsassan, and you will get command, and you may spend the lives as you will.”

Zsar’t’lac smiled a human-style smile. “I like you, Con Noate.”

“I don’t give a god damn about that,” Con Noate answered coolly.

“No, it isn’t important,” the alien agreed. He paused for a moment, considering. “When Eivaunee Dorlan made me heir to one third of the Dorlan Estates, I had to name my heirs. I listed the names of all three shifts of CommCent officers and Weapons Technician Janus. If Eivaunee and I do not survive this trip. I advise you to enjoy those credits quickly. Don’t worry about the future.”

“I have understood that for some time,” Con Noate said evenly.

“What?” It was Hafva who asked.

“Nothing that can be answered. Or changed,” Zsar’t’lac replied gently. “Just take my advice.” He left CommCent, the door closing softly behind him.

Weapons Technician Janus was waiting by the entrance to the shuttle bay. “Will you be back?” he asked the alien.

“I don’t know. If Eivaunee cannot return, probably not,” Zsar’t’lac replied, his tone indifferent. The young Weapons Technician’s hero worship was a less strong version of the near-fanatical worship most Norda had for their genetic messiah. Zsar’t’lac was used to being an object of worship, but he didn’t need it, nor did he seek it. He had spent many hours training the young man only because he was the best prospect to become Eivaunee’s next bodyguard if Zsar’t’lac had to leave.

“You won’t be in any danger will you? I could put in to serve in the Emperor’s Guard, if that’s where you’ll end up,” Janus offered.

Zsar’t’lac hit him. A back-handed blow hard enough to leave a mark. “Eivaunee Dorlan is your Commander, boy. He is in danger.” Then he walked past the wide-eyed young man into the shuttle bay where Eivaunee waited. It was, Zsar’t’lac thought to himself, probably his method of cutting his ties.

Not always, he amended mentally, thinking of his bittersweet parting with Sing’m’li. And Zsar’t’lac would not easily lose Eivaunee. He was determined to save the young human’s life. The strength of that determination was actually troubling. Eivaunee was a human, after all.

Chapter 10

“Commander Dorlan,” Captain Sheris bowed, his hand placed over his heart. “Welcome to the Tinzer.”

It didn’t take Zsar’t’lac’s ability to know that, regardless of the words of welcome, the short, balding man wished Eivaunee anywhere but on his ship. Transporting a Consenti recalled for treason, as well as his Hsassan bodyguard, was an ugly assignment. Captain Sheris’ eyes had a very worried look.

We all have our problems in life. Eivaunee thought callously. When there is only the ride home and down -

“I am no longer in command of the Comveckt,” Eivaunee pointed out coldly. “You will address me by my birth rank.”

“Of course, Master Dorlan,” the short man hurriedly agreed. “I was under the impression you preferred the Commander title.”

“Not when it is inaccurate.”

“Yes, of course.” The man bowed again. “My apologies. If you wish, I will show you to your quarters. They are the best the Tinzer has to offer. Not, of course what you’re used to, but still our best.”

“And my officer?”

“He is quartered not far from you,” Captain Sheris offered.

“I want him quartered directly next to me,” Eivaunee commanded.

“Um, well, currently we have, ah, security personnel in the quarters on either side of you. You, ah, understand.”

“Zsar’t’lac is an excellent bodyguard,” Eivaunee returned flatly. “Displace one set of the guards.”

The short man hesitated for only a moment. “Umm, yes, of course. I see. It will take but a few moments to rearrange matters. I will take you to your quarters first.”

Captain Sheris personally escorted them to the small set of guest quarters. This was going to be the three longest days of his life! Military High Command had stated that Eivaunee Dorlan was to be treated with all the respect due his rank, but of primary importance was the safe deliverance of Eivaunee Dorlan to the Imperial Planet. He must come to no harm, including anything self-inflicted. That was the major reason for the double set of guards.

A reasonable man, upon being recalled to the Imperial Planet for treason, might decide to make a quicker end to things. But one set of guards would have to suffice. If they watched him closely... Jooie Sheris shuddered to think what might happen to *him* if he did not deliver Eivaunee Dorlan safely.

“The yoeman I’ve assigned to you is waiting in your quarters. To help you unpack. Or help you

in any other way,” Captain Sheris informed Eivaunee. “Do you require any help, ah, Officer Zsar’t’lac?”

“No,” Zsar’t’lac replied gently.

They stopped before one of the doors. “This will be your quarters, Master Dorlan.” Captain Sheris placed his hand against the lock and then coded it to accept a new palm.

Eivaunee placed his palm against the lock. The door opened. A tall, well-built brunette waited just inside. Her tunic top across the front and it was a bit shorter than regulations stated. The usual tight-fitting pants accentuated her long legs. Tall, gorgeous, and, judging by the wide smile, quite willing.

“I hope Yeoman Kadre pleases you,” Captain Sheris said, smiling. “She is quite talented.”

“Really? At what? And do you speak from personal experience?” Eivaunee wasn’t in a good mood. Particularly he didn’t want this offering of flesh.

“Master?” The short man began sweating.

“I can unpack my own clothing,” Eivaunee said coldly. “If I need any other help, my officer can supply it. You are dismissed,” he told the attractive woman.

“Yes, yes. I see,” Captain Sheris said, nodding aggressively. “Well, I didn’t know.” He made quick shooing motions at the tall yeoman. “No offense meant. Ah, the dispensary is, um, well-stocked. If you—or your officer—has any interest in that.” Captain Sheris backed out of the room behind the brunette. “I’ll take care of reassigning your officer quarters directly next to you. Do you have a preference for which side?”

“No.”

The door closed in front of Captain Sheris’ worried face.

“Fool!” Eivaunee stated, beginning to pace the small room.

“You have, by the way, managed to convince him that we are lovers,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

“Don’t be absurd, Zsar,” Eivaunee rejected the idea flatly. He paced back and forth, working off his anger.

The large alien leaned his massive shoulders against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. The quick flaring of anger that was his first response at Eivaunee’s behavior was just as quickly controlled. Irritation at Eivaunee’s attitude, though, lingered as Zsar’t’lac visually scanned the sitting room, finding several hidden lenses. Not surprising. He took a small device out of an inner pocket of his tunic and, still leaning against the wall, scanned the room for audio pickups. The small sleeping room probably had the same set-up, video with no audio. He would check that, though, before he left. Zsar’t’lac put the small radio pickup scanner back in one of his tunic pockets. He continued to lean against the wall. “Am I to unpack your luggage?” he asked, his tone coolly sarcastic.

Eivaunee stopped pacing, and turned to face his friend. “Would you?” he asked, surprised. He had no intention of asking Zsar’t’lac to do such a thing, but he was surprised the alien offered, even sarcastically.

“Yes,” the alien answered, a slight smile touching his thin lips. “But you wouldn’t like the result.”

Eivaunee laughed. “I imagine not.” He tilted his head a little to one side. “Am I making you angry?”

“Getting there.”

“I presume we’re being monitored, so if you try strangling me again, it will get a fast response.”

"I wasn't trying to strangle you last time -- I was considering breaking your neck. And the circumstances were very different. Any attack now will be strictly verbal."

"I might prefer the strangling," Eivaunee responded after a moment of consideration. He had watched the alien verbally dress down an officer on occasion.

"You might," the alien agreed. "By the way, no audio pick-ups in this room."

"No surprise there. The Emperor knows I haven't committed treason, Zsar. Audio tapes might help prove that. I'm sure Captain Sheris was specifically told not to put any audio pickups in my rooms."

"I'll check the bedroom," the alien said, finally shifting off the wall. He took a quick tour of the small sleeping room. "Same situation," he announced returning to the living room.

"Another reason not to take Captain Sheris up on his offer," Eivaunee pointed out. "I don't like providing entertainment for the hired help."

"Would they laugh, I wonder?"

Eivaunee did. "I have annoyed you."

"Yes," the alien agreed. "Why, other than a dislike of providing entertainment, were you so angry with the captain's offer? And I'm not mistaken about what he thinks."

"Did you understand his reference to a well-stocked dispensary?" Eivaunee ignored the last part of Zsar't'lac comment.

"All the drugs you could want, yes."

"Do you think I want that?" Eivaunee asked.

"On occasion you have. We've got a three-day trip ahead of us. No information will reach us here. For these three days we are in limbo. Sex and drugs will pass the time for you. If I'm in the next quarters, I can keep track of the situation with you and on the ship. It's not likely that you're in any danger here. But I'll check people out. If you want to relax, there's no reason not to."

"Except that I'll arrive on the Imperial Planet with one hell of a sex and drug hangover. I need to be mentally sharp when we land, Zsar," Eivaunee pointed out. "Also, if these are among my last few days of life, I don't want to spend them in a drug-induced sex haze."

"How do you want to spend them?" the alien asked gently, pleased with Eivaunee's response.

"I don't know. Maybe just talking with you, I'm sure you brought one of your strategy games. And I might spend a night with a woman, but it will be someone I chose, not someone foisted on me. And I don't want the drugs."

"However you want to spend the time with me—talking or playing strategy games—is fine," Zsar't'lac responded, his usual mood of indulgence towards Eivaunee restored. "And I can work on the vid pickups to get you some degree of privacy."

"I suspected you could," Eivaunee replied easily. He was still pacing a little, but the caged tiger intensity was abating. He might be a caged tiger, but he was a little more in control, at least of his own personal situation.

He wasn't angry with Zsar't'lac for thinking he might want to spend his time with sex and drugs. As the alien had pointed out, on occasion he did. But this wasn't one of them. It wasn't just that he needed to be alert when they arrived at the Imperial Planet; there were drugs that could get rid of any mental fog. Eivaunee just didn't want to spend his possibly last few days lost in a drug-induced haze. Right now the pleasure of shared friendship was more important than emotionless sex.

Eivaunee thought of Anati Realt. He would see her when he got to the Imperial Planet. Nothing—no one—would prevent that. Truthfully, he didn't think Hazdel would even try. It would

be good to see her again; it had been years. They kept in touch; Anati was one of Eivaunee's best information sources, but contact was through intermediaries. He didn't want direct contact with her. He told her it was to keep her safer. That was only part of it. Too close a contact with her would still hurt.

"I'll go and have a talk with our erstwhile Captain," Zsar't'lac said, breaking into Eivaunee's thoughts. "Make sure everything is as it seems. He is...disturbed...by this assignment. I want to make sure the assignment is no more than bringing you to the Klimar Prime."

"And make sure he knows we're not lovers?"

Zsar't'lac turned around at the door. "Yes, actually."

Eivaunee shook his head. "Does it really matter so much, Zsar?"

It wasn't logical, of course. But it did matter. And the reason was only slightly shorter than Zsar't'lac himself, and he had the sweetest body the Hsasan Qtesark had ever known. It would be insulting to Sing'm'li if Zsar't'lac were ever to take a human *male* lover. Even though his beloved was many light years away, Zsar't'lac didn't want anyone, not even a human, to misunderstand his relationship with Eivaunee. He was fond of the golden human, more even than the pilot, those many years ago. Still proprieties must be maintained. Even in rumor he didn't want to offer Sing'm'li any insult.

"Yes, actually, it does." The door closed softly behind the alien.

The Tinzer was a medium-size courier ship, with a standard wedge shape. There were only two levels on the ship, each with one main corridor. The upper level had the guest quarters, officer quarters, dining room, and, at the front, CommCent. The lower level had the crew quarters, recreational facilities, and storage. The engines and power systems were contained at the angles at the base of the wedge. The Tinzer was more of a luxury ship, designed to allow the guests of the Emperor a bit more comfort. Speed wasn't a high priority. Short, less stomach wrenching, Jumps made the trip longer, but easier on the humans.

The door to CommCent opened at Zsar't'lac's approach. The small semi-circular room had only three officer stations and the Command Chair. A pilot, navigator, and a combined commsole/scanner station were all that were necessary on such a small ship. Captain Sheris turned in his chair to look at the alien.

"Yes?" he asked coolly. He had no orders to give the alien any respect.

Zsar't'lac felt the man's mild animosity mixed with xenophobia. He expected it; it was a fairly common reaction among human males. They didn't like such a tall and powerful non-human male. It was especially common with human males in authority positions.

"How long a trip is it going to be?" Zsar't'lac began a safe, neutral conversation, his tone gentle and reassuring.

"Three days," Captain Sheris replied coldly.

As expected.

"How many Jumps?"

"What does it matter?" Sheris returned flatly. "Or do the Jumps somehow interfere with your sex games?"

Zsar't'lac's eyes flickered with dark red. "Eivaunee Dorlan and I are not lovers."

Captain Sheris' expression became sneering. "If you say so."

"He'll probably choose a woman to spend the night with tomorrow, or the next night, but he doesn't like his choices made for him."

“We have a ship to fly,” Captain Sheris pointed out, looking away from the tall alien. “Why don’t you go and unpack—or something.”

“Yeah, why don’t you go and suck—“ the pilot began.

The suggestion was never finished because the pilot’s ability to speak was suddenly cut off. He was held dangling in the air above his chair, the alien strong hands wrapped firmly around his throat. The human pilot gurgled, but that was about it. Zsar’t’lac shook him a bit, like a big dog with a rat, then dropped him back down in his seat. The young man bounced a little.

“We are not lovers,” Zsar’t’lac said again, quite firmly. “I suggest you believe me.”

“Ah—“ That was all the Captain could think of to say at first. While he had no orders to be respectful of the alien, he did have orders that the alien also was to arrive unharmed at the Imperial Planet. He couldn’t order the aliens flogged, or even confine him to quarters. Eivaunee Dorlan, as a Consenti, could override any order he gave concerning one of his own people. Captain Sheris began to see that he would have to be a little careful with the alien. The assignment was looking even worse than he had originally thought.

“No, of course you’re not,” Captain Sheris finally spoke, his voice working to radiate belief. “We all believe you. Officer Zener was just being funny. Human humor.”

Zsar’t’lac looked down at the short, balding captain and displayed his teeth in a gesture that didn’t look anything like smiling. “I suggest you restrain your officers’ sense of humor, or I might think the comments are your responsibility.”

“Um, yes, I’ll talk to them.”

“Good.”

Zsar’t’lac was unpacking his clothes with perhaps a bit of undue force when the door sounded. Eivaunee. He considered not releasing the door, but there wasn’t any point to that; it would just delay the inevitable. He could tell from the edge of worry in Eivaunee that Captain Sheris had given him a brief, and completely biased, report of what had happened in CommCent.

“Come.” Zsar’t’lac released the door.

Eivaunee walked in. In his manner, and his emotions, there was some wariness. “The pilot made a stupid comment?” Eivaunee offered as a beginning.

“Yes.”

“His throat is rather - uh - colorful.”

“Humans are soft,” Zsar’t’lac replied. He continued to unpack, rearranging his clothing unnecessarily.

“Compared to you, yes,” Eivaunee conceded. “But he was an officer at his station.”

“We were in real space,” the alien countered flatly. “A few moments of inattention isn’t likely to be a problem. And I could see the console. If there was a problem, I could take care of it better than the human.”

“Agreed. Still—“

Zsar’t’lac finally turned to face Eivaunee. “What do you want—an apology? I won’t apologize to the animal.”

Eivaunee walked towards his alien friend. “He isn’t an animal, Zsar. Humans aren’t animals. I’m not an animal.”

“No,” Zsar’t’lac agreed with the last statement.

“It’s going to be a three day trip in a small ship. Don’t make it any worse than it already is.”

"The humans should learn restraint," Zsar't'lac gave his opinion.

"So should you," Eivaunee countered flatly.

Cat-amber human eyes met red-flickering, black alien eyes. The red flared more in the alien eyes, and then Zsar't'lac turned away. "I will...try."

"I've never known you to fail at anything you've tried, Zsar." Eivaunee reached out to lightly touch the alien.

Zsar't'lac drew his arm back. "I'm still too angry, Eivaun," he explained.

"I wonder what anger feels like in you?"

Zsar't'lac turned back to face his human friend. "You wouldn't like it." Zsar't'lac took a breath and held it for a moment, settling his emotions. "I am sorry," he said softly. "You, I will apologize to. I should not create more difficulties for you. There will be no further problems."

"Thank you."

The anger was gone. Zsar't'lac knew it should never have been there. The pilot was a human; his thoughts, his beliefs, were unimportant. And certainly Sing'm'li would agree with that. "What do you want to do tonight?" Zsar't'lac asked after a moment. "You haven't slept much in the last couple of nights," he offered one suggestion.

"I'm not in a sleeping mood, Zsar. Talk—or one of your games?"

"Whatever you choose."

"Talk. There's so much I don't know about you—about the Homelands."

"Curiosity is such a strong human trait," Zsar't'lac observed with a touch of wonder in his voice. He gestured towards the chairs. "Want to sit?"

Eivaunee did.

"Want something to drink?" the alien asked.

"Not right now."

The alien lowered himself to sit cross-legged in front of Eivaunee. "What do you want to know?"

Eivaunee considered the matter. He knew that for once he was being given *carte blanche*.

Zsar't'lac would answer whatever question he asked - so long as it did not threaten the Homelands.

"What makes you tick, Zsar?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, begin with what gives you pleasure. Your interest in sex seems pretty casual, and, although you're good at killing, you don't enjoy that much that, either. Is your species—your genetic class bred not to seek pleasure?"

Zsar't'lac laughed gently. "No," he answered quite firmly. "Hsassin definitely seek pleasure."

"How?"

Zsar't'lac tilted his head a little to one side considering how to explain being Hsassin to a human.

"First of all, being Hsassin is pleasure, and it is all of our lives. From our first awareness, through all of our training, learning, growing, to our deaths, everything is summed up by the word 'Hsassin.' Everything we are—everything we do—revolves around that word, and the understanding of what it means. We are the servants, the defenders, of the Homelands."

"But what about your females?"

"The Hsassin have a duty as well. It is said, and I believe it to be true, that once they fought at the side of the Hsassin. They were warriors once, too. Now their duty is genetic—to breed and to bear Hsassin."

Eivaunee shook his head. "No, Zsar. I meant what about you and your females. We were

talking about pleasure. Is your species—your genetic class—designed to enjoy sex?”

Zsar't'lac thought of so many nights with Sing'm'li and grinned. “Yes, we enjoy sex.”

“Any one in particular, Zsar?” Eivaunee paused. “Have you ever been in love?”

“Yes,” the alien answered gently. “And I wish your language was more specific—there are many types of love.”

“I mean romantic love—sexual love.”

“There is a Hsassan that I did—and do—love.”

“Hassan?” Eivaunee echoed back. “Don't you mean Hsassana—a female Hsassan?”

Zsar't'lac smiled slightly. He had been thinking so much about Sing'm'li lately. He wanted to talk about him. To admit, for once, the love he felt. And it could be useful later. If Eivaunee had a later. “No. I meant Hsassan.”

“But Hsassan means a male Hsassanae.”

“Yes.”

“Male? You love a male Hsassan?” Eivaunee voice and expression were openly incredulous.

Zsar't'lac's smile widened. “Hsassan only come in one gender.”

“But that doesn't make any sense! You were angry over the Captain thinking we were lovers.”

“You're human.”

Eivaunee stared at the alien sitting at his feet. “What a goddamned bigot you are!”

Zsar't'lac blinked, twice. Then the inner nictitating membrane snapped down over his eyes, shielding the flickering dark red colors.

“How the hell can you justify human females are acceptable and males aren't?”

There was silence for a long moment. Eivaunee knew Zsar't'lac was working to control an angry reaction. Eivaunee didn't care what sort of reaction he got; the insulting impact of Zsar't'lac's words pushed him past that.

“The sexual act is different between males and females,” Zsar't'lac explained, his voice low and controlled.

“I am aware of that, Zsar,” Eivaunee stated coldly. “The biological differences between our species are not that different. And the number of orifices, and their location, is similar.”

Zsar't'lac said nothing; there was no readable expression on his face. Through the film membrane covering the alien's eyes, flickering red could be seen, but that was the only indication of emotion.

“You still haven't explained to me why human women are acceptable and men aren't,” Eivaunee pointed out coldly.

“No,” the alien replied, but said nothing for another long moment. Then he did a palm out shrug.

“The sexual act between Hsassan and Hsassana is very similar to that between human males and females. Sex between two Hsassan isn't like sex between two human males. And it really wouldn't work between a Hsassan and a human male.”

“Why not?”

The nictating membrane came up in the alien's eyes, the dark red fires slowly flickering out. “Foreplay between Hsassan is a rough wrestling match with the pleasure being proportional to your partner's strength. How long would a wrestling match last between a human and a Hsassan?”

“Is that all sex is between Hsassan—a wrestling match?”

“Not all, no. The winner mounts the loser, front to front. And there are some pertinent biological differences. We have raised ridges on our thighs.”

“That wasn’t noted in the autopsy reports, Zsar. No, wait - the odd muscle patterns in the thighs.”

“Exactly. It takes a certain amount of sexual stimulation to raise the ridges. That stimulation comes in the form of wrestling.”

“Then your dislike of the idea of human males as lovers isn’t based on species bigotry?”

Zsar’t’lac hesitated before answering. There was the easy answer—and the truth. Hsassan don’t lie, but there are ways of deceiving without lying. Zsar’t’lac didn’t want to take that path with his human friend. “It isn’t just biology.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” Eivaunee stated, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

“Anything more you’d care to discuss?” the alien inquired, his own tone cool.

Eivaunee leaned back, his expression contemplative. “Who is this person—this Hsassan—you believe you love?”

“I do love him,” Zsar’t’lac said softly. “His name is Sing’m’li.”

Eivaunee thought for a minute. “The other Hsassan who came with you to the Comveckt—the one who piloted during the fight with the Norda war ships.”

“Your memory is good. Yes that was him.”

“You haven’t seen him for four years, Zsar,” Eivaunee pointed out. “He may not be the same person any more.”

“Doubtless he is not, but still I love him. He cannot change in any way that would result in my not loving him.”

“How very romantic!” Eivaunee mocked. “And you believe he feels the same way?”

“Yes, he does.”

“You believe he is waiting there in the Homelands, alone and lonely, sighing for your return?”

“He is waiting, and wanting, my return. And lonely for me, yes, but not alone. He has many lovers. Many Hsassan desire him.”

“I am glad to hear that there is a limit to your naivete, my friend.”

Zsar’t’lac laughed softly. “Believe what you wish, it matters not to me.”

Anger flared up in Eivaunee. He knew that jealousy and envy were its base. He envied Zsar’t’lac having someone he could believe in so completely. “Fuck you!” he told his officer coldly.

“I believe we covered that at the beginning of this conversation. Thank you, no.”

Eivaunee aimed a rough kick at Zsar’t’lac’s head. The alien grabbed the booted foot and pulled hard. Eivaunee landed on his butt on the floor alongside the alien.

“Like I said, the wrestling match would be too brief for pleasure.”

The two males looked at each other. Eivaunee had no thought that he would actually land the kick on Zsar’t’lac. It was just an irritation reaction.

Zsar’t’lac looked at his human friend, fallen back on his elbows, half-sitting, half-lying, on the floor, and felt something stir. Something he hadn’t felt in years. Later he would tell himself it was due to talking about Sing’m’li, his only beloved. But whatever the reason, Zsar’t’lac gently pushed Eivaunee down against the floor and kissed him. It began as the non-sexual nuzzling kiss of the Hsassan, a gesture of reconciliation, but then changed into something more human. The nuzzling stopped and the kiss became tender. Eivaunee lips parted and the kiss was something Zsar’t’lac had only shared with human females. The kiss continued, sweet and gentle, until Zsar’t’lac finally drew back.

Eivaunee smiled, lying on the floor alongside the alien. “You kiss quite nicely, Zsar. Different this time than usual.” Zsar’t’lac had recently begun kissing Eivaunee, explaining that in the

Homelands it was a gesture of alliance, or reconciliation. Eivaunee really didn't care. Whatever the reason, the occasional kiss clearly was meant affectionately and Eivaunee needed affection in his life. Until this time, there had been no aspect of the gesture that was even a little suggestive. "Your sharp teeth make kissing like that a little challenging."

The alien said nothing, rolling up to his feet in a smooth gesture. He looked down at Eivaunee. It was all wrong. He shouldn't lie there like that. Lying on one's back was too suggestive a posture, too inviting. Zsar't'lac held his hand down to Eivaunee and pulled him to his feet.

"Reconciliation," Zsar't'lac said firmly, explaining the kiss.

"Of course," Eivaunee agreed, his emotions clearly mocking. "Do women tell you that your mouth tastes like cinnamon?"

"Yes," the alien answered briefly. His thin lips compressed. "Loneliness only goes so far, Eivaun," the alien stated.

The mocking left Eivaunee. "I don't know about that, Zsar. I wonder sometimes if there are limits to loneliness."

"Are you done with your questions?" the alien wasn't going any further in that particular direction.

"I think that's enough for one night," Eivaunee agreed, realizing that there were probably a good many more things about the alien that he really didn't want to know. Despite that, he knew he would ask more at another time. "A strategy game?" he suggested.

"In your quarters," Zsar't'lac returned. He wanted Eivaunee gone from his quarters, gone from where he would sleep.

"Fine. You'll be by soon?"

"In a while," the alien confirmed. He wanted some time to settle his thoughts, some time to think about his beloved and remember what was proper. He had liked the tender kiss he shared with Eivaunee. Loneliness could be a trap, Zsar't'lac began to think, that could draw him into something quite unacceptable. He was Qtesark; it wouldn't happen.

* * * * *

The next day passed without incident. Zsar't'lac spent much of it in the gym working out. Eivaunee settled into reading a philosophy book he had brought with him. It was soothing, safe reading. He took his meals in his quarters, brought to him by a good-looking young man. Zsar't'lac ate in the main dining room.

It was quiet while he was there. No one spoke to him, and he had nothing to say to them. Mostly he chose to eat publicly because the physical proximity allowed him to better probe his shipmate's emotions and make sure there wasn't an assassin among them. Also he wouldn't let them believe he could be driven into seclusion. Hsasan don't retreat.

After the evening meal, Zsar't'lac went to Eivaunee's quarters. He touched the door announcer.

"Identify."

"Zsar't'lac."

The door opened. Eivaunee was settled in one of the chairs reading. He looked up and smiled at his friend. "Feeling better?" Eivaunee asked. Zsar't'lac had been very quiet and withdrawn during their strategy game the night before.

Zsar't'lac nodded in the human manner, not bothering to reply, reminding himself of how ugly all

humans were. It annoyed him that he needed to remind himself of such a thing in Eivaunee's presence.

Eivaunee put the book down, worried a little at the dark iridescence flickering in Zsar't'lac's black eyes. "Problems with the crew?" he asked.

"No," Zsar't'lac replied. "The colors in the pilot's throat seem to have been an adequate warning."

"No doubt. So how'd you spend the day?"

"Mostly in the gym." Zsar't'lac was still standing. For once, he looked a little awkward.

Zsar't'lac didn't usually spend that much time working out. Normally only a couple hours a day. Spending so long working with his body was an indication of mental unease.

"Anything you want to talk about?" Eivaunee inquired.

"No," the alien replied firmly.

"All right," Eivaunee replied, accepting the alien's reticence. "You *can* sit down," he pointed out.

Zsar't'lac sat down stiffly in the second chair. Eivaunee didn't know what Zsar't'lac's problem was. He had already forgotten the brief few moments when Zsar't'lac's kiss had changed from an asexual nuzzle to something sweeter because, beyond a brief bit of amusement, it meant nothing to Eivaunee. He had received many declarations of love —and/or desire—through the years. From both women and men, drunk and sober. With one exception, they made no impression on Eivaunee.

The only declaration of love he remembered in a special, deeply buried, place in his soul was the day Anati Realt, sitting in the gardens at the Realt Home Estate, had said that she loved him. That had been the only time Eivaunee had said the love was returned.

The change in the alien's kiss the previous afternoon from a Hsassan nuzzle to a human kiss wasn't important to Eivaunee. Just a bit of loneliness, combined with the romantic discussions. That sort of thing happened with humans sometimes. He was forgetting, however, that Zsar't'lac wasn't human.

"What do you want to do tonight?" Eivaunee asked.

"Not talk about me—or the Homelands."

"Fine. I'm not in the mood for another strategy game. How about a philosophical/political discussion?"

"What about?" Zsar't'lac asked, a little wary. Just now politics, or even philosophy, could be tricky subjects.

"Have you ever read Plato's *Republic*?"

"Yes."

"St. Augustine's *City of God*?"

"Yes."

"Want to discuss them?"

"Planning your future government?" Zsar't'lac asked, relaxing. This could be a good evening.

"Not based exactly on either of those models, but there are aspects of both that could be useful. If I survive."

Zsar't'lac considered the matter. "They could be considered as almost antithetical points of view: a highly structured theocracy and a service-oriented republic."

"But Plato's society has structure, and Augustine believes strongly in service."

“But Augustine’s service is to God.”

“Does the focus matter?” Eivaunee returned. “Change god to read ‘the people’.”

“Augustine would be appalled.”

“Augustine is not here.”

Zsar’t’lac chuckled. It was going to be a good evening.

Chapter 11

Maui screamed, a high reaching crescendo of pain, as Aman’s orgasm came. Maui was unaware of Aman’s brutal thrusts from behind; all of his attention was focused on what Aman’s hands were doing at his groin. More specifically, the long, thin metal claws Aman was wearing.

Aman gasped, such pleasure, particularly when combined with his victim’s pain. Aman’s orgasm was long and exquisite. He didn’t want it to end, but he couldn’t control that as easily as the man who was tied down.

Even as Aman’s breathing returned to normal, he continued to keep his claws in Maui. The attractive young man’s screams had fallen to shattered sobs. Such a pleasant sound. Then, with regret, Aman withdrew the claws. His assumption had been correct: this one was excellent.

It would be a while longer before he put on the wider, longer claws and enjoyed his best pleasure. Maui would never return to Haskin’s World; Aman had decided that. Aman didn’t often kill his sexual victims; the Emperor didn’t like it. But Maui was special. For him there would be the special ending.

Aman had discovered his best pleasure came when his orgasm was matched with the disemboweling of his partner. No other pleasure compared with that, but it couldn’t be done often. Such a pity that the Emperor disapproved. But soon it wouldn’t matter what Hazdel did, or did not, approve of.

If Hazdel had been more reasonable, more willing to share his power, and more understanding of Aman’s needs, the Emperor wouldn’t have to die. Aman considered the matter and chuckled. No, that wasn’t true; Aman didn’t like sharing power with anyone, although he would manage—for a

time—with the Princess.

Maui was half-lying over the hard plastic support Aman had designed to hold his victims. Arms and legs well secured to avoid any interference and body positioned properly. Maui was sobbing. Aman enjoyed the sound. A hard body with a gentle spirit. He laughed out loud and decided to visit his wife.

He deliberately left the bloody claws on his fingertips. The sight of them always disturbed Jani. It irked Aman that he could only torment her in these little ways. Another of Hazdel's stupid rules. Aman found out with his first wife that Hazdel had some very odd ideas about behavior between marriage partners. Aman hadn't even beaten that woman very badly, but Hazdel had berated him in front of the whole court! Humiliated him!

Aman remembered how Tamsek Dorlan had laughed at him that afternoon. Well, Tamsek was dead now. And Hazdel would be soon, but until Hazdel was dead, little Jani was safe. But immediately thereafter... Well, to be able to marry the Princess, his current wife would have to die. Aman kept coming up with different ideas for that. It would have to be something special. And there would be no one to complain about it. No any one of importance at least. Aman looked forward to the future, to a time of unrestricted pleasure.

Aman had brought Maui to his rooms in the Imperial Palace because the young man pleased him so much. Also because his screams disturbed his wife. Another little torment.

Some people at court wondered about Aman's marrying Jani Comptre. She had been born into hereditary fealty to the Dorlans. Her father had died with Tamsek Dorlan. Though very wealthy, the fact that she had been born in fealty, was a large social barrier. Aman didn't care. The Emperor's Favorite didn't need to worry about social conventions. And Jani was very wealthy. And maybe her belonging to the Dorlans was, for him, an attraction. Aman hated the Dorlans—first Tamsek, then Eivaunee. Humiliating someone who had once belonged to them added to his usual enjoyment of humiliating anyone.

Aman overrode the announcer on the door to Jani's bedroom and walked in. She was lying on the bed, her hands over her ears. Aman laughed as he walked across the room and pulled her hands away. He wasn't very careful with the claws, and they scratched the side of her face.

"It's over, my dear wife. For now." He sat on the side of the bed, his smile mocking. "Such a shame you don't like my music."

"Sadistic bastard!"

"No, no, my parents were married," Aman pointed out. He stretched his long elegant hands in front of her face, the claws turned inwards. "His screams had a particularly pleasing tone, don't you think?"

Jani said nothing, looking past him at the far wall.

Aman lightly touched the claw tips to Jani's face. "Some day, my dear wife, perhaps you'll have to see what these are like yourself."

Jani continued her silence, staring past him.

Aman laughed and got up to leave. He paused at the door. "Do you ever wonder about that awful accident that killed my first wife?"

"No," Jani finally spoke. "I know it wasn't an accident. You killed her." Her voice was quiet.

"Do you really think so?" Aman drawled.

"Yes."

"Then why do you stay?" Aman was actually curious.

"You won't kill me," Jani said firmly. "Hazdel won't tolerate a second wife's death."

"You are so sure of that?"

"I'm still alive, so yes."

"Good point," Aman conceded. "Still, I wonder why you stay?"

"You're seldom here," Jani replied coolly. "You spend most of your time at your townhouse, or with the Emperor—or who knows where else. It's only when you have a 'special project' that you visit here much."

It was true; Aman didn't spend much time in his official Palace apartments. The Imperial Suite was much nicer, and Aman liked lingering in those rooms. Hazdel didn't care. Even when the Emperor had another lover, Aman sometimes stayed. Aman liked that; so, apparently did Hazdel. They were alike in so many ways. Hazdel just didn't understand the pleasures of another's pain.

"Ah well, time to go. So nice spending time with you, my dear. Have a physician check on the dear young man. Don't want his heart to go, or anything." The door closed behind quietly him.

Jani leaned back in her bed, her heart pounding. She knew better than to let Aman know how much he frightened her. The real reason she stayed was that she was more afraid to go. Here at least the Emperor would know if Aman beat or killed her. But if she left, no one would know when she died. She had never thought it would be like this when she had agreed to marry the charming man who was the Emperor's Favorite. She had heard he was cruel, but she was also told the Emperor would protect her. Hazdel had wanted her to marry Aman so he would be less of a burden on the Imperial coffers.

Jani had been raised on the Dorlan Estates. She married young a kind, and much older, Baron from one of the Inner Planets. After he died, the Emperor approached her mother with the offer of the alliance between her daughter and Aman. Her mother had been so excited at the prospect. She told Jani the Emperor would take care of everything. He would make sure Jani was safe. She had nothing to fear with the Emperor as her protector. Nothing except psychological terror. Jani didn't tell her mother much of what went on with Aman. No point in that; there was nothing she could do about it. Particularly since Jani was too afraid to leave.

All Aman wanted was her money, and if she died, he got all of it. While she lived she retained some control over it, although Aman got almost everything he wanted. Jani never pushed him too far, not once she understood his particular pleasures.

After a few moments more to settle her shaking, Jani got up and, and feeling sick with disgust and fear, walked down the red pilaster hallway to the room where Maui was tied up. She couldn't let him go. She had tried that once, with another young man, but Aman had no trouble recapturing his victim. Then Aman had tied Jani up and forced her to watch while he killed him. Aman told her he hadn't planned on killing him, that his death was all Jani's fault. She didn't know if that was the truth, but she never let another one of Aman's 'special projects' go. And mostly he did let them live.

Jani paused outside the door to the room, shaking a little. She hated Aman; and she hated herself for accepting such a life.

Chapter 12

“Enough, Zsar,” Eivaunee said, stepping backwards and holding up his left hand. “I need a breather.”

“As you wish.”

The afternoon had been pleasant. Eivaunee and Zsar’t’lac spent most of it playing in the ship’s gym. Shooting at targets, and then playing some virtual reality games. Most of the VR games had been combat sports. With VR, Eivaunee had more of a chance since the combat images didn’t take into account Zsar’t’lac far superior strength and speed. Also the electronic feed-ins were actually slower than Zsar’t’lac’s own reaction times. Still, the alien always won because, even through electronic feeds, his reflexes were quicker than Eivaunee’s. But it took longer.

After the fourth time he ‘died’, Eivaunee said he wanted to change the game. Zsar’t’lac shrugged; it didn’t matter to him. He should have been warned by the slight shift in Eivaunee’s emotions.

Eivaunee’s image on their shared VR environment changed. He wasn’t a tall, slender, golden human male any more; he became a sultry, well-endowed brunette. The background changed as well, from the grassy meadow Zsar’t’lac had chosen for their combat, to a dimly-lit bedroom.

“Want to play?” Eivaunee asked, his voice and emotions light and teasing.

“No,” Zsar’t’lac answered.

Eivaunee flipped the neural receptors on for both of them and, in the guise of a beautiful woman, sauntered over to the large alien.

“Stop it,” Zsar’t’lac said firmly.

The woman lightly caressed the alien’s face. The system only acknowledged the human species, so Eivaunee didn’t feel the dry, coolness of Zsar’t’lac’s real skin, but rather generic male facial skin. Still, it could be interesting.

Zsar’t’lac’s side of the screen went dead as the alien shut his side down and pulled off the electronic pick-ups.

“I said—no,” the alien pointed out.

Eivaunee shut his side down as well, laughing a little. “I was being nice, Zsar,” he pointed out. “I did choose a woman’s form.”

“I don’t see the point in VR sex,” the alien stated bluntly.

“Ever try it?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t know, do you?” Eivaunee returned.

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d resort to it much, either,” the alien replied coolly.

“Not since early adolescence,” Eivaunee conceded. “Still under some circumstances.... I suppose I should have made myself a Hsassan. If we were on the Comveckt, I could call up an image of that

lover of yours—Singma—whatever his name is.”

“Stop it!” The tone was a command.

Eivaunee held up both hands in a peace gesture. “Just teasing, Zsar.”

“I’m not amused by that sort of teasing,” the alien stated. He walked over to where combat equipment was stored. They couldn’t bring the J’tekc equipment with them, particularly not the bulky armor, but modern science had some equivalents. Zsar’t’lac pulled out two sets of *punsi* sticks and two personal force field nets. He threw one of each at Eivaunee.

“You surprise me, Zsar,” Eivaunee said as he picked up the shield net and started slipping it on.

“I do—how?”

“You can’t bruise me through this.”

The alien chuckled. “I did think about that and decided it would be best to play something where I can’t bruise you.”

“I don’t mean to make you angry, Zsar,” Eivaunee explained as he fastened down the force field net. “I’m just a little pleased to have found a chink in that emotional armor of yours.”

“Don’t poke in too often,” Zsar’t’lac recommended as he finished fastening down his force field.

“I’ll try to resist the temptation.”

Combat with the *punsi* sticks was basic, two-stick combat. The force field registered a ‘good’ hit with a slight flash of red color. The force field net was strong enough to protect the player—in most cases.

Before trying the system with a human, Zsar’t’lac had tested it with a mock-up. His full force blow took the head off the dummy. As Zsar’t’lac had suspected. Personal force fields were pretty weak because of the energy backwash. Strong forcefield meant more energy back. It was hard to take, particularly close to the skin. Even with a weak force field, the tingling sensation was a problem after a fairly short time. Personal force fields were good for games like this, but for real combat Sandr armor was much better. Zsar’t’lac was careful of his opponents when personal force field nets were used.

They had been going at it for awhile when Eivaunee had called for a rest. Zsar’t’lac had begun by lighting up Eivaunee’s shield net like a red pulse light. Eivaunee had laughed, and retaliated as well as he could. It was fun. And there were no bruises involved.

Eivaunee breathing was settling back to normal. “Want to continue?” Zsar’t’lac asked.

“If you don’t mind, Zsar, I think I’ve had my fill of combat games.”

“As you will,” the alien said agreeably.

The force field nets slid off easily. Zsar’t’lac put them away along with the four *punsi* sticks.

“Thanks, Zsar,” Eivaunee said as he leaned back against a wall. “A good afternoon’s distraction. The books wouldn’t have held my attention for a second day.”

Light orange, the color of compassion, flickered in the alien’s eyes.

“I hate this,” Eivaunee said softly, his expression shifting back to his caged tiger look. “No information can reach me here. I received nothing useful before I left. I can’t plan—I can’t do anything, but wait.”

“Do your best to enjoy the journey, my friend,” the alien recommended. “That is, after all, what life is.”

“Easier said than done,” Eivaunee answered reasonably, swallowing down a nastier reply. He tilted his head back against the wall. “I’m probably going to spend tonight with a woman, Zsar.”

“Anyone in mind?”

“Not yet.”

“We arrive at the Imperial Planet sometime tomorrow.”

“I know, Zsar.”

“You said you would tell me about your friend who died on this trip.”

“Give me a chance to take a shower. There’s time before dinner.”

Zsar’t’lac gave Eivaunee an hour before he went to his quarters.

Eivaunee was sipping a glass of wine. Zsar’t’lac didn’t want any. He sat down in the chair across from Eivaunee.

“Darby was one of my ‘chosen’ playmates,” Eivaunee began without preamble. “The Emperor occasionally chose one or two boys to ‘play’ with me. He chose them from among the children of the upper merchant class. Except for rare holidays or vacations—approved by the Emperor—I had little contact with my own class. Hazdel didn’t want any early bonds formed that might cause him troubles later.” Eivaunee sipped his wine slowly.

“Most of these ‘chosen’ children were terrified. The Imperial Palace, the guards, the wealthiest boy in the Empire. They sat like rocks waiting for me to tell them what to do. It wasn’t exactly fun.” Eivaunee put the wine glass down. “I was twelve when I met Darby. He was fourteen. When you’re twelve, fourteen seems very old.”

Zsar’t’lac smiled slightly. Hsassan were being weaned when they were fourteen.

“Darby was different from the others. He wasn’t afraid—of the Palace, the guards, or me. He was so very alive, so vibrant. I was a quiet child; he was my exact opposite. We got along great. Actually it surprised me that once we had formed a friendship, the Emperor let him keep visiting me. That wasn’t like Hazdel, who kept rotating my servants so I had no one to be close to. Except Darby.

“I should have known Hazdel had something in mind. Truthfully I don’t think he did in the beginning, but Hazdel was never one to let a good opportunity go unexploited. He encouraged my friendship with a boy whose parents weren’t even noble. Darby told me his parents didn’t like the friendship. They were afraid it would lead to trouble with the Emperor, but Darby wasn’t afraid of anything.”

Eivaunee stared ahead, his thoughts lost in the past. “It’s not a good thing to be so fearless.”

Zsar’t’lac, who had no concept of personal fear, said nothing.

“Darby was with me when I learned the truth about my mother’s death. We swore vengeance on Hazdel together. I was thirteen; Darby fifteen. We were so sure we could destroy Hazdel. It would take time, but we knew justice would triumph. We were very naive.”

“Hazdel will die, Eivaun,” the alien said softly. “I promise you that.”

Eivaunee ignored Zsar’t’lac’s words; he wasn’t going to start that fight again.

“We plotted and planned for the future. We knew we couldn’t take on Hazdel yet, but we would someday. All of this brought Darby and I closer together. I’m sure now Hazdel knew every wild scheme we came up with. But he had his own plans now, and Darby was necessary to them, so we were allowed to continue. When I was fourteen, the Emperor told me I was to marry Moerit. I laughed in his face. Moerit and I had played together as children, but neither of us were children any longer.” Eivaunee sipped his wine. “She was seventeen, tall and beautiful.” Eivaunee shook his head. “Tormenting me was one of her favorite pastimes, but that isn’t pertinent here.”

There was a feeling of frustrated desire in the golden human. His early problems with Moerit could explain his taste in women, Zsar’t’lac thought. And maybe some of his behavior towards

them.

"To continue with Darby, the Emperor had to have my consent for this marriage. I wasn't going to give it. I was quite clear on that. I told him I'd see him in hell first. I was angry and defiant, so full of myself. I should have known better." Eivaunee shook his head ruefully.

"What happened?" Zsar't'lac asked.

"One day Darby was supposed to visit me and he never showed up. I waited and waited, but he didn't come. I wasn't supposed to leave the Palace without Hazdel's consent, but I was worried. I went to his house in the city. It was the only time I ever met his parents. They were in a panic. Darby had been taken the previous night by Imperial guardsmen. They were very afraid for him."

"Why would the Emperor want your friend?"

"To hold his life hostage for my signature on a marriage contract," Eivaunee answered baldly. Orange fire flared in the alien's black eyes.

"I went back to the Palace. Sure enough there was a message waiting for me from Hazdel. He would barter Darby's life for my signature on a contract of marriage to Moerit."

"You couldn't do that," Zsar't'lac said softly. "Then Hazdel would always have a way to control you."

"I know that, Zsar. But Darby was all I had. Just one friend. No family, no lovers, nothing. Only him. I would have done it," Eivaunee's voice was soft. "Knowing how wrong it was, I would have done it."

"But?"

"I didn't answer Hazdel's message. Not right away. I knew where the political prisoners were kept. I wanted to see Darby. Talk to him. Maybe I wanted him to talk me out of it. I don't know. I just had to see him before I signed that contract."

Eivaunee's emotions told the answer.

"He was already dead," Zsar't'lac finished the story.

"Yes. The guards lied about it, of course. They said I couldn't see him because the Emperor forbade it. But I could tell from the way they acted that Darby was dead."

"How? Why would Hazdel, or anyone associated with him, destroy such a good weapon?"

"It wasn't deliberate," Eivaunee answered quietly. "Apparently Darby had a bad heart. He always seemed healthy. We practiced combat sports and he never had any problems. I don't know if they tortured him—or if he was... was... r-raped. All I know is that he died that first night."

Zsar't'lac had noticed before that Eivaunee had trouble talking about rape sometimes, and he had a very strong revulsion response. It showed his proper sense of honor.

"I'm sorry, Eivaun."

Eivaunee took a long drink of his wine. "That night, Hazdel almost killed me."

"Why? Why would he attack you? Because you wouldn't sign the marriage contract?"

"No, because I went to the dining hall enraged and I stormed up to the head table and declared Hazdel a murderer. Not only of Darby, but of both my parents." Eivaunee smiled slightly. "You know I still don't regret that. For once the truth was shouted out in that great room. He ordered me flogged. I didn't care; I didn't stop shouting out his crimes until they gagged me."

Eivaunee looked at the far wall of the pleasant sitting room. "He told the guards I was to be flogged until he gave the order to stop." There was a long pause. "I'm told that both the Empress and the Princess pleaded with him to stop before he killed me. Hazdel wouldn't listen to them. Finally the Princess stood in front of me to stop the flogging. I was unconscious at that point."

"I do not want Hazdel to die quickly," the alien said softly.

"Any way he dies will suffice," Eivaunee replied just as softly.

"The Princess—"

"We were friends in our youth, Zsar," Eivaunee explained. "And she didn't want to lose such a wealthy potential husband." Eivaunee drained his glass of wine. "At any rate, that is the story of Darby, and how he died simply because he was my friend."

Large alien, orange-fire, eyes met cool amber human eyes. "You have another friend now, Eivaun. I cannot take the place of Darby, no one ever can take another's place, but you aren't alone."

"Maybe. Until you return to the Homelands, Zsar—until you return to Sing'm'li."

It took Zsar't'lac two steps to close the distance to Eivaunee's chair. He drew him up to stand close. "I don't know when I'll return to the Homelands. And when I do, perhaps you'll come with me. Perhaps you could live there. Just now, it doesn't matter; you are my friend. And you will always be my friend."

Zsar't'lac tilted down his head and kissed Eivaunee. Like the kiss two nights before it started out as a Hsassan nuzzle, but became something more. Eivaunee was very hungry for affection. The kiss never returned to a nuzzle. Eivaunee's pressed his slender body against the alien's.

There was no real passion in the slender human, no trace of desire; the hunger in his kiss was for affection, for love, not sexual fulfillment. That soothed Zsar't'lac's troubled mind. Eivaunee did not desire him. It would be all right. There was no dishonor in affectionate contact. It was nothing more.

* * * * *

Imperial Planet seemed to burn, the many lights blending together to form rings of fire, or so it seemed to Eivaunee as the shuttle headed down towards the Imperial Planet. The woman he had just spent the night with was a distant memory already; he would have been hard-pressed to remember her name. The night had been pleasant enough. The woman was enthusiastic, if not particularly skillful.

Zsar't'lac sat across from Eivaunee, lost in his own thoughts. The planet was rushing up to meet them, like Eivaunee's fate. The golden human was to die, like his friend, like his parents; killed by Hazdel. Dying willingly to serve a greater good.

That had been Mistress Realt's point-of-view on Darby's death. Because Eivaunee would have signed the marriage contract to save him, it was better for everyone that the young man died. Eivaunee had replied quite hotly at the time, but she was right. He knew that then and he knew it now. As he knew that his turn was coming. It wasn't that he minded dying that much, but to meekly lay his head on the block—that he hated!

The shuttle landed softly. The pilot turned in his seat. "Thank you, Master Dorlan, for all you've done for the Provinces. I was born on Jasper 2. My parents still live there. They told me to tell you they pray for you."

"Jasper 2 is a hard world," Eivaunee replied.

"Yes, sir, that's why I left it."

The door opened. Eivaunee hesitated for a moment and then walked down the few steps, Zsar't'lac close behind him. He was inside the Imperial compound; it wasn't likely he'd be leaving

again.

Chapter 13

The Imperial Chamberlain, Hagda, stood by the bottom of the shuttle steps. His usual two-person security escort stood nearby with a couple of servants. Hagda placed his right hand over his heart and bowed low to Eivaunee. No one said anything as the servants off-loaded Eivaunee's and Zsar't'lac's luggage.

Then Eivaunee asked one of the few pertinent questions. "Where?"

"I'm sorry, Master," Hagda said softly.

"My old rooms," Eivaunee answered his own question with a slight sigh.

"The Emperor insisted. I tried to get him to change."

"The psychological part of the battle," Eivaunee acknowledged.

"What is the problem with your old rooms?" Zsar't'lac asked.

"Memories," Eivaunee answered succinctly. "I don't suppose they've been redecorated or anything?"

"I tried that too, Master," Hagda offered. "He wouldn't allow it."

"No, not likely." Eivaunee shrugged. "It doesn't matter that much." He turned and walked towards the old wing of the Imperial Palace, back towards the life he hated.

Zsar't'lac was close behind Eivaunee, his mind reaching out to scan the area for any sign of an assassin's emotions. It wasn't likely there would be any. If Hazdel was going to assassinate Eivaunee, he would have done it sooner, not within the Palace compound. Still, it didn't hurt to check out the emotions of the people around them.

Hagda's avuncular love for Eivaunee hadn't changed from the first, and only time, Zsar't'lac had been on the Imperial Planet. In the guardsmen and servants there was a blend of awe, pity, and, particularly with the guardsmen, regret. Zsar't'lac remembered that most of the guardsmen were recruited from the Provinces; the Dorlan stronghold. That could be useful. Maybe.

They walked through the colorful blooming Imperial gardens. "How is your family, Hadga?" Eivaunee asked, making polite conversation.

"All fine, master. My eldest son is in his second year at the Academy. The Emperor was most generous in allowing him to attend. His grades weren't that good, and we're not nobility, but the Emperor decreed it."

Eivaunee wondered how attractive Hagda's son was, but realized he was wrong in that thought. Hagda would watch out for signs of that kind of favor. Hagda served Hazdel well. Most likely it was a small gift to a loyal retainer. Hazdel could be like that; kind, if never generous, to those who served him well. And deadly harsh to anyone who stood in his way. Eivaunee had been born in the latter class of people.

"Your other son and daughter?" Eivaunee continued to make small talk.

"It is always kind of you to remember them, Master. My youngest son's grades and physical prowess will get him into the Academy without the Emperor's help. My sweet daughter is still

young enough that her future is not planned yet.”

Meaning too young for marriage contract talks.

“My wife and the two youngest still live on Nova 1. It is better for them to be away from the turbulence of palace life. Though I miss them very much, it is better they live on an Inner Planet, not here.”

They came to a doorway, no different from the several in the area, but one both Hadga and Eivaunee knew well.

“We have your palm print stored, of course, but it is best to reset it live.” Hagda said as he touched several keys, resetting the lock.

Eivaunee nodded and pressed his palm against the exposed panel. The machinery sounded softly and Eivaunee drew back his hand. The door opened on a front sitting room—and the past.

The porters put the luggage down in the small sitting room. Hagda gestured them to withdraw, as well as his guards. The door closed silently behind them.

“When do I meet him?” Eivaunee asked the most pertinent question.

“He is giving you something of a reprieve,” Hagda said gently.

“Something of?”

“There will be an unofficial meeting between you and the Emperor tomorrow morning. No one else will be present.”

“I don’t like that,” Eivaunee said flatly. “Later he can say I attacked him.”

“He can only lie about what is said,” Hagda pointed out. “Video will be recorded, and, of course, guards will be watching.”

“In case I do attack him.”

“Precautions have to be taken.”

“But he can accuse me of admitting to treason,” Eivaunee pointed out.

Hagda shrugged. “I think that is unlikely. The Consenti families aren’t liable to believe something that obvious.”

“No,” Eivaunee agreed softly.

“Will there be truth drug questioning?”

“Unfortunately, yes. In one hour. I’m sorry, Master.”

“Could be all right, Hagda. This could be the time I get the allergic reaction and die. Cheat Hazdel of his victory. I wonder if that is planned? A little something extra added to the truth drugs?” Eivaunee’s head was tilted a little to one side, considering the matter.

“The Emperor wants your Estates. If you die in truth drug questioning, before treason is proven, the Estates go to your heirs.”

“His greed is greater than his hatred,” Eivaunee agreed. He wasn’t thinking well just now, grasping at any possible scenario. He had to focus his mind more. But it was hard, particularly in this room. This room he never wanted to see again. “What else is planned?”

“The official meeting between you and the Emperor is scheduled for the day after tomorrow. Aman, most likely will be there. So will Wrei Ptreet.”

“I want Zsar’t’lac there as well,” Eivaunee stated, turning back to look at the Chamberlain.

“I will discuss it with his Majesty, but I doubt he will agree.”

“Who is to witness the truth drug questioning?” Eivaunee asked.

“Three Consenti who are known to support the Emperor, as well as Jite Dennyson, and Mistress Realt. As usual, it will be recorded. Also the Emperor has decreed that you are to be asked only the

questions he has written down—exactly those and no others,” Hagda stated.

“He doesn’t want anyone to ask me directly if I’ve committed treason.” Eivaunee added an exasperated sound. “I haven’t, by the way.”

“That will not be for me to decide, Master,” Hagda said gently.

“I know,” Eivaunee returned coolly. “Am I confined to the Palace?” Eivaunee asked one of the more important questions.

“No. His Majesty was quite clear on that. Because of the truth drugs tonight, you won’t be going anywhere, but he suggested you might want to leave the Palace tomorrow night.”

“He suggested that? How odd.”

“I should also add that he said it could be your last time outside these walls.”

Eivaunee turned away from the Chamberlain, and looked around the front sitting room. On the west wall was a doorway that led to the small bedroom. He’d sure have hellish dreams there. On the east wall was another door that opened onto a small sleeping room for whoever was attending him. God, how he hated these rooms!

“Servants?” Eivaunee asked.

“I have assigned one valet to you. He will be here shortly. I thought you’d prefer to keep the alien as your bodyguard. If you’d like another?”

“No,” Eivaunee answered flatly. “No Imperial guardsmen.”

“I could assign a female guardsman?”

“That won’t be necessary. Zsar’t’lac is all I need,” Eivaunee replied. “What’s Aman, our dear duc of Enghien, been up to lately?”

“His mood has been excellent,” Hagda answered, his mouth turning down.

“If Hazdel succeeds in this plan, Aman might even get a to be a Consenti. That thought should keep him happy.”

“Perhaps, Master. But the Emperor can’t decree that Aman gets your title. If...if you die and the Dorlan line ends, then the Consenti title goes to the richest person of Consenti descent. Aman is not of Consenti heritage.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if documents don’t suddenly appear that show he has Consenti heritage. And since his marriage to Jani Comptre, he is quite wealthy. She not only inherited her father’s wealth, but her late husband’s as well,” Eivaunee responded.

“She should never have married Aman,” Hagda stated his opinion. “Never, for any consideration, would I let a daughter of mine marry such a man.”

“She was—probably still is—interested in climbing the social ladder. Her mother even more so. To go from being born in fealty to a Duchess is quite an achievement.”

“She was born on Dorlan Estates,” Hagda said, a touch of wonder in his voice. “To marry Aman is disloyal.”

“Her grandfather bought their freedom over twenty years ago,” Eivaunee reminded the older retainer. “He could have bought it much earlier but he liked running Dorlan Enterprises too much.” After a pause, Eivaunee asked; “Does Aman mistreat Jani?”

“The Emperor still mostly controls Aman. I don’t think he physically mistreats her, but she is not happy.”

“From what has been said about this man it is unlikely that she could be happy,” Zsar’t’lac offered his first comment in the discussion. “I do not understand your marriage customs.”

“They are quite simple, Zsar. If you look on them as business arrangements, you’ll understand

them.”

“A lifelong alliance between two people shouldn’t be based on ‘business’,” the alien replied, contempt in his voice.

“A more lasting basis than love in many cases,” Eivaunee returned. “Divorce is rare in the upper classes of the Empire, and very common in the lower classes who marry for love.”

The alien made a sound of derision that seemed to encompass all human relationships, and turned away to start checking over the room.

“Did you ever meet Jani?” Hagda asked, mostly because he didn’t want to leave.

“Once, just before her first marriage to the Baron,” Eivaunee replied. “I would like some time alone, now, Hagda,” Eivaunee added, his tone one of dismissal. “Don’t send the valet until I ask.”

“As you wish, Master,” Hagda said softly, regretfully. The door closed behind him. Zsar’t’lac was still inspecting the sitting room.

“Let it be, Zsar,” Eivaunee suggest. “Assume there’s video and sound pickups.”

“I have already found both,” the alien said. He walked over to the small servo unit set in one wall. “Want anything?” he asked as he made himself a synthetic coffee.

“Not if truth drug questioning is coming up.”

“Is there anything you want to discuss with me before that?”

“I’m going to be fairly incapacitated afterwards, Zsar. More than anything you’ve seen with the people I’ve drugged,” Eivaunee told him quietly. “Keep an eye out for Aman.”

“What is your relationship with this person?”

“As little as possible from my end,” Eivaunee answered.

“And his?”

“Lust and hatred,” Eivaunee returned succinctly. “He has reason for the hatred.”

“Why?”

“The last time I was here, Aman—against the Emperor’s command—tried to rape me.” Eivaunee said, pacing back and forth across the floor.

“He didn’t succeed?” Eivaunee’s emotions implied that, but there was an undercurrent in the slender human that Zsar’t’lac didn’t understand.

“Oh, he was stopped all right,” Eivaunee answered grimly. He stopped pacing for a moment to turn and grin at the large alien. “I crushed one of his testicles. I was trying for both, but I only badly bruised the other.”

“Very good,” the alien complimented him.

“I paid a price for it. Still, it felt good.”

“I can see why you are concerned about this person when you will be less able to defend yourself.”

“I’ll pretty much be completely incapacitated, Zsar. It’s not going to be pretty.”

“I can care for you,” the alien said gently.

“You don’t have to, Zsar. The servants can do that, but watch out for Aman.” Eivaunee stopped pacing. “I need to make a call.” A large commsole screen was set in one wall. The large screen was one of Eivaunee’s few real luxuries while he lived in the Palace.

He activated the commsole and spoke a name and a password.

The connection was made. The image of a beautiful nude woman lying on her stomach being massaged by someone off screen appeared. Soft, slightly titillating music played in the background.

"I'm busy just now, but leave a message." The voice was light and teasing.

"Sarrin! Take my call, damn you!"

"Eivaunee!" The screen's image changed abruptly to show a slender woman. Her hair was stripes of soft brown, and bright gold, her face pretty and very animated. "You are back! And you brought him!" Sarrin's eyes focused on the tall alien standing behind Eivaunee. "He is magnificent! I didn't get to see him that brief time he was on planet before. How fabulous! I'm so glad you brought him with you!"

"It wasn't my choice," Eivaunee told her when he could get a word in. "Hazdel insisted. Nice to see you, too," Eivaunee added sarcastically.

"Oh, you know I'm glad you're back. You're beautiful and fun. But there's only one Hsassan, Eivaunee, be reasonable."

"He has been recalled for a treason trial," Zsar't'lac pointed out coldly. He didn't like the woman's attitude.

"Yes, that is very sad," Sarrin said with a slight sigh. "And I hear Hazdel has a very good plot this time. Look, is there any possibility that I can borrow the alien for a while? One night would be enough. How modest is he—I mean about performing publicly?"

"Hazdel is giving me one last night out," Eivaunee answered part of her question. "I was wondering if you'd like to sponsor a gathering tomorrow night?"

"Fabulous! Really zac! I'd love it. You'll bring the alien, of course. I mean he is your bodyguard; he'll have to come."

"I'll bring Zsar't'lac," Eivaunee promised. "Let everyone know, Sarrin. I'll like this to be a very good, large party."

"Everyone will be there, I promise. I'll start calling immediately. Some people will have to change their plans, but that will be fine. It's been a long time since you've been at a gathering," Sarrin stated the obvious. "Everyone will want to see you. And the alien—is he shy?"

"No," Eivaunee answered. "But I doubt he'll perform sexually in public."

"No, I will not," Zsar't'lac reinforced Eivaunee's opinion quite firmly.

"Well, change his mind, Eivaunee. Everyone would enjoy it. I'm told he's fabulously endowed. We could start with one of my retainers. One of my favorites, a very pretty girl. I would be second, of course. Do you think sexual stimulants work on him? He will be much in demand."

"No," Zsar't'lac answered for himself. "They wouldn't work and I don't 'perform' publicly."

"Command him, Eivaunee," Sarrin said, pouting a little. "I don't want to disappoint my guests."

"I can't command him; he isn't a fealty-bound retainer," Eivaunee told her. "I'd like a privacy shell for myself."

"Well, you always do. I'll be sure one is set up with your colors. Do try to change the alien's mind, please. Well, I have to go now if I'm going to get everything ready in time. See you tomorrow!" The screen abruptly went blank.

"Any physical contact I have with that woman is liable to be violent," Zsar't'lac stated quite firmly.

Eivaunee laughed. "She's harmless, Zsar. And better, she's useful. She'll put together a very good party for me."

"I will not perform—for you—or her—publicly, not sexually."

"I wouldn't dream of asking it of you," Eivaunee said quite sincerely. "Besides, I want you with me in the privacy shell. Actually that may involve...ah, well, I'm going to be sexually performing."

Just turn your back, or whatever. I'd rather there wasn't a force field between us."

"I can guard you without watching what you're doing," the alien agreed. "I do not want a force field between us either. Not on this planet."

"Aman will probably be there," Eivaunee added. "I'm hoping he will be."

Eivaunee didn't say anything more, not with audio pick ups in the room, but nothing further was necessary. Zsar't'lac understood. Eivaunee hoped that somehow Zsar't'lac's emotional empathy might pick up some clues. Anything would help.

The door sounded. "Identify."

"Anati."

"Come."

A small, slender woman entered. She ran straight to Eivaunee who held his arms open wide. There was a quick surge of emotion in Eivaunee, which was cut off and subdued before Zsar't'lac could tell what it was. The female was similar to Eivaunee in age.

The humans kissed. Eivaunee drew back after a moment. It was clear the female didn't want to. That wasn't unusual. But Eivaunee's emotions were very unusual. It was clear that he was very fond of the small, brown haired woman dressed in a soft green gown with the gold lace trim of Consenti status at her wrists and neck.

"My friend, my childhood friend," Eivaunee said softly, kissing her again. "It has been so very long."

"Eivaun." The woman ran her hands through Eivaunee's short hair. He caught her hands and kissed them. He drew her to the couch. They sat kissing and lightly touching, oblivious to the alien.

Zsar't'lac picked up his coffee and walked over to the window and looked out at the overdone gardens. He probed both humans' emotions. The female's were pretty typical; she loved Eivaunee. It appeared a deeper love than most females felt for the golden human. Still females in love with Eivaunee was nothing unusual.

Eivaunee's emotions, on the other hand, were quite unusual. Affection was there that ran deep and was cut off, or maybe contained. Zsar't'lac wasn't sure. In addition there was respect, and caring, for this female. That was very unusual for Eivaunee. And Eivaunee and Anati had been lovers, that was clear.

Zsar't'lac didn't have to see them to know the physical contact was careful, reassuring touches rather than a prelude to something more. Eivaunee, in particular, had his sexual interest well in check, and Zsar't'lac could feel the effort involved in that. Eivaunee very much desired this female, but in a way that was different from his other lovers, there was gentleness in him towards her which Zsar't'lac had never felt in him before.

It was a few minutes more before Eivaunee remembered Zsar't'lac. Their soft voiced questions and answers had reached the alien whose hearing was better than a human.

"Sorry, Zsar," Eivaunee apologized for completely forgetting about his friend.

The alien turned around, light red and orange dancing in his eyes. "I understand."

Eivaunee was still holding Anati's hands. The golden human's face had a softer look than usual. His mouth, so often held in a straight line, was relaxed and full; his amber eyes gentle. In Eivaunee's expression, there was beauty even an alien could appreciate.

"No help, Zsar," Eivaunee answered an unvoiced question.

Zsar't'lac knew that from both of their emotions.

"I've tried every bribe or threat possible, and got nothing. No one seems to know anything." There was real anguish in Anati's voice.

"No one who is willing to talk," the alien augmented.

"Exactly," Eivaunee agreed. He released Anati's hands. "How are your sons?"

"Both fine," Anati answered a little stiffly. "They are at the Realt Home Estate."

"Potentially too dangerous here," Eivaunee agreed. After a moment he looked at Zsar't'lac; "You've never met Anati, have you, Zsar?"

"I saw her when I was here before, but we weren't introduced." Zsar't'lac thought the concept of introductions a little odd. Obviously he knew who she was and the female knew him—what more was needed?

"Eivaunee has often praised your skills," Anati added the necessary polite adjuvant to the introduction.

"As he has spoken quite highly of you," Zsar't'lac replied with proper etiquette.

Eivaunee turned back to Anati. "How is your mother?"

"Doing all right, under the circumstances," Anati replied. After a moment she added: "She will be at the truth drug questioning."

"So I was told." Eivaunee didn't, and wasn't about to, inquire of Anati's husband. "I've asked Sarrin to host a gathering tomorrow night; Hazdel is giving me one night of freedom. I'd like you to be there."

Anati nodded. She reached up to caress Eivaunee's hair. "I'll be there." There was a moment of hesitation, then she said softly, looking directly into Eivaunee's eyes: "I love you. Only you."

Eivaunee caught her hands and kissed them. "Thank you," he said softly. He started to say something more, but stopped. Zsar't'lac could feel Eivaunee's emotional uncertainty. The emotion the slender human felt was close to love, but cut off somehow. It felt more like the hope of love, than the actual emotion. But Eivaunee was grateful for Anati's love, that was clear. He had never cared about any other woman's love.

"You should go," Eivaunee said, lightly touching her face. "I'm glad you won't see the drug questioning."

"I want to help!"

"Watching me drool isn't helpful," Eivaunee pointed out. "You should go now. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll check back later."

"No," Eivaunee was quite firm. "Tomorrow."

Anati hesitated, then nodded. "If that is what you want."

"It is." Eivaunee kissed her lightly. "Tomorrow—if you want—we could...?"

"Always, Eivaunee, yes."

Anati stood, and looked down at Eivaunee for a long moment, as though memorizing his face, then she turned and walked to the door, head held high. She didn't look back as she left.

"A magnificent female," Zsar't'lac commented as the door closed.

"Woman," Eivaunee corrected him. "Not just female." He sighed and looked up at his friend. "I wish to god I could have married her."

Chapter 14

Eivaunee, with Zsar't'lac close behind him, walked into the small glass-lined room. Behind the one-way glass, there were people watching, maybe even Hazdel and Aman, though that was unlikely. Hazdel and Aman would more likely watch the proceedings from a more remote, and comfortable, place. The rules governing truth drug questioning of a Consenti demanded that a certain number of people watch it directly. Video images could be altered.

In the center of the room was a chair, tall-backed to help support the head, and covered with an easy-cleaning synthetic fabric. Eivaunee took a deep breath. God, how he hated this, hated being reduced to a drooling idiot. He should be used to it, he thought grimly. No Consenti had ever been questioned under truth drugs as many times as he had. Still, it wasn't something a person could ever get used to.

Eivaunee sat down. Zsar't'lac stood to one side, breathing a little faster than usual. He understood that Eivaunee could die here from a reaction to the drug. Zsar't'lac scanned the emotions of the people behind the glass. Mistress Realt was afraid. Jite Dennyson was worried. There were three others watching from behind the glass. Their emotions ranged from indifference, to hope that Eivaunee would die, to pleasure at the thought of watching him be so reduced. Zsar't'lac fought an urge to bare his teeth. There were two additional humans in the small room, a human male who was the physician, and a female security guard.

A restraining strap was fastened around Eivaunee's chest.

"Ready?" the physician asked Eivaunee.

"Yes," came quiet reply.

The hypospray was placed against Eivaunee's neck. There was a soft hissing sound. Nothing happened for several moments, then Eivaunee's head lolled backwards a little. He snapped it forward, and went too far. His head rocked forward and he had trouble getting it back up again. Zsar't'lac felt his anger rising, and he felt sick.

The doctor pulled Eivaunee's head backwards by his short hair. He stared into Eivaunee's face, then nodded.

"You can begin."

"Your name?" an impersonal voice asked. The sound came out of a small speaker set in the wall.

"E-Eivaunee D-Dorlan." His head lolled forward again. The physician reached for Eivaunee's hair, to pull his head upright again.

"No!" Zsar't'lac commanded. He hissed his anger. He gently drew Eivaunee's head up and carefully held it.

The physician looked over at the Imperial Guardswoman who shrugged. Unless it was an obvious problem, she didn't intend to get involved with the alien.

"Continue," the physician commanded the questioner.

“Your rank?”

“Con....senti.” Drool dripped from the corner of Eivaunee’s slack mouth, his voice was blurred. The effort it took to speak even the single word was noticeable.

“Do you love or hate the Emperor?” the voice asked.

“HAT-RED!” Eivaunee shouted.

“Repeat.”

“I—HATE—him!” Eivaunee sounded like a petulant three year old. “H-hate—hate.” He spewed spittle as he spoke. The drool was coming faster.

Zsar’t’lac wished he had something to wipe Eivaunee’s mouth.

“Do you want to kill him?”

“Y-yes,” Eivaunee smiled a very loose, open, foolish-looking smile. “Boom!” he added.

“That’s all.”

“No,” a firm female voice rejected the ending. Zsar’t’lac indentified her as Serie Realt, Anati’s mother. “Have you committed treason?” she asked.

“That question is not allowed!” the impersonal voice told her.

“It is the main question,” the female retaliated. “Eivaunee, have you—“

There was a click. The sound was shut off.

Eivaunee began blowing bubbles with his spittle.

“Give me sssomething to wipe his face-ss,” Zsar’t’lac commanded the physician, his voice hissing in anger. The physician ignored him; he turned away towards the door. Zsar’t’lac let go of Eivaunee’s head; it dropped forward. The physician hadn’t taken a full step before Zsar’t’lac caught the back of his head. Claws were slightly unsheathed as Zsar’t’lac curved his fingers inwards so the claws pierced the skin under the long brown hair of the physician.

“Something to wipe his face!” Zsar’t’lac’s tone was an absolute command.

The physician tried to nod. Zsar’t’lac felt the attempted movement under his hands, but he didn’t release him.

“Yes,” the physician agreed nervously. “I’ll get you something.”

Zsar’t’lac let him go. The physician scurried to get some absorbent wipes. He handed them to the alien and glared at the guardswoman. She shrugged. The alien hadn’t hurt the physician, and he was being a pain in the ass. If she needed to justify her inaction later, she’d point out that the Emperor had made it quite clear the alien was not to harmed. And he didn’t look like the type of being that could be stopped without harming him.

Zsar’t’lac gently wiped Eivaunee’s chin and the front of his blue silk jacket. Eivaunee continued to blow bubbles with his spittle.

“Don’t do that,” the alien said gently.

“Wh-what?”

Zsar’t’lac gave up. The door opened and two servants entered towing an anti-grav slab. Mistress Realt entered behind them. Zsar’t’lac could feel her worry radiating outward.

“Are you going to put him on the slab?” the physician asked the alien in as superior a tone as he could manage as he unfastened the restraining straps.

Zsar’t’lac picked up Eivaunee and gently laid him down on the cold metal. Eivaunee stuck his tongue out, then decided he wanted to look at it. He twisted his head around in different ways trying to get a good look.

Zsar’t’lac turned towards Mistress Realt, keeping one hand on Eivaunee, making sure he didn’t

roll off. “What is going to happen next? I didn’t think it would be this bad. I’ve seen truth drug questioning, but never this bad.”

Mistress Realt said nothing at first, fighting down her own anger. “It depends on the type of drug used. Eivaunee had the most powerful of all the truth drugs, the one with the worst side-effects.”

“Being reduced to this is a side-effect?” Zsar’t’lac was incredulous.

“Actually, it’s necessary. You don’t lie in this condition,” Mistress Realt said softly.

“What will happen next?” Zsar’t’lac repeated his main question.

“In about fifteen minutes, he’ll get very sick. That’s his body rejecting the drug. After that, he’ll pass out and sleep for a long time.” Mistress Realt shook her head. “I wish there was some other way.”

“There is,” Zsar’t’lac stated firmly.

Mistress Realt’s eyes went wide and she shook her head slightly, indicating to the alien he should be careful. Zsar’t’lac made a sound of angry derision.

“Eivaunee spoke of the possibility of a drug reaction?” the alien asked. “What happens then?”

“He’ll die,” the physician answered, a touch of hope in his voice.

“There are drugs to stop allergic reactions,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

“Not for this,” Mistress Realt said gently. “It’s too quick a systemic reaction. It can’t be stopped.”

Zsar’t’lac fought a hard battle to control his anger. He wanted to kill these people, kill everyone involved in this. Burn the Imperial Planet. He took a deep breath. Not yet. Maybe never. Maybe soon. Maybe he was wrong about saving the humans...

“I’ll take him back to his room,” Zsar’t’lac softly, still lightly holding Eivaunee to the anti-grav sled.

“We are to go with you,” one of the servants said.

Zsar’t’lac shrugged in the human manner and drew the pallet forward. Eivaunee had tired of trying to look at his tongue and went back to making ‘boom’ sounds.

“Boom! Boom! Boom-boom!”

Zsar’t’lac began to wonder if he should call his Hsassan. Maybe the others were right, maybe these animals should die—or be enslaved. Maybe that was the only way they could be taught decency. Teach them proper behavior with a slave’s collar around their necks to make sure they listened. It was a pleasant thought to hold as he walked down the ornate wide hallways while his erstwhile Commander returned to blowing bubbles.

The servants stood in the doorway to the bathroom. “If you leave him face down on the floor, he’ll be all right,” one of the servants advised the alien.

Zsar’t’lac gently picked up Eivaunee and settled down to sit cross-legged on the floor, gently holding Eivaunee against him, like a large baby cradled in his father’s arms. The alien’s long hands cradled the back of Eivaunee’s head. The golden human couldn’t even hold up his own head. For the last couple of minutes Eivaunee had been silent; Zsar’t’lac was worried. “How will I be able to tell if he is starting an allergic reaction?”

“Well, its kinda like he is now—but that could also be just going into the next phase of normal drug progress. You can’t really tell. But if he gets sick in the next few minutes, he’ll be all right. You probably want to put him down. He’ll get real sick!”

Zsar’t’lac cradled Eivaunee more closely. He wished he could help his friend. Give him a Hsassan’s body for a time. Hsassan never had allergic reactions. There were drugs that could

weaken, even kill, a Hsassan. Labela snake toxin for one, but their bodies never turned against them.

Gods of my ancestors! Let this human live! I want him—need him—to serve the Homelands— Eivaunee vomited. Copiously. All down the front of the alien's chest and his own.

Thank you. I promise you an offering of my own blood.

Zsar't'lac didn't believe in the gods of his ancestors. Not normally. But like all of his people he turned to them in times of emotional stress. It was understood that if the gods granted a wish, they wanted blood in return. Zsar't'lac had offered the best there was: his own.

Eivaunee continued to vomit. Zsar't'lac shifted the slender human slightly to make sure he wouldn't choke.

"Blech!" one of the servants said with feeling. "I'd put him down."

The alien didn't bother looking at the humans standing by the doorway. Eivaunee was now dry retching. There was nothing left in his body to void. Zsar't'lac had seen that with very drunk humans; he knew that in itself wouldn't harm Eivaunee.

"He will be all right now?" Zsar't'lac asked. "If he is sick, he won't have the allergy-reaction?"

"No," he was answered. "When they get sick, they never die."

"Bring me a towel."

One of the servants did. Zsar't'lac gently wiped Eivaunee's face.

"If you put him in the shower, and just turn it on, it gets most of the stuff off him," the servant volunteered.

Zsar't'lac wondered how he was going to manage not to kill any of these disgusting creatures during the next few days. "Leave us!"

The pallid, treacherous creatures did, closing the door behind themselves.

Eivaunee was quiet now, his head hanging down limply. Zsar't'lac realized that he had a slight problem: how was he going to properly clean his friend? He would have to strip him. Zsar't'lac didn't like that idea, but trying to clean the vomit off Eivaunee without removing his clothes didn't seem very useful. And he wasn't going to leave him to the servants' care.

Zsar't'lac settled Eivaunee carefully on the floor, before taking off his own officer's tunic. He put the soiled garment to one side and wiped the vomit off his pants.

Then Zsar't'lac turned to undressing Eivaunee. He did so with clumsy efficiency. Undressing a completely unconscious person wearing as many tight-fitting layers as Eivaunee wasn't easy. Zsar't'lac wrestled Eivaunee's over-jacket off, his tight fitting pants, and his shirt. He placed the dirty clothing on top of his tunic. After only a second's pause, Eivaunee's underwear followed. Why anyone would chose to wear so many layers of clothing eluded the large alien who, like all Hsassan, found a simple wrapped skirt and tied shirt sufficient.

Zsar't'lac bathed the vomit off Eivaunee. In the small bath room, the sweetly scented soap fought a battle with the sour smell of vomit. The soap lost. Zsar't'lac didn't mind; he found cloying, sweet scent of the soap more offensive. He finished bathing Eivaunee and laid him on a clean towel on the floor. It worried him that his friend still showed so little signs of life. His breathing, though, was steady, if slow.

Zsar't'lac took off his silk officer's shirt and his boots, which hadn't gotten any vomit on them, and quickly washed himself. He left his pants on, soaping the last traces of vomit off them. For now, it was the most efficient method of cleaning himself. Later he would change his clothes entirely, but he didn't want to leave Eivaunee alone just now.

Zsar't'lac picked Eivaunee up and carried him out of the bath room, through the living room, and into the master bedroom. He laid Eivaunee on the floor for a moment while he pulled back the silken coverlet.

He gently laid Eivaunee on the silk sheets and drew up the cover. Eivaunee shifted a little, settling in. It was the first voluntary movement the golden human had made in a while. Zsar't'lac was relieved; Eivaunee would survive. At least for now.

Zsar't'lac continued to watch Eivaunee. He seemed in a deep sleep, his breathing slow and regular. He would be all right. Zsar't'lac settled down on the floor a short distance from the bed. He drew his black Hsasan knife and cut off a small piece of his shirt and placed it on the floor in front of him. Then he made a small cut in his wrist and held the wrist out to drip onto the fabric.

Gods of my ancestors! Dark Azuris! This is for you. My blood given in return for your gift.

Zsar't'lac let the blood continue to drip until the quick clotting mechanisms of his species stopped it. A dozen drops of blood stained the white silk shirt. He paused for a moment, considering. The offering should be burned, but how to do that in this overly technical society? After a moment he walked to the food unit built in the wall. He placed the fabric inside and set it to heat. After several cycles of heating, the silk finally caught on fire. If there were any gods—if Dark Azuris existed—he should be pleased with the offering. Zsar't'lac didn't believe in the gods, especially now that Eivaunee was safe. Still, a bargain was a bargain.

That matter settled, Zsar't'lac walked across the room to the commsole terminal set in the wall. He tried activating it, hoping it wasn't security connected with the door locks. If it was, though, he would have to carry Eivaunee over and place his hand against the pad. It wasn't security-linked. The screen shimmered to life offering information, or communication, as the two first options. Zsar't'lac chose information. He was then given the choices of general information, security-restricted information (if appropriate), or access to the Imperial library. He began with general information.

On his only other visit to the Imperial Planet Zsar't'lac had done some basic research on the people he would be interacting with, but little else. At that point, he hadn't the time, or the need, for additional information. Under the current circumstances, however, he would need more information, beginning with the layout of the rambling Imperial Palace.

He was given the option of a general layout of the Palace, offered to all visitors, and a security-restricted reconstructed set of architectural drawings. The screen said the original drawings were not available.

"Not available? Why not?" Zsar't'lac asked the computer.

"Long or short response?" the computer queried back.

"Long," Zsar't'lac replied. Lost architectural drawing could be of interest.

"The majority of the current Imperial Palace was built by the dynasty before the Toneki's, directly prior to their overthrow by the current Emperor's grandfather. During the several days of fighting that occurred during the revolt, the original architectural drawings were destroyed. Due to security reasons, there was only one full set of drawings. The main architect, the well-known Samuelson, also died in that conflict, whether a casualty of the fighting, or murdered, or a suicide is not known.

"A complete set of drawings were never found. After Hazdel's grandfather moved into the new Imperial Palace, it was measured and reconstructed drawings were done. All measurements, internal and external were found to match. There are no unaccounted for hidden access routes, although

such was rumored at the time. Considering the strength, and perfect fit of the shields, it is unlikely that a hidden entrance/exit was ever designed into the Palace. That is all.”

Interesting, but not very useful. The alien moved on to look at the non-security-restricted layout of the Palace. He needed to know the best ways in—and out—of this maze of buildings and rooms.

Chapter 15

The outer door opened. Zsar’t’lac heard the faint sound and turned away from the commsole terminal, drawing his knife, as his mind probed outward. Three humans. Two male and one female. Maybe female. Her emotions weren’t exactly female. The bedroom door opened just as Zsar’t’lac identified the female: Moerit, the Princess Royal. He had met her during his last visit to the Imperial Planet. That had been three years ago, but her emotional profile was unforgettable. Strong-willed and dominant with a very strong sense of self. Sexually aggressive as well. Zsar’t’lac had been intrigued by her then. Now, feeling her emotions, he still was.

“A knife? Do you think you’ll need it?” The Princess stood just inside the doorway. Tall, with long blonde hair curled high on her head, arrogant green eyes, and the exact sort of body Eivaunee always preferred, lush and sensual. It was teasingly displayed in a dark green gown that matched her eyes, cut low in front, and lightly clinging down her long legs.

Zsar’t’lac put the knife away. There was nothing in the Princess’ emotions that implied a threat to Eivaunee.

“Beautiful,” Zsar’t’lac said softly.

“So I am told,” Moerit murmured as she walked, with just a slight sway of her hips, past the alien. She looked down at the sleeping Eivaunee. Her two guards stayed by the door.

“The servants said he threw up,” Moerit commented, her tone neutral.

“Yes,” Zsar’t’lac concurred. “I’m told he will be all right now.”

The Princess reached out a hand, as though to touch Eivaunee, but then drew it back. She turned towards the alien. “At least for tonight.”

“For longer, hopefully,” Zsar’t’lac replied.

The Princess walked towards the alien. “I am told that you are quite tender in your care of the him.”

“I am his bodyguard; he is my responsibility.”

The Princess smiled. “I’m told you have practice fights with him regularly. Broke his arm once.”

“That in the beginning,” Zsar’t’lac told her. “It was an accident. I didn’t realize how thin human bones are. I became more careful after that.”

“The two of you have had some interesting adventures in the Provinces,” the Princess commented. She was standing quite close to Zsar’t’lac. She touched the front of his silk shirt.

“You are a magnificent physical being,” she added softly

Zsar't'lac smiled in the human manner; he enjoyed this female. Three years ago, he had found her emotions—her strong sense of self—attractive. But she had sent one of her ladies-in-waiting to him, wanting to know if it was safe for a human female to have sex with the large alien. It was, but Zsar't'lac had been annoyed at the Princess for forcing another female to have sex with him.

Afterwards he had decided to serve with Eivaunee and had left the Imperial Planet, and the Princess, to serve in the Provinces. Over the years, he had occasionally thought about the Princess, wondered at what he had felt in her mind, the good and the bad.

Eivaunee didn't like the Princess, believing her to be his enemy. There was anger in the Princess directed towards Eivaunee, but not true animosity. Eivaunee might not like the Princess, but Zsar't'lac did.

The Princess' touch against the alien's chest changed, shifting from fingertips, to her whole hand, caressing downward.

Zsar't'lac caught the hand, and brought it to his lips. "This is not the time, nor the place."

"Why not?" Moerit returned. "He's out for the night."

"No," the alien said firmly. He could feel that she found Eivaunee's presence sexually stimulating. An odd relationship.

The Princess drew her hand back. From her emotions, it was clear that she hadn't really thought he would, but she liked to tease. "Tomorrow Eivaunee will receive a better offer from the Emperor than he has ever had before. If he is wise, he'll accept it."

"Why a last minute offer?" Zsar't'lac inquired. "If the Emperor has such a good plan to trap Eivaunee?"

"Don't misjudge that! The plan is fool-proof. My father doesn't want to kill his pseudo-son."

"Only have sex with him," Zsar't'lac added.

"Everyone wants to have sex with the beautiful Eivaunee," the Princess sneered.

"I don't," Zsar't'lac refuted her. "Do you?"

"I want him as my very wealthy husband," the Princess stated.

"Nothing more?"

"Perhaps."

The Princess' emotions were very contained, like Eivaunee's. Zsar't'lac couldn't tell why she wanted to marry Eivaunee. It was clear, though, that she did want to marry him. Whether it was his wealth, or some other reason, it was impossible to discern from her emotions. Maybe she didn't even know herself.

The Princess tilted her head a little to one side and played with a long pearl earring. "Do you find me physically attractive?" she inquired, her tone teasing.

"I find you attractive," Zsar't'lac answered her. "But not physically. I don't find any human physically attractive."

The Princess' raised both eyebrows in disbelief.

"It is your sense of power and self that I find very attractive," Zsar't'lac continued.

"Power is considered the strongest aphrodisiac," the Princess said with a smile.

"Power is a concept with various levels and meanings."

"True," the Princess agreed. "You have a very powerful body. I like that."

"Physical strength is the lowest level of power," Zsar't'lac stated. "Animals have physical strength. The power of the mind is more important."

"I don't have sex with minds," the Princess replied with a laugh, as she let go of her earring. "At

least not directly. Nor with animals, although you might qualify.”

“No, I don’t.”

The Princess laughed gently. “I don’t think so, either. Some other night we’ll play.” It was a promise and a command.

“I would enjoy that,” Zsar’t’lac said, quite sincerely.

Moerit turned again to look at the sleeping Eivaunee. Zsar’t’lac wished he could better understand Moerit’s emotions relating to Eivaunee. He could feel something contained behind strong emotional barriers, but he couldn’t tell what it was.

The Princess turned back to the alien. “He should accept my father’s offer,” she recommended again. “It is his best chance for survival.”

“Not his only chance?” Zsar’t’lac wondered at her choice of words.

“There are very few plots in the Imperial Palace that are exactly as they seem. Plots have plots within them. Sometimes even more than one layer of additional plots.”

“You know what is planned?”

Moerit played again with her earring. There was amusement in her. “Which plot—or subplot—are you referring to?”

“Any, or all of them.”

“The heir to the throne is a very valuable ally,” the Princess said smugly. “Something you should keep in mind.”

“I am willing to be your ally in any way that does not harm Eivaunee,” the alien told her quite sincerely.

“Ah, but what harms him? And what benefits him? You, I, and he may have very different ideas on that subject.”

“True,” the alien conceded.

“No one—not even someone as talented as you—can serve two gods. If you wish to change sides—?”

“Neither of you are gods,” the alien answered coolly. “The time may come when I serve you, Princess, but tonight I do not change sides.”

“Then I wish you sweet dreams,” the Princess murmured as she sauntered from the room, trailing laughter behind her.

The door closed behind her. Zsar’t’lac promised himself the time would come when they would be lovers. This female was more sexually stimulating than any other female he had ever known.

Zsar’t’lac looked at Eivaunee. The golden human’s breathing continued deep and steady. He would survive this night, and hopefully for sometime thereafter. Zsar’t’lac had a use for the golden human. If he survived. He wondered what Hazdel could offer Eivaunee that would make a difference? There was no way of knowing that. Better to return to the commsole and see what else the Imperial library could offer in the way of useful information.

* * * * *

The sun had been up for several hours when Eivaunee finally began to stir. Zsar’t’lac heard his movements, and felt his emotions shift from an unpleasant dream to groggy awareness. Still sitting on the floor in front of the commsole screen, as he had been most of the night, Zsar’t’lac hoped Eivaunee would take a few more minutes to fully wake. He wanted to finish reading about the

Imperial Guards.

There were four divisions of Imperial Guards, each containing a hundred guards. Each division had three barracks, each holding slightly more than thirty humans. Normally the division was one barrack for the females, two for the males. That made a total of twelve barracks, each with two private rooms for the officers. The barracks were set in a three quarters ring just inside the outer wall of the Palace grounds. Most of the guards were from the Provinces, but one division was composed entirely of men and women from the Imperial Planet. *To be sure of at least one division's loyalty?*

"What time is it?" Eivaunee asked a little groggily.

"Eight and a half hours," Zsar't'lac answered. "Your meeting with the Emperor is at ten hours," he reminded him.

"Hmm," Eivaunee answered indistinctly.

Zsar't'lac shut down the commsole. "Do you want me to order coffee and breakfast from the kitchen?"

"Please," Eivaunee answered, leveraging himself into a sitting position. "God, what a headache!"

"Do you remember...?"

"That is one of the few kind things about that drug," Eivaunee replied quietly. "No memories. How bad was I?"

"Not bad at all," Zsar't'lac answered softly. "It was the animals who gave you the drug that were bad."

"I do not need philosophy this morning," Eivaunee pointed out as he headed for the bathroom.

Zsar't'lac ordered a pot of coffee and Eivaunee's usual breakfast of eggs mixed with vegetables and herbs. He ordered a steak, vegetables, and fruit for himself.

A few moments later, Eivaunee emerged from the bathroom. "Seriously, Zsar, how bad did I get?"

"I have nothing to compare it to," the alien gave the best answer he could.

Eivaunee gave up. "The servants were gentler than usual. No bruises."

Zsar't'lac made no response. There was an awkward silence. They both knew Eivaunee had been reduced to a drooling idiot. For someone of Eivaunee's pride, it was difficult. For anyone fond of the golden human, witnessing it was almost as difficult.

"You are beautiful, my Commander, under all circumstances," the alien finally said gently. "The beauty of your spirit is always there."

Eivaunee's amber eyes met the alien's black ones, the awkwardness fading. "Well, it's over. It's not likely to be done again soon. I hope." He paced around the small bedroom. "I should call for a valet."

"If it's simply to help you dress, I can do that."

"First a nursemaid, now a valet. Is there no end to your talents?" Eivaunee gently mocked the alien. "The servants didn't take care of me last night; they're never that careful."

"No."

"If you want to expand your repertoire of talents, fine," Eivaunee agreed with a shrug. "All I really need is someone to help me button the sleeves." Eivaunee walked, a little unsteadily, into the bathroom to shower.

Zsar't'lac waited patiently trying not to think about how much he wanted to send for his Hsassan. How much he wanted to kill the humans who had so callously treated his friend.

Eivaunee came back into the bedroom and began dressing. Zsar't'lac said nothing, neither did Eivaunee, until it was time for Zsar't'lac to help with the sleeves.

"If I can tear you away from your rapt contemplation of your navel?" Eivaunee finally spoke.

Zsar't'lac stood up with a chuckle. "Norda don't have navels. At least not in the same location as humans."

"Oh, where is yours?"

Zsar't'lac shook his head, and began buttoning up Eivaunee's sleeve. The human was quite close. He smelled of the sweet soap, but somehow Zsar't'lac didn't mind.

"Zsar. Thanks for taking care of me last night. I know how you hate seeing people under truth drugs."

Zsar't'lac focused on the absurdity of using a dozen small buttons to hold a sleeve closed. Little round objects that must be pushed through little slits. Ridiculous! Almost as absurd as the way his body was beginning to react to Eivaunee's closeness.

Zsar't'lac pushed the last button through the little hole with the back curve of one of his claws, and stood back. "Someone had to take care of you," he said more gruffly than he meant to.

"Someone, meaning you. Again. Thanks."

Was that how he did it? The gentle thanks—the true gratitude for simple service? Was that how he forged the friendship between them? Friendship. It was nothing more than that. Eivaunee said friendship could have a tender aspect. There was no dishonor in friendship.

The door sounded. It was palace servants with breakfast. There was a little time to eat before the meeting with the Emperor.

Eivaunee, with Zsar't'lac beside him, walked down the wide, pale green corridors to the small audience room. Zsar't'lac wasn't going to be allowed in the meeting, but the alien could wait outside. Hopefully his emotion-sensing would gain something useful. The small audience room wasn't so large that it exceeded the alien's emotion-sensing range.

The two guardsmen at the door stiffened slightly as Eivaunee approached. It wasn't quite a coming to attention, which should be done only for the Emperor, but still a gesture of respect. The guard on the left opened the gilted covered door. "He's expecting you."

Of course, Eivaunee thought, that's why I'm here.

He entered the room he knew well from other visits. It was small, almost intimate, with wood paneled walls, hung with portraits of Imperial ancestors. Tiles, hand-painted with floral designs, covered the floor. The Emperor rarely met with Eivaunee in any other room. The large, formal Audience Chamber could be awkward for their meetings. Their relationship was always uneasy—and on the Emperor's sides, frequently violent. As Eivaunee entered, he looked straight ahead to the gold throne. No one was sitting there. It was a moment before Eivaunee saw Hazdel standing alongside the throne, dressed in grey satin with red accents. There was a more strained look in the Emperor's face. More so even than usual when he was meeting with Eivaunee. The Emperor's long, beringed hand rested on the arm of the throne.

Eivaunee knelt, his head bowed down properly. He didn't see the Emperor's hand reach out as though to stroke the fine, blond hair. Hazdel drew his hand back before he touched the kneeling young man.

"I am not on the throne," Hazdel pointed out, his voice harsh, as always. "Etiquette only demands you kneel when I'm on the throne."

Eivaunee's head came up. He tilted it a little to one side. "If I hadn't knelt, you'd have hit me,"

he pointed out.

The Emperor gave a short bark of laughter. "Probably." He removed his hand from the arm of the throne. "I hear the alien was very tender in his care of you last night?" The tone of voice made it a question.

"I wouldn't know," Eivaunee answered coolly. "I wasn't exactly aware of what was going on."

"What is the nature of your relationship with him?" the Emperor asked coldly.

Eivaunee rose slowly. He hated this man who was responsible for the death of his parents and his only friend. "Why?" Eivaunee asked softly, tauntingly. "Are you afraid someone else is getting what you want?"

The Emperor hit him, brutally hard, with his left hand, which had the heavy coronation ring. He knocked the younger, slender man to the floor. He drew back his foot, as though to kick him, but stopped.

"Answer me!"

Eivaunee rolled over onto his back, his face bleeding where the coronation ring had cut him. In most of his meeting with Hazdel he got hit at least once. Mostly because he couldn't help taunting the Emperor. He looked up at Hazdel's angry face and felt a slight sense of victory. It was all he ever got, and he always paid for making the Emperor angry. Still, it felt good. But there was no point, particularly considering the current situation, in continuing his minor rebellion.

"My officer and a friend," Eivaunee answered softly. "Nothing more." He got up from the floor.

"I hear he kisses you sometimes," Hazdel made it an accusation. From his point of view, it probably was.

Eivaunee wondered how Hazdel knew about that. Zsar't'lac was quite discrete. "Yes," Eivaunee admitted. "Other men have kissed me. I just don't let them fuck me. You do know why."

The Emperor grunted, whether in response to Eivaunee denial of an affair with his officer, or in response to his last statement, wasn't clear.

Hazdel once had been handsome, in a hard-edged way. He was still attractive, tall, and lean muscled, with piercing gray eyes and long curly brown hair, streaked now with grey. He was a cold man who had only once given way to love. For Omani, Eivaunee's mother.

"You can't win, Eivaunee," the Emperor said softly, turning away from the young man to look towards the portraits that hung on the walls. His hand caressed the golden arm of the throne.

"Nor can you," Eivaunee returned, just as softly. "Not completely."

The Emperor turned back, his eyes as cold as space. "I could."

For a moment, Eivaunee actually felt faint. The threat, unspoken, but understood, of rape hung in the air. Worse than what had been done before, rape by the man who had raped and destroyed his mother.

Eivaunee said nothing. For once, he was too afraid.

"I won't," the Emperor said flatly. "Your mother would kill me."

With the flat denial, the fear receded. Nothing, not even a tortuous death, would be worse than that. And he wasn't surprised by Hazdel referring to Omani as though she was alive. Eivaunee knew Hazdel still talked to Omani, treating her like a living person. He knew he was the only person Hazdel ever talked to about Omani.

The Emperor continued to stroke the arm of the throne, as though for comfort. "Do you know why I had the rapes continued after you came to me?" he asked in a conversational tone.

"You thought it was necessary," Eivaunee offered. "To make sure my rebellious attitude was

gone.”

“Do you think that was necessary? You were very humble when you came to me.”

“A night of repeated brutal rapes makes a person humble,” Eivaunee said softly, hate clear in his voice. “I recommend it for you.”

The Emperor gave another short bark of laughter. “I’m sure you do.” He turned to fully face Eivaunee. “That wasn’t the reason. I knew you were subdued. In the future, the merest threat of that happening again would be enough to control you.”

“Then it was Aman’s comment?” Eivaunee asked. He didn’t fully understand the relationship between the Emperor and his Favorite. Hazdel controlled the violent man, but not entirely.

“Relax and learn to enjoy it,” Hazdel quoted Aman’s remark that day.

“I wondered at the time if that was what pushed you into having the rapes continued.” In a way it seemed odd that they were talking so reasonably about what had been done to him at the Emperor’s command seven years ago. In all the intervening years, they had never spoken of the rapes. But they were going into the end game of their relationship, the most brutal aspect of it had to be discussed.

“It did,” Hazdel agreed, “but not as he meant it.”

“Why then?” Eivaunee asked, as he had so often during the long days of physical recovery. Mentally and emotionally, he would never recover.

The Emperor’s eyes looked past Eivaunee, to somewhere into the distance. “I have no sexual interest in children, you know that. That’s why I’ve always chosen to see you as a child. Your mother helps with that, to keep you safe from me. Part of why I have no interest in children is their innocence. I don’t find innocence sexually attractive. At fifteen, before the rapes, there was a sexual innocence in you. Afterward that night, when you knelt before me, with the innocence gone, I found I desired you very much.” Again there was a pause. “I had no illusions that you would ever accept me as a lover.”

“Never.”

“And your mother would never allow me to rape you.” Hazdel paused again. It was clear this was a very difficult discussion for him. “Aman’s comment made me think: what if you did learn to enjoy it?”

“Unlikely, considering my first experiences,” Eivaunee pointed out coldly. “Besides, I never had any interest in men or boys.”

“That could change,” Hazdel said softly, still looking past the younger man. “So I decided to have the rapes continued. To be sure you would never make that choice.”

Eivaunee’s hands closed into fists. His fury threatened to strangle him. “To save yourself from jealousy - !” His voice shook with his anger.

Hazdel finally looked at Eivaunee. “No. To save your life. If you took another man as your lover, I would have killed you.”

Eivaunee took a deep breath, trying to get some air into his lungs, past the constriction of his fury. Trying, somehow, to control his rage; trying to force himself not to attack. This could be Hazdel’s plan: to make him so angry he physically attacked him. Focusing on that calmed Eivaunee a little.

Hazdel stepped up and sat down on the gold throne. Eivaunee was glad of that. It is too easy to hit a man standing nearby; someone seated a full step above him was more difficult, less tempting.

“Deep breaths help,” Hazdel offered.

Eivaunee was already taking deep breaths, his anger required them. Reason and control began to

return, slowly.

"I have told you what I did so you would understand that it wasn't for spite, or viciousness, that I had the rapes continued. It was to save your life." There was sincerity in the Emperor's voice.

"P-pure altrusim," Eivaunee responded, his voice shaking with hate.

"Not entirely, no."

Eivaunee kept taking deep breaths. The Emperor said nothing; he sat waiting patiently.

"Is this the point of this meeting?" Eivaunee finally asked coldly. He knew it wasn't; Zsar't'lac had told him about the Princess' visit.

"No," the Emperor replied. "I have an offer to make you—when you are calm enough to hear it."

Eivaunee worked to force the hatred back. He had experience with that. The rapes were over; they were in the past. Never forgotten, but he had learned to live with them. He had to deal with the current situation with as clear a mind as he could.

"W-what offer?" he couldn't keep his voice totally level, but he wasn't as enraged. He could think lucidly, or lucidly enough. He hoped.

"I don't want to have to kill you," Hazdel began.

"But you will."

"If you force me to," the Emperor countered.

"I just want to be left alone! Let me live my life in the Provinces. I am no threat to you. I have not committed treason!"

"Do you think that matters?" Hazdel responded only to Eivaunee's last statement.

"It should."

"Many things should, Eivaunee, but reality is less important than perception—or in this case—proof."

"How can there be proof of something that never happened?" Eivaunee returned.

"Will happen," the Emperor corrected him.

"You are sure of this?"

"I will prove it," Hazdel answered definitively.

"I could swear to the contrary under truth drug questioning," Eivaunee pointed out, curious as to how Hazdel would respond.

"You could. If you were alive," Hazdel returned coolly.

The answer Eivaunee was expecting.

"So my treason will be proven after the fact." It wasn't a question. "After I am dead. I presume I am killed while committing treason."

The Emperor made no reply.

"It can't be that simple," Eivaunee continued the one-sided conversation. "You will have to convince a majority of the Consenti that I was committing treason at the time you had me killed. Your word—or Aman's—is not going to be enough."

"It isn't that simple," Hazdel confirmed. "Now listen to my offer."

"I'm listening."

"You know I want you to marry Moerit. No, don't answer yet! What I am offering you is the Consort's Crown. And you get to retain—under your control only—the Dorlan Home Estate. You can even increase the number of retainers attached to the Home Estate by ten percent. You can keep control over your favorite retainers."

Eivaunee said nothing. Truthfully, it was more than he had ever thought possible.

“You will have certain rights as the Crowned Consort. You could do all sorts of good deeds—in the Provinces. That, however, comes after I am dead, which I’m not planning on for quite some time.”

“And for now?”

“Certainly you go back to the Provinces; you won’t be needed to plan the wedding. You return for the marriage and then you back to the Provinces. You can have your wish—life in the Provinces, as Consort Heir.”

Eivaunee was tempted. He could save at least some of his people. It would be hard, though, to chose who would remain a Dorlan retainer, and who would go under Toneki control.

“Is it just the money?” Eivaunee asked. “You really can’t need that many credits. Even Aman isn’t that extravagant.”

“His new, Dorlan-born wife helps,” Hazdel partially answered.

“What are you planning? Or is it just hatred of my family?”

“No, I don’t hate you—most of the time. Your mother I love; and your father, well there are things you don’t know about him.”

“I was given little chance to know him at all.”

“Politics,” the Emperor shrugged.

Eivaunee fought a new wave of anger.

Hazdel looked consideringly at Eivaunee. After a long pause he said: “The Klimar Empire is just one of three empires.”

“The Consenti would never agree to war with the United Councils. You can’t wage war alone.”

“No, the Consenti has to be subdued as the first step,” Hazdel agreed. “Not eliminated, people are too used to them, but brought under proper control.”

“Ships then,” Eivaunee answered his own question. “You need the Dorlan money to build ships of war.”

“Exactly. And the Dorlan-owned shipyards are excellent. Most of the Comveckt was built there.”

“I know.”

“When I own the shipyards, and have all that Dorlan wealth, ships will be built that I will control! No one will tell me who will command them.” Hazdel smiled slightly, coldly. “It won’t be too difficult to bring the Consenti families under control then. After an example is made of one or two, the rest will become quite docile. Consenti hate so very much to see their Estates laid waste, particularly their Home Estates.”

With enough ships any Emperor could control the Consenti exactly as Hazdel stated. Particularly considering how well the Palace was shielded; return attacks are futile.

“Then your puppet Consenti agrees with your plans to conquer the United Councils,” Eivaunee carried the plan to its next logical step.

“Eventually,” Hazdel agreed calmly, lightly tapping his fingertip on the arm of the throne. “But they aren’t the empire I was going to start with.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were taught better strategy than that at the Academy, Eivaunee. Begin with the more difficult task. While the troops are fresh, and morale is high, go for the harder target.”

It took Eivaunee a moment to realize what Hazdel was referring to. “You can’t attack the Norda Homelands!”

"Once I have the ships—and a controlled Consenti—of course I can. And I intend to. Your Hsassan friend won't be hurt, if that's what you are worried about. I might not even force him to take part in the attack. Although I will have to have him back at some point. I won't hurt him. I'll just have some firm discussions with him."

"Good luck with that," Eivaunee returned with feeling. His mind was racing. He was realizing that there was something much worse than being raped by Hazdel: interstellar war that the humans would lose! He wasn't going to tell Zsar't'lac about this; it could be the final point that would push him to kill Hazdel. That couldn't be risked. Zsar't'lac didn't understand how impossible that was.

"So you see what a grand future is in store for you if you are sensible."

"Sensible?" Eivaunee quoted back, thinking Hazdel was anything but.

"I will give you until tomorrow afternoon to consider my offer. There is a council meeting tomorrow morning; you needn't attend."

Not with a treason charge hanging over his head.

"You are dismissed," Hazdel said, leaning back against the tall back of the throne. "I expect you will be reasonable. Never have I offered you so much, more than you could ever have hoped for. And I have shared with you a future far grander than any you could ever imagine."

"And if I am not reasonable?" Eivaunee knew the answer; he just wanted it specified.

"You will die. I have been patient long enough."

"Even though I haven't committed treason and have no plans to?"

"We have been over that before, truth and reality aren't important. I need the money from the Dorlan Estates, and I will have it."

There was nothing more to be said. Eivaunee would not give up the Dorlan Estates, especially not to finance a catastrophic war with the Norda Homelands that would end in the destruction of human civilization. But he wasn't going to tell Hazdel that, not yet. He had until the following afternoon.

"I dismissed you," the Emperor pointed out.

Eivaunee knelt, his mind a little numb.

"I hear you are sponsoring a gathering tonight?"

"It will be good to see people again."

"See people, and try to find out what I plan, no doubt," Hazdel returned. "No one knows anything, little Eivaunee. You will learn nothing."

"I can try."

"Be reasonable," the Emperor recommended. "If not, you will be imprisoned by tomorrow night. And Aman wants a night with you. If you make me angry, I will probably agree."

Just now even the threat of Aman and his games wasn't as frightening as war with the Norda Homelands. Eivaunee realized, with an unpleasant start, he would be willing, under the current circumstances, to accept war with the United Councils. That would be a quick war, fairly bloodless, and the Klimar Empire would win. War with the Homelands would be none of the above.

Eivaunee bowed his head to the Emperor.

Chapter 16

Zsar't'lac was waiting just outside the door. Dark red and light orange flickered in his eyes. The guards were watching the alien warily.

"Your face is bloody," Zsar't'lac said when he first saw his human friend.

"Nothing new," Eivaunee countered evenly.

Zsar't'lac felt the guards' sympathy for the golden human.

"Other than that, how did it go?" Zsar't'lac asked as Eivaunee began the walk back down the long corridors.

"Worse than expected," Eivaunee said honestly. "We'll talk later." He needed a little time to decide what he would tell Zsar't'lac.

They entered Eivaunee's quarters. After the door closed, the alien took Eivaunee into a gentle embrace turning him to stand in a specific position. "Stand right here," he said quite softly.

Eivaunee did. He knew he was blocking the video pickup. The alien walked across the room, drew his Hsassan dagger, and stabbed an ornate bit of plaster. There was a crunching sound.

"We should have audio privacy for a while now," he announced.

"Straight forward way to handle it," Eivaunee agreed.

"Works," the alien agreed. "There are some technical tricks, but if you want to be sure... Now what happened?"

"He—we discussed the r-rapes," Eivaunee began.

"What rapes?"

"That I'll explain before we go to the gathering. Someone may...may talk about it there."

Zsar't'lac hesitated. Eivaunee's emotions were very odd. There was fear, contained, but strong. Some of it directed at the alien. (That didn't make sense.) With the fear was anger, and something that indicated Eivaunee wasn't going to tell Zsar't'lac the whole truth. It had happened before; Zsar't'lac knew the feeling. This wasn't a good time for that, though. Why did Eivaunee fear him? What wasn't he going to tell him?

"Why did the Emperor hit you?" Zsar't'lac asked. It was a place to begin what could be a long, and difficult, interrogation process.

"He wondered if you and I were lovers. I didn't answer him right away," Eivaunee returned.

That was a completely truthful answer.

"What..." Zsar't'lac began his second question.

The door announcer sounded. Zsar't'lac swore.

"Identify," Eivaunee stated.

"Anati."

"Come."

Zsar't'lac swore again. It occurred to him that he never swore in the Homelands. Actually they

didn't have such a concept. Still, if they did, Zsar't'lac probably wouldn't have sworn there. Humans brought it out in him.

Anati, lovely in teal and cream, walked in. Eivaunee caught her in his arms and they kissed. Zsar't'lac walked over to the far window and turned his back on them, giving them a little privacy.

"I was told you were all right. You were very sick."

"Not exactly compatible terms, but accurate enough."

"You had a meeting with Hazdel?"

"Same old stuff," Eivaunee lied blandly. "I'm not going to marry the Princess."

Zsar't'lac turned around to stare at Eivaunee's back. Certainly not the complete truth. So, Eivaunee wasn't planning on just lying to him. *Why? What had happened in that room?*

Zsar't'lac had felt anger, from both humans at various times during the meeting and, at the end, a cold complacency from the Emperor coupled with strong fear from Eivaunee. *What had the Emperor said?*

There had been times in the past when Eivaunee preferred not to tell the alien everything. It was reasonable in some cases, but this wasn't one of them.

"Maybe you should marry the Princess," Anati suggested, a touch of desperation in her voice.

"No. That's final, although I haven't told Hazdel that."

"Everyone is saying this is it, Eivaunee. If you don't marry her, Hazdel will kill you."

"Truthfully, I don't mind if he does. But I won't let him have the Dorlan Estates. Think about it! All that income! He could build ships to attack and control the Consenti! I can't allow that!"

"He should be killed," Zsar't'lac added.

"Shut up," Eivaunee told him without turning around.

There was a leaping pulse of fear in the human. The fear was stronger than it usually was when Zsar't'lac spoke of killing Hazdel. It had a newer feeling, too. Was it something involving what happened between Hazdel and Eivaunee just now?

"Eivaunee, we have time now. Could we—?"

Anati's hands caressed the golden human's chest, and down his arms. Desire was strong in her. Zsar't'lac stopped himself before he starting swearing again. It was getting repetitious. Also, although there was desire in Eivaunee, other emotions were stronger: worry, uneasiness, and a lingering fear.

"Not just now, my friend. There are things I have to do, people I have to talk to, before the gathering. Not everyone is going to be there." There was a tenderness in Eivaunee; clear even in the welter of other emotions. "If you come to Sarrin's tonight, I will have a privacy shield."

"If you want me there, I'll be there."

"Yes, please." He drew her close and kissed her, tenderly and then passionately. "Later," he promised her as he drew back.

She kissed him again, quickly, and left.

"What happened between you and the Emperor?" Zsar't'lac resumed the interrogation as soon as the door closed. His voice wasn't gentle, as it usually was; it was hard and demanding.

Eivaunee turned around, slowly, gracefully—for a human. "We had a couple of discussions. One I will explain somewhat a little later, the other I have already. He wants me to marry the Princess. I'm not going to. That is it." Eivaunee met and held the alien's black eyes.

The alien crossed the room, his eyes flickering red. His hands caught either side of Eivaunee's face; he tilted the human's head up. "Do you think I can't tell the difference between a partial truth

and full truth?"

"I've seen you do it with other people," Eivaunee answered coolly. "People you know less well than me."

"Why bother then?"

"I've told you what I'm going to tell you," Eivaunee answered. "Let go of me."

"When I choose," the alien returned flatly. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm about to die; fear is reasonable."

"You're not afraid to die," Zsar't'lac said softly. "Does it involve the Homelands?"

Eivaunee said nothing, tried to feel nothing. Especially with Zsar't'lac's hands on him, increasing his ability to sense emotion.

"That little bit of extra fear tells me it does," Zsar't'lac's voice was very soft. The pressure of his hands increased. "I was willing to kill you once to protect the Homelands. Do you think that has changed?"

The pressure of the alien's hands on his cheek bones hurt. Eivaunee knew Zsar't'lac had sufficient strength to crush his lower face. "Good solution to the problem," he told the alien, just as softly. "Kill me now and Hazdel will never be able to prove treason."

"It might come to that later," the alien agreed, "but for just now—" Zsar't'lac's long, double-jointed thumbs slid up Eivaunee's face to press against the center of his forehead.

"Zsar! Don't!" Eivaunee wasn't sure what the alien had in mind, but he knew he wouldn't like it.

"What are you afraid of?" Zsar't'lac said softly. "Why are you afraid of me?"

There was a pressure feeling in Eivaunee's mind. He didn't understand it—didn't like it. "Stop it!"

"Answer me!"

Eivaunee fought back, although he wasn't sure what he was fighting against. It felt like his head would explode. Zsar't'lac's hands were pressing outside, and, somehow, something was inside. Forcing—forcing. Eivaunee felt like screaming. He was screaming in his mind, and he felt like he was going to vomit. An edge of blackness began creeping up in his mind.

"Answer me!"

Eivaunee said nothing. The darkness welled up further, threatening to engulf his whole mind. Abruptly, Zsar't'lac released him. Eivaunee fell to his knees, sobbing. He didn't know if he was crying, or just trying to get his breath back. He hadn't been breathing.

Zsar't'lac dropped to one knee in front of the struggling human. "Tell me," he said gently.

"Ships...attack ...the Homelands." Eivaunee wasn't willing to put up with another round of whatever had just happened.

Zsar't'lac sat down on the floor and gently shifted Eivaunee into his lap.

"Don't touch me," Eivaunee told him.

The alien ignored him and gently pushed the fine, blond hair back off Eivaunee's forehead. There was a thin film of sweat on Eivaunee's face. Zsar't'lac's touch was cool and dry, as it always was. At first there was no emotion transmitted with his touch. The reassurance was in the light caress itself. Then there was gentle, low-level reassurance. Eivaunee turned his head into the caress and the reassurance became stronger. Eivaunee shivered. "Don't ever do that to me again!"

"Probably not," the alien agreed. "You have a very strong will, my friend."

"Another of your 'forgot to tell me' abilities?"

"I've only tried that with one Hsassan. It was easier to change his will than yours."

“Sing’m’li?”

“Yes, when we were trying to discover my various abilities. Will is, to some degree, a matter of emotion.”

Eivaunee settled his head against Zsar’t’lac’s shoulder. “Never really thought of it like that. Don’t do it again,” he repeated.

“Probably not,” the alien repeated. “So Hazdel thinks to attack the Homelands?”

“Now you’ll decide he definitely has to die.”

“I had already decided that. It’s simply a matter of when.”

“Sooner now, I suppose.”

“Not necessarily. Hazdel deciding to build ships to attack the Homelands isn’t exactly a terrible threat to the Homelands.”

“No, not for the Norda,” Eivaunee agreed, lifting his head off the alien’s shoulder. “Just to humans. But I thought you didn’t want the war?”

“I don’t, most of the time. But even if Hazdel wins this battle and gets the Dorlan money, it takes time to build ships; years of time, and accidents happen at shipyards. I’m not concerned.”

“What were you worried about then?”

“That you had told Hazdel who I am,” Zsar’t’lac replied. “I am more of a weapon than any ship he could build.”

“Do you think I would tell him?”

“You might have cut a bargain,” the alien suggested. “You care very much about the people on the Dorlan Estates; you are very worried about Hazdel getting the Dorlan wealth. It is possible.”

“No,” Eivaunee disagreed. “I won’t betray you.”

That was the complete truth.

The alien nuzzled the top of Eivaunee’s head.

Eivaunee drew back and slowly got up. “Though if you try that mind thing on me again, I may change my mind.”

“It isn’t likely.”

That wasn’t exactly the most reassuring answer.

Eivaunee stood up, feeling a brief weakness. The mental battle had taken a physical toll on him.

“What now?” Zsar’t’lac asked.

“We are going to play tennis,” Eivaunee told him.

“We are?” Zsar’t’lac echoed. “Why?”

“Aman’s rooms overlook the tennis courts.”

“Is he liable to be there?”

“No,” Eivaunee answered. “But his wife is.”

“The woman who was born on your estates.”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe she’ll help you?”

“I think so. I’ll know better after I see her and she sees me.”

“So we play tennis.”

“Exactly,” Eivaunee agreed. “After we’ve played awhile, I’m going to hit a ball quite clumsily over the force field that surround the courts. It may take me a few minutes to find it.”

“And after tennis?”

“We’ll visit Jiti Dennyson and Mistress Hana.”

"Head of Military Command and Mistress of the Exchequer," Zsar't'lac identified them.

"They're not liable to be at Sarrin's tonight. Jiti probably won't be any help. At least consciously, but maybe you can pick something up. I don't think he knows what Hazdel has planned, but I'm not going to overlook anything here."

"And Mistress Hana?"

"She's completely on my side. When we left the ship, she knew nothing, but I want to see if she's found anything out since then."

The alien nodded in the human manner of agreement.

"Her son could be a problem, but nothing I can't handle."

"A problem? How?"

"Overly enthusiastic. He's the male entitled family head. Hot-headed and passionate, and not particularly bright."

"Wonderful combination," the alien murmured.

"Exactly," Eivaunee agreed.

The tennis courts were on nothern side of the Palace courtyard. Walking over there, Eivaunee met and talked briefly with a variety of people. Everyone knew why Eivaunee was recalled; some were worried about his fate, a few were gloating, most were more concerned about how it might affect them. An exceptionally self-centered group of people, Zsar't'lac decided.

The tennis courts were ringed with a slight blue haze signifying the presence of a force field. It was about Eivaunee's height. He was going to have to be quite clumsy to hit it over, but Zsar't'lac had faith in him.

"Why a force field?" the alien asked.

"So you don't have to chase the balls very far."

Eivaunee picked out a racket and chose one for Zsar't'lac. He picked up one ball and headed for the center court. Four people were playing on the court to their left. There was a small group of people watching. Most of the people knew Eivaunee and more greetings were exchanged. Zsar't'lac continued to be surprised at the lack of concern for the slender human's fate. This group of lesser nobility and court hangers-on were even more uncaring than some of the people of higher birth they had passed along the way.

Zsar't'lac had played tennis a couple of times on the Comveckt. He found the game boring, with little mental challenge. But he wasn't here to enjoy a human sport. They played for about a half an hour before a sharp spike in Eivaunee's emotions warned Zsar't'lac that his friend was about to be "clumsy."

Immediately thereafter, the tennis ball sailed high up over the force field. There was laughter from the audience. One of the palace servants standing by the sidelines bowed slightly and went off in the direction of the high-sailing ball. Eivaunee ran in the direction himself, but he veered off slightly towards the large windows that overlooked the courts. He hoped they had played enough for her to notice. Certainly Zsar't'lac was hard to miss.

She was standing there by the largest window. Her eyes met Eivaunee's. Her hand went to her throat. Her expression was all Eivaunee needed to see. There was fear, and something else. Something he had seen in her face the last morning before she left the Dorlan Home Estate forever.

"Here, master," the servant called, holding up the tennis ball.

"I thought I hit it over here," Eivaunee answered as he walked towards the servant. He didn't

look back at the woman who stood, stone still, looking out the window, her hand still touching her throat.

Eivaunee and Zsar't'lac continued to play tennis for a while then turned in their rackets. Eivaunee's emotions indicated his mission was a success. Zsar't'lac wasn't entirely sure what the slender human had in mind.

Eivaunee showered and changed clothes into what passed for elegant day clothing: tight-fitting pants, dark green this time, a cream-colored silk shirt with the usual gold lace, and a green satin slashed doublet with the cream silk shirt showing through the slashes. Again, Zsar't'lac had to button the tight-fitting sleeves.

Their first stop on their afternoon's visits was with Jiti Dennyson, a man who had been a close friend of Eivaunee's father. Jiti was the hereditary head of Military Command, a man who believed his position required absolute neutrality between the various Consenti factions.

The guard outside the office came to a slight attention as Eivaunee approached. "Are you expected?" she asked.

"Not precisely," Eivaunee answered.

"I'll check." The woman got up from her seat and with another long look at Eivaunee went into the next office.

Eivaunee knew Jiti would see him. He wouldn't like it, but he wouldn't turn him away, either.

"He'll see you," the tall, robustly-built woman said as she returned.

Eivaunee walked into the large, austere room. The alien followed close behind. Jiti Dennyson was seated behind a large gray marble desk. He gestured towards the small, armless chair in front of the desk. Eivaunee sat down; Zsar't'lac stood behind him.

Jiti folded his hands together, his short fingers intertwining. "I see you are well," he began.

"For now," Eivaunee replied evenly.

Jiti unfolded, then refolded his hands. "Well, yes."

"Do you know what Hazdel has in mind?" Eivaunee asked with abrupt directness. He didn't expect to be told, even if Jiti did know, but direct questions helped Zsar't'lac interpret emotions.

"N-no," Jiti replied. "I don't know anything at all."

"Like you didn't know about my mother's rape—or my father's murder?"

"I didn't! Not until it was too late."

"Do you mean you didn't know until the deeds were done, or just until it was too late to act—in your opinion?" Eivaunee was, perhaps, being unfair, but he didn't care.

"I didn't know," Jiti repeated. "Not until everything was done."

"You knew about the rapes," Eivaunee countered flatly. "You knew what the guards had been ordered. You didn't stop that, either." It was a cold accusation.

Jiti's hands opened and closed several times before he answered. His eyes dropped to focus on them. "I couldn't. Only the Emperor could have stopped that."

"You never even tried," Eivaunee continued his cold tone.

"The Emperor left the Palace! I couldn't talk to him."

"And you had no contact with him during the whole time he was gone?"

"It's not the sort of thing you discuss over a commsole," Jiti answered, his eyes refusing to look up from his hands.

Eivaunee said nothing for several long moments. He leaned back in the small chair, contempt in his golden face. "I haven't committed treason," Eivaunee stated firmly.

Jiti finally looked up from his hands. “That’s for a Consenti court to decide. You can defend yourself then.”

“Not if I’m dead,” Eivaunee returned. “Hazdel told me this morning that I would be. The treason charge will come after my death.”

“Well, if you don’t commit any treason before you die, then you have nothing to worry about.”

“Except dying,” Zsar’t’lac spoke for the first time.

No one said anything for a moment, then Eivaunee made a pacifying gesture with his right hand. “That isn’t as important, Zsar. Do you believe Hazdel won’t manufacture a treason case?” he asked his nominal superior.

Jiti Dennyson looked at the alien. “It is your job—your responsibility—to keep Master Dorlan alive.” He ignored Eivaunee’s question.

“It would be easier to do, if I was allowed to solve the problem my way.”

“Which is?” Jiti asked, his tone cool.

“No,” Eivaunee commanded the alien not to give a reply that could lend credence to a treason trial.

Zsar’t’lac said nothing, but at his side, his long, large hands curved inwards. A human’s hands would close into a fist and mean the same as the slightly curved hands of the alien. Zsar’t’lac’s long fingers, curved and slightly spread, had the claws angled just right to do the most damage.

“There is nothing I can do to help you,” Jiti Dennyson said gently. “You know how I feel about my vow of fealty.”

“Yes, friend-of-my-father, I know.” There was a universe of contempt in Eivaunee’s voice.

Color rose in Jiti Dennyson’s face. Eivaunee stood up. There was nothing to be gained here. Probably never had been. Eivaunee just didn’t feel like dying quietly.

Jit’s voice stopped him at the door. “I would prefer you keep Patrice out of this.”

Eivaunee didn’t bother to turn around. His head tilted a little to one side. “Whatever makes you think I give a goddamn about what you prefer?”

There was no answer.

“And I thought you already knew—she is involved,” Eivaunee added after a pause.

Again no reply.

Eivaunee and Zsar’t’lac left.

“Anything?” Eivaunee asked as they started down the pale green hallway.

“He knows nothing,” Zsar’t’lac answered softly. “He feels very guilty, if that matters. Especially when you mentioned the rapes. What rapes? What are you referring to?”

“Later,” Eivaunee returned.

“Eivaunee!” a feminine voice shouted from behind them.

Eivaunee turned around, a smile on his face. A young woman, medium height, slightly plump, with shoulder length soft brown hair was walking rapidly towards them. She was wearing a floor-length, dark brown satin skirt, with a lighter brown jacket. Her soft-soled shoes made soft snicking sounds against the tiled floor.

Eivaunee caught her up in his arms and twirled her around. “Patrice, how is the loveliest mother?”

Patrice wrapped her arms around Eivaunee’s neck and kissed him. It was a kiss of friendship; Eivaunee returned it in the same manner.

“It is good to see you,” she said sincerely. “I wondered if you’d visit Jiti today.”

"It wasn't a pleasant visit," Eivaunee warned her. "He won't be in a good mood."

"Were you a little too honest?" Patrice asked, guessing the cause. "Fuck him then." Her hands dropped down to hold Eivaunee's.

"I'll leave that to you," Eivaunee replied, a smile lingering on his face.

Patrice Borest was the daughter of an Inner Planet Baron. Only two years older than Eivaunee, and almost twenty years younger than her husband, she had been dropped into the welter of Imperial politics upon her marriage to Jiti Dennyson seven years ago. She handled the situation remarkably well. Intelligent, strong-willed, and honest, she was well-liked by most people in the Palace, even those who didn't agree with her.

"How's your daughter?" Eivaunee asked.

"Fantastic," Patrice answered. "I'd love to have a dozen more."

Eivaunee laughed. "You could probably handle them." After a pause he added: "No change in the medical situation?"

"Not trying any more," Patrice answered evenly. "One child is enough as things are now."

Eivaunee made no reply. It was her and Jiti's business.

"I haven't found out anything, Eivaunee," Patrice told him quietly. "I've tried, but no one knows what Hazdel is plotting."

"Or at least no one knows is talking," Eivaunee augmented.

"Exactly," Patrice agreed. "I hear you're sponsoring a gathering at Sarrin's," she continued.

"Not something you'd be interested in," Eivaunee returned.

Patrice pretended to consider the matter. "I hear you'll have a privacy shield."

"True," Eivaunee returned. "Interested?"

"And if I was?"

"I didn't think things were that bad between you and Jiti," Eivaunee answered, his tone a little worried. "Don't let what's between him and I harm you."

Patrice shook her head. "I was just teasing. I won't be there. Jiti's point-of-view on the Emperor and his oath of fealty should concern me; it should cause major problems in our relationship. But he is a good father and husband. And I love him."

"Practically unique in Consenti marriages," Eivaunee said, his mouth turning downward.

"Your parents had a love marriage," Patrice pointed out.

"Not exactly an overwhelming endorsement of the practice," Eivaunee returned.

Patrice knew what had happened to Eivaunee's mother, and she had heard rumors of Eivaunee's love for Anati Realt. "Sometimes it works out," was all Patrice said.

"I have to go," Eivaunee told her. "I don't think I need say anything about how to vote on the treason trial."

"No, of course not. You're too intelligent to have committed treason, at least not serious treason."

"And think of all the money you'll get, if I'm dead and not convicted of treason."

"You shouldn't have changed your Inheritance Decree," Patrice told him. "One third of the Dorlan Estates—in my control only!"

"I was feeling a little irritated at Jiti for some reason. It wasn't a good day. It's for your daughter really."

"Will you come and see her? She's almost six now."

"If I'm not imprisoned by tomorrow night, I will," Eivaunee promised. He raised Patrice's hand

to his lips and lightly kissed it. "Til next."

Eivaunee and Zsar't'lac continued down the hallway.

Chapter 17

"I was hoping I'd see you today," Mistress Hana welcomed them into the large, pleasant room.

She was seated behind a desk, made of some kind of light colored wood. The room was painted a pale yellow with scattered paintings of landscapes. Mistress Hana had pale blue hair and dark blue eyes. Zsar't'lac didn't know if the hair color was natural or not. Human hair came in a wide variety of color, but he wasn't sure about that particular shade of blue.

"And this is the much discussed Zsar't'lac," she turned her attention to the alien.

"Mistress," Zsar't'lac inclined his head slightly. His attention was focused more on the older, white-haired man sitting in the damask-covered arm chair by the side of the desk. Judging by the older man's emotions, he was some sort of relative—uncle maybe—or a close friend?

"Yes, we've all heard about him," the older man drawled. "Boringly repetitious."

Eivaunee smiled. "Out in the Provinces, his help was very welcome and not boring at all." Eivaunee's tone was casual and warm, a light defense of his friend.

"Sit, please, both of you. Cleo, get another chair."

"I'll stand," Zsar't'lac forestalled the action.

"How are you doing?" Eivaunee began as he seated himself in the large, comfortable armchair across from her.

"The Exchequerate is solvent—no thanks to His Majesty. Jori still is being stubborn about marrying Celi, or anyone else for that matter! I'm in good health. I won't ask about you."

Eivaunee smiled at Quea Hana's quick overview of her life. "Jori has plenty of time to marry and have children," Eivaunee pointed out. "The Hana Estates will stay in the family," he reassured her on the most important reason for every Consenti person to wed. "And if not through Jori, there's always your daughter."

"True, quite a reasonable girl. She's scheduled for another body sculpting session tomorrow. The Princess sets the style in body fashion, you know. Corinia just wasn't born that way, but the surgeon will take care of it."

Eivaunee made no reply to that. He had to agree he found the Princess quite attractive; it was one of the more frustrating aspects of his life.

"Anything new?" he changed the subject.

"Sorry, no," Mistress Hana replied, regret clear in her voice.

"Kill him," the older man gave his point-of-view. "Kill the bastard. Then he won't be able to kill you."

"Now, Cleo, don't go off on that again," Mistress Hana chided him. "Have some common sense."

"I'm told killing the Emperor is very difficult," Zsar't'lac offered, wondering what sort of response he would get.

"I'm sure you could do it," Cleo suggested with an undertone of malicious glee. "You should at least try; it's your duty."

"Don't be absurd," Eivaunee returned. "It would be a suicide."

"Maybe, maybe not. I think he should try."

"You do know there is audio and video surveillance in this room," Zsar't'lac pointed out casually.

"Of course," Mistress Hana replied, undisturbed. "There's scarcely a room in the Palace that doesn't have audio and video pick-up. Talking about treason isn't grounds for a treason trial. You have to do something. There are limits, even for an Emperor. And I don't recommend you take Cleo's advice."

"Eivaunee commands me not to make any attempt on the Emperor's life." He wished someone would introduce, or at least explain, who this man was. Eivaunee knew who he was, and easily accepted his presence.

"And you always obey him?" Cleo's tone mocked him.

Zsar't'lac made no reply; Eivaunee laughed outloud. "Oh, yes. Certainly."

Mistress Hana smiled. "I met the Yseret when they were here. Such arrogant creatures. I'd heard the Hsasan were quite conceited as well."

"Not quite so much," Zsar't'lac told her. "Still, we not, um, easy to command. If I may inquire who you are?" Zsar't'lac phrased it as politely as possible.

"Sorry, Zsar," Eivaunee responded. "Mistress Hana's older brother."

"But her son Jori is the male entitled head of the Hana family?" Zsar't'lac didn't understand how all this worked, but certainly if Quea Hana had a brother he would be the male entitled head of the family.

"Bastard older brother," Quea explained without embarrassment. "Our father acknowledged him, but still he can't be entitled."

"Or even called Consenti," the older man explained further. His tone was casual, but resentment burned underneath. "And for a bodyguard you are very inquisitive."

"Zsar is more than my bodyguard," Eivaunee returned.

"One hears tales of more certainly," Cleo's tone was snide.

"Zsar't'lac is my friend," Eivaunee stated firmly. "And I'm not here to discuss him."

"We all find him interesting, of course, but there will be time for discussing him later," Quea agreed.

Meaning after Eivaunee was dead.

"So tell me the latest Palace gossip," Eivaunee suggested, "particularly how Aman and our dear Majesty are doing."

"Better than usual," Mistress Hana answered, disgust in her voice. "Aman should be strung up and disemboweled. But he might enjoy that. I don't know, though, he probably isn't a masochist. He certainly is a sadist. Palace gossip says he has a new 'project,' meaning some poor soul he's torturing."

Eivaunee's mouth turned down. "For all of Hazdel's failings, he isn't into sexual torture."

"Nor children, but that is faint praise," Quea Hana agreed. "The Gorsis twins are marrying," she

continued. "Marrying two brothers. It's the talk of the Palace. A double-double wedding."

"I remember the Gorsí twins quite well," Eivaunee said, a twinkle in his eyes.

"I heard something about a night with you and both girls," Mistress Hana said, smiling.

"Lies, or at least exaggerations," Eivaunee returned easily.

The next hour passed pleasantly for Eivaunee, catching up on Palace gossip. He had been raised in the Palace; these people were the closest thing he had to family. Also within in the gossip there might be a clue to what Hazdel was planning. Something of this magnitude wasn't occurring in a vacuum.

Zsar't'lac only partially listened to the conversation. It had little meaning to him. He spent the time probing deeper into Mistress Hana's emotions, as well as her older brother. He couldn't decide if Quea Hana irritated him, or amused him, with her easy flow of gossip. She was willing to help Eivaunee, that was clear, but at the same time she accepted his likely fate with little negative emotion. Part of her indifference was level-headed pragmatism, part of it fatalism. Maybe that was the problem. Everyone, including Eivaunee, had been expecting this to happen. So now that it had, no one was surprised, or even overly concerned.

Eivaunee was fighting for his people, for the best interest of the Klimar Empire, more than for his own life. Zsar't'lac was impressed with that; it was a proper Hsassan response. But it bothered him that the humans who knew him best were so unconcerned over his unwarranted death. Eivaunee had explained to Zsar't'lac they had their own Estates to protect. To Zsar't'lac, it seemed obvious that if the majority of the Consenti banded together—particularly those who held the main offices in the Empire—Hazdel could be neutralized, if not deposed. Eivaunee said it wasn't that easy. Consenti families were more jealous of each other than worried about the Emperor. Zsar't'lac would have liked to have all twenty-seven entitled Consenti family heads in one room for an hour or two. Try to talk some sense into them. And if that didn't work, well, then something firmer...rougher...bloodier. It was a pleasant thought.

Cleo Hana was a nasty man. It wasn't apparent in his face, or openly in his manner, but it was clear in his emotions. Whenever the discussion turned to something unpleasant, he was pleased, but not openly so. The comments he added were mostly barbs aimed at one person or another, but they were frequently phrased in an amusing manner. Eivaunee laughed at some of them not realizing the true spite behind them. Cleo Hana despised the Consenti members, because he could never be one of them. And he was quite jealous of Eivaunee's preeminent position among the Consenti. Zsar't'lac wondered how dangerous the older man could be.

Eivaunee finally stood up. He was charming in his leave taking, kissing Mistress Hana's hand. He nodded at Cleo Hana, a casual farewell that the man felt was dismissive. Envy burned in him. Zsar't'lac thought him quite stupid: what is there to envy in a position that requires you to die?

"An interesting woman," Zsar't'lac offered as they walked back to Eivaunee's rooms.

"She's been like an aunt to me," Eivaunee answered.

Zsar't'lac felt Eivaunee's affection for the older woman, mild really, but Eivaunee had so little affection in his life that it seemed stronger to him.

"I need to talk to some more people when we get back to the room, Zsar," Eivaunee was saying. "Non-local people."

"Then you will tell me about what is meant by the 'rapes'?"

"Yes."

Zsar't'lac was beginning to believe he knew what was meant. He hoped he was wrong. He

wasn't sure how he could keep from killing the people responsible if he was correct. Kill them slowly and painfully, with much blood offered to the dark god of his ancestors. Many of the humans in places of power in this palace were predators in their emotions. It would be very pleasant, Zsar't'lac thought, to show them what that word really meant.

* * * * *

Zsar't'lac was sitting to one side of the floor of the sitting room, out of range of the commsole video pickup, watching and listening as Eivaunee talked to a variety of people: childhood companions, lovers, acquaintances, even distant relatives. This was a very different Eivaunee from the person who was Commissioner for the Provinces and Commander of the Comveckt. The charm was more urbane and sophisticated, with casual references to drugs and sex. Eivaunee's manner had a touch of sexual teasing about it, towards both genders.

Zsar't'lac was neither pleased nor displeased by this aspect of his commander. The manner Eivaunee displayed towards others wasn't important. The people he talked to acted in much the same manner towards Eivaunee; they were equals, or near equals, sharing their particular lifestyle. Or so it seemed on the surface. But Eivaunee was plying his particular expertise in politics, trying to find answers that would save his life, or at least keep the Dorlan Estates from the Emperor's control.

After one particular conversation, Eivaunee turned to the alien. "You might want to shower before we go out tonight. I'd suggest using the shower adjacent to the main bedroom. The shower in the servants quarters is quite small I'm told."

The alien nodded and rose to his feet. Eivaunee began his next conversation as the alien began his shower. Eivaunee was just finishing a different conversation when the alien was finished.

"Enough," Eivaunee said, leaning away from the commsole and stretching. He hadn't found any answers, that was clear from his emotions. "We'll see what tonight brings." He stood up. "Time for me to shower," his voice was a little mechanical, and Zsar't'lac could feel the golden human's emotions shutting down, like doors closing one after another.

"What is tonight going to be like?" Zsar't'lac asked, beginning to worry a little.

"I'll tell you after I shower. You won't like it."

"I haven't liked any of this so far," the alien pointed out.

"It gets worse," Eivaunee answered as he headed for the shower.

Chapter 18

Eivaunee came out of the bathroom in his underwear, his emotions fully closed off.

“So what do you want to know about first, Zsar?” Eivaunee asked. “The rapes, or tonight?”

“If it is acceptable to you, the rapes.” Zsar’t’lac’s voice was gentle. He had rarely felt Eivaunee’s emotions so completely shut down.

Eivaunee walked over to the closet and took out a gold silk shirt and a pair of dark blue, tight-fitting pants. He pulled the pants on in silence and then slid his arms through the wide sleeves of the shirt. His gaze through it all was unfocused. He finally focused on his reflection in the tall mirror as he began to button the many small sapphire buttons on his shirt.

“After Darby died,” Eivaunee finally began softly, his hands clumsy on the small buttons. “I became very d-difficult. Not overtly rebellious, it was more passive resistance and minor destruction. Enough, though, to infuriate Hazdel.” Eivaunee’s eyes shifted down in the mirror to stare, unseeing at some distance place. “Hazdel had me flogged a few times, but not nearly as bad as the first time. Looking back, I’m wasn’t really sane at that point. I’d laugh during the floggings. I knew the guards would tell Hazdel and it would make him angrier. He couldn’t touch any of my people because I hadn’t broken any laws; he could only punish me. I thought I’d been through the worse he could do.”

Eivaunee’s thin eyelids slid down to shelter amber eyes; thick lashes brushed against golden skin. Zsar’t’lac could feel a defensive coldness rise up in the young human.

“I w-was wrong. One day he had all my people sent away. He could do that for short periods of time. I thought he was punishing me by making me do without servants. Again, I was w-wrong.” There was a long silence. Eivaunee’s hands remained motionless, touching a single sapphire button. “That night two guardsmen came.” There was another long silence. “They raped me,” he stated bluntly. “Hazdel sent them to rape me.” His eyes opened fully for a moment, an ocean of pain in them. “I f-fought them...but...I lost.”

Eivaunee’s eyes closed again. “That’s a-about it. It happened more than o-once, but it ended. Eventually.” Eivaunee fought to contain the memories, to hold them at bay, and lost the battle. A shiver ran through his slender body, and Zsar’t’lac felt a wave of pain and humiliation, rising up from the buried fields of denial.

Eivaunee cried out just once, an inarticulate sound of pain. Zsar’t’lac reached out to his friend, but Eivaunee knocked his hands aside. The shivering continued for several more

moments, then slowly it was contained. Eivaunee held himself very still, his breathing fast and shallow. He opened his eyes, and took a deep breath, and then met the alien's eyes in the mirror. In their depths, in his emotions, there was a mute appeal for forgiveness, then his eyes looked down again.

"After...after," Eivaunee fought to keep his emotions under control. He stopped, took another deep breath and then began again, his voice stronger. "Afterwards," he stated firmly, the brutal, demanding control he normally maintained beginning to return. "Hazdel said that if I ever harmed those guardsmen, he would order the death of a hundred of my people. And he would do it." The fear and humiliation that had controlled him briefly was banished, contained once again behind strong mental walls. "You will not harm them either."

Zsar't'lac's breathing was deep and hard; he knew his eyes were flaming with dark red fire. For a long moment he couldn't understand what Eivaunee was saying. His last words weren't important; the guardsmen would die; Zsar't'lac would see to that. But he wondered about what he had seen briefly in Eivaunee's eyes, and what he felt in his emotions. *Forgiveness? For what? Not being able to fight off two well-trained, fully grown men? What was there to forgive?*

Eivaunee met Zsar't'lac's angry, burning eyes in the mirror. "There are those who say it is because of that time I have no interest in men. Truthfully, I had no interest before."

"And certainly none after," Zsar't'lac added softly, wondering what he could say that would help his friend's pain. "He will die, Eivaun. He *will* die." It was a promise.

"Yes, Zsar, everyone does sooner or later," Eivaunee agreed quietly. He began buttoning his shirt again.

Zsar't'lac wanted to hold him, caress him, somehow keep him safe. But Eivaunee didn't want physical contact with him just now. He had just made that clear.

Azuris! Dark god of my ancestors! Zsar't'lac's mind, angry, unbidden, invoked the bloody god. Give me this! Let me be responsible for the death of this human Emperor. In return I will give you all the blood of his two servants.

Eivaunee finished buttoning his shirt and chose a jacket of dark blue trimmed with real gold. Long slashes in the sleeves revealed the gold shirt beneath. "I'll need help buttoning the sleeves."

The alien did so in silence. He still could think of no words, nothing that would help heal his friend's pain. The task was made harder by Eivaunee clearly wanting no words, preferring silence from his friend.

The golden human walked over to a desk. Lying on top was a hypospray and two cartridges. "Tonight will be a night of sex and drugs. Sex even more than drugs," he explained. "I'm looking for information. Everyone is aware of that. I'll pay whatever price I have to." Eivaunee checked the liquid level in one of the cartridges, adjusted it slightly, then loaded it into the hypospray. He flicked back the wide gold lace at his wrist, placed the nozzle against the inside of his wrist, and pulled the trigger.

“What drugs are you taking?” Zsar’t’lac asked softly.

Eivaunee discarded the used cartridge and checked the level on the new one. Apparently it didn’t need adjusting. He injected it into his other wrist before answering.

“A sexual stimulant, and a general stimulant.”

“Is a sexual stimulant necessary?” Zsar’t’lac asked.

“Considering I’m liable to have sex with more than a couple of people, some of whom I have no desire for, yes.”

Eivaunee, oh my Eivaun! the alien cried out in his mind.

“Despite what I have just told you, Zsar, tonight’s activities may include men as well as women. Whoever has the information I need can have whatever they want in return,” Eivaunee’s voice was cool and detached.

“These people—they would require that?”

“Some might,” Eivaunee returned quietly. “Some people, like Mistress Hana, will do what they can to help me without wanting anything in return. Some people want money; others may want something else. Believe what I say, Zsar—whatever it takes.”

Zsar’t’lac had no trouble believing his friend. Eivaunee’s emotions were cold and hard. His amber eyes met the alien’s dark fiery ones. “It’s called prostitution,” Eivaunee said quietly. “Your Commander is going to be a whore tonight.”

Zsar’t’lac fought against an fury that threatened to consume him. He wasn’t angry at Eivaunee; he was doing what was necessary for other people, serving the greater good of the Klimar Empire. Zsar’t’lac’s anger was directed at the Emperor who had so abused a child under his care and protection and at the other humans who would take advantage of the situation and Eivaunee. Anger, though, would not help Eivaunee just now.

“Almost everyone is a prostitute at one time or another, Eivaun,” the alien said gently. “Most people just aren’t as honest about it. There are a variety of ways a person is bought and sold. Prostitution doesn’t have to involve sex.”

Eivaunee gave the alien a grateful look. “Do you really believe that?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“I’d like you to be there tonight, Zsar.” Eivaunee walked across the room to open a carved wood box resting on top of painted dresser. “Your abilities would be useful, but if you don’t think you can manage this, tell me now.”

“What do I have to do?” the alien asked, knowing there was very little he wouldn’t do for his friend just now.

“Just be my bodyguard. That’s it,” Eivaunee answered. “I want you inside the privacy shield. It’s safer that way.” He took the heavy gold chain necklace of interlacing S links out of the wooden box and put it over his head to lay on his shoulder, glittering against his dark blue satin jacket. The symbol of an entitled Consenti.

"I can do that," Zsar't'lac agreed.

"You don't have to watch what goes on. Actually I'd prefer you didn't."

"Understood," the alien agreed.

"Tonight, Zsar, you have to obey me completely," Eivaunee warned. "No fine points of Hsassan honor arguments. There's going to be little enough honor anywhere tonight."

"I understand," the alien stated. He would do what was necessary for Eivaunee's sake. Not kill anyone, not even rake a little sense across someone's face. None of the things he was sure he would want to do. For Eivaunee's sake. That was what he would have to keep in mind. Later, one way or another, he would settle with these people. He would have time; he was immortal.

"Well, the gathering started about fifteen minutes ago," Eivaunee commented. "It's a half hour air car ride to Sarrin's. About the right entrance time. Let's go."

Zsar't'lac was wearing his officer's uniform. Eivaunee had been relieved of command, but nothing had been said of any change in Zsar't'lac's status. It seemed reasonable to keep wearing the uniform until he was informed of some change in his status.

It was a ten minute walk out of the Palace compound, during which Eivaunee explained to Zsar't'lac that he didn't like taking any of the Imperial flyers. A personal thing. It didn't matter to Zsar't'lac. There were a variety of air cars cruising past the main entrance to the Palace. Eivaunee waited while Zsar't'lac chose one. The alien didn't like automatic air cars. He could feel when a human had been suborned; electronic devices had no emotions.

Several air cars went by before Zsar't'lac raised his hand indicating his choice. It wasn't a driver Eivaunee knew from his earlier days living in the Palace, but if Zsar't'lac chose him, he was fine. The driver was impressed and honored to be transporting Eivaunee Dorlan. He said so repeatedly.

Zsar't'lac thought about his earlier atavistic impulse, calling on the old, dark god of his people. He had to make sure he could keep his end of the bargain.

"Eivaun?"

"Um," Eivaunee gave a soft sound of acknowledgment.

"Those two guardsmen," Zsar't'lac began.

"Let it be, Zsar," Eivaunee told him softly.

"I want them," Zsar't'lac replied firmly. "If you die, or if you become Emperor, they are mine."

Eivaunee turned from his disinterested gazing out the window. "I had thought to deal with them personally, Zsar, in the extremely unlikely case that I become Emperor."

"I want them," the alien repeated firmly. "You can watch if you'd like—if your stomach is strong enough."

If Eivaunee died, the Emperor couldn't hold Dorlan retainers accountable for the alien's actions; his people would be safe. It was extremely unlikely he would ever become Emperor. Hell, it was unlikely he'd be alive in two days.

“All right, Zsar,” Eivaunee agree with a shrug. It was little enough repayment for all the alien had done for him. “You can probably do a better job with them, anyway.”

“I will do a very good ‘job’ with them, my Eivaun,” he promised.

“Which door, Master?” the air cab driver asked as they floated down towards a white marble fantasy castle built high on a ridge.

“North door,” Eivaunee answered. “It’s going to be a dungeon party,” he added to Zsar’t’lac.

“How amusing,” the alien commented indifferently.

The air car driver adamantly refused payment, stating that being able to advertise that he had Eivaunee Dorlan as a passenger was worth far more than a simple fare.

Twelve foot tall, heavy wood doors opened with artistic groaning at their approach. A fealty-bound retainer met them. Eivaunee assured the woman he knew the way to the dungeon.

Sarrin stood at the top of the steps dressed in a diaphanous flowing gown that consisted of several long rectangles of translucent cloth.

“Ah, Eivaunee, earlier than I expected,” she commented, smiling sweetly. She immediately looked over Eivaunee’s shoulder. “My god, he’s even more impressive in person.”

Zsar’t’lac said nothing. The woman wasn’t worth his attention.

“Do try to persuade him to be reasonable, Eivaunee,” Sarrin pouted.

“He’s here as my bodyguard,” Eivaunee pointed out.

“You’re not in any danger here,” Sarrin returned, then she pouted prettily. “Well, actually Aman is going to going to be here later, but I can loan you one of our people. He really is an excellent bodyguard.”

“No,” Eivaunee stated firmly. He turned away.

“At least have him undress later,” Sarrin pleaded.

Zsar’t’lac ignored her. He looked down the staircase into the large, crowded room, closing off his mind to the babble of emotions rising up from below. Then slowly, he lowered the mental barriers again. He would have to monitor the emotions of this roomful of casual predators and preening beauties. Their emotions rippled up in waves: slothful lust, cold envy, and hard-edged ambition.

Eivaunee paused for a moment at the top of the stairs, Zsar’t’lac standing behind him. In contrast to the alien’s massive size and darker coloring, Eivaunee appeared delicate, pale, and very beautiful.

Slowly and deliberately, with his own variety of sweet grace, Eivaunee descended the stairs, his amber eyes lightly surveying the crowd. At the bottom of the stairs a small crowd of people waited, clamoring for his attention. Anati Realt was among them.

The crowd engulfed Eivaunee as he stepped off the bottom stair. Zsar’t’lac found himself, quite literally, up against Eivaunee’s back. He didn’t like it; it gave him too little room to maneuver. None of these people had any threatening emotions towards Eivaunee, but still it

wasn't good. Zsar't'lac put his hand against the small of Eivaunee's back and pressed. Eivaunee understood the direction and forcibly moved forward towards Anati.

He kissed her hand. "It is good to see you, my friend."

She kissed his hand in return. "My love."

"I need to circulate a little and see who's here. Meet me by my privacy shield in a half an hour." He kissed her hand again and moved on, exchanging greetings and mild pleasantries with several people in the crowd.

The crowd began to thin out as Eivaunee moved on. Some of them already had what they wanted, a moment of his attention. Some, who wanted more, got a casual promise for later. Zsar't'lac was glad to have more room to move in.

A casual, full circuit of the room took closer to three-quarters of an hour. Anati was waiting patiently by a shimmering blue and gold dome; one of three privacy shields set up in the large room. She was dressed in a long gown in her own heraldic colors of gold and brown.

Zsar't'lac was surprised to see that the privacy shield had a regular door set in it. Eivaunee set his palm against it and it opened.

"Come in," he invited Anati.

The young woman's emotions had a sharp focus to them and her will was hard-set. There was also fear in her. Not a general fear for Eivaunee. This was different. This was a very specific fear of failure. She wanted something tonight—would fight very hard for it—and she was afraid she would fail.

What did she want? Zsar't'lac wondered. Probing deeper, it wasn't clear. Her fear of failure was so strong it masked whatever was beneath it. Zsar't'lac would have been concerned, if the love Anati felt for Eivaunee wasn't so strong.

Within the privacy shield there was a long, wide couch, two chairs, and a small table. On the table was a bottle of wine and two glasses. On a lower shelf, a hypospray and several cartridges. Folded neatly on the back of one chair was an exotic silk robe, not too different from the one Eivaunee preferred when he was alone. Obviously, Sarrin tried to provide her guests with everything she thought they might want.

"It's going to be a long night," Eivaunee began.

Anati said nothing at first, simply holding out her hands so Eivaunee could begin to undo the long line of buttons that went up her forearm. "I presumed you prepared for that," she commented calmly.

Eivaunee finished unbuttoned her sleeves and held out his own arms. "I wish we had more time."

"We have what we have," Anati returned practically as she unbuttoned his tight-fitting sleeves.

Her calm words were at odds with the sharp, hard focus of her emotions. She finished Eivaunee's sleeves and began to undue the gemstone buttons on the bodice of her over-gown.

“Eivaunee,” she said, her voice raised the slightest bit in pitch.

“Um?” Eivaunee was unbuttoning his own jacket.

“I don’t want protection when we have sex,” Anati stated calmly, her head tilting up a little. Eivaunee stopped what he was doing. “What? Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m not,” Anati returned, her voice continuing calm and even. “There’s a possibility you won’t survive this next week.”

“Exactly, which is a very good reason not to have unprotected sex.”

“No,” Anati disagreed. “I want to have your child.”

“A Dorlan?” Eivaunee’s tone carried a world of scorn. “The Emperor would never let it live.”

“A Realt child,” Anati countered coolly. “My husband is tall and slender and blond.”

“He doesn’t have my skin coloring.”

“No,” Anati agreed. “But the child may not either.”

Eivaunee took Anati’s shoulders in a firm grip. “I don’t want this spoiled by a fight, Anati. There will be no possibility of a child. That’s final.”

“Why?” Anati countered, her tone cold. “Because you don’t want one. You’re not liable to live long enough to see it. I want this child. You say you’re my friend—give me this!”

“Having children isn’t a matter of friendship!” Eivaunee returned hotly. “If Hazdel finds out the child is mine—he’ll kill it!”

“He didn’t kill you,” Anati pointed out.

“Hazdel won’t kill it,” Zsar’t’lac offered his first comment.

“Stay out of this, Zsar! It doesn’t concern you.”

“Perhaps it does,” the alien offered gently. “Hazdel won’t kill your child if it is no threat to him. As Anati has said, the child won’t be a Dorlan, but a Realt.”

Anati gave the alien a grateful look. It was clear she hadn’t expected him to be her ally.

“I’m not going to leave a child behind—unprotected. I know what that’s like.”

“Scarely unprotected,” Anati countered, her voice continuing calm and reasonable, although Zsar’t’lac could tell she was anything but calm. “I’m in no danger from the Emperor, nor is my mother.”

Zsar’t’lac noted the absence of any reference to her husband. It wasn’t that the Emperor would harm him, but rather that he wasn’t important to the issue at hand.

“No,” Eivaunee stated with finality.

There was silence after that. Anati was close to losing her hard-won control; tears were welling up in her eyes.

“I will protect him,” Zsar’t’lac found himself saying.

“Don’t be absurd!” Eivaunee turned on him. “You have enough responsibilities. It isn’t like you to lie.”

Zsar’t’lac had spoken without thinking, a rare occurrence for him. Eivaunee was right; he didn’t need any more responsibilities, especially not an infant human. But what he had promised was protection, not care. Thinking about it, Zsar’t’lac had no regrets.

“Hsassan don’t lie, my Eivaun,” the alien said softly. “And you want this child—as Anati does—as I do.”

“Don’t do this!” Eivaunee warned. “Leave it alone.”

“Genetic continuance is a kind of immortality for humans and Norda alike. The Dorlan name may not continue, but a part of you will in this child.”

Eivaunee said nothing at first. Stepping forward, Zsar’t’lac caught the sides of the slender human’s face in his long hands. He transmitted no emotion with the touch; no part of his will intruded into Eivaunee’s mind. “A part of you will continue to live this way, my friend. It may be the only way you continue,” Zsar’t’lac voice was low and persuasive, his eyes burning light red fire. “Anati wants this—I want it—and so do you. I will protect your child, your genetic continuance.”

Eivaunee still said nothing. Zsar’t’lac could feel his emotions shifting. It had been clear from the beginning that Anati’s words touched a deep-based hunger in him, but for the child’s sake, he would deny it. But if Zsar’t’lac pledged to protect it ...

“You will do this?”

“Yes,” the alien said softly.

It was another long moment before Eivaunee took a deep breath. Zsar’t’lac released him and Eivaunee nodded. The tears spilled over in Anati’s eyes. She brushed them away angrily.

“Wait outside, Zsar.”

The alien smiled a little in the human manner and left.

Zsar’t’lac stood outside the door, feeling the emotions of the two people inside. He was a part of it; his commitment to the child had made him that, and he had no regrets. He had thought of wilder plans during the past couple of days.

Zsar’t’lac liked the feel of Eivaunee’s emotions. There was a tenderness in him towards Anati. And most unusually, a strong concern for her pleasure. He could feel the effort it cost his friend to rein in his own demanding desire, increased by the sexual stimulant, and gently draw Anati to pleasure. Regardless of what he might say, and how he would deny it even to himself, Eivaunee Dorlan loved Anati Realt.

“So he’s poking the little mouse,” the Princess’ commented.

Zsar’t’lac gave himself a mental shake. He had been so focused what was happening inside the shield, he hadn’t been monitoring the people outside. A very bad mistake.

“Scarely a mouse,” Zsar’t’lac returned. Anati was slender, but like Eivaunee, sturdily built.

The Princess ran her hand up Zsar’t’lac’s arm. “I prefer lovers that are more...well, like you.” Her fingertips played across his chest. “You shouldn’t come to a gathering so well dressed.”

“Depends on what I plan to do.”

“Sarrin has already told me she’s desolate you won’t perform publicly.”

“Loan her the recording you made when you sent your lady-in-waiting to me,” Zsar’t’lac

returned coldly. That still irritated him.

“No, I don’t think so. I prefer to keep that to myself.” The Princess’ hand drifted down the alien’s body.

“We’ve played this game before, Princess,” the alien said, lightly catching her wrist as it passed his waist. He continued to hold it; she made no attempt to break free.

“I like the coolness of your skin,” the Princess said softly.

“And the claws, and the fangs,” the alien added.

“Yes, there is something particularly intriguing about having sex with someone who has claws. Do you purr?”

Zsar’t’lac laughed softly and released the Princess’ wrist. “Actually, yes. But I haven’t since I came to the human lands.”

“Eivaunee can’t need you every minute tonight,” the Princess pointed out reasonably. “I can have a privacy shield put up.”

“I’m here as Eivaunee’s bodyguard,” he said firmly. “Not to have sex.”

“Not even to serve Eivaunee?”

That stopped the alien. “Would you tell him what you knew in return - ?”

The Princess laughed; it had a hard edge. “I don’t pay anyone, in any coin, to have sex with me.”

“I imagine it has never been necessary,” Zsar’t’lac agreed. The long parting between Eivaunee and Anati was ending. “Another time and place, I would like very much...”

The door opened, Anati, tears flowing freely down her face, walked out.

“Such a sad little mouse,” Moerit mocked her.

“Such a nasty bitch,” Eivaunee didn’t hesitate to attack the Princess. He was wearing the exotically figured silk robe.

Moerit laughed and sauntered on, two guardsmen trailing behind her.

There was a small crowd waiting around the door. Eivaunee surveyed it briefly. “Tomas,” he said briefly inviting the young man in. “You too, Zsar.”

Zsar’t’lac stood back, allowing the Consenti to enter before him, as was proper.

“He waits outside,” Tomas stated firmly, as he entered, pointing at Zsar’t’lac. Tomas was Mistress Hana’s son. A large young man, opulently dressed, with bright red head, and cold green eyes.

“No,” Eivaunee returned as Zsar’t’lac walked to the back of the small enclosed area.

“He wasn’t in here for Anati,” Tomas complained.

“Anati is a different matter,” Eivaunee answered, his tone weary.

Tomas grabbed Eivaunee’s shoulders. “I want to be alone with you!”

Eivaunee made no effort to break free of the young man’s hard grip. “What do you know?”

Tomas shook Eivaunee a little. “Dammit! Is that all that matters to you?”

“Survival is very high on my list of priorities just now,” Eivaunee answered, his tone cool. “Let go of me.”

Tomas released Eivaunee pushing him a little backward. “You know how I feel about you.”

"Yes," Eivaunee agreed, his tone distant and unconcerned. "You made that clear one night on a beach. As I remember I beat you half unconscious because you wouldn't listen to me."

"It was too soon after the rapes," Tomas agreed, his tone not in the least apologetic. "There's been plenty of time now."

"Plenty of time for what?" Eivaunee asked softly. "To forget and to 'get over it'? Don't bother to answer, Tomas; it doesn't matter. I have no sexual interest in men; I have no desire for you."

"You've never let things go far enough to find out."

"You don't know anything more do you?"

"And if I did?"

"But you don't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You would have begun by try to bargain with that, rather than grabbing me."

"Doesn't love mean anything to you?" Tomas asked angrily.

"No, it doesn't." Eivaunee gestured towards the wide couch. "The usual rules, Tomas, if you'd like." The golden human's tone was indifferent.

"You're a fucking cold bastard!"

Eivaunee smiled thinly. "We've known each other most of our lives. That should scarcely be a surprise to you." He sat down at one end of the couch. Tomas grabbed Eivaunee roughly and kissed him hard. He pushed the robe off Eivaunee's shoulders; his hands demandingly pawed at Eivaunee's upper torso. He would have pushed Eivaunee over, but the arms of the couch prevented it.

Zsar't'lac didn't look away; he watched intently, wondering when he should intervene. Eivaunee's emotions were a mixture of irritation and toleration. He didn't like what the younger man was doing, but for reasons Zsar't'lac didn't understand, he allowed it. Tomas pushed Eivaunee's robe opened further; Eivaunee began to push Tomas back away. Tomas' hand dove between Eivaunee's legs. Eivaunee's closed fist struck him alongside his face. Tomas opened his mouth to say something; it came out as a howl as the alien grabbed the young man ears, claws digging into the thin skin behind Tomas' ears. Tomas was in danger of having both his ears ripped off.

"Enough, Zsar," Eivaunee said quietly, as Tomas released his grip on Eivaunee.

After a moment, the alien let go of the red-haired man's ears. Eivaunee pushed Tomas away.

"Too much sexual stimulant," Eivaunee suggested as he reclosed his silk robe.

Tomas was breathing heavily. "Damn you!" He glared into Eivaunee's cool amber eyes. "You'd make a monk go mad."

"It would depend, I would think, on the monk," Eivaunee returned.

Tomas leaned back against the couch, his eyes remaining hot and frustrated. Finally, he shrugged. Sitting up, he resettled his clothes a little, regaining some dignity. "Well, maybe it was too much of the drug." He took the excuse Eivaunee offered. His voice was a little thick, still heavy with desire. He didn't look at Eivaunee as he rubbed the side of his face, which was red from Eivaunee's blow. "You didn't have to hit me that hard."

"You shouldn't have grabbed me like that - you know better," Eivaunee's voice was gentle.

"We may never see each other again," Tomas pointed out, his tone angry, as though it was Eivaunee's fault.

"So I should let you rape me?"

"It wouldn't be rape," Tomas angrily disagreed.

"Yes, it would be," Eivaunee answered quietly. "There's more people I have to see, Tomas."

The young man stood up, angry and frustrated. "You never cared at all about me."

"Friends was all I ever said," Eivaunee replied tiredly. "And even that, I think, was one-sided."

Tomas glared at Eivaunee and stalked from the room without a further comment.

"Why did you let him—?"

Eivaunee shook his head; there was no time for discussions now. "Lady Claris should be out there, Zsar; ask her to come in."

"Who is she?" the alien asked as he walked to the door.

"Hazdel's official Mistress," Eivaunee answered.

The lady in question wasn't young, but not particularly old, either. Approaching middle age, was Zsar't'lac's best guess. She was dressed very lightly, as most of the people were.

"Wine?" Eivaunee offered as the woman came in.

"Yes, please," Claris answered as she sat down on the couch. There was a grace and gentleness about her that seemed odd for someone who was Hazdel's Mistress.

Eivaunee handed her a glass; he had poured himself a half glass. "So how is our dear Majesty these days?"

"You saw him earlier today, you tell me," Claris answered, her voice soft and mellow.

"Still the same situation?" Eivaunee asked.

"He sends for me occasionally, actually rather rarely. It's only because he feels his Imperial dignity requires a Mistress that he has one at all."

"He never had much interest in women," Eivaunee agreed. "Have you found out anything since your last message?"

"I don't think it's of much use, but I was talking with a lover of mine—a barracks' captain—and he said the guards are very unhappy about your recall. They don't believe you committed treason."

Zsar't'lac came forward and sat down on the floor in front of the couch. "How many guards are unhappy?"

"Well, most from the Provinces are," she answered. "And that's a majority of the guards."

"This could be useful," Zsar't'lac said softly.

"But the Emperor has the Imperial Planet barrack guards mostly on duty in the Palace now," Claris added. "The Province's loyalty to Eivaunee is well known."

"Still—" Zsar't'lac considered.

"A Palace revolt is treason," Eivaunee pointed out.

"Won't matter if you win," Zsar't'lac stated the obvious.

“The Palace guards barracks are inside the perimeter shields, Zsar,” Eivaunee returned, “but the Palace itself has its own shields. Normally they aren’t activated, but they can be on a moments notice. They aren’t as strong as the shields that surround the entire Imperial complex, but you’d need some awfully strong artillery to break through. The guards don’t have that in their barracks.”

“He’s right,” Claris said, shaking her head. “With Eivaunee’s recall, Palace security is really tight. Everyone’s tense and jumpy. Last week we had two Palace shield shut downs. I don’t know if anything actually happened, or if it was just a drill.”

“Hazdel isn’t stupid, Zsar,” Eivaunee said, his tone annoyed. “I keep trying to make you understand that.”

“If you would let me kill him,” the alien said, his voice low and angry. He wasn’t concerned over speaking so openly in front of Claris; he could tell she felt no loyalty to the Emperor.

“You mean let you make the attempt,” Eivaunee returned, his voice cold. “And the answer is no! The price of failure is too high.”

“I wouldn’t fail,” the alien promised.

“No arguments was the agreement,” Eivaunee reminded him. “Leave us.”

The alien stood and retreated to the back of the enclosure.

“Sometimes he’s overly aggressive,” Eivaunee commented lightly to Claris.

“Magnificent, really,” Claris said, smiling. “I can see why Sarrin is so unhappy he won’t perform. It would be interesting to watch.”

“His performances are in private,” Eivaunee answered coolly. “And if you can take your mind off him for a moment?”

Claris laughed and wrapped her arms around Eivaunee’s neck.

Zsar’t’lac didn’t watch. He spent his time probing the emotions of the humans outside the privacy shield. Aman had arrived; he was easy to detect, his emotions were demanding and destructive. And someone else new. Someone unexpected; Sarrin was surprised. An older woman. Haughty, arrogant and strong-willed, with a very focused interest. Zsar’t’lac hoped it was Eivaunee; he wanted to meet this person.

Aman kept walking in a wide circle around Eivaunee’s blue and gold privacy shield. There was no reason for this in Aman’s emotions beyond a hunting instinct. The predator circling the prey.

Eivaunee and Claris were close to finishing their encounter. Rather quick, but both had taken sexual stimulants. The older, interesting, woman was coming closer. Eivaunee was her destination, it seemed. Most of the rest of the people in the large room were watching, at least part of the time, what was happening around Eivaunee’s privacy shield.

There was soft conversation between Eivaunee and Claris, casual, pleasant farewells. The older female had a sharp encounter with Aman; Aman lost. Zsar’t’lac definitely wanted to meet this female.

Claris draped the light, translucent rectangles back around her body. Eivaunee put his robe back on. There was a sharp knocking at the door. Eivaunee turned towards Zsar't'lac.

"A fascinating, older woman," Zsar't'lac told him. "An ally."

"How can he know that?" Claris asked.

"Let her in," Eivaunee told the alien. He wasn't sure who this person was, but Zsar't'lac wouldn't be wrong about whether the woman meant him any harm.

Zsar't'lac opened the door. An old woman stood there, her small body encased in a long, dark brown dress. Her white hair was pulled back severely; her eyes were silver.

"Mistress Merrivel!" Eivaunee and Claris spoke in unison, both clearly surprised.

The old woman stumped in. There was no better word for how she walked. She had a cane with a gravity tip. Zsar't'lac had never seen such a thing. She used it to pull herself along.

"Enough," the old woman said, waving a hand at Claris. "Go."

Claris curtseyed deeply and left.

Zsar't'lac worked out who the woman was. From her title she was a Consenti and the heavy gold necklace stated that she was one of the twenty-seven entitled members. That made her the female head of the Merrivel family, Nervna Merrivel.

"You should have told me about this recall," the old woman said, her voice sharp in disapproval, her cane poking outward.

"I...well," Eivaunee was at a loss for what to say. "Please, Mistress, be seated. A chair or the couch, whatever is more comfortable for you."

Mistress Merrivel stumped over to the chair and sat down heavily. Zsar't'lac wondered if the weight of her dress was too much for her fragile frame. Then he remembered she had won a verbal battle with Aman; she wasn't all that fragile.

"Pour me some wine," Mistress Merrivel commanded.

Eivaunee did, a half glass. "How did you hear about the recall?" he asked as he handed it to her.

"Listening to the retainers," she answered curtly. "The way I learn most of my information these days. People think I'm too old and fragile to be told what's going on."

"You shouldn't have come," Eivaunee said gently. "There's nothing you can do."

"Nonsense," the old woman stated firmly. "I'm better than that idiot son of mine. The Darcy's have him in their clutches."

"You wanted that marriage alliance," Eivaunee gently pointed out.

"I thought the boy had enough backbone to stay clear of the Emperor's faction."

That 'boy' was a grandfather, Eivaunee thought with a smile.

"And don't you be more stupid than my fool retainers," the old woman snapped. "This is a Consenti matter. I should be here."

"Video transmission for the trial would have been sufficient," Eivaunee suggested.

"Bah!" the old woman dismissed it. "Too easy to ignore an old woman sitting in her chair far away."

"There isn't anything you can do," Eivaunee warned her.

"You told me the same thing after ... that guardsmen matter. I still say you were wrong."

"The Imperial Guards can only be commanded by Hazdel," Eivaunee pointed out.

"That's how Dennyson comforts his conscience," Mistress Merrivel stated flatly. "If I'd been sitting there, they'd have thought twice about harming you."

"I don't know," Eivaunee answered honestly. "You could have gotten hurt."

"I doubt it," she returned. "And if I had, maybe then some Consenti would have been properly shamed. You should have told me."

"We have been over this ground before, Mistress," Eivaunee said gently. "It is done and over."

Zsar't'lac could tell that Eivaunee couldn't think of Mistress Merrivel as a champion, or a guardian, because of her age and frailness. To Zsar't'lac, she was the strongest member of the Consenti he had yet met. Her body might be weak, but that was the only thing about her that was.

"You have your own Estates to consider," Eivaunee added.

"Another excuse," the old woman said, rapping her cane against the floor. "Too many Consenti use it. Risk is sometimes necessary."

"So I keep telling him," Zsar't'lac spoke for the first time.

The silver eyes turned towards the alien, appraising. She wasn't overly impressed by the large alien. Zsar't'lac liked that.

"Eivaunee grew up surrounded by enemies," the old woman switched to defending Eivaunee. "It makes a person cautious."

"Caution can be more dangerous than action sometimes," Zsar't'lac countered.

"True," the old woman agreed. "But the wisdom to know when to act and when to be cautious is not easily acquired."

Zsar't'lac probed more deeply into the old woman's emotions. He felt more fully her strength, and felt its foundation in decades-old conflict and pain.

"You have this wisdom," Zsar't'lac suggested.

"Time and experience helps," she answered. "That alone doesn't always supply wisdom." She turned back to Eivaunee. "There are more people you need to talk to," she said. "And I have to go and get settled in. I hear you won't be at the council meeting tomorrow."

"Not with a treason trial hanging over my head."

"I don't like that, either," Mistress Merrivel stated as she leveraged herself up. "You haven't

been charged with anything yet. An entitled Consenti has the right to sit in Council when they are present. This is another encroachment of Hazdel's on our rights."

"I'm the only person he's ever charged with treason," Eivaunee pointed out reasonably.

"But you may not be the last," the old lady added ominously. "Still, it might be better if you're not there. People may speak more freely."

Zsar't'lac was certain that Mistress Merrivel always spoke quite freely, regardless of who was present. "When this is settled," Zsar't'lac said, his voice sweet and low. "I should like to get to know you better. I should like it very much if you would accept me as a lover." He was grateful to Mistress Merrivel. She had renewed his belief in humans.

The old woman stopped at the door, seeming to consider the matter. "Perhaps we'll talk," she considered. "But never lovers."

"Why?" Zsar't'lac asked, his voice still sweet. "I would not harm you."

Mistress Merrivel never even turned around. "It is against my dignity."

"Why? Because I'm an alien?"

"No, you're much too young," she gave her final reply as she left the enclosure, her step firm, if uneven.

"How do you judge the age of an alien?" Zsar't'lac asked no one in particular.

"I'd love to know your age," Eivaunee commented.

There was rapping at the door again. Not the hard, demanding knock of Mistress Merrivel, this was softer, diffident. Eivaunee looked at Zsar't'lac who shrugged in the human manner. "No danger," was all he could offer as he opened the door.

"Jerri!" Eivaunee said, with evident pleasure as a young man about his age walked in.

"Mistress Merrivel came here?" the dark complected man asked in wonder. "I wouldn't have thought she could manage the trip."

"I wouldn't have, either. I'd rather she didn't," Eivaunee added. "I don't want her death on my conscience."

The two men sat down in the chairs. Their talk was quick and to the point. Jerri didn't know any specifics about what the Emperor had planned, but he had heard from someone—he didn't want to say who—that someone close to Eivaunee had betrayed him.

"What can they betray?" Eivaunee asked. "I haven't committed treason."

"I'd like to say that you have nothing to fear if you haven't, but with Hazdel and that viper he beds..."

Eivaunee shook his head. "I haven't always exactly obeyed orders. I've come close to open disobedience on occasion, but I've never crossed the line into treason."

"They're confident, my friend," the young man said quietly. "I hear Hazdel made you an excellent offer this morning. If I were you, I'd take it."

A speculative look came to Eivaunee's eyes. "I'm certainly considering it," he lied blandly.

The young man got up. "Well, there's other people you need to talk to. Choose the better part of valor, my friend."

"Good advice," Eivaunee agreed.

The door closed behind him. "The Princess was behind that, I'd be willing to bet," Eivaunee commented quietly.

"Still, he could be right," Zsar't'lac pointed out.

"No marriage to the Princess," Eivaunee said firmly.

"No, I mean about someone betraying you."

"How can I be betrayed by someone when I didn't do anything!"

"Someone close to you helped set up this trap."

"What makes you say that?" Eivaunee asked, worried.

"He was telling the truth when he said someone betrayed you. That was very clear."

"Moerit lied to him," Eivaunee answered with a shrug, "and he believed her. That's all."

"Possible, but I don't think so."

"There aren't that many people who can betray anything about me, Zsar," Eivaunee pointed out. "Hell, you're the only person who knows enough to cause me any real trouble. And I won't believe you've betrayed me."

"You are correct in that, but I still believe someone close to you helped set up this trap."

Eivaunee shrugged; it couldn't be proven one way or the other just now.

There was another rapping at the door.

"Why isn't there an announcer on this door?" Zsar't'lac asked, irritated at functioning as an answering device.

"Won't work with this kind of force field," Eivaunee replied.

Zsar't'lac opened the door. Another middle-aged lady. The alien retreated to the back of the enclosure while they talked. She knew nothing; she just wanted to say good-bye. Two more people came and went in much the same way. Zsar't'lac felt his frustration rising. He was a hunter, a warrior, trapped in the role of bodyguard. He was beginning to understand Eivaunee's predilection for pacing. Something—anything—to release the tension of being forced to do nothing.

It had been far too long since he had hunted, Zsar't'lac thought with irritation. When possible Eivaunee gave him time off from his duties to roam free on wild, frequently inhospitable, worlds. Sometimes it was to hunt, sometimes it was just to test his powerful body against the elements. When Zsar't'lac came back from these 'releases', as he called them, his mood was always better, more peaceful. It had been a long time since he had last roamed free, but that didn't change anything about the situation they were facing now, except to heighten Zsar't'lac's impatience with Eivaunee's caution.

The third person left, a young man, the second son of an Inner Planet baron. He wished Eivaunee well, but could provide no help.

Eivaunee leaned back against the chair. "Does anyone out there know anything?" he irritably asked the alien. "I don't want any more good-bye sessions."

The alien had been continually probing the emotions of the humans in the large, open room.

"Only Aman and the Princess," Zsar't'lac told him.

"That's one thing I don't understand, Zsar," Eivaunee commented as he poured himself another half glass of wine. "I have trouble believing Moerit is involved in a plot to kill me. I don't believe she wants me dead. Her wealthy, absent husband, yes. But murdered? I have trouble believing that. We grew up together. There have been times when I wanted to break that beautiful neck of hers, and I'm sure she has felt the same, but to cold-bloodedly plan my death?"

"I've never understood why body temperatures should figure into considerations of killing," Zsar't'lac commented. He poured himself a glass of wine.

"It's a figure of speech, Zsar," Eivaunee responded wearily.

"Yes and no," the alien returned. "If someone should die, then they should die. Planning the killing is a good idea. If they shouldn't die, then killing them in anger doesn't make it right."

It was a discussion they'd had in the past; Eivaunee wasn't in the mood for a discussion on the philosophy of killing. There was another knock on the door.

"Unless it's Moerit or Aman, don't answer," Eivaunee commanded.

"I'll tell them you're unavailable," the alien suggested. "Better than having them keep beating on the door."

He did so, as Eivaunee leaned back in the small chair and considered what to do.

"I think I'm going to have a chat with Aman," Eivaunee said, standing up. "Maybe do some bargaining."

"It's hard to bargain with someone who -"

"I know, Zsar," Eivaunee cut him off sharply. "But it's either he or Moerit, and there is little I can offer her."

"Whereas with Aman...?"

"Exactly," Eivaunee agreed coldly.

Zsar't'lac wanted to argue the matter; suggest some other course of action, but he couldn't think of any. Eivaunee had said he'd do anything to stop the Emperor from gaining control of the Dorlan Estates. Zsar't'lac knew Eivaunee meant exactly what he said.

The tall, golden human, shifted his exotic silk robe so that it was open a little more in the front.

"He's close to the door now," Zsar't'lac told Eivaunee.

Eivaunee opened it. Aman was standing directly in front of him. Eivaunee cocked an eyebrow. "Want to talk?"

Aman smiled thinly. "No," he answered. "But we can begin there." As tall as Eivaunee, and a generation older, Aman was heavier built, but most of it was muscle. He sauntered into the small privacy chamber.

"The alien leaves," Aman commanded coolly.

"No," Eivaunee countered. "He stays. You can get overly excited sometimes."

Aman laughed. "You managed to beat me off last time on your own."

"I tricked you. I doubt it would work again."

"No," Aman agreed softly. His right hand reached out and twitched Eivaunee's robe open a little further. Eivaunee allowed it. Aman's eyes, hot and demanding, looked down the opening. "So you're willing to discuss a deal?"

Eivaunee sat down in the chair; the robe falling fully open. "I'm told someone close to me betrayed me, I want to know who."

"That's all you want?" Aman asked, his tone incredulous. "Don't you want to know our cunning plan?"

"Yes," Eivaunee said quietly. "But I doubt you will tell me that—for any consideration."

"Why should I even tell you who has betrayed you?" Aman asked reasonably. "I'll get what I want when you're imprisoned."

"Hazdel made me an offer this morning," Eivaunee pointed out.

"Yes, he told me. I told him he was a fool. You'd never throw most of the Dorlan retainers to the wolves—meaning the two of us—just to save a few."

"There is the crown matrimonial," Eivaunee pointed out coolly.

"If that was of interest, you'd have bargained for that years ago."

"I might not have been as motivated then."

"You're going to accept his offer?" Aman was surprised.

"Any reasonable person would."

"True, but I didn't think you qualified."

Eivaunee laughed, stretching his legs out in front of him. There was a long pause in the conversation as Aman simply stared hungrily at what was being displayed.

Zsar't'lac was working hard to contain his anger. Aman's emotions infuriated him. It wasn't sex he wanted; it was destruction. The method used would be sexual, but sexual fulfillment wasn't the point; the total destruction of Eivaunee was.

"So you're offering your body in return for the name of who betrayed you?" Aman wanted the matter specified.

"It's good to know when you've misjudged someone," Eivaunee answered calmly.

"How long?" Aman asked.

"How long do you need?" Eivaunee returned, his tone cool and distant. "And nothing debilitating, Aman. If I'm limping tomorrow when I meet his dear Majesty, there'll be a scene."

"Take the robe off," Aman commanded.

Eivaunee stood up in a leisurely manner and gracefully dropped the robe to the floor.

"Turn around."

Eivaunee raised a mocking eyebrow. "Slow, fast, or shall I piroette?"

Aman grabbed Eivaunee's upper arms with a grip that bruised. "You won't laugh at me later," he stated, shaking Eivaunee a little.

Zsar't'lac moved closer; he was within easy reach of the two humans.

“Which later?” Eivaunee asked, his tone still cool. “Tonight after you’ve given me the name of who’s betrayed me? Or some vague later that may never happen?”

Aman tightened his grip; Eivaunee refused to flinch back from the pain. “When you are shackled to the wall,” Aman stated, his words thick with anger and desire. “I will do exactly what I want with you. Whether I leave you limping, or worse, won’t matter.”

“Yes,” Eivaunee agreed quietly. “Hazdel has already said the treason trial will be posthumous. Still, I haven’t been charged yet, so take your hands off me.”

Aman hesitated.

“Zsar’t’lac is not likely to be gentle,” Eivaunee pointed out.

Aman released the younger man.

Eivaunee stepped back a little. “So you’re not interested in my offer?”

Zsar’t’lac could tell how very much Aman wanted Eivaunee. The violence Aman enjoyed best couldn’t be part of the night, but it would be a beginning. A beginning to the long night of destruction he planned for later. Zsar’t’lac felt a slight shifting in Aman’s emotions; an influx of cunning added to the desire and anger.

“I think we can work something out,” Aman said quietly.

“No,” Zsar’t’lac said suddenly. “Whatever he tells you is a lie.”

Aman laughed. “Of course he’s going to say that,” Aman returned. “Because he’s the one who betrayed you.”

Eivaunee turned away and picked up his robe and put it back on. He wrapped it close around in front.

“Good bye, Aman,” Eivaunee said firmly. “You should have tried a better lie.”

“He has betrayed you!” Aman said. “Who else knows enough?”

“Why would he betray me?” Eivaunee asked, curious as to the reason Aman would give.

“The usual reasons,” Aman replied. “Money...power...advancement.”

“He gets one third of my Estates if I die,” Eivaunee pointed out. “The Emperor is only offering twenty percent for proof of treason. He’d be better off killing me.”

“There are other considerations,” Aman replied.

“Perhaps,” Eivaunee agreed. “For a human. But he isn’t.”

“I thought you knew better than to truly trust anyone,” Aman said, his tone snide.

“If I truly trusted him, I wouldn’t have felt it necessary to outbid the Emperor,” Eivaunee pointed out. “Who has betrayed me?” he asked sharply, hoping that Zsar’t’lac might make out something from the older man’s emotional response.

“When I’m done with you,” Aman said softly. “You will beg to die.”

“I doubt I’ll wait that long,” Eivaunee replied undisturbed. “Who has betrayed me?”

“I will enjoy your screams,” Aman continued softly. “And you will scream so very much.”

“No doubt,” Eivaunee agreed easily. “Who has betrayed me?”

“Who else but a lover?” Aman responded, goaded past good judgement.

"Enough," Zsar't'lac stated. "I think it is time you left, Aman."

Eivaunee raised an eyebrow at the alien's taking command, but then shrugged. "As he says, Aman, it is time for you to go. Be sure to come to my coronation."

"I'm not as big a fool as Hazdel. I know you'll never marry the Princess."

"The door is behind you. I will count to three and then Zsar't'lac will help you leave."

"I will remember all of this," Aman promised thickly. He waited a moment longer, for dignity's sake, then left.

Eivaunee sat down heavily. "I'm sure he will." He reached a slightly shaking hand to the wine decanter and poured himself a full glass. "I hope you got something out of that."

"He was telling the truth about a lover betraying you," Zsar't'lac said quietly. "But there was no emotional response towards that person. It isn't someone he knows personally."

"So I've been betrayed by a lover that Aman doesn't know," Eivaunee summed up the matter. He drank the full glass of wine in one long gulp. "Not someone at court then. A lover from the Provinces. Not exactly a small group." Eivaunee paused. He focused on stopping his hands from shaking. He hated Aman, and was terrified of what was coming. "That's all you got?"

"That's it."

Emotions provide limited information, Eivaunee knew that, and they were subject to interpretation, which could be wrong. Still, Zsar't'lac hadn't qualified anything, so what little he had gained, he was sure of. But it wasn't much.

"Yseu," Eivaunee suggested after a moment's thought. "She'd sell her mother if the price was right."

"But what does she know?"

"Since I haven't committed treason, it's not a matter of knowledge. She would help set up the trap, though, if the price was right. Especially since I haven't visited her lately."

"What could she have done?"

"If I knew that, I'd know what they're planning!" Eivaunee's voice was sharp in frustration. He leaned his head against the tall back of the chair. "I'd like to ask a favor of you," he said softly.

"Anything I can do," the alien returned as quietly.

"Kill me before Aman can get to me," Eivaunee's amber eyes held the alien's.

"It would be better to kill Aman," the alien pointed out gently.

"He is as well protected as the Emperor," Eivaunee returned sharply. "You can't risk your life. If you die, too many humans die. My life isn't worth it."

Zsar't'lac made no reply.

"You said you'd do what you could to help me. It won't be hard to kill me in prison. Or even before that. Actually before that would be better."

Zsar't'lac had plans for Eivaunee. He hoped the golden human would show the Hsassan that humans were more than the Hsassan thought them, but Zsar't'lac wasn't thinking about that just now. The Homelands were very far from his thoughts. All he was thinking about was Eivaunee, golden and slender, fragile by Hsassan standards, but stronger than many of them. Eivaunee's strength was in his spirit, in his soul. In the past few days Zsar't'lac had felt a desire that was inappropriate towards a human male. Now he felt something else. Something deeper, something almost to be afraid of.

"Zsar?" Eivaunee prompted. "I'd like an answer."

No, you wouldn't, the alien returned silently. Aman will never rape you, he promised his friend in his mind. The Emperor and his lover will both die before you. I am the Hsassan Qtesark; this is my word.

"Zsar?" Eivaunee asked as he stood up. The alien's eyes were dark burning fire. "I don't want to have to suffer through that."

"You won't," the alien promised.

"Don't try to kill Aman! You can't risk it!" Eivaunee was standing close to the alien; the scent of perfume and sex on him, his short hair tousled, his amber eyes troubled. Zsar't'lac knew with a sudden, hard, hurting clarity that he had come to love this human. He wouldn't let him die; and most certainly he wasn't going to allow him to be raped. There was nothing to be said on the matter, however, that Eivaunee would accept. Instead of words, Zsar't'lac took the slender human into a gentle embrace and kissed him, gently and tenderly.

At first, Eivaunee's body was stiff and unyielding, then his long arms wound around the alien's hard-muscled neck and he returned the kiss, his body pressed firmly against the alien's. So many of the others wanted something from Eivaunee, sex or money; Zsar't'lac wanted nothing. He gave instead. He gave exactly what Eivaunee needed: affection.

The alien drew back. "It is time we left, my Eivaun. Nothing more can be gained here."

Eivaunee nodded. "The drugs are wearing off, Zsar. I'm tired." He understood Zsar't'lac's silence; the alien would try to kill Aman. But he wasn't likely to succeed. Or maybe he would. At this point, Eivaunee was too tired to care. Tomorrow he would care; tomorrow he would fight with the alien. Not tonight, though; nothing more tonight.

There was knocking at the door. They both ignored it as Eivaunee began getting dressed. The person knocked again.

"Who?" Eivaunee asked Zsar't'lac.

Before the alien could answer, the door opened. "Our hostess," Zsar't'lac answered unnecessarily as Sarrin walked in. She was down to a single, mostly transparent rectangle, tied around her waist that hung to the tops of her thighs.

"You can't be leaving already?" she asked as Zsar't'lac helped Eivaunee into his gold silk shirt.

"It's been a long day," Eivaunee answered as he buttoned up the shirt.

"I left stimulants," Sarrin pointed out sharply.

"I've taken enough."

"That's unlikely," Sarrin said, her tone still sharp. "Not when it's this early. Besides, no one has seen much of the alien."

"Zsar't'lac will be around for longer than I will," Eivaunee pointed out as he pulled on the tight-fitting pants.

"That's true, but still it's rude to disappoint people." There was a bargaining aspect to Sarrin's emotions that concerned Zsar't'lac a little as he helped Eivaunee into his jacket.

"He functions as a valet as well?" Sarrin asked, her tone mocking.

"He's being kind," Eivaunee returned.

Zsar't'lac said nothing; he had nothing to say to this foolish woman.

Sarrin tilted her head a little. "You owe me a favor, Eivaunee."

"What do you want—other than Zsar't'lac to perform—which he won't?"

"As you say, you won't be around much longer," Sarrin began, her eyes on the alien. "I would pay a great deal for him."

"He isn't a fealty-bound retainer, Sarrin," Eivaunee said wearily. "He's not for sale."

"I'd kill you," Zsar't'lac offered his first comment.

Sarrin smiled broadly. "I like the strong ones."

"He means what he says," Eivaunee told her.

"I'm an entitled Consenti, attacking me is a death offense," Sarrin stated smugly.

"You would have an accident," Zsar't'lac specified further. "A violent, and quite fatal, accident." He preferred to kill openly, but the foibles of human society didn't always allow that.

"He means that?" Sarrin asked, her eyes opening a little wider.

"Yes," Eivaunee answered firmly as he held out his arms for Zsar't'lac to button up the sleeves.

Sarrin dramatically shivered. "Aren't you afraid of him? You could have an accident as well."

Eivaunee's eyes, hollow and old, met Sarrin's unnaturally bright green ones. "I've just asked him to kill me," he said softly. "Before Aman gets to me."

That got through even to Sarrin, self-indulgent as she was. She looked down. "There's always some hope," she suggested, although she didn't sound convincing.

"Do me one favor, Sarrin: believe I haven't committed treason."

Sarrin looked up. "I believe you," she said quietly.

Eivaunee pulled his boots on. "Send the bill for all of this to Xeno, my accountant, he'll take care of it."

Sarrin nodded. Eivaunee stood up. "Good-bye," he said briefly. Sarrin lightly touched the side of his face. "Good-bye."

They left the way they came; Eivaunee feeling more and more tired. The drugs he had taken to provide the energy and the sexual drive were wearing off. Added to that was the lingering effect of the drugs used in the truth questioning the night before. Normally it took a couple of days to fully recover from the effects of those drugs, but Eivaunee didn't have a couple of days,

his limited time of freedom was running out. He had to figure out Hazdel and Aman's plot before he was imprisoned. Before he was killed, and before Zsar't'lac risked his life attempting to kill Aman.

Chapter 19

There were several aircars circling up and down outside the entrance to the castle, hoping for a client. Not a Consenti, they would have their own aircars and drivers, but one of the lesser luminaries who was lucky enough to be invited. When Zsar't'lac and Eivaunee walked out, several cars recognized the pair and flashed their lights for attention. Zsar't'lac hesitated a moment, then indicated his choice.

"Someone who knows you," he told Eivaunee, as the aircar pulled to the curb. The doors opened and they got in.

Eivaunee wasn't paying attention; he was too tired to care. He sat down heavily and sighed softly. After a moment, curled up on his side, laid his head in the alien's lap. He was asleep before the aircar pulled fully away from the curb.

"I wouldn't have thought I was that comfortable," Zsar't'lac commented to no one in particular. His long-fingered hand lightly caressed Eivaunee's short blond hair.

"He's the best of them," the aircar driver said, his eyes meeting the alien's in the rearview mirror.

Zsar't'lac continued to lightly caress Eivaunee's hair. "You knew him when he lived here before?"

"Took him to and from many of these functions. He never liked the Emperor's drivers."

Zsar't'lac's hand came to rest on Eivaunee's shoulder. "He had some problems with the Emperor's people."

"I wouldn't know about that," the older man replied. "I just know what a fine man he is."

In the aircar driver's emotions there was something that indicated a particular reason for his

comment. "Helped you once?"

"My daughter," the older man answered. "She was very ill; the doctors people like us see couldn't help her. I told the young Master about it. I didn't know if he would help an old aircar driver, but he had one of his own people come to our small house. Later he paid all the expenses of the operation she needed. My daughter blesses him every night."

"He can be kind," Zsar't'lac agreed.

"I've seen news holos of the two of you," the aircar driver said. "You serve him well."

Zsar't'lac made no reply. He wanted to serve Eivaunee better.

"Everyone says this is the end for him," the older human spoke again. "The Emperor will kill him now."

"He isn't dead yet," the alien pointed out.

"You can save him?"

"I don't know," Zsar't'lac answered truthfully.

They stopped at the gates outside the Palace. "You need to wake him up," the aircar driver said.

"I can carry him."

"I'm sure you can, but he won't like it. It's a point of pride with him that he's always walked into the Palace on his own feet."

That was like Eivaunee. Zsar't'lac wasn't sure, though, that Eivaunee was capable of walking so far. Zsar't'lac shook him. "We're at the Palace, Eivaunee."

The golden human made a soft, unresponsive sound.

"I told him, Master, you wouldn't want to be carried in," the aircar driver added.

There was a stronger sound from the curled up human. After a moment, Eivaunee pulled himself upright. He looked directly at the aircar driver for the first time. "Sams?"

The driver's face broke into a wide grin. "So good of you to remember, Master."

"An old ally, Zsar," Eivaunee commented. "How's the daughter?"

"Going to be a doctor. Attending the University next year," Sams answered.

"Wish her well for me," Eivaunee said as he rubbed his face.

"I will, Master," he said softly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Eivaunee looked at him, smiled slightly, and shook his head. "'fraid not."

"You're the best of 'em," the old man said sincerely.

"Given what most Consenti are like, that's not saying much," Eivaunee answered with a grin.

"Thanks for the ride." He made no attempt to insult the older man with an offer of payment. During his last year living in the Palace, Sams had taken Eivaunee many places, and credits had never changed hands. The debt between them was too great for that.

Eivaunee slid out of the aircar. With Zsar't'lac close beside him, they were admitted to the Palace compound. Eivaunee walked, if somewhat unsteadily, the several blocks to his room.

"I'm for bed," Eivaunee declared immediately upon entering the small suite.

Zsar't'lac followed him into the small sleeping room. He helped Eivaunee undress to his underclothing.

"Thanks," Eivaunee said sleepily as he slid between the silk sheets. "I want to talk to you later," he added as he rolled over on his side. He fell asleep immediately.

Zsar't'lac returned to the sitting room. He activated the commsole and sat down. He was going to try every avenue of access to learn about the layout of the Palace. He knew the basic room and corridor arrangement, but he needed more. Whenever they got a chance to leave, Zsar't'lac had a feeling it wouldn't be by a door. He also needed more information on Aman—to begin planning how he would kill him.

* * * * *

Eivaunee cried out in his sleep. Zsar't'lac stopped his search for more information and went into the master bedroom. Eivaunee was tossing and turning. Zsar't'lac knelt by the bed.

"Eivaunee! Wake up!" It wasn't the first time Zsar't'lac had waken Eivaunee from nightmares. He had his left hand firmly on the golden human's chest, as he shook him slightly with his right hand.

Eivaunee came to wakefulness abruptly, swinging hard. The alien ducked under the blow easily. "It's me," he said gently as Eivaunee struggled against the hand that held him down. It took the slender human a moment to understand and to stop struggling.

"It's all right," Zsar't'lac said softly. "It was only a dream."

"For now," Eivaunee added as softly. He reached up to Zsar't'lac's shoulder-length, black hair and wound his hand in it. "I almost got away that first night," he said softly. "But they grabbed my hair. They held me down by it."

"Is that why you have such short hair?"

"Yes," Eivaunee answered as he unwound his hand. The alien's hair was very different from a human's, thicker and slippery, like a heavy satin. "Zsar?"

"Yes?"

"Stay with me tonight," Eivaunee said softly. "Sleep with me."

Zsar't'lac could feel that Eivaunee meant exactly that—sleep. He had no interest in sex with anyone just now.

"I would like that, too, my Eivaun."

Eivaunee smiled sweetly. He drew back to give the alien room.

"A few minutes," the alien promised. "I'll be back."

Eivaunee settled back to wait, glad that Zsar't'lac understood.

It was more than a few minutes before Zsar't'lac returned; Eivaunee was half asleep again. The alien took off his service tunic, shirt, and boots. He left his pants on.

“Very proper,” Eivaunee commented with a smile.

Zsar’t’lac smiled in return. “I am very proper.” He lay on his side, facing the human. His head was propped up on his hand. His other arm lay along his hip. Eivaunee touched the alien’s heavily muscled chest, briefly, lightly, as though he wasn’t sure of Zsar’t’lac’s reaction. There was no response. Eivaunee’s hand began exploring over the banded muscles on the alien’s chest.

“Your skin is so cool and dry.”

“It’s not the first time you’ve touched me,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

“Nor the first time I’ve made that observation,” Eivaunee agreed. “Still, there is so much more of you, um, available to touch.”

Zsar’t’lac smiled. Eivaunee’s behavior wasn’t all that different from most women that Zsar’t’lac had slept with. Here the end result would be different, but the beginning was very similar.

Eivaunee’s fingertips traced lightly around an area where something was missing. “You don’t have nipples.”

“Why should a male have them?” Zsar’t’lac returned.

“No reason I guess. Especially if you have a choice.”

“No one asked me,” Zsar’t’lac returned. “Genetic engineering decisions are made by Yseret.”

Eivaunee leaned forward and nuzzled against the alien’s hairless chest. A friendly, playful gesture.

“Don’t do that,” Zsar’t’lac told him.

Eivaunee drew back. “Why not?”

“Some forms of play could elicit a response neither of us wants.”

A pale blond eyebrow shot up. “What, Zsar, with a human male?” His tone was mocking.

“Do not push it too hard, my friend,” he was warned.

Eivaunee laughed; he wasn’t worried. His hand reached out again to the alien’s chest, tracing across the long banded muscles. Zsar’t’lac said, and did, nothing, allowing Eivaunee to touch him as he chose.

There was silence in the small room, comfortable and easy. Eivaunee wanted this sort of intimacy with his alien friend. He wanted to be close physically, to kiss and caress a little. It was as much physical affection as he was capable with a male, perhaps as much emotion as he was capable of acknowledging with anyone.

Zsar’t’lac leaned forward and gently kissed Eivaunee; his long hand caressing the human’s face, tracing down his neck. A gentle, loving touch. Zsar’t’lac could control the emotions and desires that swirled in him, if that was what Eivaunee needed. Zsar’t’lac had said he would help Eivaunee however he could; giving him sweet affection was not particularly difficult.

Eivaunee returned Zsar’t’lac’s kiss, exploring the alien’s mouth, being careful of the sharp teeth. Eivaunee liked kissing Zsar’t’lac, his mouth tasted like cinnamon. Eivaunee’s hands

roamed more fully over the large alien's body. Zsar't'lac allowed it, even when Eivaunee's hands played over the top of his thighs, exploring the long, strong muscles clearly defined through the tight pants. Eivaunee wanted to know more about the alien, but within limits; his hands explored no intimate regions.

The kissing and caressing continued for several minutes, then Eivaunee drew back. "I'm glad we have this time, Zsar. Tonight is my last night of freedom, I wanted to spend it with you."

The alien touched the side of Eivaunee's face, transmitting affection. "Among my people, Eivaun, there is a ritual of bonding I would like to share with you."

"What?"

Zsar't'lac caressed the side of Eivaunee's neck. "With my people, sex has little emotional meaning. It is a sport, like fighting, or hunting. More pleasurable, but mostly without emotional context."

"Sounds reasonable to me."

"It would," Zsar't'lac agreed drily. "But when there is a desire for more than sport, there is an offering we make." Zsar't'lac caressed the side of Eivaunee's neck.

"Which is?"

"We offer a taste of our blood."

"Blood? Why am I not surprised?" Eivaunee grinned at the alien, looking at his four sharp incisors.

Zsar't'lac smiled. "I'm sure you're not surprised. You've known me for long enough."

Eivaunee leaned lazily against the large silk pillow, considering. "Are you offering me a taste of your blood?"

"Yes." Zsar't'lac didn't hesitate in his answer; the decision had been made before the conversation began. Zsar't'lac believed he and Eivaunee would win this conflict against the Emperor; he believed Eivaunee would survive. But he wasn't so arrogant he didn't acknowledge the possibility of error, although more likely by Eivaunee. This then would be his parting gift to the human he had come to love—a taste of his blood—and immortality among the Hsassan people. Eivaunee didn't understand the deep meaning of the gift, but that didn't matter: the Hsassan would. That was what this was about, a gift of immortality among the Norda in the story of a human who tasted the blood of the Qtesark.

"You can have a taste of my blood," Eivaunee agreed to Zsar't'lac's suggestion, "so long as I can taste yours."

"I have already said that."

"Knives or teeth?" Eivaunee asked softly. "Together? Or one after the other?"

"You are a true jewel, my Eivaun," the alien said as softly, his voice sweet. "My teeth are quite sharp enough. You can use my knife. And it is one after the other."

"You, no doubt, go first," Eivaunee said, leaning more fully back against the large pillow.

There was in his tone, and in his sweet reclining posture, a seductiveness that tore at Zsar't'lac. He desired the human, desired him very much. Just now the sexual problems of what would and would not work didn't seem very important. Zsar't'lac wanted to hold Eivaunee down and mount him. Zsar't'lac didn't care whether there were raised ridges on Eivaunee's thighs, or not. He wanted to make the golden human truly his lover.

"Your eyes are burning an interesting shade of red, Zsar," Eivaunee commented, his tone almost teasing, as though he knew the light red color meant desire.

"I'm sure they are," the large alien answered, holding himself perfectly still, fighting a desire, a passion he hadn't felt since leaving the Homelands. He leaned back away a little. He would control himself; he was the Hsassan Qtesark. It took a moment longer to be sure, then Zsar't'lac smiled. "Yes, I begin," he answered Eivaunee's earlier question. Blood would be enough, he told himself.

"The dominant male goes first?" Eivaunee asked, the teasing tone continuing. "You, of course, must be that."

"Careful just now, Eivaun," the alien quite softly. "Do not challenge me." The young human male was quite correct in his assumption.

There was that in Zsar't'lac's voice that convinced even Eivaunee to be careful. "No challenge, my friend," he replied.

Zsar't'lac nodded, forcing himself to respond in the human manner, hoping to reinforce Eivaunee's humanity. Zsar't'lac focused on how Eivaunee smelled and looked. So very wrong for a lover; so very human.

"How?" Eivaunee asked, breaking into Zsar't'lac's concentration. "How do you want me?" For a moment, Zsar't'lac couldn't breathe.

"Where do you bite me?" Eivaunee added.

Zsar't'lac exhaled slowly. "Here, where the shoulder meets the neck," he said softly, lightly touching the area.

"Shoulder, though, not neck?"

"Shoulder," Zsar't'lac confirmed. "Too many major veins in the neck. It is a taste, not a drink."

Eivaunee nodded. He was getting caught up in the ritual, drawn in by Zsar't'lac's intensity. "Sitting - laying? You're not offering much help here, Zsar."

"Sorry," the large alien answered. He wondered how he was going to accomplish this with minimum physical contact. "Sit up," he told Eivaunee who did.

Actually there wasn't any way to do this without embracing in a way that was somewhat sexual. Normally that wasn't a problem. Other than with his tutor, Zsar't'lac had never tasted any Hsassan's blood except in a situation that also involved sex. Zsar't'lac decided on a position that would be slightly uncomfortable for himself.

"Sit here, on top of my crossed legs," Zsar't'lac said.

Eivaunee moved there somewhat cautiously. Zsar't'lac's intensity was a little disturbing. "Do I put my legs around you?"

“No, sit cross-legged, like I am. On top of my legs.” The less dominant male should never, in any way, be physically on top of the more dominant male for the blood tasting, but here that could be good. Such behavior would be unthinkable for a Hsassan, but Eivaunee was human. It was good to keep reinforcing that.

Eivaunee settled somewhat precariously on top of Zsar’t’lac’s crossed legs. It wasn’t easy trying to sit cross-legged on top of someone else who was also sitting that way. If it wasn’t for Zsar’t’lac’s overly long legs, it wouldn’t be possible. “This is how you guys normally do this?”

“Not quite,” Zsar’t’lac replied, “but it is best here.”

“Because I’m human?”

“Yes.”

Eivaunee’s knees dug into Zsar’t’lac’s thighs, but better than some other arrangements. Zsar’t’lac held Eivaunee gently. “It won’t hurt much,” the alien said softly. “It doesn’t hurt Hsassan at all.”

“Too few nerve endings.”

“Among other reasons,” Zsar’t’lac agreed. He liked holding Eivaunee like this, a careful, gentle embrace. It was better to have them both sitting, easier to control his desire.

A long moment passed, then another. “Are you going to do something, Zsar? Or do we sit here all night?”

The alien laughed softly and drew the human close. He nuzzled the side of Eivaunee’s neck, curving down along his shoulder. Eivaunee was well-muscled for a human with long, sinewy muscles. Zsar’t’lac licked the area close by the neck.

“Interesting tongue,” Eivaunee commented. It had a different texture, a little rougher, a little more pointed. Eivaunee hadn’t noticed as much when they kissed.

Eivaunee still smelled a little of human sex and salty sweat, but Zsar’t’lac didn’t care; Eivaunee was his lover. Not physically, but in more important ways.

Zsar’t’lac opened his mouth, the long incisors touched against the soft flesh of the human, then Zsar’t’lac bit down. Eivaunee made a quick, muted sound against the pain; then fell silent. Zsar’t’lac felt a surprising shift in Eivaunee’s emotions. Pleasure filled the human. Not a sexual pleasure, a more non-specific, general pleasure.

Like a Hsassan.

Bonding seared into Zsar’t’lac’s soul. This human was his lover. It was unlikely they would ever have sex, but still Eivaunee Dorlan was his lover, now and forever. Fragile and strong, difficult and sweet; he was his lover. Time stood at the edge of a chasm; pausing for their pleasure.

Salt and sweetness slid into the alien’s mouth, the taste of human blood. There was the quicker beating of the human heart, and the slower, stronger beating of a Hsassan heart.

Then slowly, regretfully, Zsar’t’lac opened his mouth, withdrawing the teeth from Eivaunee’s flesh.

“No! Don’t,” Eivaunee said. “Don’t stop.”

Zsar’t’lac didn’t listen; he knew what it was like, and he knew why, but it was best the teeth not stay too long in flesh. Zsar’t’lac licked the bright red blood that flowed from the slight wounds. Eivaunee’s hands were curled deep in the alien’s thick hair, holding the angular head close against his shoulder.

Zsar’t’lac drew back; Eivaunee’s hands couldn’t hold him.

“I—” Eivaunee didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t understand what he had felt, and more, he didn’t understand why.

“Simple chemical stimulus,” Zsar’t’lac explained gently, caressing the side of Eivaunee’s face. “I didn’t think a human would react that way—would feel the pleasure.”

“What do you mean, Zsar? What chemical?”

“There are glands alongside my incisors, in the presence of blood, they release a chemical that stimulates the pleasure centers of the brain. Only with a Norda, I thought.”

Eivaunee snuggled close to the large alien, who continued to lick the blood that welled up.

“Your turn now, my...my friend.” Zsar’t’lac wanted to call him his lover, but not just yet. That needed more time.

Eivaunee drew back a little. He no longer cared if he tasted Zsar’t’lac’s blood or not. He had originally insisted on it because he wanted some semblance of equality. But now... “It’s not important,” Eivaunee said quietly.

“Yes, it is,” Zsar’t’lac countered flatly. He handed Eivaunee his Hsassan dagger. “It is very sharp,” he warned him.

Eivaunee took the black-bladed weapon. “I know, Zsar; I’ve seen you kill with it.”

Zsar’t’lac held his arm out.

Eivaunee considered it. “You won’t feel any pleasure,” he pointed out an unfair aspect of the situation. “Even if I use my teeth, I don’t have those glands.”

“In a different way, I will feel pleasure; I already have.”

“That’s true; you felt my pleasure.”

“Yes,” Zsar’t’lac agreed, although that wasn’t what he referred to.

Eivaunee stabbed Zsar’t’lac’s forearm lightly. The tip of the blade went deeper than he meant it to. “Sorry.”

“Not a problem,” Zsar’t’lac told him as he replaced the knife on the table by the bed and raised his arm to Eivaunee’s mouth.

The slender human licked the dark golden blood that seeped from the slight wound; the blood was disturbingly cool. Eivaunee shivered; he didn’t know quite why.

Norda blood clotted quickly when exposed to air. Eivaunee licked twice, and there was no more.

Zsar’t’lac lifted Eivaunee off of him. He gently pushed him down against the silk sheets and mounted across the golden human’s slender hips. Eivaunee said nothing; his amber eyes opened

wide, but there was no fear in him. Zsar't'lac was glad of that. He lowered himself to lie touching against the human's body, lightly. He stayed there for a long moment, then rolled onto his side alongside Eivaunee.

"What was that about?" Eivaunee asked, as the alien settled down.

Zsar't'lac laughed. "What do you think it was about?" He was pleased with everything. Eivaunee was his lover. He had even mounted him and he had done nothing improper. There were Hsassan who would disagree with that claim, certainly, but Zsar't'lac didn't care about that. He was Qtesark; in his opinion he had done nothing improper.

"If you weren't so bigoted about the species and gender of your lovers, I would say..." Eivaunee hesitated to say exactly what he thought.

Zsar't'lac caught Eivaunee's face between his long, strong hands and kissed him quite thoroughly. Then, quite deliberately he bit into his own thin lips. He wanted the taste of Hassan blood.

"True, species and gender have to be combined before my bigotry kicks in," Zsar't'lac pointed out, enjoying the sharp, metallic taste of Hsassan blood. He watched Eivaunee and felt very content with the taste of human and Norda blood lingering in his mouth.

Eivaunee shook his head. "I'm tired, Zsar; I don't feel like fighting with you."

"I'm not sure you could just now."

Eivaunee decided not to take Zsar't'lac's words as a challenge. There was something he wanted to know. "How many Hsassan?" he asked.

"How many Hsassan what?"

"How many Hassan have you tasted the blood of?"

"I never kept count," the alien answered casually. "Many."

Eivaunee felt cheated and angry. "I thought this ritual had more meaning than that. You've tasted the blood of so many Hsassan you couldn't keep track?"

"Yes," Zsar't'lac agreed, unconcerned, a gentle finger traced down Eivaunee's face.

Eivaunee pushed the alien's hand away.

"Ask the correct question," Zsar't'lac prompted him.

"I'm not in the mood for a game of questions," Eivaunee told him coldly.

"Still, you will like the answer."

"What is the correct question?" Eivaunee asked coldly.

"How many Hsassan have I offered my blood to?"

"Only a hundred...two hundred?" Eivaunee returned coolly. "Few enough you can remember the number?"

"Certainly few enough," the large alien agreed, his hand reaching out again to caress the human's face. "One is an easy number to remember."

"One?" Eivaunee questioned back. "Just one?"

"Just one, my Eivaun," Zsar't'lac confirmed. "Two Hsassan have tasted my blood. My tutor—it was his right, but I didn't offer. It was perhaps wrong of me, but I didn't. I didn't stop him, either. He tasted my blood the one time it was his right. It never happened again." Zsar't'lac drew his hand back and rolled over onto his back.

“Sing’m’li is the only one?” If there was only one, it would be Zsar’t’lac’s beloved.

“Yes,” Zsar’t’lac concurred. He turned his large, angular head to face the human. “Are you pleased now?”

“Yes, Zsar’t’lac. Thank you.”

The alien turned on his side and pulled the human close. Desire still stirred in Zsar’t’lac, but it was quieter now; he had part of what he wanted. Eivaunee was his lover. Not physically, but in the ways that were more important; they were blood-bonded. Eivaunee shivered as he settled close to the alien. “I wish your body temperature was warmer, Zsar.”

“I wish yours was cooler.”

“You wish I was Sing’m’li?”

“There is no reason to discuss that,” Zsar’t’lac said gently.

Which was a way of saying yes, Eivaunee understood that. Still, they were in Klimar Empire and Sing’m’li was in the Norda Homelands. Eivaunee was sure that the large alien cared more for him than any other human. For this night, that was enough.

Chapter 20

A slight noise woke Zsar't'lac before his mind felt the danger. Three humans were coming for Eivaunee, who lay, as he had since falling asleep, pressed close against the alien. Zsar't'lac's arm circled Eivaunee's shoulder, closing in a firm grip.

"Wake up!" he shouted as he flung Eivaunee towards the floor on the other side of the bed. The bedroom door opened as Zsar't'lac snapped off the bed to face the intruders. Blasters twitched to ready as the two men and one woman faced the standing alien, his eyes flickering dark red.

"Stop! Don't shoot!" Eivaunee shouted as he hurriedly untangled himself from the bedclothes. "Don't do anything," he added firmly. "Particularly, don't shoot him."

"We have no orders to shoot him," said the woman who appeared to be in charge of the group.

"Then don't make any mistakes," Eivaunee cautioned as he finally got clear of the bedding. He walked over to stand by Zsar't'lac. "What is the problem?"

"No problem, Master," the woman said, a little embarrassed. "The Emperor simply ordered us to wake you."

"Wake him?" Zsar't'lac was incredulous.

"I'm sure he didn't like seeing us in bed together," Eivaunee said dryly.

"Probably didn't see you had some clothes on," one of the male guards offered.

"If he had any doubts, he would have watched enough of the recording to be sure," Eivaunee stated drily. "I'm awake," he added. "You've done your duty."

"Yes, Master," the three said in close unison. They left quickly. Clearly, they didn't like the assignment they'd been given.

"Don't be so stupid again, Zsar," Eivaunee said. He stretched a little, his muscles feeling stiff. It wasn't surprising considering the coolness of the alien's body. "I've haven't many days left. Don't take risks for my sake."

The alien shrugged in the human manner. "Habit," he replied. He wasn't in a mood to argue with Eivaunee over the potential length of his life.

Eivaunee met the alien's black eyes, flickering a little with light red. "Thanks," he said softly. "For last night."

Zsar't'lac smiled and lightly touched the side of Eivaunee's face. "My pleasure," he replied quite honestly.

"I'm going to shower and then head out to visit someone. I neither need, nor want, you with me on this trip."

"Who are you visiting? Someone here in the Palace, in presume."

"An old friend," Eivaunee said. "Of course the Palace. I doubt Hazdel will let me go again." He walked into the bathroom.

Zsar't'lac followed him. He lightly pushed the human up against the wall and kissed him roughly. He nuzzled Eivaunee's neck and whispered quite softly in his ear. "Who?" he demanded.

Eivaunee bit Zsar't'lac's ear, not particularly gently. "Aman's wife," he replied as softly. He pushed against the alien's chest.

Zsar't'lac drew back satisfied. "I think I'll visit the Princess."

"Good luck."

Zsar't'lac was gone by the time Eivaunee got out of the shower. It was awkward dressing himself, but he managed. He didn't want to wait for a valet to be sent.

Aman's rooms were in the main section of the new wing of the Palace. Eivaunee was quite sure Aman wouldn't be there. He knew from his sources that even when Aman didn't spend the night with the Emperor, he rarely slept in his suite. He hardly ever visited there except when he had a "project" to tend to, meaning some poor soul to torture, which Eivaunee had been told was the case. Still, it was unlikely Aman would be in his rooms this early.

Eivaunee touched the door announcer.

"Identify?" It was the polite, even voice of a servant.

"Eivaunee Dorlan."

He had to wait several moments before the door opened. Jani stood there, her eyes opened wide in fear. "You shouldn't be here!"

Eivaunee walked in. "Why not? Aman will manage to control himself until I'm imprisoned."

"Still, it's not safe," Jani stated.

"For you or for me?" Eivaunee casually walked through the entrance hall into the opulent red and gold living room. He turned around to face her. "Why did you marry him? Does his rank mean that much to you—or to your mother?"

Jani's chin tilted up. "I'm not a Dorlan retainer any more. I don't have to answer your questions."

"I need your help."

Jani shook her head slowly. "I'm not a Dorlan retainer."

Eivaunee grabbed her shoulders. "That isn't the answer to everything. You had money and a title—why marry him?"

Jani turned her head away; she didn't want to see his face. "It just happened."

"Marriage isn't an accident - it doesn't just 'happen.'"

"The Emperor talked to my mother," Jani said, her head still turned away.

"Even he can't force a marriage."

"He didn't. It just...seemed best. You wouldn't understand."

Eivaunee pushed her away. "No, I don't."

Jani looked at him again. In her eyes there wasn't fear, but something else. Something Eivaunee intended to use.

"I need your help," he repeated.

"I can't help you," Jani answered.

"I think you can. Has Aman told you anything?"

Jani said nothing, which was an answer.

"I can't believe Aman never gloated."

Jani shook her head, but gave no vocal answer.

Eivaunee walked towards the young woman who retreated slowly. Neither said anything more. The room was large, but Jani came up against a wall eventually. Eivaunee didn't like what he was doing, but he hadn't like what he had done the previous night, either. Sometimes doing the right thing was a luxury he couldn't afford.

Eivaunee put his hands against the wall alongside Jani's head. She could have ducked under his arms and escaped, but he knew she wouldn't.

"You *are* a Dorlan retainer," he said softly, his amber, cat-like eyes locking with her soft grey ones. "You were born a Dorlan retainer. What your grandfather did years ago, buying your freedom, doesn't change that. As your marriage to a brutal bastard doesn't change it."

"I'm not a Dorlan retainer," Jani said softly. Her eyes, though, said something else entirely. Jani didn't love Eivaunee, nor desire him. Not in the usual sense. What she wanted—needed—was a place to belong, a place where she felt comfortable and secure. She had lacked a sense of place for so many years, her mother's social ambition driving her ever further. She'd had a place once and she hadn't wanted to leave it. Eivaunee was well aware of that; it was a weapon he intended to use.

"Do you remember the night, the last night we were both at the Dorlan Home Estate?"

Jani shook her head. She remembered, but she didn't want to talk about it.

"You came to me when you thought everyone was asleep. You woke me up."

"I was young."

"You were afraid. You were leaving the place where you had been raised—the place you called home—to marry an old, twice widowed Baron to satisfy your mother."

Jani shook her head, but didn't deny the truth of his words.

"You couldn't swear fealty to me that night—not with the marriage pending—but you said then you would always be a Dorlan retainer. Not legally, you couldn't be that, but you would always be mine to command. Always in your heart and soul, you would be mine."

"I was...was young," Jani repeated.

"That's not why you said it. What you wanted was a place saved for you. You wanted a

place you could come back to. Your mother, though, would never allow it.”

Tears formed in Jani’s eyes, slowly they spilled over. Memories of that night, held so close, so precious, were being spoiled.

“You were quite clear that your love for me was that of retainer for her Master. You didn’t want to sleep with me. How could you? I never have sex with retainers. And that was what you wanted to be: my fealty-bound retainer. You wanted to follow your grandfather’s steps and work in Dorlan Enterprises. But there aren’t any titles there for your mother’s pride.”

Jani’s tears continued to flow. Everything he said was true. They had talked so long that night, rather she had talked and he had listened. No one had ever listened to her as he had. And he had understood. Understood what she wanted and could never have. Understood how she could never stand up against her mother who was so proud, loving, demanding.

“I have never asked anything of you,” Eivaunee pointed out. “Even when you married Aman, I never asked you for any information. I’m not asking now: I am commanding you to tell me what you know. As my retainer, it is your duty.”

The tears stopped.

“You are mine. You were never his.”

Jani licked her lips, still uncertain.

“You *are* a Dorlan retainer,” Eivaunee said, low and intense. “As you were born a Dorlan retainer.”

“Yes,” Jani agreed suddenly, her decision made. This was right. Suddenly she felt better than she had in years. It felt good—so very right—to be in a conspiracy with Eivaunee Dorlan against her brutal husband. “It is your ship.”

“My ship? The Comveckt? How?”

“I don’t know. Aman just said it was fitting that the officers who are so loyal to you would be the cause of your death.” Jani spoke softly, although she knew there were no audio pickups in the room. Not Aman’s rooms.

“Anything else?”

“It will be soon—I’m sure of that.”

Before anything more was said, there was a low cry of pain from a room down the hall. Eivaunee turned his head.

“Aman’s latest project,” Jani said softly.

A door opened and a thin, dark-complected man staggered out. All he was wearing was a soiled breechclout.

“He shouldn’t leave the room—Aman will be very angry.” Jani was afraid for him.

There was blood on the man’s wrists and ankles. He had pulled his hands and feet free somehow. He could barely walk.

“Master?” The man’s voice was dry and raspy. “I heard your voice Master.”

Eivaunee walked towards him. Whatever Eivaunee’s other concerns, this man’s need was more immediate. There were dark red, angry wounds over his torso and down his legs. His thighs were particularly tortured. There was something vaguely familiar about the man.

“Master,” the man said again as Eivaunee reached him and put an arm around his thin shoulders.

“Maui?” Eivaunee asked in blatant disbelief. The bone structure was there, stark against thin-drawn skin. “How? Why?”

“I carried a package from Yseu,” Maui said softly. “She gave me to him.”

The door opened. Electronic doors always open softly, but in the quiet room, the slight sound made Maui and Jani jump. Only two people could open the door without announcing, and one was already there.

Eivaunee didn’t release Maui as he turned to face Aman. Two heavy-set bodyguards stood by the tall, elegant Favorite. Eivaunee had no personal concerns about them; he was an entitled Consenti. Jani and Maui, however, were in a great deal of danger.

“Whispering tales, dear wife?” Aman drawled. “I think you’d realize one of the retainers would tell me what was happening.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” Jani mocked him. Eivaunee was beside her; he was the man she belonged to. Never Aman, nor anyone else.

“It is getting time to kill you, I think,” Aman offered softly. “My dear sweet wife.”

Eivaunee’s favorite drill sergeant at the Academy once explained to Eivaunee that if you know it’s going to come to a fight, don’t talk. Hit first and hit as hard as you can.

Eivaunee kicked Aman with all his strength directly in the groin.

“Run!” Eivaunee shouted, as he sprinted around the doubled over man. “Run like the devil himself is behind you.” His arm was around Maui’s shoulders, he half carried, half dragged the thin man running down the wide gilt-edged hallway.

“Kill him!” Aman screamed in rage and pain. “Kill him!”

The guardsmen weren’t that stupid. No one killed an entitled Consenti; the punishment for that crime was too hideous to consider. Even trying to wound the two people running at his side was too dangerous. They helped Aman up instead. Aman hit both guards then began running after Eivaunee. He had to catch him. He had a bad feeling he knew where Eivaunee was going.

Eivaunee wished he had Zsar’t’lac with him now. The large alien could carry Maui without slowing down. Still, they had a lead on Aman, and they were making good time. Aman, due to some pain, wasn’t exactly able to run at full speed.

There were people in the hallway; they stepped aside quickly. Whatever was the problem between Eivaunee Dorlan and the Emperor’s Favorite, they didn’t want to get involved. Especially since the Favorite’s wife and a mostly naked man were running with Eivaunee Dorlan. One young man and an older woman, though, did carelessly get in Aman’s way and slow him down a little. Aman cursed and shoved them aside, but Eivaunee gained some more ground.

The Council chambers were in the oldest wing of the Palace. Eivaunee kept running, half

carrying, half dragging Maui. Jani was doing fine on her own. She pulled up the wide skirts of her long dress to give her legs room to move. Aman was a very short distance behind them when Eivaunee came to a halt in front of the doors to the Council chamber. Two Imperial guardsmen, carrying blasters, stood outside.

“Open the door!” Eivaunee commanded.

The Emperor had very strong feelings on decorum. Having an entitled Consenti, under the shadow of treason, a mostly naked, obviously tortured man and the Favorite’s wife, barge in on an Imperial Council meeting would not please him. Not at all. The guards weren’t going to let him in.

Aman stopped directly behind Eivaunee. “Let it go,” he whispered to him. “You’ll only make him angry.”

“I demand to see the Emperor!” Eivaunee wasn’t going to be dissuaded.

“I’ll check,” one of the guards offered.

He opened the door to talk to one of the guards. Eivaunee kicked the door hard. It opened further. He pulled Maui inside.

The guard tried to grab Eivaunee, but the slender human slipped around. Jani followed quickly behind.

The Council Room wasn’t very large. It didn’t need to be; it rarely held many people. Just now there were little more than a dozen people sitting around the Council Table. At one end of the long rectangular table sat the Emperor; the other end was reserved for the Empress. She hadn’t attended a Council meeting in years. Along both sides of the long table sat the entitled Consenti who were in residence at the Palace. As Eivaunee burst into the room, all heads turned towards him.

“What is going on?” Hazdel’s voice, always harsh, was colder than usual.

Eivaunee lowered Maui to the floor. He walked to the head of the Council table and knelt before Hazdel.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “These people need your protection.”

Hazdel Toneki glanced at the two people Eivaunee indicated, then looked at Aman standing just inside the doorway.

“Why would my Favorite’s wife need my protection? And who is this man?” Hazdel turned away to look at one of the guards in the room. “Give him your jacket.”

The guard moved quickly to obey.

“Answer me,” Hazdel commanded Eivaunee.

“Aman threatened to kill Jani just now. He found her with me. He has been torturing this man.”

“Who is this man?”

“I don’t know,” Eivaunee lied.

“Aman?” Hazdel asked coldly, his dark grey eyes looking towards his Favorite.

“Just a man,” he was answered. There was a touch of fear in Aman’s voice.

Hazdel's hawk-like eyes returned to Eivaunee. "Aman is not so stupid that he will kill another wife."

"Are you sure?" Eivaunee asked softly. "It would be quite hard on the Treasury, if he did. A third wealthy wife would be very difficult to find."

Hazdel said nothing at first. Eivaunee was surprised at Hazdel's mild response to all of this. He was obviously in a good mood. Then Eivaunee realized his conversation with the man in the Princess' pay had been reported to the Emperor. Hazdel believed Eivaunee would marry the Princess. That could be useful just now.

"Do you continence the torture of innocent men?" Eivaunee asked gently. He wasn't going to push Hazdel too hard.

A slight smile touched Hazdel thin lips. "I've done it myself, more than once. I'd think you'd know that."

"Sexual torture? As bad as this?"

Hazdel leaned back in the large chair. "No, but it is only a matter of degree, and location."

"It makes a difference," Eivaunee responded. *Not much*, he added silently, but he needed Hazdel's support to save Jani and Maui. "And I believe there is more to this than Aman is admitting," Eivaunee skirted a dangerous area. "It could be awkward if this man died now. And Jani's death would certainly cause problems."

There was another brief silence. Most of the Consenti could hear their conversation. It was embarrassing for the Emperor. He should have been able to order his Favorite not to harm the two people, but everyone knew Aman didn't always obey the Emperor. Although when he didn't, the punishment was harsh.

"You are—have always been—a problem, Eivaunee," the Emperor stated coldly, transferring the blame most unfairly.

"So Your Majesty has told me. Repeatedly." If it saved Jani and Maui, Eivaunee would accept the blame.

"Damn it, I'll take the man and Jani into my household." It was Mistress Merrivale who spoke up. Her silver eyes turned to stare coldly at the Emperor's Favorite. "On Segari III. You'll have to travel a long way to harm them there."

"That won't be necessary," the Emperor countered firmly. "Princess, you will take Jani into your household for now," Hazdel commanded. He didn't bother looking at his daughter who sat close to the head of the long the council table, at the Emperor's right.

"This man," the Emperor pointed at Maui who was half-sitting, half-lying on the floor, a guardsman jacket covering him to the middle of his thighs. "Will be cared for in the guards' room that adjoins mine. He will be safe there."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Mistress Merrivale inquired coldly.

"They are my guards," Hazdel returned. "They obey me."

Mistress Merrivale looked at the kneeling Eivaunee. "Is that acceptable?"

“Yes,” Eivaunee said quietly. Jani would be safe with the Princess and with all this public display, Hazdel would keep Maui safe. At least for the next few days. After that Eivaunee couldn’t even guarantee his own safety, let alone any one else’s. “Your Majesty is kind,” Eivaunee said, trying to keep the mockery from his voice.

“Sometimes,” Hazdel answered. “And sometimes quite the opposite. Remember that when we meet in two hours.”

“I never forget that,” Eivaunee said quite honestly. For a moment he looked over at Moerit. He wondered how Zsar’t’lac’s talk with her had gone. He wondered if the alien found out anything useful. Eivaunee now had some idea of Hazdel and Aman plans. Maybe, just maybe, they could be stopped.

Chapter 21

Zsar't'lac was looking forward to his visit with the Princess. He liked her arrogance and her sense of power. The guardswoman outside the door to the Princess' suite relayed Zsar't'lac's request for an audience. Permission arrived with a young man who escorted him into the Princess' dressing room.

Moerit's thick blonde hair was unbound, spilling over her shoulders; her green eyes danced with mischief. She was wearing a figured silk robe, similar to the one Eivaunee frequently wore.

"There is a council meeting soon," the Princess told him. "If you want, we can talk while I get dressed."

"Thank you."

The Princess considered him for a moment. Then she turned away to instruct her women on what she would wear. She turned back to face him. "When you first enter the presence of royalty the correct protocol is to kneel," she pointed out.

"Is it?" Zsar't'lac queried back coolly. He dropped easily to one knee and then stood.

"The royal person tells you when to rise," Moerit stated coldly.

"I'll try to remember that."

"When you are the captain of my guard, you will learn respect."

"If," Zsar't'lac returned.

"You have few choices."

"When will I have few choices?" Zsar't'lac questioned back. "After Eivaunee Dorlan is killed?"

There was a sudden twitch in the Princess' emotions. It was hard to tell what it was, or what it meant.

"Are you here to plead Eivaunee's cause?" the Princess asked, changing the tone of the meeting.

"I'm not very good at pleading," the alien said honestly.

The Princess laughed coldly. "That I can believe. Still, you are here on his behalf?"

"For the most part," Zsar't'lac agreed. "He has trouble believing you want to kill him."

"All he has to do is agree to a marriage contract," Moerit pointed out. "And accept the Crown Matrimonial. Not a hard task I should think."

"He has his people to consider," Zsar't'lac pointed out, continuing to probe the Princess' emotions.

“He can keep some of them safe—if he is reasonable.”

“You spoke once of plans within plans,” Zsar’t’lac reminded her.

“Did I?” the Princess asked as her clothing was brought to her. “You will be staying at court from now on, Zsar’t’lac, you need to learn that everything is not as it seems. And words aren’t always the truth.”

Some of that was a lie—but which part? Zsar’t’lac was having trouble understanding her emotions. She was cold and calculating, determined and wary. Other things too. Things Zsar’t’lac couldn’t completely understand.

Moerit undid her robe and shrugged it off her shoulders. She was wearing nothing underneath. Zsar’t’lac didn’t look at her or away. He was more concerned with his questioning and how to get a direct answer from her.

“Do you want Eivaunee’s death?”

“No,” the Princess answered mildly as she stepped into her underwear. “But I may not be able to prevent it. He should sign the marriage contract.”

But I may not be able to prevent it. A reasonable, casual sentence, but her emotions said there was more to it than that. She had some sort of plan—with Aman? There was something in her emotions that implied a connection with him. His cruel aspect was easy to pick up in the emotions of who knew him. Aman was an unlikely ally for anyone trying to save Eivaunee.

“It will be interesting to see how you develop as the Captain of my Guards,” the Princess added as a sheer dress was draped over her. “I think there will have to be a few floggings in the beginning. You need to understand who commands.”

“If I end up as the Captain of your guards, it will be—as you say—interesting,” Zsar’t’lac agreed.

A heavy satin dress went over the sheer silk. It was cut low, and fit tight, accentuating the Princess’ volumptuous body.

“Are you plotting with Aman?” Zsar’t’lac asked directly, hoping to gain some firm knowledge.

“What would I plan with him?” Moerit answered as she stepped into heeled shoes.

Definitely planning something with Aman.

“I wouldn’t know,” Zsar’t’lac answered casually. “I’m new to the court. Are you lovers?”

There was sudden, blazing anger in the Princess. “He is my father’s lover! Don’t listen to every lie Eivaunee tells.”

“He never suggested you were. I just asked.”

The Princess’ head tilted up. “Your manners are worse than a raw Provincial,” Moerit stated with disdain. “Maybe I won’t want you as Captain of my Guards.”

Zsar’t’lac did a human-style shrug. “I suspect I can manage without. Eivaunee has always been generous, and if he dies, I get one third of his Estates.”

“Not if he dies a traitor.”

"I understands that he dies first—and is accused posthumously."

"Another rumor. Rumors are for the ignorant."

"I am not ignorant," Zsar't'lac answered casually. "I had an excellent tutor. We never discussed anything about human behavior because humans aren't important."

"Perhaps not in the Norda Homelands, although I find that hard to believe, but you aren't living in the Homelands anymore."

"I had, in fact, noticed that."

It took a moment for the Princess to decide how response. In the end she laughed. "I'm late for the Council meeting. Do stop by and question me again some time."

"If I get the chance, I'm sure I will."

The Princess walked in front of the large alien. "By the way, when royalty leaves a room, protocol requires that you kneel again."

"A great deal of getting up and down," Zsar't'lac observed. He didn't kneel.

The Princess stared at him for a long moment, and then turned towards the door. "The next time you are so rude, one of my guardsmen will flog you."

"Perhaps," Zsar't'lac replied indifferently. He knew the nuances of royal etiquette. Eivaunee had been explained them all in detail on the trip to the Imperial Planet. Zsar't'lac was being deliberately rude; sometimes when humans are annoyed, they give away more information. The Princess wasn't one of them. Still, he had learned something, she was allied with Aman.

* * * * *

Zsar't'lac was waiting outside Eivaunee's rooms when the golden human arrived. Eivaunee pressed his hand to the door sensor and they walked in. Zsar't'lac could tell Eivaunee had found out something as well; something that worried him.

Eivaunee walked across the room to pick up his cape. "I'd like to go for a walk outside, Zsar. Think a bit."

Eivaunee wasn't looking for a quiet place to think, but some audio privacy. They walked in silence to the center of the park situated behind their rooms. Flowers bloomed in wide-ringed circles.

"Zsar, the Comveckt is in trouble," Eivaunee began softly.

"We aren't exactly in good shape ourselves," Zsar't'lac returned. "Let them take care of their own problems. Con Noate is a good Commander."

"They are part of our problem," Eivaunee returned, bending over to smell a white rose. "Jani told me that Aman is using the Comveckt to prove treason."

Zsar't'lac sat down on the stone path. "How can he? As you have said repeatedly, you haven't committed treason—with or without the Comveckt."

"What if the Comveckt arrives here, guns blazing?"

"What if the sun falls?" Zsar't'lac returned. "Why should the Comveckt come to the

Imperial Planet? It should be at the space dock being refitted for that new cannon Military High Command wants tested.”

“It should be, but maybe it’s not. Or maybe it has already been done. It took us three days to get here. The space dock is at the near edge of the Provinces. It would only take the Comveckt a day and a half to get here.”

“Again, why would the Comveckt come here? You made it clear they weren’t to try any wild rescues.”

“But what if I changed my mind? What if I commanded them to come to the Imperial Planet?” Eivaunee said softly, breaking off a rose.

“You wouldn’t,” Zsar’t’lac stated flatly.

“What if Con Noate thinks I did? What if a recording was made of my voice telling them to come here and attack the Palace?”

“But it wouldn’t have your signal signet,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out. “Con Noate could tell it wasn’t you.”

“What if transmission is cut off? Or if I imply there is no time for the signet? All Con Noate has is my voice telling him I need him here.”

“Yes, but...” Zsar’t’lac paused for a moment. “Yseu’s betrayal,” he said softly.

“Exactly. It is likely that she has been recording my voice every time I’ve been there, just in case. That would be like her.”

“Con Noate wants to save you,” Zsar’t’lac agreed. “The attack on the Palace would be proven treason. Especially if the Comveckt is destroyed and you are dead. No one for truth-drug questioning; the facts speak for themselves.”

“You should be grateful that the truth-drugs don’t work on you or they’d kill you.”

“The human species should be more grateful,” Zsar’t’lac returned. There was a hard edge to his voice.

“True,” Eivaunee said softly. His hand closed on the rose, crushing it. “The Comveckt has to be stopped.”

“First we need to be sure your guess is correct,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

Eivaunee sat down beside the alien. The stones were cold beneath him. “I’ve thought of that. I can’t make any attempts to contact the Comveckt. I can’t even try to find out where it is. You’ll have to do that.”

“I am still an officer of the ship,” Zsar’t’lac agreed. “I can come up with some lie that necessitate my contacting the ship.”

Eivaunee turned his head to look fully at his alien friend. “I didn’t think you ever lied.”

“Truth can be selectively revealed or hidden without actually telling a lie, but I don’t think that will work here.”

“So you will lie?”

“It will be necessary.”

“Hmmm, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Zsar’t’lac didn’t like it, but he knew he would go further against his cultural mores to ensure Eivaunee Dorlan’s survival.

“The time frame is important,” Zsar’t’lac changed the subject slightly.

“I’ve thought about that, too,” Eivaunee answered. “They wouldn’t send the message until we were here, maybe even not right away. My guess is that the message went out this morning, with a hyper-curve priority. The Comveckt would receive it within hours.”

“Two days would be enough to install the cannon,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

Eivaunee nodded. “It’s likely the Comveckt was at space dock this morning, but it could be here in two days if they pushed the Jumps.” There was a slight touch of panic in Eivaunee’s voice.

“In the message, you—meaning Hazdel and Aman—probably specified a time for the Comveckt to arrive,” Zsar’t’lac offered. “They need to be sure of having you some place where they could kill you quickly. Also they have to know when the Comveckt is coming out of hyperdrive to call off the attack if you agree to marry the Princess.”

Eivaunee nodded. “Probably want me somewhere like a prison cell,” Eivaunee suggested. He fought against the edge of panic rising in him. Everything he worked so hard for: keeping his Estates out of the Emperor’s control, keeping his officers and crew safe from the Emperor, he was going to lose.

“It wouldn’t have to be a prison cell,” Zsar’t’lac said gently, lightly touching the side of Eivaunee’s face, reassuring him. Eivaunee’s high fear level wasn’t productive. “Any place where someone is close by to kill you would work.”

Eivaunee took a deep breath, steadying himself. He drank in Zsar’t’lac reassurance. He didn’t mind dying; it had even reached the point where death was a pleasant thought. But for so many people to die because of him! His officers and crew killed; the Dorlan retainers controlled by the Emperor, even the possibility of interstellar war if Zsar’t’lac was foolish.

“A consideration, my Commander,” Zsar’t’lac said, his voice still soft; his long fingertips still touching Eivaunee’s face. “What if the cannon is part of the plot? What if the cannon is rigged to self-destruct when used?”

Eivaunee looked into the alien’s black eyes. “I hadn’t thought of that.” He couldn’t decide if the cannon destroying the Comveckt was better or worse than their being destroyed fighting the battleships that protected the Imperial Planet.

“I will find out if the Comveckt is still at the space dock,” Zsar’t’lac promised. “We meet with the Emperor in two hours?”

“It not a ‘we’ situation, Zsar.”

“I wasn’t planning on asking,” the alien stated, his hand dropping from the side of his friend’s face.

Eivaunee shrugged. Boldness might work. If not, the Emperor would simply order the alien out. Some orders Zsar’t’lac had to obey. “The meeting is in slightly less than two hours,” he

confirmed.

"I will be back here in one hour," Zsar't'lac promised as he rose to his feet. "With some idea of where the Comveckt is, or is not."

Eivaunee watched Zsar't'lac walk back towards the Palace with the powerful confidence that was always his. Eivaunee envied him.

Military High Command was housed in a building halfway between the tall outer walls of the Imperial compound and the main Palace buildings. It was an old, round nondescript building. Zsar't'lac walked in without being challenged. The guard thought about asking him his business, but the alien was past him before he could make up his mind.

From his studies of the layout of the Palace and surrounding buildings, Zsar't'lac knew Military High Command's Communication Center was on the third floor. He took the automatic chute up. He would have preferred the stairs, but humans rarely used them and Zsar't'lac didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he naturally did.

A sweet-natured human female sat at a reception desk in an outer office area of the Communications Center. "May - may I help you?" she was a little flustered by his unexpected appearance.

"Yes, thank you," Zsar't'lac replied, his voice low and sweet. "I was wondering if the Comveckt was still at space dock in the Provinces?"

"I could check?" the woman offered. "Is there some problem?" Under most circumstances she would never have questioned why a senior officer was wondering where his ship was. He had every right to know, but with Master Dorlan's recall, it wasn't exactly a normal situation.

"Nothing important," Zsar't'lac reassured her with a gentle human-style smile. "I left some personal belongings behind, and since I may be here longer than I expected, I was hoping to get them shipped to me."

"Of course," the matronly woman understood completely. "It would be easier to ship them from there."

"Exactly," Zsar't'lac agreed.

"It will only take me a moment."

Zsar't'lac waited patiently.

"I'm very sorry," the woman told him a few moments later. "They left the space dock a couple hours ago. They are Jumping to Sector 7, near Calgar 5. A long Jump, actually. They'll be out of communications contact until sometime late tomorrow. You could send a message to them there. If it is sent with a hyper curve boost, it would beat them there."

"That's all right, I'll come back tomorrow and check on the situation. Thank you," Zsar't'lac said gently, touching the side of the woman's face. He transmitted gentle reassurance with his touch. The woman smiled.

Zsar't'lac left the Communications section and took the chute up to the top floor where Jite Dennyson had his offices. If necessary, he would come back tomorrow and see if the Comveckt

arrived at Calgar 5. He didn't think it would.

Eivaunee sat on the cold stones for a minute or two after Zsar't'lac walked away, then made up his mind. There was one other person who knew what was going on. It wasn't likely she'd help him, but he had to try. And he had an offer in mind she might consider.

Moerit stood in the middle of her blue and gilt receiving room, her expression wary. There was no one else present. "So, you've finally come to me."

"I tried Aman last night," Eivaunee said quietly.

"Yes, he told me this morning."

"Did it amuse you?" Eivaunee asked sharply. He didn't intend to begin this way, but he was finding seeing the Princess more difficult than he thought; and he hadn't thought it would be easy.

"Not really, more like pathetic," Moerit answered, her tone neutral.

"You and Aman have worked out an alliance," Eivaunee observed. He began pacing the elegant room.

"We're not lovers," Moerit stated flatly.

Eivaunee paused in his pacing. "I didn't think you were. I was angry when I accused you of that."

"And what are you now?" Moerit inquired, her tone neutral; her expression giving nothing away.

"Desperate," Eivaunee stated truthfully.

"So I would think if you've come to me."

Neither said anything for a long moment. Eivaunee stopped pacing and faced her fully. "Once we helped each other," Eivaunee said softly. "Once we were friends."

There was a subtle shifting in the Princess' expression, a slight, very slight, softening. "It was a long time ago."

"Was it?" Eivaunee asked back softly. "In experience, certainly. After the rapes, you were ... kind and understanding."

There was an indecipherable expression in the Princess' eyes. "I don't want your death," she repeated what she had said before. "But I may not be able to stop it. You should sign the marriage contract."

Eivaunee sat down in one of the delicate small chairs. It wasn't proper Imperial etiquette, like not kneeling when he came in, he didn't think she'd care. Not with him. Not in private. "Look, Moerit, I don't really give a damn if I live or die. I could take my mother's way out and like it."

"Don't," the Princess said gently. "It's...it's very final."

Eivaunee smiled slightly. "Really?"

"I don't want your death," Moerit repeated.

"I know," Eivaunee said quietly. "If you did, I'd put that on the bargaining table, too."

Moerit smiled very slightly. "So what are you offering me then?"

"Half the Dorlan Estates."

Moerit's finely plucked eyebrows rose. "Avoiding marriage with me is worth that much to you?"

Eivaunee leaned forward, towards the Princess. "I really don't care one way or the other about marrying you, Moerit," he said truthfully. "If other things weren't involved, I'd say it was a reasonable alliance, for us, at least. The Consenti families would scream to the stars."

"Let them," Moerit said, her expression continued to soften.

"And I would want to father the heir."

"A reasonable point of view. You spoke of 'other things' being the problem. Specify what they are."

"Your father is the largest one. I won't let him control the Dorlan wealth or my retainers. Truthfully, I don't want you to, either."

Moerit looked mildly interested in Eivaunee's reply. "And if my father wasn't Emperor?"

Eivaunee looked into her face. Casual interest was all that was there, but the question could not be casual. Eivaunee said nothing at first. He exhaled softly. "I won't give you anything to support a treason charge."

"You never were very trusting," Moerit observed.

"In my position, would you be?"

"No, but the question was simply a matter of curiosity."

No, it wasn't. That question could never be simply a matter of curiosity.

"Zsar't'lac said there were plots within plots," Eivaunee commented. "He said you said that."

"Imperial politics are always convoluted," Moerit pointed out mildly. "You know that." She turned her hand over to examine her well-manicured nails. "Zsar't'lac is going to be mine," she stated. "The captain of my guards."

"He'll decide that," Eivaunee returned.

The Princess' eyes rose to meet Eivaunee's. They were cold and hard. "No, I will."

"As you will," Eivaunee said with a shrug; Zsar't'lac could fight his own battles much better than Eivaunee. "I'm more concerned with the Dorlan Estates. Does my offer interest you?"

The coldness retreated from Moerit's eyes, replaced by a look that could almost be called sympathetic. "It's gone too far, Eivaunee. It can't be stopped now."

Eivaunee snapped to his feet, facing the Princess. "Then why bother with this meeting this afternoon? Why the marriage contract offer?"

Moerit paused before answering, obviously considering her words well. "Although some things can't be stopped, they can be viewed in different ways. Especially if you're alive and can be questioned under truth drugs."

Eivaunee understood; he understood very well. The Comveckt was enroute to the Imperial

Planet; it couldn't be stopped. He and Zsar't'lac had been wrong about that. But the attack on the Palace could be viewed as treason by Eivaunee, or as the actions of a group of loyal, desperate officers, all of whom would be dead. The Comveckt was doomed; it couldn't be stopped. His fate was still negotiable.

Eivaunee wouldn't accept that the Comveckt was lost. "With the proper knowledge, anything can be stopped," he stated. If he knew when the Comveckt would arrive, he could be in the communications center; he would order them not to attack the Palace.

"Not in this case," Moerit said softly.

So the Comveckt had been ordered to come out of the Jump, guns blazing. Or maybe just one cannon.

"They did nothing wrong!" Eivaunee knew he shouldn't give so much away, but he didn't want the officers and crew to die because of their loyalty to him.

Moerit stared for a long moment at Eivaunee's face. She knew he had solved the puzzle of how he would be charged with treason. "Don't be so stupid with anyone else," she told him coldly. "You can die sooner rather than later. It makes no difference. It can't be altered, or stopped. As for your statement: they will be committing treason."

"They don't know it's a trap," Eivaunee countered flatly.

"If the possibility doesn't occur to them, then they are fools."

Actually that was the one slight ray of hope. Con Noate was a cautious man. But how careful would he be if he believed his Commander's life was at stake?

Eivaunee was breathing deeply, his eyes staring into the Princess'.

"You can't save everyone, Eivaunee," she offered softly.

"I can try to save some."

"You will fail this time."

Neither said anything more for a long moment, both knew what lay at the core of Eivaunee's desire to save those that he could; the three-year child hadn't been able to save the one person he desperately wanted to, his mother.

"There are risks; they know it; they're taking them. They lose. It's that simple." Moerit summed it up.

"Is that how you sleep at night?" Eivaunee asked coldly. "Simply not caring about anyone but yourself?"

"You have no idea how I sleep at night," the Princess returned coldly.

"Thank god for small mercies."

"You felt differently once," Moerit pointed out just as coldly.

"Sex is a biological drive," Eivaunee countered. "You shouldn't take it personally."

The Princess slapped him. Hard.

Eivaunee was expecting it, his head tilted with the blow defusing some of its impact. It still stung, but his words had as well. He knew one of Moerit's weaknesses was her vanity about her appearance, about her desirability. And he had been lying. He did desire her; he had since adolescence, but he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

"Taking quite a bit after your father," Eivaunee observed calmly. "Yes, you're getting very

much like him.” He knew she would hate that as well.

“Get out!” Moerit told him, her face contorted with anger. “Fry in hell for all I care!”

Eivaunee performed a graceful bow in leaving.

* * * * *

There were two guardsman posted outside the door to Jite Dennyson’s office, and a stern-faced woman sat at a desk in the anteroom in front of his office.

“Is he expecting you?” she asked the alien coldly, obviously knowing the answer.

“No, but I expect he’ll see me anyway,” Zsar’t’lac answered gently.

The woman sniffed in response, a world of disbelief in the single sound. She spoke softly into a small microphone embedded in her wrist. The conversation continued briefly. Dennyson was close enough that Zsar’t’lac could feel his emotions. Dennyson wanted to talk to the unusual alien, but he was worried about a disagreeable scene developing. Zsar’t’lac’s felt, then heard, Dennyson’s decision not to see him.

“Tell him if he doesn’t see me, I will visit his wife,” the alien countered, “and discuss the matter with her.”

The grey-haired woman stared stonily at the alien, obviously displeased with such blatant blackmail. “Tell him,” Zsar’t’lac commanded.

The threat was relayed and Dennyson chose the lesser of two evils.

Jite Dennyson’s office was elegantly spartan. The walls were paneled in a pale-colored real wood, but had few ornamentations. There was a fine wood table, several chairs, and a large desk in the room. That was all. Zsar’t’lac pulled one of the chairs over in front of the desk and sat down without waiting for an invitation. Dennyson said nothing, sitting behind his desk, clearly angered.

“Given your manners, I don’t think you’ll last long at Court,” Dennyson observed.

“I can be quite difficult to kill,” Zsar’t’lac observed.

“I suspect that will be determined,” Dennyson replied coolly. “Now what exactly is so important?”

“Eivaunee’s impending murder.”

“There is talk of a treason trial. Nothing about murder.”

“He has committed no treason, but will be killed before being charged with treason. I believe that qualifies as murder—even at Court.”

“Rumors are constant here. If you live long enough, you will learn not to pay much attention to them.” Dennyson was condescending in his tone.

“This rumor comes from the Emperor,” Zsar’t’lac replied. “A reliable source, I would think.”

“Not always,” Dennyson returned casually. “His Majesty says things for various reasons. Some of what he says is the truth, some isn’t. It depends on what best serves his interests. If

Eivaunee believes he truly is in danger, he will sign the marriage contract.”

“You think he should sign the marriage contract?”

“In the long run, it is the only way he will survive,” Dennyson stated flatly.

“It could be unpleasant for a variety of people if the Emperor gains the Dorlan wealth.”

“So long as Eivaunee lives, the Emperor can’t control it completely.”

“How long will Eivaunee live after he and Moerit are married?”

“His safety is your responsibility,” Dennyson pointed out coldly.

“No one can completely guarantee another person’s safety.”

“I thought you believed yourself very superior to us humans.” Dennyson’s tone was snide.

“I am superior,” Zsar’t’lac returned quietly. He decided there was little point in continuing the conversation. He had probed Jite Dennyson’s emotions enough. The Consenti was not directly involved in the plot against Eivaunee, but he do nothing to save him, either.

“I am superior,” Zsar’t’lac repeated as he stood up. “As you are a coward.”

Color flooded Dennyson’s face. “You are dismissed!” Jite commanded the alien.

Zsar’t’lac paused as though considering the matter, then smiled slightly. “As you will,” he said softly mocking.

“He’s having a bad day,” Zsar’t’lac informed the female aide as he left.

Zsar’t’lac found Eivaunee seated on the stone pathway in another part of the garden. He had moved in case an audio pick-up had been installed near their last location. It wasn’t likely, but there was no point in taking the chance.

Eivaunee was projecting his fears quite strongly. Zsar’t’lac had to put up a mental barrier to keep them from beating too strongly on his mind.

“More trouble?” he asked as he walked up.

“I went to see Moerit. I offered her half the Dorlan Estates to buy her to our side. She said it has gone too far, that it can’t be stopped.”

“The Comveckt?”

“Yes,” Eivaunee returned. “I let her know that I knew their plan.”

“Not the best idea.”

“It just happened,” Eivaunee snapped. “She said that nothing could prevent what was going to happen. I think the Comveckt has been told to come out of the Jump firing on the Palace!”

Zsar’t’lac was silent for a moment, considering. “That is not like Con Noate,” he pointed out.

“But what if he believes I ordered exactly that? What if he believes it’s necessary to save my life?”

“That might overcome his natural caution,” Zsar’t’lac allowed.

“Even if the cannon isn’t rigged to destroy the ship, there’s two Star class battleships in orbit here. Two to one odds, plus the Palace defenses. They can’t win.”

“It would be an interesting challenge,” Zsar’t’lac agreed, in his own way.

“Fuck you and your god-damn ‘challenges’,” Eivaunee returned coldly. He wanted someone, something to attack. “These are people you know. I thought you liked some of them.”

“Some are reasonable,” Zsar’t’lac conceded. “But that doesn’t change anything. They have their problems and we have ours. They are linked, but not the same. Our focus has to be solving our problem.”

Eivaunee wanted to hit Zsar’t’lac, simply as release of tension, and as a way to deny his words. “They are my officers, my crew. I won’t abandon them.”

“You have other considerations,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out gently. “It may not be possible to save everyone.”

Zsar’t’lac’s words echoed the Princess’. It didn’t improve Eivaunee’s mood.

“If the ship doesn’t attack the Palace, I can’t be accused of treason. Solving one problem solves the other,” Eivaunee bit out the words, angry that Zsar’t’lac didn’t see such an obvious answer.

“We cannot contact them while they are in a Jump, and we have no idea where they will come out until they are at the Palace. And we do not know when that will be.”

“We have to try somehow, someway to stop them,” Eivaunee repeated.

“If the situation allows it, yes.”

Eivaunee was silent for a moment, staring straight ahead. Then his thin eyelids slid down, sheltering his eyes. Zsar’t’lac could feel an opening in Eivaunee’s emotions, a crack that ran deep inside. “I don’t want this! I don’t want people to die for me.”

Eivaunee’s friend had died because of him, but not for him. This was something more than a friend’s death, however dear the friend. A darkness ran through this pain, searing to Eivaunee’s core. Gentleness was bound in. And love, too. At least the memory of love. Then the pain was shut away and Zsar’t’lac couldn’t feel it any more, but where it had been was now a cold emptiness.

“People make their own choices, Eivaunee,” Zsar’t’lac said gently. He wasn’t sure what else to say.

Slowly, the thin eyelids raised. “They should find out if their sacrifice is wanted.”

The alien reached out his hand. Eivaunee pushed it aside. “Don’t touch me.” Eivaunee got back to his feet wearily. “We meet with the Emperor soon.”

The two walked back to the small suite of rooms in silence. Upon entering, Eivaunee went directly to lie down on the large bed. Zsar’t’lac watched him, uncertain of how to help.

Eivaunee lay quietly. Death would come soon, he knew. Truthfully, it couldn’t come soon enough. Even a night with Aman didn’t concern Eivaunee just now. It was simply the mountain pass he had to pass through to gain the valley of death. His only real regret was that Zsar’t’lac would try to kill Aman. Maybe he would even succeed, but Eivaunee doubted it.

He couldn’t stop Zsar’t’lac. He never controlled the alien messiah, now even less than in the

past. Zsar't'lac would do as he chose. If he died, there would be war with the Norda Homelands, but Eivaunee wouldn't be here to see it. He had done what he could. He remembered a line of poetry from somewhere: "Embracing death like a lover." That was how he felt. Death would be sweet surcease from the pain of living.

The commsole sounded. Eivaunee made no move to answer it. It chimed again. "There isn't anyone I want to talk to," Eivaunee told the alien. They now knew Hazdel and Aman's plan, but the knowledge gained them nothing. They couldn't stop the Comveckt.

Zsar't'lac ignored Eivaunee's words and answered the commsole. "It's Anati," he told Eivaunee. "She wants to talk to you."

Eivaunee got up slowly. He walked over to the commsole, his emotions dead; his mind shut off. He didn't care about anything or anyone. He couldn't; the price of caring was too high. He sat down in front of the screen. He didn't look at Anati, his eyes focused somewhere beyond her.

"Are you...are you all right?" Anati asked, concerned with Eivaunee's lack of expression.

"Better than I'll be later tonight," Eivaunee answered casually. "When Aman is done with me." He leaned his head back against the top of the tall chair. He still didn't look at her eyes. "There isn't any point to this," he told her gently. "We said our good byes last night."

"I know," Anati answered. She hesitated then blurted out. "It...I'm...it worked, Eivaunee."

Eivaunee blinked. For a moment he couldn't think of what she was talking about. *What worked?* Then he understood. *Anati was pregnant.* "Are you sure?" Something, an undefinable emotion flickered in him.

"Yes."

Eivaunee looked at her face then and saw the tears running down. "Sure?" Eivaunee asked again; he had to know, had to be sure himself. Anati nodded.

Eivaunee looked at Zsar't'lac and saw the light red dancing in his large eyes. "She's sure," he told the alien.

"I heard."

The strange emotion that had flickered in Eivaunee now exploded. He wanted to jump in the air; he wanted to shout; he wanted to pound Zsar't'lac on the back. Silly things, all of them. And potentially dangerous. Eivaunee settled down. Anati and Zsar't'lac didn't think the child was in danger. Eivaunee wasn't as sure. He had to be careful what he said.

"Thank you," he told Anati softly. "Thank you very much." The words seemed so very small, considering the torrent of emotion in him, but they were the safest words to say.

"I love you," Anati said. "I always have."

There was a moment of silence, then Eivaunee began. "I...I..."

"Don't bother trying to say it," Anati said smiling. "You said the words in the past."

A lifetime ago. And since then he had denied them to himself a hundred times. But whether he loved Anati or not wasn't important. He was grateful, very grateful. And he knew that was

wrong. He wouldn't be here to raise this child; he should never have agreed to this. But he was very glad he had. He looked up at his alien friend.

"You will keep your word?"

Zsar't'lac caressed the side of Eivaunee's face. "Don't I always?"

"Yes, but..."

Zsar't'lac smiled. "Yes, Eivaun, I will keep my word," he gave the reassurance that was desired.

It would be all right, Eivaunee told himself. Zsar't'lac would protect the child. Anati would raise it. Eivaunee let himself feel the pleasure of the moment. "I wish you were here," he said. He wanted to kiss her, hold her. Say many things.

"Shall I come over? I could be there in a half hour."

"I'll be with the Emperor by then," Eivaunee told her. That meeting wasn't as frightening now. He would die; he understood that. Aman would do what he had always wanted to with Eivaunee, but that didn't matter. It didn't matter, not because Eivaunee was dead inside, but because something good, something very good had happened. Anati was going to have his child.

"Thank you," Eivaunee said again, his amber eyes brilliant. He touched the button that ended the conversation and leaned his head back against the chair. "This is all wrong, Zsar't'lac," Eivaunee said with no regret in his voice.

Zsar't'lac knelt by Eivaunee's chair. "No, it isn't," he disagreed, capturing Eivaunee hands between his, and holding them. Eivaunee smiled. He would have preferred Anati, but she wasn't here and Zsar't'lac was.

The alien eyes danced with light red fire. Eivaunee smiled sweetly. After a moment more spent enjoying the thought of having a child, Eivaunee stood up. "Time to get ready for our meeting."

Eivaunee hummed a child's lullaby while he showered. He dressed with precise care, and Zsar't'lac's help, in black and gold. The color combination he looked best in. He wasn't vain, but for the most important meeting of his life, he would look his best.

"You can't be stupid about Aman," Eivaunee pointed out as he finished dressing. "You have to keep your word."

"I will keep my word," the alien reiterated.

Eivaunee wanted him to promise not to kill Aman, but he could scarcely ask for that with the audio pickups in the room. And they didn't have time for a fight. He would have a few moments with Zsar't'lac later. Hazdel would grant him that surely. Eivaunee would make him promise not to try to kill Aman.

Chapter 22

Two guards stood at attention outside the Emperor's smaller throne room. Both were large and capable, but Zsar't'lac didn't think they would be difficult to kill. He didn't plan Eivaunee's survival based on blasting their way out of the Palace at this point; he had another plan. Still, no plan was guaranteed. It was proper to evaluate the capabilities of the guards.

They didn't stop the alien from entering with Eivaunee. The two had been seen together frequently, even in the Emperor's Presence. Surely the alien must be expected if he so confidently walked in.

"He was not invited!" Aman spoke sharply on seeing the alien. He stood to the left of the throne.

"This meeting was an invitation?" Zsar't'lac asked as he matched Eivaunee in going down to one knee. His head, however, was held high. "If we have a choice...?"

The Emperor chuckled, obviously in a good mood. Why shouldn't he be? Eivaunee, finally, was going to be sensible. Hazdel leaned against the tall back of the gold throne.

The Princess stood to the right of the throne. She had no delusions about Eivaunee's decision, but said nothing to her father. Her hand rested on the top of the throne, a possessive gesture. Wrei Ptreet, the Emperor's chief advisor, and the Empress' brother, stood behind the throne.

"It was *not* an invitation," the Emperor corrected his favorite. "It was a command. And it didn't include you." His voice, though harsh as always, wasn't angry.

"It should have," Zsar't'lac returned gently. "You have Aman, Master Ptreet, and your daughter. Eivaunee should have someone on his side."

"No!" Aman countered angrily. "This is more of his arrogance."

Zsar't'lac raised a thin eyebrow. "Which one of us is more arrogant, I wonder?"

The Emperor chuckled again. "A good point," he commented. "It would be difficult to decide."

"He is..."

"Be silent! It is for me to decide, Aman!"

A moment passed in silence. It surprised Eivaunee that Zsar't'lac said nothing more. Then another moment of silence.

"Very well," Hazdel finally said. "You may stay."

So, Eivaunee thought, *Hazdel had been testing Zsar't'lac, seeing if he could remain silent. An easy test to pass when you're an emotional empath and can feel the testing aspect in the Emperor's emotions.*

"Your answer now, Eivaunee, and we can set the date for the wedding." The Emperor tapped his fingers against the lion-headed arm of the throne. "And you can begin deciding which of your

people will be transferred to your Home Estate.”

Eivaunee’s head remained slightly bent. He didn’t want the Emperor to see his expression too soon. Slowly then, he raised his head. “No marriage,” he said with finality.

The Emperor’s expression turned cold and hard. “You prefer death? You prefer Aman?!” The Emperor’s voice rose sharply.

“No,” Eivaunee said softly. “But I have committed no treason. I will trust...”

“In justice?” Hazdel finished coldly. “You’ll get what you deserve from me!”

“I will trust in the intelligence and the integrity of the entitled Consenti. Whatever you have planned, Hazdel; they will not believe a lie.”

“They will believe what it is in their best interests to believe.” Aman stated with cold satisfaction.

“Exactly,” Eivaunee agreed. “And it is *not* in their best interest for the Dorlan Estates to be in the Emperor’s control. That is what I meant by intelligence.”

There was silence for a long moment. It was the end of a long and tortuous road. Whatever happened after this moment, this was the end of any attempt at peaceful co-existence between Eivaunee Dorlan and the Emperor. One or the other had to die after this.

“I have given you every chance, Eivaunee Dorlan.” The Emperor’s voice was cold with anger. “Every opportunity to live! Your mother has to understand that. What you have chosen is nothing less than the suicide she chose. So be it! Aman can do with you what he chooses.”

The Emperor’s Favorite laughed. Zsar’t’lac looked at Moerit, trying to probe her emotions, but they were as closed as her expression. He could feel nothing. The alien glanced at Eivaunee, whose head was raised, fearlessly meeting the Emperor’s anger.

There was little emotion in the golden human other than a bit of relief that it was over and settled. And a touch of hidden pleasure lingering from his conversation with Anati.

“I don’t think indulging Aman in this matter is in your best interests,” Zsar’t’lac said quietly to the Emperor.

“Shut up, you!” Aman snarled.

“I do not take commands from you,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out casually.

“Actually, he’s not very good at taking commands from anyone,” Eivaunee commented mildly, settling back on his heels. He had not idea what Zsar’t’lac was trying to do here; it didn’t matter much to Eivaunee. Not even a night with Aman seemed all that bad. One night. And then death. Zsar’t’lac would keep his promise; his child would live. “Despite that drawback, he is worth more than any human I’ve ever known,” Eivaunee added.

“Such a kind compliment,” Zsar’t’lac murmured.

The interchange annoyed the Emperor. Eivaunee’s lack of fear pushed at the Emperor’s temper, and his pride. “Why is this not in my best interest?” Hazdel demanded sharply.

“He will try to...”

“Shut up, Aman!” the Emperor snarled. “Explain this to me!” he commanded the alien coldly.

“Have you ever seen Eivaunee stripped?” the alien asked softly, his tone low and seductive.

“Zsar!” Eivaunee didn’t know what the alien had planned, but he didn’t like how it was beginning.

“No,” the Emperor said coldly. “It ...would not be appropriate.”

“I have,” the alien told him. “For a human, he is exquisite. Pale-golden and sweet.”

“Zsar’t’lac, stop it!” Eivaunee commanded. Rape by Aman, even with the violence, was

preferable to the Emperor who had killed his parents.

"He is a child. I have no interest in children." Hazdel was firm in his reply. He twisted a long lock of his dark brown hair.

"He is no child," Zsar't'lac returned, the seductive tones lingering in his voice. "He is a full-grown man. But he is not for you. You are wise to know this. He should not be for Aman, either. That is not in your best interests."

"What I do with a traitor has nothing to do with the Emperor," Aman stated coldly.

"But it does. In two ways." Zsar't'lac said nothing more, waiting, letting the curiosity grow.

Hazdel fought a battle within himself, and curiosity, mingled with self-interest won.

"What are these two ways?" he demanded contemptuously.

Eivaunee said nothing; Zsar't'lac had allayed his worse fears. Now he, too, wondered what the large alien would say.

"The first reason has to do with Eivaunee's sweet body. You have desired him for many years."

"As you say, he is not for me."

"True, but why should he be for Aman? Aman doesn't love you; he may be more of a traitor than Eivaunee."

"That is a lie!" Aman snarled.

"Which part?" the alien asked softly. Considering what he had felt in Aman before, and the sharp spike of fear now, Zsar't'lac was sure Aman had plans for the throne. Plans that included the Princess. But he couldn't prove that to Hazdel now. It wouldn't hurt, though, to lay the ground work for later discussions.

"You still haven't answered why I shouldn't give Eivaunee to him?" Hazdel reminded the alien. "You have answered the question with a question."

"Sometimes it is best to begin that way," Zsar't'lac explained gently. "Think again of Eivaunee's body, then yours. How do they compare? You are over twice Eivaunee's age. How does aging Imperial majesty compare with splendid, virile youth, when it is laid in bed, with no clothes to hide behind?"

"It doesn't...matter," Aman said awkwardly, finally understanding where the alien was going. "I love Hazdel Toneki. And there will be no bed for Eivaunee Dorlan, he will be chained to the wall."

"That changes nothing," the alien said firmly. He looked directly at Hazdel. "He never obeys you, does he? You told him to shut up."

"Lovers are never easy to command," Hazdel offered quietly, his eyes and emotions troubled.

"He has worked and schemed very hard for this night of pleasure. He must desire Eivaunee very much."

"Yes," the Emperor agreed.

"It is revenge," Aman countered. "Not desire."

"And afterwards what memories he will have—memories of a violent, brutal ravaging of a young, sweet body? How will he look at you, with such memories in his mind? The comparisons will not be kind." Zsar't'lac's voice was gentle and compassionate. "And with you he cannot indulge in the violent pleasures he likes best."

"It isn't like that!" Aman countered hotly, knowing it would be—if Hazdel lived long enough, which Aman didn't intend. "Remember our plan!" he told Hazdel earnestly.

"This has no part in your plan," Zsar't'lac countered firmly. "Rather Aman's desires interfere with them."

"What do you know of our plan?" Hazdel asked coldly.

"Nothing past what you have said," the alien lied without compunction. "You intend to kill Eivaunee and prove treason afterwards. This indulgence in Aman's lust does not serve that plan," he repeated.

"Why?" the Emperor asked. The alien had his complete attention. If the alien could prove this harmed their plan ...

"By giving Eivaunee to Aman, before he is even accused of treason, you are inferring your own guilt."

"How?"

"Because you are acting as though there will be no consequence to your actions. How could that be unless you already have Eivaunee's death planned?"

"I told you that," Wrei Ptreet agreed with the alien. "Aman's desires harm your cause."

"It is my plan!" the tall, slender Favorite pointed out hotly.

"And it is a good one," the Emperor agreed. "With one change."

"No!" Aman countered angrily. "He is mine!"

"You can always fuck his dead body," Moerit pointed out without sympathy.

Aman glared at her. "The Consenti will do as they are told. They will not risk their Estates. We risk nothing by my actions."

"Wrong," Zsar't'lac replied. "The Consenti families never want to see one of their own rise in status, but still less will that like one of their own brought so low. They will be less tractable after Eivaunee is brutally raped. Self interest begins to motivate them. You firmly control only a minority of the Consenti, a second minority believe in Eivaunee. They will not agree to the treason charge, regardless of what evidence you present. The middle group is the important one; those committed to neither side. They are the ones you need to convince of Eivaunee's treason. The brutal rape preceding the murder, looks too suspicious. Will you risk all your plans to give Aman a night of pleasure? Is it worth it to *you*, Your Majesty?"

"What is your interest in this, alien?" Aman challenged. "I cannot believe you are simply acting out of kindness to Eivaunee."

"You would find that difficult to believe," the alien agreed with a touch of sarcasm. "And I should remind Your Majesty that if Eivaunee dies, and is not convicted of treason, I get one third of the Dorlan Estates."

"Then why are you helping us convict him of treason?" Aman asked coldly. "It doesn't make sense."

"Not to a human," Zsar't'lac agreed.

"Zsar't'lac looks on controlling the Dorlan Estates as a burden. Wealth doesn't motivate him," Eivaunee added his bit.

The Emperor's heavy eyelids slid down a little, shielding his expression, considering this additional aspect to the situation. One he hadn't considered before. The alien with control of one third of the Dorlan Estates. That was worse than Eivaunee controlling them. Also with so much land and power, the alien could never be brought under proper control. That couldn't be allowed.

"What do you suggest?" the Emperor inquired with deceptive quietness. Behind his words was a dagger of emotion. Better to kill the alien than let him control one third of the Dorlan Estates.

"It is not necessary to imprison Eivaunee. He simply has to be in a controlled environment where he can be killed quickly when the time comes," Zsar't'lac summarized the Emperor's main criteria for Eivaunee's immediate future.

"With you, no doubt?" Aman asked sarcastically, conceding for the time being the battle for Eivaunee's body.

"No," the alien answered. "You cannot trust that I will kill Eivaunee. It would be better to place him under Palace arrest and have him accompanied by two trusted Imperial Guards wherever he goes. When the time comes, they will kill him for you."

"Why are you so helpful?" Moerit asked coldly. "I thought you were his friend?"

"His words," Zsar't'lac answered with a shrug. "Friendship is not a Hsassan concept," he said quite truthfully.

"Still, why betray him?"

"I haven't. I have even saved him from Aman. There my services end. I don't think Eivaunee can win this conflict, and I prefer to be on the winning side."

Eivaunee said nothing. Zsar't'lac was doing just fine so far.

"You do not care that he will die?" Wreit asked.

"I care, but I don't see how I can stop it. Hsassan rarely indulge in futile gestures of defense," the alien lied again. Futile gestures of defense were much admired among the Hsassan. To boldly die for a cause in a situation where there was no hope of winning was the subject of many Hsassan songs. No Hsassan wanted to live carefully; dying gloriously was much better. These humans wouldn't understand that, though. Zsar't'lac found that he was enjoying lying to these humans.

"I want you to serve my daughter," the Emperor told Zsar't'lac.

"Once this matter is finished," the alien agreed.

"True," Hazdel decided. "I don't want you residing in the Palace while this is being resolved."

"Resolved?" Eivaunee questioned. "A new word for murder?"

"You had your chance," Hazdel pointed out, leaning back against his throne. "You chose death—like your mother did. I offered her a throne as well. It must be genetic. Stupidity runs in your family."

"Stupidity? Or honor?" Eivaunee shot back.

"Preferring death to a throne is stupidity," Hazdel replied evenly.

"Before we begin discussing the terms of my service to the Princess, perhaps a demonstration would be appropriate?" Zsar't'lac intervened before the disagreement could escalate.

"That isn't necessary," Moerit commented. "Your abilities have been shown. And you are better at politics than I guessed."

"I'm better at a few things than you guess." Zsar't'lac offered her a pleasant, human-style smile. "Still, you've never seen me fight."

"You don't like to..." Eivaunee began, then stopped. Zsar't'lac had something in mind, obviously.

"An excellent suggestion," the Emperor agreed. "You can provide entertainment at tonight's dinner. I will have you fight—how many guards?"

"Three or four. See how it goes," Zsar't'lac suggested. "I don't know how good your guards are."

"Four," the Emperor decided. "I would like to challenge you."

Four Imperial guards wouldn't be much of a challenge, Eivaunee thought, depending on how

many were females. Zsar't'lac always had trouble being very aggressive against women.

"Well, everything is settled," Hazdel said. "Two guards are waiting outside, Eivaunee. They were to take you to prison, now they will escort you back to your living quarters. Zsar't'lac, for the remainder of today, you will attend with my daughter. Tonight you will provide entertainment for us, and tomorrow, you will report to the guards' barracks."

Nothing was said about where Zsar't'lac would spend the night, but the Princess' taste in lovers, as well as her interest in the alien, was well known. Assumptions could be made.

The Emperor looked directly at Eivaunee. "You had your chance. Now you will die as you deserve. I have waited too long to set my plans in motion. I need the income from your Estates."

"Nothing is settled yet, Your Majesty," Eivaunee's tone mocked the title. "I am not dead yet, nor do you do control my Estates."

"A matter of a few days only," Hazdel returned.

"Until my death?" Eivaunee asked, hoping an emotional response from the Emperor might give Zsar't'lac some information. "Or until the trial?"

"You are dismissed," Hazdel responded, waving a hand.

"He should be at the dinner tonight," Zsar't'lac suggested.

"What is this?" Aman asked astounded. "He is not a guest."

"Do you intend him to starve?" Zsar't'lac asked.

"He can eat in his quarters," Aman pointed out.

"Again, an assumption of guilt," the alien pointed out. He looked at the Emperor. "He isn't charged yet with treason. He normally would eat with the other Consenti at the Emperor's table."

"True," Hazdel agreed. "Besides, he may realize his mistake."

Also Hazdel wanted to see Eivaunee again, Zsar't'lac thought. Eivaunee was the child he had loved; a man he desired; an enemy who stood in his way. Love and hate, child, lover and enemy, all focused on one slightly built body. The Emperor would want to see that body and that delicate-boned face, while he could.

"You are all dismissed," Hazdel commanded. "I want to be alone."

The five retreated to the door. Only Ptreet looked back to see Hazdel playing with his hair and talking low to woman who had died over twenty-five years ago.

Chapter 23

“Don’t expect to manipulate me as easily as my father,” Moerit warned as they walked towards her suite of rooms.

Zsar’t’lac had bid a light farewell to Eivaunee without any apparent regrets. The golden human was puzzled over what Zsar’t’lac had in mind for the evening. Actually worried was more a correct term. Without saying too much Zsar’t’lac had tried to reassure him; he hadn’t succeeded. It didn’t matter. Eivaunee would learn what he planned at dinner.

“I merely gave your father a reason to do what he wanted,” Zsar’t’lac told the Princess. “He never wanted Aman to rape Eivaunee.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because he so readily agreed with my suggestions,” the alien returned. “Do you really think your father wanted Aman to play his games with Eivaunee?”

They took another couple of steps before the Princess answered briefly. “No.”

“So, you see, I helped him.” Zsar’t’lac was walking two paces behind the Princess Royal, as royal etiquette demanded. The Princess’ usual two bodyguards walked beside him.

“You have no interest in helping my father. Eivaunee was your only concern.”

“True,” the alien conceded easily.

The Princess glanced over her shoulder to look at the alien’s face, but he wasn’t interested in satisfying her curiosity, so his expression was quite unreadable. He was in a very Hsassan mood, fighting a battle that appeared lost.

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The two guards followed behind Eivaunee as he returned to the rooms he never thought he’d see again. Eivaunee was quite grateful to Zsar’t’lac. No prison, and particularly, no visit by Aman. Eivaunee felt practically light-headed. The rape had been what he feared most.

Eivaunee was worried about what Zsar’t’lac had planned for the evening. He wouldn’t be so foolish as to try to kill the Emperor at dinner, would he? Eivaunee had thought so at first, but on reflection, it wasn’t likely. That would be suicide—even for Zsar’t’lac. Still, the alien had something in mind. Zsar’t’lac didn’t like putting on gladiatorial fights for the amusement of the crowd. Whatever he had in mind, it was Zsar’t’lac’s concern. Eivaunee had his own work to do.

As soon as he was back in his rooms, Eivaunee began calling the entitled members of the Consenti. Exerting his easy charm, he flattered, cajoled and bribed, fighting the impending treason charge. Death would come, he had no fear of that. He would make no attempt to fight against that. All that mattered was that the Emperor not gain control of the Dorlan Estates.

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The room buzzed with the noise of too many people. The Imperial Dining Room was large, but tonight it seemed too small for all the people milling about. Anyone who could possibly wheedle the necessary invitation was there. The last appearance of Eivaunee Dorlan. Or maybe the second to the last. No one was quite sure on that. The uncertainty only made it better. It would be an evening worth talking about. It was even being said that the alien was going to put on some sort of fighting exhibition. Delicious. For the bored and restless people who lived at court, this would be an evening worth hours of discussion. Everyone wanted to say they were there.

Eivaunee did not disappoint in his appearance, dressed in a dark blue silk doublet shimmering with golden threads; deeply slashed sleeves, edged with gold carnelian crystals, displaying gold silk beneath. Around his slender waist was tied a gold sash, edged with real gold lace that matched the lace that fell from his wrists and neck. The closures down the front of the jacket were made of carnelian crystals surrounded by diamonds. His tight-fitting pants were a darker shade of blue with gold piping down the sides. Eivaunee seldom wore any jewelry beyond the golden interlinked S-chain that lay wide-set on his shoulders and the Dorlan family ring, plain gold with the Dorlan crest. Tonight, though, he wore a single exquisite sapphire in his left ear.

Friends and acquaintance crowded around him. Eivaunee was pleasant to everyone. When Patrice, Jiti Dennyson's wife, came towards him, Eivaunee lightly touched the arm of the man standing closest to him, nudging him aside, giving her room to approach. Eivaunee caught Patrice about her waist. He drew her in close and kissed her. It began as a kiss of welcome, but then Eivaunee drew her body closer, and the kiss became more than casual. Patrice returned it. Whether, like Eivaunee, it was a deliberate slight against her husband who refused to help an innocent man, or whether it meant something else, Eivaunee neither knew, nor cared.

After a moment, Eivaunee drew back, looking over Patrice's shoulder to where he knew her husband would be, a slight malicious smile touched his face as he met Jiti's angry eyes.

"Eivaunee!" A new voice demanded his attention.

He turned from Patrice, his smile becoming honest and warm. He caught Anati's hands in his. "Beautiful lady." He kissed her hands, cold with fear for him. He nuzzled them a little, as though to warm them.

"Eivaunee," Anati repeated softly. Her arms went around his neck, and as he raised his head, she kissed him.

He returned the kiss, but lightly. He had kissed Patrice to irritate Jiti; Anati meant too much to him for casual show.

The bell sounded for seating.

Eivaunee drew Anati's arm through his and they walked together up the wide room to the head table. He kissed her hand once more before they parted.

"Later?" Anati asked.

"I don't know," Eivaunee replied. He was seated next to the Princess, his usual place.

"So the little mouse still enthralls you," Moerit commented caustically as Eivaunee sat down.

"Better a mouse than a bitch," Eivaunee returned coolly.

"Perhaps," Moerit returned indifferently.

A light, slightly sweet wine was served with a cool vegetable soup. Both were excellent. Hazdel had many flaws, but his taste in wine and food weren't among them.

A *pate terrene* was being served when a small door opened in the center of the far wall and Zsar't'lac walked out. Even across the wide room, the alien looked impressive. More so because he was dressed again as a Hsassan. The deep V-neck, wrapped top accentuated his massive shoulders, while revealing the hard-banded muscles that ran across his chest and down his bare arms. On his upper right arm, as always, was the pierced goldwork armlet with a single red stone set in the center. Eivaunee knew now it was a parting gift from Zsar't'lac's beloved Sing'm'li.

As Zsar't'lac walked to the middle of the large room, ringed with tables, silence settled in the large room. The courtiers waited for the beginning of the evening's entertainment.

"For your enjoyment, the alien is going to fight four of my guards," Hazdel told the waiting people. "Come here," he commanded the waiting alien.

Zsar't'lac approached the Emperor and knelt easily, his back and neck held straight. Hazdel flicked a finger and four guards stepped down from behind the Emperor's table to kneel with their necks curved down and their heads bent over, as was proper.

Only one of the guards was female. Eivaunee was relieved.

"I wish an interesting contest," Hazdel Toneki said quietly, his voice carried easily throughout the room by miniature microphones. "You have your knife, alien?"

"Yes."

"The guards have vibro knives," the Emperor told him. "To even the odds a little."

"How far do you wish the contest to go?" Zsar't'lac asked. "First blood, unconsciousness, or death?"

Hazdel smiled thinly. "My guards are not to be killed," he replied. "But you aren't worth saving if you can't stop them."

Eivaunee felt a sudden stillness in the Princess next to him. This was news to her.

"He's not in much danger," Eivaunee reassured her.

"You have an odd friendship," Moerit told her curtly.

"Perhaps," Eivaunee agreed. "It's based on experience and respect. At least I hope he has some respect for me."

Moerit gave a quick grin. "One can only hope."

The Empress sat, as always, at the Emperor's right side. Silent, as she mostly was. Still, as Eivaunee looked at her, he wondered if this idea of a one-sided deadly combat was hers. The Empress' bastard son sat on the other side of her. An unprepossessing adolescent with pale, unhealthy skin, the Emperor never spoke to him. Few people at court did. The bastard's pale green eyes glittered in anticipation of the combat. The idea may have come from them, Eivaunee decided.

Zsar't'lac walked to the middle of the room where sonic barriers were being placed in a wide rectangle. The thin cone towers emitted a painful sonic jolt to anyone who broke the infrared lines, it was a precautionary measure for the audience's safety.

The five entered the rectangular fighting area. The sonic field was activated.

"At my command," the Emperor told them.

The four humans drew apart to the four corners, as widely spaced as they could be.

"Begin," the Emperor commanded.

The four humans shifted a little cautiously. Zsar't'lac hesitated not at all. He attacked the human to his right. He moved quicker than any one but Eivaunee expected. The alien was so large, it didn't seem reasonable that he could move so fast. Zsar't'lac didn't draw his knife; he doubted that would be necessary. He struck the man once with a closed fist to the side of his head. The human dropped unconscious to the floor.

Zsar't'lac spun quickly, turning to face the other three. They were moving towards him warily, brandishing their vibrating knives in front of them. They closed ranks a little, facing him in a wide line. The alien laughed slightly and charged the man in the middle. Running forward, he leapt upward. The man stumbled backwards; Zsar't'lac kicked him in the chin, and the man went down. Zsar't'lac was turning as he came down, so the knives of his other two opponents missed him.

He faced them, a short distance separating them. The woman attacked, her knife reaching outward. Zsar't'lac side-stepped. The woman adjusted quicker than anticipated; the knife cut slightly across the alien's stomach. A half-closed alien hand, the claws carefully sheathed, hit the woman firmly in her solar plexus. She doubled over, gasping for breath.

The last man attacked as Zsar't'lac hesitated for a moment, watching the woman, making sure he hadn't hit her too hard. The knife went halfway to its hilt in the alien's side before Zsar't'lac broke the man's wrist. He hit the human hard, directly in the chest; the human made a slight odd sound, and dropped to the floor. Not dead, but he might need a bit of medical attention to remain that way.

The audience was pleased. They clapped and called out to the alien. This was better than they expected. Zsar't'lac ignored them; they figured into his plans for the evening, but only in a very passive way. He didn't need their approval; he had something very different in mind. Soon they would feel what he wanted them to feel. It was early yet, although they thought his part in the entertainment was over.

Zsar't'lac turned to face the Emperor. "Are you satisfied now?" he asked. His tone was overwhelmingly arrogant, his stance equally so. No entertainer, or courtier, had ever addressed the Emperor so arrogantly. Only one human, slender and golden, had ever challenged the Emperor in his own dining room. He had very nearly died that night. This wasn't quite so bad...yet.

"Kneel!" the Emperor commanded coldly.

Zsar't'lac smiled slightly, and considered the matter.

"For god's sake, Zsar't'lac, kneel!" Eivaunee shouted at his friend.

Zsar't'lac strolled over to stand in front of the Emperor, and there, in his own good time, he

knelt. As usual, there was nothing submissive in the gesture, his head was held high.

The Emperor's eyes glittered with fury, as the color rose in his face. "I have tolerated enough of your arrogance! You will be flogged. Now."

Zsar't'lac did a human-style shrug. He looked over at Eivaunee.

"He cannot save you," the Emperor stated coldly.

"I doubt he wants to," Zsar't'lac returned. "He has often wished to flog me."

The Emperor turned his head to look at Eivaunee. Eivaunee understood why Zsar't'lac wanted him to be the one that held the whip. He remembered that Zsar't'lac had said that if anyone else ever flogged him, he would feel compelled to kill that person. Eivaunee knew that whatever Zsar't'lac had in mind, he didn't want to have to kill an innocent man. But what did he have in mind? Why had he pushed matters so far?

"Do you wish to flog him?" the Emperor asked Eivaunee.

"Yes," the golden human replied, meaning it, irritated at not knowing what scheme Zsar't'lac had in mind.

"Thirty lashes. And any blow that lands too light will be repeated," Hazdel Toneki stated.

"They won't land light," Eivaunee promised. Thirty wasn't too bad a punishment; Eivaunee had feared worse. Apparently, despite the Emperor's anger, Hazdel wanted to discipline the alien, not maim him.

Guards set up a cross in front of the Emperor's table.

The dinner guests were silent. The situation had changed so abruptly, no one seemed quite sure why. Only one person had ever deliberately provoked the Emperor so badly that he had been flogged at dinner. Did the alien have so little knowledge of Imperial etiquette? Was he stupid? It was unlikely that the Chamberlain hadn't explained Imperial etiquette to the alien, so that left stupidity. Somehow that didn't seem like a good explanation, either.

Zsar't'lac untied his top and dropped it on the floor, as he walked over the cross. He gripped the crossbeams. Electronic restrainers clicked down on his wrists. One of the guards handed Eivaunee a whip, leather with short, sharp cutting points along the tip.

Eivaunee took a deep breath. His brief anger towards Zsar't'lac had passed; he didn't want to do this. He focused for a long moment on his regret so Zsar't'lac would feel it. He didn't want to hurt Zsar't'lac and he wanted him to know that. Then he took a wide-legged stance and raised his arm. Eivaunee's well muscled arm drew back and then the whip fell across the alien's shoulders with a startling crack.

Ten hard lashes landed in quick succession. Eivaunee knew waiting for the blow to land added to the torment. He paused for a moment; his arm needed a brief rest. Where the lash had landed, there were tears in the alien's flesh. Not the deep, cutting tears a human would have, but still painful. Dark yellow blood began to flow.

Zsar't'lac made no sound. He didn't even flinch away from the lash when it landed. Eivaunee didn't know how any sentient being could have that much restraint.

“Continue,” the Emperor commanded.

Eivaunee began again. He was trying to aim the lash so it wouldn’t land on previous welts, but he couldn’t control it that well. The alien’s back was cross marked with blows. He was bleeding across most of his back where the knife tip lash had landed.

Eivaunee fought back an urge to cry. He didn’t want to see his friend like this, brought down by Hazdel.

Finally the last blow landed. Eivaunee threw the whip aside. He started towards his friend as the guards released the restrainers.

“Return to your seat!” the Emperor snapped at Eivaunee, who hesitated, then turned aside to comply with the Emperor’s command.

The alien’s powerful body didn’t even sag when the supports were removed. He turned towards the Emperor and knelt, his movements a less graceful than usual, but his back still proud and unbent.

“I trust you have learned your lesson,” the Emperor said coldly, choosing to ignore that high-held head.

“Yes, Your Majesty, I have,” Zsar’t’lac returned quietly.

“You are dismissed! Tomorrow you report to the guards’ barracks.”

“As Your Majesty wishes,” Zsar’t’lac replied, his tone of voice, though quiet, was not humble.

He stood up, almost awkwardly, and walked down the head table to stand in front of Eivaunee. There he knelt again. This time going down on both knees, and touching the backs of his hands to his forehead, the straight-held back curved over displaying the blood marks of the whip. The proud head curved down. Zsar’t’lac did not bow down to the floor; he was Qtesark, that far he couldn’t go, but the gesture was one of submission, clear even to the humans who watched.

The alien knelt to the Emperor because protocol demanded it. The gesture given to Eivaunee was not required by any etiquette. The alien served, and perhaps even loved, the golden human. He, and no one else. That was now quite clear.

Zsar’t’lac rose slowly to his feet, turning away to leave the overly opulent large room. He reached down to pick up his top as he walked across the silent room to the small door where he had entered. He kept scanning the human’s emotions, hoping they understood the display.

They did. The alien’s actions, much louder than any proclaimed words, told a cautionary tale to the watching humans. The alien was very hard to kill; and he served Eivaunee Dorlan, not the Emperor. Nothing, not even a flogging could change that. Anyone who hurt Eivaunee would answer to the alien. And no one, not even the Emperor, would stop it. It was unlikely that Eivaunee was in much danger from anyone but Hazdel and Aman, but Zsar’t’lac wanted to be sure. Humans had a tendency to turn on their fallen heroes.

Zsar’t’lac particularly focused on the Emperor’s emotions. Hazdel was realizing that he had been manipulated. Of all the people in the large room, only the Emperor had enough cunning to

understand, if belatedly, what the alien had done. Zsar't'lac could feel in that human's emotions a slight questioning of whether he should kill the alien. And he could feel the hard knife of jealousy aimed at Eivaunee Dorlan for inspiring such loyalty. And Hazdel's determination that the Dorlan line would come to an end. It was only a matter of degree. Hazdel was already committed to ending the Dorlans.

Chapter 24

Zsar't'lac felt the Princess' emotions as the door opened,- some concern and worry, stronger still was tingling desire. He lay, on his stomach, diagonally across the too short bed.

"You were magnificent!" the Princess said as she knelt on the floor, close by his head.

"I'm sore and tired," Zsar't'lac responded. "And not in the mood for games."

The Princess smiled and reached a hand to touch against the blood that hadn't been washed off yet. Zsar't'lac caught her wrist. "No," he told her firmly.

"A little taste?" the Princess asked sweetly.

Zsar't'lac tightened his grip for a moment, bruising the Princess. "I said no."

"You're hurting me."

Zsar't'lac released her wrist. "Go to bed, Princess. There is nothing here for you."

"Only for Eivaunee?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I am tired and sore and need to rest and let my body heal."

"I read in the report on you that you heal quickly, almost regenerate."

"Regeneration is possible. But I heal more quickly from sharp cuts or incisions. Flogging, particularly with knife-tipped whips, tears the skin and bruises the muscles. Tears and bruises do not heal as quickly."

The Princess lightly touched the side of the alien's face. "What about the future?"

"There will be one."

"I meant more specifically. What about us?"

"Just now, Princess, there is no 'us.'" Zsar't'lac said gently, raising himself up onto his elbows. "For the future? I don't know just now. Nor is it particularly important to me. My main concern is saving Eivaunee's life."

The Princess' hand stayed touching against the alien's face; she enjoyed the cool, dry feeling of his skin. It was exotic and alien. "I don't want Eivaunee to die, either."

"So you have said."

The door sounded. "Eivaunee," Zsar't'lac told the Princess. "Come," he released the door.

"How did you know it was him?" Moerit asked as Eivaunee walked in.

"His scent," Zsar't'lac told a partial truth.

Eivaunee paused just inside the door. "Do you wish me to go?" he asked his alien friend.

"Soon," Zsar't'lac replied. "And with the Princess."

"I didn't think you were in the mood for..."

“—much of anything but peace and quiet.”

“Why did you do it, Zsar? You aren’t that stupid, or even that arrogant.” Eivaunee sat down on the floor alongside the Princess.

“I had my reasons.”

“Which are?”

“Later, I’ll tell you,” the alien promised. He touched the side of Eivaunee’s face, then tilted it up to kiss him gently.

“You won’t get very far with him,” the Princess warned him. “He doesn’t have sex with men.”

Eivaunee drew back from the kiss. “Zsar’t’lac considers having sex with human males on a par with having sex with animals.”

“Really,” the Princess’ tone was disbelieving. “How is that possible when human females are acceptable?”

“It depends on what is done with the partner,” Zsar’t’lac explained.

“Sodomy offends you?” the Princess asked coolly.

“Somewhat, yes,” Zsar’t’lac answered.

“He has a male lover in the Homelands,” Eivaunee added, although he doubted Zsar’t’lac wanted that widely known. Zsar’t’lac’s sexual bigotry continued to irritate him. And he wished Zsar’t’lac had told him what he had planned for the evening.

“Norda males are acceptable, but not human?” the Princess asked, smiling a little. That could give her an edge.

Zsar’t’lac stared for a moment at Eivaunee, dark red flickers lighting his black eyes. Then he turned towards the Princess. “Hsasan males,” he specified the matter more clearly. “It is time you both left. You can continue your discussion of my sexual iniquities elsewhere.”

“Sorry, Zsar,” Eivaunee said, lightly touching the alien’s angular face. “We’ll leave you alone.” He hesitated still; he wanted a few minutes in private with his friend. “Princess, would you leave us? Just a moment is all I want.”

“Fine,” Moerit said, standing. “Kiss him good-bye.” The door closed behind her.

“I am sorry about that, Zsar,” Eivaunee apologized again. “I shouldn’t have told her about Sing’m’li.”

“I didn’t want it known, but I doubt she has any interest in passing along that bit of information.”

“I wanted...wanted to say good-bye. You’ve been one hell of a friend.”

“Your death is not settled, Eivaun,” Zsar’t’lac replied.

“If you wish to believe that,” Eivaunee shrugged.

The alien sat up a little awkwardly. “I will talk to Hagda tomorrow,” Zsar’t’lac told Eivaunee. “I want him to assign a page to be near you. So if you see someone close-by constantly, don’t worry.”

“Hagda won’t risk the Emperor’s anger,” Eivaunee told him.

“Once he might not have, perhaps now he is more willing.”

“And if he isn’t?”

“Claws can be very persuasive,” Zsar’t’lac pointed out.

“Maybe,” Eivaunee conceded. “Don’t risk too much, Zsar.”

“Good night,” the alien told him, choosing a very human form of dismissal.

“Not good-bye?”

“No, good night only.”

Eivaunee smiled. “You are very stubborn, my friend. Remember your promise to me and to Anati.”

“I do not forget such things.”

Eivaunee wanted to kiss the alien a gentle kiss good-bye, but it was obvious Zsar’t’lac wasn’t in the mood. He settled for lightly touching his face, and then his thick, luxurious hair. “Take care, my friend.”

“No Hsassan would ever take such advice.”

Eivaunee shook his head and left quietly.

Chapter 25

Zsar't'lac rested more than slept. His body ached, but more, his mind kept him from full sleep. He had a plan, not a very good one. Actually it was more an idea cobbled to a hope, but it was the best he could do under the restraints he had.

Zsar't'lac forced himself to remain lying quietly in the bed until the sun had been up for at least an hour. Then he showered, dressed again in his fleet uniform and left the small, undistinguished room.

He was going to talk to Hagda, the Palace Chamberlain, but he took a couple of side detours en route to his office, checking out some areas marked on the Palace architectural drawings. He also needed to check out the guard situation at the Palace Communication Center.

He finally arrived at the large office complex that was the Imperial Chamberlain's operating center. He was admitted to the inner office where Hagda sat staring forward. "Nothing can save him now," Hagda said softly.

"Perhaps," Zsar't'lac returned. He took a small device out of the pack he was carrying and set it on Hagda's desk. He activated it and it began twirling.

"What is that?" the chamberlain asked.

"Our conversations will not be able to be picked up on audio listening devices."

"How does it work?"

"Frequency jamming," the alien explained briefly. "I don't want to use it too often or Hazdel will suspect something."

"You have some sort of a plan?" There was a spark of hope in the portly man's voice.

"I want you to make sure that someone you trust, a page perhaps, is always near Eivaunee."

"Why? What good will that do?"

"The moment the Emperor sends for Eivaunee, or decides to visit him, I need to know. Immediately!"

Hadga continued to stare at the large alien. "Why? What can you do?"

"Maybe stop Eivaunee's death. Maybe remove the grounds for the treason charge."

"If he could chose..."

"I know. I will first stop the grounds for the treason charge."

"If this is treason, I do not want to know anything about it ...unless there is a very good chance of success," Hadga told the alien quietly.

"It is not treason, but I will tell you nothing of what I plan. Just make sure someone is always near enough to Eivaunee to know if he is going to see the Emperor, or if the Emperor is going to see him."

"That can be done," Hagda agreed readily. There was little danger in having someone watch Eivaunee. "I will have the page contact me the minute it is clear the Emperor wishes to see Eivaunee."

"And you will contact me how?"

"Tomorrow you will be assigned an ear clip. All the guards wear them."

"I know. I saw them."

"The guards' channel is 34. Set the clip encoding to also receive on subchannel 98C. Be sure to add the letter C to the encoding. It is a subchannel that isn't registered. I will contact you on that channel."

"There can be no mistakes in this," Zsar't'lac said firmly. "Eivaunee's life will depend on how fast I can respond."

"There will be no mistake," Hagda reassured him.

"Now, which Imperial guards' barrack am I being assigned to?"

"Barracks Seven."

"Are the guards Provincial or Imperial Planet?"

"The guards in that barrack are all from the Provinces."

"Good." Zsar't'lac said nothing further as he walked away. It was too soon to check the location of the Comveckt. Besides, wasn't that important; the Princess had realistically confirmed the plan that Eivaunee had deduced. Still, if he got the chance, Zsar't'lac would check on the Comveckt. He couldn't afford a stupid mistake at this point.

The barracks were fairly standard, a long rectangular building with beds placed at regular intervals. Unlike the barracks he had grown up in on Norda, which were completely open inside, this one had walls dividing off each bed area. Since the walls only were on three sides, privacy was more an illusion than reality.

Most of the guards assigned to the barracks were waiting inside for him. Their emotions covered the range from general xenophobia to hope that he could somehow save Eivaunee Dorlan. The last emotion was strongest in the man who appeared in charge of the barracks.

"I'm Sergeant Millit," the short, broad man told the alien.

"Zsar't'lac." The information was completely unnecessary; the man obviously knew who he was, but Zsar't'lac had learned that humans liked their ritual of introduction completed.

"Welcome to Barracks Seven," the sergeant said, uncertain what else to say. "Your bunk is the third on the right."

"Thank you," Zsar't'lac replied formally. After a moment, he added: "I was not told what my duties would be."

"Guard duty. What did you think?" That came from a nasty-faced wiry man, not Sergeant Millit.

"The term encompasses many activities," Zsar't'lac returned coolly. "I was hoping the sergeant could be more specific."

Sergeant Millit casually cuffed the man who had spoken up. "We don't need your comments, Sega."

"We don't need him," he was answered.

"Maybe not, but maybe someone else does."

"The Princess?"

There was ribald laughter from several of the guards. Zsar't'lac said nothing.

"We don't have any uniforms that will fit you," Sergeant Millit continued. "I'll have a tailor measure you later today. For now, you'll just have to wear your Fleet uniform."

"I liked him better in the skirt," another guard commented snidely. "Suits him. On most planets it's slaves who wear skirts."

Zsar't'lac ignored him.

"Let's go outside," Sergeant Millit gestured towards the door. Zsar't'lac could feel there was something more in his desire to leave than just to get away from the casual harassment.

They walked in silence a short distance from the barrack towards a large training field where a small group of humans was practicing small arms fire. Sergeant Millit stopped short of the training field. "I was born on Cardor 6," he said softly. "My parents and my sister lived in the capital city."

"Certainly past tense," Zsar't'lac commented mildly. "The Emperor didn't like what he thought was insurrectionist activity."

"Yes," Sergeant Millit agreed softly. "The Comveckt vaporized it three years ago."

"And your parents?"

Sergeant Milli said nothing at first, his eyes searched the alien's face. There was no expression in that sharply angular face that a human could understand.

"I heard you were involved," Sergeant Millit continued to speak quite softly.

"In saving the town's residents, yes. And destroying the empty town."

"Can you save him?" Sergeant Millit asked. There was no need to specify who was meant.

"I will try."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Assign me duty in the Palace. Constantly."

"I can't do that. Not constantly."

"As often as you can, then."

"Tonight is another public dinner. The Princess has ordered you to be her personal guard there," Sergeant Millit told him.

"Eivaunee won't be killed at dinner. What about later?"

"Most money is betting you spend the night with the Princess."

"It would keep me in the Palace," Zsar't'lac conceded. "What about tomorrow? That is the important time."

"I'll see what I can do," the sergeant offered, "but it will be difficult. Normally I just do the

assignments, and no one reviews them. But your assignments are to be reviewed. If they are planning on killing him tomorrow, they won't want you in the Palace."

* * * * *

Zsar't'lac stood behind the Princess' chair. Mostly she ignored him. Her dress was as provocative as her others had been, tight and cut low in front. At one point the Princess had turned slightly in her chair to talk to Eivaunee, a casual conversation concerning the lightly clad acrobats who were performing just then. As she turned, she ran her hand up the inside of Zsar't'lac's thigh. The alien had pushed the probing hand aside.

"Next time I bruise it," Zsar't'lac had whispered, leaning over between Moerit and Eivaunee.

"Believe him," Eivaunee warned the Princess.

The Princess turned away. After the acrobats had finished performing, she spoke to a page standing by her chair. Shortly thereafter one of the acrobats made his way to the Princess' chair. He was tall and handsome.

Zsar't'lac stepped back as the acrobat leaned close. There was some brief conversation and the acrobat sat down cross-legged alongside the Princess' chair. Occasionally, Moerit dropped a morsel of food in his mouth. The acrobat kissed the Princess' hand and licked teasingly at her fingertips.

Zsar't'lac was mildly amused by the Princess' actions, but most of his attention was focused on the Emperor and Aman, trying to decipher from their emotions when the Comveckt would arrive. There was tension in both men, but not enough to indicate that Eivaunee would die tonight. And the Princess' emotions, and her performance with the acrobat, collaborated that.

Nothing, however, was certain. Even if they didn't plan the murder for tonight, long space Jumps couldn't be timed with absolute accuracy. They might expect the Comveckt tomorrow, but if it arrived tonight...

Zsar't'lac leaned forward a little. "Does the little acrobat please you?" he asked the Princess.

"He is not so little," the Princess replied without looking up.

"Depends on who he is compared to."

The Princess finally turned to look up at the alien. "I don't like being rudely rejected."

"And I don't like being pawed in public."

"And in private?"

"That is open to discussion."

The Princess laughed softly, then turned to talk to the lady seated at her left side.

Eivaunee heard the interchange between his officer and the Princess. Whatever Zsar't'lac had in mind, lust wasn't his prime motivation. Zsar't'lac was attracted to the Princess; Eivaunee had no doubt about that. Eivaunee desired her as well, but just now too much was at stake for casual lust to be involved. Actually, that was true for the Princess as well.

What game was she playing?

It irritated Eivaunee that it was his life was in danger and everyone was playing their own game around him.

Zsar't'lac stood at the back of the room, watching the glittering dancers. Several woman had approached him with proposals. He had declined, saying he was already committed for the evening. One man had sauntered up, but before he could suggest anything, Zsar't'lac had drawn back his lips, displaying long, killing teeth. The man understood and veered off.

Did these people think of nothing else? Zsar't'lac was irritated, then thought of evenings in the hall of the Hsassan. Politics and philosophy might be discussed by the older, mated Hsassan sitting quietly at the sides of the hall. But the younger Hsassan's main interest was sex, who would be their lover that night? It wasn't so very different here.

Eivaunee strolled over, his walk and attitude seemingly casual, the hard focus of his emotions was anything but.

"What are you planning?" he softly asked his friend.

"A night with the Princess."

"Why?"

Zsar't'lac smiled, looking down at the golden human. "Few would ask why."

"They don't know you as well as I do, so why?"

"To stay in the Palace," Zsar't'lac replied quite softly.

"It will be tonight?" Eivaunee questioned back.

"I don't think so, but I would rather not take chances."

"Do not," Eivaunee commanded firmly.

"I meant with your life."

"And I meant with yours."

"I know. Now go away. Aman and Hazdel are glaring."

"Fuck them."

"I don't think so and I want to be allowed in the Palace tomorrow, so leave," Zsar't'lac repeated.

Eivaunee strolled away towards a group of women who smiled at his approach.

Later, when the music changed to something that involved more prolonged contact with a single partner, Eivaunee sought out the Princess.

"A last dance for the bereft never-to-be husband?" he asked.

"Wrong choice of words," the Princess countered as she held out her hands to accept his offer. "The bereft are left alive."

"Whereas the dead are simply dead," Eivaunee agreed.

"Exactly."

The Princess was tall for a woman, only slightly shorter than Eivaunee. They made an exquisite pair on the dance floor; tall, beautiful and graceful.

"But even dead, shouldn't I be bereft having never enjoyed connubial bliss with you?"

The Princess laughed lightly. "How should...or could...a dead person feel bereft?"

Eivaunee grinned back. It was like their early verbal sparring matches, before matters between them had turned so ugly. "Surely such a small thing a death shouldn't overcome such despair?"

"If you desire me so much, you should have married me."

"Past tense?" Eivaunee questioned back. "No options now?"

There was a slight stiffening in the Princess.

“No, Moerit, I’m just teasing. I know time is running out.” There was little point in hurting her now. Actually he rarely meant to hurt her. They were just on opposite sides. His Estates, as much as her father, stood between them.

Moerit leaned in close to Eivaunee, her head alongside his, her body pressed close. She turned her head slightly, a gesture that could be taken as vaguely affectionate.

“When the time comes, trust me,” Moerit whispered quite softly, then she stepped back, pushing Eivaunee away. “You are such a clumsy oaf. Your officer is so much more interesting.” She laughed cruelly as she walked away.

“And you are such a nasty bitch,” Eivaunee returned with feeling. But he did trust her. He wasn’t sure she could save him. She had said as much herself, but it was nice knowing she would at least try. Eivaunee went looking for Anati.

Zsar’t’lac followed the Princess into her bedroom. She dismissed her attendants.

“Do you know how to undress a woman?” she asked the large alien, her tone arrogant.

“I’ve had some experience,” Zsar’t’lac answered coolly.

The Princess turned around. Zsar’t’lac began undoing the long row of closures down the back of the dress. He didn’t need to probe the Princess’ emotions very deeply; they were quite clear: she had no interest in sexual play tonight.

“What is the point of this?” he asked as the heavy silk overdress dropped to the floor. The Princess turned around. The thin, translucent undress left nothing to the imagination. The Princess’ body was firm and lush. Exactly what Eivaunee always preferred. Zsar’t’lac’s tastes were more wide ranging.

“You said you don’t find human bodies physically attractive?”

“No,” the alien agreed, but Moerit slightly challenging emotions were mildly stimulating. Under the circumstances, it wasn’t the best idea.

“You do not intend sexual play tonight,” Zsar’t’lac told her bluntly. “So what is the point of this?”

“What makes you so sure I’m not planning on sex tonight?”

“Your scent—your expression. Also your intelligence. Tomorrow is too important for both of us.”

The Princess tilted her head to one side slightly, a gesture similar to one Eivaunee made occasionally. “You just might be too clever for your own good.”

“But not for yours.”

“Perhaps,” the Princess allowed. “Still, it is best you stay in the Palace tonight.”

“I agree. Do I have any part in your plans for saving Eivaunee?”

“Perhaps as a distraction.”

“I could be more than that,” Zsar’t’lac informed her.

“Not safely.”

"Whose safety are you concerned with?"

"My own," the Princess answered bluntly.

"Truth drugs will not work with me; I cannot betray you."

"They do, however, work with me."

"Your father wouldn't..."

"I'm not completely sure. Besides, he isn't the only one involved. As I said before, there are plots within plots here. No one is truly safe just now."

Zsar't'lac considered the Princess' words. Certainly if Aman was involved, he would not hesitate to subject the Princess to truth drug questioning. If he ever gained complete control. The Princess was Aman's ally, but Zsar't'lac doubted that term meant much to Aman.

"What sort of distraction did you have in mind?" Zsar't'lac asked.

"You are clever. Some things you have to solve yourself," the Princess answered. "The Level Three password for tomorrow is 'Ruby Throne.' That word will open any door."

"Thank you. It would be best if I stayed in the Palace tomorrow."

"You can't," the Princess said firmly. "That would be too dangerous."

"But —"

"You must leave the Palace," the Princess stated unequivocally. "Your leaving must be seen. It must be registered electronically. Then you will return."

"How?"

"Through my bedroom window," the Princess told him. "You will leave, report to your barracks. Your sergeant will give you leave—I know him. Go through the gardens, and the park. I will be waiting here. When you get here, I will drop the shielding around the window very briefly. You must be quick or alarms will sound."

"I'll be quick."

"I'll leave shortly after you arrive. I have affairs to take care of."

"When is the Comveckt arriving?" Zsar't'lac asked the most important question.

"You will know when it has arrived," the Princess assured him.

"It would be best if I knew in advance."

"In the morning some time. The Jump is too long for precise timing. You can sleep over by the door," the Princess told him.

There was a slight undercurrent of fear in the Princess. Zsar't'lac understood that part of his role tonight was as a bodyguard. Truthfully, that suited him better than lover. Another time it would be different.

The alien lay down in front of the door. He didn't need to sleep.

Sunlight was filtering through the cut crystal panes in the window of the Princess' bedroom when Zsar't'lac leaned over her bed. "Your servants are coming," Zsar't'lac said softly.

Moerit opened her eyes, becoming fully awake quickly. "How do you know that?"

"I can hear them," Zsar't'lac told her a partial truth.

The door sounded. “Guards Xento, Remi and Cathon, and the Lady-in-Waiting, Ameria.” Their identities were confirmed by computer.

“Come,” the Princess released the door.

Two men and two women entered. Both men and one of the women were wearing the green and gold tunic of military service. The other woman carried a tray with a coffee pot and two cups. She put it down on a small table.

“Do you want some coffee before you go?” the Princess asked. “I hear you have become quite fond of the beverage.”

Zsar’t’lac could tell the Princess wanted him to stay a little longer. “One cup.”

The serving woman poured him one.

The door sounded again. “Aman, Duke of Eighen.”

Zsar’t’lac felt a brief pulse of fear in the Princess and a hard anger in Aman.

“Come,” Moerit released the door.

The tall, slender Favorite stalked into the room. “Get out!” he commanded the alien.

Zsar’t’lac turned to the Princess for confirmation. It was clear from her emotions that this was why she wanted him to remain, for Aman to see him. Why, he had no idea.

“Go back to your barracks,” Moerit dismissed him.

Zsar’t’lac knelt briefly to the Princess and left.

Aman didn’t wait for the alien to leave before he began berating the Princess. “How could you be so stupid! Couldn’t you wait?”

“Like you waited with Yseu’s retainer? That bit of random lust could have cost us dearly! And don’t play dumb with me, I know who he is.”

Listening to their conversation as he left, Zsar’t’lac thought of the Princess’ words: plots within plots, indeed.

Anati lay quietly against Eivaunee, watching the sunlight creep into the small room. It shouldn’t be like this, she thought; so sunny and bright. Not when Eivaunee was going to die. She had suggested several plans to him early in the night; he had refused to consider any of them. He wasn’t going to flee to the United Councils and leave his lands forfeit— even if Anati went with him. The other plans were even wilder.

They hadn’t slept much. After arguing over her plans for his survival, they had made love and talked until silence offered more than words. For the last couple of hours little had been said, the silence safer than any words.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Eivaunee finally asked about the child he would never see.

“Girl.”

“Have you considered a name?”

Anati laughed a little raggedly. “No, actually, I’ve been a bit busy trying to figure out how to save her father.”

Eivaunee caressed the side of Anati’s face. “Not one of my family’s names, please.”

Tears, so many tears. Anati hadn’t thought she could cry anymore, but she could. She was lying against Eivaunee; salty droplets of grief sliding down on him.

It was enough for him, more than enough. He kissed her briefly and got up. At least Zsar't'lac didn't cry over him.

"It is time you left," Eivaunee suggested firmly.

"We don't know when..."

"Exactly, it could be any time now. I don't want you around when the trouble starts."

Anati got up slowly. She started to say something, but Eivaunee cut her off. "We don't need to say anything more. Nothing."

Anati nodded; she could understand, but she still wanted to say something more, what she wasn't sure. She began dressing slowly and silently. Eivaunee also dressed, but quickly. He decided to forego his usual morning shower.

Eivaunee helped Anati with the long line of buttons on her sleeves. Eivaunee had chosen a casual over-jacket that didn't have the long difficult sleeves. He saw no reason to be well dressed for his murder.

Anati wanted to linger, but Eivaunee hurried her along, almost pushing her out the door at the end. There wasn't anything she could do at this point, nothing really at any point, until the treason trial. Eivaunee had faith in her to fight his battle then. After she left, though, it was hard to sit and wait, like a lamb before the slaughter. He wanted so very much to fight. Fight for his people, for his officers and crew, for some semblance of justice. But if there would be any justice, it would come after his death. Hopefully. It was not the most reassuring of thoughts.

Zsar't'lac explained to Sergeant Millet what he wanted: six guards he could count on that would obey his commands. Sergeant Millet nodded, he would make sure they were there.

The woman at Military Communications was reassuring Zsar't'lac. The Comveckt wasn't at space dock, but that was because the Jump was so long. Sometimes the longer Jumps took longer than they mathematically should. No doubt the Comveckt would arrive soon. Zsar't'lac agreed with her. The location he had in mind, however, was quite different, but he wasn't going to explain that.

"Soon, soon now you will have everything you ever wanted," Aman spoke soothingly to the Emperor. He was afraid the fool would change his mind even at this late time.

"I doubt if you have any idea what I truly want," Hazdel countered.

"The Consenti beaten into submission; interstellar conquests; your daughter holding the child that will continue your dynasty."

"Your child as well, Aman," the Emperor said softly. "Your dreams as well as *some* of mine."

"My dream is for more than just fathering the heir," Aman said softly, perhaps unwisely. But despite Hazdel's silent gloom, the Emperor showed no signs of canceling the day's main event: Eivaunee's death.

Hazdel looked at his lover's cold face. "No marriage to my daughter," he said softly. "The son of a minor baron does not marry into the Imperial family."

“So you have said,” Aman replied coolly. “Repeatedly.”

Hazdel turned away. He wondered if Omani would ever speak to him again.

Zsar’t’lac slipped into the Princess’ room; she was standing alone by the window. She scarcely looked at him. “You’re on your own,” she said as she left.

Zsar’t’lac had a last resort plan of entry to the palace if nothing else had worked out, the wastewater outlet system. Zsar’t’lac was grateful he didn’t have to use it.

He slipped out of the Princess’ suite into the hallway and then around a corner into a maintenance room. Some humans saw him; there wasn’t any help for that. Only one person emotionally reacted to seeing the large alien. That human had a brief pulse of fear followed by a “wait-and-see” attitude. He wouldn’t raise any alarm, not when doing nothing was the safest path.

Once inside the small room, Zsar’t’lac looked around and found the access panel for the climate control system, a rectangular tunnel scarcely large enough for his large body. It was palm print coded—with a voice access option. He activated the voice access control. “Ruby throne.”

“Password, level three, accepted. Voice unknown. Security will be notified.” The door opened. Access was all Zsar’t’lac needed. Soon everyone would be far too busy to check out an unknown voice print, especially when the highest level security pass word was used. If necessary, Zsar’t’lac could have burned through the access panel, but that would have brought security in a bit quicker.

Zsar’t’lac quickly climbed up into the open ductwork system that ran between the floors of the Palace. He crawled towards his destination: the access panel in the ceiling over the Palace communications room. He settled down directly above the room, waiting until he was notified the Emperor had sent for Eivaunee.

“Draw it in tighter!” the Princess commanded.

“Sandr armor isn’t meant to be worn this way,” her trusted henchwoman replied, as she worked to bring the overlapping plates closer together. “You aren’t supposed to wear it next to your skin.”

“If I walk into that room obviously wearing armor, Aman will know something is wrong.”

“Only your torso is protected,” the woman continued to complain.

“Better that than nothing.”

Eivaunee paced back and forth. When? When would it start? He wanted it over. The end to the guilt—and to any foolish hopes of survival.

The door sounded; Eivaunee jumped slightly. Even though he was expecting it—wanting it—the sound frightened him.

“Identify.”

“Imperial Guards. The Emperor commands your presence.”

So this was finally it.

“Come.”

Three men came in, hands on their blasters.

“I’ll go peacefully,” Eivaunee told them.

“The Emperor has sent for him,” Hagda’s voice whispered into the communicator by Zsar’t’lac’s ear. “He is being taken to the small audience room.”

The large alien shifted back a little and set his blaster for wide burn. Blasting directly in front of his feet, then kicking hard, he dropped through to the room below.

“What the—“

The communications officer never got the sentence finished. A backhanded blow from the alien sent him to the floor where he stayed. Zsar’t’lac pulled the communications technician off her seat and threw her to one side. Attack alarms started shrieking. Zsar’t’lac’s blaster swept the remaining communications crew to one side. He keyed in the communications frequency for the Comveckt.

“Con Noate, this is Zsar’t’lac: do not attack the Palace! The message from Eivaunee was a fraud. Repeat, do not attack! Do nothing for now.” Zsar’t’lac set the message for constant repeat then burned the panel so it couldn’t be altered. He grinned at the frightened communications personnel. “I’m trying to stop a rebellion, not start one.”

He left the room at a run, heading towards the small audience room.

The pulsating sound of the alarms began just as Eivaunee was approaching the small Audience Room. The guards abruptly grabbed his arms and pulled him forward.

A little sooner than they expected, Eivaunee thought. Well maybe he could slow things down a little more, maybe help Zsar’t’lac a little.

Eivaunee pulled back against the guards, dragging them off balance. Finally now, he could fight—and he did—with a wild vengeance, enjoying the hard impact of his fist against one man’s face; he kicked another guard low and dirty. The third guard hit Eivaunee hard in the back of his head with the hilt of his blaster. The blow knocked Eivaunee to the floor. He rolled to one side. His one chance at fighting, he wasn’t going down easy. The man Eivaunee had kicked between the legs tried to return the favor. Eivaunee was faster, snapping up to his feet. The guard behind him, though, hit him harder with the hilt of his blaster and this time Eivaunee went down mostly unconscious. He was jerked upward, and propelled, dazed and bleeding, into the small Audience Room. The guard threw him to the floor.

“Leave us,” Hazdel commanded.

The door closed behind the guards.

“We will not be disturbed,” Aman smugly told Eivaunee. “This room is sealed off by guards loyal to us.”

Eivaunee stumbled to his feet, the room spinning. Aman drew a blaster from inside his tunic.

“Not just yet,” Moerit came through a secret panel into the small room.

Moerit looked odd somehow. Eivaunee couldn’t place it at first, then realized what was

wrong: her clothing was high-cut and loose, quite unlike her. Eivaunee watched her walked across the room.

"I didn't know that Aman had told you of our plans," Hazdel commented quietly.

"You certainly didn't," Moerit returned coldly.

"You have, on occasion, shown some partiality for Eivaunee," her father explained.

"And you have not?" Moerit countered, her voice remaining cold. She walked around the throne to stand directly in front of it. Between Hazdel and Aman and Eivaunee.

"Well, this is best," Hazdel agreed soothingly. "You understand the necessity of this."

"Oh, quite," Moerit stated, continuing to stand in front of Eivaunee, her hands on her hips. "Now, Aman," she told her co-conspirator.

Aman's blaster had been pointed towards the floor, now it came up to point directly at Hazdel Toneki.

"I shall miss some of our evenings together," Aman commented with mild regret.

Hazdel looked towards the glass, towards where his guards should be. Guards that should even now be blasting Aman. Nothing was happening.

"Don't expect them to save you," Aman told him, laughing. "The guards that surround you today are loyal to the new regime."

"Which is?"

"Moerit will be Empress; I will be Imperial Consort. A step up from Favorite, don't you think? Moerit is not so proud she refuses to marry the son of a minor baron. Nor will she interfere with my pleasures as much as you have done."

"I can't believe—" Hazdel looked at his daughter. "You would kill me?"

"You killed your father!"

"He was going to cost me my throne!"

"You were going to cost me my husband."

Eivaunee reached forward and lightly touched Moerit's waist. He could feel the hard surface of Sandr armor beneath her clothing. Was that her plan? Simply stand in front of him wearing armor?

No one was paying any attention to Eivaunee just now. He pushed Moerit to one side and kicked Aman hard, high in the chest. The blaster went spinning; four people scrambled for it, swearing, clawing and kicking. Aman won. Moerit was slowed down by the armor; Eivaunee by the beating he had already taken.

"Enough," Aman stated, standing up again, panting a little from the fight. He pointed the blaster directly at Hazdel. "Time for you to die, my lover. And after that, the little Dorlan. Perhaps though, I shall wound him so he can't speak and then enjoy myself a little bit before he dies."

"Pleasure will be your downfall," Eivaunee predicted caustically, trying to prolong the verbal exchange. Zsar't'lac was somewhere in the Palace. He needed more time.

Aman laughed, uncaring. “Good-bye, my lover,” he told Hazdel.

The door to the small Audience Room exploded inwards. Zsar’t’lac entered, a blaster in each hand, centered on the small group in the middle of the room, additional Imperial Guards swarmed in behind him.

“The guards you left at the door are dead,” Zsar’t’lac told Aman. “The ones in the small rooms behind the mirrors aren’t going to help you, either.”

“The Comveckt?” Eivaunee asked quickly.

“Overhead, I presume,” the alien answered. “I didn’t take time to check. I just told Con Noate not to attack the Palace—or anything else. The alarms are due to my attack on the Communications center.”

“Do you understand the notion of calvary coming just in the nick of time?” Eivaunee asked his officer.

“Y-yes,” the alien replied a little uncertainly. There was an odd aspect to Eivaunee’s emotions that made him a little unsure.

“I wish you had been just one minute later,” Eivaunee told him.

“The guards in the rooms behind the mirrors,” the Princess turned to the alien, “what about them?”

It took Zsar’t’lac a moment before he replied. “Guards loyal to the Emperor have them under control. I don’t know if they are dead or alive. I take it they were your people.”

Moerit nodded.

“You double-crossing bitch!” Aman spat.

Moerit laughed. “My father’s betraying lover complains of treachery. Did you think that I would let something like you be my Consort?”

Eivaunee put his arm around Moerit’s armor-encased waist. “Thank you.”

“I have said many times that I intend those rich estates of yours to be mine.”

Eivaunee kissed her, a hard, demanding kiss. “Over my dead body,” he told her softly.

“Or at least your prone one,” Moerit replied and kissed him back, just as hard and demanding.

“This is all your fault!” the Emperor shouted, his voice rising sharply, wild with rage. “It has always been your fault!”

Eivaunee faced him. “No, it isn’t. None of this is my fault. As very little of what you have blamed me for over the years was my fault. My existence is the problem—that and my mother’s love for me.” This was the end of any accommodation with Hazdel. The truth could be told now.

“She never loved you,” Hazdel sneered. “If she had loved you she never would have committed suicide and left you to me.”

“She killed herself to save me,” Eivaunee returned coldly.

“You believe that?” Hazdel laughed.

"She told me," Eivaunee returned.

"She told you nothing!" Hazdel shouted. "I had everything checked. No communications went out—all files were destroyed. She left nothing for you!"

"Paper," Eivaunee returned succinctly. "She wrote me a letter on paper."

"Eivaunee." Zsar't'lac laid a restraining hand on the golden human's shoulder. "We should go. Or let me finish this."

Eivaunee knocked the hand aside. "No." He took two deliberate steps towards Hazdel. "I know what happened—how you raped her!" More than anything else just now, he wanted to confront this man who had so controlled his life and had destroyed both of his parents.

"It wasn't so bad," Hazdel returned coolly. "She made it worse than it needed to be. It wasn't worth killing herself over. If she loved you. I don't think she told you anything."

"She left a letter for me to read at thirteen. Didn't you ever wonder why I became so difficult then?"

"No. I don't believe you."

"You raped her and left her pregnant. With a son. What you wanted most: a son by my mother."

"No. No, you don't understand..." It wasn't clear if he was talking to Eivaunee, or to someone long dead.

"That's why she killed herself," Eivaunee continued undaunted. "Women never interested you much. You were never sure if you could have a son. But Omani, the one woman you loved, became pregnant with a son."

"I so wanted a son," Hazdel said desperately.

"Even if she aborted this child, you would be back, even if your guards had to hold her down again. You would be back."

"It didn't have to be that way. I loved her. I offered her everything, even the crown."

"She couldn't risk living; it would cost my life. If you found out about the pregnancy you would keep her in chains if you had to. My father would have had a quick death so he couldn't demand genetic testing, and I, of course, would have to die."

"Why?" It was Aman who asked. He knew about Omani; the whole court did, but much of this was new. He was going to die; he had openly committed treason, but this he wanted to understand.

"If I died, then this child—his son—would inherit the Dorlan Estates," Eivaunee answered.

"The Dorlan Estates and later the throne," Hazdel said softly. "Our son."

"Yes, yours and Omani's son with the Dorlan Estates and the Ruby Throne. What dreams of conquest could you have woven, but for her hatred?"

"It wasn't like that! You don't know. She liked me. A little. The guards didn't hold her down much. Only in the beginning. Then she began to like it. You wouldn't know."

"I was there!" Eivaunee surprised himself by saying that. He had no memory of his mother at

all. He had always told Zsar't'lac that.

"No!" Hazdel shouted.

"She always kept me close to her," Eivaunee continued. The words seemed to come from someone else. "She was afraid of what you might do to me!"

"No..."

Memories now flooded Eivaunee's mind. Memories he had suppressed for years. He said he remembered nothing of his mother. But he did. The memory burned most in his mind: the night of the rape. Particularly his mother's eyes as she turned her head from Hazdel's looming face to see her young son curled down, cowering in the corner. The fierce fight had stopped abruptly. The screaming, the hatred spewing from her mouth all ceased. She lay quietly and accepted what happened. Saving her son from further pain.

Eivaunee's breathing was deep and labored. He couldn't get enough oxygen in his lungs. He couldn't save his mother and he had seen it all. The memory, so long buried, tore at him.

"She stopped fighting to spare me what pain she could. It was always for me, you bastard!" Eivaunee spoke brutally, wanting only to hurt the man who had destroyed his mother. "She told me once she found out she was pregnant, she sent you a message telling you to come to her, telling you she was pregnant with your son."

Hazdel began making a high-pitched keening sound.

"Eivaunee!" Zsar't'lac again warned his friend. The large alien could feel Hazdel's rising madness.

"And you found her," Eivaunee continued. If it cost him his life, this he would settle with Hazdel. The truth would be known to the whole court. "She took a neurological poison to deaden the pain. She didn't want to take the chance that the pain would stop her as she cut across her belly and killed your child, Hazdel. Killed him and herself—so *I* would live. She loved me that much."

Hazdel screamed, high-pitched and wild.

"Enough," Zsar't'lac decided. He grabbed Eivaunee's arm and pulling, half-dragged him towards the door. Hazdel's screaming continued behind them.

"Let go," Eivaunee told the alien, pulling back his arm as they reached the door. "I can make it on my own."

"The rooftop," Zsar't'lac told him. "A shuttle is always up there."

"I know, through here," Eivaunee lead the way to a narrow internal staircase. Alarms continued to sound throughout the Palace, but no directions, no commands came from the Emperor or his guards. Eivaunee and Zsar't'lac weren't stopped as they ran.

They were most of the way up the staircase when the shrill commands began. "Kill him! Stop Eivaunee Dorlan!" It was hard to understand, or even recognize, the Emperor's harsh-toned voice in the shrill, shrieking words.

The shuttle pilot was waiting, his blaster out when they reached the roof. Zsar't'lac was quicker. He killed the pilot and pushed the body to one side. They quickly boarded the shuttle.

Eivaunee coded for the Palace military communications channel as Zsar't'lac lifted them off. They needed to know what commands Hazdel was giving.

"Destroy the Comveckt! Kill Eivaunee! Stop him! Stop him!" the Emperor's raging followed them.

"Zsar, I don't think this is going to work," Eivaunee said softly. "You need to save yourself."

"Don't be a fool," the alien returned coldly.

"I'm not! You need to survive! I don't want interstellar war on my conscience."

"Too bad," the alien replied indifferently.

The shuttle roared towards the Comveckt. They had no clearance; no filed flight path, other ships simply got out of their way. Those that didn't see them in time, Zsar't'lac dodged around. Eivaunee coded for the Comveckt's communications channel.

"Con Noate?"

"Eivaunee?" There was wild hope in the older man's voice and the sound of cheering in the background.

"What is the situation there?" Eivaunee asked.

"We've got shields up full. Hazdel is demanding the fleet ship fire on us. Nothing yet. There are three Starclass battleships here and seven meteor class fighters. They are maneuvering into position. Trying to encircle us."

"Zsar?" Eivaunee turned towards his friend.

"We'll be there in a couple of minutes. Make a very small hole in the shields and let us in. I'll take it from there," the alien gave his instructions.

"A pitched battle against the Imperial fleet is the same as treason," Eivaunee pointed out. "In the unlikely case we survive."

"I know," the alien said quietly. "I don't intend to fight."

"Run?"

Zsar't'lac spared a moment's attention from his instruments. He bared his teeth. "Not my first choice, but here, for everyone else's sake—yes."

A small hole was made and the shuttle entered. Some hotshot Weapons Officer on one of the encircling ships tried to get a shot in with them. It didn't work.

Zsar't'lac didn't wait for Eivaunee. With his long legs, he made it to CommCent considerably ahead of his erstwhile commander. The Weapons Officer began to slide out of her seat.

"No, stay," Zsar't'lac corrected her. "James, out of your seat," he commanded the pilot.

"Yes, sir!"

The ten ships were moving in to encircle the Comveckt, spacing themselves in three dimensions so they could attack the Imperial flagship without endangering each other.

The alien took the Comveckt out of its orbit, aiming it towards a narrow opening between a battleship and a fighter. Eivaunee sat down in the center chair vacated by Con Noate, staring

hard at the front screen.

“I don’t see how...” Eivaunee questioned the alien’s tactics. “We can’t outrun them.”

“Alert for hyperspace Jump,” the alien commanded.

“You can’t Jump this close to a sun!” Eivaunee couldn’t believe the alien’s words. “The gravity differential will pull the ship apart.”

“Sound for the jump,” the alien told him flatly. “The ship can take more than you think.”

“And the humans?” Eivaunee countered.

“We’ll find out. Count of ten, Eivaun and we Jump.”

Eivaunee hit the alarm for abrupt hyperspace jump, then hit the pad to activate his restraining net.

The screaming began very soon thereafter.

Chapter 26

“Ten dead,” Con Noate noted with relief.

“Ten dead,” Eivaunee said in a colder tone.

They were sitting in Eivaunee’s ornate living room. It was six hours since the Comveckt had abruptly entered a Jump; two hours since they had come out of it, just past the Inner Planets. Eivaunee’s stomach still hurt and he had a headache that felt like his head was being ripped apart, which was close to correct, if a few hours off.

He had, like most every human on the ship, been knocked unconscious by the roaring pull of gravity in the near-sun Jump. He had been unconscious for most of four hours. He hadn’t been the first, nor the last, to wake. The ship reeked of the smell of vomit. Eivaunee had considered ordering Zsar’t’lac to clean CommCent. He hadn’t, of course. He was just a little angry over the deaths of four officers and six crew.

“Ten dead is much better than would have happened if we’d fought ten ships,” Con Noate pointed out.

“There are over three hundred officers and crew on this ship; ten casualties is a fairly small number,” Zsar’t’lac offered in his gentle voice.

“Fine, then you tell their wives and mothers,” Eivaunee snapped back. It was a baseless threat. He never pawned off the ugly job of death notification on anyone else. Zsar’t’lac was well aware of that. Eivaunee took a deep breath. There wasn’t any point in attacking Zsar; he had saved them, and ten deaths *was* a small number compared to what might have been. He knew that; he just hated anyone dying for him.

“On the positive side,” Eivaunee continued, “we will no longer be directly serving His Majesty.”

“What?” Con Noate asked, astonished. “We didn’t go through all of this to give that bastard real reasons for a treason trial.”

“We won’t,” Eivaunee reassured him. “I just received notification that Hazdel has declared me an outcast. An archaic concept, but I am banned from returning to the Inner Planets—or the Imperial Planet—on pain of death.”

“Can he do that?” Con Noate asked. Imperial politics were a convoluted concept at best.

“No one wants to argue with him too strenuously just now,” Eivaunee returned with a touch of a smile. “He is in a raging fury, I’m told. Aman will be executed.”

“The Princess Royal?” Zsar’t’lac asked.

“Apparently she convinced her father that she was just going along with Aman to save him, and show him what Aman really was after.”

“Think that was it?” Con Noate asked.

“No. If Zsar’t’lac wouldn’t have arrived when he did, Moerit would be Empress.”

“What does being an outcast mean?” Zsar’t’lac asked, changing the subject. “Other than being banned from places you have no interest in going?”

Eivaunee grinned openly. “Not very much out here. Jiti also added that the Conveckt will no longer be supported by Imperial monies.”

Con Noate shrugged. “Provincial taxes are far more than the upkeep on the ship. We’ll keep those.”

“No, we won’t,” Eivaunee corrected him. “That could be grounds for treason. Taxes will still be sent to the Imperial Planet.”

“How will we support the ship?” Con Noate returned. “The men and women on the ship support you, but they need some pay.”

“Dorlan Enterprises,” Zsar’t’lac answered.

“Exactly,” Eivaunee agreed. “It won’t be easy and money will be tight, but it can be done.”

He wasn’t thinking of Dorlan Enterprises, or even the Conveckt just now, but of his mother. Memories of his early years with her. Omani had loved him. More than she loved her own life. It was something he always knew in some buried part of his mind. Now there were other memories to go with that knowledge. Memories of days spent in her gardens; memories of games they played together. Her laughter bright and sweet.

Hazdel was going to die. Mistress Merrivale was right. Sometimes the risk had to be accepted. Hazdel’s death was such a sweet thought.