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The Rememberer

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# ***THE REMEMBERER***

Elizabeth Stewart

## *Dedication*

*To Sam Waterston who inspired Robert, and Karen, who was present at the creation.*

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Rolodex: Insilco Corporation

## ROYAL DECREE

WHEREAS, the rulers of the joint and several regions of the New Republic, hereinafter referred to as “Tarsheens”, having convened in conclave and following due procedure and law as set for in the New Republic Constitution, hereinafter referred to as “Republic”; and

WHEREAS, the Tarsheens, after serious contemplation and debate, and seeing the grave need to enact this measure, have decided to issue this Royal Decree which shall take precedence and supersede all regional and local laws and regulations and shall extend to all the Republic and her citizens; and

WHEREAS, the Tarsheens, in order to promote the safety and wellbeing of all free citizens and to protect the interests of those free citizens and the ruling government do hereby decree and direct that;

Those persons, possessing false and unlawful knowledge concerned with past, present or future events (hereinafter known as “Rememberers”) and disseminating that information, in any fashion whatsoever, either oral or written with the intent to foment unrest and rebellion in the Republic; and

Those persons, receiving such information and giving any aid or comfort to a Rememberer, in whatever form (hereinafter known as “Harborers”);

THEREFORE, are hereby and forever, declared to be traitors to the Republic and all its free citizens. Any persons having knowledge of Rememberers and/or Harborers are to report them to the appropriate legal authorities who shall apprehend said Rememberers and/or Harborers, take them to a place of confinement and shall hold them for a trial before a judge and jury of free citizens.

If, after such a trial, such persons are found guilty of the crimes of being a Rememberer or a Harboring and who have been proved to be in possession of such knowledge as to be deemed a danger and threat to the Republic and its free citizens, the punishment for such crimes is death in whatever manner is accepted and appropriate at the time and place of the offense.

THIS DECREE IS HEREBY ADOPTED BY THE REGIONAL RULERS OF THE NEW REPUBLIC, TAKES EFFECT IMMEDIATELY AND SHALL REMAIN IN EFFECT THROUGHOUT THE REPUBLIC UNTIL SUCH TIME AS IT IS REVOKED BY THE REGIONAL RULERS.

## Chapter One

"The Tarsheen does a great honor to grace the humble establishment of Svarek," the little man simpered, his voice lost somewhere near his shoes as he practically bent double in front of her. "If I may be of any service to you or Senator Baron, you have only to ask."

Miraelise eyed the top of his greasy little head, his hair thick, flat and shiny as fresh black paint. With an effort to avoid gagging, she framed a reply.

"I am here," she told him carefully, "simply as a companion to my friend, Senator Baron." For emphasis, she threw an annoyed sidelong glance at the woman beside her. "My feelings about your occupation and your establishment remain unchanged."

Renee Baron stifled a little giggle with the back of her hand. Svarek's face was hidden, but Miraelise thought she detected the merest stiffening of his thin little shoulders. It pleased her to think she'd scored a barb, even a small one.

"Of course, Tarsheen," he continued, "your views are well known. But regardless of the reason for your visit, you are welcome a thousand times." Raising his coconut-head slightly, he showed a row of yellow-brown teeth. "I've prepared your usual box, Senator, and arranged a special, private tour so that you may view the stock up close and at your leisure."

"You go on, Renee," Miraelise sighed, "I'll just go and wait in the box."

Svarek's little, brown monkey face fell. "Oh, Tarsheen," he cried, "I was hoping to show you my facility. I know that part of your opposition to my trade is the deplorable condition of the establishments of some of my competitors." The sleazy tone took on a veneer of pride. "I can assure Your Grace that Svarek adheres *scrupulously* to both the letter and the spirit of all laws regulating my profession."

"Oh, come on, Mira," Renee prodded playfully. "Don't be such a pain in the ass. Think of it as an inspection tour." She flipped her soft, shoulder-length, honey-blonde hair and laughed. "Lead on, Svarek."

Those ugly teeth showed again as he presented each of them with a brochure. "These will tell you everything, but if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask. I have some really outstanding stock for this auction, one or two of which I think might be of particular interest." A small brown paw pointed to his right. "We can use my private elevator."

"Even though you are my oldest and dearest friend," Mira hissed in Renee's ear as they trailed the proprietor, "you are not to call me a pain in the ass in public. Especially not in front of this wretched troll. I am still your ruler, friend or no."

Renee laughed again. "If the shoe fits, my friend, if the shoe fits," she whispered as they stepped into the elegant dark blue box and Svarek punched the "down" button.

In a moment, the doors slid open and they stepped into a large warehouse-sized basement, whitewashed concrete block walls rising perhaps ten feet to a ceiling of large, bright rectangles of indirect light. The floor was gray concrete. On both sides of the elevator, corridors ran the length and breadth of the building, metal doors set in the walls at intervals of about eight feet on both sides of every corridor.

"You see, Tarsheen," Svarek announced with a flourish of his sticklike arm, "clean and modern in every respect. Artificial sunlight as on a spring day. Comes on gradually in the morning, goes off gradually at night. Temperature set at a constant seventy-two degrees. All stock housed in their own spotless pen, complete with sanitation. Stock is bathed twice a week, receive three feedings a day—I'm proud to say I have my own nutrition consultant and cook—and have a program of daily exercise."

He paused to take a breath and allow his virtues to sink in. "Of course, the real secret to my success is the stock itself. I handle nothing but the finest quality. Mostly, of course, I breed, raise and sell only my own stock. However, I do sometimes take stock on consignment for auction but only of verifiable bloodlines. My buyers receive papers on each one and my personal, money back guarantee of satisfaction."

"Well, I know I've always been happy with my purchases," Renee chimed in, "and I always recommend you to my friends." She grinned at Miraelise, obviously pained by the whole thing.

The little man fairly glowed. "The Senator is too kind," he oozed. "My only wish is to serve my customers."

*That, Miraelise thought bitterly, and make a handsome profit.*

"Numbers on the pens," he was bleating as they began a slow stroll down the first corridor, "correspond to the lot numbers in the brochure. Please feel free to look into any of the view-ports. Our stock are all trained to remain away from the door."

Renee consulted her brochure frequently as they moved slowly along the corridor, peering into practically each view-port, oooooing and ahhhhing over every one. Two or three times, she even insisted that Miraelise look as well.

"Dear God," Renee squealed with girlish delight, "this one's gorgeous! Oh Mira, look! Look!" She practically threw her friend against the metal door.

"As always," Svarek smirked, "the Senator's eye for quality picks the cream of the herd. Here, let me open the pen so you may have a better look." He pulled a card quickly through a slot and the door slid open.

The young man, in his middle twenties perhaps, had been lying on his cot, hands folded beneath his head, staring at the ceiling. At the sound of the door opening, he automatically rose and moved to the center of the small eight by eight square, standing quietly, arms at his sides, facing front.

"He's premium in every respect," Svarek began his sales pitch as they stopped about three feet from him. "Impeccable blood lines. Both sire and dam three generations



in service. Perfect conformation. Strong as an ox, docile as a kitten. Quick learner. Would make an excellent worker in virtually any capacity.

"What's his name?" Renee bubbled with excitement.

"Timothy," Svarek answered brightly. "He's also been trained to respond to Tim. Of course, that's only what's listed on his natal registration papers. The Senator could, of course, make whatever changes she might desire. He's totally adaptable."

"Oh Mira," Renee gushed, "isn't he absolutely adorable? I mean, don't you just love him?"

"He's very nice," she replied noncommittally.

"If the Senator would like to examine him more closely." Svarek could almost smell the sale. Reaching for the single snap on each side of the waistband that held the young man's plain blue cotton shorts in place, he pulled them and took a step back as the simple garment slipped down to the boy's feet.

Renee made a slow circle, inspecting every inch of him with a careful, practiced eye.

"Has he been bred yet?" she asked, running her fingers along his shaft and feeling the heft of his sack in her hand.

"No, Senator. I only recently acquired him from the estate of an elderly woman who kept only a small domestic staff. She owned both his sire and dam and intended to breed him in-house, when she died suddenly. Daughter has quite a large stable of her own and just didn't feel she wanted to take on any more stock. A pity. He'd make an excellent addition to any breeding program."

"What do you think, Mira?"

"I think you're going to buy him regardless of what I think."

"As the Senator is an honored and valuable customer, I would be most happy to make whatever financial arrangement you think fair."

Mira smiled sarcastically at Renee. "Of course, I'm sure that even in her hormone-induced frenzy, the Senator would not consider breaking the law. And I'm sure you, Svarek, would not be a party to making a private deal for livestock already advertised for public auction. That, as I'm sure both of you will recall, would be illegal."

"Oh, Mira," Renee moaned in mock disappointment, "do you know what he's going to go for at auction? You've probably cost me a fortune."

"Nevertheless," Svarek agreed hurriedly, "it would, as the Tarsheen points out quite correctly, be a violation, however small, of the law and that Svarek does not do. I hope though, that the Senator will bid, if she's sufficiently interested."

Sufficiently interested.

Mira rolled her eyes but said nothing. As eager as Renee was to get her hands on the young man, she'd probably inflate the price past all reason. It was one of her friend's few faults. More money than brains and an almost pathological need to have what she wanted, when she wanted it. It was a childish trait and could be more than a

little annoying, but it was as much a part of Renee as her aquamarine eyes or tall, willowy build.

As they neared the end of their tour, Mira saw a door, set off by itself, painted a bright red. Curious, she pulled away from Renee and Svarek who were going in to look at another young man, and glanced into the view-port. The sight shocked her.

The pen was small, perhaps six feet square she thought, poorly lit and dirty, a mattress thrown on the floor, a small sink and toilet. A man, fifty-ish, stood in the center of the cell, arms stretched over his head as far as they would reach, chained so that his whole weight was suspended from his crossed wrists. His ankles were crossed and chained to the floor. A tangle of shaggy, matted salt and pepper hair and a shadow of stubble were all she could see as the head was lolled to one side, chin on his chest. Certainly she'd seen stock chained before, but never like this and it seemed to root her to the spot with horror.

"Ah, Tarsheen." Svarek's oily voice shattered the spell and made her jump in surprise. "A thousand pardons. I didn't mean to startle you."

"What...what is the meaning of this?" She pointed unsteadily to the view port.

"An unfortunate reject that Your Highness was certainly not meant to be subjected to. The red door is to indicate 'undesirable'. My apologies that you had to be exposed to such vermin. If you and the Senator will follow me, I'll take you back to your box. The auction will be starting soon."

"Why...why is he being kept like that?" Mira could barely compose herself.

"Alas, I'm afraid he's just a bad apple," the little man explained in disgust. "I, personally, have sold him twice. He's been returned both times. Totally unmanageable, even with the implant. I only took him this time because he was part of an odd lot that I got for a song. I've advertised him for sale as is the law, but no one, certainly none of my clients, will bid on him. And after today's auction, Dr. Keller will be here to purchase all of my leftovers for her reproductive research center." The ugly little head jerked toward the red door and the voice took on a mean sound. "We'll see how uppity he is with his balls in a jar."

Renee peeked in and shivered. "Uh, he's awful!"

"Ladies, if you please." Svarek held out his hand and pointed them toward the exit.

"Yes, I'll be right there," Mira assured them. "Just give me another second. I'll meet you at the elevator."

"If the Tarsheen is unwell, I could get one of my servants to assist you to your box." Svarek was all solicitude and concern.

"No, I'm fine. Please go on. I just need a moment to recover."

"Are you sure, Mira? You're white as a sheet."

"Yes, I'm sure."

When they were gone, Mira leaned against the cool wall, her heart inexplicably racing. She wanted to get away from this place but didn't seem able to move. Finally,

she roused herself but instead of heading for the elevator, she found herself drawn to the view-port once more. As she gazed, almost mesmerized at the figure before her, he suddenly raised his head and looked, she could have sworn, directly at her. It was a craggy, rugged face, square with a strong chin, large, Roman nose and high cheekbones. But it was his eyes that riveted her, black in the half-light, huge and alive with what Mira could only describe as defiance. For a moment, their eyes locked, held almost by some tangible force. And then, as if exhausted by the effort, the eyes closed and the head fell forward again.

Thoroughly unnerved, Mira literally ran to find Renee and Svarek and escape this place.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Next on the program is lot number three forty-five," the auctioneer announced as the young man took his place on the block. He was completely naked. "This is Timothy. If you'll consult your program, you'll see this is prime quality. Bids begin at five."

Renee's paddle bobbed up, high above the crowd on the floor. Several other paddles appeared as well.

"Shit, Mira," she whispered unhappily, "look at that. Didn't I tell you I should have taken Svarek's offer to let me buy him?" She waved her paddle again.

"The bid is seven-five. I have seven-six, seven-seven, seven-eight in the front. Eight from the Senator's box. Do I have nine?" The auctioneer's voice continued to roll.

"I don't see what you're concerned about," Mira replied, a touch of sarcasm at the edge of her voice. "You could buy all of Svarek's stock and not put a dent in your credit card limit. If you're dead set on having him, you'll simply keep bidding until everyone else is eliminated."

As if to show her agreement, Renee waved her paddle twice.

"I have twenty from the Senator. Do I have twenty-one? A bargain for this degree of quality." He nodded. "I have twenty-one, twenty-two."

Renee made a face. Once again she raised her paddle and five fingers.

"I have twenty-five. Do I have twenty-six? Twenty-six?" His eyes scanned the room but saw no other paddles. "Twenty-five once. Twenty-five twice." He tapped his wooden gavel. "Sold for \$25,000. Our next lot number is..."

"Oh Mira, I won, I won!" Renee bounced in her chair like an excited child.

Mira indulged her friend with a smile. "There was never any doubt. Now go pay for him so we can get out of this place. Since you're the one who forced me into this, lunch is on you and I intend to order something outrageously expensive."

"Agreed. It's almost over anyway. Nothing but the dregs left." She stood up and grabbed her bag. "I'll hurry as fast as I can and then we can go," she called and disappeared behind the curtain leading to the door.

Several lots came and went, nothing approaching the price Renee had paid. Since she frequented the place, Mira could well imagine the horrible little Svarek planted people around the place to bid on anything Renee was interested in specifically to inflate the price. And, she thought smugly, it would serve her right.

"Our last lot is number four-oh-three," the auctioneer said disinterestedly, "Robert."

Chains rattled and two workers wielding what Mira could plainly see were prods, forced the man she'd seen earlier to the block. Unlike the others who'd been brought in naked, he was covered with a thin, loose-fitting, sleeveless white shirt and blue shorts. Stumbling as he tried to get up the steps, he fell, striking his left forearm hard against the sharp edge, wincing visibly. When he didn't get up fast enough, one of the workers stuck the metal wand in his back and he struggled to his feet again, finally reaching the middle of the platform. All around the room she could hear the buzz of disgust, amusement and disbelief that Svarek would actually bring this scraggly creature up for auction.

"We'll open at the audience's discretion," the auctioneer said professionally. Vainly, he searched for a paddle.

"Despite his present appearance," the auctioneer cajoled, "he's really a very good bargain. Strong. Able. Bathed and properly groomed, he would be good for any type of menial labor. Who'll open the bidding?"

"Ten dollars."

All heads, including Mira's, swiveled curiously to follow the voice. From a box almost directly across the hall, a lone paddle was visible. A ripple of laughter flowed through the crowd.

"Ten dollars from Dr. Keller. Do I have fifteen?" the auctioneer ventured.

On the block, Robert glanced up but the glare of the lights prevented him from seeing where the bid had come from. But at the bid, he straightened himself, squaring his shoulders and raising his head to face the crowd. And Mira was struck again by those eyes, determined, defiant and yes, even a little proud.

"Ten dollars once." He searched the audience again. "Ten dollars, twice."

"Fifteen."

Again, heads swiveled and the buzz became a clamor as people realized who'd made the bid.

"Fifteen dollars from the Tarsheen," he repeated in amazement.

For most of the auction, Mira hadn't even realized she had a paddle. Svarek had insisted she take it, saying that he'd registered her as a bidder, "just in case". It had lain in her lap, almost unnoticed, where she'd dropped it. Suddenly though, her fingers had simply seemed to find it and force it into the air by themselves, the voice calling out the bid, alien to her even as it left her mouth.

"Twenty," came the bid even before the auctioneer could call for it.

"Twenty-five."

This was ridiculous! She shouldn't even be here, much less participating in this obscenity. *Put the paddle down and stop this nonsense.* It was not only stupid but potentially disastrous, personally and professionally.

"Forty."

Victoria Keller's voice was sharp and cold as an icicle. The sound of it made Mira shiver. But whatever it was that possessed her, wouldn't be denied.

"Fifty."

"Seventy-five."

She and Victoria Keller had been rivals since childhood. Long ago, when women had been struggling for power, Mira's maternal line and Victoria's had both vied for the Tarsheen's crown. Mira's had won and her line held the hereditary title. But Victoria's line had never fully accepted that and the houses had been clashing since. Dragging Mira into a public skirmish, even over something as silly as this would be just like Victoria. Still, she seemed powerless to stop. And there were those eyes...

"One hundred."

"The bid is one hundred." Questioningly, the auctioneer's eyes moved to Keller's box. Mira could not see the other woman's face clearly, but she didn't see the paddle either.

"I have one hundred. Last call. One hundred, once. One hundred, twice." He threw a final glance at the other box and then brought down his gavel. "Sold, for one hundred dollars to the Tarsheen. The auction is now closed. All bids are final and all merchandise must be paid for before leaving. Thank you for attending and we look forward to serving you again."

For a few moments, Mira sat, disbelieving, as people rose, filled the aisles and began moving toward the exits. As soon as the gavel had fallen, Robert had been removed and with him, had gone whatever spell she'd been under. Unfortunately, the deed was done and there was no backing out.

Renee appeared, breathless and flushed. "Sorry to be so long, but the line at the cashier was out the door. I don't know when I've seen it so busy. And there are only three people working. Really. You'd think Svarek would have more help for such a big auction. Anyway, Timothy's all paid for and he'll be delivered tomorrow. I'd love to have him this afternoon, but I have that charity thing, which will no doubt run long, and I want to be there when he comes. Where shall we go for lunch?"

"I...I have to make a stop first," Mira said, finally rousing herself.

"Can't you wait 'til we get to the restaurant? The powder room here will be positively packed."

"It's not that, Renee," she snapped. "I...I have to stop at the cashier's."

Renee cocked her head quizzically. It took only a few moments for it to sink in.

"You bought something!" she squealed, a huge, knowing smile lighting her face.

"For Christ's sake, Renee, shut up!" Mira gathered her things and stood up but her friend wouldn't be put off.

"I knew it!" she continued eagerly, "I knew you couldn't resist if you actually came here!"

"Will you come on?" The Tarsheen moved for the door.

"What?" she demanded. "What did you buy? Which one?"

"It doesn't matter." Mira was becoming annoyed. "Just come on so I can get this over with."

As they went through the door and into the hall, Renee leafed through her brochure. "It has to be one of the lots after Timothy," she mused, "after I left. You know, Mira, you could have told me you were going to do it. I would have loved to have seen you in action."

"It was an unfortunate impulse which I regret, even now."

"Miraelise? An impulse?" Renee laughed and shook her head. "My God, Mira. I've known you longer than either one of us wants to consider and I have never, ever known you to do anything on impulse. You are the world's most calculating creature. Oh, this is too delicious."

"Will you please just be quiet and show me where the cashier is?" She almost pushed Renee down the stairs.

"This way," Renee told her as they reached the bottom of the stairs. To their left, the corridor was filled with people moving to the exits. The right was far less crowded, only those going to or from the cashier area.

Just around the first corner, they ran into a crowd, divided into three ragged lines, defined more or less, by rope barricades. Mira headed for the shortest one, her friend tagging after.

"So are you going to tell me," she whined, "or are you going to make me guess?"

"The last one, Renee," Mira snarled, "the last one. Robert."

Renee flipped quickly to the back of the brochure. It was a very short silence.

"Mira," she yelped, "how could you?" Immediately, all heads turned in their direction.

"Will you *please* shut up!" Mira replied in a hoarse whisper. "Either that, or just get the hell away from me."

"Why ever would you want that...that thing?" Renee stared at her, totally incredulous.

Mira's voice and bearing changed to one of regal authority. "Because I am the Tarsheen and I do not explain my actions to anyone. Even you. Now if you won't stop this infernal caterwauling for your friend Miraelise, then you *will* cease at the order of your ruler. Do you understand?"

Blinking with surprise, Renee nodded once and shifted her gaze to the floor. Immediately, Mira felt foolish and sorry to have hurt her friend, but not enough to apologize and have the conversation continue in the same vein. And so they waited in silence, moving with the rest of the buyers until they reached a cashier.

"Ah yes, Tarsheen," the little man behind the counter smiled, dipping his head slightly to show his respect. "You purchased lot number four-oh-three. A most shrewd bargain, if I may say so. If you'll wait a moment, I shall tally your bill. What method would Your Grace prefer to use to make payment?"

"Credit card. And don't forget the receipt."

"Of course, Your Highness. A moment please."

Several moments went by while Mira searched in her purse for her wallet and credit card. She was just pulling it out when the gnome returned and pushed a bill of sale toward her.

"A hundred ninety-seven dollars and thirty-two cents," she shrieked. "There's obviously been some mistake. My bid was one hundred dollars."

"Yes, Your Grace," he agreed, "but if you will look at the itemization, you'll understand the total."

Mira glanced at the upper portion of the bill. Bid, tax, handling, commission and delivery.

"All right, all right," she relented, pushing the card and the bill back to him. "Just finish this so I can get out of here."

\* \* \* \* \*

"YOU DID WHAT!"

"I bought a slave," Mira repeated tiredly, dropping into her large desk chair, "and please, Caina, not you too. Between Svarek smirking and Renee giggling, I've had everything I can stand for one very trying morning."

"For God's sake, why?" The older woman came around the desk and stared down at Mira. "In case you've forgotten, you're the opposition. You don't believe in slavery and are trying to abolish it."

"No, Caina, I have not forgotten. It's a long story and I don't feel like going into it right now. He'll be delivered later this afternoon. We can discuss it then. In the meantime, please bring me a glass of ice tea for my stomach and two aspirin for my head. I feel as if my brain were draining out through my ears."

"I told you not to go to that place," she continued, irritation plain in her voice. "That you went there at all diminishes your credibility. That you actually bought a slave, blows it to hell. Honestly, I can't believe you'd do something so stupid. Sometimes I think Renee Baron's idiocy is contagious."

There was, Mira knew, no way for her to explain to her Proconsul. Her mother had set Caina to be her nursemaid, teacher, advisor, friend, mentor and conscience when she was a baby. With her mother's obligations and responsibilities as Tarsheen, Caina had virtually raised her. Five foot six but seeming much taller with her straight bearing and carriage, short, steel gray hair, clear, thoughtful hazel eyes, strong mouth, round face and thin nose. She was every inch what one would expect a member of the royal household to be.

Mira, on the other hand, had always been cursed with what she termed, "ordinariness". Instead of her mother's grand five-foot eight-inch stature, Mira was barely five foot four and was required to spend all of her public life in high heels. An oval face, black eyes, black hair worn shoulder-length, more so it could be done up dramatically for State occasions than for comfort, pug nose sprinkled with freckles that were especially noticeable in summer and a small mouth that seemed to her, too prone to giggling and not serious, thoughtful contemplation. And at forty-five, the battle to remain in her size eight clothes seemed to require more sit-ups and less chocolate ice cream every year.

"I doubt seriously that one slave, more or less, will bring down my house," Mira teased gently. "After all, I own slaves myself. My line has owned them as long as it's been legal. I would not be able to keep my estate or any of my other enterprises without them. As odious as the institution may be, it can't simply be uprooted and discarded without something to replace it. Women didn't invent it. In fact, for most of human history, we've lived it. We took matters into our own hands because the planet was on the edge of chaos. We found ways to bring it back from the brink, give it stability and peace and I have no doubt that we will find an answer to this question, as well. Now please, just bring me my tea and my aspirin and give me a few moments of peace."

Her Proconsul continued to look at her for a few more moments and then abruptly shrugged her shoulders. "Very well," was all she said as she went out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"In as much as it is the Tarsheen," Svarek oozed, "I insisted on handling the delivery myself. I wanted to be sure that every detail was attended to and that Your Grace was satisfied in every way."

Those revolting yellow teeth appeared. "May I say what an honor and privilege it is for me personally to enter into the house of the Tarsheen and that it reflects perfectly, Your Highness's beauty, intelligence and great style."

*Any more of this shit, Mira thought, and I'll puke. "Thank you."*

"Here are Robert's papers," he said, setting a large manila envelope on her desk.

His prune forehead crinkled up. "If I might be so bold as to speak to the Tarsheen openly and with some frankness."

"Yes?"



"The slave, Robert. May I suggest that the Tarsheen take a firm hand with him from the beginning. Don't be afraid to use the implant or the lash or whatever other means Your Grace may have at hand to bring him to heel."

"I do not believe in flogging or even the use of the implant except in the direst of situations. I believe in reason and decent treatment."

"Of course, Your Highness. The Tarsheen's kindness and good nature are well known. And I'm sure most successful with your average slave. But Robert is not like other slaves. He's...he's..."

"He's what, Svarek?" Mira asked, leaning forward slightly.

"He's...willful. He submits only to superior force. If given the opportunity, he will take advantage of the Tarsheen's kindness and bring only grief. He understands only fear."

"Thank you for your assessment," Mira told him, barely able to contain her anger at his barbaric suggestions. "I shall keep them in mind."

"And remember, should the Tarsheen be dissatisfied for any reason, you have only to return him for a full refund."

"I shall remember, Svarek."

"I hope that the Tarsheen will honor my establishment again. Perhaps Your Grace would like to be placed on my mailing list so that I may be able to alert you to any future stock I obtain for auction that might interest you."

That was too much. Mira almost leapt out of her chair and attacked the little man physically. "I most certainly don't wish to be on your mailing list," she shouted. "I don't ever want to think about your filthy hole, much less go there except with a can of gasoline and a torch. I want you out of my sight, now! Your stench fouls my house! And I never want to see your shriveled little face again!"

Scared shitless, the ugly little creature scurried for the door and disappeared. Mira collapsed back into her chair and closed her eyes, as Caina returned.

"He looks as if he'd just seen Satan himself."

"Do you believe that ghastly, misshapen toad had the unmitigated gall to ask if I'd like to be on his mailing list?" Mira opened her eyes and gazed at her Proconsul.

"What did you expect?" the other woman replied evenly. "He'll probably put up some kind of a sign announcing that he is 'Purveyor of Slaves to the Royal House'."

"Don't even joke about that," Mira warned her sternly.

"At any rate, he's here. Shall I send him in?"

Mira nodded. "I suppose I should just get it over with. Have we a place for him?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I've put him in Lawrence's old room. It's on the third floor. I had it made up after you told me."

"Fine. Send him in."

He'd obviously been bathed, shaved, his hair combed, and put into a clean white T-shirt and blue cotton shorts. Apparently though, the hair had a mind of its own, falling in a slight shag at his ears and neck, one particularly unruly shock dropping down between those remarkable eyes.

Looking down at her from his advantage, at least six feet she surmised – nothing on that calm face, the eyes deep and empty – he still made her vaguely uneasy as she rose.

"I am the Tarsheen, Miraelise," she announced with as much grandeur as she could muster.

"I know," he replied simply. "It's all I've heard since the gavel came down." Without turning his head, he seemed to take in his surroundings and her at a glance. "Everyone, including Svarek, has been telling me, at some length, how lucky I am to have been purchased by such a fine lady and how grateful I should be."

It didn't seem to Mira that he sounded at all grateful. In fact, something in his tone, his eyes, pricked her ever so subtly. Nothing she could quite put her finger on, but she could even imagine that he was making fun of her in some private fashion of his own. Whatever it was, she didn't think she liked it.

Perhaps Svarek had been right after all. Not about the cruelty, but about showing firmness from the beginning. Certainly there didn't seem to be anything subservient in his manner, standing erect, head up, gazing at her straightforwardly. Only his arms hanging down in front of him, wrists barely touching, belied his familiarity with chains.

"I can assure you, your purchase was quite accidental. I only went to that wretched place because my friend, Renee, insisted. I don't buy slaves."

A quizzical eyebrow shot up. The prick became a barb. He was bordering on the insolent and he hadn't uttered a word.

"What I mean," she tried again, anxious that he not see how flustered she was becoming, "is that I don't believe in slavery. I lead the opposition party in trying to abolish it. But I do believe that Dr. Victoria Keller is a sadist, thinly masking her torture as 'medical research'. It wasn't you I was specifically interested in. Only in preventing you from falling into her clutches. I would have done the same for anyone else in your position."

Unexpectedly, a wry grin appeared at the corners of his mouth and he dipped his head a bit. "The Tarsheen has both my body and my thanks."

What had Svarek said? Uppity. Yes, that described him to his toenails. Well he wasn't going to stampede her. She was the Tarsheen and his owner. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to relax and sit down.

"My rules are few and if adhered to, you will find me a tolerant and I hope, fair, mistress. I do not expect universal personal admiration or respect. I do, however, demand respect for the title. Above all else, you will remember that you are in the house of the Tarsheen and you will, at all times, conduct yourself appropriately."

"You will not speak to the Proconsul, the Overseer or myself unless you are spoken to. You will address me as 'Your Highness' or 'Your Grace' and you will bow upon

entering and departing my presence. The Proconsul is to be addressed as 'Proconsul' or 'Madam Consul'. The Overseer is to be addressed as Ms. Pontier or Ma'am. Bowing is not necessary to them, but you will demonstrate a respectful demeanor and tone in all your dealings with them, no matter how trivial. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"When your duties have been determined, you will be assigned work hours. The Overseer will show you your room, see that you are issued suitable clothes and personal toilet articles and explain such details as meal hours, curfew and general rules."

"And the punishments for breaking those rules?"

The picture of him shackled in Svarek's pen came to her and almost without realizing it, her voice softened a tone.

"There are always consequences to our actions," she told him calmly, "whether Tarsheen or slave. Generally, the Overseer handles any problems that arise in the daily course of events between slaves. Most of them are minor and easily resolved. However, I am the final authority in all such matters, especially severe breaches. I listen to both sides and try to make a just determination. But you will not find the lash or chains here and the implant only as a last resort."

"Your Grace is indeed kind and enlightened."

Again, there was that undercurrent of something in the otherwise respectful tone, something floating just below the surface. And Mira was now convinced she didn't like it.

She opened her mouth to reprimand him, when his body seemed to wobble ever so slightly, causing a short, sharp intake of breath and a flickering of his eyelids.

"Are you all right?" she asked nervously.

"Yes." Robert seemed to gather himself. "I...I was just a little dizzy. I've been doing a lot of standing lately." A shadow of that grin flitted across his face again.

There was a fleeting memory of his face, his eyes as he'd looked up at her peering at him through the view-port. He couldn't have seen her, she knew. Still, it had been as if he'd reached out and physically touched her. And now, she was suddenly seized by the most unsettling, un-regal urge to ask him to sit down.

"It's all right," he said staring down at her calmly. "A slave doesn't sit in the presence of the Tarsheen."

It was like an electric shock jolting through her. Surely he couldn't read her mind. A coincidence. Or perhaps he'd simply read the concern on her face. Caina had been scolding her since childhood for being too open. "You don't have your mother's poker face," she'd sigh. "It will, no doubt, get you in serious trouble one day."

This is silly, she told herself sternly, shaking off both the incident and the momentary lapse of protocol.

"That's right," she agreed coolly, "they don't."

Picking up the papers from her desk, she began to scan them. "I see that you have no sire or dam listed, or any natal registration date." Looking up, she addressed him, perhaps a little more sarcastically than she'd intended. "Am I to assume yours was another Immaculate Conception or just a garden-variety bureaucratic screwup?"

"My parents," he told her bitterly, emphasizing the word, "were Anne and Robert. I was named after him. My birthday is August eighth."

A moment of uncertainty, and perhaps dread, shuddered through Mira before she could regain her composure. "I shall make note of that."

Returning to the papers, mostly records of sale, she continued to read for several minutes. At some point, she wasn't even sure herself exactly when, she became aware that he was no longer standing straight but had shifted his weight slightly and put his left hand at the edge of her desk. Glancing up, she was surprised to see he was now pale, a small line of sweat beads on his upper lip.

"Are you sure you're all right?" The rapid change in his appearance escalated her concern and unnerved her. She was not accustomed to dealing with slaves under the best of circumstances. One that might be unwell was totally beyond her experience.

Raising his head a little, he tried to smile but didn't quite make it. "I guess I just haven't gotten my sea legs yet. I lost track of how long I was chained up."

"Sit down," she told him firmly, moving around the desk. Protocol evaporated in the face of necessity.

"No, really. I'm all right. But perhaps I could have a glass of water?" He suddenly sounded like a small boy.

"Of course." Mira turned and took a couple of steps back toward the credenza behind her desk where she kept her water glass and carafe. There was a sound like air escaping from a balloon and the soft thud of a collapsing body as Robert crumpled unconscious to her thick, cream-colored carpet.

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Dr. Lisa Elliott pushed through the Emergency Room doors and crossed the rug of the private waiting room as Mira stood up.

"Where the hell did you find that?" she asked sourly.

"I bought him. And no, I am not going to tell you about it. You're going to tell me how he is."

The other woman glared at her for several seconds. "Well, it's plain as hell you don't buy many slaves," she continued acidly.

"You know," Mira shot back sharply, "that I have my own stable of stock which I breed and raise. This...this was a mistake."

"You can say that again," the doctor chuckled. "If it was anyone but you, Mira, I'd tell you you'd lost your marbles."

Mira frowned. "Then I would suggest that if you wish to remain both my friend and Court Physician, you will confine your diagnosis to the slave Robert."

"Where do you want me to start?" she replied with a shrug.

"Why don't you try the beginning? Why did he collapse?"

"Veratril. It's a drug some of our less reputable dealers use on their stock. Perfectly legal although ethically 'gray' if you know what I mean. Fill a slave with Veratril. Keeps him alert and relatively active on a minimum of food and water. Cuts down on overhead, I guess. But too much, over too long a period, brings on weakness, dizziness and unconsciousness."

She sighed deeply. "Judging from the amount of the drug in his blood and the degree of dehydration, I'd say he probably hasn't had anything appreciable to eat in two, three days. Fluids? I'd guess at least a day, maybe a day and a half. Also, he's suffering from acute exhaustion. No doubt having to do with the fresh manacle marks on his wrists and ankles and the left shoulder sprain."

"He...he is going to be all right, isn't he?" Mira asked slowly, hardly able to believe her ears.

"He'll recover from this, if that's what you mean. He's getting IV fluid replacement and nutrients, a mild painkiller and sling for the shoulder and something to make him sleep. Be out at least twelve hours. Maybe longer." She glanced uncertainly at the Tarsheen. "There's more. Maybe you should sit down."

"You may dispense with the theatrics, Dr. Elliott, and just get on with it."

"How much do you know about this Robert?" she inquired, suddenly turning very serious. "I mean, really?"

"Not...not a great deal. I only bought him from Svarek this morning. Why? What's wrong?"

A disgusted snort escaped the doctor. "Svarek," she repeated like an obscenity. "I should have seen his cramped little fist in this."

"What?"

"Your Robert is, what we call in medical terminology, a real mess. The implant in his pain center shows scarring and dead and damaged tissue. Even cells in the surrounding brain tissue have been damaged. It's the worst I've ever seen. It must have taken years of abuse to have done that much damage. His back looks like healed hamburger. I did a complete body x-ray. There are old fractures in every major bone I looked at. Some more than one. He's been chained up so much his wrists and ankles have calluses. And not to offend Your Grace's delicate sensibilities, but from the number and location of the scars, I would say that unless he has some extremely bizarre sexual tastes, he's been tortured extensively in that area as well."

Mira stood, trying to process the information, her brain feeling like an inadequate computer. Several seconds went by while she tried to comprehend what she'd heard.

"I...I don't understand," she finally managed to stammer.

"Okay. In a nutshell, you got a lemon. Hell, you got the whole citrus orchard. Svarek must have seen you coming. My suggestion is that you let me stabilize this loser, get him back on his feet and then shag ass to that weasel-faced lowlife Svarek and get your money back."

"But..."

"But nothing, Mira," her friend almost spat. "Those aren't merit badges he's got all over his body. They're punishments. Severe, drastic punishments. Hell, let's face it. They're torture. And I'm sure he didn't get them for breaking curfew or forgetting to yield to a woman on the street. Take my advice. Get rid of him and get rid of him now."

"I can't."

"Can't? What the hell do you mean, 'can't'? You're the Tarsheen, for Christ's sake! You can do anything you want! That little shit, Svarek isn't going to give you any trouble. And even if he does, you can just squash him like a bug. Chalk it up to Public Service."

"You don't understand. I only went to Svarek's because Renee insisted I go with her. And I only bought this slave because if I hadn't, he would have been shipped off to Victoria Keller's little House of Horrors. I didn't even mean to do it. Renee'd gone off to pay for a slave she'd bought and he was there on the block in chains and I heard Victoria's voice call out a bid and the next thing I knew, the gavel was coming down and the auctioneer was yelling 'sold'. If I take him back, I'll be responsible for, as Svarek put it so delicately, 'his balls in a jar'. I couldn't stand that, Lisa, I just couldn't."

"Funny you should mention balls," the doctor said without a trace of humor.

"Now what?" Mira's sighed, her voice filled with resignation.

"Well, I wasn't going to mention it, but since you bring it up, your Robert has a Sillman device."

"Oh no, Lisa! You can't be serious!" Mira felt a wave of revulsion and horror wash over her.

"Wanna see the ultrasound picture?"

"But those haven't been used for fifteen...twenty years. It isn't possible."

"His is probably twenty-five years old at least. They were fairly common when he would have been coming to prime breeding age."

"It's barbaric! I want it removed while he's here. You can replace it with a Wilson. Low dose, continual spermicide."

"Uh-uh," Elliot replied emphatically. "No way."

"What are you saying? I'm his owner."

"I can't, Mira."

"Why, for God's sake? I'm the Tarsheen. You may consider it a Royal command. I will sign the release forms now and send you a formal request in the morning."

"I don't care if you carve it in granite and have the Archangel Michael deliver it, I can't do it. Removing a Sillman device without the written consent of the owner who ordered it, is illegal. I'd lose my license and go to jail. Even the Tarsheen isn't above the law."

"I want it out," she repeated hotly.

"Then get one of your legal eagles to file papers. My guess is that the owner who originally ordered the implant is long gone so file as the new owner. You have the right to make the request legally. And it's not like any judge in her right mind is going to turn you down. The whole thing takes twenty minutes and I can probably still do it before he leaves."

"He doesn't leave here until he's well," Mira insisted. "Completely well. I won't have a repeat of this."

"Don't worry, you won't. All things considered, he's in fairly good shape."

"And he's to have a private room."

"I don't know that there are any private rooms in that wing."

"Then find one or make one or do whatever you need to. I will not have my property mixing with...with whatever you have down there. And he's to have whatever he needs."

"I'll make the arrangements personally," Lisa agreed. "After all, who am I, a humble doctor, to argue with the Tarsheen."

Mira nodded and grinned. "Exactly right. Call me every day at nine a.m. sharp with his progress. If I'm not available, talk directly to Caina. I shall call my legal counsel as soon as I leave here and set the wheels in motion for the removal of the Sillman."

The doctor bowed slightly and replied with exaggerated deference, "As Your Highness commands."

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"A Sillman device," the other woman repeated.

"Yes, Deirdre, a Sillman device." Mira disliked talking to lawyers, even her own, especially about matters she considered petty. And she was impatient to have the situation handled.

"As his owner, I want it removed, preferably the sooner the better. However, Lisa Elliot tells me that there's some kind of silly law stating that only the owner who originally ordered the implant can have it removed and that as the new owner, I have to jump through some foolish legal hoops to do it. I want you to file the appropriate papers and have this taken care of as soon as possible. He's in the hospital now and it would be much more advantageous to have the implant removed while he's there."

"I've never handled a Sillman removal," Deirdre Fairchild confessed, slightly bewildered. "I didn't know there were any of them left."

"Well, there's at least one. Lisa seems to think it should be a relatively simple matter to have this heard by a judge and permission granted."

"Probably, but I will have to do some research. I'll give it to my clerk when I get back to the office. Depending on how complicated the law is and how much work to put the papers together, I should be able to get an early court date."

"I won't have to appear or anything, will I?"

"Oh no, Mira, this is just a technicality. You sign the request and I explain that you're this slave's new owner and you want to remove the Sillman and put in something more modern, less...less..."

"Barbaric is the word you're searching for," Mira told her coldly.

"Right, 'barbaric'. I'll use that very word in the papers and to the judge."

"I don't care what word you use, just so long as it results in that thing being removed from the body of my slave. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mira. It's understood."



## Chapter Two

The sun was filtering through a partially closed venetian blind when Robert blinked open his eyes. For an uncertain, fleeting moment, he didn't know where he was. Panic and the almost automatic urge to run quickly gave way to curiosity as he took in his surroundings. A small room, painted brilliant white. He was lying between crisp, slightly starched white sheets, a pillow under his head, the bed raised slightly, the metal railings up on both sides of him. Thin tubing trailed from twin plastic bags hanging over his head, dripping some kind of clear fluid into the top of his left hand, bandaged where the needle had been placed. Bands of soft white gauze encircled his raw wrists. Beside his bed stood a plain gray metal nightstand and a matching overbed table pushed over it. Across the shiny white tile floor, a door stood open to the bathroom and a smaller one, closed, which he guessed was the closet.

How long had he been here? The last thing he remembered clearly was standing in the Tarsheen's office, her face swimming before him, legs turning to rice pudding, feeling himself slipping into the blackness. Apparently, whatever Svarek had been shooting into him the past few days had either dissipated or caught up with him. But aside from a little weakness and a throb where the IV needle was stuck in his hand, he felt surprisingly good. Better, in fact, than he had in a long while.

A squeak announced the opening of the door and he turned quickly to see a woman in a white lab coat striding toward him. Medium height, straight brown hair, brown eyes, no expression on her cream-in-coffee face, a metal-jacketed chart in her hand. Her picture ID badge identified her as Lisa Elliott, MD.

"Well," she stated neutrally, "I see you're finally awake."

"Have I been asleep long? I feel like Rip Van Winkle." A tiny smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"Not quite that long," she shot back. "About thirteen hours." She laid the chart on the nightstand as she reached for his wrist and looked at her watch.

"It's been a long time since I had a pretty woman hold my hand," he commented. "You have very soft skin."

"Lots of hand lotion," she told him, unimpressed, grabbing for the stethoscope around her neck. "Occupational consequence of washing my hands a lot. Sit up and lean forward a little."

Robert did as he was told as the doctor pulled down at the neck of his gown slightly and pressed the metal against his skin. Surprisingly, it wasn't cold.

"You're the first doctor I ever met who didn't keep her stethoscope in the refrigerator," he whispered as she moved the instrument to a different position on his chest.

"I try to warm the scope with my hands before I put it on the patient."

"That's very compassionate of you."

"Take a deep breath and hold it." She listened for a few seconds. "Again." After a few more seconds, she took the metal away and pulled the earpieces out.

"Pragmatism, I assure you. I discovered early on that if you put cold metal on bare skin, you inevitably get an unwanted intake of breath and a speedup of the heart rate. Screws up the vitals. Easier to just hold the thing in your hands for a few seconds while you're walking to the patient's room. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Dizziness? Headache? Nausea?"

"Not that I notice. Of course, I'm lying down. It might be different when I try to get up."

"Yes, well that'll happen soon enough." Taking a pen out of her pocket, she picked up his chart, flipped through a few pages and poised herself to write. "How long were you in Svarek's?"

"Hard to tell," he shrugged quietly. "I guess I lost track of time."

"If you had to guess?"

"Four, five days. I'm not sure."

"How much of that time were you chained up?" There was still no expression on her face, no tone except professional inquiry in her voice.

"Most of it."

"Any particular reason?"

"I don't think Svarek likes me."

She wasn't amused. "And how long was it before you were sold that you had anything solid to eat?"

"Does a bowl of lukewarm water with three practically transparent slivers of horsemeat count?" He'd adopted her tone and expression.

"For Svarek, yes."

"About three days."

"And water?"

"I got a cup of something liquid and wet every so often. Generally when Svarek and one of his goons came with a needle." A slight touch of bitterness tinged his voice.

Dr. Elliot scribbled something.

"Since most of your medical history is visible on your body and I'll bet you wouldn't tell me anyway, I won't waste either of our time by asking you about it. However, I would like to know if you have any medication or other allergies."

"Not that I know of. But then, I haven't spent too much time in hospitals." Pausing, he glanced around the room. "Especially not ones this nice."

"Maybe you haven't spent a lot of time in hospitals," she countered, "but with the marks and scars you're carrying, you probably should have. And slaves do not usually get their own room. This is by order of the Tarsheen."

"I thought as much. She's been very kind and generous to a poor slave." Dr. Elliott thought she detected just the slightest hint of sarcasm. It was, she thought, a rather strange reaction, considering the circumstances.

"I wouldn't feel too smug if I were you," she replied tartly. "You're one of Mira's things and she takes very good care of her things. Likewise, she expects the people who are entrusted with the care of her things, to take good care of them also. And make no mistake. I would no more think of being careless with Mira's slave, than I would her crystal collection. Believe me, Mira has very strong, very definite ideas of how things should be."

"You mean, she's spoiled."

The doctor studied him for a moment. "Perhaps 'spoiled' would be too strong a word. Let's just say she's accustomed to having her own way. She believes that having her own way is one of the primary perks of being the Tarsheen. And she has no compunctions about reminding people that she is, indeed, the Tarsheen."

"I know. That was a large part of her opening speech to me."

"Listen, you," Lisa's voice rose in anger, "if it wasn't for Mira, right now, instead of recovering in a private room in a good hospital, you'd most likely be strapped to a metal table being dissected by Victoria Keller. Mira had no obligation, legally, to seek medical help for you, much less this level of care, but she did. And while we're at it, she's also started the legal process to have your Sillman device removed. Not because of you personally so much as because she thinks the Sillman is torture and that stamping them out is a small victory in her war against slavery. You may not realize it, but making the Sillman illegal was one of Mira's first achievements after she ascended the throne. She fought tooth and claw when no one, and I mean no one, gave a rat's ass about a slave's balls."

"I...I didn't know," he replied softly.

"No, I don't suppose you did. And I doubt seriously you'd care if you didn't have one of them attached like a leech inside your scrotum." Taking a breath, she scribbled something else in his chart and flipped it closed.

"I'm going to start you on a liquid diet. Sorry, but we're fresh out of horsemeat. You'll have to settle for broth and tea for the moment. Depending on how you tolerate that, we'll try to move you along to solid food as soon as possible. I'll have an orderly come in with toilet articles and a walking pole for the IV. He'll help you bathe and

shave and into clean pajamas. Don't get too frisky. Take his help. And then back to bed. We'll see about you getting up and walking after you've had some solid food."

"How long am I going to be here?"

"At least a week. You need to regain your strength and give your shoulder and wrists and ankles time to heal. Mira's ordered that you not be returned to her until you're well. Also, she's hoping to be able to push through her request and have your Sillman removed before you leave. If she does, then you'll be here a couple more days. And now, if you'll excuse me, I have other patients I need to see."

"Thank you," he called after her, sounding sincere and, she thought, just a tad contrite.

"No need," she told him simply, grasping the doorknob. "I get paid by the hour."

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"My God, what else!" Mira threw up her hands in irritation and mock despair.

"Calm down," Deirdre tried to soothe, "it's not the end of the world. It's a little snag. Nothing to get upset about."

"You told me this was a small matter, easily taken care of. I sign the request, you take it to a judge who signs the order, you take it to Lisa and *voila!* Now you tell me that there's been a snag. Do you believe that this slave is the only thing I have to occupy myself?"

She stood up and waved a handful of papers in her lawyer's direction. "The Urban Resettlement Bill has run into opposition in the Ways and Means Committee. The Budget squabbles have begun. And there were three more raids on the northern border. I begin to think very seriously that the Sillman device of a solitary slave is not worthy of this much of my attention."

"You know that isn't true, Mira. If you did, you wouldn't be the leader of the anti-slavery forces in this region and your life would be considerably simpler." She smiled at the Tarsheen.

In spite of herself, Mira smiled and sat back down, tossing the papers on her desk. "Very well, Counselor, what is this snag?"

"There's been an objection to your request."

"An objection?" Mira was so surprised, she leaned forward, not sure she'd heard correctly.

Deirdre nodded and produced a legal paper that she held out to Mira.

"For Christ's sake, Deirdre," Mira growled, pushing the paper out of her face. "You know I have no interest in reading some long-winded legal mumbo jumbo. Simply tell me what the problem is, in English."

Pulling back the paper and setting it on her lap, the lawyer looked calmly at her client. "Simply stated, someone objects to the Sillman device being removed from your slave." She waited for the statement to sink in.

"Victoria Keller," Mira sighed, closing her eyes and leaning back in her chair.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"You know, there are times when I believe that woman has her eye to every keyhole and her ear to every wall in my house."

"It was bound to come out, Mira. You are, after all, the Tarsheen. When your name appears on a legal document, especially one of such an unusual and, if I may say, personal nature, people will naturally be curious."

"And if I were having my dog spayed or my cat neutered, would that be of interest to the general public too?" Mira asked sourly, not opening her eyes.

"It's difficult to say," the other woman chuckled, "especially given the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for gossip of the rich and famous. However, news that you are releasing a newly-purchased slave from his Sillman device raises...well, certain questions."

One of Mira's eyes popped open and she gazed at her friend suspiciously. "What sort of questions? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"You're a big girl, Mira. You know exactly what sort of questions. Not, of course, that anyone would actually broach them to Your Highness' face, except perhaps Renee, and we both know the gutter her mind runs in. Still, even a Tarsheen could be excused for seeking some diversion from her cares and stresses."

"Since I'm sure that my friend and counsel would never stoop to such thoughts, we shall move on. What's the next step?"

"Yes, well, Your Grace will be required to appear in court and give testimony as to your reasons for wanting the Sillman removed and Victoria will appear and give testimony as to why she objects. The judge will listen and render a verdict. It really isn't all that much more difficult than the original plan."

"I have already set down my reasons for the removal in my request. It is an antiquated, barbaric instrument of torture that is today illegal, having been replaced by any number of more humane, more effective methods of birth control. What more is there to be said?"

"Nothing, Mira, and when the judge hears your simple, eloquent reasoning, she can't help but be moved."

"Does Victoria give a reason for her objection in her paper?"

"No. She is not required to state her objection in writing, only that she has one and that she wishes to be heard in court."

"No doubt it was the 'humane' part. Probably offended her ugly, sadistic nature."

"Well, whatever the reason, if you want to continue, you'll have to appear."

"When?"

"I managed to get a hearing with Judge Latham for day after tomorrow at ten-thirty. The whole thing shouldn't take much more than a half hour. An hour, tops."

Mira glanced at the appointment calendar on her desk and frowned. "Judge Coraline Latham?"

"Uh-huh. You know her?"

"She and my mother went to school together," Mira answered wearily. "She's known me since I was a child."

"Well that's good," Deirdre said, brightening.

"She was a horrible old bag even then. And she thought I was a wretched, spoiled brat who needed a good spanking. Probably more than one."

Deirdre giggled again but wisely didn't say anything.

"All right," Mira agreed, writing the appointment in her calendar. "Shall I meet you in your office or just go directly to the court?"

"You can go directly to the court. Section Twelve. I'll meet you there about ten-fifteen. Okay?"

"I suppose I have no choice."

"By the way, how is your slave?"

"According to Lisa, he's coming along as well as can be expected. Eating solid food and going to the Day Room with the others."

"I don't believe that you managed to browbeat Dr. Lisa Elliott into taking care of a slave. Even for you."

"I didn't ask her if she wanted to do it," Mira replied sternly. "She is my Court Physician and is required to care for any member of my household I deem necessary."

"I'll bet she's thrilled to death about it too."

"It is not up to the doctor, no matter how she may feel personally, to deny medical attention to anyone I command her to care for."

"Yes, Your Highness. We all serve at your command."

"And if you are prudent," Mira reminded her, catching the slightly caustic tone, "you will continue to do so. If there's nothing more, you are dismissed."

"No, Your Grace," Deirdre smiled, gathering up her briefcase and rising, "nothing more. I'll see you at ten-fifteen, day after tomorrow." Backing to the door, she lowered her head respectfully. "Until then."

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Victoria Keller always reminded Mira of a snake. Cold, dark gray eyes set a trifle too far apart in the top part of a triangular face, tapering past thin cheeks to an almost pointed chin. Thin, straight nose, a mouth like a red pencil line drawn just above that chin. Her touch-too-blond hair was pulled into a flat twist at the back of her head. The

head balancing on her long skinny neck, seeming to move ever so slightly back and forth like a serpent ready to strike, completed the effect. Even her tall, slender body, today dressed in a simple black suit, seemed reptilian.

Mira glanced at her regally as she sailed past her and into the courtroom. She took her seat at a large, dark oak table that Deirdre pointed out as her lawyer seated herself beside Mira, and began emptying papers from her briefcase onto the table's mirror top. Across the room, Dr. Keller and her attorney were doing likewise.

At precisely ten-thirty, the bailiff's voice rang out, clear and professional, "Hear ye, hear ye. This court is now in session, the Honorable Judge Coraline Latham presiding. All rise."

Coraline Latham had to be seventy if she was a day, Mira thought idly as she settled herself back in her seat. A sometime visitor to their house when her mother had been alive, she'd never been one of Mira's strongest supporters. There was always talk about "how things were when they, the men were in charge. My grandmother used to tell me stories that would curl your hair. And here you are trying to give the whole thing back to them."

"Docket number 328659, Tarsheen Miraelise petitions the court for removal of a Sillman device from her slave, Robert. Petition is opposed by Dr. Victoria Keller," the bailiff read.

"Are all parties to this hearing present?" the old judge croaked.

"Yes, Your Honor," Deirdre answered, standing. "Deirdre Fairchild for the Tarsheens."

"Yes, Your Honor," the other attorney said, "Marilyn Healey for Dr. Victoria Keller."

"I've read the petition and the opposition. Are both sides ready to proceed?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Good. Since this is an informal matter, we'll dispense with the witness box. Everyone's been sworn in so you may simply answer my questions from your tables." She looked down at the top of her desk, seeming to read something, peering through the bottom of her ugly, severe, black plastic bifocals.

When she spoke again, it was with less respect than Mira was accustomed to, but probably more than this crusty old woman normally begrudged anyone else. "I see that you've petitioned for the removal of a Sillman device from your slave, Robert?"

Mira rose, straightening the skirt of her navy blue suit as she did so. "Yes, Your Honor. He's a recent purchase and I only discovered the device when he underwent a medical examination."

"I wouldn't have thought, given Your Grace's widely known views, that you would have purchased a slave, much less without a complete medical history." There was just the tiniest hint of reproof in her voice.

"It was, I suppose what Your Honor would term, an 'impulse purchase'." She didn't like having to explain herself.

"I didn't know Sillmans were still in use," she mused, almost to herself. "I thought they'd been outlawed." The judge glanced down at Mira, knowing that it was Mira who'd pushed the law.

"Yes, Your Honor," she agreed, almost through clenched teeth. "But his implant is perhaps twenty or twenty-five years old."

"If he's had it that long, why then do you wish to take it out now?"

"Because, Your Honor, it is archaic and inhumane. Restricting the blood flow to the...the male member, it makes intercourse impossible but leaves the natural urges unsatisfied. It makes the slave discontented and potentially violent. This fact was recognized years ago and is among the primary reasons the device was outlawed. Not to mention there are many more modern, more efficient birth control measures available. In fact, I intend to have a Wilson implant put in to replace the Sillman."

"Thank you, Your Grace," she smiled, "you may be seated." Glancing across the room, she glared down at Victoria in much the same way she'd glared at Mira. "Please stand, Dr. Keller. You oppose this petition?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"On what grounds?"

"Several, Your Honor," she responded in that crisp, clipped diction of hers. "First, the law states that only the owner who originally had the implant placed may order its removal. Secondly, the device itself is not in any way harmful to the slave. The fact that he's had his for some twenty years proves that. Thirdly, it is a perfectly effective method of birth control. In fact, according to the literature, only the..."

"I take your word for its efficacy, Doctor. If you'll continue."

"Yes, of course. Lastly, the Sillman was used, not just as a method of birth control, but as a method of control reserved for those slaves with particularly difficult behavior problems. I feel that if the owner who originally ordered the implant felt it necessary to employ this radical solution, it would be a very dangerous thing to tamper with now."

"In what way, Doctor, do you feel this might be 'dangerous'?"

"Oh, I don't know. He may still have his behavior problems. Or control issues."

Deirdre sprang to her feet. "Your Honor," she shouted. "This is ridiculous and the flimsiest sort of speculation."

"Is the original owner available to testify?"

"Unfortunately, no, Your Honor," Deirdre admitted. "According to Robert's papers and our research, the owner who originally ordered the implant was a Doris Phelps, since deceased. No records remain as to her motives for the implant. The most logical assumption is that it was simply a method of birth control and nothing more sinister."

"But, Your Honor," barked Keller's lawyer, jumping up like a jack-in-the-box, "we have no proof. Without knowing why the implant was ordered, Dr. Keller, herself a



respected physician, believes that removing the control the Sillman affords would not be in the best interests of the community at large."

"Your Honor," Mira said calmly, rising to her feet again, "if I could address the court for a moment?"

"Of course, Tarsheen."

Everyone else sat down and turned to watch Mira.

"Your Honor, my knowledge of the law has been acquired over the years in the most practical sense, as Tarsheen, in the arena of politics and not necessarily in the courtroom. And I do not pretend to have the expertise of these learned counsel or your august self. But I do know this much. As a woman, a citizen and a property holder, the law entitles me to certain rights. One of these is the right to the full use and enjoyment of my property. The simple matter is that the presence of the Sillman device prevents me from that use and enjoyment. With the original owner deceased and there being no proof that there is any reason the device shouldn't be removed, I believe that Your Honor will make the only just verdict possible. Thank you." Mira sat down quietly, folded her hands demurely on the table in front of her and gazed respectfully up at the woman on the bench.

"While the court recognizes and respects the opinions and concerns of the well-known Doctor Keller," Judge Latham began solemnly, "it appears that the spirit as well as the letter of the property laws are squarely in favor of the Tarsheen. The slave Robert is her property, having been purchased from the previous legal owner and therefore comes under those property laws. Being that the court fails to find any basis for the opposition and that the petition itself is in proper order, the request for removal is hereby granted." She wrote something and handed the paper to her bailiff who in turn handed it to Deirdre.

"Case closed," and the gavel came down.

"You must be very pleased with yourself, Miraelise," came a voice from behind her as she and Deirdre exited the courtroom.

Slowly, Mira turned and eyed Victoria. Even with Mira's three-inch heels, the other woman towered over her. But Mira was ready for her.

"You will use the proper form of address," she announced, frost forming on the words, "the proper tone of respect and you will bow."

Those eyes flickered but it was a public place and she couldn't afford to make a scene. With a slight bow, she allowed her voice to take on an edge of respect. "I'm sorry, Your Grace. Sometimes our long association makes me forget the difference in our stations."

"It is exactly our long association that reminds me continually of the difference in our stations."

Ouch! Mira could almost see that needle digging in.

“So now that you have your little piece of dick,” Victoria continued brightly, “I hope your thoroughly disagreeable personality will be somewhat relieved.” Mira knew she must be really angry to risk saying such a thing, especially within earshot of others. Victoria Keller was an icy, calculating creature—only her hatred for Mira could thaw her, even a little.

“You know, Victoria, you always were a petty, jealous, vindictive bitch. Even as a child. In this changing, quicksilver world of ours, it’s almost comforting to know that some things never change.” Turning on her heel, Mira strode down the marble halls, almost feeling the daggers of the doctor’s eyes in her back.

## Chapter Three

Renee adjusted the silk tie at the throat of her sheer emerald nightie and regarded herself critically in her vanity mirror. Oval face, perhaps a tad longer than she would have preferred, almost flawless skin, high cheekbones, touched now with a hint of excited blush, full lips painted a dark wine, eyes like a Siamese cat, made up to look darker and more dramatic, her shoulder length, honey-colored hair hanging in loose waves around her face. Nice breasts, full and womanly, barely hidden behind the flimsy material. Not bad for a woman on the backside of forty.

With a final approving nod, she got up from her dressing table and went into her bedroom. The French doors to the terrace were open, a gentle breeze and a whiff of roses drifted lazily up from the garden. Champagne-colored satin sheets shimmered in anticipation on her huge bed. Thoughts of the upcoming activities caused her to shiver slightly.

Right now, the house slaves would be finishing with him. A shower to scrub him clean and then a leisurely soak in a tub to relax and soothe him. Shampoo, shave, her favorite musky cologne placed sparingly in strategic places. Then a short, loose silk robe, tied demurely in the front, to deliver him with a modicum of decency.

She took another sip of wine, feeling the liquid splash into her stomach. It wasn't like her to be nervous. After all, he was hardly the first boy to come to manhood in her bed. Still, there was something particularly exciting about this one. Something that went beyond the beautiful body and exquisite eyes. Something that stirred more than her belly.

A gentle rap on the door startled her.

"Come in," she barked, a bit more anxiously than she'd intended.

The door swung open revealing Timothy and her elderly house servant, Barnaby.

"He's here," Barnaby said simply, standing aside and giving Timothy a little shove in the back. "Will there be anything else, Senator?"

"Not tonight, Barnaby. You may retire now," she answered, not taking her eyes off the young man. The sight of him, cleaned and combed, in the short black kimono, made her feel as excited as a youngster on Christmas morning, eager to tear into her presents.

"Very well. Good night, Senator." He retreated silently, pulling the door closed after him.

"Come here," she said softly.

Timothy obediently crossed the large room in a few long strides. It was everything she could do to control herself. Few times could she remember being so consumed for a

man, much less a slave. But there was a method to these things and the anticipation was as important as the act itself.

"Good evening, Timothy," she purred.

"Good evening, Senator," he replied automatically, but she saw his eyes taking in her body, growing wide at the sight of her.

"Have a glass of wine," she offered, holding out a crystal goblet, gleaming a deep maroon in the soft light. "It's Merlot. From my own vineyards. Very tasty."

Tentatively, he reached out and took the glass from her.

"Sip it slowly," she warned lightly. "Roll it around on your tongue a little to get the full flavor."

Careful, she reminded herself. He'd most likely never had wine before. From long practice, she knew that a little alcohol was a good thing in this kind of situation. Relax him, clear away some of his natural awe and shyness in the presence of his owner. Too much, however, would ruin the party.

"Do you like it?"

Timothy nodded.

"That's good. I want you to enjoy everything about tonight." Her eyes flickered over him again. "Why don't we get more comfortable? Let's go over to the bed."

Gliding like a big cat, feeling his eyes on her, Renee finished her wine in one long draw, set the glass down on her nightstand and turned her head to look at the boy over her shoulder. "Come here, Timothy," she called softly. "Come and sit down."

Padding slowly, uncertainly, but dutifully, he went to the bed.

"That's a good boy," she praised him when he'd perched himself on the edge of her satin sheets. "Finish your wine. It'll warm you. Make you feel more at ease."

When she'd set his empty glass beside hers, she stood close in front of him, using her knee to separate his legs so that she could stand between them. Carefully, slowly, she began stroking his hair, ears and face. After a few moments, she reached up and tugged gently on the tiny tie of her skimpy gown, barely keeping it closed. Like theater curtains at the beginning of a performance, the sheer material parted to reveal her body.

Renee felt Timothy's body tense in amazement, heard the sharp intake of breath, felt his heart beat faster. Her smile broadened in satisfaction.

"Have you ever seen a woman's body?" she breathed in his ear.

Timothy could only shake his head, dumbstruck at the sight before him.

"Would you like to touch me?" she sighed, her own heartbeat now raised.

Again, he could only nod.

"Put your hands on my breasts. My nipples."

Closing her eyes, she felt the warm, strong fingers of his hands and his touch sent a thrill of excitement and pleasure through her whole body. Without opening her eyes, she reached down, undid his sash and began sliding the thin robe off his body.

Being young and a virgin, Timothy's body was already responding to Renee's body, to her touch.

Gently, she touched her lips to his, feeling him yield as she ran her hands past his nipples, along his hard, flat stomach and down to his erect cock. Slowly, she began stroking it as she used her tongue to ease his mouth open and explored it hungrily. Svarek had been right about one thing. He was a quick learner.

Moans of pleasure escaped them both as Timothy became more aroused and as he followed Renee's instructions to find her secret places and heighten her excitement as well.

"Get into bed," she told him in a hoarse whisper, after several minutes of foreplay. He did as he was told and Renee followed him, lying out on her back, the cool sheets rustling beneath her. "Now come lie down on top of me." Taking him in her hand as he lowered himself, she guided him inside. There was a mutual gasp as he settled in and slowly, unevenly, began working himself.

Pleasure. Blood-boiling, reality-altering, cliché-ridden pleasure engulfed her, threatening to drown her, making her breath come in shallow, rapid pants and her heart race. She was out of control, totally at the mercy of this young man pounding out his primeval rhythm in the most private part of her being. There was nothing to do but dig her red fingernails into the pale skin of his heaving ass and let the tidal wave overwhelm her.

There were animal sounds—pants, moans, cries—but no way to know if they were his or hers. He was pumping frantically now, her body grinding and moving into his.

And then there was one blinding, white-hot moment when their friction produced a firestorm, convulsing their bodies, spreading them like a shower of shooting stars across a rainbow of ecstasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm telling you, Mira, it was *the* most explosive experience I ever had."

Renee took another sip of coffee and shook her head slightly, as if still not quite able to believe what had happened.

"I mean, if I hadn't been there, I wouldn't have believed it. All the things you read in those trashy romance novels...the earth moved, angels sang...all the tritest crap you can imagine. True. Every stinking word. Incredible. Absolutely incredible." She watched her friend expectantly, waiting for Mira's response to her story.

Mira leaned back and sighed. "Why is it that every time you break in a new young stud, you feel compelled to run over here and tell me, in disgusting detail, about it?"

"Because, Mira, my love," Renee continued cheerfully, "it's my duty as your dearest friend. Let's face it. If it wasn't for listening to me, you wouldn't have any sex life at all. Besides, that was just the first time. Let me tell you about the third time around. Still

going like gangbusters. I told him if he wanted to go again, he'd have to ride by himself."

"Does it ever bother you, even the slightest, that you are an absolutely, positively, unrepentant horny old sow?" Mira laughed.

"Not in the least," she replied. "However, until you can go three rounds with a twenty-two-year-old virgin volcano, I will thank you not to use the term 'old'."

"I stand corrected. But what are you going to do with your little toy now?"

"Besides fuck his brains out?"

"Yes, well I meant with Catherine coming home this afternoon. Won't that put something of a crimp in your fucking plans?" Mira needled playfully. "Or don't you care if your only daughter finds out her mother is a randy cow with a taste for young men half her age? God knows, she's probably the only person in the region who doesn't know."

"Catherine is not going to find out anything." A touch of frost appeared at the far edge of her voice. "She's a child and what goes on behind my closed bedroom doors is none of her concern."

"Nonsense," Mira countered, "Catherine is not a child. She's twenty years old. Twenty-one in the spring. She'll be a junior in college this fall. I'm sure that somewhere along the line, she's probably heard about sex."

"Fucking a good-looking slave is nothing," Renee snarled, her tone growing colder. "When the time comes for her to have a daughter, I'll help her pick a donor worthy of her. I won't have her rumpling the sheets with just any piece of stray ass that wanders by."

Realizing that she'd gone too far, Mira retreated back to safer ground. "I'm sorry, Renee," she soothed. "I didn't mean anything, you know that."

"I know you didn't," Renee agreed, the cloud passing from her face. "I know the kind of pressure you're under. And I know just the cure."

Putting up her hands, Mira pretended to be shocked. "Spare me, please. I don't think my libido could stand to hear anymore."

"That's the problem," Renee grinned evilly, "your libido's been getting it secondhand for way too long. What it really needs is a little firsthand experience."

"My libido is fine, thank you."

"Oh really?" She eyed her friend suspiciously. "How long has it been since you had a nice, hard cock in your bed?"

"Renee..." Mira started to protest but Renee continued.

"How long?" she repeated.

"None of your business."

"I knew it!" Renee crowed triumphantly. "I just knew it! We need to find you a man. And from the sound of you, the sooner the better." She furrowed her brow as if in

deep thought. "Hmm. You know, if I wasn't so selfish with my toys, I'd loan you Timothy."

"He's a lovely, sweet boy, Renee, no doubt with a quick mind and good heart..."

"Not to mention an ass you could crack eggs on."

"No doubt..."

"Of course you know he's not hung like that bull Barbara Hendricks parades around," Renee meowed, "but I don't think that's the least bit sexy. Looks like a circus freak if you ask me, but I guess different strokes..."

"Renee, I'm not interested in your latest little pet," Mira finally managed to get out.

Suddenly, Renee's eyes widened and she stared at her friend in unabashed glee. "Speaking of slaves, how about that one you bought at Svarek's the day we were there."

"He's only coming out of the hospital today. I haven't even seen him since he collapsed."

"So? Everyone knows you had his Sillman removed. Went to court and had a face off with everybody's favorite ghoul, Victoria Keller. Don't play coy with me. I hear you told the judge it would interfere with your 'use and enjoyment' of him. God knows he's going to be hot as the hinges of hell after all that time of not being able to get any."

"I hate to burst your sordid little bubble," Mira tried to brush her off, "but there's nothing to tell."

"But...but you told the judge..." Renee was a mixture of disbelief and disappointment.

"If you spent as much time in the library as you do in your bed, you'd know that 'use and enjoyment' are legal terms referring to property rights, including slaves. What meaning the judge may or may not have put on it is of no concern to me."

"You mean...you aren't..."

"No, Renee. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm having lunch with Mary Forbes and I have to see to the last minute details. You're invited if you want."

Renee made a face. "Oh, God no! The thought of sitting across the table from that dried-up old hag makes me want to puke!" She shivered in disgust. "Uh! The only reason I tolerate her is because she's got more money than God and, unlike you, I have to run for re-election and she's a huge presence in the north."

"Yes, well, that's what she's here to discuss. She wants more National Guard along the border. Says the raids are no longer just a nuisance, they're growing into a real problem. Feels that sending the Guard in and, as she puts it, 'clean out the whole nest of them', is the solution."

"Sounds good to me," Renee agreed.

"That's because you've never seen the northern border terrain. Miles and miles of forests so thick you could hide a whole civilization of Bigfoots in there. Caves, ravines, rivers. The ideal place to lose yourself. The communities are small and scattered. Not to mention that I believe that the small farmers and townspeople up there are probably

doing business with them. And not solely out of humanitarian motives, either. A little barter economy, off the tax rolls, would be beneficial to both sides." She shook her head. "I could send every soldier we have in there and they probably wouldn't find anything."

"So why are you wasting perfectly good food on her?"

"Because, even though I don't have to be re-elected, I have to keep the peace, what there is of it, in the Senate. Sometimes you forget that I hold the coalition together, uneasily at best, only because I spend most of my life smoothing ruffled feathers and hurt feelings and making promises that are just this side of influence peddling."

"It's too complicated for my simple mind," Renee giggled. "But you're right. I should be running along. Catherine gets in at four and I still have mountains of things to get done." They rose.

"Remember though," Mira said quickly, "you and Catherine are coming here for dinner tomorrow. We'll eat on the terrace. Tell her we'll have ravioli. I'm having Daniel make them specially for her."

Renee smiled. "You really are terrific, you know that, don't you?" Mira took her in her arms and they shared a hug.

"I'm not terrific," Mira laughed. "I'm just the only one who'll put up with your childish shit."

"That's what friends are for, isn't it?"

"Exactly."

"Goodbye, Mira."

"Goodbye, Renee."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mary Forbes squatted across the small, round veranda table and continued to croak. "You have no idea, Your Highness, no idea at all."

To Mira, she seemed an old, fat, albino toad—huge, slightly bulging black eyes, large, turned down mouth, skin drooping under her chins.

"It's very difficult."

Mira nodded thoughtfully, trying to pretend she was not only interested but concerned about the older woman's whining.

"I'm sure," she agreed, sympathetically.

"There were three raids last month alone. Cattle, sheep, grain, and ten of my best field slaves. All gone. And I'm not the only one. They hit every ranch and farm in the area. And the longer they're allowed to continue, the bolder they get. One of these days, I firmly expect to find them in my kitchen rummaging through my refrigerator." She shook her huge head. "If we don't get some help, Your Highness, every property owner



along the northern border will be ruined. Lord, we'll probably all be murdered in our beds."

"I realize how difficult the situation is on the border," Mira replied carefully. "It's the same everywhere. The communities have existed as long as the Republic. It seems to come in cycles. They're quiet for a while and then the raids start up again."

"This is not the same thing," the old woman replied coldly. "These raids must be stopped and they must be stopped now. If Your Highness really wants to end these troubles, you need to send the National Guard in. Tanks, mortars, missiles if necessary. Destroy their nests, their bases. Kill them all. And the ones you don't kill should be put on trial and publicly executed. And I mean their breeders and their brats as well. Pull the plant out by the roots."

Mira was revolted but kept her face and voice calm. "You know, Ms. Forbes, that is not within my power. I've sent military expeditions to the border in the past. They've scoured the area from the air and on the ground. They've never found anything but empty, abandoned encampments. I've even stationed a unit there permanently. And even if we could find runaway slaves, they would be subject to local authority, not mine. As I'm sure you know, only being a Rememberer and a Harboring, proved in a court of law and beyond a reasonable doubt, are still capital crimes."

Anger appeared in the croak. "I am well aware of the law," she answered, "and Your Highness's own views on holding slaves. But these communities couldn't survive without leaders. Leaders who must teach them and instruct them in these rebellious, evildoings. That makes them, *ipso facto* Rememberers. And those people in the communities who listen and follow, are Harboringers."

She blinked those dull eyes. "I know that as the Tarsheen, you are not subject to the will of the voters. But many of those whom you depend on to exercise your power, especially in the Senate, are. If you don't heed that will and exercise that power for the good of your subjects, we will certainly elect people more in tune with our thinking."

It wasn't a hollow threat and Mira knew it. She also knew that the old woman sitting across from her knew it too. *Miserable, contemptible bitch*, she thought.

"I can't make any promises that we will rid you of these raiders," she said finally, "but you have my word that I will do what I can. I'll send word to the Guard garrison on the border to step up patrols, especially in the area of your estate. And I will see that an expedition into the back-country is organized. I will also call the local sheriff and ask him to be more vigilant."

The mouth turned up at the corners, seeming to take up her whole face. "Your Highness is too kind. Both to invite me into your home for lunch and to listen to my problems. I'm sure when I return home, it will be a great relief to be able to tell my neighbors that the situation is under your personal scrutiny. We shall all look forward to a speedy and favorable conclusion to this matter." She paused ever so slightly. "Hopefully, before the next election."

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"And if that woman ever sets a clammy, webbed foot in my house again, I shall not only kill her, but you as well!" Mira screamed as she strode past Caina and blew into her office. "It's bad enough to be threatened and blackmailed by that bullying old bag, but in my own house! That, even for a rich, powerful old crone, is intolerable!" She flung herself into her desk chair. "Do you know what that bitch wants?"

"I haven't the slightest," Caina soothed.

"She wants the communities in her area destroyed and all their inhabitants—men, women and children—killed! Slaughtered! Butchered like so many animals! Says we should just assume that they're all Rememberers and Harborers and shoot the lot of them!"

"It's not an uncommon sentiment," the Proconsul observed coolly, "especially among the rich and powerful such as Ms. Forbes, who are preyed upon by the communities."

"She's a mean, greedy old toad who could support a dozen communities and never feel it."

"No doubt. But it still remains that she is rich and powerful and she can cause you a great deal of unpleasantness. Especially if she should decide to throw her support elsewhere. Such as Victoria Keller."

"Thank you for that cheerful tidbit," Mira answered sourly.

"Well, perhaps this will brighten your mood somewhat. The slave, Robert, has just returned from the hospital. He seems much improved from when he was here last. Shall I send him in?"

"Yes, please. And bring me a pot of tea and some aspirin. I have a feeling it's going to be a long afternoon."

Caina went to the door and motioned with her hand as she stepped out. When Robert was in, she closed the door behind her.

He certainly did look better, Mira thought, as he crossed the room and took his place in front of her desk, same erect bearing, same wrists held close together.

"Your Highness," he said, bowing from the waist. When he came back up, there was the same mere hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Robert. How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thanks to Your Grace and Doctor Elliott."

"No lingering discomfort?"

"Nothing that some aspirin won't take care of. Doctor Elliott is very good."

"Which is why she is the Court Physician. She says you're fit to return to your duties, providing those duties are not too strenuous for at least another week." Mira leaned forward slightly. "It seems to me that our first conversation was interrupted before we could actually discuss your duties."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"I've read over your papers several times and given considerable thought as to how your particular and may I say, unique, talents might best be utilized."

"Your Grace must know that I've done virtually every kind of menial labor."

"I'm aware of your record. But I try to fit my workers to something they're suited for, might be happy doing. And I've decided that you are not a common field laborer." She stood up and went to the door. "Come with me," she ordered.

Baffled, he fell into step behind her. She went down the hall, stopping two doors from her office and throwing open the massive double doors. Robert found himself in her library, a huge room, perhaps twenty by twenty he gauged, twelve-foot ceilings, filled with rows and shelves of books. Only a pair of French doors and a large fireplace interrupted the books.

"This was my mother's library," she told him as they walked to the center of the room and stood on a thick, plush Oriental rug. "When I was little, this was my favorite place in the whole world. I spent hours rummaging through these volumes. Unfortunately, I seem to find less and less time to spend here as I grow older."

"It's wonderful," Robert murmured as he surveyed the walls of books.

"I thought you'd like it," she smiled. "Most people prefer getting their information, their learning from the Internet. Or on CDs. But I've always liked books. There's something...I don't know...comforting, solid about books. I like being able to hold the words, feel the weight of them in my hand. Seems to me they're more alive, more real that way."

She looked around fondly. "My mother used to have them arranged by color. I remember she'd say to me, 'Mira, get me that red book of poetry by What's-Her-Name.' Not terribly sophisticated I suppose, but it worked for her and the blocks of color were pretty, especially when I was a child."

"I don't think I've ever seen so many books in a private home."

"Probably not. My mother loved books. Collected them." Her voice faded away and he saw a shadow of unhappiness darken her face. But it was gone in another moment. "Which brings us to you. You're going to be my librarian, Robert."

"Me?"

"Certainly. You are one of the few workers I have who can read and write sufficiently well to organize and catalog this mess. You know, history, philosophy, whatever categories are necessary. I want them all grouped together physically and I want some kind of index so that I can find a particular book if I want."

"Are you sure you trust me with this kind of treasure?" he asked quietly, as if he couldn't quite believe his good fortune.

"I'm afraid that you may find it is less treasure and more work than you imagine. But yes, I trust you. Is there some reason I shouldn't?"

"I mean, with all these books, I might be tempted to read them. No telling what ideas I might get in my head."

"I'm giving you this job precisely because I think you will read these books. You understand their importance and I know you'll take care of them and do the job well."

"I'll try."

"Good. Your hours of work will be nine a.m. to five p.m. This means that you will be in this room at nine a.m., ready to work. You'll leave at ten minutes to noon and return to the dining hall for lunch. You will be back in this room at one p.m. sharp. You will remain here until five. Dinner is precisely at six. From seven to ten, is free time. You may go to the Day Room or to your own room. Lights out is at ten sharp and curfew begins.

"Normally, you would shower and receive clean clothes twice per week. However, since you will be in the house, you will be required to shower and have clean clothes every day. Ms. Pontier, the Overseer, will explain everything in more detail. Do you have any questions?"

"No, Your Grace."

"Good. You'll start tomorrow morning. Ms. Pontier is waiting for you in the kitchen. Caina will show you. Goodbye, Robert."

"Goodbye, Your Grace," he answered, bowing again. "And thank you. For everything."

## Chapter Four

"This is your room," she told him simply, opening the door and stepping aside.

Robert, his arms full of clothes, toilet articles and linen, stepped carefully past her and into his new home. It was about ten by ten, painted a nondescript beige. A single bed, a battered brown nightstand and an elderly wooden four-drawer bureau. An open area in one wall showed half a dozen brass hooks in the back wall. *A closet*, he thought dryly. A single, double-hung window looked down on the main house across a wide area of lawn. Thick metal bars, running up and down and set in the stucco wall, made a tic-tac-toe pattern across the layers of glass imbedded with chicken wire.

"Look at me," she ordered.

Obediently, he turned. Jennifer Pontier was not like any overseer he had ever had contact with. Smaller than he was, slender, her light brown hair pulled into a sort of ponytail at the back of her head, her muddy brown eyes intent and watchful. In her red, floral print overshirt and well-fitting blue jeans, she was actually quite pretty. Only the holster at the wide, black leather belt and the short, fat stick dangling from her right wrist by a narrow black leather strap gave a hint of her true occupation.

She smiled a small, surprisingly cruel smile. "I've been informed of your work hours. Except for those times, you will be in the dining room, the Day Room or here. You've been issued a laundry bag. All of your clothes and your linen will be in that bag and outside your door every Monday no later than seven a.m.

"Showers are between seven a.m. and seven-thirty. Shaving and dressing are between seven-thirty and eight. You will present yourself in the dining room between eight and eight-ten. I personally lock the door at eight-ten and no food is issued until lunch. Breakfast is from eight to nine. All slaves are to be at their jobs by nine. Lunch is served from noon until one. The doors are locked at twelve-ten. Dinner is served between six and seven. Doors are locked at six-ten. Again, no food is issued after the doors are locked. Food and beverages are *strictly* forbidden outside the dining room.

"From seven to ten, you may be in the Day Room or here. Lights out promptly at ten p.m. when the lights are shut off and the doors lock automatically. They're on a timer and can't be reopened, except in the direst of emergencies and only by myself. If any of the doors are so much as jiggled, it sets off an alarm. Random bed checks are made frequently. Violation of curfew is a serious infraction and will be dealt with accordingly. Except for your duties, you are forbidden to go to the main house unless summoned or with my express permission."

The club swung a slightly larger circle. "Don't underestimate me," she warned. "My mother was Overseer for the Tarsheen's mother and she taught me all about

handling your kind. I can't be sweet-talked, bribed or intimidated. I take pride in my ability to do my job and I take a very dim view of troublemakers."

Snapping the holster open, she produced a black pistol and held it up for him to see. "I assume you're familiar with this?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's a stun gun. And from the looks of it, I'd say it probably packs quite a punch."

"Full power, it's the equivalent of a fall from a second story window," she replied proudly. "Incapacitate a bull elephant. It recharges almost instantly. Usually just the sight of its handiwork on one of you, is enough to cow the others back in line. And I'm an excellent marksman."

"Yes, ma'am. I understand."

"Good," she chirped as she replaced it and re-snapped the holster. "Now, put your things down on the bed, strip and bend over."

As slowly as he could without arousing her anger, Robert put his bundle down on the bed and began taking off his clothes. When he was finished, he put his hands out, bent at the waist, spread his legs wide and shut his eyes.

"Don't feel special," she assured him sarcastically as she came up behind him, "all the new stock get the same treatment. No telling what you sneaky bastards may try smuggling in here." He winced as he felt her finger thrust inside, poking and prying. It wasn't necessary, he knew. It was another way to humiliate him, make sure he understood his situation.

"All right," she told him crisply. "You're clean. But body searches are routine and random so I recommend you stay that way. Now you can turn around again."

Doing as he was told, he watched her as she surveyed him like a mongrel dog. "Since you don't begin your duties until tomorrow, you'll be confined to your room. Put your things away and make your bed. You weren't expected for dinner in the dining room, so you'll be taken over to the kitchen in the main house and fed when everyone else has eaten. Do you understand everything I've said?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Do as you're told and you'll be fine."

Turning on her heel, she went out the door and he heard the lock click behind her.

Exhaling, he picked up his clothes and put them back on. There were five shirts and five pairs of jeans, which he hung on the hooks in the closet. Five pair of plain white cotton boxers, five pair of thin black cotton socks which went into the bureau. A white cotton washcloth and matching towel that went into another drawer. Toothbrush, toothpaste, bar of soap and holder, small black comb and a cheap, battery-operated razor. These he put on the top.

Next, he took the crisply starched white sheets, matching pillowcase and single brown blanket and made his bed.

Finally, he went to the window. From his third-floor room, he could see the entire west side of the main house, part of the garden behind the high brick wall that encircled the house and part of the long circular drive that lead up to it. Pressing his cheek flush against the window, he could just see her office and the open French doors. She was probably sitting at her desk, bent over some important papers or leaning back in that big chair, those lovely eyes closed in thought.

For a moment he felt that if he closed his eyes and pictured her in his mind, he could reach out to her. Send the warm, unaccustomed current through her that was coursing through him. Span the distance, real and imagined, between them. But he knew it was impossible. At least for now.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the uneasiness of entering the den, uninvited. Not real fear—the danger was more psychological than physical. Ms. Pontier and her minions would not stand for anything overt. Still, he was the newcomer, friendless, devoid of a place in the pack. Vulnerable. Naked.

There were perhaps fifty men, all ages, sizes, even colors, crammed into the large shower room. Only about ten showers were actually in use, the rest of the men had formed a sort of meandering line as they waited their turn. Even though he'd come early, Robert had made sure not to take a place in the line until most of the others were assembled. It was important, especially on this first day, to see who was who and where they fit in this highly structured society. For here, deprived of any other power, they'd reverted back to the troop mentality. An alpha male and everyone else tracking down from there. Now, as he stood naked, his towel draped casually around his neck like the others, he hung back toward the end of the line and watched silently.

He felt like one of those scientists who goes into the jungle to observe animals. After all, this was not the first time he'd been in this situation. And it was not difficult to decipher the code if you knew what clues to look for.

Take, for instance, the shower. These were the highest of the hierarchy. They got the first showers, when the water was hottest and the shower cleanest. These would take the longest shower, unconcerned about being molested or about using up other men's time. It was one of the perks of power. But who among them was the leader, the Silverback who reigned over this motley empire?

Robert had learned that it did not always have to be the biggest. In fact, it was generally the cleverest, the smartest, the most cunning. The one who could outthink the others and then surround himself with others physically big enough to protect him in return for a few crumbs of the perceived power. He himself had never felt the need or the desire to curry favor with these men, even associate with them. At best, he'd simply wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Slowly, the line snaked forward, the showers growing shorter with each passing moment. The clock above them glared down as relentlessly as the faces in the observation windows high up in the walls.

Almost as soon as he'd appeared in the room, he'd felt the ripple as word of the stranger had spread. No one had spoken, or even looked in his direction, that he'd been able to see, but he'd felt the eyes on him, sizing him up, measuring him, examining his scars. In keeping with the way of these things, he'd simply stared at his feet or the floor or the guards or the clock as he moved toward the shower.

By the time he reached a free head, the water was down to a tepid spray. Wetting himself down, he turned it off to conserve the remaining warm water, soaped down quickly and turned the water back on. Even at that, it had turned cold by the time he'd washed the suds off. Rubbing himself down, he wrapped the towel around his waist, the stiff little thing barely reaching, and padded off to find an empty sink and mirror.

The dining room was nicer than most of the ones he'd been in. A big, spare rectangular room, lined with rows of wooden tables and wooden benches on either side. At one end, a row of steam tables and servers. At five minutes after eight, many of the tables were already occupied and the line stretched almost down one long wall. As he took his place in the line, he noted that the same men who'd been first in the shower, were now seated and already eating.

Reaching the beginning of the steam tables, he took a dark metal, compartmentalized tray, packet of plastic utensils and napkin from a stack. A large serving spoon of scrambled eggs, two long strips of bacon, a spatula of hash brown potatoes, two pieces of white toast, a foil wrapped pat of margarine, packet of strawberry jam, tiny packages of salt, pepper and sugar and a cup of black coffee.

Finding a place at an empty table near the back, Robert tested the food. It was plain, institutional-grade fare—the bacon wasn't cooked as crisply as he liked, the toast was cold and the coffee could have been warmer. But he'd eaten far worse and been glad. And it had been long enough since dinner to work up an appetite.

As he ate, he kept a watchful eye out, not just for anyone who might be watching him, but for the movements of the guards who circulated not only on the floor between the tables, but on a catwalk, high up on the walls. It would take time to study the individuals, find out what made them tick. What ticked them off. Walking uncertainly in this minefield, both of his keepers and his comrades, was the worst part about coming to a new stable.

Pretending to take a gulp of coffee, he glanced up at the clock on the opposite wall. In a few minutes he would escape this place and cross over to the haven of the main house, the library. And Mira.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert waited at the kitchen door, hiding his impatience as best he could behind a façade of calm disinterest. As badly as he wanted this, he knew he mustn't do anything



to betray himself. Even with the Tarsheen's permission, it might still be taken away if he counted on it too heavily.

Breakfast had seemed interminable, watching the hands of the clock creep toward nine. Scraping his tray and putting it in the wash stack, Jennifer Pontier had appeared suddenly at his elbow.

"Follow me," she ordered.

Doing as he was told, he followed her into a small storage room.

"So," she began coolly, that same hard smile twitching her lips, "you've managed to get yourself a cushy job in the main house."

A lump began forming his throat. "The Tarsheen has been kind enough to give me a job in her library," he replied quietly, trying not to be afraid.

"Yes, well, we'll see how long that lasts, won't we? In the meantime, strip." The last word was like a blow from her stick.

Quickly, obediently, Robert shed his clothes, braced himself on a shelf and assumed the body search position. It seemed to him that she took a little extra time, was a little rougher than usual.

"Get used to it, slave," she hissed in his ear. "You'll be strip-searched every day, coming and going. I'd be derelict in my duties if I didn't protect Her Highness from the thievery and violence of your kind of scum. And you have only to give me the slightest excuse, anything..."

Finally she finished with him and allowed him to dress. The guard she assigned to walk him to the main house was a large, beefy black woman, towering over him, the blue nametag over her shirt pocket identified her simply as "Tilly". She walked almost on his heels, prodding him in the small of his back with her nightstick.

The kitchen door swung open and a middle-aged man in an apron appeared, looking quizzically at him.

"This is Robert," Tilly growled, pointing her stick in his back. "He's here to work for the Tarsheen."

He blinked his dull blue eyes at her and then at Robert. After several seconds, he finally stepped aside and opened the door for them.

The large, sunny kitchen was a hive of activity. A rich, sweet smell of baking apples and cinnamon filled the air as two pies emerged from the bottom half of a double oven. Dishes and silverware clattered as they were transferred from the big metallic dishwasher to the overhead cupboards.

A small black boy, probably no more than seven or eight, sat at a worktable, diligently polishing a copper saucepan under the watchful eye of the man who'd opened the door.

The windows were open and a cool, soft breeze fluttered the crisp white and yellow curtains.

"I shall take him from here," came a stern voice that snapped Robert back to reality. "Thank you for bringing him."

"Yes, Proconsul," Tilly replied deferentially. "I'll be back for him at ten of twelve."

"Please be prompt." She fixed him with a glare that could have frozen water. "There is a pitcher and a cup on the table behind you. Fetch them and follow me."

They were the same dark metal as his tray...a short pitcher, dented and dinged, perhaps half full of water, and a cup in much the same shape.

Without another word, she led him up a short flight of stairs, through a formal dining room and into a hallway. Opening the library doors just long enough for them to come in, she nodded to a small wooden table that had been set up in the corner. A computer sat on the top and a wooden, straight-back chair in front of it.

"This is where you will work," she stated as they approached. "It is the desire of Her Grace, that you take down each book and record the title, author and what category you feel most appropriate for it. Can you use a computer?"

"No, Proconsul," he admitted, "but if someone could show me, I would make every effort to learn."

"There's no great mystery," she told him coldly. "This is the on-off switch. It has voice recognition. Once the machine becomes familiar with your voice, it will do the work."

"Thank you, Proconsul."

"Do not thank me, slave. You are here only over my bitterest, most strenuous objections. I don't like you nor do I trust you. You have the feel of trouble about you. And make no mistake. I intend to do everything I can to see you returned to the pens as quickly as possible."

"I will try to do my work to your satisfaction and will make every effort not to cause any trouble. You have my word."

"Hah," she laughed derisively. "The word of a slave. What good is that?" She regarded him like something she'd stepped in. "At any rate, you're here, at least for the time being. The French doors are locked and there are guards patrolling outside. When I leave, the double doors will be locked as well. The computer is not connected to the Internet and anything you do will be recorded and reviewed."

"If you have to use the bathroom, you will pick up the telephone and dial six. That will bring a house guard who will escort you to the slave's facilities in the basement, off the kitchen. You will under no circumstances be allowed access to any other bathroom in the house so I suggest you not wait until an emergency arises. And if you're found outside of this room without escort, you will be returned immediately to the pen for suitable discipline. Do you understand your duties and the rules?"

"Yes, Proconsul."

"Very well. I'll leave you to your work."

When he heard the lock click behind her, Robert slowly let out the breath he'd been holding. He was actually here and he was going to be allowed to stay. Instead of locking him in, they'd locked out everything else. There was just him and all these beautiful, wonderful books.

Breathing in, he reveled in the sweet smell of old leather, musty paper and fine wood. Walking over to the nearest bookshelf, he reached out and gingerly placed his fingertips on one of the books. It was a fat volume, a deep chocolate-brown leather, the title embossed deeply in fading gold. Carefully, slowly, he traced out the title, *Moby Dick*. The sensations ran together, making him almost giddy with their unfamiliar, exhilarating presence.

Rousing himself, he went to the tall ladder leaning against a far shelf, pushed it to the corner and scaled it to the first book on the tallest shelf. Plain tan cloth cover, soft as velvet under his fingers. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was printed in simple black type on the spine. Holding it firmly, he climbed down the rungs and went to the computer.

Uncertainly, he pushed the red on-off switch that the Proconsul had pointed out. The machine immediately came to life, the screen showing a series of scenes until it finally settled on one reading, "Voice Identification".

"Name, please," a hollow, mechanical voice asked from the machine.

"Robert," he replied a little startled.

His name appeared on the screen.

"Designation or title?"

"Sla...." He stopped and thought for a moment. "Librarian to the Tarsheen."

The machine whirled for a moment as if contemplating his words. But the designation appeared under his name.

"You may begin," the mechanical voice told him.

Begin what? A moment of fear seized him. The Proconsul had told him *what* to do, she hadn't told him *how* to do it. If he failed, he'd be sent back to the pens. Away from the books. Away from Mira.

"I want to make three columns," he began tentatively. Immediately, his words appeared on the screen.

"No!" he cried. "No" clicked on, followed by an exclamation point.

"Stop! That's not what I mean." The words continued on the screen.

Frustrated, panic rising, Robert slumped back in his chair and stared at the screen and the mocking cursor helplessly.

He couldn't just sit there until the Proconsul came back for him. She'd already made it clear that she didn't want him here and this would certainly make the perfect excuse to get rid of him.

Damn, he thought angrily, why hadn't he asked her how to work this monster? It was too late now, anyway. Another wave of helplessness washed over him. If he'd had tears, he was sure he would have shed them.

"Do you wish to continue?" the computer asked casually.

"I can't," Robert answered dejectedly, almost forgetting he was conversing with a machine.

"Explain."

"I...I need help."

"Help menu being displayed," it responded as the screen changed to a list of subjects. "Choose topic."

Suddenly heartened, Robert sat up and scanned down the list. "Columns," he said in mounting excitement. "I need to make three columns."

"Procedures for columns being listed." And a complete set of instructions materialized as if by magic on the screen in front of him. "Print?"

"Yes. Yes." Robert could hardly believe it as the square gray box behind him began to whirl and spit out printed pages. Grabbing them up, he hurriedly read through them. Oh God, he almost laughed out loud to see how easy it was.

A few simple instructions and the columns were there, bold and underlined – Title, Author, Category.

However, he was now faced with another problem...he had no idea what the book was about and hence, what category to put it in.

Carefully, he opened the book and leafed through the pages. Every fiber of him wanted to sit back and read each word, soak them up and make them part of him. And not just this book, but all of them. There was so much here he wanted, needed to know.

The sound of the lock clicking startled him. Mira appeared and swept into the library, a light yellow, gauzy dress trailing after her as she moved.

"Good morning, Robert," she smiled as she stopped beside him.

"Good morning, Your Grace," he answered softly as he rose from his bow.

She leaned over to see the title of the book he was holding, her bare arm brushing ever so briefly against his. "*The Hound of the Baskervilles*" she read. "Sherlock Holmes. One of my favorites. I'd forgotten it was even here."

"Sherlock Holmes?" Robert repeated uncertainly. "I...I thought it was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle." He pointed to the name on the spine.

Mira laughed, a sort of musical sound that made him feel instantly warm. "Doyle is the author. The hero of the story is a detective, Sherlock Holmes. He was supposed to be the world's best. There are lots more of his books in here." She waved around the room. "That's one of the reasons I need someone to organize this disaster. Wherever did you find it?"

The sound of her voice, the sight of her face mesmerized him and he had to force himself to speak coherently. "Up there." He pointed to the ladder. "On the top shelf."

"Well, be careful. If you need anything, please tell Caina, my Proconsul. At any rate, I just stopped in to see how things were going. I have my work and you have yours." She turned and took a step.

"Your Grace?"

"Yes?" Her brown eyes were beautiful.

"I...I do have a question." He'd never felt so stupid in his life.

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what categories these books should go in. I'm sorry."

He could tell from the surprise on her face that she hadn't considered this. Tomorrow, he would no doubt be stooped over picking strawberries under a hot sun or stacking hundred-pound grain sacks in the stifling heat of the barn.

"Very well," she said at last, "simply record the title and author. We'll go over the categories later."

And she was gone, the door swinging shut, her exit punctuated by the familiar click of the lock.

"Thank you, Your Grace," he whispered as he made a deep bow to the closed doors.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he looked up, the door was opening and the Proconsul was standing there. Blinking, he glanced from the screen to the small, decorative clock on the mantle. Unbelievably, it was ten of twelve.

"I see you've been busy," she commented coldly, tapping a manicured fingernail on the top of the stack of books beside the computer.

"Yes, Proconsul," he replied carefully. "I've almost finished with the topmost shelf. I hope my work meets with your approval."

"Actually, I think this whole exercise is ridiculous. There are far and away more productive pursuits for an able-bodied slave than playing with a lot of useless books. Personally, I've never understood what Mira or her mother found so enchanting about these ugly old dust catchers. If it was up to me, I'd have thrown the whole lot out ages ago."

Robert was silently glad that it wasn't up to her.

"Anything Mira could possibly ever want or need from these books could more easily and more simply be found on the Internet. CDs would take a fraction of the space. And slaves would be in the fields where they belong."

The cold hatred in her eyes made Robert shiver slightly and look down at the floor.

"Come along. Your guard is here to take you to the dining hall."

Tilly was waiting, slouched in the open kitchen door, idly rolling her baton between her fingers. On seeing Caina, she immediately straightened up.

"Take him," she said simply. "And have him back precisely at one." Turning away, she moved purposely past Robert and back the way she'd come.

"Come on you," she grumbled. "Ms. Pontier said to make sure you got back on time."

After the light and air of the main house, the dining hall seemed even more bleak and dingy. As Robert stood patiently in line, he noticed how grimy and filthy the thick, layered, barred windows were, letting in only a thin, sickly gray light. And while the floors and tables themselves were clean, the walls had faded from whatever color they may have been originally to a gloomy gray.

Two large serving spoons of a thick brown stew, with chunks of meat, potatoes, and carrots, a small mound of lettuce, a cup of wobbly red squares, two slices of white bread, a pat of margarine, a small packet marked "salad dressing", seasoning and a cup of coffee.

Again, he took a seat at a deserted table toward the back. No one made any overtures to him and he made none to anyone else.

The stew was lukewarm and obviously out of a can. He used the bread to sop up the gravy. Slowly, he opened the salad dressing packet and squeezed out a dot. An orange-looking goo oozed forth. Tasting it, he decided it was probably supposed to be French. Instead, he opted for the salt and pepper. Spooning a block of the gelatin into his mouth, he swallowed. It was like room temperature rubber. Gelatin was not one of his favorite things, but the guards frowned on food "wasted" by slaves so it was simply easier to put it in his face and think about getting back to the library.

Ms. Pontier wasn't anywhere to be seen when lunch ended and he was returned to the main house. She'd promised him a body search coming and going from the house and he had no reason to think that she wasn't as good as her word. Still, there might be many reasons why she was away. But it didn't matter because Tilly returned him to the kitchen door at one, straight up.

And he made another astounding discovery. In a corner by one of the French windows, sat a huge, fat book on a pedestal stand all by itself. *Dictionary of the English Language* by Noah Webster. As he turned the pages, words, thousands of them, tumbled out at him. But more than that, there were explanations, definitions they were called, of all the words. Everything he needed to know about all the words in all the books, was here, in this single glorious volume. The enormity of it overwhelmed him. It was too wonderful to believe. He now had the key to open the door to this fantasyland he'd found himself in.

When Caina came for him at five, it was as if he'd just sat down, the time sped by so quickly. And tomorrow was such a long way away. How was he ever going to last that long?

Dinner passed uneventfully. A slice of meatloaf, swimming, like the blob of thin mashed potatoes, in a runny brown gravy, a serving spoon of peas and carrots, a cold biscuit and a spoonful of canned applesauce. He ate mechanically, chewing and swallowing by rote. Like so many other things in his life, he'd reduced eating to the simplest, most basic of acts. If it was edible, and sometimes even if it wasn't, he ate it. That was one of the ways he kept himself alive. Period. But he did notice that Jennifer Pontier was again conspicuous by her absence.

After dinner, he decided to go to the Day Room. He wasn't particularly interested in anything going on there, but he did want to see what it was like and again, it was important for him to find out who was in charge.

In his time, he'd seen Day Rooms that were nothing more than sheds with a few dilapidated chairs and tables. This one, however, boasted a big screen television, showing only sporting events and video movies hand-selected by the Overseer, a pool table, ping-pong table, and a card table. Outside, a regulation basketball court and beyond that, a baseball field. There were no magazines, books or newspapers but no one seemed to be interested.

The television was tuned to a football game and most of the interest seemed to be in that. A group of about six men was sitting in the best chairs closest to the television. These were the cream, the leaders. He'd seen them in the showers and the dining hall. Still, he couldn't determine who the actual leader was, that would take more time, more careful observation.

Having looked around and found nothing to interest him, Robert ambled slowly outside and stretched out in a small patch of grass at the edge of the basketball court, pillowing his head in his hands. The sun had gone down and the sky was in that purple transitional phase between the blue of day and the black of night. In a little while, the first stars would pop out.

Closing his eyes, he lay perfectly still, taking everything in. The smell of the grass, the feel of the slight breeze on his face, even the distant song of some bird saying goodbye to the day or hello to the night. It stirred something far down in his memory, his heart, his soul.

"You!" The sharp tone was almost as jolting as the boot toe jabbing in his side. "You're not supposed to be outside by yourself. Get up and get back to the Day Room."

"Sorry," he mumbled as he got up and dusted himself off. "I'm going back to my room."

"Just make sure you don't go roaming off by yourself."

"I won't." He could feel her eyes on him as he crossed the small dirt courtyard and presented himself to the guard at the front door of his quarters. She checked him through the barred doors and watched as he made his way up three flights of stairs to his room. Video cameras followed his every move.

Outside, he could just see Mira's office in the gathering darkness. The light wasn't on. His heart sank a little and his eyes swept over the face of the building, wondering if

she was somewhere else in the house. He knew that her bedroom must be on the second floor, probably on the other side of the house, perhaps where one of the many chimneys rose above the pitch of the blue gray slate roof.

One last trip down the hall to the bathroom and then back to his room. Stripping off his clothes and putting them in his laundry bag, he lay out on the top of his bed and listened to the quiet. He knew that the other slaves probably wouldn't come back to the quarters until just before lights out so he had the place pretty much to himself.

Perhaps later, Mira would be in her office and he could watch the light for awhile.

His door flew open, causing him to literally jump out of his bed. The sight of Jennifer Pontier chilled him like a cold wind blowing on his naked body. Pushing the door closed with her boot, she strolled casually to where he stood, coolly appraising him. It made him feel like he was on the block again and automatically, he covered himself.

"Don't bother," she told him, reaching out with the tip of her baton and moving his hands. "You don't have anything I haven't seen before."

There was nothing he could do, he knew it and she knew it. He couldn't even ask what she wanted with him. All he could do was wait for her to do whatever it was she was going to do.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there at lunch and dinner to keep our little date," she told him sweetly, smiling as if she was having a pleasant conversation with a good friend. "But I had to sit in on the oral boards for the new guards we're hiring."

So that was it. She'd come to give him the strip search she'd promised him. Oh well, it was part of the drill. And he was clean. The sooner she got on with it, the sooner it would be finished and she'd go away.

"You really think you're very clever don't you?" The tone was still sweet but the smile was gone and there was now a hard edge to her voice.

"I...I don't know what you mean." Robert truly didn't know where she was going.

"Oh, don't play coy with me. First she gets that little thing out of your balls and then she puts you in her house, right next to her office." She poked him in the balls with her nightstick. "You must have something pretty potent to heat up the Ice Princess." A mean, humorless laugh escaped her.

Something very close to anger flickered inside Robert. This bitch wasn't good enough to say Mira's name, much less talk about her like she was a common breeder or call her names.

"Her Grace was kind enough to have the Sillman removed because she feels it's inhumane, and she gave me the position as her librarian because I can read and write." Keep calm he told himself. She was baiting him, waiting for him to give her an excuse to do whatever it was she intended to do.

"A position as her librarian," she taunted. "And does she prefer to keep her position above you when you fuck?" The laugh erupted again.



"Stop it, bitch!" he blurted out, his whole body tensing.

Of course he never saw the blow coming. Only a blur and the excruciating pain in his right side that collapsed him to his knees, crumpling him in half. She'd wielded her baton with practiced perfection, landing it in the soft flesh between his lowest rib and his hip. And it had felt, not like a small piece of round wood but a weighted lead pipe.

Clutching himself around the mid-section, rocking slightly, he fought down the pain. Don't let her know how much it hurts. Don't give her more incentive to do it again. Don't give her the satisfaction.

He felt her fingers curling in his hair and then, with a hard yank, she jerked his head up, looking down into his face, her club raised slightly so he could see it.

"Listen to me, slave," she growled menacingly. "You will never, ever, use either that language or that tone of voice to me again. I don't give a shit whose pussy you're sticking your dick in up at the big house. Here, in the pens, it belongs to me. And I decide whether or not you get to keep it. Remember, there are a hundred ways for a slave to die and I know them all. I wouldn't want to tell the Tarsheen that her little pet had slipped in the shower and splattered his brains all over the tile. Or fallen down a flight of stairs and broken his neck. Or even that you'd run away when you were actually fertilizing the roses in her precious garden."

She twisted her fingers to his skull and pulled harder. "Do you understand me, slave?"

"Yes," Robert gasped.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes...yes, ma'am," he managed to choke out.

Satisfied, she released him and took a step backward, a broad smile lighting her face. "Good. Now that we understand each other, I don't expect to have any more trouble with you. In fact, I may even decide to sample you myself. I mean, if it's good enough for her, it certainly should be good enough for me." She laughed again, this time harder, meaner, and Robert had to grit his teeth to keep his mouth shut.

"Get up and assume the position," she ordered.

Slowly, painfully, he managed to drag himself to his feet and over to his bed.

"I'm getting very fond of your ass," she breathed. Her fingers slid forward and fondled his balls softly. "Yes sir, I'm definitely going to have to get a piece of you. Some night when you're not quite so sore, I'm going to come up here and ride you like a stallion. You make me happy, I can do the same for you."

Without warning, she grabbed his balls and sank her claws into them like a wild animal. As he screamed, she released him and he fell onto his bed.

"Make me unhappy, and I won't kill you. I'll just make you wish I had."

When she was finally gone, he managed to bring his pain, fear and anger under control. He'd been stupid, let himself be manipulated by that bitch. She'd found a way to get into his head and that made her especially dangerous. And she'd done it quickly

and easily. Perhaps, he thought fleetingly, she could be placated with sex. But he knew that wasn't what she was really after and that thought truly revolted him.

Suddenly, he began to shake uncontrollably, his teeth chattering with cold, sweat forming in his palms. With an effort, he got his blanket and sheet down and curled up like a baby in his bed, his bedcovers pulled to his chin.

How long he lay there, he didn't know. The lights went out and still the cold clung to him. Finally, the chills subsided and he fell into a fitful sleep. He dreamed of a warm, welcoming light shining in the black night.

## Chapter Five

"So your mother, who by this time is stewed as a tomato, turns to him and with great aplomb and dignity, replies, 'excuse me, but are you always this stupid, or am I just catching you on a particularly bad day?'"

The three women at the table dissolved into gales of almost childish laughter, the youngest one giggling until tears ran down her lightly blushed cheek.

Catherine Lynn Baron was the picture of her mother. Same tall, willowy build, same honey-colored hair, worn short, almost boyish. Only the eyes were different, round and a color that seemed to change with her clothes, ranging from a pale blue gray to an almost emerald green. This evening, in response to her flowing silk, dark silver pantsuit, they were the color of an angry winter sky, heavy with clouds and threatening rain.

Mira reached for her wineglass and sipped as she listened to her goddaughter laugh. It was the perfect accompaniment to a perfect evening. The warm, midsummer sun had long since settled lazily behind the low hills as they'd eaten their dinner on the terrace and reminisced. At some time, the servants had come out and silently lit the torches that now illuminated the area, giving them light but not obscuring the canopy of stars above them.

"Oh God, Mira," Renee pretended to grouse, "how can you bring that up? We were practically children, for Christ's sake."

"It doesn't matter, Mother," Catherine insisted as the giggles subsided. "It sounds just like you, even now."

"Oh, sharper than a serpent's tooth..."

"Please, Mother," she laughed, "you're not going to launch into your pregnancy and delivery again, are you?"

"It was terrible," Renee insisted, still trying to sound slighted and hurt. "Mira, tell this ungrateful little wretch what I went through for her."

"Trust me, Catherine," Mira agreed. "It was awful." She paused and grinned. "I was afraid none of us were going to survive your mother's pregnancy."

"Mira..."

She ignored her friend and leaned closer to Catherine. "In the first place, she couldn't decide on a donor. I mean, one day she wanted an artist, one day an athlete, one day a scientist. I think she went through every respectable bank at least twice before she finally decided. And every time she'd get a new idea, day or night, she'd have to come over here and chew it over with me."

"The donor for my daughter was a very important decision," Renee pouted, "and I thought my oldest and dearest friend, who by the way was going to be her godmother, would care and want to help me."

"And then came the morning sickness." Mira rolled her eyes. "My God, it was like it started practically the day after she missed her first period. There she was in the bathroom, every damn morning throwing up. Into her fourth month. And she pissed and moaned every second of the time."

"I have a very delicate constitution."

"You have the constitution of a she-hippo," the Tarsheen shot back playfully. "Well, almost as soon as she stopped being morning sick, she started to eat. And I mean, eat. Every time I saw her, she was putting something in her face."

"I was eating for two."

"You were eating for a platoon of Marines," she told her friend. To Catherine, she continued, "Your mother got huge. I mean, she was big as a house. If I hadn't actually seen the ultrasound that there was only one of you, I would have sworn she was carrying at least quadruplets. You should have seen her at the Lamaze classes. It took two strong men and a boy to get her down on the floor and a construction crane to get her back up. And all the while she complained that her back hurt and her feet hurt and she was bloated and she couldn't sleep and she felt like she had to go to the bathroom every twelve minutes."

"Fine friend you are," Renee sniffed.

"You're damn right about that," Mira agreed. "By the eighth month, I'd begun to feel like I was going to have the baby. Anyway, your dear mother finally went into labor. Of course she had her first pain a little after six in the morning and immediately called me. And I spent every moment of the next seventeen hours and thirty-eight minutes going through it with her." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "You would not believe the kind of language your mother used. Even I, who've known her since we were children, was appalled. I mean, I didn't know she knew half those words."

"I was in pain."

"You were a pain. Dr. Avery said that in twenty-eight years of practice, you were, unquestionably and without a doubt, the worst patient she ever had. Said two of her best nurses threatened to quit if you ever came back in the hospital for so much as a hangnail."

Catherine giggled again and Mira searched her face lovingly. "And then you were born and you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," she said tenderly. "Dr. Avery put you in your mother's arms and you were pink and perfect with the tiniest, most delicate, beautiful fingers and toes."

"Why didn't you ever have a daughter?" she asked, watching Mira with the intensity and honesty of the young.

"Catherine," Renee barked, "don't be vulgar. That's not a question a young lady of breeding and refinement asks in polite company."

Mira laughed. "She is not being vulgar, Renee. Vulgar is to ask your dearest friend if she's having sex with one of her slaves."

Unexpectedly, Renee's cheeks were touched with red and she reached quickly for her wineglass, but said nothing.

"I wanted very much to have a daughter," Mira replied wistfully. "I tried several times. It...it just never happened. Something to do with my biology, the doctors said. That means they didn't know either."

"You should have gotten a surrogate," Catherine continued thoughtfully. "You would have been a terrific mother."

"Exactly what I told her when I volunteered to carry the baby for her," Renee interjected.

Those gray eyes widened with surprise. "You volunteered?" she repeated in amazement.

"You needn't sound so shocked," Renee told her, half-joking, half-seriously. "Just because I'm a selfish, hedonistic, thoroughgoing bitch, doesn't mean I haven't had one or two decent impulses in my life, especially where the woman who's practically been my sister is concerned." She showed Mira a small, knowing smile.

"Why didn't you let my mother do it?"

"Oh, lots of reasons. For one thing, much as I tease her, your mother really did have a difficult pregnancy with you. I hated the thought of putting her through it again for me. But more than that, there was a special bond that formed between you and your mother, even while you were in the womb. I remember how she came racing over here one morning, all breathless and pink with excitement. She'd felt you moving inside and she ran over tell me. I put my hand on her stomach but as hard as I tried, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't feel anything. She said you felt like gossamer butterfly wings fluttering inside her. It was almost another month before I could actually feel you. I guess I envied that tie and knew that with a surrogate, even your mother, I'd never have it."

Sighing, she was silent for a moment. "And anyway, Caina always said that my life was obviously in another direction. So, let's not talk about me anymore. I want to hear all about college. What have you learned in this, your sophomore year?"

Catherine shrugged. "Not much. I hate chemistry. It's too hard. And if I have to read one more English renaissance novel, I know I'll puke. But I love philosophy. Professor Grayson who was supposed to teach, got a hernia or something else gross like that and had to rest this semester, so we got a special guest lecturer and guess who it was? Dr. Thaddeus Washington. He's just so interesting and his views are extraordinary. He sounds like you, Mira."

"Oh, Jesus," Renee snarled, "I'm paying a hundred thousand dollars a year to have my daughter listen to the rantings of an ex-slave. What is this country coming to?"

"He is not an ex-slave," Mira corrected gently. "He was born a freeman and you know it. He's an educated, enlightened thinker and I personally believe it's an excellent

opportunity for Catherine to hear him speak. I've read some of his papers on the equality of the sexes. He makes some very thoughtful points."

"You're right, Mira. He's so forceful. He says that men and women need to work together. That slavery of any kind is wrong. We can only forge a real democracy if we give everyone the chance to contribute, to be as complete a person as possible. If everyone has an equal chance, we'll all benefit."

"You can teach an orangutan to play the harmonica," Renee replied, her voice brittle, "but that doesn't make him a musician. Men had their turn at running things and, you'll pardon my language, fucked it up to a fare-thee-well. They gave us war, environmental carnage, political chaos and VD. If we women hadn't taken control, the world would probably be a radioactive cinder by now. All men understand is fear. If we hadn't used the implants, we couldn't have controlled them and gotten enough of a handhold to stand a chance of saving things. Men are stupid, violent, sperm machines. A necessary evil. Like tampons and pantyhose. I say, keep them in the fields and the breeding sheds." She saluted them and drained her wineglass.

"You're drunk, Renee," Mira smiled indulgently. "But you should listen to Catherine. She's the voice of the future."

"Bullshit. She's an impressionable child awed by a clever orator. Next week or next year, it'll be something else. It's a trend, a fashion. Like hemlines or fabric."

Those gray eyes flashed lightning and Catherine opened her mouth to respond but Mira beat her to the punch.

"All right, all right," she soothed, "this round is scored a draw. The combatants will go to their neutral corners and await the decision of the judge."

"She doesn't understand," Catherine slipped in.

"I understand far better than you do, my darling daughter," Renee told her icily. "I've been dealing with them twice as long as you've been alive. I knew I could give you a beautiful skull but stupid me, I wanted to put a brain in it too. Your own donor was a freeman writer, for Christ's sake! I sent you to the best private schools I could find, damn the cost. You traveled so you could learn about the world. I'm spending a bleeding fortune so you can go to the college of your choice. And what do I get for my efforts? Shit, that's what!"

"Well, I'll tell you what, Miss Priss. Why don't we go home right now, I'll call all the slaves together and declare them free. Tell them to take whatever isn't nailed down and send them on their merry way. And then, since we won't be able to run it, we can simply give away the estate. Turn it into a community for slaves. Of course, being destitute might eat into your education and your lifestyle, but hell, you can get a real job."

Catherine looked at her mother, as shocked as if she slapped her. Pushing her chair back, she ran into the house.

"Well, Renee," Mira sighed, "that was a touching little maternal scene. What are you planning for an encore? The third act of *Medea*?"

Renee drained her wineglass and reached for the bottle. "She's a snotty little brat," she retorted. "Always has been. Willful and headstrong."

Mira smiled and shook her head slightly. "Yes, I've noticed. Probably gets it from her donor."

"Uh-huh."

"Do you remember what your mother called you when, in the midst of our spring recital, you sat down on the floor, removed your ballet slippers, threw them at the dance mistress and announced that you had decided you no longer wished to be a ballerina?"

"That's not the same thing, Mira, and you know it. For one thing, I was all of eight years old."

"It is the same thing. You were too much like your mother and Catherine's too much like you. No wonder you're always butting heads." She pushed her chair back and stood up. "I'll go and smooth things over. You have a cup of coffee."

Catherine was sitting in the formal living room, crying into a sofa pillow. Mira sat down beside her and she instantly transferred to Mira's shoulder. Softly, the older woman stroked the younger one's hair.

"She's impossible," Catherine muttered between sobs.

"Yes," Mira agreed lightly. "Always has been."

"And she never, ever takes me seriously."

"Now there you're wrong, Catherine," Mira told her, gently raising her head so she could look into her eyes. "You are probably the only thing in the world that your mother does take seriously. She adores you. You are her life. And I'll tell you something else about your spoiled, nonchalant, ditzzy mother. I've lost track of the times she's stood up in the Senate with me through some close, ugly, unpopular votes. Votes I probably couldn't have won without her. And you wouldn't believe the times she's wheedled and cajoled and cooed the fence sitters. She is a very remarkable woman. Perhaps not Harriet Beecher Stowe exactly, but a terrific lady just the same."

"But..."

"No 'buts' about it. You and she just see things from different perspectives, that's all. One day you'll have a daughter and she'll be beautiful and intelligent and headstrong and you'll have these very same arguments with her."

She reached into her pocket and produced a small linen hankie that she handed to the girl. "Now wipe your eyes and blow your nose and come back to the table. I think your mother's going to need a little help getting home."

"I wish you were my mother," Catherine pouted.

Mira laughed. "Oh, no you don't. Because if I was your mother, then we'd be having the argument and you'd be crying on her shoulder."

They shared a warm hug and went back to the terrace.

Renee had moved to the edge of the flagstone and was staring out into the night, black beyond the flickering yellow illumination of the torches. Catherine came up and gently put her arm around her mother's waist. Without looking at her, Renee did likewise and they hugged. They stood for several minutes, silently holding each other as Mira watched, pierced suddenly by a spear of loneliness.

After a few more minutes, Renee called her car, there was a round of goodbyes and promises to see each other the next day, and then Mira was alone again, watching the red taillights disappear down the drive.

"Will there be anything else, Mira?" Caina asked as they stood in the foyer.

"No, nothing else."

"She's grown into a lovely girl," the old woman commented.

"She has indeed. Renee can be very proud." Mira stared off into space for a few seconds and Caina could almost feel her pain.

Putting her arms around Mira, the older woman held her as she'd held Catherine. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Me too," Mira whispered back, her voice so low Caina could barely hear it.

They held each other for a few more seconds and then Mira pulled away. "It's late and I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Good night, Caina. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Mira," she replied tenderly. "Sweet dreams."

But instead of going up the stairs to her bedroom, she had a sudden impulse to go into her office. There was nothing she needed to do and no reason to go there. Still, she felt a strong need to do just that. Flicking on the light, she stood at the door, uncertain as to what had caused her to come in. Looking around, she didn't see anything that needed her attention. And as she stood there, the feeling slowly ebbed away and was gone.

With a bewildered shake of her head, she turned off the light, closed the door and went upstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

He could feel the pain even before he was awake, a dull, thumping in his side that seemed to radiate out to the very ends of his hair and fingernails. Slowly, carefully, he pulled the covers down and raised his arm to survey the damage. An ugly purple stripe, the exact imprint of a stubby nightstick, covered his right side and spilled onto his abdomen, precisely where she'd aimed it. She was good, he had to admit. The soft tissue damage would hurt, take longer to heal than a broken rib and there was nothing that could be done for it like a splint or a cast.

Grimacing and holding his side, Robert forced himself out of bed and to his feet. For a second, the room wobbled and he thought he was going to collapse.



*Pull yourself together, he told himself sternly. You have to get up, shower and pretend everything is all right. She can't know. She can't.*

Creeping across the floor, he gathered up his towel and toiletries and began making his way down the stairs to the shower room.

Only the household slaves were in the shower, about fifteen altogether. Several of them had already finished and there were showers not in use. At least he could get in and get out, perhaps even have some hot water.

"Well, well," came an unwelcome voice behind him, freezing him in place, "good morning, Robert. I was beginning to think you weren't going to join us today."

Turning slowly, he faced his adversary. "Good morning, Miss Pontier," he replied, gritting his teeth. "I'm sorry to be late."

Her eyes traveled leisurely to the bruise. Raising her baton, she poked him right in the middle of it. Caught off guard, he winced and reached for it.

"That's an ugly looking mark you have there," she commented in mock concern. "What happened? Have an accident?"

The room had suddenly grown deathly still, the background noise and chatter died away, all eyes on the two of them.

"I...I tripped and fell on the stairs."

She jabbed him again, a little harder. "It must hurt a great deal."

"No," he lied, "I'm fine."

"I don't know." A third time. "Maybe you should see the nurse. Have it checked it out."

"Thank you, no." The room was beginning to wobble again. "I just need to take a shower and get to breakfast." He could hardly get the words out, the pain was so intense.

"Well, if you think you're all right," she pretended to concede. "And we certainly wouldn't want you to be late for breakfast." Pontier smiled and pointed the stick toward the shower.

Dragging into the shower, he turned on the water and propped himself against the tile as he tried to catch his breath. Like an experienced predator, she'd expertly cut him out of the troop. Not only had they all seen the unmistakable mark of her billy club, but she'd gone to some lengths to make sure that everyone knew he was on her hit list. By the time he got to the dining hall, all the other slaves would know too. He was utterly alone now. If there'd ever been a chance that he could just disappear into the group, perhaps even form an alliance, the Overseer had shattered it. Now she could take her time, play with him for awhile and no one would interfere.

Resignation rather than fear engulfed him. Closing his eyes, he tried to summon that warm yellow light in the darkness, but it was nothing more than a pinprick blur in the all-encompassing black that surrounded him.

*God, why now, he cried out in silent despair. Why now?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Three canned peach halves, a compartment of lumpy, beige mush, two small sausage links, the familiar white toast, margarine, sugar, mini container of skim milk, no doubt for the mush, salt, pepper and coffee.

As he sat down at the table, he could almost feel the moat forming around him. In this troop mentality, every member knew that the smell of a weak, wounded animal would surely bring the predators and that the best thing to do was to get as far away as possible and leave the prey to his fate.

Food went in his mouth and down his throat without any thought. All that existed for him was to get out of there and back to the sanctuary of the library. Furtively, he kept a watch, both on the clock and for the Overseer. But as the hands inched with agonizing slowness toward the top of the hour, he didn't see her.

When he'd finished, scraped his tray and stacked it, Tilly appeared, glum and impatient as the day before. Quickly glancing around once more and not seeing Pontier, he quietly went out the door, his guard once again on his heels.

Walking was especially difficult because of the pain in his side, and he was sure Tilly must know because she seemed to be particularly impatient this morning, prodding him almost every step.

Caina was waiting in the kitchen, a deep frown creasing her face, the toe of her highly polished black pump tapping lightly on the oak floor.

"Sorry to be late, Proconsul," Tilly apologized in a low respectful voice, "but this one just wouldn't move this morning."

"It's quite all right, Tilly," she replied in a tone that told him it was far from all right. "You may go and, thank you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Pick up your water and come along."

Turning to the table behind him, Robert was a little surprised to see that someone had set the battered cup and pitcher on a small, equally forlorn, metal tray. The cup was even turned upside down. Probably put them on the tray to protect the furniture, he thought wryly as he grabbed them and followed the Proconsul.

Settling into his chair, he listened for the click that told him he was alone. Gingerly, he massaged the area around the bruise with his fingertips. For an instant, he wished he'd swallowed what was left of his pride and gone to the infirmary, despite Pontier.

The ladder and the top shelf looked down at him disdainfully. In his present condition, there was no way he was going to be able to get up and down. Well, he'd just work on the shelves he could reach standing up without bending or stretching. It wasn't like anyone was going to know.

Leaning forward ever so gently, Robert picked up the pitcher and the cup. His hand stopped in midair and he literally did a double take. Under the overturned cup was nestled a quartet of small white pills.

Picking one up and holding it between his thumb and forefinger, he examined it in utter bewilderment. These were not the ordinary aspirin dispensed routinely in the infirmary by the nurse. They were real painkillers, the kind doctors gave out for genuine pain. Two for the morning, two for the afternoon.

But where had they come from and how had they gotten under his cup? They were almost certainly stolen, perhaps out of the dispensary but more likely out of one of the medicine cabinets in the house. By a member of the house-staff who'd undoubtedly seen him in the shower this morning.

Someone in the house had risked both the wrath of Jennifer Pontier and being caught stealing drugs for him. The thought both elated and disturbed him. No one had spoken to him, looked at him even, made any sign of sympathy to him. It would be nice to have an ally but it was dangerous too. Trust made you vulnerable and the vulnerable didn't survive.

He picked up a second pill and popped them into his mouth, washing them down with a long gulp of the room temperature water. If nothing else, swallowing them disposed of them. And he'd have to find a place in the library to hide the others. There was no way he would risk carrying them back to the pens.

It'd been a long time since he'd scanned a room for possible hiding places but the instinct seemed to return almost unbidden. Tearing off a small corner of his notepad, he wrapped the pills tightly and went to the little mantle clock. A flick of his finger released a latch on the side and the enameled floral front of the case swung open. Sliding his packet as far back under the mechanism as he could, he pushed it closed and breathed a sigh.

In a few minutes, the pills worked their magic and Robert felt almost normal. Only a nagging soreness and the occasional sharp jolt when he forgot and moved too fast or too hard reminded him.

The morning was gone before he knew it and it was time to go back to the dining hall. As he and Tilly walked, he deliberately slowed his pace to hide the fact that he was much better. He couldn't afford for her to become suspicious. And as they passed through the kitchen, he threw a quick glance around the room, but everyone seemed to be busy with their own tasks, paying them no attention.

Pontier was there, but she ignored him, seemingly engrossed in conversation with another guard. She didn't even glance in his direction. But he could feel her watching him and he made sure to drag slowly to a table, pretending to wince as he set his tray down and swung his leg over the bench.

By the time he got back to the library, the morning pills were wearing off and he was glad to swallow the other two. Idly, he wondered if there would be more in the morning. No, he thought firmly, there was no point in thinking about it. With an efficiency born of long experience, he simply put the whole matter out of his mind and went back to his books.

At exactly ten of five, Caina arrived to escort him back to the kitchen and Tilly.

"Caina!" came an urgent voice from behind them as the Proconsul closed the library doors.

They turned, and there she was.

Mira was standing on the grand staircase, about halfway down, her hands clutching the fat, dark wooden railing. She was dressed from head to foot in bright, rich crimson, a beautiful floor-length formal gown in some kind of shimmery, soft fabric that clung to her body, her arms and shoulders bare, the swells of her breasts just peeking out of the top.

The older woman hurried to the foot of the stairs, Robert trailing after at a distance, feeling as if he was being drawn by some invisible force, unable to take his eyes off her.

"What's wrong, Mira?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm caught," she squealed, stepping quickly down the stairs to where Caina was standing. "Help me!"

She whirled around, her back to the other woman, facing Robert only a couple of feet away. "The zipper's stuck." Her head swiveled around as far as it would go.

"Hold still, child," Caina soothed. "I can't do anything with you hopping around like a kangaroo."

She was like one of those exquisite dolls he'd seen in the house of one of his previous mistresses. Her hair was swept up in the back, off that gorgeous, creamy neck, held in place with a row of diamond and ruby combs, tiny curls hanging just in front of her perfect ears. Skin like pale velvet, eyes huge and dramatic, lips full and moist, the color of her dress and her fingernails. A single large, square ruby, surrounded by a box of smaller diamonds, hung in the hollow of her throat, and matching, slightly smaller rubies and diamonds hung from her earlobes by slender gold wires. He could almost feel her under his fingers, taste her on his tongue.

"I hate this," she pouted to Caina. "I'm going for drinks and dinner and the theater with my dearest friend and goddaughter and I have to dress up like a Halloween mannequin."

"You are the Tarsheen," Caina replied gently, "and you are going to a public function with a senator and her daughter who will, no doubt, one day take her mother's place. You must look the part."

A soft fragrance wafted to him, warm and sensual, that made his head swim and his knees weak. Something half-forgotten yet familiar stirred in him.

"There you are, Mira," Caina announced as the reluctant zipper slid the remaining inches and stopped at the top of her dress.

"Oh, thank you, Caina," she giggled. "Now be a dear and run upstairs and get my bag and wrap, will you?"

Caina threw Robert an uneasy look. "Mira, I have to get the slave to the kitchen. The guard will be waiting."

Turning as if she'd suddenly just noticed him, Mira smiled. "Is there some reason why Robert can't find his own way to the kitchen?" she asked sincerely. "After all, he's traveled the route and the kitchen isn't that difficult to find anyway."

The Proconsul's mouth dropped open in shock. "Mira," she almost yelled, "you can't have a slave wandering through the house by himself."

"All right, all right, I haven't got time to argue. Renee is expecting me at six and if I don't get out of here soon, I'll be late. Just go up and get my bag and stole. Robert can stand here while you do it."

Shock gave way to abject horror. "I...I can't leave you by yourself with a slave! Even for a moment! It...it wouldn't be right. No. I won't do it."

"You will do as you're told, Proconsul." Mira's voice was suddenly coated with ice. "You will do it now and I will not repeat myself."

"But...but the guard is waiting," insisted Caina, "and if the slave is late getting back to the dining hall, he won't get anything to eat."

"I'm sure that the guard can be patient a few extra moments...especially at the request of the Tarsheen. And if you'll be kind enough to do as I ask, Robert will not be late. But even if he is, I'm sure you can explain the situation to Jennifer. Now, please do as I ask."

With a last withering glance, the Proconsul started quickly up the stairs.

"Well, Robert," she smiled warmly, "good evening."

"Good evening, Your Highness," he replied hoarsely, catching a glimpse of the diamond studded bows on the top of her crimson pumps as he bowed. Her scent was heady and exotic and he wanted to breathe it in like fresh air, but managed to restrain himself.

"How is the library coming?"

"Fine, Your Grace, fine," he mumbled. The sound of her voice was like some kind of enchanting music, harps and violins and wind chimes.

"That's good. I'm very pleased. We must set an appointment to go over the categories. Soon. Perhaps next week." She folded her lower lip over her bottom teeth and frowned thoughtfully. "I'll speak to Caina about my calendar."

"As you wish, Your Grace." Her nearness was like champagne and cake to a man who'd been surviving on bread and water. Exhilarating and bubbling through his blood, filling him to overflowing. If he could only touch her. The memory of her skin brushing his in the library came back to him like an electric shock, sending a shiver through him he could barely disguise.

"I'm sorry to keep you from your dinner."

"It's not important, Your Highness." Nothing was as important as these few precious moments, alone, with this beautiful, perfect creature.

Caina reappeared and almost ran down the stairs.

"Your wrap, Mira," she growled, holding up a length of shiny crimson material. As she did so, she shot Robert a look that could have melted steel.

Mira slipped into the long stole, settling it across her shoulders and wrapping it around her upper arms. Caina handed her a small ruby and diamond evening bag.

"Well, I'm off now. Please make sure that Robert's guard knows he was detained on my account and see that she in turn tells Jennifer. I don't want there to be any trouble for him."

"I shall see to it, Mira."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"You're welcome, Robert." She moved off toward the huge front doors. "I probably won't be back tonight," she laughed. "You know how Renee gets when we're on the town. I'll no doubt see you tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night, Mira."

"Good night, Your Highness," Robert bowed, taking one more opportunity to gaze at her as he rose slowly.

"Come along," Caina told him curtly. "Tilly will be waiting."

"Yes, Proconsul." And he fell silently into step behind her.

At the kitchen door, Tilly was nervously checking her watch. It was almost five o'clock.

"You'll pardon the delay," Caina said neutrally, "but I had to attend the Tarsheen. She sends her apologies and asks that you inform the Overseer that it was in no way the fault of the slave."

"Of course, Proconsul. Thank you."

"Hurry up," Tilly hissed at him as she prodded him in the back with her baton. "You don't move that sorry white ass a'yours, you're gonna be in deep shit."

Pontier was at the door, leaning casually against the post when they arrived. When she spied them, she curled the corners of her mouth.

"Well, well," she purred, "we'd begun to think you weren't planning to join us for dinner tonight. Thought maybe you got a better offer up at the main house."

"Proconsul was late bringing him back to the kitchen," Tilly reported sullenly. "Said she had to take care of the Tarsheen. Then he dragged along like a goddamn snail all the way back."

"Now, now, Tilly," she mocked, "let's not forget Robert's injury." She jerked her head toward the dining room. "Get inside."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, looking down and hurrying past her.

Thin spaghetti noodles in a runny red soup, a mound of lettuce, a small piece of round French bread with a thick, hard crust, a cup of something he supposed was probably custard, the usual condiments and coffee. He didn't need food for the body

though, he had food for his soul. And up until today, he hadn't even realized just how badly his soul had been starving.

After dinner, he would have liked nothing better than to go back to his room and be alone. But there was Pontier to consider. Sooner or later he'd have to confront her but he wanted to put it off as long as possible...reduce her chances of catching him alone.

So he drifted to the Day Room with the others, settling into a fat, overstuffed chair in a corner toward the back. Another football game was in full swing and virtually all the others were gathered around the television, jeering and cheering and laughing and talking loudly. The noise was almost unbearable, the dull thud in his left temple beginning to mirror the dull thud in his side. Closing his eyes, he tried to shut it out.

"Pleasant dreams, slave?"

Wearily, Robert opened his eyes. She was standing just at the end of his outstretched legs, her tall, black leather boot resting on the arm of an adjacent chair, her stick dangling from her right wrist. That icy smile on those full lips.

"No, ma'am," he said carefully. "My side hurts and it's been a long day. Looking at that computer screen makes my eyes tired."

"Ah. I keep forgetting that you're not a common field slave," she prodded sarcastically. "You're a literate member of the house staff. An intimate of the Tarsheen." Gales of ugly, mean laughter escaped her. Robert wanted nothing more than to jump up and smash his fist in her face, but the pain in his side kept him in his chair. Instead, he simply continued to stare up at her.

"What's the matter, slave? Cat got your tongue this evening?" The little circles the club had been making began to get bigger. "Or have you learned to keep it in your filthy mouth?" Menace tinged the edge of her voice.

"I don't want to be hit again," he replied quietly.

"And I don't want to hit you," she agreed, her amiable smile betrayed by the steel in her eyes. "At least not yet. But mark my words, slave. You're not nearly as clever as you think. I've seen dozens of your kind come and go. Sooner or later I always break them. And I'll break you too. Fucking the Tarsheen or not."

Robert forced himself to fight down his anger. She was a vampire, feeding off the emotions of the slaves under her power like Dracula off the blood of his victims. When she moved among them or watched them naked in the showers, she knew full well the effect she had. Like a piece of meat dangled in front of starving animals, waiting with her billy club when one of them reacted. Lust, fear, anger. They all fed her insatiable appetite for power. And withholding his emotions gave him a kind of power too.

The Overseer stared down at him for a few more moments, waiting he knew for some kind of reaction...hopefully one that would give her an excuse to exercise her barely contained violence. When she didn't get it, she pulled her leg down and settled her hands on those firm, tightly muscled hips.

"Watch your back," she growled. "You never know..." And with that, she drifted off.

The thud in his brain had become intolerable, worse even than the pain in his side. At last, he pulled himself up and made his way slowly to his quarters. Peeling off his clothes, he lay down on his bed and closed his eyes.

He wouldn't be able to try reaching out to Mira, he knew, until well after lights out, when the building was finally silent and Pontier had made her bed checks. There was no doubt in his mind that she'd visit him tonight. And if he was going to try, he knew he'd also have to get rid of both this headache and the pain in his side. It would be hard, but he had to try.

At some point, he dozed off. Awakened roughly by the Overseer making her rounds, he realized that his head was clear, his body refreshed.

For a long while he lay there, straining into the darkness, listening for even the tiniest sound of someone stirring. He couldn't afford to be discovered, to have anyone, especially Pontier, find out what he was doing.

Finally, convinced that he was alone and wouldn't be disturbed, he readied himself.

It was harder than he could ever remember to still his excited body and quiet his churning mind.

*Relax, he told himself. Bring your body to a quiet peace. Let everything drift away and feel the lightness of serenity, the calm of harmony. Empty your mind and let it go blank, tranquil. Blend into the nothingness.*

"Come to me, Mira," he called softly into the blackness of his mind. "Come to me."

Long, agonizingly slow moments dragged by as he waited, trying with his whole being to reach out and touch her, bring her to him.

And then there was the faint rustle of soft material and a lightening of the darkness far away. A red speck appeared on the horizon, and heartbeat by heartbeat, moved closer. Robert felt the mounting excitement in his body, the tension rising and focusing itself below his belly.

She was exactly as she'd been in the hall, her luminescent body draped in that gorgeous red fabric, that perfect face like ivory velvet. He felt his heart speed up and his breath caught inside his chest.

Reaching behind her head, she pulled out the combs, throwing them like confetti into the darkness. With a light, musical laugh, she shook her head and her black hair cascaded in silken, inky waves to her shoulders, surrounding her face like an ebony night embracing a full moon.

Putting out her arms, she reached for him, inviting him to her. And if he tried, stretched just a little more... The smell of her, the feel of her, the taste of her...all just beyond his fingertips. *God, he thought desperately, I want you! I want you!*

The emotions and sensations, the desire grew and expanded and would have overwhelmed him but in the last second before he was drowned in his own overloaded body, there was a blinding, liberating, shattering climax that rocked him, obliterating even Mira's image before him.



Afterward, he drifted in that golden, peaceful twilight between wakefulness and sleep, reliving the passion and marveling that he'd actually made the connection. And as sleep finally overtook him, he was comforted by the tiny reality that she had, indeed, come to him when he'd called.

## Chapter Six

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Renee chirped as Mira dropped into the chair opposite her and motioned for the silver coffee server. "We'd begun to think you weren't getting up at all."

"Do you have to be so damned cheerful," Mira groused, "especially before I've even had my coffee?"

"Sorry," the other woman smirked.

"What time is it anyway?"

Renee glanced at her watch. "A little after eleven."

"What time did we finally get home last night?"

"Uh, about three, I think. Give or take a few minutes."

"How long have you been up?"

"Since about seven," Renee teased.

"Jesus," Mira groaned, sipping her coffee carefully, "how is it possible that you party 'til three in the morning and then get up at seven looking like the first daisy of spring. It's...it's...unnatural."

"Nonsense," Renee continued playfully. "It's the absolute most natural thing in the world. Just a little something I take at bedtime. Pleasant, relaxing and guaranteed to make you sleep like a baby. You should try it. Also no doubt do wonders for that miserable morning disposition of yours."

"There is nothing wrong with my disposition," Mira insisted, "and someday I'm going to go up to that attic of yours and find that portrait of you, hanging in all its decaying splendor."

"Suit yourself." Renee shrugged. "Would you like some breakfast? Carl's made some of his fabulous warm apple turnovers and thick slabs of French toast, fairly swimming in maple syrup."

"Oh God, Renee!" Mira squealed, her face screwing up in a look of abject horror. "Don't even mention food! You know I can't even stand the thought until noon. Especially when I've just opened my eyes."

"Just trying to be helpful," she giggled.

"Yes, well don't try quite so hard."

They sat in silence for a few moments, Mira working on her coffee, Renee reading over some papers. The breakfast table was set on the terrace just off Renee's second floor bedroom, overlooking broad green lawns, giant oak shade trees, outbuildings and

green fields rolling away to the distant low brown hills. It was a beautiful view and it never ceased to soothe and calm Mira.

"Where's Catherine?" she asked.

"Puttering in the garden," Renee said without looking up. "You know how she is. Got Timothy down there digging and planting like crazy. Been down there since about nine."

"Timothy?" Mira raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Certainly, Timothy," her friend replied. "Why not Timothy?"

"I, uh, thought you were saving Timothy's energy for more...how shall I put it...recreational pursuits."

"Oh, that." Renee waved her hand as if to dismiss the whole subject.

Mira was now genuinely intrigued. Setting her cup back in its saucer, she tapped Renee's arm gently. "Oh that? What about the 'most explosive experience' I ever had?"

"Don't be clever," Renee scolded lightly, "it doesn't become you. I meant what I said. Sex with Timothy was wonderful. But it was what it was and it's over. I intend to send him to the breeding shed, probably sometime after the first. In the meantime, I have him working around the house. Even with his clothes on, he's quite pleasant to look at."

"And I assume you have someone else to take his place?"

"Certainly," Renee purred, a satisfied smile on her face. "William. Gorgeous, obedient and hung like a stallion."

"You're hopeless," Mira sighed in mock resignation. "Not only do you have the morals of an alley cat, but the attention span of a spoiled two-year-old. You might at least have the decency to be ashamed of yourself."

"Whatever for? You talk like a harmless little roll in the hay is some kind of crime. You call me unnatural. You wanna know unnatural? I'll tell you unnatural. Unnatural is a healthy, desirable woman surrounded by an assortment of available, willing men, choosing celibacy. That's unnatural."

"Simply because I don't feel the need to bed every young man half my age in my stable..."

"Fine. So you don't go for the young stuff. Hell, Mira, that's like saying you don't like caviar so you're going to pass on the whole buffet." She was quiet for a moment and then brightened. "I know. That slave you bought when we were at Svarek's. What's his name?"

"Robert?"

"Robert. Right. I saw him a couple of days ago. He was being walked back to the pens from the house while we were arriving for dinner. As my Grandma would say, 'cleans up right nice'. Not my type, certainly, but definitely very attractive in that dark, brooding, *Wuthering Heights* sort of fashion. You know, on the outside all quiet and

reserved. But strip him naked and drop him in the sack, I'll bet he rattles the windows all...night...long."

"Stop it, Renee!" Mira barked angrily. Something uncertain and unexpectedly sharp had pricked her mind and soul as she'd listened to Renee talk so sexually about Robert. For some reason, it made her both anxious and more than slightly upset.

Renee looked as if Mira had slapped her. She'd been joking, teasing her friend. No more or less meanly than was normal for them. That Mira had taken it so seriously and reacted so angrily, completely bewildered her.

"Your Highness has my deepest and sincerest apologies," Renee murmured, dipping her head to her friend. "I meant no offense."

"It's I who should apologize," Mira told the other woman gently, touching her arm. "I...I don't know what got into me. You know what a bitch I am until I've had my coffee."

Renee patted her hand and smiled limply, but Mira could tell that she'd hurt her friend. That she'd done it was bad enough. That she had no real reason was even worse.

A fragment of dream fluttered through her mind. Dressed for the theater with Renee, she'd been wandering in the dark. Well, not wandering exactly. Someone had been calling her. It hadn't been a truly human sound, more like the wind if it had been given voice. All around her, almost inside her. It faded and disappeared but the unsettled feeling remained.

The phone at Renee's elbow rang and she picked it up. Mira poured herself another cup of coffee and peeked into the basket of breakfast rolls.

"Jesus Christ!" Renee shouted into the receiver. "You have got to be kidding!"

Mira watched her friend's expression darken as the party on the other end continued to talk.

"All right, all right," she said finally, her voice full of anger and frustration. "I understand. Well, have the doctor clean her out and put her on the inactive list for three months. And while she's on the table, make sure we get some eggs harvested. I don't want this fucking thing happening again!"

The receiver slammed back into its cradle, rattling the china cups in their saucers and bouncing the silverware on the thick white linen tablecloth.

"God damn it!"

Mira waited patiently for the other woman to compose herself and explain.

"That was the breeding shed," Renee snarled, pointing at the phone. "They just finished routine testing on one of my pregnant breeders. Found what they laughingly refer to as 'a heretofore undiscovered genetic abnormality'. Do you fucking believe that! And not only that, but now I'll have to pull George and have them run tests on him as well! Jesus, I hate this!"

"It happens," Mira tried to soothe. "Even to healthy breeders and slaves. It's just one of those things. Probably nothing more than a fluke."

"That doesn't help me now. I have a contract to deliver six healthy male slaves to the Crockett Home this year. Not to mention I have to keep my own stable supplied. Damn! I never should have hired that bitch. I should stick to my own breeders."

"Yes. And eventually you get so much inbreeding it looks like a Hapsburg family reunion."

Renee eyed her friend coldly. "I'm glad my predicament amuses someone."

"I'm just saying that everyone has to bring in new blood, breeders and slaves. Where did you get her? Did she have papers?"

"Of course she had papers, Mira. I'm not totally stupid. She'd just finished a long-term contract with Sharon Ashcroft. Dropped five healthy whelps in seven years. I signed her to a seven-year contract. Said she didn't work for more or less time. And she even hinted that her ten-year-old daughter might be ready for breeding when her contract expired. God, I hate being at the mercy of these cows! You'd think after all this time, science could figure out something more fucking efficient!"

"And what would you suggest?"

"I don't know. But they've got us in a corner and they know it."

"I think you're making more of this than it warrants. I mean, the life of a breeder is hardly what I'd call luxurious. They're generally the offspring of breeders and slaves themselves, poorly educated, almost no other options."

"Don't give me that bleeding heart crap of yours," Renee answered hotly. "They can't work in any respectable breeding program until they're at least sixteen. They're artificially inseminated and for nine months they do nothing but carry their load. And when the delivery's over, so is their responsibility. Then at least three months of lounging around, at their contract holder's expense before they can breed again. Room and board, housing, medical care and a personal allowance. If they don't want to work in an established program like yours or mine, they can freelance. Not to mention they have jobs with the State nurseries and homes practically assured when their breeding years are over. And they are entitled, by law, to a daughter. I know proven breeders who've managed their daughters' careers very nicely, thank you. They've got it made and they know it."

"That's a rather simplistic picture."

"It's a simple process. Technicians put male semen in them and they take money for incubating those sperm for nine months and producing slaves. You say it's because they have no options, I say it's because they're lazy. At any rate, I have to support this bitch for at least another three months, with no return on investment, I have to pay a replacement breeder so I can meet my contractual obligations and, unless I can prove fraud in a court of law, which we both know is virtually impossible, I am, as they say, shit out of luck."

Mira opened her mouth to say something when Catherine burst through the open doors and over to the table.

"Good morning, Mira," she smiled, bending down to kiss her godmother. "Good morning, Mother." They kissed and hugged as the young woman sat down. "May I have the coffee, please?"

"Good morning, Catherine," Mira smiled as she handed her the silver pot. "You're looking very well. How's the garden going?"

"It's a mess," she sighed. "It doesn't look like anything's been done since I went away to college. I don't understand how you can let it go like you do, Mother."

"Roses give me hay fever," she responded tartly. "Diamonds, on the other hand..."

Catherine ignored her mother. "That young man, Timothy, has been very helpful. I think he really enjoys working in the garden. May I have him a little longer?"

"Certainly, dear," Renee said distractedly. "Keep him as long as you'd like." She stood up. "You'll excuse me, but I have some work to do. Mira, stay as long as you like. If I don't see you before you leave, I'll call you."

"All right, Renee. I'm just going to finish my coffee, shower, dress and go home. I've got a lot of things I need to get done myself. Thank you for a wonderful evening and letting me stay. I really am very sorry about your problem. Goodbye."

"Thank you. Goodbye, Mira. Catherine, I'll see you later."

When she was gone, Catherine turned to Mira, the question clearly on her face.

"Your mother's having a little problem with one of her breeders. I'm sure she'll be able to work it out but you know how she has a tendency to go off when things don't go exactly right."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"No. In fact, when I get home, I'm going to see if I've got a breeder available I can loan her. I didn't want to say anything because I'm not sure and if I tell her I can loan her one and then find out I can't, she'll be even more upset."

"My mother can be pretty childish sometimes," Catherine agreed.

"Oh, maybe not childish, exactly," Mira mused, almost to herself. "Perhaps just a little unrealistic. I sometimes think that for a grown, sophisticated woman, she tends to live in her own little world where reality rarely rears its ugly head."

They both laughed. "Yes, that's Mother all right."

"Listen, Catherine," Mira smiled, "why don't we plan to go shopping soon?"

"Oh, I'd love that," she squealed in delight. "When?"

"When I get home, I'll check my calendar. I'll have Caina clear some time for me. Next week. We'll make a day of it, just the two of us."

"Can we go into the City?" she asked excitedly.

"Of course. We'll have lunch some place spiffy."

"I can hardly wait! Oh Mira, you're so wonderful!" She threw her arms around the older woman and they hugged tightly."

"It's a date, then," she laughed. "And now, I really do have to shower and get home."

"Promise you'll call me the instant you get home. I'll sit right here by the phone until I hear from you."

Mira kissed her goddaughter lovingly. "I promise."

"I love you, Mira."

"I love you too, Catherine."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye, darling."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have a tea reception at four," Caina read from her saddle-leather-bound diary. "You're receiving a plaque from the Science Teachers Association for your participation as a judge for the regional high school science competition. You, in turn, are presenting a proclamation naming next month as 'Support Science Month'."

Mira looked up from the papers she was signing and grinned. "Didn't I just get through proclaiming next month as 'Black Writers' Month' and 'Environmental Awareness Month'?"

"And 'Law Enforcement Officers Killed in the Line of Duty Remembrance Month' and, I believe, 'Eat More Poultry Month'," the old woman added dryly. "Fortunately, it's a long month."

Chuckling, Mira returned to her papers and Caina continued her litany. "You're due at the Courtyard at six-thirty for cocktails with some Ambassador. Her name, spelled phonetically and her new, microscopic country are in your short, prepared speech. You can practice in the car. Dinner is at eight at Vanessa Cooper's. She's hosting some terribly expensive, terribly boring fundraiser for the opera or a home for unwed cats or something. Details and a moderate but respectable check are in your silver evening bag. Try not to have more than two cocktails at the Ambassador's reception because you're sitting at Vanessa's table and she'll no doubt want you to say a few extemporaneous words on the value of this week's pet project. They'll also be in your bag."

"Did you leave any room for my powder and lipstick?" Mira teased. Caina ignored her.

"If you haven't managed to extricate yourself by eleven, I'll phone and make some pretext. You have to be on your toes tomorrow as you have a very full day, beginning at eight o'clock with a breakfast meeting with a congressional delegation about the Omnibus Education Bill."

"The thought of that spoils my appetite right now," Mira replied, ending her signature with a flourish and pausing while Caina removed one stack of papers and replaced it with another. "Did you check on the availability of a breeder for Renee?"

"You have three ready," Caina explained as she set the papers down. "I believe that Shelby would be the best candidate. She's a proven producer, a long-term contract and more likely than the others to withstand Renee's efforts to try and get her to break her contract with you and sign with her."

"You don't have much faith in my friend," Mira observed.

"I've known you both since you were children. When Renee discovers that Shelby is a prime breeder, she will spend the next nine months showering her with bribery and flattery and explaining in precise, minute, complete detail, all the reasons why she would be better off in her program than yours. She's a compulsive brat."

With pen poised over the first paper, Mira looked up at her Proconsul. "Should I actually care about any of these papers I'm so nonchalantly putting my name to?"

"If that were necessary," Caina told her calmly, "I would certainly tell you."

"Well, sometimes I have the feeling I should perhaps be reading at least some of the things I sign."

"Nonsense," Caina said flatly. "In the first place, if you actually tried keeping up with all the paperwork involved in being the Tarsheen, you'd never have time to be the Tarsheen. And in the second place, that's what you have me for. Now, after breakfast tomorrow..."

Mira bent her head over the papers and began scribbling again, listening only halfheartedly. "By the way," she interrupted without stopping her pen, "I'd like you to clear a day for me in the next few days, next week at the latest. I want to take Catherine to the City for some shopping. And make a reservation for lunch for us at The Summit. Twelve-thirty."

Not getting a reply for several seconds, Mira glanced up to find the other woman frowning down at her. "Have you heard a word I've said?" she asked coldly.

"Of course I heard you, Caina," she sighed, knowing that look all too well. "You've been explaining how meticulously my life is blocked out and spoken for."

"No, Your Grace," the other woman replied, ice now forming on her words, "I have been explaining your myriad duties and responsibilities and the complex scheduling required to make it possible for you to perform said duties and responsibilities. Put more precisely, you do not have days to be cleared, especially not for something as ridiculous and selfish as a shopping spree."

"I'm not asking..."

"You are asking to put your personal whims before your crown. Something you have been prone to since childhood and which seems to be getting worse, not better, with the passing years."

"All right, Caina," Mira conceded, anxious to avoid a confrontation. "When can you arrange for me to take the child who's practically the daughter I never had and whom I haven't seen for almost six months, out for an afternoon?" Her voice took on a slight edge.



The two women stared at each other for several long seconds. At last, Caina's shoulders sagged. "I shall do what I can, Your Grace, perhaps next week, if that meets with your approval?"

"I'm sure you'll do your best."

"May I continue?"

"Certainly."

Returning to her writing, Mira tried to pay more attention, but the luncheons and receptions and endless meetings began to run together. As she finished the stack of papers she was signing, another took its place.

Eventually, Caina looked up from her book.

"If it's not too much trouble," Mira ventured as she signed, "I'd like to have half an hour with Robert to go over his progress in the library."

She heard Caina's mouth click open and moved to quell her resistance. "I know my schedule is very full," she said hurriedly, "but this project is very important to me."

"There is no reason for you to talk to the slave," Caina responded angrily. "Simply tell me what you wish to convey and I shall be happy to take care of it for you."

"I appreciate your offer of assistance, Caina, but I really want to handle this myself."

"As you wish, Your Grace."

"And one last thing, Caina," Mira told her, trying to sound casual. "Please notify Jennifer that beginning tomorrow, Robert will no longer need an escort to and from the house."

Again, that ominous silence, causing Mira to finally raise her eyes.

"What's gotten into you, Mira?" Caina's eyes narrowed in suspicion, her voice lowered to a hoarse rumble.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," she retorted, throwing her pen down.

"First, you actually purchase that...that mongrel," she spat, "a purchase that was neither necessary nor wise. Even that vermin, Svarek, warned you against him. At best, he should be out in the field, as far away as possible from decent women, under constant watch. Instead, you choose to bring him into the house. To a room filled with valuable objects and only steps from your person. Now you want to allow him unrestricted, unsupervised movement! Have you gone completely mad?"

Restraining her anger, Mira rose slowly and faced the other woman. "Because you have been like a mother to me," she began in a tight, measured voice, "I will overlook both your words and your tone. My actions, including the purchase of a slave, do not require an explanation, to you or anyone else. Regardless, you of all people should know that it has always been my policy to trust my slaves and give them as much latitude as possible. Robert has my trust and will continue to have it until such time as he betrays it. In the meantime, I'm sure I pay my guards to perform more valuable

service than walking one slave two hundred yards from the pens to the kitchen door and back."

"But..."

Mira raised her hand and shook her head. "The matter is settled. He is in full view of guards the entire time. If it makes you more comfortable, you may continue to escort him from the kitchen to the library and back, although if my schedule is really as overwhelming as you say, I should think that you'd have more productive ways to spend your time as well."

"You're a fool."

"Perhaps. But I am also the Tarsheen."

Sitting back down, Mira retrieved her pen. "Is there anything else?"

"No, Your Highness. Nothing else."

\* \* \* \* \*

The click of the lock brought his attention immediately back to the library, as the door opened and Caina appeared.

"Good afternoon, Proconsul," he told her respectfully as he came to his feet.

She surveyed him disdainfully. "Her Grace," she began stiffly, "has sent me to inform you that you will meet with her tomorrow at eleven-fifteen to go over the categories of books and to assess the progress of this project. You are to print out two copies of your work so far and give them to me at the end of the day, today."

Stopping, her face took on the look of someone delivering particularly distasteful news. "Also, Her Grace wishes me to convey to you that beginning tomorrow morning, you will no longer be escorted to and from the pens."

"Thank...thank you," he replied, blinking in surprise. "And thank Her Highness."

"It is purely Mira's whim. She believes a great deal in trusting people, even when that trust is obviously misplaced. But you will still be under the watchful eyes of the guards and I will escort you to and from the library and the kitchen. Beyond that, none of the rules have changed."

"I understand, Proconsul."

"And one thing more, slave," Caina told him, quiet menace drenching her tone. "Step carefully. There are transgressions from which even the Tarsheen cannot protect you." A heartbeat longer and she was gone, the door locking behind her.

## Chapter Seven

"My feet hurt," Mira whined under her breath.

"Your Highness." Another head dipped respectfully.

"Good evening, Representative Carlin." She smiled automatically and extended her hand. "So good of you to come."

"An honor, Your Grace." The head dipped again and was replaced by another. Without turning her head, Mira glanced sideways down the endless line of people and sighed inaudibly.

"I knew I should have worn my low, square-heeled black pumps," she continued softly to Caina, standing at her shoulder, "instead of these ghastly, three-inch silver monstrosities."

Almost as one, Mira and Caina flashed skin-deep, professional smiles and shook the jeweled hands that appeared in front of them.

"The black pumps," Caina reminded her, "would not have been appropriate. You know as well as I do, that had you made such a fashion faux pas, these wretched buzzards would have seized on it like warm prey. Consider it another small sacrifice for the crown. And anyway, I told you there'd be a reception line."

"Yes," Mira agreed, gritting her teeth and forcing a smile, "but you failed to mention that every woman not a breeder and every freeman in my realm would be in it. It's a Goddamn assembly line."

"Watch your language, Mira," the other woman admonished. "And considering what these people are contributing to your charitable foundation tonight, I should think your inconvenienced piggies would be little enough to endure."

"Your Highness," an unfamiliar face addressed her timidly. "Representative O'Neal. The West District."

Representative O'Neal. Quickly, Mira flipped through her mental Rolodex. Newly elected junior member of the West District delegation. Rumored to owe her fledgling political career to a distinct lack of any other real talent and a wealthy, well-connected family. No political experience, no voting record to speak of.

"How good of you to attend," Mira cooed, holding the young woman's hand a fraction longer than she had the others. "It's always good to see young blood in the Chambers. Keeps the rest of us old women from becoming permanently ossified. You must call my Proconsul in the near future so that we may have lunch and get better acquainted."

The young woman turned bright scarlet and giggled like a schoolgirl. "Oh, Your Grace," she gushed, practically drooling on Mira's feet, "that would be just wonderful! I mean...uh...yes, of course. I'd be honored. Thank you, Your Highness."

Mira continued her satisfied smirk and patted the girl's hand lightly. "I look forward to hearing your views on the questions of the day."

"Oh...oh thank you, Your Grace," she practically squealed, now completely flustered as she moved past Caina.

"That was vile," Caina hissed, "even for you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Mira replied, feigning ignorance.

"You think by flattering that little airhead, you can gain another ally for the coalition. Especially on the West delegation which could be crucial if it comes to a showdown. Not to mention, I understand her mother has more money than anyone out there."

"Really?" Mira insisted, now having trouble keeping a straight face. "I was just being kind to a new member of the House. Why must you always think the worst of me?"

Caina threw her an "oh please" glance.

In spite of herself, a single, stray chuckle escaped Mira before she turned her attention back to the reception line.

Already, out of the corner of her eye, Mira could see Representative O'Neal informing everyone she could buttonhole that the Tarsheen herself had invited her to call for lunch. No doubt, after the ball, her mother would get the news by telephone, no matter how late the hour.

Tomorrow, Caina would receive a phone call, certainly not before ten o'clock. Anything earlier would look anxious. And certainly not from Representative O'Neal herself. That would definitely look anxious. No, the Representative's secretary would call, acknowledging that both women's schedules were crowded and hoping to set a mutually agreeable date and time for lunch. No doubt, the young Representative would be standing at her secretary's elbow, listening intently and coaching the precise dialog. Mira would tell Caina to set the appointment for two weeks. Long enough to build up a sense of importance and anticipation but short enough so that the young woman – and her mother – wouldn't feel slighted.

Having put out the bait for her newest coalition candidate, Mira now had to be very delicate about reeling her in. A delegate vote, was, after all, a delegate vote. Even a slightly ditzy one.

"Your Highness is looking pleased with herself this evening." Victoria Keller showed her teeth, her head weaving ever so slightly as she lowered it an inch in Mira's direction. "What mischief are you plotting now, Your Grace?" The honey frosting on her words was not quite enough to hide the acid underneath.

Smiling and holding out her hand, Mira and Keller touched fingertips and instantly pulled away.

"Victoria." Mira returned the other woman's fake smile. "To what do I owe this thoroughly unpleasant surprise? I'm sure I never invited you." She turned an exaggerated questioning face to her Proconsul. "Caina, did you make some sort of hideous blunder and actually invite this creature to my foundation gala?"

"No, Your Grace," Caina answered quietly, scowling at both women.

The doctor arched a perfect eyebrow, her eyes cold but her voice remaining sweet. "Your Highness knows that I would never stoop to socialize with her royal personage but unfortunately, my dear friend, Janice Howell, the electronics heiress, found herself unescorted at the last moment and begged me to accompany her."

"Yes," Mira pretended to agree. "I'm sure these long, drawn-out affairs must be very difficult for you. I mean, having to be back in your box by daybreak must be so tiresome."

Keller's smile froze in place. "Your Highness is in rare form tonight. I'm glad to see that having the Sillman removed from your little dick has had a positive effect on your naturally foul humor. You must loan him to me sometime. As a research scientist, I'd be very interested in doing breeding experiments on him. Find out if he possesses some heretofore undiscovered sexual attractant, or whether Your Grace is simply turned on by filth."

Caina opened her mouth but Mira touched her arm, her voice now taking on a veneer of concern. "Speaking of foul humor, Victoria, you don't seem in a particularly gala mood. What's the matter? Get up on the wrong side of the crypt this evening? Cut yourself sharpening your fangs? Or are you just an envious, horny old bitch with nothing better to do than embarrass yourself in public?"

The physician heard a poorly stifled laugh behind her.

"As for your so-called 'research', I don't believe in torture and I would never allow one of my slaves to breed outside his species. And now, if you'll excuse me, Dr. Keller, I have people waiting in line behind you with whom I really do wish to speak."

Those cold reptile eyes held hers for another moment. Finally, she nodded slightly. "As Your Grace wishes," she acknowledged bitterly. "But not forever," Mira heard her mumble as she moved away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mira limped slowly down the stairs, wincing in pain with every step. Even her silk bedroom slippers seemed to pinch and pull at her swollen feet.

"I hope you're satisfied," she growled at Caina who waited stoically at the bottom. "I'm probably crippled for life."

"I've never heard of sore feet being fatal," the old woman replied coolly. "Unless, of course, you're a horse."

"Yes, well if you had as much compassion for me as you would a lame horse, you'd put me out of my misery, as well."

"Nonsense," Caina retorted. "I never want to see anything happen to you, Mira. And perish the thought that you die."

"Why, Caina," Mira breathed, reaching out to touch the other woman's arm. "I...I had no idea you felt that way."

"Of course I do, Mira," she answered calmly. "Have you any idea of the paperwork involved in your death? My Lord, the succession process alone is mind-boggling. And speaking of paperwork, your desk is fairly groaning under the load. I had Henry put a tray in your study so you wouldn't have to make the trek to the dining room and then to your study."

"Your thoughtfulness is underwhelming," Mira shot back sarcastically.

The faintest hint of a smile touched the corners of Caina's mouth. "I remember once when your mother..."

Instantly, Mira held up her hands. "And if you tell me that wretched story about how my mother presided over a marathon Senate session of twenty hours after having broken her ankle coming up the steps, I swear I'll scream."

"I wouldn't dream of bringing that up again," the other woman said simply. She paused a fraction of a second. "Although it was quite impressive."

With a quick, angry glance, Mira turned and slowly began making her way down the hall.

"Is Your Grace all right?"

Yelping in surprise and jumping slightly, Mira landed hard on her sore feet, causing her to grimace.

"Robert," she snapped, "must you always sneak up on me like that?"

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," he told her softly. "I meant no harm."

"It's all right."

"Is Your Grace all right?" There was real concern in his face, those dark eyes, his voice.

"My feet are a bit tender this morning. Standing too long in a pair of attractive but incredibly uncomfortable shoes last night at a charity function."

"Perhaps I could help Your Grace to her office?" Robert extended an arm to her, being careful not to actually touch her.

"That's very kind of you, Robert," she told him, putting her hand on his arm and leaning her weight on him.

There was a pleasant wave of warm electricity through his body and a flash of image in his mind—him sweeping this small, beautiful doll into his arms, kissing those red lips.

Slowly, leaning her weight on him, they navigated the hall and he lowered her gently into her chair.

"My footstool," she ordered, pointing to a low, tapestry-covered stool sitting in a corner near her desk. Tenderly, he raised each foot and set them down on the soft material.

"Please bring me a cup of tea," she told him as she settled into her chair. "One lump of sugar. And a blueberry muffin, lots of butter."

"I'm sorry Your Grace is indisposed," Robert said softly, trying to ignore the heavenly aroma as he took a muffin from its warming basket.

"High heels," Mira muttered bitterly, "along with periods and pantyhose, are the great bane of womankind. Especially when you're forced to stand in them while smiling and shaking hands with people in a reception line that stretches from here to Chicago. It's a torture to make the Inquisitors shudder."

Silently, Robert chuckled as he slathered soft butter into the warm muffin. After setting it on a small, white, paper-thin china plate, he carefully poured out the dark steaming tea into a delicate cup balanced on a saucer, the same white, almost transparent color as the plate. Using a pair of tiny tongs, he dropped a single sugar cube in the tea. Finally, picking up a thick, soft napkin, he put the muffin plate on it, parked the spoon on the saucer and carefully carried them to the desk. Mira cleared a space in front of her and Robert set his load down.

"Oh, that's good," she sighed as the first sip of tea warmed her throat. As she picked up a muffin half, a sharp pain stabbed at the arch of her foot.

"Damn," she cried, reaching down and massaging her left foot.

"Your Highness," Robert began uncertainly.

Mira looked up at him quizzically.

"If you'd allow me, I...I might be able to relieve some of Your Grace's discomfort."

"Really? How?"

"If Your Highness would permit me?" He pointed to her feet.

"If it will help this misery, please."

Slowly, he knelt down and reached for her slippers. Gently, he slid them off, but even that small movement caused her to wince.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," he apologized.

"It's all right," she assured him halfheartedly.

"I'll try to be more careful." Holding her ankles in his hands, he raised her feet enough to slide his large frame onto the tiny footstool. Balancing himself precariously, he lowered her feet into his lap.

They were beautiful, Robert thought. Slender, creamy, perfect toes with healthy, unpainted baby pink nails.

Cradling her left heel in one hand, he gently started to put his fingers on the top of her foot.

"Don't!" she squealed.

"If Your Grace will allow me," he replied in a low, soothing voice. "I've spent a lot of my life standing for long hours on my feet. I've learned a trick or two about what to do when they hurt." He looked up at her with those deep, dark eyes.

There was something in them, something she couldn't name but which seemed to ease her anxiety.

"All right," she murmured, "but be careful."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Tenderly, he placed his thumb on the top of her foot, just behind her toes. "Your feet are tired," he explained softly. "They need rest and care." Slowly, lightly, he began stroking her skin. "You need to get the blood flowing, feed those aching muscles and frayed nerves."

As he rolled the ball of his thumb gently across the joint between her toes and foot, Robert moved his fingertips delicately around to the arch.

"You have such soft, smooth skin," he whispered, locking her eyes in his own. Ever so carefully, she felt the pressure of his fingertips increasing, the area of his massage widen. "There are lots of nerve endings in the foot," he explained quietly. "The Chinese believe that stimulating the foot can have a beneficial effect on the whole body. But you have to relax...let go...really feel it." He paused a heartbeat and watched her intently. "Can you feel it?"

She gazed down into those clear, deep eyes, the sound of his voice as soothing as the feel of his skin on hers.

A flurry of sensations radiated upward from her toes. Calm, relaxing warmth. A lessening of her physical pain and a kind of lightening of her whole being. Prickly currents of something she couldn't quite identify. And over all, a vague but comforting sense of tranquility and wellbeing.

"Lean back and close your eyes," he ordered gently. "Release your body and your mind. Let go. Of the pain, of the swelling, of everything. Float free and feel the healing. The peace."

Feeling herself melt back into her chair, her eyes fell shut almost by themselves. Doing so seemed to heighten all her senses. Robert's hands had moved up from her toes, gently massaging, caressing her flesh, his voice caressing her spirit. He seemed to be all around her...inside her. Filling her 'til she felt she'd burst with him.

"Mira!"

The loud, angry voice was like a bucket of ice water, popping her eyes open and almost pulling her out of the chair. Immediately, Robert let go of her foot, placing it back on her stool and standing up.



A mortified, furious Caina stood in the doorway, her hand still resting on the knob. Just behind her stood a surprised Jennifer Pontier.

As the two women crossed the room, Mira saw the ugly look Caina threw at Robert. Robert, however, was more disturbed by the mean, knowing smirk the Overseer flashed him. *Bitch*, he thought angrily.

"What's going on here?" the Proconsul demanded, her fury barely contained as she glared first at Robert and then at Mira.

"You are dismissed, Robert," Mira told him calmly, regaining her composure, "with our thanks. The pain is considerably reduced."

"I was happy to be of some small help, Your Grace," Robert replied with a bow. As he came up, he caught that smirk from Pontier again. He could almost see the filthy, twisted pictures she was painting in her mean, small mind.

"Not so fast, slave!" Caina barked, putting out her hand. "I demand an explanation. Why were you —"

"I said," Mira cut in firmly, "you are dismissed, Robert. Please close the door behind you."

"Your Highness." He bowed again. "Proconsul. Miss Pontier." As quickly as he could, Robert left, pulling the door after him.

"Mira, I demand —"

The Tarsheen held up her hand and looked at her Overseer. "Did you need something, Jennifer?"

"Uh, no, Your Grace," Pontier stammered, stretching out her hand and laying some manila files on Mira's desk. "I was just delivering the monthly reports. Very routine. Nothing that requires Your Grace's attention. But if Your Grace has no further need of me, I have several pressing matters I should be handling."

"Of course, Jennifer. Thank you for your promptness with the reports. Just one of the many reasons I so value your service."

"Your Grace is too kind," Pontier replied, casting a quick, cautious glance at the woman beside her. "It's my honor and pleasure to serve."

"You have my gratitude, Jennifer. You are dismissed."

"Your Highness." She dipped her head. "Proconsul." And she too made a hasty exit.

"Mira —" Caina began.

"You will speak when spoken to, Proconsul," Mira informed her coldly, not looking at her but instead reaching for a muffin half and her teacup.

As her Proconsul fumed, Mira settled back in her chair, nibbling the muffin and sipping tea. Several moments went by as the Tarsheen enjoyed her breakfast. Finally, she washed down the last bite of muffin, replaced her cup in its saucer and wiped her hands and mouth on the thick, white damask napkin.

"For God's sake," Caina blurted out, "what were you doing! It's bad enough that you allow that animal free rein to roam through the house, but now you let him in here...your personal study. Alone. And he had his filthy hands on you."

"Robert helped me down the hall," she explained, "and was kind enough to get me a muffin and a cup of tea. When he learned of my sore feet, he offered to see if he could relieve some of my pain." She looked down at her feet and wiggled her toes. "He did an excellent job, too. I'm feeling much better."

"What do you suppose Jennifer Pontier thought when she saw that pig with his field ape paws on you?"

"As long as my signature is at the bottom of her paycheck, what Jennifer Pontier does or does not think, is of surpassing disinterest to me."

"And what about me, Mira? Do you care what I think?" A note of hurt appeared at the hard edge of her voice.

"Not when you allow your personal and may I add, irrational bias to cloud your otherwise impeccable judgment. As far as I've been able to tell, Robert's never said or done anything to warrant your intense dislike of him. You complain bitterly and relentlessly that he's trouble. But when I try to pin you down to specifics, even you have nothing to say against him. Jennifer says he keeps to himself and does as he's told. His work in the library has been exemplary." She wiggled her toes again and moved her feet in circles. "And he's worked absolute magic on my poor, abused feet. So unless you have something to add, you may consider this conversation and this whole matter, ended."

Caina stared down at Mira, clenching her fists in barely bottled rage. "As Your Highness directs," she answered simply.

"Good. Now, I have a great deal of work to do and I imagine you do also. You are excused, Proconsul."

"Your Grace."

The Proconsul's hand was shaking as she pulled the study door closed after her. A few quick, angry steps brought her to the library.

As she unlocked the door, she threw it open so hard it banged on the wall behind it. Surprised, Robert looked up from the computer. Seeing the anger in the old woman's face, he hurriedly scrambled to his feet.

"Madam Proconsul."

Reaching up, she slapped him across the face, wielding all her pent-up fury as she did so. "Whatever game it is you're playing, slave, stop it! Now!"

"I don't understand."

She struck him again, as hard as before. "Don't you dare open your filthy mouth to me. Perhaps you think you can get to Mira with your phony charm and sweet ways. Well, let me save you the trouble. To get to Mira, you have to come through me. And believe me, I'll dance on your grave before that happens."

“Please, I—”

“And if you ever put your hands on the Tarsheen again, for any reason, I’ll kill you myself.”

Eyes blazing, Caina turned on her heel and was out the door, the boom of the slam followed by the angry click of the lock.

Rubbing his face, Robert dropped back into his chair. He’d been foolish to offer his healing skills to the Tarsheen. Revealing even the tiniest thing about himself was dangerous—it always had been. In this place, surrounded by such evil, it could prove fatal. But for some reason even he didn’t understand, all his natural caution, learned mistrust, his very instinct for survival, seemed to melt away in the presence of this wondrous creature. Beyond that haughty, regal arrogance, something sweet, almost childlike seemed to reach out and find his most hidden, most vulnerable spot.

Seeing her limping, in pain, had clutched at him, made it his pain too. The feel of her body, leaning on him, her smooth pale skin under his hands. The look of peace, surrender in her eyes.

Even Caina’s rage couldn’t take those from him. Relishing the sensations for a moment longer, he finally put them in the treasure chest of his soul, to be taken out and savored in other, more personal moments.

With an internal sigh, Robert rubbed his crimson cheek once more and then returned to the comfort of his books.

## Chapter Eight

"Shhhh," she hissed loudly, holding her hand tightly over his mouth. "It's only me. Come to make good on my promise."

She was barely visible in the soft glow of the small electric lantern she held in her left hand. But he could see the coldness in her eyes and the cruel smile twisting her red lips. Involuntarily, he felt a shiver run through him. His surprise and dread seemed to please her.

"Now, I'm going to take my hand away and you're going to be very quiet, aren't you?"

Robert nodded once and Pontier moved her hand away. "Pull your blankets off," she ordered.

Doing as he was told, Robert flipped the bedclothes to the wall, exposing himself. Like a cat examining a particularly interesting mouse, she held the light up and leisurely surveyed every inch of him. There was nothing he could do but lie there and try not to let her know how horrible it was.

"Look at me," she told him, finally setting her lantern on the floor next to the bed. Reaching for the top button on her blouse, she began undressing. Taking her time, button by button, showing first her skin and then the tiny patches of black lace bra barely covering her nipples. Her blouse dropped to the floor behind her as she put her boot on the bed beside him. Unzipping it slowly, she removed it and threw it casually on the floor. Likewise, the other one.

"I like it when you watch me," she breathed, never taking her eyes off him as she undid her black bra and began unzipping her jeans. Pushing them down past her knees, he saw she was wearing only a thin black lace garter belt. Carefully, she stepped out of her jeans and put her foot on his chest, the feel of her black stocking surprisingly soft and silky. And he could see clearly, her pink, shaved pussy above him. In spite of himself, he felt a stirring.

"A shaved pussy's nice, don't you think?" she continued to purr as she unsnapped the garters and rolled the stocking down her leg and off onto the floor. "Makes me feel clean and smooth as a twelve-year-old again. Do you like it?"

He gulped and nodded.

When she was finished stripping, she stood back and let the light play over her naked body. Whatever else she was, he had to admit, grudgingly, that she was attractive.

"You see, slave, if you behave yourself, this may not be as disagreeable as you imagine." But the cruelty and meanness of her short laugh did little to quell his fear.

Slowly, she lifted herself onto him, her knees straddling his body, pinning him to the bed. Leaning down, she laid her breasts on his chest, her blood-red lips lightly brushing his.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked in a husky whisper.

*I think you're a vampire and a bitch,* he answered silently. A small nod was all he could manage.

"As pretty as the lady of the house?"

Angry words leapt to his throat, but he fought them back. He couldn't even nod. All he could do was stare at her, hoping she wouldn't feel his anger, fear and disgust.

"Put your hands up over your head," she ordered firmly, "one hand over the bar, one under."

An instant of flashback burst in his mind, scattering fear like shrapnel through his body and causing him to shudder. Pontier picked it up like a sensitive seismograph.

"Well, well," she smirked as she reached for something on the floor beside the lantern. "Was that a tremor of anticipation...or something else? Have you done this before, slave?"

He could feel her probing, searching his mind just as she'd done his body. A line of tiny sweat beads formed along his spine and his mouth was dry. Hang on, he told himself desperately, hang on. This is just another torture. Like so many before. You can get through this. You have to.

A small black bag appeared in her hand, soft-sided, and loose, rustling noises from inside. Placing it on his chest, she unzipped it and produced a pair of metal handcuffs. Slipping one loop over her finger, she dangled them in his face.

"You know what these are," she teased. "They're good for playing games. I like games." Reaching up, she snapped one cuff around the wrist he held under the single metal bar at the head of his bed. Giving the short chain a quick whirl around the bar, she cuffed his other wrist on top. "Do you and Her Highness play games?"

Robert wanted to spit in her face, but even that emotion was quickly swept away before the pictures now running like a jerky video in his brain and the terror they induced in him. Worse yet, he could feel that Pontier somehow sensed the mental torture and was only using the physical torture to dig deeper, find the stronghold in his mind and destroy both it and him.

Softly, delicately, she moved her fingertips down from his wrists, along both his arms and shoulders to his chest. Taking a nipple in each hand, she began twirling them between her thumb and index finger, smiling as they reacted.

"You're really quite attractive," she murmured. "Not like most of your stupid, brutish kind. There's more to you somehow. Makes the game more of a challenge."

Again, she dipped her hand into the bag, this time coming out with a small plain, silver tube, like the one his toothpaste came in. She readjusted herself so that she was balanced on the top of his thighs.

"I don't suppose you know what this is," she mocked. "I mean, never having been to the breeding shed. It's...how can I put it? A little something to help get the old engine going. Prime the pump as it were. I'm sure Her Highness is enough to get you revved up, but I think tonight you might need an extra little push."

Squeezing a large dollop of the clear gel-like substance into the palm of her right hand, she began stroking his erection, softly, gently, cupping her hand around his shaft and spreading the lotion liberally over his balls.

Almost immediately, he felt the rising heat and the increased blood flowing to his growing erection. He hated her, hated this, but she now seemed to have complete control over his body.

"I knew you'd like this," she gloated. "You're all the same. Let me see how big you really are." In a few moments, he was fully extended, hard and throbbing, the ache for release already almost unbearable.

Expertly, she eased herself down him, sighing deeply and closing her eyes at the pleasure of taking him up. Spreading herself across him again, she lazily moved up and down, feeling him inside, helpless and hot. The combination sent erotic waves washing over her. Not yet, she thought, not yet.

"Open your mouth," she told him. There was nothing for him but to obey. Instantly, he felt her tongue ranging over his mouth, exploring, delving as deeply as she could.

Shutting his eyes tightly, he tried to force himself away from her, regroup in his mind. He had to stop her from getting any closer. He had to get back some control of himself.

He felt her tongue retreat slowly, but before he could open his eyes again, he felt her fingers forcing themselves and something else into his mouth, making him gag. By the time he could see what was happening, her fingers were pulling back, his mouth filled with a soft, giving material, but too big to choke out.

"Don't worry, slave," she reassured him sarcastically, "it's just a little something to keep you quiet. You may not be able to control yourself in a little while and we don't want to be disturbed."

She stopped suddenly and watched him for a moment, her head cocked quizzically to one side, as if trying to figure something out.

Robert tried desperately to hide his mounting terror, but he was sure now that it must be radiating out from his eyes like lighthouse beacons into a stormy night. Pontier was so close now, anything, no matter how small and she might overrun his fortress, the haven of his mind, at any second.

But the moment passed and she began easing herself up and down on him again, little purrs of pleasure escaping her. Closing her eyes and laying herself out again, rubbing her hardened nipples on his naked skin.

He forced himself to lie perfectly still, to not give her even the slightest encouragement, add in even the smallest way to her pleasure. But the feel of her,

around him, on top of him, was excruciatingly sensual. It was only a matter of time now before she took even this last shred of his dignity.

Her mouth nuzzled his throat, moving to the side of his neck with small, wet, warm kisses. She seemed able to find his weakest, most vulnerable places. Breath sweet and hot, she mumbled incoherent obscenities. Dear God, he didn't want her, didn't want this, but it was like trying to tread water at the whirlpool's edge.

Suddenly, he felt her teeth in his neck, plunging down like a wild animal into the flesh just at his shoulder. Screams erupted but died behind the cloth in his mouth. And struggling only seemed to send her sharp teeth deeper, her body into faster, more frantic movements.

"Mmmm," she finally smiled, pulling back her head and letting him see the flecks of his blood on her lips. "You're very tasty. And when you thrash around like that, I can feel you all the way to my toes."

Nausea rolled over him and he wished more than anything he could just die.

"Tell me, slave," she breathed, her up and down movements over him greatly increased. "Does she like being on top as befits a Tarsheen or does she like for you to cover her and pound away with that nice fat dick of yours? Does she let you paw her naked body with those dirty, field hand paws of yours? Suck her tits and lick her pussy with that filthy mouth? Does she whisper sweet things to you...tell you how big you are and how you fill her like no other man? Tell me, slave. Tell me if I'm as good a fuck as the Tarsheen."

Even if he hadn't been gagged, he wouldn't, couldn't have told her anything. But they both knew that wasn't the point. The degradation, the humiliation was what she craved, heightened her enjoyment.

Forcing her hands under his ass, she pushed him against her as she rose and fell, harder and faster now. "Move, damn you, move that ass!" He felt her fingernails digging into his cheeks as he rubbed against her, his own need now almost as great as hers. Disgusted, revolted and yet unable to stop himself, he felt completely helpless, completely powerless.

He felt her shudder over him, her cries buried in his chest as she swept him over a cliff and into a soaring, multicolored shower of pleasure. Finally, her convulsions passed and she collapsed like an overtaxed muscle, panting like a dog, sweating from the exertion. Lying back in his pillow, he tried to catch his breath, made more difficult by the gag.

"No wonder the Tarsheen keeps you close. You can slip into her office, lay her out across that big desk of hers, pull down her panties and have a quickie. Or stretch out on that lovely linen sofa of hers and really fuck."

Sliding off, she moved his legs apart and curled up between them. Reaching for the bag which had slid off the bed, she took out one more item, a short, stubby looking thing, like a six-inch silver bullet. Holding it up for him to see, she searched his eyes intently. "I'm sure you know what this is?"

Robert thought he was going to pass out. She knew.

"Tell me, slave," she ordered, her voice suddenly cold and menacing.

He couldn't say anything but he knew from the way her face lit up and that cruel smile, that his face was betraying him.

"Of course you do. And you know what it's for."

The video returned to his brain in all its detailed horror. A muffled pleading sound escaped him even though he knew it was futile and what was coming.

"Well, since you asked so nicely," and he felt the metal crash its way inside him, dry and dragging painfully. Instead of the scream she'd been expecting, hoping for, there was only an agonized moan. At least she couldn't know the anguish in his head.

Pushing it up and twisting it slowly, she watched him writhe, listened to the stifled cries, the scrape of the handcuff chain on the metal rod.

"Is that the secret you've been keeping?" she pressed. "Is that the secret of your survival? That pretty pink ass of yours?"

Turning his head to the wall and shutting his eyes, he tried to escape, but the horror raging in his mind was worse even than what Pontier was doing. The refuge of his thoughts, the blankness, the nothingness was crumbling, leaving him absolutely at her mercy. He felt like he was tumbling down a black, airless hole that could only end in hell.

"Look at me, slave," Pontier growled, backhanding him across the mouth, a trickle of blood appearing at the corner. "I want you right here so we can both enjoy this."

Reluctantly, painfully, he brought his face back to her, his eyes open.

"That's right."

Pulling the bullet almost out, he thought for split second that she might be finishing. Instead, she forced it back up with renewed force.

"Does the Tarsheen know that she's fucking a common whore?" Pontier giggled. "We watch you, you know. From the observation windows in the shower. That's your favorite place to go. You all think you're so smart, sneaking out after bed check to have your little 'parties'. But we know everything that goes on. Sitting in the dark up there and watching you ass-fuck each other like animals. The dominant ones mounting the lesser ones. It's a very useful commodity. Say a slave tells us something, like an escape attempt or a troublemaker, we let them have a reward. An hour alone with their choice. Or to let you punish one of your own. Sometimes we just like to watch you rutting." She concentrated on the metal for several more moments, relishing every movement, every sound.

"Yes sir, I bet this little ass of yours has been very valuable to you over the years. I wonder how the boys around here would like having it to play with? I think I should tell you that some of your kind have very...exotic, and I'm afraid unhealthy tastes in games. Much worse than my little pastimes. They might find you very appetizing."



Reaching up, she suddenly pulled the gag from his mouth, smiling as he gulped for air, sweat running off his face.

"We're not going to have any trouble, are we? We understand each other. You'll go on fucking the Tarsheen and I'll go on fucking you. We'll play whatever games I like, whenever I like and you'll be a quiet, willing participant. And if you so much as burp without my written permission, I'll personally serve you up as the main dish at a shower party."

He wanted to kill her, take that creamy neck in his hands and squeeze until he broke it. Feel the life oozing out between his fingers, like water from a broken pipe. His hands clenched and unclenched, with the need to wipe that evil grin off her face. Whatever the consequences, the torture, the death. It would have been worth it to him at that moment. Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! The mantra burned through every cell in his body.

"Are you going to be a good boy?" she asked sweetly.

Obscenities raced through his brain and to his tongue. Only a survival instinct stronger than his hatred kept his teeth clenched tightly, swallowing the venom.

"Yes," he whispered.

Her hand came up and slapped him, hard, again. "You have a very short memory, slave. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am," he gasped.

"That's better." Slowly, she pulled the bullet out and dropped it into her bag. "Now that I know what you like," she said as she pulled herself up and stood on the floor, stretching, "I'll be sure to arrange some more games. I knew I liked your ass."

Quickly she gathered up her clothes and dressed. After putting everything back in her bag, she finally leaned over and unlocked the handcuffs.

"There you are. Good as new." As she dropped the handcuffs in the bag and zipped it up, Robert pulled the bedclothes back over him and rubbed his wrists. His ass felt like it had been torn open, but he gritted his teeth against the pain. Before he'd let her know how bad it was, he'd die.

When she'd picked up everything, she moved the lantern around to make sure that there was nothing else to show that she'd been there.

"Remember, slave. This is our little secret. If you know what's good for you, you'll keep quiet. Until next time."

It took a long time and a great deal of effort for him to finally bring his pain-racked body and terrified mind back under some semblance of his control. She'd discovered a flaw, a weakness and she'd exploited it. Now she had an advantage, control. He'd showed her fear and she'd turned it back on him.

Retreating back into his mind, to the welcome emptiness, he let go of himself and drifted free, waiting for the connection that he hoped would come before it was too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

Perhaps it was the name.

Leslie.

Maybe the ambiguous label had caused the confusion. After all, if she wasn't sure about the creature sitting on the other side of her desk, it was possible they weren't either.

"Turkey, ham, roast beef, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberries, whole and sauce, sage dressing, corn, green salad with three choices of dressing, an assortment of rolls and breads, and pumpkin, apple and mince pie for dessert."

Leslie parted thick red lips and showed a pair of buckteeth, perfectly at home in a long, horse face.

"If I may say, Your Grace's choice of the traditional Harvest feast is a welcome adherence to tradition." Rolling dark, slightly bulging eyes heavenward, Leslie flicked a big, pale hand on a limp wrist.

"Your Highness would not believe some of the drek I've been asked to cater." A shudder went through the large, bony body.

"I'm sure it must be very difficult," Mira sympathized automatically.

"Your Highness is such an intelligent, sophisticated, understanding woman," Leslie gushed. "If only all my clients were ladies of your caliber instead of tasteless old cows." Pursing those fleshy lips, Leslie indulged in a moment of self-pitying petulance.

"Well, where were we?" She stuck a large, slightly crooked nose in the black leather folio on her ample lap.

A man in drag, Mira pondered. It hardly seemed possible that God would have created such a big, homely, ungainly woman naturally. But then, it seemed equally ridiculous that a man would go to all the trouble of dressing up like a woman to achieve such a pitiful result.

"Decorations will be simple," Leslie was continuing. "Balloons, swags, a centerpiece for the buffet table. No use going to a lot of trouble for ignorant, mongrel slaves. Assorted sodas, coffee and liquor. Checking back to last year's party, I note that there are virtually the same number of slaves. I assume that the same number of beer kegs will be sufficient. Three glasses of beer per slave?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Your Highness is very wise to restrict the alcohol, both kind and amount." Leslie sniffed. "Hard stuff is, of course, out of the question, and I'm sure none of these animals would know a Chardonnay from a Pinot Noir. And I know from experience that three glasses of beer is more than enough. Now, as to the music. I've hired the same person as last year. She was, needless to say, pleased and honored that Your Highness has asked her to repeat. If Your Grace would like, I can provide you with a list of songs, however, I can say absolutely that there will be only the most conservative, tasteful selection for listening and dancing. Nothing to encourage...disruptive or...inappropriate behavior."

"That won't be necessary," Mira replied evenly. "I trust to your judgment in these matters."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Leslie fairly beamed. "I believe that the success of any affair is scrupulous attention to detail. Since this is Your Grace's Harvest Party, I will, of course, oversee everything myself."

*For what I'm paying you, she thought sarcastically, that's the least I should be able to expect.* Mira smiled and nodded slightly.

"Well, I guess that leaves only the entertainment. Because of Your Grace's large stable, I would suggest at least two dozen, as last year. And unless Your Highness has some preference, I would be happy to assemble a selection of colors, ages, builds and so forth."

"That will be fine, Leslie."

"If Your Highness would be interested," Leslie ventured cautiously, "I've acquired some really unusual talent. Exotic. Very skilled. One perfectly feline creature in particular. Perhaps as a 'special reward', or a contest prize. Of course, there would be a small extra charge for this degree of quality."

"That won't be necessary, Leslie. But thank you for your kind offer."

With a small sigh, Leslie made a notation in her book. "And, as always, the three privacy trailers will be parked behind the dormitory, out of sight and hearing of the main house."

"Your consideration and discretion are always appreciated."

"For Your Highness," Leslie cooed, "nothing but the best. And if I might add, what an honor it is for me to be selected to plan and cater Your Grace's Harvest Party. It's become so well known that the first question my other clients ask is, 'when is the Tarsheen's party? I want mine beforehand so it won't suffer too much by comparison'." A surprisingly girlish laugh erupted from deep in the big body.

"Well," Mira concluded graciously, "I think that covers just about everything. Having implicit faith, I leave the whole matter in your professional, capable hands."

Glowing like a hundred-watt lightbulb, Leslie snapped her folio shut and reached for the attaché at her feet.

"I hope Your Grace will be satisfied with the arrangements. And if there's any question, any detail, no matter how minute, please don't hesitate to call, day or night. I'm completely at Your Grace's command." Leslie stood up, tugging demurely at the hem of her entirely too short, black suit skirt.

"I'm sure everything will be to your usual excellent standards."

A shiver of delight rippled through the cow body. "I shall do my best, Your Highness. And again, thank you for the honor and privilege to serve you."

The body folded in half and finally made its way out the door. Almost immediately, Caina appeared.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked dryly.

"Yes, thankfully. I was afraid if that...that person had drooled any more sweetness and light on me, I'd have had to call for the insulin."

"Personally, I don't understand why you spend either your time or your money on this stupid party. Animals don't appreciate it."

"Even an animal performs better for the occasional treat than continual abuse."

Caina snorted derisively. "The only treat involved here is the ridiculous fee you pay Leslie for organizing this waste."

Mira cocked her head at the other woman. "What do you think, Caina, honestly? He, she or undecided?"

"He," she replied simply.

"Really? How can you be so sure?"

"The ass. It's always a dead giveaway. Woman have narrow waists and big, round asses. Men are built just the reverse."

"I don't know," Mira continued thoughtfully. "I mean, granted, she's not what you'd call graceful or attractive, but then, not every woman is. And the feminine side does seem to be dominant. I mean, you wouldn't believe the horrible things I've heard her say about men in general and slaves in particular."

"More proof he's a man. When they're passing, they always seem to be more biased against their own kind. I don't know if they feel they have to prove they're more feminine than the rest of us or whether they really do hate their own maleness and hence every other male as well."

"That's very profound of you, Caina," Mira told her, slightly surprised at her Proconsul's observation.

"Nonsense," Caina replied sharply. "It's the simple truth. Even a ridiculous creature like Leslie understands that life is greatly simplified as a woman so they indulge the fantasy. But scrape off the ghastly makeup, atrocious clothes and no doubt totally unsuitable undergarments and you'll find the ugly reality."

"Even if Leslie is a man," Mira persisted, "it shouldn't make any difference. He/she is very good at what he/she does."

"Perhaps it shouldn't make any difference," Caina agreed wearily. "And perhaps in a perfect world it wouldn't. But in this imperfect world, it matters a great deal and he knows it. If Leslie turned up on the doorstep of any of his clients as a man, they wouldn't open the door, much less let him cater a party for them. And you can bet that even if they did, no one would come. The social stigma would be insurmountable. But as you say, he's good at what he does so it's to everyone's benefit to go along with the charade."

"Well, I wouldn't turn him away," Mira announced, a trace of defiance in her voice.

"Of course you would," Caina corrected distractedly, obviously growing tired of the whole subject. "Especially after the negative responses started coming in from your coalition members. Trust me, Mira, no one wants to know that not only is the Emperor

naked, but that he's butt-ugly in the bargain. The lie is much easier to live with for all concerned. And now, if you've quite finished with this Harvest party nonsense, could we please get on with the mundane business of running the government?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, well," Jennifer Pontier sneered as she surveyed the rows of slaves before her, "aren't we a pretty little group? All cleaned and polished and sporting our party finery. My, but you look almost human." She ran a jaundiced eye down the rows, pelting them with her disdain like rocks. Robert could feel the sharp edge of it even from his place in the back row.

"So," she continued in that acid, mocking sweetness, "I suppose you're all looking forward to the Harvest Party. The food. The beer. The whores. Especially the whores. For myself, I've never understood Her Grace's generosity toward you animals. She might just as well feed caviar to pigs. But she does provide this generosity and I intend to see that nothing happens to spoil it for her. So, we're going to go over the rules. And if you know what's good for you, you'll pay close and careful attention." Those cold eyes flickered over them again.

"You will each be issued three tokens, each token good for one glass of beer. To redeem your tokens, you will go to the beer booth, give your name, registration number and your numbered token to the attendant. If everything is in order, you'll be given a glass of beer, which you will take to the designated area to drink. Whores are not allowed in that area under any circumstances. Soda and coffee will be allowed elsewhere in the Day Room. Beer and tokens will be strictly monitored. Anyone trying to dispose of his tokens or use someone else's, will find his party ended abruptly."

Moving up and down the front row, she kept her eyes on each of them, like a cat waiting for a trapped mouse to try and escape.

"Food will be served buffet-style. You will form a single, orderly line. There will be no talking in line. You may have as much as you want of whatever you want. You may even go back during the evening. There will also be snacks such as chips and dip around the Day Room. Soda and coffee will be available all night. However, everything that you take, you will eat. There will be no waste of the Tarsheen's bounty."

"Now as to the whores," she smiled evilly. "They will be available in the Day Room for dancing and selection. The Tarsheen has graciously provided about two-dozen of them. That means there will be approximately one woman for every two of you. If you wish the services of a particular woman, you'll line up and wait your turn. Should one of the whores decline your interest, you will not make any trouble. You will simply make another, more compatible choice. Once you've satisfied yourself, you may have another whore, but only after your 'friends' have had their opportunity. You'll be given a condom in the privacy trailer. Use it. The whores are under strict instructions to refuse service to any one of you who doesn't. And it's a very long time between Harvest parties." A sharp, mean laugh rocked her.

"Since the Day Room will be open, you will be allowed to come and go more freely than usual. But the guards will be patrolling so I suggest you stick close to the pens. Lastly, because of the party, the curfew will be extended to two a.m. Mind the clock. A breach of curfew, no matter what the hour, is still a serious offense and will be treated as such."

Taking a deep breath, she paused and made a last sweep of the assembled men. The ever-present club dangling from her wrist made those ominous circles.

"Remember this, animals. You will be under constant watch. This party is very important to Her Highness and hence, is very important to me. Anything, no matter how small, that wrinkles that perfection, will upset Her Grace and, as a consequence, me. And you may rest assured that I will deal with any troublemaker personally."

With a nod to her right, another guard opened the door and motioned for the first row of slaves to leave. Silently, they filed out of the assembly room, through the front door and over to the Day Room.

Inside, the big room had been transformed into a barn, hay bales strewn around, swags of gold and yellow and brown crepe paper, twisted and suspended from the high ceiling, all meeting in a huge gathering of orange and silver balloons. Mouth watering smells greeted them, wafting across the hall from a long table, covered with a white tablecloth and groaning under the weight of more food than Robert could ever remember seeing. At one end of the room, a woman was setting up some sound equipment and another corner had been set off with pumpkins and colored cornstalks encircling several tables. Next to it, a booth where the beer kegs were being set up.

Robert took his place in line, edging slowly toward the food as the first slaves dawdled over their selections. So much food, so little tray. At last he reached it, gripping his tray with both hands, his stomach twisting with the anticipation.

Green salad, with real tomato and cucumber, covered with a ladle full of white, creamy dressing, chunks of blue cheese visible. A woman in a white jacket and hat sliced off a thick slab of roasted turkey, the juice running down as she placed it on Robert's tray. And a slice of ham, coated with a crisp glaze and a piece of pineapple ring. Mashed potatoes, turkey gravy, a big spoonful of whole cranberries, a heaped scoop of dressing, corn, like sunshine piled on the tray, curls of steam rising. A soft, fat dinner roll, a yellow pat of butter and a single serving of grape jelly. From the dessert table, he selected a piece of apple pie and coffee.

Settling into a small table off by itself, he noticed that several men had already lined up for the beer tokens. Mostly though, the men had found tables and were digging into the food, the room almost silent except for the sounds of scraping and chewing. Quickly, Robert stabbed his fork into the firm, white turkey meat and ran his knife back and forth twice as the meat separated into a healthy mouthful.

Oh God, he thought, it was wonderful! Not at all like the turkey loaf they served in the dining room. And the cranberries! Sweet with that tangy, sharp aftertaste. The lettuce crunched between his teeth, the tomato slices squirting juice as he chewed, the

creamy texture of the dressing contrasting with the crumbly tartness of the blue cheese. Closing his eyes, he savored the food with all his senses.

But a thin thread of irony entwined with the enjoyment. No doubt, he mused, Mira naïvely believed that she was giving them a gift, a diversion from the mind-numbing dullness of their ordinary lives. It was done without malice, rancor or even thought. How could she know that even this “gift” came not wrapped with a red ribbon, but in chains? The list of restrictions was almost as long as the list of “privileges”. And the quality of the food, the beer, even the whores, simply served to underscore the grayness of their existence. It was like giving a man dying of thirst a sip of cold, pure water and a glimpse of the oasis...then slamming the cell door shut again.

Through the years, there had been parties of one sort or another for varying reasons, but this was the best one he could ever remember. It made Pontier’s words—“it’s a very long time between Harvest parties”—just that much meaner and more painful. Still, as long as it lasted, he intended to enjoy it, record every sight, sound, sensation and then relive them in the long nights until the next one.

When he’d scraped the last crumbs of pie into his mouth and the last drop of coffee was gone, he got up, placed his tray and cup in the dirty stack, threw away his napkin and plastic utensils and looked around the room. Tokens were being issued at one table and beer dispensed from the booth. Several of the tables in the designated beer area were already filled with slaves enjoying the alcohol.

The woman DJ had started playing music, a soft instrumental that floated above the muted conversation. And the women had begun filtering in from a door in the back of the room. Tall, short, black, white, blonde, brunette, redhead. They were all dressed in simple black sheaths—no doubt for ease of removal—and even from a distance, it was obvious that they hadn’t bothered with underwear.

As he looked at them, a tall, thin redhead, middle thirties perhaps, turned her head and their eyes met. There was a weariness, a “used up” quality to her. Robert felt her despair, her hopelessness, like a sharp stab under his ribs. They were joined, he realized, by their common bondage. Sex, power and economic circumstances bound them together as certainly as chains to a post. Their bodies were bought and sold at the whim of others...those “in charge”. He an animal, she a machine. The only real difference between them was that one day she would be worn out, too old to earn her living as a whore and would be turned out. For him, release would come only with death.

“Checking out the merchandise?”

Jennifer Pontier’s voice was like a needle in his back.

“No, ma’am,” he replied evenly, turning to look at the Overseer, not because he wanted to, but because not to would have brought a quick, painful response from the club swinging carelessly from her wrist.

“Nonsense,” she teased cruelly. “I mean, I’m sure even Her Highness would understand you looking. As long as you don’t touch.” She leaned over and lowered her

voice. "I noticed that tall redhead glancing in your direction. Even as satisfying as I'm sure the Tarsheen is, a little variety is always welcome. I'd be glad to give you a good reference and you can depend on my lips being sealed to Her Highness." Pontier dissolved into laughter.

Robert felt a surge of anger and fear and hatred rush over him. She knew how to torture him mentally as painfully as she did physically. No matter how hard he tried, this bitch seemed to be able to breeze into his mind, his soul, at will, cut into him with her tongue as sharply as a whip and leave him cringing and bleeding. And he felt helpless against her. The only weapon he had to fight her was his ability to hide, at least partly, how much damage she was actually doing. How scared he really was of her.

"I think that tall, skinny one with the orange hair is interested in you," she mocked. "Oops, too late."

He turned his head just in time to see one of the other men grasp her by the wrist and lead her out the door toward the trailers.

"You should have moved more quickly. Wait too long and all the good stuff'll be gone."

"Actually," he told her with more calm than he felt, "I was thinking about going outside and getting a breath of fresh air."

"Do whatever you like," she smiled but her eyes were cold, "after all, this party is for you animals to howl. In fact, except for one or two guards to keep order, you'll be pretty much on your own. I've got better things to do than watch you swine wallow in the mud. So enjoy yourself. Tomorrow will come soon enough. Good night, slave."

"Good night, ma'am."

He watched her stride down the middle of the room toward an open door. Stopping for a moment, she said something to the guard and then went out.

"Do whatever you like," she'd said. "You'll be pretty much on your own." Except, of course, for the video cameras, which watched every inch of the Day Room, and the guards who stood behind the large mirror that took up almost one end of the room. Pontier expected, hoped, that the absence of the guards would provoke "breaches" of the rules, breaches she would take great pleasure in dealing with tomorrow.

Slowly he made his way to one of the open doors at the side of the building. Glancing around to make sure there were no guards, he stepped out into the warm night.

It had been rising in him for several days, since at least the new moon. Not physical exactly, although his skin seemed to buzz with its own electricity, especially late at night when a stray sliver of moonlight would creep feebly into his room. No, it was a restlessness of his spirit, a vague suspense, anticipation almost, gnawing at his gut. Several times he'd tried to connect with it, find out exactly what it was. But each time, it had dissipated like fog, only to return again.

A huge, full yellow moon was teetering uncertainly on the scalloped edge of the faraway hills, waiting to launch itself into the night sky. Its light seemed to tug on the



saltwater in his veins like the tides, bringing the restlessness to a full crested need. His whole body tingled, trembling with something primal, foreign yet familiar. A need that seemed to increase with every beat of his heart, every rise and fall of his chest.

The moon shone down into his questioning, upturned face, as he waited for the answer, the truth that would tell him what he needed to know.

## Chapter Nine

Mira wasn't sure how long she'd been working when she became aware of the other presence. No sound, no movement. Just that inexplicable "knowing" feeling when you feel those watchful eyes on you. Instantly, her head jerked up like a puppet on a string.

He was standing in the doorway, the French doors open to the patio and the autumn night, slouched comfortably against the jamb, his arms folded casually across his chest, his dark eyes fixed on her, the merest hint of a smile at the edges of his mouth.

"Oh," she yelped, dropping her pen on the desk and jumping a little in her chair.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, making a deep, slow bow. "I didn't mean to startle Your Grace."

"That's all right, Robert," she assured him, trying to recover. "But I really wish you wouldn't move so quietly. Caina says if you keep up your stealthy ways around the house, we'll have to put a bell on you."

He grinned. A funny, lopsided, almost boyish smile that seemed to light up his whole face, make those remarkable eyes fairly sparkle. Mira realized it was the first time since she'd known him that he'd actually smiled with anything but faint sarcasm. And she realized also, that it was a very charming, very attractive smile.

"I'll try to remember," he told her.

"Why aren't you at the party?" she asked, settling back in her chair as she struggled to retrieve her composure. "Or don't you find my hospitality to your liking?"

"It's very nice," he answered, turning his head and glancing in the direction of the pens. "Dinner was delicious, the decorations in the Day Room are pretty, the snacks and beer, the band." He turned back and the smile took on a trace of mischief. "Even the...entertainment is first-rate."

"But...?"

Robert shrugged. "I guess I'm not much of a party person."

"How did you get over here?" she asked uncertainly. "I should think my guards would have insisted you stay closer to the party."

Those eyes watched her for a few seconds, the look so intense, Mira could feel a blush rising. Not that there was anything threatening or intimidating in his stare or anything else about him. On the contrary, he seemed to be perfectly at ease, alone with her here in her own study. But his comfort seemed to be what made Mira the most uneasy, although she couldn't say exactly why.

"I stepped out of the Day Room to get a breath of fresh air," he explained casually, "and I saw your light was still on and the doors were open. It's very late for you to still

be working so I thought I'd come over and see if you were all right." He smiled again. "I guess the guards were otherwise occupied."

"Well, unfortunately," Mira sighed and pointed to the top of her desk, "there never seem to be enough hours in the day."

Saying nothing, he continued to watch her, Mira's feeling of discomfort growing by the second. She should simply dismiss him with a firm but polite, "good night, Robert", but for some unknown reason she didn't seem able to.

"You should really take a moment and come and see this moon," he remarked, looking skyward. "It's beautiful."

"I've seen the moon, thank you," she joked nervously.

"Not this one," he answered quietly.

Again, Mira wanted to simply send him away and return to the mountains of paper on her desk still to be scaled before bed. But there was something...

Almost in spite of herself, Mira rose slowly and came to the open doors, drawn, it seemed, by his eyes shining down at her. Stopping just inside the door and just out of his reach, she craned her neck to follow his gaze upward.

Above them, a huge, fat yellow-gold moon hung suspended in the warm, black-velvet night, littered carelessly with a million glittering diamonds. All around was the scent of autumn flowers as the sound of music and laughter floated across the open space from the party in the Day Room.

"You're right," she murmured, feeling mesmerized, "it is beautiful. I don't think I can ever remember seeing the moon look quite like this before. It looks so big and close, I feel...I feel like I could reach out and touch it."

They stood watching the sky for several moments, locked in a peaceful silence of their own. Like water seeping slowly into a sponge, Mira became aware that Robert was watching her again.

Tearing herself away from the moon, she looked at him. Robert was staring down at her, those eyes filled with fire and something she couldn't name. Even slouching against the doorjamb, well out of arm's reach, he seemed to tower over her, not just height but the sheer size of him. Chagrined, but not frightened, Mira remembered that she was wearing only her slippers and that her three-inch advantage was gone. And she had the fleeting thought that her hair was pulled back in a casual ponytail and that she wasn't even wearing any makeup.

"You're very beautiful in the moonlight," he whispered. "You don't need lipstick but you should let your hair hang loose around your face."

Momentarily stunned, she stared at him, mouth open.

The sight seemed to amuse him, causing the grin to get bigger and his dark eyes to crinkle up at the corners. For an instant, she was sure he was going to laugh out loud.

He was being outrageously impudent, she knew. Speaking to her without being spoken to was a gross breach of etiquette. That he would say she was beautiful, speak as if he'd read her mind, was unthinkable. And part of her was certainly offended.

But there was something else, something that both excited and calmed her, made her feel tingly with anticipation and anxiety. She looked up at the moon again, as much to avoid his gaze as a desire to see that heavenly object again.

She had work to do and he really shouldn't be here. Even with the laxity of the Harvest Party, his mere presence was a violation, not just of decorum, but rules and regulations as well. That something tugged at her again...that push to make him leave and the unexplainable pull to make him stay.

At last, Mira seemed to rouse herself from whatever had possessed her. "Well," she sighed heavily, "I have work I have to finish and you should be getting back to the party. Even on a special night like this, I wouldn't want you to get into trouble with Ms. Pontier for wandering away." She took a small step back into her study. "Good night, Robert."

"Don't go," he told her quietly.

"What?" Mira couldn't believe her ears.

"Don't go. Please." He stood up then, making her feel suddenly small and helpless, yet still not afraid. "It's time."

"Time? Time for what? I don't understand, Robert."

"Now. You and I have been waiting our whole lives for this night. This moon. This moment." He put out his hand to her. "Come to me, Mira," he breathed softly, "come to me."

And in that perfect, crystal moment, the world as she'd known it, ceased. Hesitantly, barely breathing, Mira stretched out her hand to meet his.

Their eyes on each other, gently, he took her hand, moving her fingertips to his face. Lightly, he brushed his lips over them, feeling the shudder of electricity race from her body to his own.

Like magnets drawn together by a force of nature greater than themselves, Robert and Mira embraced, closing their eyes, their lips finding each other. Gently, tentatively, they kissed, Robert marveling at the soft give of her lips, Mira amazed by the tenderness of his. As they found each other, the kisses extended, passionately, urgently, deeply.

When they parted finally, it was only far enough apart to give them room to breathe. There were no words...just that wonderful, fizzing astonishment at the pure joy with which another person can suddenly ignite your otherwise ordinary life.

Mira raised her hands and cupped Robert's face as he moved his head to feel her touch and kiss her palms. He moved his hands from her neck up to the clip holding her hair, fumbling with it until it released. Mira shook her head slightly, her hair falling loose as he plowed his fingers into it, feeling like strands of thick black silk.

Overwhelmed by his own senses, he touched her and kissed her and breathed in the scent of her, afraid that he was simply having another of his dreams and that any moment the alarm bell would sound and wrench him back to reality. And Mira watched his face, unable to believe that she could evoke such wonder, such awe, such love in someone else.

Without speaking, she took his hand and pulled him gently into her study, away from the open window and possible prying eyes, but not out of the glow of the moon. Stopping, they shared another kiss, romantic but eager, tender but hungry. And then a few more steps toward the closed door that lead to the hall. Again, shared kisses as Mira found the doorknob behind her and managed to open it without leaving Robert's arms.

Throwing a furtive glance to make sure the hall was dark and quiet, they scampered toward the grand staircase leading upstairs.

"What about Caina?" he whispered anxiously. "The rest of the house?"

"Everyone's at the party," Mira practically bubbled. "And Caina hates the Harvest Party. She's gone to spend the weekend in the City. We have the house entirely to ourselves." Kissing him, she started up, taking the steps two at a time, Robert running behind her.

At the top, Mira turned to the right and they hurried down a long hallway to a set of double doors at the very end. Grandly, Mira threw them open and stood aside for him to come in. Robert took a step, his head swiveling in all directions at the large, elegantly appointed room. Lit only by a small table lamp, he could see that the ceilings were high, the walls a sort of creamy peach with white accents, the floor covered in a thick, soundless, peach carpet. The lamp, covered with small purple flowers, sat on a rich, dark wood, carved table. There was a small sofa in front of a lovely marble fireplace with a large gilt mirror over the mantle.

"This is my private sitting room," she announced as she crossed the room and opened another set of double doors. "For when I want to be alone. And this," she waved her hand into the other room, "is my bedroom."

Stepping into the room, she went to her nightstand and reached for one of the lamps.

"No," he said, coming and standing beside her. "No light. Not when we have the moon."

Understanding, they went to the open French doors that lead to the terrace. Standing by the railing, everything was quiet and bathed in a warm luminance even though the moon itself was still on the other side of the house. Noise from the party was muted to the point where it had all but disappeared. Beyond them, a broad expanse of ghostly gray lawn stretched to a grove of old, thick elms, nothing more than ragged blotches against the jeweled sky. Further away, empty fields rolled to the camel hump hills on the horizon.

Entwined in each other's arms, they drank in the view in silence, the heady intoxication of lust and romance like wine for them. In the heat of their embrace, she'd felt his arousal and it had added to her own. Nestled in the crook of his arm, she felt safe and wanted.

Finally, Mira took his hand and they went back into her bedroom, settling on the edge of her enormous bed. Sharing a passionate kiss, Robert gently eased her onto the bed, laying her on her back, her dark hair spilling out from her face over the whiteness of her plump pillow. Carefully, with almost unbearable slowness, he began undoing the buttons on her silk blouse, his long, thick fingers fumbling with the delicate fasteners as he tugged the soft fabric from the top of her slacks.

"Oh God," he breathed as he revealed her plain white lace bra and the soft pale flesh of her stomach. Mira smiled as his eyes widened and he scanned her body appreciatively.

Turning her back to him to expose the clasp on her bra, Robert quickly undid it and peeled it off her as she rolled back to face him.

"I hope you're not disappointed," she murmured. "There's not much to them."

Hesitantly, Robert cupped her breast in his hand, feeling her tremble slightly and reminding him of a white dove. He marveled at the softness of her skin and felt suddenly ashamed of his hard, callused hands.

"They're perfect," he replied, thoroughly enchanted by the sight and running his fingers lightly across her brown nipple, feeling it harden as he played with it.

Mira moaned softly and closed her eyes. Encouraged, Robert moved to the other breast, amazed at the effect his touch was having on her. And on the increasing bulge in his own jeans.

Without moving or opening her eyes, Mira found his buttons and faster than Robert would have believed, she had his shirt open and free of his jeans as well. Pulling him closer, she ran her hands the length and width of his chest and abdomen. As her fingers twisted and rubbed his nipples, he felt himself being overwhelmed by the enormity of the unfamiliar pleasure and desire she stirred in him.

Raising her hands to Robert's shoulders, Mira slid his shirt off. Next, she reached for his belt buckle. Lowering his zipper, she immediately felt the size and heat of him through his white cotton boxers. Taking his cue from her, Robert had already slipped his hands inside the elastic waistband of her slacks and panties and pulled them down, being sure to remove her slippers and toss them on the floor with the rest of their clothes.

When they were both naked, Mira and Robert embraced again, their kisses hot and hungry. Caught up in her passion, Mira moved Robert to his back, never taking her lips from his. Trailing kisses down his throat and chest, she stopped at his nipples, playing her tongue expertly across them, feeling him tighten beneath her, small whimpers of pleasure escaping him. Pausing only a moment, she continued down his abdomen,

darting her tongue playfully in and out of his belly button, the rumble of his laugh like music to her.

Reaching his shaft, she took the top of it in her mouth, sucking gently and moving her tongue in slow circles around the swollen, sensitive head.

"God!" Robert cried, grabbing a handful of sheet, his back arching. "Oh dear God! That feels so..." His words were lost in a long drawn out moan.

Knowing that he couldn't stand much more, she released him, retracing her path back to his mouth. Lying back down as closely as possible, Mira put her hands on his face and drew him down to her.

His mouth on her breast, his tongue scrambling over her nipple, was like pouring gasoline on an open flame. She felt herself engulfed in another wave of heated passion. As his tongue worked on her breast, she gently took his hand from her other breast and lead him down the curve of her stomach, through her dark curly hair and into the wet warmth between her legs.

There was a moment when everything stopped. Mira could feel his surprise, uncertainty and delight at the new sensation. Slowly, she moved his fingers over her clitoris. The solid, hard feel of his callused flesh over her full, hot, tender pouch nearly drove her out of what little self-control she still had. It would, she knew, have taken scant effort to bring her to climax and she wasn't ready yet.

Grabbing his shoulders, she guided him over the top of her, sliding him inside with cries of mutual pleasure. It took no instruction for Robert to begin taking long, slow strokes, hardly able to believe the waves of pleasure charging and swirling through him. Through half-open eyes, he saw Mira, her eyes closed, a dreamy smile on her lips, her body virtually glowing with their shared ecstasy. The thought that he was giving her this gift, as a man, filled him to overflowing with an emotion so powerful yet so foreign, he was at once elated and humbled.

Mira pressed him to her, an odd, fleeting sensation of rippled corduroy as her fingers gripped his back, their bodies moving together, in an escalating rhythm of desire.

Now moans became cries as their bodies, minds and souls merged in a white-hot fusion and for one perfect, fragile moment, they were one.

Afterward, they lay together, still wrapped tightly in each other's arms, kissing softly once or twice, floating slowly down from the raging volcano of their passion to the quiet lagoon of satisfied sleep.

Just before she stepped off into the welcome void of sleep, snuggled securely in Robert's arms, Mira heard the wind calling her name. Hushed, seeming to come from inside her head and yet all around her as well, it began forming words.

"At last, Mira," it whispered. "At last."

## Chapter Ten

Slamming the door behind her, Mira hurried across her office, tossing her bag on the desk and reaching for the phone in one fluid motion. As she punched up the number, she impatiently consulted her watch. Even though it took only a few seconds to connect, the impatience showed in her voice.

"Dormitory," came a hollow voice at the other end.

"Yes," Mira snapped, "this is the Tarsheen. Have the slave Robert sent to my office at once."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Not even trying to conceal her edginess and frustration, she replaced the receiver and sat down. She'd never been a terribly religious person, even as a child. Disillusionment, not just with her mother's church but with organized religion in general, had begun in her teens. Had it not been for her position, Mira knew that she would have abandoned it long ago. Getting up on Sunday mornings, dressing in suit and hat and spending two hours in that huge, impersonal building, had always been difficult. This morning, it had been intolerable.

She glanced at her watch again, checking it against the large clock on the wall across from her desk. Without thinking, she pulled the pin out of her small black hat and threw it next to her bag. Hats! What a ridiculous concept in this day and age. Certainly, if one needed to block the sun or the rain, but simply to cover one's head in a drafty hall? It was stupid.

Where was he? It was Sunday. With the party the previous evening, the schedule would have been set back a little, but surely breakfast would be over. And she couldn't imagine Robert attending the nondenominational service for slaves, even out of boredom. That would mean he must be either in the Day Room or his own room. How long could it take to find him, relay her message and walk over?

A light tap on the door startled her.

"Come in," she called, perhaps a tad more nervously than she'd intended.

The door opened and Robert stepped in, closing the door quietly behind him. Striding to the desk, he bowed his head. "Your Highness sent for me?" he asked formally.

Mira jumped up, ran around the desk and almost knocked him over rushing into his arms. "Oh God," she cried, clutching him as tightly as she could, "where were you this morning! When I woke up and you were gone, I was frantic!"

Robert smiled as he gazed down into her upturned face. Gently, he ran the ball of his thumb down her cheek. "I couldn't stay," he replied, speaking as if he were



explaining something to a small child. "Even with the extended party curfew, I still had to run all the way back and I was practically the last one in. If I'd have missed curfew or bed check, Ms. Pontier would have been very upset."

"But..."

"You're beautiful when you sleep," he told her, the memory softening his entire body. "I wondered why such a little thing as yourself would have such a big bed." A chuckle escaped him. "You wander all over the bed when you're asleep. I'm surprised you ever get any rest, you're moving so much. I lay beside you just watching you. You know, you don't make any noise when you sleep."

Moving his hand, he slipped it under her breast. "I put my fingers over your heart so I could feel it beating because I couldn't hear it."

"Robert..."

He moved her hand to his face, softly kissing her palm. "You have such tiny little wrists," he said with a note of quiet awe in his voice. "And such beautiful, long, white hands. I couldn't imagine how such tiny, delicate little wrists could support such strong, lovely hands. Hands that hold such power."

"Then I had to get up and dress and I sat on the edge of the bed and watched you because I knew I should leave and I couldn't. You were lying on your stomach and the moon was shining almost directly into your bedroom."

She felt his hand on her back, moving gently under her suit jacket, over her thin, slick yellow shirt.

"Your shoulders and the line of your back." His fingers traced her spine downward. "And you have the cutest little dimples on each side of your spine, just at your waist where the small of your back curves into your ass. God, what a beautiful ass you have." His hands moved down and began kneading her, pressing her against him. "It's almost like a young boy's, it's so flat and yet it has the most wonderful, soft feel to it."

"Finally, I had to leave. I stood in the doorway and your arm was up on your pillow, by your face and I could see your breast, pale and round as some luscious, tantalizing fruit. You looked like one of those perfect marble statutes except that I knew you were warm and alive and I thought having to close that door and go back to the pens would kill me."

"I didn't close my eyes the whole rest of the night. I was afraid that if I did, I might wake up and that it would have all been a dream."

Tears welled up in her eyes, touched not just by his words but by the look of wonder and awe in his eyes, the warm electricity of his body against hers, the tender caring in his voice. The depth of their shared feelings came to her, making her quiver with the excitement and the enormity of it. And yet, there was a calm, a safety here in his arms that seemed perfectly normal, perfectly right.

"Last night was so beautiful," she told him in a low, halting voice, "that when I woke up this morning and I was alone, I had this horrible moment when I was afraid

I'd dreamed it. Dreamed you and our glorious joining. I don't ever want to wake up again without you."

Robert's smile shriveled to a shadow of itself and she saw his eyes cloud over. "That isn't possible and you know it, Mira."

"Nonsense," she replied firmly. "There are no curfews in the house of the Tarsheen."

Puzzlement appeared on her face and he could see that she truly didn't understand. He pondered how best to explain the impossible to a little girl unaccustomed to the concept.

"Perhaps not," he agreed solemnly, brushing her cheek again, "but there are in the pens. And the gulf that divides the two is unimaginably wide. Too wide even for a momentarily shared dream."

"You're being ridiculous," she insisted. "I shall simply call over to the dormitory and have your things moved here." She grinned and hugged him closer. "I have lots of rooms upstairs. You may have your choice. As long as it's the one next to my bedroom."

Shaking his head slightly, he chuckled. "In the first place, Mira, with the exception of a toothbrush and a clean change of clothes, my 'things' are what you see before you. And in the second place, how would you explain me in your house? In your bed? To your subjects. To Ms. Pontier. To Caina."

It was her turn to chuckle. "If my subjects or Jennifer or even Caina can't figure out why I would want you in my bed, that's their loss. Besides, I am the Tarsheen. I don't explain myself to anyone."

He chuckled again. "You're a child, Mira. You know that, don't you? I remember the first time I ever saw you, sitting behind this big desk, trying to look, to sound so imperious, so grown up. Even then, I thought you were beautiful. I wanted you so much, if I'd been physically able, I think I would have taken you right here on this thick, plush rug." Bending down, he met her waiting lips, as hungry and eager for her as she was for him.

"Caina won't be back for hours yet," she panted between kisses. "Take me now."

Part of Robert knew that this was not only impossible but dangerous as well. That torture, even death were very real consequences of this foolishness. If Pontier didn't make good on her threats to kill him, Caina certainly could. But a lifetime of caution and self-preservation seemed futile against the need, the want he had for this child-woman. And as he felt himself being drawn to the floor, he knew also that the only thing that mattered to him now, regardless of what might happen later, was Mira.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Really fine specimen, Renee. First-rate." Dr. Flora Lewis scanned the chart again as they walked down the corridor. "From the physical I gave him and the test results, he should stand at stud for years."

"For what he cost me," she grumbled, "he should. Where is he?"

"Cubicle four. But he's not quite finished being prepped. Should be a couple more minutes."

As they walked along the wide, gleaming white hall, they passed several rooms on either side. Some of the rooms were brightly lit, people moving around inside, but most of them were dark.

Near the end of the hall, they stopped in front of a large observation window facing into one of the rooms. It looked like a doctor's examination room, spare but for a narrow, metal table about six feet long, covered with a thin paper sheet, a small metal tray on a stand, covered with a white cloth, a sink and a small cabinet.

"Since you insist on being a spectator," the doctor commented wryly, "you should really get rid of these antiquated two-way mirrors. Get video cameras. Then you could watch all the action and take a load off."

"Nothing beats being here," Renee shot back tartly.

Sensing the other woman's mood, Dr. Lewis wisely lapsed into silence, turning away and pretending to study the chart again. Having been the Senator's Chief of Breeding Program for almost ten years, she knew this was different.

Many times, her boss would simply appear in the breeding shed, enjoying whatever stud was being handled. And she was always on hand for the initial session of one of her "special" young men. Light banter and easy laughter were the hallmarks of such occasions. Today, she seemed edgy, almost angry.

A door opened in the back wall of the room and a naked Timothy, looking apprehensive and confused entered, followed by a frumpy-looking, middle-aged woman in a white lab coat.

The woman said something and nodded toward the table. Hesitantly, he moved to it and lay down on the paper. With quick efficiency, the woman pulled padded cuffs over his wrists and ankles, securing him to the table. Pressing a button under the lip of the table, she turned away to the sink as the table began tilting upward vertically.

Surprised, Timothy said something but the woman washing her hands either didn't hear him or ignored him.

"It would be a lot easier," Dr. Lewis ventured, "not to mention less...stressful, if you'd let us explain the process to them. The first time can be kind of scary. Especially for the young ones."

"They don't need an explanation," Renee told her coldly, never taking her eyes off Timothy. "He'll find out soon enough."

By the time the table had stopped, not quite vertical, the woman had rolled a small metal stool to Timothy's side and lifted one corner of the white cloth, revealing the

tray's contents. Seating herself on the stool, she reached up and took a plastic glove from the tray, sliding it onto her right hand. Carefully, she put on the other one.

Picking up a silver tube, she undid the top and squirted a blob of the colorless gel into the palm of the right glove.

Turning back to Timothy, she began rhythmically massaging his shaft, using a technique obviously perfected over long years of practice. Immediately he began to squirm, his mouth moving frantically, struggling against the restraints. As if milking a cow, the woman ignored him, continuing on, her face and body registering nothing more than attention to her job.

The combination of his youth, the experienced technician and the drug being applied directly to his skin, rapidly produced the desired effect. As his erection grew in the woman's hand, the struggling became heated, aroused writhing, the fear dissipating into building pleasure. Bulging and throbbing, the tech mechanically proceeded with her actions, moving her hand expertly from the base to the head, seeming to gauge him perfectly.

Renee's reaction surprised the doctor. Or more precisely, her lack of reaction. Instead of her laughter and blatantly sexual chatter, the Senator was silent, leaning forward slightly, surveying every detail. The hard, angry face and the stiffness of her body, though, betrayed her true emotions.

Taking a plastic cup in her left hand, the technician increased her tempo, giving special attention to the sensitive tip. On the table, Timothy, his eyes closed now, wiggled, and the two women could almost hear his moans. Like a jockey going to the whip in the home stretch, the tech changed her hand position and varied her rhythm, moving the cup to within a few inches of him.

Timothy's body stiffened, his back arched, wrists and ankles straining against the cuffs, his mouth open, obviously venting his release. Impassively, the woman caught his fluid, missing only a couple of drops, milking him until she was sure he was spent. Only then did she let him go, snapping the blue plastic lid in place, slipping off her gloves and depositing them in the wastebasket.

"Well," Dr. Lewis said when the procedure was finished, "that went well. I'll see that he's rested and then returned..."

"I don't want him returned to the pens," Renee interrupted.

"I...I don't understand."

"It's very simple, Dr. Lewis." Renee was using her most impersonal, hardest tone. "He's to remain here in the shed until I say otherwise. Breed him as often as you deem physically appropriate. Take sperm for sale to other breeding programs. Use him for whatever breeding or genetic research you care to. But under no circumstances is he to leave here without my express authorization. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Senator," the doctor replied quietly, "I understand." Of course she didn't understand but it was obvious that her employer had chosen the breeding program, not

as a reward but as some kind of punishment. Idly, she wondered what kind of sin this boy could have committed to merit this kind of retribution.

"Good."

"As soon as the sperm have been separated," Dr. Lewis continued, eager to be finished with the subject, "we'll inseminate the breeder..." she consulted the chart in her hand, "Jane. Should be an excellent match. Probably want to give her at least a couple more shots, just to be on the safe side. I'm sure he'll be fine at stud, but it's better to be safe than sorry, especially with an unproven sire."

"Do whatever you think necessary. I have to be running along now. Goodbye, Dr. Lewis."

"Goodbye, Senator."

Renee pivoted on her heel and took a step. Stopping suddenly, she turned back, that same cold, determined look on her face.

"One more thing, Doctor."

"Yes?"

"He's to have no visitors, no communication with anyone beyond this building unless you speak directly to me first. *No one*," she emphasized.

"I'll see to it personally."

With a perfunctory nod, Renee left the confused physician and walked purposefully toward the exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mother?" Catherine called cheerfully as she came into Renee's study.

"Yes, dear?" Renee answered without looking up from the papers she was reading.

Catherine settled herself on the corner of her mother's desk, almost at her elbow. "I need to talk to you. It's about the garden."

Despite the fact she'd been expecting it, Renee felt a sharp pain in her stomach. "Not now, darling," she tried brushing Catherine aside. "I've got simply oodles of paperwork. Why don't you catch me after dinner." Still she didn't look up.

"Mother," the younger woman feigned irritation, "it's important. I need to talk to you. Now."

Without flinching, Renee pretended to keep reading. "All right. What about the garden?" She tried to sound casual, nonchalant.

"The grape vines I ordered have arrived. You know, for the arbor over by the wall. Anyway, I'm ready to move those ugly old juniper shrubs so we can get on with the planting of the vines and I can't find Timothy. Where is he?"

Renee's stomach twisted and she had to take a moment to compose herself before she answered. "He's gone to the breeding shed," she responded simply.

As the seconds dragged out, Renee was finally forced to look up. Her daughter's face was a jumble of astonishment, confusion and horror. The sight pained her and it was everything she could do to keep from grabbing her and folding her into her arms. But she managed.

"What?" Catherine cried, popping up from the desk.

"He's gone to the breeding shed," Renee repeated, trying to keep calm.

"But...but how could you! You had no right!"

"On the contrary, Catherine, I had every right. Timothy was always destined for the breeding shed. I spent a great deal of money to purchase him, specifically to improve the bloodline. He was only available to help you while we ran the necessary tests and waited for a suitable breeder to be available. I'm certainly not about to waste prime stock as a common laborer. If you need a strong back in the garden, feel free to pick one. I have several dozen to choose from."

"I don't want anyone else!" Catherine screamed. "I want Timothy!"

The stab of pain was almost unbearable, but Renee tried to keep going. "I'm sorry, Catherine," she mumbled, "but you can't always have what you want. When you're older, hopefully you'll understand that. But for now, the matter is closed."

Tears...of rage, hurt, something Renee couldn't name...welled up in her daughter's eyes and spilled over.

"You have no right!" she shrieked again. "No right! He...he..." Her words dissolved into sobs that wrenched at Renee's heart. But something else stopped her, kept her from falling prey to her child's misery.

"Fine," she told her daughter firmly, "I won't use him in my breeding program."

There was a moment when she looked into Catherine's eyes and saw relief, hope, genuine happiness.

"I'll simply sell him and be done with it. I'm sure Svarek can get me at least what I paid for him. And I'll have at least one whelp to show for my trouble."

Catherine's face collapsed and she ran sobbing from her mother's study, slamming the door as she flew out of the room.

Renee felt tears sting in her own eyes. "Please try to understand, darling," she croaked to the empty room. "It's for you...everything is for you. It's hard now but you'll see. You'll understand. Forgive me, dear. I...I love you."

## Chapter Eleven

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," Renee hissed, leaning across the desk. "I said, 'they're fucking'." She drained her wineglass and reached for the bottle at her elbow.

"I heard what you said," Mira retorted sharply. "In fact, I heard you the first four times."

"Well, if I'd known you weren't going to give a shit, I wouldn't have bothered saying anything. Besides," she sniffed, "I didn't come to see you anyway. I came to see Catherine. She is here, isn't she?"

"Of course she's here. Where else would she go under the circumstances? As for talking to her, there's no chance of that. At least not right now."

"I want to speak to my daughter," she growled.

"Well, your daughter doesn't want to talk to you. 'Ever. As long as either one of us lives' were her exact words," Mira told her calmly. "And right at this moment, I can't say I blame her."

"Oh, that's right," Renee pouted between gulps of wine. "Take her side. You always do."

"I'm not taking anyone's side. But when my goddaughter shows up on my doorstep, so hysterical it takes ten minutes for me to calm her down enough to understand what she's saying, I'm going to be concerned. And when she told me what you were doing to that boy..."

"Don't give me that shit," the other woman barked. "You know as well as I do that I bought him to breed. Not fuck my daughter."

Mira, her temper rising, eyed her friend. "I know you bought him because he's pretty and he made you horny."

Renee opened her mouth to object, but Mira raised her hand and shook her head. "And don't try to tell me any differently. You've been an alley cat since puberty. But even if you did intend to breed him when you were finished with him, you have no right to do what you're doing."

"I have every right in the world to do whatever I like with him." There was an unexpectedly harsh tone of menace in her voice. "He belongs to me, the same as my dog or my handbags or my cabbage. I can sell him, throw him out with the other garbage or even slit that beautiful throat of his and there's nothing, legally or morally, that anyone, including the Tarsheen, can do about it."

"And what about Catherine?"

"I've told you and I've told her," the Senator continued in that same menacing tone, "I won't have her fucking like a common breeder. Especially not some nothing slave. If he's so anxious to lose his load, it'll be in the shed and not in my daughter's bed."

"Well, well, haven't we suddenly developed a pretty set of morals," Mira mocked. "Or were all those stories about your sexual adventures just so much shit? Including what was his name? Albert?"

"Allan," Renee replied sullenly. "And it wasn't the same thing."

"No?" Mira raised an eyebrow in feigned surprise. "What do you think your mother would have done had she discovered her sixteen-year-old daughter seduced and then surrendered her virginity to a kitchen slave twice her age?"

"He was not a kitchen slave," she insisted petulantly. "He was a pastry chef."

"Right. And considering he was probably a much better pastry chef than you ever were a daughter, if she had found out she'd have probably taken the horse whip to you."

"I was very mature for my age. Besides, we were in love."

"And what makes you think Catherine and this boy, Timothy, aren't?"

Renee glared at her friend. "Don't even suggest that. She's a child."

"She is not a child, Renee. She's a woman. A healthy, beautiful grown woman who's attracted to a good-looking young man." Mira gazed across the desk and smiled ever so slightly. "And anyway," she needled, "have you even considered that your concern for Catherine's virtue may be unwarranted? Not to mention, tardy."

Renee jumped out of her chair so fast she spilled her wine. "Don't say that!" she screamed. "Don't even think it!"

Mira stood up to the other woman.

"Face it, Renee. It's a different world now. Catherine's twenty years old. She's been living away from home for two years. Hell, you weren't a virgin when you were twenty." The hurt look in her friend's eyes touched her and she softened her voice. "Neither of us were. And we've both had our flings with good-looking slaves."

"Surely you have to know that keeping them apart isn't going to solve anything. He just becomes forbidden fruit. And overworking him in the shed just reduces the quantity and quality of his output. You're cutting off your nose to spite your face."

"Then, oh Great and Wise One," Renee shot back as sarcastically as Mira, "in view of your vast and extensive child-rearing experience, what do you suggest?"

Even though the barb hurt, Mira let it pass. "I suggest," she answered calmly, "this." She picked up a sheet of paper and held it out to the Senator.

"What's that?" she asked, making no move to reach for it.

"It's a lease agreement for Timothy."

Intrigued, Renee took the offered paper and scanned it quickly. "And this is supposed to accomplish what?"



"Well, for one thing, it might save your relationship with your daughter. At the very least, it will get Catherine back under your roof where you and she might possibly try talking to each other."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Simple. You lease Timothy to me. That gets him out of your breeding shed and out from under what Catherine calls, 'my mother's ignorant tyranny'. I've promised her that I won't put him in my breeding program, that I'll give him a job around the house or the garden. In return, she's agreed to go back home and not see him again, unsupervised, until you and she have hashed this out."

"That's extortion," Renee snorted, angrily flinging the paper back on Mira's desk. "Catherine is my daughter but she will not tell me how to run my affairs or how to treat my property and she will come home if I have to go upstairs and drag her by the hair."

"She isn't trying to tell you how to run your affairs. She's a young girl smitten with a young man. If you force her to go home, she'll simply run away again. Next time she might not come here. Do you know any of her friends? Would you have any idea where to look for her in that case?"

Renee shifted her weight uneasily, looked away and finished what remained of her wine.

"Catherine doesn't understand," she said quietly. "I...I don't want her to be like me. I don't want her to be hurt. They're all alike, sweet words and hot kisses 'til they get what they want. Then they show their true colors. They're selfish, uncaring animals. I just want to protect her. For her to be happy. I love her."

Mira took a step and put her arms around her friend. "I know you do," she soothed. "And Catherine knows it too. This is just one of those things that happens between mothers and daughters. Next year, she won't even remember his name. Now, what do you say to the deal?" She stood back and smiled.

Renee wiped her teary eyes, made a disgusted face and picked up the paper again, reading it more slowly, more carefully than the first time.

"I don't know about the price..." she began thoughtfully.

"Don't give me that shit, Renee," Mira laughed. "I was there when you bought him and I know how much you paid. That's a very fair lease price." She held up a check. "And don't forget. You're doing this for Catherine."

"I could put him up for auction," Renee insisted. "Svarek could get me a better price than you're offering."

"No doubt," Mira agreed, dropping the check and picking up her pen. "But, can he get your daughter back for you?"

"And you call yourself my friend," Renee grumbled, plucking the pen from Mira's fingers, pushing the paper down and scribbling her name.

"You can pick him up yourself. I'm not wasting any more time or effort on that miserable bastard. But he doesn't move an inch 'til Catherine's back home."

"Just have him rested and ready for pickup."

"It's a good thing you're both my dearest friend and the Tarsheen," Renee continued to grumble. "Otherwise, I might be sorely tempted to call you a royal bitch. Your Grace," she added tartly.

Mira giggled like a schoolgirl. The return of her friend's acid tongue was as sure a sign the storm had passed as clouds parting for a rainbow.

"Thank you for your restraint. On behalf of both your friend and ruler."

"You're welcome," Renee answered, tossing the pen back on the desk. "Now, if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to take my daughter and leave."

"I'll send her home later this afternoon."

Immediately, the rainbow vanished and the storm clouds reappeared. "Look Mira..." she began hotly.

"Don't get upset, Renee," Mira interrupted, "everything's fine. Catherine just wants a little more time before she confronts you. Her words, not mine. Go on home and cool off. I'll show Catherine the lease agreement, tell her what an angel you were about the whole thing and send her home smiling."

"Mira..."

"For once in your life, Renee, be reasonable. Or at the very least, patient. Catherine's coming home. That's the important thing. A few hours more or less aren't going to make any difference weighed against the rest of your lives. Now please, just go home. I'll have our girl home by dinner."

"All right," she sighed, giving in only grudgingly. "I don't see that I have much choice."

They walked slowly to the front door. As Renee put her hand on the doorknob, Mira embraced her and smiled. "It's the best thing. You'll see."

Reluctantly, the other woman returned the embrace. "I hope you're right," was all she said.

Mira watched her friend slide into her car and her driver maneuver the big black limo down the long driveway toward the road.

Suddenly tired, Mira closed the door, leaned against it, and wearily shut her eyes.

"Is she gone?" came a timid voice from the top of the stairs.

"Yes," Mira called, "your mother just left."

She heard the light footfall of running feet on the thickly carpeted staircase. When she opened her eyes, Catherine was dashing toward her.

"Did she agree?" Catherine asked anxiously. "Did she?"

In answer, Mira held up the lease agreement and smiled.

"Oh Mira!" the young girl squealed. "You did it! You really did it! How can we ever thank you?" She threw her arms around her godmother and squeezed as tightly as she

could, all the while babbling delightedly in her ear. "I knew you could do it! You're wonderful! Absolutely wonderful!"

Carefully, Mira disengaged herself from the exuberant girl. "All right, Catherine, settle down."

"How can I?" she gushed. "Oh Mira, you have no idea how happy this makes me! I love you so much. You're the only one who could get through to her. When can we go and get Timothy out of there? Every minute he's in that place, I can't stand it. Can we go now? Please?"

"Catherine," Mira said calmly, "I appreciate how happy you are about Timothy and how anxious you are to have him out of the breeding shed. But don't forget, you're part of this agreement as well as your mother and I. We're entering into this with the expectation that you'll carry out your end like the mature, grown woman you want to be treated like and not some giddy teenager."

"But—"

"No 'buts' about it. You agreed that you would go home and try to settle things with your mother and that there will be no unsupervised contact between you and Timothy until something's been worked out. Something all of you can live with, including your mother."

"She doesn't understand," Catherine whined. "Not like you do. You know that Timothy and I are different. We're in love. Now that you have him, you're the Tarsheen, you can free him and then we can declare ourselves and be together."

"Hold on, young lady," Mira snapped. "I agreed to help get him out of the breeding shed for you. No one ever said anything about freeing him." She shook her head, slowly but firmly. "No, Catherine, that's absolutely out of the question."

Dumbstruck, the young girl took a step back and stared at Mira as if she'd suddenly grown another head. "But...but why not? You know we can't declare ourselves and be together legally unless he's a freeman."

"I'm quite familiar with the law, Catherine. Including the statute that bans freed slaves from siring offspring, even daughters. Ever. Even in legally declared unions."

"I only want Timothy," she insisted, her voice rising. "I don't care about a daughter. I just want to be with him. Forever."

"You're too young to know what you want. Maybe you think you don't care about a daughter now, but you will sometime. You'll ache for a daughter of your own. And at twenty, you can't possibly know how long forever can be."

"You sound just like Mother," she snarled. "If having Timothy means never having a daughter, fine. I can live with that. I can't live without him."

"Catherine..."

"Are you going to free him?"

"No."

"Then we'll run away. Together," she announced with the defiance of youth.

"Really? How do you intend to get to him? Get him out of your mother's breeding shed? Off her estate? Where will you go? How will you get there? And how will you live if you do get away?" Mira watched as confusion replaced the anger and defiance in her goddaughter's face.

"Catherine, darling," she said gently, "I couldn't free Timothy, even for you. He's your mother's property. She has rights under the law. Rights that no one, not even the Tarsheen can interfere with without legal justification. And I'm certainly not going to risk the friendship of my oldest, dearest friend and staunchest political ally over this. The lease agreement solves the problem for the time being. Go home. Talk to your mother."

"There's no talking to Mother," Catherine answered bitterly. "She doesn't care about me. Neither do you."

"You know that isn't so. For one thing, you of all people must know that one of your mother's least lovable personality traits is how much she hates to lose. Yet here she is, giving in on something she feels very strongly about and for what? For you. Because you're the most important thing in her life. You are her life."

"And Timothy's mine."

"Then believe me, dear, we'll work something out. Together. Just the way we always have. But you've got to do your part. Try talking instead of tantrums. And I promise you, if you break your word about the unsupervised visits, not only will your young man go back to the breeding shed, but you can forget about asking for my help again. Do you understand?"

The young girl nodded.

"All right, then. Let's have some lunch and then home you go."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good afternoon, Robert," Mira said formally as she clicked the lock on the library door and tried not to smile.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," he replied, standing up from his computer and bowing low. "To what do I owe this most pleasant surprise?"

Crossing the room, she held up a large brown wicker picnic hamper. "I have need of your..." she smiled wickedly, "your services this afternoon. I'm afraid it will mean taking up your lunch hour. I've sent word that you'll be absent from the dining room and I've had lunch prepared. I hope you won't be too distressed by this imposition."

"I live to be of service to Your Grace."

Dropping the hamper by her feet, she threw herself against him, clutching as tightly as she could. Tenderly, he embraced her, laying his cheek on the top of her head. Immediately, she raised her face and they shared a passionate, hungry kiss.

"Do you love me?" she asked breathlessly.

"That's a stupid question," he teased.

"I mean it," Mira insisted. "Tell me you love me. Madly. Deeply. Passionately.

"Of course I love you, silly."

"Tell me."

"Here, in the daytime, when I walk down the hall and I catch your lovely scent of sunshine and fresh oranges and I know you've been there. That you're in your study, so close, and I'm locked in here. And at night, I can't sleep because the want of you is worse than the need of you and the need of you just about kills me." He ran the tip of his finger lightly down her cheek. "I love you so much," he breathed, "it hurts."

"Oh, Robert," she cried and they hugged and kissed again, food forgotten in their mutually growing arousal.

Never leaving each other's arms or mouths, they managed to stumble to the large black leather sofa against one wall. Backing onto it, Mira lay down, pulling Robert after her, both of them fumbling with the other's buttons.

In their haste, Mira only kicked off her shoes so Robert could pull her slacks and panties down, opening her blouse and slipping the clasp on the front of her bra. Mira opened Robert's shirt and belt, helping him out of his boxers and jeans. Then they were devouring each other, wanting nothing more than to be joined.

In the short time they'd been together, they'd learned the secrets of their bodies. Robert suckled her breasts as his fingers played lightly, softly with her wet pussy, making her moan and sigh with pleasure. Mira took his shaft, rubbing it, feeling it harden in her hand until he was ready and then guiding him inside her.

"God," she murmured as he entered and began to move.

"You feel so good," Robert whispered, his lips brushing the soft skin of her throat. "I love the feel of you."

Mira pulled him closer to her, sliding her hands under his shirt, and ran both palms from his shoulders down his back to his flat ass. As her flesh traveled over his, she again had the thought that his back was not rough exactly, but ridged and textured. But the thought was lost, as it had been before, in the wave of mounting ecstasy threatening to overwhelm them both.

Burying their faces in each other's bodies to stifle their cries from any passing ears, Robert and Mira achieved the fulfillment of their desire, coming in a heated frenzy of tangled limbs and erupting passion.

As they cuddled in the narrow space of the sofa, Robert on his side and Mira in the crook of his arm, she tugged playfully on the tail of his shirt. "Don't you ever take this off? Even to make love?"

"Your Grace will have to excuse me," he smiled, "but I was in something of a hurry." He gave her nose a tiny peck. "Does Your Grace have a complaint?"

"Only that I've never seen you totally naked."

"Oh? And how much more naked could I have been than that first night? In your bedroom?"

"That doesn't count," she retorted. "It was dark. I want to see you in the daylight. I want to see your back."

"Something wrong with my front?"

She slapped his arm lightly and made a face. "Absolutely not. I just want you to take your shirt off so I can see all of your beautiful body. Surely under the circumstances that's not a lot to ask."

"Remember what happened to the curious kitty," he continued to needle her gently.

"I want to see your back," she persisted. "Come on."

"I have a better idea," he told her, kissing her lips longer, stronger than the peck he'd given her nose. "Let's eat. I don't know about you, but I seem to have worked up an appetite." He started to lift himself off the sofa but she stopped him and he sensed that the playful mood was wearing off.

"When we make love," she told him firmly, "I've felt your back. I know the way it feels and Dr. Elliott told me that it looks, as she put it, 'like healed hamburger'. But that won't make any difference to me. I love you. I just want to see what all of you looks like." A note of that spoiled child-imperious ruler appeared at the edge of her voice.

"They're scars," he explained quietly. "From a whipping. They're very ugly. It was a very long time ago and they have nothing to do with now. With you. With us."

"A whipping?" Mira repeated, almost unable to believe her ears. "What? Why?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"Of course it matters. Everything about you matters to me. I want to see them. The scars."

"Mira, please..."

Her body stiffened ever so slightly. "Everything that has to do with you," she told him softly, "has to do with me."

"Try to understand, Mira," he began gently. "I live in a cold, black hole. Everything about my life is dark and ugly. Except you. You're clean and bright and beautiful. You're the only thing in my life that brings me any peace, any joy. I won't let anything dirty or ugly ever touch you. Even me."

"Now, Robert."

There was, he knew, nothing he could do. Slowly, painfully, he got up from the sofa, turned his back to her and slid his shirt off his shoulders, exposing himself to her.

"Eh!" The sound of Mira's sharp, short scream was like a knife through him. Shrugging his shirt back on, Robert turned back to her. For him, the sight of her was even worse than the sound.

She looked like a small, terrified child, her eyes huge and wide, tears falling silently down her white cheeks, a fist pressed against her lips, her whole body trembling. Robert felt his chest tighten and the pain came again, sharper this time.

"Oh God, Mira," he cried, taking her in his arms. "I'm sorry."

"How?" she asked in a small, strangled voice. "Why?"

"Don't ask, Mira," he pleaded. "Please."

"I don't understand. Tell me what happened."

"A long time ago," he began miserably, "I tried to run away. I got caught and I got whipped. That's all."

"Dear God, Robert," Mira whimpered as she pressed her face in his chest and cried. Lightly, tentatively, he felt her fingertips running across the welts of his back. Years of half-forgotten pain gripped him – not the lash, but something far deeper, far worse.

He held her in his arms, rocking and stroking her like a child, feeling the cold and dark creeping back, blotting out the sun, sucking him back.

After what seemed an eternity to him, Mira raised her tear-streaked face to him. "Why did you try to run away, Robert?" The simple, direct, childlike question stunned him. It was so ludicrous, it took him a moment to realize she was serious.

What was there to tell her that she might ever be able to understand?

"Was it...was it because of the Sillman?" she ventured timidly. "Because you couldn't..."

Robert looked down into her sad, doll-like face and sighed deeply. "No, not specifically," he whispered hoarsely. "But everything in my life is connected, tied together with everything else. Except you. You're perfect and apart from all the filth and misery that's my life. If I tell you about this, about anything, I'll just pull you down too. And I couldn't stand that. It would kill me."

"I don't want to be perfect and apart," she replied anxiously, "I want to be part of you. I want to know everything there is to know about you. Tell me, please." She paused, searching his face nervously. "Unless...unless you don't really love me. Trust me."

Trust. How ironic that she should pick that particular word.

"I was twenty," he sighed again, focusing on a spot on the far wall. "I'd just been sold so I was the new kid on the block. And being new, I got all the choice jobs. Like cleaning the stables. Even then I'd learned to keep to myself, not trust anyone. But there was this guy..." Robert's voice caught at the memory.

"Rick. He was about my age. When I came, he graduated to groom. He was nice to me. Showed me the ropes. Talked to me. We ate together. After awhile...well...I guess I thought we were friends." He was silent for several long moments and Mira could only sit and wait for him to continue.

"One day, we were out in the stable by ourselves. Out of a clear blue sky he suddenly leans over and whispers that he's planning to run away and do I want to

come with him. At first, I thought he was crazy, told him even talking about such a thing could get us both killed. But he told me he had a plan. That he'd even managed to make contact with the Railroad and they'd promised to help him escape."

"The Railroad?" Mira was incredulous. "It...it really exists?"

"If I told you that," Robert smiled weakly, "I could be executed as a Rememberer and you for a Harboring. Anyway, we talked about it some more and finally, he convinced me to do it with him. We were going to meet at the stables after bed check, steal a couple of horses and ride out to meet the Railroad conductor. When I got to the stable, Rick wasn't there. I figured he'd be along so I started saddling a horse. Suddenly, the lights came on and the stable was full of armed guards. And there, standing beside our owner, was Rick.

He stopped and Mira saw the sweat on his face, felt his heart speed up, his breathing become ragged.

"I thought for a moment they'd got him too. The guards grabbed me, knocked me down and shackled me. The owner walked over, looked down at me and smiled. 'You were right,' she called over her shoulder. 'He was running away. Well done, Rick. You've earned your freedom.' Then she told the guards to throw me in the hole. 'I'll deal with him tomorrow.' As the guards yanked me to my feet and dragged me away, I looked at Rick and I realized that it had all been a lie. He hadn't ever meant to run away. He'd always intended to sell me out in return for his own freedom."

"Robert..."

"Don't judge him too harshly," he told her gently. "Then, I would have killed him if I could have gotten my hands on him. But looking back, I'm not sure I wouldn't have done the same thing in his place."

"You'd never have done anything that awful."

"Never say never, Mira. It doesn't make any difference now. Anyway, I spent a long night chained up in a cell. Next morning, four slaves came in, backed by armed guards. They stripped me naked and then dragged me out into the main courtyard. They didn't want to but they had no choice.

"It was just after dawn and everyone, slave and guard, was gathered, Rick sitting very uncomfortably beside the owner. The slaves took me to a shiny metal cylinder planted right in the middle of the courtyard, so big I could barely get my arms around it. They chained my wrists and ankles so that I was flush against the metal, so tight I couldn't move at all. It was like ice on my bare body."

He swallowed hard and Mira, horrified by the picture he was painting but not able to break away, wondered if he'd be able to go on.

"Even though I couldn't turn my head, I heard my owner behind me. 'Watch carefully,' she ordered to the assembled crowd. 'This is what happens to slaves who try to run away. Forty lashes. And put some muscle into it. I want to see the white of his backbone when you're finished.' I remember there was the sound of the whip cracking and then this searing pain..."



His voice faded away and he was quiet again for several more moments.

"There was just this red haze of pain and I thought at least I was going to die and it would be finished. When the whipping ended, she said, 'leave him'. I think I was only conscious in spurts during that day. But as the sun got higher, the cylinder got hotter and hotter. It was like being chained to a griddle and cooking slowly. I could feel my skin burning. I prayed to die but even God had deserted me.

"At sunset, a couple of guards came, took me down and threw me back in the hole. I don't know how long I was there but suddenly, I felt cool water going down my throat. I opened my eyes and it was the old black butler and a couple of the other house slaves. He smiled down at me.

'I knew they couldn't kill you,' he chuckled. 'Now you just hold on.'

"I remember him putting some ointment on my burned skin. His big, gnarled hands were so gentle and the salve seemed to take away the fire like magic.

'Gotta clean that back a yours,' he told me, 'but all I could lay my hands on was some alcohol. Gonna hurt like hell. Nothin' ta be done about it though. Take this.'

"He put a piece of rag in my mouth and the other slaves held me down. There was just this one absolute, blinding flash of excruciating pain when the alcohol hit my open flesh. When I woke up, I had some torn rags wrapped around my chest and back as a bandage and it was the next day."

Mira blinked, trying to clear the tears from her vision. It wasn't possible that any decent, honest slave owner, any woman at all, could be capable of such cruelty. Obviously, this had been a woman of another, less enlightened generation. A vicious, ugly person lacking in even the simplest humanity.

"I understand, Robert," she sobbed softly.

Holding her tightly, he felt his spirit lift. Gently, he kissed the top of her head, breathing deeply of her sweet citrus scent and body musk.

"It was, of course, wrong for you to try and run away," she told him quietly, "but I can understand that even a dog will finally run away from an abusive mistress. And I think what Rick did was just despicable. I'm so glad we don't do things like that anymore. But I'm glad you told me."

At once surprised and yet not, Robert sighed and held her close. She was trying, he knew, not just because she loved him, but because she truly did want things to be better. But he knew too that they existed in different universes and that this fragile connection they shared was no doubt more rainbow than reality.

Silently, they held each other close.

## Chapter Twelve

"I love you," she purred contentedly.

"Mmm," he sighed, folding himself around her but not opening his eyes. Warm sun filtered between the closed drapes of her study, an unaccustomed glass of red wine and their lovemaking having combined, lulling him into a comfortable drowsiness.

"That's not very romantic," she yawned.

"I'm practically comatose from being romantic," he snickered in her ear. "What more do you want from me, you needy little brat?"

"I'm not a brat," she insisted mildly, "needy or otherwise."

"Of course you're a brat," he continued playfully. "I imagine you were born a beautiful, haughty, spoiled brat."

"You'd be wrong. I was a skinny, ugly, graceless tomboy. And I was too insecure to be a brat."

"It couldn't have been that bad."

Mira opened her eyes and looked up at him. "Well it was," she told him flatly. "I was the only girl in the eighth grade with no boobs. The other girls called me 'Butch' behind my back. Even Renee used to throw up her hands in despair and tell me I was hopeless."

Robert ran his fingertips over her bare breast and smiled. "Well, you've definitely got boobs now," he said with a little laugh, "and very nice ones, too, I might add."

"Well, they weren't then." Her voice took on a sad, faraway tone. "You have no idea. My mother was tall and lovely and graceful as a swan. Intelligent, witty, charming. I can remember, even as a tiny little girl, people telling me how wonderful and elegant and practically perfect she was. How proud I should be of her and how I should try to grow up to be just like her."

"Nobody can be just like someone else. You should only try to be the best person you can be."

"I'm afraid in my case," she replied softly, "that just wasn't good enough. Caina was forever correcting and criticizing and picking at me. Reminding me that I was the daughter of the Tarsheen. That one day I'd sit on the throne myself. She was always harping on me that every detail of my life was under scrutiny every moment of every day and that nothing short of perfection was acceptable."

"That was Caina," Robert whispered. "What about your mother? Did she expect perfection from you too?"

"I don't know." Mira sighed deeply and closed her eyes again. "I barely knew my mother. Her duties as Tarsheen were numerous and time-consuming and she attended them faithfully. When I was a very young child, I saw her sporadically, mostly for short periods before bed or between obligations."

"Not very much time."

"No," she agreed sadly. "As I grew older, I began traveling and attending official functions with her. The opening of the Senate. State dinners. Balls. But even then she didn't really have time for me. Mostly, I just stood beside her quietly. 'Absorbing' Caina called it. She used to tell me endlessly that if I wanted to be an excellent ruler, the complete woman, I should study my mother."

"But you didn't want to 'study' your mother," Robert added. "You wanted to love her and spend time alone with her. You wanted her to love you."

"I'm sure my mother loved me," Mira responded, not sounding sure at all. "It was just that being Tarsheen seemed to gobble up her whole life. I don't think I appreciated that fully until she died and I came to the throne." She stopped, searching his face as if looking for the answer to some puzzle.

"When I'd cry or complain, Caina would scold me and say I was being selfish and stupid. That I should understand that being the Tarsheen was very important."

"And being the Tarsheen's daughter wasn't?"

"That's how I felt sometimes. Anyway, my mother and I had a very..." Mira stopped again, looking for the right word, "cordial relationship as I grew older."

Robert thought "cordial" was an odd word to describe a mother-daughter relationship but said nothing.

"We were like good friends with lots of things in common. We had some really good times together. You know, I can't ever remember my mother being angry or raising her voice to me or even scolding me. She was always gracious, always regal, always the Tarsheen."

There was such sadness in her voice, it made his heart ache. Softly, he put his lips on her forehead and felt her squeeze him tighter.

"When she got sick, she continued with her duties. Even after the doctors told her there was nothing they could do. I begged her to slow down, take it easy. She just smiled and shrugged.

'What good would that do?' she said. 'At least being busy fills the time. I don't want to just sit around counting the heartbeats. I'd rather be active, do what I can, what I know best, as long as I can.'

"She was at a reception honoring Joan Callahan, the director, when she doubled over. I was standing next to her and Caina and I kept her from falling. She died three weeks and two days later. Out in the garden, lying on her favorite chaise lounge in the sun. It was so gentle, so quiet, I didn't even know she was gone until the book she'd been reading slipped out of her hand."

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "It's never easy losing someone you love."

"My mother was buried four days later after being taken from the house, to the hospital to the mortuary and then lying in State." Her voice caught and she squeezed him again.

"It was a huge State funeral with all the pomp and majesty that befits a beloved and long reigning monarch. I rode in an open carriage behind the glass hearse, from the church to the cemetery, dressed in heavy black mourning clothes, sweating like a pig while Caina kept whispering for me to hold my head up and put on a 'brave' face for my subjects."

Mira could feel the sting of long forgotten tears welling up behind her eyes.

"There were thousands of people lining the whole route. It was like a damned Fourth of July parade," Mira said bitterly. "The entire Royal Guard in full dress uniform, a motorcade of long black limousines filled with dignitaries. Escorts of mounted police and motorcycle officers. All in all, quite a spectacle. But I was just past my twenty-second birthday so I understood that's how Tarsheens live. And how they die."

Robert was helpless to do anything except hold her, try to share some of her pain.

"Of course, silly me, I believed that during the 'official' thirty-day mourning period, I'd be allowed some time alone with my grief. To mourn my mother privately, away from the spotlight."

"But that didn't happen?"

"The morning after the funeral, Caina woke me promptly at seven. She told me that while I would not officially be the Tarsheen until my coronation, the business of the realm did not stop, even for the tragic passing of a great ruler. There were cards and letters of condolence to be answered, floral arrangements and gifts to be acknowledged. Not to mention all the mundane details of government. She said that the engravers were already furiously working on my official seal and from that day forward, I would sign my name, 'Mira, Regina'. As she was leaving, she stopped at the door and told me not to dawdle because the designer and fitter were coming at nine sharp to begin work on my coronation gown."

She buried her face in his chest and he thought she was going to cry. For several long moments she was quiet, nothing but the feel of her heart against his body. When she looked up again, there was a hint of a resigned smile at the corner of her lips.

"So, six weeks after I buried my mother, I was crowned Tarsheen. There I was, in the same grand cathedral where we'd had my mother's service, the same cleric praying over me who'd prayed over her. Asking the same God to watch over and care for me that he'd asked to do likewise for her. Riding in another open carriage, this one white instead of black, dressed in an unbearable brocade gown and heavy ermine cape, wearing this ridiculous, antiquated headpiece, sweating like a pig while Caina harped incessantly about smiling and waving to my subjects. Same Royal Guard, same

dignitaries, same police, same throngs along the parade route. Except that these faces were smiling and cheering."

"Sounds a little spooky."

Mira chuckled dryly. "Believe me, my darling, it was beyond spooky. More like surreal." Her voice dropped. "Especially when I realize that there won't be anyone in that open carriage behind me when I make that journey again."

"What about your friend Senator Baron and her daughter?"

"It's not the same thing," she responded wistfully. "Not having someone to leave your life to. Someone who'll miss you. Remember you."

"Madam Proconsul seems to think you'll be remembered for all time, daughter or no." She recognized the slight sarcasm at the edge of his voice.

"Stop it," she ordered, smiling and poking him playfully. "It's bad enough having to listen to that idiotic drivel from her. I certainly don't want you needling me too. Just come here, kiss me and tell me how much you love me."

Squeezing her tightly, they put their lips together and shared a long, passionate kiss.

"You may not have been a brat as a child," he teased, "but you've more than made up for it as an adult."

She poked him again. "All right. I've told you about me. Turnabout is fair play."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, silly," she laughed, "now it's your turn to tell me about you."

"Nothing to tell," he assured her breezily. "And anyway, I have to get back to the library. Lunch is over."

"Lunch is over when the Tarsheen says it is," she answered cheerfully.

"Everything about me that you need to know was in that manila envelope Svarek gave you the first day." The smile was growing dimmer.

"Nonsense. The whipping wasn't in the papers."

"Mira..."

She looked into his eyes, earnest and intense. "Darling, I've told you things today that I've never said to another living soul. Not even Caina. And not just because I love you with all my heart. I trust you, too. I know that I could do, say, anything and it wouldn't make any difference to you. That you'd still love me. You make me feel safe and secure. I want you to feel the same way about me. Love me. Trust me. Know that there isn't anything about your life that would make me not love you."

He watched her, his pain matched only by his love for her. His whole life had been spent hiding, concealing, never trusting anything or anyone but himself. Now, he was caught between every survival instinct he'd ever had and his desire to be joined, truly joined, to this most impossible of all people. There was no way she could understand

his life, even if he did tell her. Telling her meant giving himself over to her and once that happened, there wouldn't be any going back. For either of them.

"All right," he whispered hoarsely. "All right."

"My father was an escapee," Robert began slowly, avoiding her eyes. "He'd been accused of being a Rememberer. A band of escapees helped him get to the Railroad. My mother was a breeder who wanted out of the life. They met in the same community and declared themselves. I was born and when I was two, my brother Joey came.

"We lived in the mountains. The Rockies, although I couldn't tell you exactly where. I never knew. But it was high up. There was fresh air and sunshine and wild flowers in the summer and lots of snow in the winter. I thought it was the most beautiful place in the world."

"It sounds lovely," Mira told him quietly.

"Home was a two-room log cabin my parents built with the help of other community members. I suppose we were poor, but we always had enough to eat and we weren't any different from the other people in the community and we were always happy."

His face and voice softened. "My father carved a wooden horse for me when I was a baby and my mother sewed Joey a little bear, made of deer hide and stuffed with straw. He carried it everywhere. Slept with it even."

His image swam before Mira's eyes as tears welled up. Gently, she put her fingers on his arm, even though she could tell he was no longer there with her.

"My mother taught me to read and write and how to do simple arithmetic. She showed us how to eat, as she put it, 'like civilized human beings'. My father and I would go for long walks by ourselves. Sometimes we'd just lie in the grass or sit on a big rock by a stream. He told me lots of things...things he said a boy needs to know to grow into a man. Said when I was old enough, I could go with him and mother to the council house and sit with the grownups." He paused for a moment, his eyes clouding over. "But that never happened."

His voice faded again and the cloud in his eyes became a dark shadow of pain.

"It was just after my eighth birthday. Joey and I were asleep. I woke up to the sound of firecrackers and loud, angry voices. I got out of bed, tiptoed to the door, opened it a crack and peeked out."

Robert stopped and swallowed several times. When he continued, his voice was hoarse with emotion. "The room was filled with people in dark uniforms carrying guns. Two of them were holding my mother who was screaming and crying and trying to get away from them. My father was lying face down on the floor. I wondered how he could sleep through all the noise and why he didn't get up and help my mother.

"I ran out and tried to get to her but one of the people grabbed me and picked me up. I was yelling and trying to get away but I couldn't. Another person went in the bedroom and came out carrying Joey. He was screaming, 'Mama! Mama!'

"She fought harder, calling 'Robert! Joey!' but one of the people hit her in the head with the butt of their rifle and they dragged her out. Then they took us out. It was dark outside and cold. We just had our pajamas on.

"People were running around and there were bright lights and screaming and firecrackers going off. The people carrying Joey and me stopped for a second to talk to another person and I managed to reach out and grab his hand. Right away, they pulled us apart and the person in the uniform who'd been talking to the people who had us, saw Joey's bear. She snatched it out of his little fist, tore its head off and threw the pieces on the ground.

"Then the person who had me went one way and the other person took Joey another way. I screamed for him and for my parents and I heard Joey screaming too.

"The person threw me in the back of a big covered truck with bars across the back and a cold metal floor. I remember how cold the metal was as I tried to force myself between the bars and get out. I was screaming and rattling the bars, frantic to get out, when I heard Joey.

"Not the hysterical, panicked cries I'd been listening to, but a long, drawn out, wounded animal scream that literally froze my blood. Sometimes, even now, I still hear that last scream in my nightmares. I never saw my parents or Joey again."

He sighed deeply. "They threw a couple of other kids in the back and then the truck took off. We must have driven for a long time because the next thing I remember was waking up in a strange bed in a white room and it was morning and my head hurt. I tried to raise my hand to rub my head but I couldn't move. I was tied down with little white straps. I started crying and yelling for my mother.

"A tall old woman in a white dress came in. 'Be quiet, you little whelp,' she hissed. Of course I didn't. Suddenly, I felt like my head was on fire. Like a lightning bolt had hit it.

'Now that you're among decent people,' she told me angrily, 'you've had an implant put in. It'll teach you how to behave. Keep quiet or you'll get more of the same.' She held out this little black box she had in her hand and showed it to me. I managed to keep from screaming anymore because I was more scared of the pain than of being alone.

"Where am I?" I asked. "Where are my parents? My brother Joey?"

'They're gone,' she answered coldly, 'and you belong to the state.'

"I tried asking where they'd gone and why couldn't I go too but she hit her little button again and waited for the pain to die down.

'You are not to ask any more questions. You are to speak only when spoken to. You're in a hospital for a few days until your implant heals. Then you'll go to an institution.'

"Of course, I didn't know what an implant was." He threw Mira a quick, sidelong glance. "But I learned." His tone and the look in his eyes sent a cold shiver down her spine and she looked away.

"When I left the hospital, I went to a 'home' for boy slaves." Mira was more than a little surprised at the bitterness in his voice. "It was a big, old-fashioned, red brick building. Drafty and cold in the winter, stifling in the summer. We were divided by age. The old metal beds squeaked and squealed all night.

"We were issued one pair of shoes and two sets of clothes at the beginning of the year. We wore one set for a week and then sent it to the laundry and we wore the other set. If you outgrew your clothes or they were lost or wore out, you either made do or went without.

"We got up at six o'clock, six days a week. Washed our faces in cold water, combed our hair, got dressed, made our beds, cleaned our dormitory and went to breakfast. A bowl of oatmeal and a glass of milk. No alternative, no seconds.

"Then there was our 'training'. We raised vegetables which were supposed to go on our plates but which were sold by the home. Our laundry did a big business because it was cheaper than any other place around. I worked in the kitchen scrubbing pots and cleaning floors.

"Sundays we got up at six-thirty. A minister from a nearby church would come and attendance was compulsory. She used to drum into us that even though we were animals, it was her Christian obligation to try and bring some religion to us.

"We were forbidden to talk or even touch each other. If you were scared or hurt, too bad. You toughed it out yourself. The only physical contact we had with the matrons was a push or a twisted arm or a pinched ass. But they didn't punish us with anything as simple as a beating. That might have left marks and raised questions. No. They had something better. They had The Closet."

Mira felt Robert's body shiver at the mere mention of the word. She squeezed his arm to try and reassure him, but she felt no response.

"When we were disobedient, or cried or just pissed off one of the matrons, we got 'quiet time' in The Closet. It was a six by six by six-foot metal box. No windows. Just a vent to keep us from suffocating and the trap door they dropped us through. When the door was closed, it was like being buried alive. Black and quiet as a tomb. Except, of course, for the sound of your own screams echoing. Believe me, once or twice in that torture chamber was enough. We'd do just about anything to avoid that place.

"And the matrons knew everything. They had spies everywhere. Kids who ratted us out at every opportunity, not just for the cookie or candy reward, but for the smile or the pat on the head. The matrons cultivated them like prize hunting dogs. Not only could they tell on us for what we did, they could lie and get us that way too. We all lived in mortal terror of them. We did their chores, gave them anything we had to keep them happy. I think we were more scared of them than we were of the matrons.

"Sometimes we had visitors. People like you." There was that inscrutable look again and another uncomfortable prickle traveled down Mira's back. She wished desperately that she could read his voice, his eyes.



"We'd scrub the place from top to bottom for days before. Everything had to be picture-perfect. The morning of the visit, we'd all be bathed and given clean, well-fitting uniforms. White shirts, blue pants, white socks and black shoes. They felt wonderful. Then we'd get something like pancakes and syrup or bacon and eggs for breakfast. So our guests would know how well we were fed. Finally, we'd all gather in the assembly room and the visitors would smile and explain what a fine place it was and how lucky we were to be taken care of by the state in such a fine fashion. They'd hand out candy or cookies or something and we'd all say thank you and then eat it to show how grateful we were."

As Robert spoke, Mira had flashes of her own visits to such places. Rows of clean, well-behaved, uniformed young boys filing by, accepting her gaily wrapped chocolates with a shy 'thank you, Your Grace'. Smiling matrons walking along gleaming halls, proudly pointing out well-tended gardens and well-stocked kitchens. No sign of any Closets.

"We stayed until we were ten, the age when the brokers came. The matrons made us get undressed and then herded us into the assembly room. We stood in line, shivering with cold and fear while groups of strangers, mostly women but some men, slowly walked up and down, inspecting us critically, feeling our arms and legs and looking in our mouths and eyes and ears. They'd poke and pry.

'This one works in the garden,' one of the matrons would say. 'Strong back. Good disposition.' Or, 'Laundry worker. Does his job but not very bright.'

"The brokers would put different color wristbands on us and the matrons would make us go and stand with others who had the same color band. We stood around until all of us had been examined and put in groups. Then the head matron came to each broker, counted up how many 'head of stock' they had and the broker paid her. Each group was moved outside and we were put in covered trucks like the one from that first, awful night. I was so scared, I couldn't do anything but curl up in a corner and relive that whole nightmare over and over.

"Children aren't auctioned," he muttered sarcastically. "Bad form. Doesn't sit quite right with you liberals. So we were sold in groups. I went to a big estate in the east.

"I lived, if that's what you'd call it, in a room not much bigger than The Closet, with a dirt floor and a barred window so high up in the wall, I probably couldn't see out of it even now. I had a cot, a moth-eaten blanket, an old hand-me-down shirt and ragged jeans. I went barefoot year round. The first winter, I was so sick I couldn't breathe half the time.

"I scrubbed pans in the kitchen and lived off table scraps. It was worse even than the home. I had to learn to survive any way I could. So I did."

Robert's voice took on a note of what Mira could only describe as pride. "At twelve, I was an accomplished liar and thief. I could steal food off your plate while you were eating. I learned the best places to stash things I'd stolen because I knew I couldn't take anything back to the pens. Sometimes I stole things I didn't need just because they were

pretty and I wanted them. Sometimes I just did it for the hell of it. Lying became a way of life. Say whatever I had to so I could get through another day. It almost got to be a game.

"By the time I was fourteen, I'd added spying and blackmail to my talents. No one knew I could read and write so they didn't bother about leaving papers on desks or throwing things in the trash. And a nobody little slave that no one pays any attention to and who learns to move quietly, can pick up a lot of useful, valuable information, in the main house or even the pens.

"And by the time I was sixteen, I was a well-rounded young hoodlum. I had my own gang of younger boys working for me. I'd even learned a little forgery, although it was more for my own amusement than any real use."

The thought of the man she knew, loved, stealing and lying was almost unbelievable to her. She managed, though, to keep quiet, waiting for Robert to go on.

"But what I really wanted," he said dreamily, "was my turn in the mistress's bed."

Shock must have registered in her face and she dropped her hand from his arm, unable to do anything but stare at him. Seeing her reaction, Robert smiled a small, humorless smile.

"Don't be so shocked, Mira," he chided gently. "It wasn't what you think. She was ten years older than you are now, at least, fat, ugly, cruel and thoroughly unlovable."

"But if you didn't care...I mean..." Mira stammered.

"Why did I want to be in her bed?" Robert finished for her.

Mira nodded.

"Because it was big and warm and soft. Because there were bowls of fresh fruit and plates of chocolate on the nightstand. If you were sleeping in her bed, it meant you could eat at her table 'til you were full and ride in her car, to places away from the pens. You could wear clothes and shoes that felt good and hadn't belonged to someone else. You could be clean and safe and human, even if it was just for a little while."

He watched her face, but he could only see confusion. She had no idea what he was talking about. Perhaps there was no way she ever could.

"I was tall and skinny and gawky, though, and she had a taste for boys with pretty bodies and nice faces. I was afraid I'd never get there. I used to watch them come and go and sometimes I'd get so angry and jealous, I couldn't stand it.

"Then, when I was about eighteen, my chance came. It was a bitterly cold January morning. The regular maintenance man was sick in bed and the furnace in the main house was out. Since I'd spent years getting to know every nook and cranny in the place, I volunteered to go down in the basement and see what I could do.

"What they didn't know was, I had a secret. I'd discovered a set of printed instructions in a cabinet showing how to light the pilot light. I'd found it when I was exploring. So, I spent a few minutes pretending to look the furnace over and then I went

to the cabinet like I was looking for something. I had the furnace back on and running in fifteen minutes.

"Ms. Phelps, my mistress, asked to see me. She was sitting up in her bed, dressed all in silk with lots of blankets and comforters piled up on her. There was a half-eaten fruit salad on a tray and she was drinking hot coffee out of this beautiful cup and I was so hungry I thought I'd pass out from the smell of it.

"She sat there, sipping her coffee and staring at me like I was hanging in a butcher shop window.

'What's your name?' she asked finally.

"Robert," I answered, trying to smile a little.

'Come here.'

"I went and stood just by the edge of her bed. Those beady little eyes of hers were practically invisible in the rolls of fat, but I could still almost feel her stripping me naked. I wanted to run but the smell of that coffee was overpowering so I just stood there.

"After a few more seconds, she turned to her House Manager. 'He needs a bath,' she told him and that was all there was to it.

"When dinner was over that night, I didn't go back to the pens. Instead, I went to a bathroom in the main house. First, this young man with soft hands trimmed and washed my hair.

'My God,' he exclaimed, 'what absolutely gorgeous hair you have. Thick. Black. And no Goddamn bugs. I absolutely detest bugs!'

"Then I had to shower with lots of hot water and soap and a stiff brush. I couldn't remember being so clean since I was a child. Next was a shave with a sharp razor and some kind of wonderful-smelling aftershave lotion. Lastly, I got a robe. It was dark blue, soft and thick as one of her bath towels. It even smelled clean.

"Going to her bedroom, I felt like I was walking the last mile. I was a green kid. All I knew about sex was what I'd heard the older guys talking about. The breeding shed and the prostitutes. And of course taking care of my own needs when I was horny. I'd lied, stolen, blackmailed and a lot of other things I wouldn't want to admit now, but I never felt lower, less human, than when I was standing in front of those doors, weak-kneed and sick to my stomach.

"The old hag was in bed, just like she'd been that morning. Only now she was drinking something pale and bubbly out of a long, thin glass and her hair was piled up on her head and her face was painted like some garish doll. She motioned for me to come to her. When I got to the bed, I could see she was naked, the lard starting at her eyebrows and rippling down her body like those dogs that look like someone let the air out of them.

"Her fingers were like stubby little sausages around my wrist as she pulled me to her and untied the belt on my robe. I went completely cold. Suddenly, even the thought of all the food I wanted and a warm bed and clothes didn't seem worth it.

'Pour me another glass of champagne,' she commanded, pointing to a big bottle in a silver tub filled with ice on her nightstand. 'You can have one too, if you'd like. Or maybe you'd like some chocolate.' Her lips parted and she showed her teeth. 'I never knew a young man who didn't like sweet things.'

"I handed her the glass and she drank it, all the time watching me over the rim of her glass. Finally, she pulled the covers off and patted the mattress next to her. I felt like she was summoning a pet dog, but I walked around and started to climb in.

'Take your robe off.'

"I shivered as the robe slipped off and I crawled into her bed. The mattress and the sheets were so soft I couldn't believe it. I had two big, white, fat pillows under my head. It was heavenly.

'You've never been with a woman, have you?'

"I could tell from her voice that she was making fun of me. I couldn't believe she'd found another way to humiliate me and we hadn't even started yet. I just shook my head and looked at the wall.

'That's all right,' she teased, 'I'll show you everything you need to know. Come here.'

"I slid over next to her and she grabbed me with those fat little hands of hers. God, I thought she was going to pull it off.

'Play with my breasts,' she mumbled.

"They were like huge melons, hanging down and laying on that monstrous gut of hers. Her nipples were big as my thumb, brown, like old rubber. When I touched them, she closed her eyes and made these sort of whimpering noises. I tried thinking about how much she had that I wanted, about the physical sensation in my cock. But nothing worked."

He smiled a tiny, slightly embarrassed grin. "I couldn't, as they say, rise to the occasion." A self-effacing chuckle rippled through him.

"Patience, as it turned out, wasn't Ms. Phelps strong suit. When it became obvious that nothing was going to happen, she flew into a rage. Slapped me so hard it knocked me out of bed on to the floor. Started yelling at me, calling me things I wouldn't repeat to Your Grace. Screamed for her guards. Had me taken back to my room. I figured that was that."

Mira felt him tremble again, a split second longer, more deeply than before.

"Two nights later, the guards came for me again after dinner. Same shower, same aftershave lotion, same robe. I couldn't believe I was lucky enough to be getting a second chance. I promised myself that no matter what, I'd go through with it."

The tremble became a shiver and he swallowed again, his breathing speeding up. She took his hand between hers and squeezed, hoping to help him finish this story, no matter what.

"But when I got to her room, she wasn't in bed. She was fully dressed, sitting at a little table covered with plates of meat and cheese, drinking wine. There were three big, burly men standing behind her. I recognized one of them as a broker she used sometimes. He looked like a gorilla—big, hairy, ugly.

"Ms. Phelps smiled when she saw me and it made my stomach turn.

'Be a good boy and take your robe off,' she said sweetly. 'Give us a good look at you.'

"I thought she meant to sell me.

"The ape came over to where I was standing and walked around me, checking my eyes and teeth and bones. Even my cock.

'Bend over,' he ordered.

"I'd had body searches before so when he put his ape paws on my ass, I braced myself. He shoved his finger up me, probing and feeling but it wasn't like anything that had ever happened to me before. It scared the hell out of me.

'Well?' she asked him, still smiling.

'Cherry?'

She nodded. 'Absolutely pure as the driven snow.'

'Okay,' he agreed simply.

'But it has to be here,' she told him firmly. 'On my bed. I want to watch.'

'Suit yourself,' he answered flatly.

"He turned to the other two men and nodded once. They came over, grabbed my arms and dragged me over to the bed. One of them shoved me face down into that soft, silky comforter and pulled my arms up behind my back. I felt them push my legs wide apart and put their heavy boots against my feet so I couldn't move.

'Hey, bitch,' the broker laughed from the other side of the bed, 'look here.'

"I managed to lift my head. He'd...he'd pulled down his pants and was naked from the waist down."

Robert's voice cracked and Mira saw a silent terror in them, somehow more terrible than anything else so far.

"I tried to get up but they just held me tighter.

'Ever see one like this?' he asked, pointing proudly to his cock. It was huge, like a long, thick, erect billy club. I heard Ms. Phelps gasp in startled appreciation.

'Your mistress says you're not much of a man. Wants to see how you do as a woman. So we're gonna play a little game called, Bang the Bitch. Hump the Whore.' He threw back his big, hairy head and roared with laughter. The two goons holding me down laughed too.

"He walked around the bed and I felt his paws on my ass again, pressing down and separating. His huge cock brushed itself up and down my ass as his hands kneaded my cheeks.

'Come on,' one of them urged, 'Shove it up him. Make the bitch's eyes bug out.'

'Okay, bitch. Here I come.' I felt the tip of his cock against my asshole..."

Mira realized that Robert was sweating, his voice nothing more than a ragged whisper.

"There was this moment that seemed to last forever. And then..."

She watched as the muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched, his lips moving slightly but no sound. Lightly, Mira ran her fingertips along his cheek, feeling her own tears, helpless to do anything for his anguish, wishing fervently that she'd listened to him when he'd asked...no, begged her not to press him.

"Pain," he finally managed to choke out. "I remember screaming. He was huge and...dear God...it hurt so bad. They laughed and joked and called me names. Bitch. Whore. When he was finished, he helped hold me down while the other two took their turn with me. And through it all, I heard her laughing, enjoying the whole thing.

"I...I don't remember much after that. Maybe I was in shock. I don't know. There's just nothing there. The next thing I remember clearly, I was in the hospital recovering from the rape and I had the Sillman and Ms. Phelps had sold me to the broker."

Robert sighed once again. "He kept me for awhile. Private stock, he used to say. He liked to 'play games'. Tie me down and...and..." He closed his eyes and shivered. "Sometimes he'd loan me to his friends or have 'parties' where I was the main entertainment. But finally, he got tired and sold me. Because of the Sillman, I was no good for breeding so I wasn't worth much."

He looked at her finally, smiling faintly and touching her face softly. "And I never was again. Until you walked into Svarek's."

"Oh God, Robert," she cried, hugging him as tightly as she could. "I'm so sorry. Not just for what happened to you but for making you live it out again. I had no idea...I would never..."

"Shoosh," he told her, wiping a tear from her cheek. "It's all right. Really. I'd closed myself off completely. I was worse than dead because I'd quit living. I'd forgotten how. You gave me back my life. It's only right that you should know what kind of a hell you rescued me from."

She pressed her face into his chest and listened to his heart return to normal, the trembling cease.

"I love you, Robert," she whispered.

"I love you too, Mira."

"It's all over now," she assured him. "We have our whole lives in front of us. Together."

He didn't answer her. Instead, he held her as closely as he could and gently kissed the top of her soft black hair.

## Chapter Thirteen

"I said," Caina repeated, exasperation drenching her words, "you have to stop dawdling and finish signing those papers. It's almost time for you to go upstairs and have your bath. Michele and her people will be here at three to do your hair, makeup and nails. Cocktails are at six and dinner is promptly at seven-thirty."

"Oh," Mira answered distractedly, looking down again at the stack of papers under her poised pen. Placing it on the topmost sheet, the pen began to move, almost on its own.

"For heaven's sake," the Proconsul pushed, "what's the matter with you this afternoon? You've been a million miles away since lunch."

"Nonsense," the Tarsheen tried to bluff, pretending to take an interest in the letter before her. "I'm fine. I was just thinking about the reception tonight. That's all. And besides, lately you've taken to mumbling under your breath. I can't hear you half the time."

"I agree that you don't hear what I'm saying, but it's because you aren't listening." She stopped and fixed Mira with a hard gaze. "You have something on your mind all right, but I'd be willing to bet it has nothing whatsoever to do with the reception."

"Caina," Mira responded, uncomfortable under the other woman's stare and irritated by her words, "everything else about me belongs to you, my subjects and the State. Surely I can be forgiven a few stray, private thoughts."

Saying nothing, Caina threw an angry glance toward the couch on the other side of the room.

"Perhaps," she remarked acidly, "you should curtail these long...solitary...lunches, locked here in your study. Obviously they aren't good for you."

"On the contrary," Mira retorted, "they are very good for me. Refreshing in both mind and body."

The old woman opened her mouth but Mira silenced the other woman, the regal tone of her voice cutting between them like a fine-edged stiletto. "As you've pointed out, Madam Proconsul, I have a great deal of work to accomplish before three. Unless you have further comment, I would appreciate being left to do it."

They stared at each other for several more tense moments. Mira could feel the other woman's anger in her own body, a hard knot of hate, directed not against her but catching her nonetheless in its wake like a powerful wave.

"Be sure to finish them *all*," Caina said finally, being careful to stress the last word.

As soon as the door shut behind her aide, Mira threw down her pen and leaned wearily back in her chair. Robert's words still churned in her brain, tearing at her heart.



Hers had always been a clean, orderly life, privileged even by the standards of her own class. Poverty, hunger, terror and despair all existed in the abstract—words on paper, pictures in books. The only death that had ever really touched her had been her mother and even that had been simple and dignified. A quiet passing from one place to another.

But Robert had brought those abstract words into her house, her life. Dumped them like filthy, foul-smelling manure on the fine carpet of her pleasant existence. Made them as real as his scarred flesh under her fingers.

It was such a long time ago, she told herself. The world had been very different then. No one, at least on her social level, beat their slaves anymore. Even the Army had grown more humane. None of her troops would have shot down an unarmed slave, even an accused Rememberer. While being a Harbinger was still a capital crime, now Robert's mother would have been allowed contact with her children until sentence was carried out. And two brothers would never have been separated. At least not under such horrific circumstances.

Surely the "home" Robert had been consigned to was the exception, a hideous aberration in a fundamentally sound, decent system.

Joey.

He was a grown man now. Older even than she was. Most likely, she reasoned, he'd had a very different life than his big brother. A safe, caring "home" as a child. An enlightened, thoughtful mistress. Certainly a useful trade. Perhaps, with a rudimentary education like Robert, even a position as a house servant.

Of course, she realized, suddenly sitting bolt upright, that was the solution! She could talk forever and not convince Robert that the system did not have to be entirely bad. That there were people such as herself who worked tirelessly, not just to end slavery but to make its existence at least bearable in the meantime.

Joey could show him how wrong he'd been. And what a gift she could give Robert. Something that would show more plainly, more eloquently than anything else, how much she truly did love him.

Unbidden, tears filled her eyes as she pictured the scene in her mind. She would find Joey, wherever he was, buy him and reunite him with his brother. Give them both their freedom and Joey would stand beside Robert when they declared themselves.

But how to do it?

Mira wrinkled her brow. Asking Caina was out of the question. In fact, a request for help to anyone close to her would simply bring unwanted questions, and sooner or later, her Proconsul's wrath.

Deep in thought, Mira's eyes fell on her computer on the credenza behind her. Robert had told her the community had been in the mountains...the Rockies...and that the Army had raided it when he was eight. She had his age, his parents' names, even a birth date. Not a great deal of information, certainly, but enough to begin a search.

Flipping the “on” switch, Mira tried to remember her geography. The Rockies? That would mean the Central Region. Cheyenne? No, Denver was the Regional Records Center. Carefully, she typed in the required address and waited as the computer made its connection. After making her way through several pages of information, she arrived at the area of the website she wanted – Records Search. Skipping down past the lines of information to be filled out, Mira went directly to the “comments” box. Directing her words to the Chief of Records, Central Region, Mira quickly gave the information she had, stated that she wanted the information as quickly as it could be found and that the whole matter was to be considered of the utmost confidentiality. All information was to be returned to her personally. Touching a special button on her keyboard produced an exact replica of her official seal on the screen. Satisfied, she hit the “send” button and her request disappeared into cyberspace. Smiling, Mira switched off the computer and returned to the stack of papers still waiting her attention.

*I love you so much, she thought gleefully, and soon you'll know just how much.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone at Mira's elbow jangled once. She didn't even look up from the papers she was signing as Caina answered it.

“Yes?”

“Mira,” replied a thin, hollow whisper.

“The Tarsheen is engaged,” she stated tartly. “I am the Proconsul. If you'll tell me what the matter concerns, I shall relay the message to Her Highness.”

“Please, Caina,” the barely audible voice whimpered.

Surprised, Caina paused. “May I ask who's speaking, please?”

“It's me, Caina,” the voice whispered, a little louder. “Mira...must talk to her...desperate...”

The Proconsul made an annoyed face and glared down at Mira. “It's Renee Baron,” she announced acidly. “Insists she *must* speak to you. Says she's ‘desperate’. If you ask me, she sounds more drunk than desperate.”

Without comment, Mira dropped her pen and motioned for the receiver.

“Renee? Renee, is that you?”

Several long seconds went by with only the sound of labored breathing at the other end of the line.

“Renee, stop this shit,” Mira barked into the phone. “You may have time to play these ridiculous games, but I don't. If you're so desperate to tell me something that you'd interrupt my work, spit it out or so help me, I'll hang up. I swear.”

More moments ticked away, Mira becoming increasingly irritated.

"Fine," she sighed in exasperation. "Have it your way. I have far and away more important things to do than humor you and your idiot pranks. I'm hanging up now. Call me when you're sober."

"Mira, please!" the voice wailed.

The terrified, mournful cry stopped Mira cold. Instantly, irritation disappeared, erased by genuine concern for her dearest friend. Whatever was wrong, it must be important. And very serious.

"Renee?" Mira demanded, sitting bolt upright in her chair. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"Come," the voice pleaded softly. "Now."

"Renee, for God's sake, what's wrong? Is Catherine all right?"

"Come," she repeated, so low Mira could barely hear her. "Now." There was a click and the line went dead.

Jumping up, Mira looked at her Proconsul. "Caina, have my car sent around immediately and then go upstairs and get my bag. I have to leave as quickly as possible."

Making no move, Caina eyed her. When she spoke again, her voice was as hard and disapproving as the look on her face. "Why?"

"I have to go to Renee," Mira responded quickly. "You heard her."

"Yes, I heard her. She's drunk. Not an unusual state for the good Senator, but certainly nothing to warrant you dropping everything and running off."

"She's not drunk," Mira insisted. "I'd know if she was. There's something wrong. Terribly wrong. I have to get to her. Help her."

"That's just the trouble," the other woman sniffed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mira evaded, reaching for the phone again, "but I don't have time for this. Just do as I say."

Unexpectedly, her Proconsul reached out and grabbed Mira's wrist, halting her hand in mid-flight. Aghast, she looked up into the old woman's cold, set face.

"Not until you listen to me," she replied, her voice dripping anger.

"Take your hands off me!" Mira squealed, struggling to escape. "You forget yourself, Proconsul."

The iron grip tightened like a handcuff. "I do not forget anything, Mira. Least of all your ridiculous need to 'fix' everything and everyone, regardless the cost or the worth of the project. Renee Baron is a childish, spoiled trollop without sense, morality or decorum. It continually amazes me that she hasn't been killed in a drunken car crash, shot by some jealous rival or died from a hideous and well-deserved sexually transmitted disease."

"Caina..."

"But instead of letting this arrogant, foolish whore take the consequences of her own actions and perhaps have some sense knocked into her, you've spent most of your life trying to spare her from reality and cleaning up her trail of chaos and debris. This is no different. If she is drunk, you will have wasted your precious time. And if there is something wrong, then perhaps it's time she faced it herself."

Mira had stopped squirming and now faced the other woman, fury as she could never remember seething inside her. Strangely though, when she spoke, her voice was tight and controlled. "Proconsul," she began slowly and evenly, "release me this instant. If you don't, I shall scream for my guards and place you under arrest."

They glared at each other a second longer. Reluctantly, Caina opened her fingers, Mira jerking her arm away, rubbing the crimson band that had formed around her wrist.

"I've known since we were children," she continued in that same flat voice, "that you've never liked Renee. I confess though, I had no idea your hatred ran to these depths. Be that as it may, I have neither the time nor the inclination to debate Renee Baron's shortcomings. I'm acutely aware that they're numerous and varied. But she is more than just my friend. I doubt we could be closer if we actually shared DNA. And I will *always* be there for her, regardless of the circumstances. Now you will do as I've commanded and we will consider the matter closed or you will leave this house and *never* return. Do you understand?"

"As Your Grace commands," Caina replied wearily.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was taking too long.

Mira could feel the mounting dread with every passing mile. In her gut, a cold ball of eels, knotted hopelessly in the pit of her stomach, writhed and snapped as it twisted out of control.

Outside, the familiar scenery slid noiselessly past, every second closing the distance between her and Renee.

"Come...now," she'd said, the words replaying over and over in Mira's brain. "Desperate." What could she possibly have meant?

Glancing at her watch again, she felt her stomach tighten once more, making her heart beat faster and breath come more rapidly.

Renee wasn't drunk, she was sure of that. Mira had always been able to gauge her friend, even when she was successfully fooling everyone else. She'd heard every sound her friend was capable of from unbridled laughter to howling shrieks of hysterical anger. But she could never remember the sound she'd heard on the phone...helpless, hopeless...

"Desperate," came to her again.

"Mark," she called anxiously into the intercom, "can't we go any faster?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The limousine curled around the circular driveway and slid to a stop. Before her chauffeur could get out, Mira had already thrown open her door and leapt out.

"Stay here," she ordered. "I'll call if I need you." Slamming the door, she ran up the stone steps, fanned out like the layers of a wedding cake from the concrete of the driveway up and backward to the huge, dark double entry doors. As she neared the top, a shiver of fear ran through her as she realized that one of doors was standing wide open. Her heart sped up.

Just inside the door, Mira paused to catch her breath and let her eyes adjust to the cool darkness after the glare of the outdoor sun.

"Renee?" she shouted, turning her head in all directions. "Renee. It's Mira. Where are you?"

Her voice died, swallowed up in the absolute silence of the empty house.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" Even the house servants seemed to have deserted the place.

Slowly, her panicked heart pounding with each step, Mira started down the long main hallway toward the circular staircase and the upstairs.

"Renee! For God's sake, answer me."

Panting from the exertion of hurrying, Mira paused at Renee's study doors to take a breath. She gulped a few large swallows of air, as if going underwater, turned the doorknob and the door swung slowly open.

Timothy was lying on the pure white carpet almost in the center of the room, sprawled on his stomach like a marionette with its strings suddenly cut. His face was turned to the side, a look of amazement etched permanently on his face, his huge brown eyes open wide, already clouding over. The hair on the back of his head was wet and matted with blood which had spilled down his neck and created a crimson pool on the snowy floor beneath him. Glass fragments of all different sizes covered him like ice shards, the remainder of a heavy crystal vase lying nearby.

Feeling queasy and dizzy, Mira edged uncertainly into the room and knelt beside the boy's body. Something inside her knew instinctively that he was beyond help but she forced herself to put trembling fingers on his neck. He was still warm but as she'd expected, there was no pulse.

Getting up quickly, Mira went to her friend. Renee was slumped like a rag doll behind her desk, an empty wineglass in front of her, a faraway stare on her blank face. The front of her simple, pale blue linen suit was splattered with drying blood and two large smudges where she'd wiped her hands.

"Renee," Mira called anxiously. No response.

"Renee," she shouted, grabbing her friend's shoulder and shaking it roughly.

After a few seconds, the other woman slowly turned and lifted her head, the vacant expression only slightly lessened.

"Mira?" she asked, sounding like a small, uncertain child.

"Dear God, Renee," Mira cried, leaning down into her friend's face, "what did you do? What happened?"

"Happened?"

"Timothy," she screamed, pointing to the body for emphasis. "What did you do to Timothy?"

The Senator's eyes followed Mira's finger and rested on Timothy's body. There was a long pause while she stared, seeming not to comprehend what she was seeing. Then, unexpectedly, she shuddered and looked away.

"He was stealing," she finally mumbled, so low Mira wasn't sure she'd heard correctly.

"Stealing?" Mira repeated, her anxiety rapidly giving way to confusion. "Stealing what?"

Renee dropped her head to her chest and mumbled something Mira couldn't understand. Sticking her finger under Renee's chin, she pulled her face up. "What in God's name could he have possibly been stealing that would drive you to do this?"

"Catherine," she whispered.

"Catherine?" Mira was almost too astonished to answer.

Her friend could only nod.

"All right, Renee," she said, taking a deep breath to collect herself, "tell me exactly what happened. From the beginning."

"I was supposed to be in the City this weekend," Renee began haltingly, almost mechanically. "For that meeting on education. But it was canceled because the keynote speaker got sick." Her voice faded and she turned her head to the desk. Picking up the empty wineglass, she looked around. "I...I need a glass of wine. I had a bottle here somewhere..."

"No wine," Mira told her sternly. "Tell me what happened."

"I...I can't think," she insisted plaintively. "I need a glass of wine."

Realizing it was no use trying to get any information like this, Mira went to the bar across the room and brought back an open bottle of red wine. Filling Renee's glass, she waited while the other woman drained half of it and leaned back in her chair. Several moments passed and Mira was afraid Renee had drifted away again.

"All right, Renee," she coaxed, "what happened?"

"I decided to come home and surprise Catherine. We don't spend enough time together." She looked up at Mira again, a pathetic sadness in her eyes. "We should spend more time together. I think that's one of the reasons we've drifted apart. Don't you think we should spend more time together, Mira?"

"Yes, Renee," she answered gently, "but you have to tell me what happened."

"I came in the back way and was going upstairs when I heard a noise in here. Like someone moving around. The door was open a crack and I peeked in and he was here, going through my desk."

She stopped again and took another gulp of wine as her eyes wandered aimlessly back to the body on the floor.

The scene began replaying itself in her mind as she started to speak again...

"What are you doing in here?" she demanded angrily, pushing open the door and striding across the room to where he was standing, his hand in an open drawer.

Timothy froze at the unexpected sight of her. "I...I..."

"What?"

"I was looking for a book," he managed to reply lamely. "For Miss Catherine. She...she told me she left it down here."

Renee narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Don't lie to me, you worthless little dick," she snarled. "Catherine hasn't been in here for I don't know how long. She certainly didn't leave a book here. And even if she had, she'd know better than to let a slave into my study. Especially you. Now, what are you doing in here?"

"I told you," he gulped, backing away from her as she came around the desk. "I was looking for a book for..."

Renee's open hand landed on his cheek, hard, snapping his head to one side. "How dare you so much as speak to me," she yelled, "much less lie." She slapped him again, this time drawing a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth. "Tell me or so help me, I'll have my guards in here and beat it out of you."

The only reply Timothy made was to keep backing up, moving toward the door as he rubbed his face.

As she took another step toward him, her foot caught on something on the floor by the corner of her desk. Glancing down, she saw an old, small blue canvas knapsack, a sliver of bright red silk spilled from the corner. Bending down, she pulled it, revealing a woman's blouse.

Stunned, Renee held it up, watching the young boy's eyes fill with real terror. Without taking her eyes off him, she reached down, grabbed the bag and dumped its contents. Two bras, two panties, a heavier blouse, two pair of jeans and two pair of white socks thudded onto the top of her desk.

"You sonofabitch!" she screamed, moving toward him again. "You were running away! With Catherine!" Blind, overwhelming hatred welled up in her.

Timothy bolted for the door. But he'd underestimated the enraged tigress he'd unleashed. Without thinking, she picked up the tall, leaded crystal vase from a table beside her and crossed the distance between them, raising the heavy object as she came. With a strength born of fury, she brought it down, catching him in the back of the head, just behind the left ear. There was a sickening blend of shattering glass, crunching bone

and a sharp squeal of pain. His body stiffened for a moment and then crumpled forward onto the carpet with a thud.

It took several moments for Renee to regain her senses and realize what had happened. She gazed dully at the stem of jagged, dripping glass in her hand, momentarily unable to connect it to the blood flowing out of the mangled skull beneath her. Unclenching her fist, it slid out of her grasp and she heard it plop on the carpet.

Time seemed to stop as she watched, paralyzed by the scarlet stain growing on the brilliant white background.

Suddenly, close by, there was a horrible anguished sound, like the wail of some dying thing and a blur flew in front of her, coming to rest on the floor beside the young man. The blur became a young woman.

"Oh God!" she screamed, kneeling on the wet floor. "Timothy!" It was a cry of pain as tears flooded her face. "No! Oh God, no! Please God, no!" She brushed at glass and blood, realizing even as she did so, it was no use.

"Catherine?" Renee tried to focus on her child, not quite comprehending why she should be having hysterics over this slave. She reached out and gently touched her daughter's shoulder. "Catherine?"

Instantly, the young girl pulled away, jumped to her feet and confronted her mother, fury and hate surging through her as she took in her mother's blood-soaked suit and the bloody vase.

"You killed him!" she shrieked. "You killed him, you bitch! You monster! How could you!"

"I...I don't understand Catherine..." her mother replied slowly, like an overtaxed machine struggling to cope with an unbearable burden.

"You killed Timothy! I loved him and you couldn't stand it, could you, you selfish, jealous bitch! I hate you! I hate you!"

"No, Catherine," she objected, trying to make some sense of her daughter's rantings. "He...he was trying to run away. I was just trying to stop a slave from running away. I have the right..."

"We were running way," Catherine taunted. "We were going as far away from you and your breeding shed and your stinking slavery as we could get! We were both going to break our chains and be free of you once and for all!"

"Please, Catherine..."

"Don't ever speak to me again!" Tears of hate and crushing sorrow washed over the girl and she collapsed beside the boy's body again, racked with sobs, unmindful of the broken glass.

Several moments went by as Renee looked down at her daughter, the haze in her mind slowly subsiding. Finally, she took Catherine's arm and managed to pull the distraught young woman to her feet.



Taking an arm in each hand and holding on tightly, Renee began speaking to her crying daughter. "He was using you," she murmured. "To get away. I...I couldn't let him just run away. Take you away. Hurt you. I told him to stop but he wouldn't. I had to make him stop."

"So you bashed in his skull," she screamed back, trying to escape her mother's grasp. "Let me go! Let me go!"

"It's all right," her mother continued, trying to soothe her daughter. "He was a slave. No good. It will be all right. You'll see."

"Without Timothy, nothing will ever be all right again! Not ever! I wish it was you lying there dead!" She tugged and squirmed, trying to get free. "Let...me...go..." As she flailed, her bloodstained hands caught her mother's dress, smearing her handprints across the fabric.

"Please, Catherine," Renee pleaded. "You have to understand."

"The only thing I understand is that the man I love is dead and you killed him! I hate you! I can't stand the sight of you! Let me go! I just want to be away from you!" And with one last burst of strength, she managed to free herself and back toward the door.

"Catherine, don't go." Renee, her panic renewed, took a step toward her daughter, but the young woman backed away even further.

"The only way you can keep me here is kill me too!"

"Don't say that, dear..."

"I never want to see or hear you again! And I will hate you as long as I live!"

Before Renee could do or say anything else, Catherine dashed frantically out the door...

"By the time I got to the front door," Renee finished sadly, "her car was already careening out through the gates. That's when I called you."

She raised a stunned, tear-stained face to Mira, her eyes filled with an almost childlike look of pain.

Mira's heart wrenched—for the boy dead on the floor, guilty of nothing more sinister than being in love. For her goddaughter, alone, out of her mind with grief. And for her dearest friend, frightened, confused, desperate for her to somehow untangle this mess.

At last, she patted Renee's head gently. "Why don't you go upstairs and lie down," she soothed. "I'll handle things now. Call the police and..."

"Police?" Renee asked groggily.

"They have to be notified. There has to be an official report and they'll dispose...dispose of the body."

"But he was a slave," Renee said, looking up at Mira plaintively. "He was running away. Stealing. I had the right..."

"I know, dear," Mira calmed her friend. "It's a technicality. Nothing to concern yourself about. But it's the law. Now please, let me help you upstairs."

"Catherine," she whimpered. "What about Catherine?"

"We'll find Catherine," the Tarsheen reassured the other woman. "She can't have gone far. I'll tell the police and they can start—"

"No." The sudden firmness in Renee's voice brought Mira up short. "No police."

"But Renee, it's the—"

"I don't care what it is," she replied coldly, fixing Mira with hard eyes. "I won't have anyone, let alone the police, asking questions about my daughter and this...this piece of shit." She gestured toward the middle of the room but didn't take her eyes off Mira. "I won't have them making insinuations, thinking filthy thoughts." She shook her head resolutely. "No," she repeated.

"Renee, be reasonable. There are procedures to be followed. You can't just—"

"I can do anything I want," she continued, ice coating her words. "I'll have my house staff clean up this mess and he can be buried in the slave cemetery with the rest of his miserable kind. And you'll find Catherine and bring her home."

"Me?" Mira cried in surprise. "Why would you think I could find her?"

"Because this is your fault."

"My fault?" Mira was now completely confused.

"Yes," Renee told her bitterly. "You and that sonofabitch dick you've been fucking."

"I don't understand, Renee. What are you talking about?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about." The ice in Renee's voice was being replaced with the fire of anger. "First you convinced me to lease Timothy to you, promising me you'd keep Catherine and him apart. Then that bastard slave of yours, Robert, filled his empty head with a lot of bullshit about running away. Stealing my daughter like a common thief."

"Renee," Mira tried to reason, "you don't know what you're saying."

The other woman rose to her feet and faced the Tarsheen, hate rolling off her in hot, almost tangible waves. "I know exactly what I'm saying," she responded simply, "and so does everyone else. God knows you haven't taken any pains to hide it. Especially after all your high and mighty talk about me."

"Renee..."

"No, Mira. You've been fucking him like a rabbit in heat. Thinking that your little secret's safe and that you can go on being the spotless arbiter of everyone else's life. Well, playtime's over and the bill is due. Either get that lying piece of shit to tell you

where Catherine's gone and bring her home, or so help me God, I'll denounce you both."

Mira felt as if Renee had punched her. Stunned, both by her friend's words and attitude, she took a step back, fear and confusion running through her like ice water. "Denounce us?" she managed to croak. "You...you can't be serious."

"Why?" Renee snarled caustically. "Because you're the Tarsheen? Because we're friends? You talk so prettily about decency and morality and then fuck with that lying, conniving pig. Well, newsflash, Your Highness. You have no friends. Only subjects. And when they find out that their beloved, virgin ruler is not only a hypocrite and a common whore but screwing a Rememberer in the bargain, they'll be screaming for your blood. And I'll be front and center leading the pack."

"No one will believe you," Mira tried to bluff. "You have no proof."

"You'd be amazed at what people will believe. Do you think your house slaves or Jennifer Pontier or even Caina would lie for you in open court? Go to prison for you? And as for proof, there'll be plenty of proof when Victoria Keller gets finished with your precious little dick."

For Mira, this was the final horror... The implication of what her friend was saying was more awful even than the threat of denunciation. "Oh God, Renee," she whispered, almost afraid to believe her ears. "You wouldn't...couldn't do that. You know as well as I do what she is. Please, don't even think that."

"I don't care about him. Or you. I only care about Catherine. So if you want to save both your asses, find my daughter and bring her back to me."

"But —"

"No 'buts', Mira. Either, or. There's no in between here. And I won't wait forever for you to make up your mind."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dead?" Robert repeated slowly, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Yes, dead," Mira reaffirmed wearily. "I saw his body on the carpet in Renee's study. She cracked his skull with a big crystal vase. Said she came home unexpectedly and found him rummaging in her desk. He had a knapsack with some of Catherine's clothes in it. She figured out they were running away and she went crazy. She was just trying to stop him. She didn't mean to kill him. It was an accident."

"Do you believe that?" he asked quietly.

With a deep sigh, Mira sank into the chair behind her desk and shut her eyes tightly. Immediately, Timothy's body, lying in his own blood, appeared in her mind's eye. "Does it matter?"

"No, I suppose not. Legally, she had the right to kill him, accident or not." Mira detected the underlying note of accusation mixed with sarcasm, but she was too tired to open her eyes.

"You know," she told him softly, "it's ironic that you should blame me for this. Renee does too."

"Why would she blame you for her killing a helpless, innocent boy?"

She opened her eyes and gazed into his face for several moments. "Because," she finally responded, "I convinced her to lease Timothy to me. Because I didn't keep them apart. Because you and I are sleeping together. And mostly because I'm harboring a Rememberer who was helping her daughter run away with a mere slave."

If her words surprised him, he didn't show it. He looked down at her, those remarkable chocolate-colored eyes calm and thoughtful.

It was all there. In his face, in his silence.

"I'm glad you're not going to waste my time by denying it," she sighed.

"Mira..." he began but she shook her head and held up her hand.

"Please, Robert, I know you're a Rememberer. I think some part of me's known from that first time, in Svarek's. You looked up and it was like you knew I was there, even when I knew you couldn't possibly. And then, in my office. It was like you could read my mind." She smiled ruefully. "I suppose on top of everything else, you're telepathic."

"Not in the way you mean," he replied seriously. "I'm an Empath."

"An Empath? What the hell is an Empath?"

Robert made a small shrugging movement with his shoulders. "It's a little complicated," he apologized. "Do you remember the old black man I told you about? The one who took care of me the day I was whipped?"

She nodded.

"Well, he started me out. My heart had been so filled with hate, suspicion and despair for so long, I thought there wasn't any room for anything else. And the only thing on my mind was how was I going to survive another day. But Isaiah changed all that. Before the whipping, he'd told me he'd been watching me. That he knew I was smart and sly and had the will to survive. That I had something more. Something special."

"This Empath thing?"

"Uh-huh. He said I 'felt' people. Got behind their eyes and into their heads. Sometimes I even felt like I knew what they were going to do or say. Said he'd checked around and found out I'd been part of a real family so he figured that one or both of my folks had the same power."

"And what did you say?" Almost in spite of herself, Mira was being drawn into Robert's story.

"Nothing. Literally. I couldn't believe he knew so much about me. I'd always thought being able to sense what was going on in people was normal. That everyone did it. I remember when I was little, my dad would laugh and say that it amazed him

that my mom knew what he was thinking but loved him anyway." A faraway look came into his eyes and he grew quiet for several moments.

Mira watched him, feeling as helpless as she had in Renee's study.

"Isaiah said I was an 'Empath' and that it was time for me to learn how to control it. Use it to help others instead of just myself. Of course, I didn't believe him. Hell, I didn't even understand him."

"And then came the whipping?" Mira added.

Robert nodded once. "After Isaiah poured the alcohol on my back and I passed out, I had a dream. I'd been wandering around in the dark and cold for what seemed like forever. I was frightened. Then suddenly, Isaiah appeared with a bright lantern. He smiled and told me he'd come to take me home. We started walking and then it was daylight and we were in the mountains. Like the ones I grew up in. It was spring and the sun was shining and the air was clean and warm and there was grass and wild flowers and white clouds in a blue sky. It...it did feel like home."

Tears stung behind Mira's eyes.

"We walked up and up and up and finally we came to this rocky crag overlooking the whole thing. I could see in every direction for miles and miles. Isaiah tapped his walking stick on the ground and told me that this was where I was going to build my fortress. I started to ask him what he meant but he smiled and tapped his stick again and there was a big block of smooth, beautiful granite. Almost like the mountains themselves.

'This is your first stone,' he said with a laugh. 'My present to you to get you started. The rest you gotta do fer yerself, but I know you can do it.'

'What do you mean?' I was desperate to know.

'This is going to be your place. Where you can come and be free. Where nothing, no one, can ever hurt you again. You're not alone anymore. You're one of us now. A Rememberer. I'll start your teaching. If you leave here, don't worry. We'll find you. We'll help you build your fortress. And when your fortress is built, you'll be ready to help some other young man build his.'

"I don't understand," Mira said quizzically. "What do you mean, 'fortress'?"

Robert stared at her like a child to whom he was struggling to explain a difficult, abstract concept. Not only did he know she couldn't understand, but he was revealing something he'd spent years hiding. He was not only showing this woman, his owner, his fortress, he was literally taking her there. Letting her know the secret and giving her the keys, not just to his but to countless others. Single-handedly, she could bring down the whole network.

Trust was a luxury he'd long since abandoned. Now, he was about to take a giant leap of faith for another luxury he probably couldn't afford either.

"Rememberers," he told her solemnly, "pass on the knowledge and the wisdom that's been suppressed and hidden, not just since men and women separated this time,

but for all time when the few powerful were afraid of the many powerless. Knowing who to pass the information on to has always been as important as what was passed on. Not just for the survival of the keepers, but of the lore itself. Because it's silent and can only be sent and received between sensitive people, empathy is a major way for Rememberers to find and connect with each other. But it takes years of work, practice, silence, to become really good at it. And it requires that every Rememberer have a fortress. Somewhere in the mind, the soul, where he can go and be absolutely still, absolutely at peace. Detached from everything and everyone. Empty and ready to receive, full and ready to share."

All he could see in her eyes was total confusion.

"You asked me once about the Sillman. What it was like to have one all those years. I told you it was just something I got used to and forgot about."

Nodding silently, she felt like she was being pulled behind a team of racing horses, powerless to direct them or even follow. All she could do was hold on for dear life and hope they reached their destination in one piece.

"It seems simple enough. A little device that reduces blood flow to the penis and so makes an erection impossible. Touted as 'birth control' with no harmful side effects." Bitter sarcasm seeped into his voice. "But the Sillman was a special kind of torture, not just of the body, but the mind and soul as well. It takes away the ability but not the need. It's like starving and having your mouth wired shut. I was eighteen years old, in the full heat of my manhood. I'd been comforting myself for a long time. Waiting for the time when I'd be allowed a chance at one of the prostitutes or the breeding shed or even the mistress. After the Sillman, I couldn't even relieve my own need. It was a gnawing, painful hunger that didn't ever go away."

"Oh, Robert," Mira whispered, taking his hand in hers and kissing it. "I'm so sorry." Tears rolled down her cheek.

Pulling her to him, he felt her tears spreading on the fabric of his shirt. She felt so small and helpless in his arms.

"It's all right, Mira," he told her. "It actually helped me. Isaiah showed me how to let go of the pain. Get back to the mountains. Build my fortress. Helped me escape. He taught me a lot of other things that helped keep me alive. Including how to recognize other Rememberers. Who to trust. Who to avoid."

"But how?"

"Mostly, they found me. Thoughts, pictures, sometimes even words would appear in my mind. Usually at night because that's when I was alone and more relaxed and because it's safer then. Not so many Listeners."

"Listeners?"

"Some people," he continued softly, "are 'natural' Empaths. It's such a part of them, mostly they don't even know they have it. But it makes them open and caring and they're always trying to help people, to live decent lives. My mother was like that. And so are you. It's why you fight so hard to end slavery. You just know in your heart of

hearts that it's wrong, even though you can't say exactly why. That's how I knew you were there, outside the door at Svarek's. Without realizing it, you reached out to me and, for want of a better word, I 'felt' you."

He reached out and tenderly touched her cheek with his fingertips.

"And in your office, I was almost overwhelmed by you, literally. Behind that cool, regal exterior was a warm, sensitive, loving human being. For me, it was like shocking a dead, lifeless heart back to life. The feel of you flooding through me like racing blood was almost more than I could stand. Like some kind of animal who's spent his whole life in the cold and dark who's suddenly thrust into the warmth and brightness of a sunny day."

"I...I think I felt something too," she confessed, raising her face and smiling slightly.

Robert smiled back. "I know you did. It's the reason I tried contacting you. The night you were going out and were dressed all in red. I sent my thoughts out to find you. See if I could touch you and get you to come to me. And you did."

"I'm glad."

"But not every Empath is a Sharer. Some are Listeners. They use their gift to gain power, take advantage, cause pain. They get inside people and manipulate them. Sometimes for profit but sometimes just because they can. Cruelty becomes a way of life for them."

Jennifer Pontier's name leapt to his lips but he fought it back. Mira would never believe, never understand what her Overseer was, what she was truly capable of. She might even be naïve enough to confront Pontier. That this cold, black-souled creature, if discovered, could harm, even kill Mira was a real possibility. His own slow, agonizing death at her hands was a foregone conclusion.

"If these people have such terrible power," she whispered, "how...how do you...your kind...survive?"

"Sometimes we don't," he told her calmly. "More than one Rememberer's been lulled into revealing himself to a clever Listener. Someone who's managed to pick up even the smallest signals. The only saving grace is that Listeners are so blinded by their small power, they never see how great the power can be."

Mira sighed. "So now that you've told me everything about you being a Rememberer, I truly am a Harbinger and," she smiled up at him weakly, "my oldest and dearest friend has threatened to denounce us because you were helping Catherine and Timothy run away. Probably by way of the Railroad. It is true, isn't it?"

"The first time I ever saw Catherine, I was in the corner of the library, hunched over the dictionary looking up words. She came in through the French doors and didn't see me. Timothy came in from the garden right after her. She closed the doors and they were in each other's arms." He gazed down into her face.

"If you could have seen them, Mira. Felt them. It was almost as beautiful as you and me. Not just the heated passion of two young people. Love. Real and strong. It made me

feel good just being near them." He paused. "They were terrified when they realized they weren't alone. But as soon as I touched Catherine, I felt her strength and desire for him. When I touched him, I felt...I felt what your dear friend had done to him in the breeding shed. I knew then how much they wanted to be together. How wrong it was for them not to be. If it's any consolation to you, I didn't put the idea in their heads...it was always there. And it was Catherine who came to me, not Timothy."

"How did she know?"

"How did you know?"

"What did she say?"

"That she and Timothy wanted to be together. Away from her mother. Away from here. Like everybody else, she'd heard rumors about the Railroad. She wanted to know how they could find it."

"And you told her."

Robert was silent.

"Why now?" Mira wondered out loud. "I had the situation in hand. I was working on solving the problem. In time, I could have worked things out. Why the hell did they have to pick now to run?"

Still, Robert said nothing. But as she watched him, his eyes calm and empty, never leaving her face, a picture began to form in her mind. Nothing substantial, like wisps of fog swirling together. And then she understood.

"Oh dear God," she cried, the reality hitting her like a shower of ice water. "Catherine's pregnant, isn't she? She's carrying his child?"

There was no need for Robert to answer. His silence told her everything.

"Where is she, Robert?"

"I don't know exactly."

"But you know where they were going to meet the Railroad," she insisted. "That's where she's going now. She doesn't have that much of a head start. If you tell me, I can go after her. Reason with her."

"Let her go, Mira."

"But you don't understand. If I don't bring her back..."

"I know," he told her. "But she wants to be free. She wants her child to be free. She has that right. Everyone has that right."

"I understand that," she responded, her anxiety growing, "and I'll fix everything later. But I won't get the chance unless I find Catherine and convince her to come back. And if you think Renee won't denounce us, you're wrong. Catherine's her whole life. If she doesn't come back, nothing else will matter. Not our friendship. Not my crown. She'll see us both in hell and be glad."

"I've been to hell," he replied softly. "It doesn't hold any terror for me."

"Well it does for me," she yelled.



"So you want me to sell Catherine out as the price of our freedom?"

His meaning stabbed at her and she put her hand on his cheek, her voice softened. "I'm sorry, Robert. You know I didn't mean it that way."

He kissed her fingers gently, but said nothing.

"I love you," she whispered.

"Then let me take you to the Railroad."

She looked up at him, astonished. "But...but I thought..."

"Come away with me, darling. Today. Now. Here, we'll always be the Tarsheen and the slave. Here, we'll never have any chance. Let me take you to a place where there's only Robert and Mira. Where we can stand up and declare ourselves. I want to hold your hand and kiss you and not give a good God damn who sees. I don't want to hide in the dark any more. I want you. I want us to be free. Both of us."

Mira's eyes widened as she listened to him. "Oh, Robert," she breathed. "You know I want that too."

"Then throw a few things in a bag and I'll get a couple of books and we'll disappear." Those wonderful eyes danced. "We'll be long gone before anyone knows."

"I...I can't just leave, Robert. If I run away now, Renee won't have to denounce us. We'll be denouncing ourselves. Not to mention that everything I've worked for, struggled for. The anti-slavery cause. It'll all collapse. Be lost." The light in his eyes disappeared.

"It's already lost," he explained. "It was lost a long time ago. And there's nothing you can do about it but accept that fact. Catherine has and she'll see that her child does too. You can't stop it and you can't fix it."

"I have to try, Robert. I have to try. Please help me."

The moments drew out between them. Finally, he heaved a resigned sigh. "You'll have to dress down a lot," he mumbled. "It's a very simple place. And you can't go in your limo. I'll draw you a map."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Thank you, Robert my love," she told him happily. "It will be all right. It will. I promise you. You'll see."

"Dress warmly," he replied simply. "It'll be cold."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tires crunched on the gravel of the deserted lot as Mira pulled the SUV to a stop and shut off the engine. In the gathering twilight, the garish red neon sign in the window of the small building in front of her announced, "BERT'S". Getting out, the slamming of the door echoed hollowly. There was no other sound except a chill wind whispering through the tall pines that surrounded the elderly, weather-beaten building.

She'd been driving for more than three hours, following Robert's directions, traveling basically east, the roads getting narrower, the scenery more rural. This little

diner was the first sign of people she'd seen for almost an hour. There hadn't even been a car on the two-lane blacktop road for at least a half hour.

Going slowly up the gray wooden steps, Mira heard the sound of denim rubbing on denim in the quiet. It had been a long time since she'd worn jeans in public, but she was glad for both the warmth and the anonymity. While not really frightened, she was acutely aware of how far out of her element she was. And how alone.

The door squealed as she opened it and banged shut behind her. A row of empty, dark brown stools sat in front of a counter running the length of the little building, three small booths to the right of the front door, three to the left, facing out to the parking lot, visible through the front windows. Two bright lights illuminated the space from overhead and light poured out from a pass-through window to the kitchen. Looking around, she didn't see anyone.

Taking a deep breath, Mira tried to calm herself and concentrate on what Robert had told her. Take a seat in the third...no, the second booth on her right. She slid into the worn brown vinyl and waited, nervously folding her hands on the old wooden tabletop, craning her head in all directions.

Without warning, the swinging door between the kitchen and dining room flew open and a huge man, covered by a dirty apron that had probably once been white, stomped toward her. Stopping at the table, he loomed over Mira, causing her anxiety to accelerate directly to fear.

A single, plastic, laminated piece of eight and a half by eleven white paper appeared in his grizzly bear paw and slapped down in front of her. Mira jumped, seized by an urge to run but knowing she was totally blocked by this gargantuan creature.

"Coffee?" he growled.

"Yes...yes, please," she managed timidly. The sight of him almost made her forget what Robert had told her. As the man turned, she found her voice again. "And...and a piece of strawberry pie...if you have it."

The bear turned back to her, suspicion showing in his watery, pale eyes. "Strawberries is outta season," he rumbled menacingly.

"Then...then perhaps I could have apricot," she continued, trying to remember exactly how Robert had told her the conversation must go. "But only if the apricots are local."

A hand the size of a baseball mitt rubbed the top of his smooth, cannonball head. "No pie." Mira thought she detected just the merest softening of his voice. But those eyes were still full of mistrust. And he was obviously waiting for her to say something else.

"All right. I'll have the carrot cake. Without frosting, please."

He nodded and went back behind the counter. In a moment, he returned with a big white mug of steaming coffee and a square of cake, the rich smell of spice wafting to her.

"I hope this will be enough," Mira said quietly, sticking her hand in her jacket pocket and retrieving a five-dollar bill and a Lincoln-head penny. "It's all I have." Carefully, she laid the penny, face up, on the bill and slid them to the edge of the table.

With a nod, he picked them up. "Better eat," he told her gruffly. "Coffee'll get cold." And he disappeared back through the kitchen doors.

The sight of the cake made her queasy. She took a small sip of coffee and watched the swinging doors. Robert had told her that the code would tell the conductor she was looking for the Railroad, but that it would be up to the individual to decide whether or not to let her pass. He'd also made sure that she understood that the people, places and code changed often. It was a subtle statement that while he trusted her, he wasn't willing to jeopardize anyone else.

As she drained the last of her coffee, the man reappeared. He set three dollar bills and some change down. "Ladies' room's out back," he mumbled and was gone again.

Leaving the money on the table, Mira slid out of the booth and went outside. It took a moment for her to locate the small red arrow pointing to the rear of the building.

As she rounded the corner, Mira spotted a small, vine-covered gazebo about twenty feet away. Someone had hung a lantern in the doorway. Hurriedly, she moved to it, up the steps and into the little wooden structure.

It was empty, the layer of dirt on the floor and bench circling the inside, undisturbed. Her heart sank.

"What are you doing here?"

Mira started at the voice, spinning around.

Catherine stood just inside the doorway, dressed in black pants, heavy black jacket and boots. Her face was set and hard as her tone.

"Oh, Catherine," Mira breathed in relief, taking a step toward her.

The young woman put out her hand. "Take another step," she warned, "and I'm out of here."

"All right, Catherine."

"I asked you a question," she repeated.

"I came to see you. Talk to you."

"You mean my mother sent you to try and talk me into going back. Well, you made the trip for nothing."

"Can't we at least talk?" Mira cajoled. "You and I have always been able to talk. Since you were a little girl."

"I'm not a little girl anymore. And there's nothing to talk about," Catherine told her flatly.

Mira shivered. "Please, Catherine," she pleaded. "Can't we even go back in the diner? Have a cup of coffee?" She paused and looked at her goddaughter anxiously. "It's not good for you to be out in the cold like this. Especially not in your condition."

"My condition is fine," she responded proudly. "I'm going to have a child by the man I love. The man my loving mother murdered."

"For God's sake, Catherine," Mira said, her voice rising slightly, "you can't honestly believe your mother would...could, do anything like that on purpose. She was out of her mind with fear and concern for you. It...it was an accident."

"It was murder," the young woman insisted. "I know it and you know it. You just don't want to face it."

"Catherine..."

"No," she answered sharply, closing the distance between them. "Don't you think I know what my mother is? Do you think I've somehow escaped her mean, petty behavior? Her selfishness? Do you think I haven't heard the whispered gossip and the self-righteous snickers?" Catherine's voice cracked. "That I don't know why she bought Timothy in the first place?"

A tear trickled down her cheek and Mira felt her heart clench.

"It wasn't a matter of me wanting a slave. It was wanting *that* slave. You know how Mother is about her toys. She gets bored and doesn't want them anymore but she doesn't want anyone else to have them either. She murdered Timothy because she was losing him, to me no less, and she couldn't stand it."

"It was an accident," Mira repeated, perhaps with a little less certainty. "But...but even if it wasn't, what do you want from me? It's done."

"I want her punished," Catherine fired back. "I want her to answer for what she did."

"You know as well as I do, Catherine," Mira tried to reason, "the law is on your mother's side. Legally..."

"I don't care about your Goddamn fucking law!" the young woman screamed, moving to within inches of Mira. "She killed him and she should have to pay. Not just for Timothy's life but for mine and our child's too."

"There isn't anything I can do. No matter how I might feel personally, that's how it is. Being the Tarsheen doesn't put me above the law, Catherine. It makes me the law."

Suddenly, the fire seemed to go out of the young woman and she smiled. At least the corners of her mouth turned up. But Mira could see there was no mirth in it.

"Ah yes, the law," she mocked. "Tell me, Your Grace, since you have a law that erases a human life like so much chalk dust, do you have one that can force me back to my mother's house? Make me stay? Are there chains for children as there are for other slaves?"

"You know there aren't," Mira sniffed, wounded as much by the other woman's tone as by her words. "And you know you don't have to go home to your mother's. You can come home with me. Later, when things have settled down, you and your mother can talk...work this out."

The smile froze and became suddenly ugly.

"And my child?"

"Of course, dear," Mira replied, tears forming in her eyes. "You're both wanted, welcome. Not just by me. When your mother's had time...to get used to the idea...to adjust..."

"And if she doesn't? What then? What becomes of me and my child?"

"You have my solemn word," Mira told her gently, "not just as your ruler but as your godmother and someone who loves you like her own child that you and your daughter will live under the seal and protection of the Tarsheen as long as the Office exists."

Mira's words seemed to amuse Catherine, as if she'd said something the girl had been waiting for.

"My, my," she continued with exaggerated politeness. "Your Grace has worked everything out so carefully, so neatly. Most impressive. Most impressive, indeed."

She watched Mira's befuddled face for a few more moments, seeming to enjoy some private joke. Finally, she crossed her arms and leaned toward Mira. "However, Your Grace has neglected one small detail. Suppose my child is a son?"

The word fell between them like a boulder. A son? Such an idea had never even occurred to Mira. Stunned silence was the only answer she could give and her astonished bewilderment seemed to please the young woman immensely. Catherine giggled.

"An interesting notion, isn't it?" she needled. "No anonymous donor sperm, males neatly separated out and females implanted in a nice, sterile doctor's office. Just two people in love coming together to give that love a physical form. Take the best of that love and create a new life. But the old-fashioned way is so messy, so unpredictable. A crapshoot, they call it in the breeding shed."

Tears shone in her eyes, but didn't fall. Carefully, she laid her palms on her flat stomach. "We were in your library when I told Timothy," she murmured softly. "He put his hand on my belly and cried. Cried because he was so happy, wanted the baby, me, so much. And I cried because I knew it couldn't happen. It was then we decided to run. Robert knew about us and I just knew there was something...something good and decent about him. And I knew he'd help us. I can't believe he'd betray us like this."

"He hasn't betrayed you, dear," Mira said quickly. "He only told me because I begged him. Because he knows how much this means to me. How much I love you."

"But love doesn't change the law, does it?"

Mira sighed. "No, Catherine, it doesn't. I'm sorry."

"Then tell me, Your Grace," Catherine asked caustically, "what does the law say about the male offspring of a slave?"

"What?" Mira was engulfed by an icy wave of fear.

"You heard what I said. You're the Tarsheen, surely you must know such a basic, fundamental property law."

"Don't do this, please."

"Answer me, damn you!" Catherine snarled. "What's the law? Tell me!"

"All male offspring of a slave," Mira recited wearily, "are automatically deemed the property of the slave's owner."

"So my son would belong to my mother," she pushed. "She could take him, wet and squalling from my womb and sell him to whoever was handiest. Or she could simply have me strapped to a table and 'cleaned out' as she likes to put it."

"Your mother wouldn't do that," Mira insisted hotly.

"Why not? She murdered his father!"

"All right," Mira conceded grudgingly. "There is a chance the child could be a male. It is, as you pointed out, a crapshoot. But there's just as much chance that you could have a daughter."

"So?"

"So you don't want your daughter growing up in some community, do you? Living in poverty and fear. Never knowing if there'll be enough to eat or if the Army will raid. Dirty, poorly educated, nothing to look forward to. I know you better than that. Come home with me, Catherine."

"No."

"You can be tested. Find out if you are carrying a daughter or a male."

"I don't care about that," Catherine replied. "I'm carrying Timothy's baby and that's all that matters. Why can't you understand that?"

"I do understand," Mira pressed. "That's why I'm asking you to think about the baby. You need proper prenatal care. Vitamins. Plenty of healthy food. And the best obstetrician to deliver her. In a clean, modern, well-equipped hospital."

"My baby and I will be fine," she answered, catching Mira's unconscious use of "her".

"How can you say that? Do you even know where you're going? How long will it take for you to get there? And what will you find at the end? A group of criminals and outcasts, scratching out a hand-to-mouth existence like a pack of hunted animals. Is that what you're going to throw your life, your child's life, away for? And why? To strike out, to 'punish' your mother for what happened to Timothy? For God's sake, Catherine, be reasonable. Think."

"I have thought, Mira," the young girl replied softly, the anger dissipated and replaced with a weary resignation. "In fact, that's about all I've done since I realized I was pregnant. If I have a son, my mother can destroy him as simply as she did Timothy. Just pretend they never existed. And if I have a daughter, you've offered us your protection. But what can you protect us from, really? Can you protect her from my mother's hatred, her violence? Can you protect her from the labels and the whispers of the adults? From the taunts and name-calling of other children? Can you protect her from the inevitable day when she asks what happened to her father?"

Her voice caught again and she had to stop to catch her breath before she could continue. "Can you protect me from the rage that makes me want to kill my mother? The picture of Timothy, dead, that I'll carry every day and night the rest of my life? The pain and the grief that eat away at me like slow acid? Tell me what you can protect us from, Your Grace."

Tears flowed silently down Mira's face.

"Do you know what Timothy was doing in my mother's study?" Catherine asked quietly.

Mira shook her head.

"He was looking for his bill of sale. He said someday, he wanted to be able to show it to our child. He wanted to be able to tell our child how much we loved each other, loved him or her. And how much we wanted to be free, wanted them to be free. I told him I thought he was being stupid. That we should just go. But he told me that it was important to him. Took my backpack, said for me to finish packing and he'd meet me downstairs."

She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "But I was the one who was stupid. I didn't understand at all what he meant. Not until I saw him lying there." The tears finally overwhelmed her and she dissolved in sobs.

Gently, Mira reached out to take the girl in her arms, but Catherine flailed at her. "Don't touch me," she sputtered, struggling to pull herself together. "I know now how important it was, is. To Timothy so that he could be physically free, not just from my mother but from the tyranny of the whole fucking slave system. So that we could be together, so that our child, son or daughter, could be born and live free. And for me too. So that I could finally realize that the system chains us too...you, me, my mother...women as much as men. It wraps us in these rich, luxurious silk ropes. Pulls a soft, velvet blindfold over our eyes. Swaddles us in chocolate, and champagne, and beautiful ball gowns. Makes us believe that we're somehow 'entitled' to what we have. Separates us from the reality of the suffering and misery that every bite of food, every pretty dress actually costs some other human being. And worst of all, eventually convinces us that they aren't really human beings at all."

"Catherine..."

The young woman shook her head and sniffed. "Timothy paid for this trip. For me and the baby. I intend to see that we finish it." She glanced at her wrist. "It's late. I have to be going. Tell Robert thank you. Goodbye, Mira," and she turned to go.

"Catherine," Mira yelled anxiously. "Your mother..."

"I don't care what you tell my mother," Catherine sighed, turning her head. "Tell her you couldn't find me. Tell her she won't ever see or hear from me again. That she should think of me as dead. If she mourns her whole life, maybe she'll understand a particle of the loss I feel."

"Your mother's threatened to denounce Robert and me as Rememberer and Harbinger if you don't come home with me," Mira blurted out. She'd promised herself

that she would reason with Catherine, convince her to come home on her own. Not try to force her home with guilt. But it was obvious the other woman wasn't going to listen to her and Mira was suddenly frightened, desperate to get Catherine to understand the gravity of the situation.

Stopping, Catherine slowly turned back and searched Mira's face, as if trying to decide if this was the truth or just another ploy.

"I see. That explains a lot."

"Don't you understand, Catherine?" Mira felt a rush of panic. "Your mother means it. And with you gone, she won't have any trouble making her case. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes, I know. But as you pointed out, no matter how I might feel about it personally, that's how it is." There was no emotion on the girl's impassive face, in those deep gray eyes.

"Don't play word games with me, Catherine!" she shouted. "You talk about your mother's petty, selfish behavior but you're no better. I can't punish your mother so you're going to punish me. And Robert."

"I'm sorry, Mira," the girl sighed. "Robert deserves better."

"Is that all you've got to say!" Mira was aghast at her goddaughter's indifference. "You know as well as I do what this means. How can you just stand there and do nothing?"

"You know, I used to think you were the smartest, kindest, most good-hearted person I ever knew. A little naïve maybe, but still trying to do the right thing. I thought you were so much better, nobler than my mother. But you haven't heard, understood anything I've said. You didn't come here for me. You came here for you." She shook her head slightly. "I guess I thought...hoped maybe, that a little of Robert had rubbed off on you. That you... Well, it doesn't matter now anyway. There's nothing more to say."

"Catherine!" Mira screamed.

"I'm sorry," she repeated sadly. "But there's no going back, Mira. For any of us."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mira gripped the steering wheel and watched the beams of the headlights hack a weak path through the rural darkness, the car following the short yellow lines on the asphalt like a trail of breadcrumbs back to the known. The familiar.

According to the fluorescent green clock on the dashboard, it had been less than an hour since Catherine had stepped out of the lighted gazebo and into this foreign, total blackness. By the time she'd reached the doorway, there was no trace of her goddaughter. No movement, no sound, no nothing. It was as if she'd disappeared completely. As if she'd never really existed. When Mira had turned the corner back to the diner, she'd found it closed, dark and locked. Even the neon sign had been shut off.



What was she going to do? Frantically, Mira's mind tried to work, make sense of this mess. Find some solution. But what? How?

Obviously, she would have to reason with Renee. Yes, that was it. Renee had been in shock, hadn't known, meant what she'd said in the study. My God, she'd just killed...accidentally...one of her slaves and her daughter had run off. She'd acted crazily. Certainly she'd talked crazily. But Mira was her dearest friend. They were really more like sisters. After all, didn't Renee always turn to Mira when there was a problem? Something to be fixed, cleaned up? Keeping her head and doing the right thing had always been more her way than Renee's.

When Renee was calmer, when she could talk plainly and rationally to her, Mira could smooth this over. Make Renee understand that she would right this mess as she always did. But that it would take time.

Explain. Reason. Console. That's what she needed to do. Perhaps tonight when she got home. Or tomorrow. Mira could explain that Catherine, much her mother's daughter, had run off on impulse, feeling trapped and because she hadn't known what else to do. But she was basically a levelheaded, clear-minded young woman and that when she'd seen for herself that there was nothing out there for her, that this was where she belonged, she'd come home. If not immediately to her mother's house, then to Mira's. It was just a matter of letting things cool down, for the dust to settle.

In a few days, a few weeks, Catherine would come back. In the meantime, Renee would have regained herself and Mira could break the news, carefully, about the child. A beautiful granddaughter. How could that fail to touch Renee, soften her heart and her mind? Besides, a little while apart would probably be the best thing for both of them. Give them some distance, some perspective.

Mira released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and felt herself begin to relax. Renee wouldn't denounce Robert and her. It'd been a terrified, anguished, empty threat. Like when they'd been teenagers and Renee had threatened to tell Caina that Mira was failing algebra unless Mira gave her a gray angora sweater she coveted. It was simply Renee at her most childish, most petty. There'd been angry words then, too. But Renee had returned the sweater in a few days, having worn it only once. And she'd given Mira a pearl pendant to apologize. A pendant still in Mira's jewel box.

Reaching into the glove compartment, Mira retrieved her cell phone. Robert hadn't wanted her to take it. Perhaps the lingering fear that if she could get in touch with the authorities... But she'd countered that she didn't want to be in the wilderness, far from home, without at least this small comfort. Reluctantly, he'd agreed but before she'd left, he'd made her turn it off, extracting a promise that she would only use it to summon help if she was stranded by car trouble or some other catastrophe.

Caina would be home by now and wondering where she was. Especially since she'd left no message except to say that she would be gone and that she'd return as soon as she could. And most especially if she failed to answer her cell phone. The limo could be tracked electronically but since the Tarsheen didn't ride in the estate SUV, it

had never been outfitted with a homing device, one reason she and Robert had decided she should take it.

Keeping one eye on the road and one hand on the wheel, Mira punched in the speed dial number for home and brought the small black phone to her ear. There was barely one ring.

"Hello?" Caina answered anxiously. "Mira?"

Inwardly, Mira chuckled. She was a grown woman and yet Caina was still behaving as if she were a little girl, late with her check-in call.

"Yes, Caina," she began with a smile.

"Where have you been?" the old woman demanded sharply. "I've been trying to reach you for the better part of an hour."

"I had a personal errand to run," Mira replied, a little annoyed at her Proconsul's unwarranted case of nerves. "I left a message that I would be out and that I'd return. And I turned off the phone so that I wouldn't be disturbed. Even the Tarsheen is allowed the luxury of some peace and quiet once in awhile. Now, as soon as I'm finished speaking with you, I want you to call the dormitory and tell them I wish to see Robert. I expect that it will be another two hours at least before I'm home. I shall see him then."

"That's what I've been calling you about," Caina replied, her voice rising another notch.

Something dark and ugly ran a cold hand down Mira's spine. "What...what do you mean?"

"I mean that I was delayed and only returned home about an hour ago. Ms. Pontier was waiting for me. She said that about two hours after you left this afternoon, a squad of Special Officers, heavily armed and in full riot gear, arrived with a warrant for your slave, Robert. He was taken away in chains. Ms. Pontier said there was nothing she could do." There was a long pause. "I have the warrant in my hand, Mira. He's been charged with being a Rememberer."

## Chapter Fourteen

"Well, well," Victoria Keller chuckled dryly, "so this is the much talked about Robert." She made a cursory but expert scan of his naked body, strapped wrists and ankles to the narrow metal table. "You're not at all what I would have expected of our fair Tarsheen. Still, I must say, at least little Mira's taste is improving."

Running her hand lightly across his chest, she traced a crescent-shaped scar with a long, perfectly manicured, bright red fingernail. "A little the worse for wear, but definitely interesting."

Robert lay still, watching her alertly but in his mind, already behind the granite walls of his fortress. As soon as he'd seen the Special Officers, he'd known why they were there and had begun his retreat. Physical resistance would have been futile. The only thing to do was get beyond the torture he knew would come. Submitting meekly as the officers had roughly shackled him and then riding silently in the back of the armored wagon, he'd begun emptying his mind, separating into the blankness.

When the wagon had stopped and the door opened, he'd expected to find himself at some police station. For a moment, the low, plain gray concrete buildings, surrounded by a tall cyclone fence topped with three rows of barbed wire made him think that perhaps he'd been brought directly to some kind of prison. Then he'd seen the two women in lab coats signing for him as two officers pushed him toward an open door in the nearest building and a harsh wind blew across the tranquil pond of his mind as he realized where he was.

Dr. Victoria Keller was well known in pens far and wide, her name was spoken in whispers and made even the fiercest, biggest male in the group grow cold with fear. While no one he knew of had actually been inside her "research facility"—it was generally considered gospel that males went in but never came back out—stories of torture, mutilation and castration circulated widely, normally straight from someone who knew someone who knew someone who worked there and had actually seen these things. Being brought here instead of to a regular police facility could only mean one thing. He renewed his efforts to reach his fortress.

The lab coats motioned for him to follow and, with two officers bringing up the rear, they'd walked leisurely down a brightly lit but deserted hallway, zigzagging around corners until they came to a metal door. One of the women put her hand, palm down, on a screen. A bright green line moved up and down and the door slid open. Inside, the other woman nodded to the officers, one of whom produced a key and released Robert's shackles.

"Strip," she told him firmly. Silently, he obeyed, peeling off his clothes as slowly as he dared, trying to give himself as much time as possible to get away. When he was

naked, an officer nudged the barrel of her gun in his back, pushing him toward the metal table in the middle of the room.

Lying down, Robert shivered slightly, hoping that his captors would believe it was from the cold metal or the air-conditioning. But no one seemed to be paying any attention to him. A lab tech snapped padded metal cuffs around his wrists and ankles, checking to make sure they were secure and then the four of them left the room, the door closing behind them.

Keller came to the table, gliding her fingertips lazily down Robert's body. "I've been looking forward to this since that first day," she told him in a light, almost friendly tone, "at Svarek's. I was interested even then in seeing just how much pain you could handle. Quite a bit I'd guess, judging from your body." Her fingers stopped and expertly manipulated his sack. "I knew, of course, when I bid on you, that Mira would have to respond. Actually, the only thing I had in mind was to draw her into a public embarrassment. Her Royal Highness believes herself so clever, so wise." The doctor snorted derisively. "In reality, she's a brainless, transparent child playing games and making a mockery of her crown.

"But," she purred contentedly, "all that's about to change, thanks to a drunken bitch and a common slave." Mean, cruel laughter bubbled up from the doctor's skinny body.

Robert forced himself to remain behind the walls of his stronghold. He'd cut himself off from his body. He was beyond whatever might happen now.

"I suppose you think," she was saying, "that because you've been tortured before, you can withstand me...save your precious little slut from her just desserts. And I fully expect you'll give me a fine show. Believe me though, in the end, you'll not only confess to being a Rememberer, but, more importantly, you'll admit that our beloved Tarsheen is a common whore and a Harboring."

She leaned down, her face close to his. "Her family should never have had the crown in the first place," she hissed. "My family were the rightful heirs. We've waited a long time for our chance and now that stupid little bitch has dropped it in my lap. When she's convicted and sentenced to death, her whole line is marked. None of them can ever claim the throne again. And since mine is the rightful line and I've been careful to cultivate the right people...well...let's just say that justice is going to be served in more than one fashion."

She was goading him, he knew. Make him do, say something stupid. Calm silence was his only defense now.

"You probably suppose you're being very noble, very heroic," she mocked, "suffering, even dying to protect your wretched little piece of ass. Well let me tell you something, slave. I've known Mira since we were children and you may trust that not only does she not appreciate your sacrifice, I'm quite sure she doesn't even understand it. For all her pretty words, Mira is a selfish, spoiled brat, sublimely unconcerned with

anything or anyone but herself. I can assure you, to save her own pink little ass, she'd throw you to the wolves in a heartbeat and not give it a second thought."

Something inside wavered and he felt his hands clench into angry fists, his body tighten. It took every ounce of strength and willpower he possessed to force himself to let go...refuse to be drawn out of his refuge and back to his physical body.

"I know you don't believe me," Keller chatted amiably. "It's a trait I've come to know in your kind. That..." she searched for the right word, her brow furrowing. "That self-satisfied aloofness, the faint air of being somehow better than other slaves. Oh, you're all very good, to some degree, about hiding it, but sooner or later, it betrays you."

Moving slightly to her left, Keller rolled a small metal table to her side. Turning his head, Robert saw a pair of rubber gloves, a small white tube and a thin metal cylinder, perhaps eight or ten inches long, no more than an inch or two around.

"Since being a Rememberer and a Harboring are capital crimes," she told him, picking up a glove and pulling it on, "the courts are very careful about confessions. Don't want any suspicion, any hint of 'coercion'." The second glove snapped into place, echoing in the still room as she wiggled her fingers. "You'll be examined before and during the trial. Nothing elaborate. Just a quick look to make sure there aren't any obvious signs...bruises, abrasions, fresh patterns in the pain center."

Calmly, she picked up the tube and squeezed some white, toothpaste-looking gel into her left hand. She then picked up the gunmetal-gray wand with her right hand. Robert saw that the handle was wood, fat with finger grip grooves. He also noted a beige coated wire coming from the handle and dipping away toward the floor.

"But they don't look for the less obvious signs," she commented as she began liberally applying the gel to the metal. "Do you know anything about electricity, slave?" It was a rhetorical question and he let it pass.

"Electricity can be a very effective tool for eliciting the truth. It can be administered in long, painful, low voltage amounts over a considerable period of time or in vastly more excruciating short bursts, depending on the individual situation. Personally, I've found that a judicious blending of the two gets the best result in the most expeditious manner."

She held the wand up and examined her handiwork. "The really interesting thing is that electricity, introduced into the body by inserting a metal rod in the ass and coating it generously with a special mixture to enhance contact with sensitive internal membranes while reducing tissue burn, can produce almost unbearable pain. Pain that can be maintained for long periods of time while leaving no evidence of 'undue influence' for the court."

An icy chill reached Robert's soul, even in the sanctuary of his fortress. The magnitude of this woman's evil dwarfed anything he'd ever encountered. Compared to Victoria Keller, Jennifer Pontier was practically benign.

"When I'm finished," Keller said simply, "you'll be little more than a shell. You'll put your mark to anything I say. And just so you don't forget anything in court, I'll be paying you a visit in prison. Give you a last little prod as it were." She giggled at her pun. "Now, I like to start by getting a ballpark idea of a subject's tolerances. Generally start low and work up. But since I'm fairly sure your tolerance is high, we'll begin higher than normal."

As she reached down to the side of the table, Robert heard the loud "click" of a switch flipping on and the low hum of some kind of motor. Her hand moved as she glanced down, obviously making adjustments. The pitch of the motor increased slightly.

Slowly, holding the wand so he could see it, she moved it between his legs. There was a slight pressure and he felt the cold steel slide quickly inside. Another moment's hesitation while the doctor altered her grip slightly and ever so slowly, pressed a red button under her thumb.

Robert felt his castle tremble, as if a short, sharp earthquake had rumbled underneath it and he heard a low moan. Even cut off from the physical pain, he could feel the jerking as the first wave of current tore through his body, heard it cry out in anguish. Three more times the shock came, each a fraction longer than the last.

"Very nice," she smiled, releasing the button, watching his body release its spasm, his racing heart fighting to stabilize his body, his panicked lungs gasping for breath. "I knew you were going to be worth the sport. Let's see how far you can really go." Her hand went down again and the pitch of the motor became a whine. An instant later, lightning ripped through him, convulsing his body, arching his back off the metal table, his arms and legs straining at the cuffs. The moan became a scream.

The physical horror rolled through Robert's mind, shaking his keep to its foundation. In the safety of his fortress, he knew that the fiendish doctor wouldn't actually kill his body. She was an expert at this, knew precisely how to judge the pain. There was a need in her to draw out the torture, savor it. But more than that, she needed him to get Mira.

Mira.

Under other circumstances, he might simply have surrendered the body. It was older than he'd expected it would ever get. Often, he'd thought it was tired and worn and had outlived its usefulness. That he would be just as well free of it.

But that had been before Mira. Before he'd rediscovered his life. Even in the face of this almost unbearable torment, when every cell of him cried out for release, he couldn't bear to turn loose of his physical body. The eyes that marveled at her beautiful, naked body. The arms that held that body close, the fingers that ran over her soft, pale skin. Through her black silken hair. The lips that kissed her perfect mouth. Without his physical body, Mira would truly be lost to him. Forever.

Mira.

If he tried to hang on though, he knew that sooner or later, the body would be destroyed. His fingers would sign away both their lives. His lips would condemn them both to the death chamber.

Either way, he knew his life was over. All that remained was whether he would take her with him.

Mira.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Call, damn it!" she muttered, plopping hard into her desk chair. Fifteen minutes of double pacing had only heightened her anxiety and made her feel more and more like a caged animal. For the millionth time, she glanced at her watch and then the large school clock on the wall to her left.

Where the hell could Caina be? She'd promised to call the instant she learned anything. Mira had ordered her to find Robert and get him released, whatever she had to do. Threaten, cajole, invoke the office of the Tarsheen, but get him back to the house.

Pushing her foot to the floor of the SUV, Mira had managed to shave the two hours back home considerably. Arriving home frantic, she'd read the note Caina had left, explaining that she would search the police stations and return Robert.

The warrant lay neatly folded on her desk. As Caina had told her, Renee was listed as the Complainant, Madeleine Fletcher, the warranting judge. Charge—Rememberer. Inexplicably, Mira's name was absent except as Robert's owner.

An angry call to Renee had produced only an apologetic Barnaby and a vague, "The Mistress has retired." When Mira had screamed at him, demanding that he rouse her, the elderly, quavering voice had almost broken.

"I...I'm sorry Your Highness," he'd whispered, "but the Mistress has taken a sleeping pill. There's no way to wake her 'til it wears off. Maybe six or eight hours."

"Sleeping pill, my ass," she snarled, banging the phone down as hard as she could. "She's dead drunk and passed out!"

Mira looked at her watch again. Perhaps she should call Caina. The not knowing was becoming unbearable.

The older woman's voice came back to her. "No, Mira," she'd stated firmly, "you are not to involve yourself in this in any way. Come straight home and stay here. Don't talk to anyone, either in person or on the telephone. Including me. You have to maintain as much distance from this mess as possible. I'll handle everything. You know you can rely on me."

But why was it taking so long? Caina was the Proconsul, her personal representative. What problem could there possibly be that she couldn't overcome?

A single sharp "ding" and a small flashing red light on the front of her computer monitor announced the arrival of e-mail. Distractedly, Mira pressed a key to retrieve it. A title, "Requested Information" appeared. Mira opened the file.

"Your Highness," it began, "I'm sorry to have been so long responding to your request, but records from so long ago were archived off-site. That, combined with the vagueness of your information, made finding and accessing it rather difficult. However, I hope this is what Your Grace wanted. If not, or if I may be of any other service, please don't hesitate to contact me." It was signed, M. Braeton, Commissioner of Records. A small paper clip in a blue square indicated an attachment.

The information about Robert and his family. God, it seemed like such a long time since she'd made the inquiry. She'd almost forgotten about it. How ironic that it should come now.

As the file began downloading, Mira idly watched the small black bars clicking away the information. But her mind was really busy elsewhere, waiting for the phone at her fingertips to ring.

A short list appeared in the upper left hand corner. Robert—adult male, Anne—adult female, Robert—child male, Joseph—child male.

Mira highlighted "Robert—child male". There was a soft whir and a little leprechaun danced onto the screen, stopping in the middle and producing a large gold pocket watch. It was the computer's way of telling her that the program was working and to be patient.

Looking at the screen, Mira gasped, her eyes widening in surprise as the picture and text emerged. On the left side of the screen, a young boy's face, thin, with shaggy black hair that partially covered his ears and huge, terrified black eyes. It seemed to her, more the eyes of a cornered animal than a child. The right side of the screen gave his vital statistics—age, height, weight and so on. Scrolling down, she read the few sentences. "Male child, living with runaway slave, breeder and younger male offspring. Taken in an Army raid, Green Valley Community, Colorado Rocky Mountains. Removed to Harris Hospital where he received successful behavior control implant and then sent to Colorado Boys' Home. Sold to an estate in Wisconsin at age ten."

She stared into those eyes for several seconds, horrified, pained and disbelieving. Whatever she'd expected, this wasn't it. All of the little boy slaves she'd ever been around had been born and virtually raised on her estate. She'd never seen one from an institution. It made her uneasy and slightly sick at her stomach to look into those eyes.

A click of the mouse and the picture disappeared as she returned to the list. Highlighting "Robert—adult male", she waited while the leprechaun came and went.

If the picture of the child Robert had been unsettling, the adult was downright scary for it was her Robert, perhaps fifteen years younger, but eerily the same. Angular face, Roman nose, shaggy black hair, mesmerizing black eyes. But in those eyes she didn't see the child's fear, but the man's defiance. The same look her Robert had been wearing the first time she'd seen him in Svarek's. Tall, over six feet, muscular and well-built. Date of Natal Registration. Date of Death. Doing the math in her head, she realized with a pang that he'd been just short of his thirty-eighth birthday when he died. "Escaped from an estate in Kentucky. Living with breeder and two male offspring. Shot while



resisting arrest in Army raid, Green Valley Community, Colorado Rocky Mountains. Died at scene before medical assistance could be rendered."

Painfully, Mira remembered Robert's telling her that he hadn't understood how his father had slept through the chaos of that night.

The image swam before her eyes as she wondered how many lonely nights, anguished months, terrible years Robert had spent wondering why his father hadn't tried to save them before he'd finally understood the truth.

Clicking away Robert, her hand trembled as she prepared to meet Anne. Again, she wasn't what Mira had expected, although Mira herself now understood that she hadn't really known what to expect.

Anne had been small, shorter even than Mira. Black hair and eyes the color of a fine sapphire ring she owned. Those eyes. Filled with such pain, despair, heartbreak. It was the look of a person who's lost everything dear to them. Mira gazed into those tormented eyes and with an unpleasant start of recognition, realized she knew that look. She'd seen it, long ago, staring out of the mirror when her last attempt to get pregnant had failed and the doctor had finally told her it was hopeless. She'd seen it very recently too, in Renee's eyes when she'd realized Catherine was gone. And in Catherine's eyes when she'd spoken of Timothy.

"Breeder, living with runaway slave and two male offspring. Captured in Army raid, Green Valley Community, Colorado Rocky Mountains. Tried and convicted of Harboring. Death by lethal injection, Fallbrook Women's Correctional Institution. Date of birth. Date of death." Thirty-two years, four months old.

Part of her wanted desperately to stop this. A hard, painful knot had formed in her chest, making her heart beat faster and her breathing shallow and difficult. She'd found out too much about these people already. But the fear of finding out more seemed to be outweighed by something stronger. Like the spell that had possessed her at the auction, raising her paddle and her voice, almost against her will.

A powerful dread gripped her as she highlighted "Joseph—child male".

Everything she'd seen, read before, hadn't prepared her for this. It was a small, delicate, almost toddler face. Black hair, cut short, soon before this official photo had been taken, she guessed. A rounder, fuller face than his older brother, button nose and sweet mouth. He would have been very appealing, she thought, except for his eyes. They were the same brilliant dark blue as his mother's, but unlike the fear or defiance or even the pain she'd seen in the other eyes, his were empty. Dead. They stared back at her in mute horror. Silent anguish. "Living with runaway slave, breeder and one older male offspring. Taken in Army raid on Green Valley Community, Colorado Rocky Mountains. Removed to Peletier General Hospital for behavior control implant. Complications required extended stay. Sent to Virginia State Boys' Home. Died of heart failure. Date of birth. Date of death. Six years, ten months old. He'd lived barely six months after the raid.

In her mind's eye she saw clearly, perhaps more than when Robert had first told her, the picture of two, terrified, screaming children being carried into the night by heavily armed soldiers, their little bodies struggling futilely, reaching out for each other. And she saw the pieces of that small stuffed bear on the ground.

Her fingers moved by themselves over the keyboard and the dead little eyes vanished, replaced suddenly by the four pictures together.

Family.

The word exploded in her mind like a red flare, suddenly illuminating a dark night.

Gently, she put her fingertips on Anne's image, slowly tracing them over her face.

Thirty-two years old. A little younger than she'd been when her hopes for a child had ended. This wasn't a nameless, faceless breeder, carrying an anonymously induced whelp she'd never know, never care about. Never love.

This woman and the man she loved had watched the miracle they'd created unfolding together. Saw her belly swell, felt the life they'd made growing inside her. Seen their sons emerge into the world.

She'd held her children in her arms, suckled them at her breast. Brushed their silken hair, breathed the sweetness of their freshly bathed little bodies. Marveled at their complete peace as they slept.

Together, Anne and Robert had laughed and worked and cared for each other and their sons. Loved them and each other. As Renee had loved and cared for Catherine. As Catherine and Timothy had loved and cared for each other. Hoped to do for their child. And as she and Robert loved each other.

Mira shivered and she felt a tear slide down her cheek. The hard knot was fast becoming a boulder, cutting off her air, the weight of it making her hurt all over.

These people had shared their lives and their love and then suddenly, everything was gone. In an instant, Anne had seen her love destroyed, killed in their own home, in front of her. The sight of Timothy dead in Renee's study ran together with the picture, now so clear, of this man, lying bloody and lifeless.

And then the sight of her children being forcibly ripped from her. Tears muddled the screen but not the scene in her mind, the screams in her head. She remembered once when Catherine had been about six and she'd been injured in a fall that had required stitches. The Emergency Room staff had taken her, bleeding and howling from Renee's arms and started to leave. When she and Renee had tried to follow, they'd been calmly but firmly pointed to the waiting room. Even invoking her title had done no good. And so they'd sat, clutching each other and sobbing uncontrollably, listening to Catherine's blood curdling cries and heart wrenching screams of "Mommy! Mommy!" No wonder the soldiers had finally had to knock Anne unconscious to subdue her.

In the last months...days...hours of her life, had she thought of anything except her children? With her empathy, had she felt...known somehow, when Joey had died? Had she asked, begged as a last request, to see her children? Hold them? Find out what happened to them? Had she held the picture of the man she loved and her children in

her mind and heart as they'd slowed and stopped, finally releasing her to that last peaceful, dark freedom?

Heart failure.

It must have been a tiny heart, she reasoned sadly. Easily overwhelmed by the crushing burden of terror, loneliness, abandonment, despair and finally hopelessness. Mira could see in that delicate, vacant face, he had neither the strength of will that had driven his father to risk everything, including his life, for the chance of freedom, or his mother's gift of empathy to blunt the horror that had become his life. Bereft, he'd simply given up.

Heart failure.

Remembering back to her Sunday school days, the words of a childhood hymn came to her. "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." Funny, but she'd never realized until now that the song didn't specify only girls.

Tears streaming down her face, her breath coming in painful pants, Mira wondered if there truly was a heaven, had these people found it? After all, what had been their sins?

A man, desperate to be free, shot down for defending the people he loved. The woman, guilty of loving the wrong man, choosing to live her life with him. Claim their sons as her own and keep them. The little boy, unable to bear, even understand the end of his world.

If there was a heaven, would the man have been waiting for his son, the boy running full speed, "Daddy! Daddy!" erupting loudly as he came. His father, scooping the wiggling bundle into his arms, exchanging frantic hugs, kisses and joyful tears.

Would they have waited then, together, for the woman, the boy galloping to meet her as she arrived, more tears...adult and child...at the reunion? Filled with the indescribably heady knowledge that they would never be separated again.

And were they waiting for Robert? For their family to be complete once more?

The truth didn't strike her like a lightning bolt, toppling her reality and changing her forever. Instead, it seemed almost to seep into her consciousness on the flood of tears flowing down her face. Creep into her soul, unnoticed behind the physical pain churning in her body.

Little by little, as the sobs subsided and she regained herself, Mira began to understand...to know... not just in her mind but in herself, that everything she'd built her life on, everything she'd believed in and cherished and lived, had been a lie.

Yes, she'd believed that "slavery", as an institution, was "wrong". "Morally reprehensible" and all the other fine words she'd used in a thousand speeches decrying it. She'd cherished the ideal that someday she, as the lighthouse of civilized society, would overthrow it. That all people would at last be "free".

In reality though, it had all been on the surface, for show. A lie even to herself. She lived off slaves as certainly as Svarek or Mary Forbes or even Renee. Oh, she told herself it was necessary, that without her crown and her wealth, she would be powerless to bring it to an end. So she'd practiced "enlightened" slavery, pretending to be "better" than the others. A shining example. But she'd been careful to keep her distance, always taking the "high road". Never daring to look too far beneath the pleasant exterior, too closely in the mirror.

Worst of all, she'd never really even thought about them as people. They were "slaves" and "breeders", different somehow than she and Caina and Catherine and Renee. All the women who populated her cramped, shallow, artificial world. Freeing them was a "good" thing, a "noble" thing even. But that was in the abstract. In the practical, they were as unknown to her as aliens from another planet. And because they were "different", they didn't love, didn't hurt, didn't need. They ceased to be "human" at all, to have "value" as she did. They became "things". Property to be bought, sold and even disposed of with no thought.

The truth glared back at her, as clear and simple as the images on her screen. They'd known it. Robert knew it. Catherine knew it. Even poor Timothy had known it. Basic. Unadorned. As fundamental as life itself. How could she have been so blind? So stupid?

Mira was suddenly awash in another foreign emotion. Shame. Profound, utter, overwhelming shame. Not just for all the suffering and death these faces represented, but for her own ignorance. The casual complicity that had helped make the misery possible in the first place. That kept it firmly in place and humming along smoothly, virtually invisibly.

"Dear God," she whispered hoarsely, leaning forward toward the monitor and feeling a fresh round of tears begin to sting. "I'm so sorry. I...I didn't know. Didn't understand. I was worse than any of them. On the heap of my sins, you can toss hypocrisy. That fine, thin sheen of respectability, humanitarianism I covered myself with. I was arrogant and foolish. I thought I could just wave my magic scepter and make everything right. At least the people who beat you...killed..." Her voice caught and she had to stop to get her breath. "At least they were honest in their cruelty. I pretended...pretended to care when in every way that really mattered, I didn't."

She struggled against the tears to finish. "I've been dishonest my whole life. Not just with you and the rest of the world, but with myself as well. But there's one thing in my life that is real. Is true and honest. I love your son, Robert. He filled a gaping hole in my life that I didn't even know was there."

Smiling weakly, she gently touched Robert and then Anne's face on the screen. "He's wonderful," she murmured softly. "Despite everything, he's wise and gentle and good and kind. From the first, he's tried so hard to show me, teach me and I've been so dense, so unreasonable. Honestly, I wonder now why he bothers with me at all, much less loves me. You can be very proud."

The images wavered and she wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "I don't think I ever really knew before how much I do love Robert," she continued quietly. "Not until now. When I had to face the awful possibility of losing him. I guess I had to come right up to the edge and look over into that lonely, black pit. I told you I was dumb," she said sheepishly. "But I know now what I have and what I could lose and what we can have for the rest of our lives. And I make you, Robert's family, this solemn vow. My last official act as Tarsheen, before I relinquish my crown, will be to give Robert and all my other slaves not only their freedom, but also their choice of money or land, so that they can begin their lives...their own lives...as they wish."

Mira paused uncertainly. "I...I can't give Robert children. I've always wished more than anything that I could have a baby of my own. Now I ache for a baby of ours."

Her eyes fixed on the child Robert and his baby brother. A thought flittered into her mind, awing her with its simplicity and beauty. "Maybe..." she ventured timidly, "maybe after Robert's free and I step down...we might find a child...a little boy...who needs us as much as we need him. We...we could be a family too."

"Oh, dear God," she cried, "please, please give him back to me! Don't let it be too late for us. Not for my sake. I know I don't deserve anything but your everlasting disdain and disgust. But please God, please, for his sake. For their sake. Please, please, don't take him away from me." She dissolved into sobs again. "Please don't let it be too late. Please, please..."

\* \* \* \* \*

He was dying.

His fortress heaved and rumbled with Keller's every lightning strike. Walls crumbling, foundation cracking. All around, the shrieks and cries of the body howled like a banshee wind. There was no longer any choice. Surrendering to this monster would deliver Mira into her clutches and only postpone his own inevitable death. It was better to end it now, while he could still make the decision.

In the very center of his stronghold, as deep as he could drive himself, Robert huddled down, every ounce of his waning power aimed, laser-like, at the faltering image wobbling before him in the half-light.

"I love you so much," he told her tenderly. "I wish I could see you again, even just for a moment. Hold you. Kiss you goodbye. And even though I already miss you so much it breaks my heart, I hope you have a long, full life. That you do all the good I know you're capable of. Remember me, love, and know that no matter how long it takes, I'll be waiting when you finally get home."

Her image flickered like a dying candle and faded into the blackness surrounding him.

*All right, he sighed finally, it's time.* Closing his eyes, he braced himself and began the journey out, to reconnect with the body. A few more short moments and then he'd shut off the light for the last time.

"Goodbye, love."

With everything he had left, Robert gathered up the thought and sent it sailing into the nothingness. Perhaps, if she listened with all her heart, this last gift might find her.

Mira.

\* \* \* \* \*

The light above him was an unbearable, runny white, boring into his eyes as he re-emerged into Keller's torture chamber. Though he'd been expecting the worst, the reality was even more horrible. Inside, the repeated shocks to his heart had turned its rhythm to a frantic jitterbug. Lungs, exhausted by the effort to keep oxygen moving through the electrical storm, screamed for rest. And muscles, knotted into tight balls and starved for air, cramped in excruciating rebellion. Waves of agony rushed into his mind like icy black water through the hull of a dying ship.

"There you are," she purred. "I was afraid you'd decided not to rejoin our little party." Keller leaned down into his blurry vision. "You're not getting away that easily, slave," she continued sweetly. "I can keep this up much longer than you can. You and I have unfinished business and I'm not letting go of you until I get what I want. Confess and give me your slut. It's her ass I want, not yours. Once I have your mark on paper, I might be willing to let you die. Peacefully. Painlessly. A simple injection. You close your eyes and it's over. Wouldn't that be better than dying agonizingly, inch by excruciating inch?"

Only his parched throat and mouth kept him from spitting in her face. Dying without implicating Mira would have to do.

She watched him as if he were an interesting specimen of mold for a few more seconds. Finally, Keller shrugged her white-coated shoulders in mock resignation. "Suit yourself, slave."

As she picked up her wand and the sound of the motor's whine came to him, Robert closed his eyes, a tear trickling from the corner and sliding down his temple to the table. Instead of steeling himself for what he knew was coming, he forced the body to relax.

"It's almost over," he encouraged the body gently. "Let go. Let go so it can happen."

There was a sound, like a soft whoosh, almost masked by the motor. Without thinking, he opened his eyes as Keller turned slightly to glance at something over her left shoulder. Her features started to wrinkle up in annoyance and he thought she was going to open her mouth and say something.

A sound, two short, dull thuds, like small rocks, thrown very hard, crashing into a bag of grain. Keller's expression of annoyance turned instantly to surprise and she glanced down, not at him, but at herself. A large red stain had suddenly materialized on the front of her white coat. There was a moment more and the doctor slumped a little forward over him and then, in super slow motion, she seemed to crumple up and with a "thump", slid into a puddle on the floor.

Caina appeared at the side of the table by his head. Robert, his vision clear now, was struck by the lack of emotion on her face as she looked first at the floor and then at him. And he saw then, the small automatic weapon in her hand.

"Thank you," he croaked.

"Victoria Keller's needed killing since she was a child," the old woman said simply. "Her death's long overdue. But don't flatter yourself, slave. It was for Mira." Robert thought he heard a small quaver in her voice and he could feel the fear, anger, disgust and revulsion as they radiated from her.

"How...how did you know?"

"It wasn't difficult. As soon as I saw Renee Baron's name on the warrant, I called her. That doddering old toad of hers, Barnaby, tried to tell me she was asleep. Couldn't be awakened. So I called a contact at the phone company and had her phone records pulled. As I expected, she'd called Keller." Disgust coated her words. "Tomorrow, the stupid, drunken sow probably won't even remember. Afterward, this bitch called her favorite judge. Madeleine Fletcher is renowned for her hatred of men, free and slave. A couple of quick calls to the local police station to determine you weren't in custody there and I knew you had to be here."

"That's very clever of you."

"Not really. Simple deduction." She reached into her coat pocket and produced a plain white card key. "As the Proconsul and first lady-in-waiting to the Tarsheen, I have a master key that opens any lock in the realm. Safety precaution. There's a janitor's gate at the back of the premises that is unguarded. It's well known that this wing is where the 'Good Doctor' conducts her 'private' research. I knew she'd be alone with you. And I have a license to carry this." She waved the little gun slightly. "Most people believe a small caliber pistol, while easily concealed, isn't very effective. But I can assure you, it's quite adequate to the task. Especially at close range."

Robert's heart and breathing had slowed almost back to normal, but a chill dread still clung to him. And the sight of Mira's Proconsul was oddly not reassuring.

Caina stared down at the floor again for several long, silent moments. Robert could feel her wrestling with something. Finally, she turned back to face him. "The easy part's done," she said earnestly. "The world's better off without this creature. Certainly Mira is. But there's still the problem of you."

The chill became a cold fear. "I don't understand."

"Of course you do, slave," Caina replied derisively. "You're trouble. I knew it the first moment I laid eyes on you. And I knew you'd come to no good. If it wasn't for Mira, I'd have let Keller cut your heart out and feed it to the dogs."

Hate rolled off her in white-hot waves. "I tolerated you in my house because it was Mira's childish whim. I even endured you in Mira's bed because it was what she wanted and I knew raising a stink would only make it worse."

"Mira and I love each other."

"Unfortunately," she sighed, "I believe you. If it were a thing of the body, an appetite that needed sating, it would be a simple thing to turn you loose and send you away. But you've bewitched her somehow. There's a connection between you. I think if you went to the other side of the universe, she'd still be able to find you. And I know certainly that sooner or later, she would go looking."

Those eyes were as cold and empty as her voice. "I knew from the time she was a child that Mira was special. And when God denied her the baby she wanted so desperately, I knew it was because her life, her greatness, lay in another direction. Long after you and I are dust and forgotten, slave, Mira's name will be remembered and honored. She may yet even see your kind free. I've devoted most of my life to protecting and nurturing that greatness. And I won't let anything or anyone stand in the way of her destiny. Not Victoria Keller. Not you. Not even Mira herself."

"Mira?"

"Don't pretend to be so naïve," she snorted. "You know as well as I do that given the chance, Mira would throw away everything she's worked for, struggled for to run off with you. Live in squalor and poverty with nothing but some stupid notion of 'love' and 'bliss'." She shook her head slightly. "No. As long as you breathe, Mira will never be free of you."

"I can't help how we feel," he answered quietly. "If it's what she wants..."

"What she wants?" Caina repeated angrily. "That's always been her problem. Half the time she doesn't know what she wants. The other half, what she wants is not what she needs. What's good for her."

"And you know what's good for her?"

"Always," the old woman snapped. "Mira's mother equated 'spoiling' with 'love'. I was always the one to tell her no. Discipline her. Make her face the reality of her responsibilities." She paused. "Do what needed to be done...regardless of how...how unpleasant."

Abruptly, she lowered the gun and went to a row of overcounter cabinets on the other side of the room. Quickly, she began checking labels on the bottles, pulling some out.

"Did you know I was a chemistry major in college? I was going to invent wonderful new products to make the world safer, cleaner. Ease its suffering. I only went into Public Service at Beatrice, Mira's mother's pleading."



He watched apprehensively as she began opening bottles and spilling their contents out on the floor.

"Chemical fires are especially difficult to fight," she continued. "Not only do they release extremely toxic fumes which can keep firefighters at bay, but many fires are actually worsened by the water from the sprinklers mixing with the chemicals. In a relatively small, confined space like this room, with so many chemicals, a fire could be disastrous. Even fatal."

So that was it. She hadn't come to rescue him at all. The pain that stabbed through him was worse than any of the doctor's torture. He'd been prepared to die at Keller's hands. Caina's appearance had given him a spark of hope that he might escape death and be reunited with Mira. To have that hope dashed...

Caina returned to his side. "It won't take very long," she told him. "Even though the fire will burn hot and fast, you'd probably be overcome by the fumes before... Well, it will be hard enough for me to tell Mira you died in the fire before I arrived." She raised the gun. "At least I'll be able to tell her, truthfully, that you didn't suffer in the flames. That you were already dead when the explosion happened."

For another instant, they gazed at each other. Robert thought he saw a flicker of indecision in her eyes, saw the gun waiver ever so slightly. But it was gone in the bright flash and the agony of the sharp pain in his chest.

Immediately, he felt his own warm blood flowing across his skin and onto the table.

*Dear God*, he shouted in his mind, *please, not now!* After all the times that he'd prayed for death, it had finally come but at the moment when he wanted most to live. There was Mira now, the wink of time they'd had a cruel taste of what their lives could be. It wasn't right!

There was the sound of shattering glass and almost immediately an acrid, chemical smell. A bright light seemed to come through his closed eyes and he could feel heat.

*Don't do this*, he screamed silently. *Please let me live.*

Mira.

He felt his life slipping away, his brain growing fuzzy, the bonds of the body dissolving around his spirit.

A single last thought.

Mira.

## Chapter Fifteen

"That's when we heard the explosion and saw the flames," Caina finished.

The young brunette in the security officer's uniform agreed. "I'd just punched in Madam Proconsul's entry card and was reaching for the button to open the gate when, 'BOOM', all hell broke loose." Immediately realizing her choice of words might not be appropriate for the company, she turned a deep scarlet. "Excuse me, Madam Proconsul. I meant no offense."

Caina smiled thinly. "It's quite all right. It's been an unnerving night for all of us."

Across the table, the police detective—Mapes, if Caina remembered the introduction correctly—scanned her notebook thoughtfully. Middle-aged, she guessed, short, graying brown hair, intense hazel eyes, full mouth turned down slightly at the corners. Nothing on her face betrayed how well Caina's story was being received.

"So basically," Mapes said, "you were here trying to get the Tarsheen's slave...this Robert...released from Dr. Keller's custody."

"Yes, Detective," she answered carefully. "His arrest was a gross mistake. Had Her Highness or myself been at home when the officers arrived, we would, of course, have been able to straighten the whole matter out then and there and none of this would have happened."

"According to the warrant, he'd been charged with being a Rememberer." Detective Mapes trained those eyes on Caina. "That's a very serious allegation."

*Careful, Caina thought. Don't seem too eager. Volunteer too much.*

"Serious, yes," the Proconsul agreed slowly, choosing each word with care. "But an allegation nonetheless. Not a fact. Had there been any proof of this charge, no doubt the slave would have been taken to a regular police facility. That he was brought here says clearly Dr. Keller was trying to force 'evidence' from him as a personal strike at Her Highness." Leaning forward slightly, she lowered her voice. "Considering Victoria Keller's long-standing and very public vendetta against the Tarsheen and the nature of the 'research' she performs in this facility, I should think the scenario would be plain enough."

The detective shifted her weight uncomfortably. "Well, I guess it's a moot point now, anyway." She glanced at the firefighter sitting next to her. "Do you have anything to add, Lieutenant Pauly?"

"Nothing right now."

"When do you think you'll know something?"

"Tomorrow, at least. We're still knocking down hot spots. Isn't much left. Especially in the room where the fire started and the explosion occurred."

"Remains?"

The officer threw a quick glance at the Proconsul and the security guard and shook her head once. "Got pretty bad in there. Don't know what, if anything, we'll find when we start poking around."

Involuntarily, Caina shuddered and a wave of nausea passed over her.

"Are you all right, Madam Proconsul?" Detective Mapes asked anxiously. Having this powerful woman be sick or even faint during questioning was not a pleasant prospect.

"I'm fine," Caina managed, making an almost visible effort to compose herself. "But if there are no further questions, I really would like to leave. The Tarsheen will have to be notified of this. I'm sure she's anxious for my return."

"Of course, Proconsul," she agreed quickly. "If you'd like, I can have one of my officers take you home."

"Thank you, but no. I have my car." She rose and the others stood too. Putting out her hand, she gave a perfunctory shake to each of the other women.

"The Tarsheen will," she said firmly, "expect a full written report of this incident from both the police and fire departments at the earliest practicable moment."

"Certainly. Of course. Her Highness will have it on her desk as soon as possible."

"I'll say good night then. Detective. Lieutenant. Officer."

"Madam Proconsul."

Outside, the chilly evening air still reeked of sour chemical smoke curling up faintly to join the huge cloud floating overhead like a thunderhead and blotting out a large patch of sky. Around her, firefighters moved equipment, shouted to one another and milled around the trucks.

Caina forced herself to walk back to her car at a normal pace. More than anything, she wanted to be away from there. Unlocking the door, she slid into the driver's seat and rested her forehead on the cool steering wheel. Abruptly, she began to shake uncontrollably, cold sweat coating her palms and leaving a wet splotch where her forehead lay on the gray plastic. Her mind filled, not with Victoria Keller's lifeless body on the floor, but with the slave, strapped down, helpless as an insect mounted for display. Suddenly, she was no longer in her car, but standing again in the room, poised over him, gun pointed at his chest. There'd been a single moment of hesitation and then she'd squeezed the trigger. Blood had spurted from the wound, a small hole in his naked skin. The eyes had flashed wide open, as if in surprise, then closed, his head lolling to one side.

There hadn't been any more time. Opening the door, she'd thrown the jar of igniting fluid, shattering it on the chemicals spread across the floor and dashed out. Running as fast as she could, she'd reached the gate. A moment later, she was in her car, speeding toward the main entrance. She must be there, have an iron-clad alibi to give Mira. Dear God...

"Get ahold of yourself," her inner voice scolded. "Victoria Keller deserved what she got. The other...well...that's a done thing. It can't be undone. Best to face it and put it behind you. Get on with it."

The shivering and sweat subsided. With a determined sigh, Caina started the car. As she checked behind her, she caught her reflection in the rearview mirror. Strangely, the face was the same, comfortingly familiar.

As always, she'd handled things. Mira was free, both of her lifelong enemy and the slave. She alone had righted the world, returned things to the way they should be. Were ordained always to be.

"Yes," she whispered aloud as she put the car in gear. "Everything is as it should be. Everything will be all right now."

Of course, Caina had no way of knowing just how horribly wrong her prediction would turn out to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a short, highly publicized but "thorough" investigation, the fire and explosion at the Keller Institute for Reproductive Research, were ruled an accident. The technicians on duty that night all testified that when they left the lab, Dr. Keller and the slave were alone. They also testified that a variety of chemicals, many of them highly flammable, were stored in the lab and that Dr. Keller routinely used electricity in her "research" on slaves.

The security guard testified that no one had entered or left the facility between the time the slave was brought in by the officers and the Proconsul's arrival seconds before the explosion. Videos produced by the security firm showed that except for the private research wing, the facility was closed and quiet. A tape from the security camera at the front gate corroborated both the guard's testimony and Caina's statement.

Fire inspectors determined that the fire had begun in the lab, probably by an electrical spark igniting accidentally spilled chemicals. When the automatic sprinklers had come on, water on the chemical fire had caused a flashover and massive explosion. The force of the blast in the confined space of the small lab, combined with the heat of the fire, estimated to be between two thousand and twenty-five hundred degrees, were enough to utterly destroy any remains.

So, there being nothing to dispute the findings, the case was officially closed.

Unofficially, however, the speculation continued unabated.

Madeleine Fletcher went squawking to the media, howling loudly about corruption, collusion and outright cover-up. The slave had been charged with being a Rememberer under the roof—and she hinted, the sheets—of the Tarsheen. Senator Renee Baron, the Tarsheen's oldest and dearest friend, had signed the complaint. Before her death, Dr. Keller had, she insisted, told her that she had reason to believe that the slave and the

Tarsheen were somehow involved in the death of one of the Senator's young slaves and the sudden, unexplained disappearance of her daughter.

Renee gave no statement to the press. Under questioning by the police, she'd reluctantly admitted to swearing out the complaint, insisting emphatically that she'd been ill and under prescribed medication that she'd foolishly mixed with a glass of red wine. While her recollection of the events was hazy at best, she was sure that she would never have signed such a ridiculous piece of paper had she been herself. Dr. Elliott confirmed that she'd given the Senator some tranquilizers for an anxiety ailment. When asked about her daughter, Renee, pale, had gulped and stated simply that after a quarrel, her daughter had gone away to "be by herself and think things over". No, she didn't know exactly where her daughter was, but she was adamant that her daughter had left of her own accord and that she would return when she was ready.

Throughout the short-lived flurry, the Tarsheen remained silent behind the walls of her estate. The Proconsul issued a short statement on Mira's behalf stating that she had read the reports of both the police and fire departments and found them to be complete and professional. As far as she was concerned, the matter was closed. And she was taking some much needed time off from her official duties during the Legislature's break at the suggestion of her physician who felt she'd been working too hard.

As with most such things, this was soon lost in the newest scandal and was all but forgotten. Without the slave, Robert, there was nothing to confirm or deny. Nothing to tie Her Royal Highness to anything.

And it seemed for a while that Caina had indeed been right. Almost everything seemed to have fallen back into place. Almost.

Having no daughter, Victoria Keller's considerable wealth was bequeathed to an aunt, who it was rumored, had shared nothing but a mutual animosity with the doctor and to whom she hadn't spoken in years. Even though there were no remains, with great pomp and circumstance, she'd seen that a large white marble stone was placed in the family plot, "in memoriam". As soon as that was done, quietly, she'd begun liquidating Keller's assets. An appraiser was brought in to inventory and dispose of the contents of her large, tastefully furnished house, with a few of the very finest pieces being sent back to the aunt's home. Then the slaves had been sold, on consignment, to Svarek—"my sincerest condolences and only a small handling charge". Finally, the research facility itself was sold to a developer who'd coveted the property for sometime as the perfect site for a new shopping mall. When the aunt finally left town, all that remained of Victoria Keller's life was an ugly, ostentatious cemetery monument. It was as if she'd never lived.

Two months later, the Legislature reconvened. The closing of a local dump site, favored by Mira but opposed by a hazardous waste disposal company, had been debated at length before the adjournment and was considered to be a close vote. Combined with speculation over the vote and the scandal of Dr. Keller and the slave, the upper gallery was unusually full as Mira called the session to order and Senator Lydia Field called for a vote.

Anxiously, Mira watched the “scoreboard”, the large tally sign on the west wall of the Senate chamber where all the senators’ names were listed, along with red, green and white lights. Red “no”, green “yes”, white, “abstain”. Slowly, the lights bloomed. It took several minutes, but finally, all of them were on. A buzz of surprise rippled through both the politicians and the gallery as the numbers were displayed.

“The vote,” the Secretary intoned solemnly, “is forty-two for, forty-three against and one abstention.”

Mira’s eyes scanned the list. It took only a second for her to see what she was looking for. Turning back to the senators seated at their desks, her angry eyes locked on Renee. In front of her, a small red light glowed brightly. They glared at each other for a long moment, Renee’s hate and Mira’s anger written in a silent code only they could understand.

“The bill,” Mira said simply, “is defeated.” She brought down her gavel. “The next item of business is Senate Bill 438, Public Assistance Housing. The Crown recognizes Senator Lathrop.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mira’s phone chimed softly but insistently from her bedside table. Even though she no longer slept well and was not really asleep, the sound startled her anyway. This was her private phone, the number known only to a small, select group. It was for personal rather than Crown business. As it chimed again, Mira sighed heavily. There was little question in her mind who was on the other end.

It had been more than three months since the dump site bill had been defeated. Leaving the Senate building, she’d literally run into Renee as she was getting into the elevator. They’d looked at each other and up close, Mira had seen that Renee was pale and drawn, her eyes red. Having known Renee since childhood, Mira knew the telltale signs of a monster hangover. The other woman had opened her mouth as if to speak but closed it again and glanced down at her feet. “I beg your pardon, Your Highness,” she mumbled in a low, hoarse voice.

“You are excused, Senator Baron,” Mira replied brusquely and pushed past Renee, Caina trailing a step after. She hadn’t seen or spoken to Renee again.

Slowly, Mira picked up the receiver and put it to her ear.

She heard crying. A pitiful, heart-wrenching sound. A lost, motherless child wailing in the night. Broken, frightened, alone. There were no words. There was no need. Mira knew that the tears themselves were the plea. Help. Compassion. Absolution.

Mira listened but said nothing. What was there left? Catherine and Timothy should be reveling in the wonder of their child. Renee should be adjusting, with a dubious level of success, to her new role as doting grandma. She should be snuggled up somewhere under a homemade quilt, sleeping blissfully in Robert’s arms. She could...would have

been if only she hadn't been so blind. So stupid. If her dearest friend...the woman now crying in a drunken, maudlin jag...hadn't betrayed her.

Everything played out in her head again. If she'd made Renee see reason. If she'd listened to Catherine, bought Timothy outright and given him his freedom. If she'd persuaded Catherine to come home. If she'd truly had the courage of her so-called "convictions" and not held slaves at all. If she'd at least have freed the slaves she held. Even if she'd simply given in to her heart and gone when Robert had told her they should.

The tears flowed into her ears, sad and seemingly endless. Perhaps Renee was right to reach out. After all, she herself was burdened with the pain of losing both Catherine and Robert. Renee was burdened with the loss of Catherine and three deaths on her hands. It was very much in character for her to turn to Mira, to ease that burden. Make things better. Fix things. And she knew too that in any other circumstance, they would have come together, held each other silently as they wept for what was. For what would never be. Their pain would have been mitigated, even a little, by being shared.

Should have.

Would have.

Could have.

All those things that might have been were crushed under the weight of the one overwhelming reality that was. She could not return Timothy to Catherine or Catherine to Renee. Nor could Renee return Robert to her. Those losses had gouged huge, permanent, gaping holes in all their lives. And they could cry for all eternity, but those holes would never be filled.

"I'm sorry, Renee," she whispered into the phone. "Truly I am." Carefully, she put the phone back in its cradle. With a last dejected sigh, she turned away, pulled her thick comforter up under her chin, closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six weeks later, amidst whispers of drunkenness and growing emotional instability, Renee Baron surrendered her Senate seat. In a simple letter of resignation delivered to the Secretary, she cited "health problems", "the rigors of public life" and a "desire for a simpler, more private life" as her reasons. The resignation was accepted without comment by the Crown.

To fill Renee's term, Mira nominated an old friend, middle-of-the-road and who she felt would be acceptable to the rest of her uneasy political alliance. Anticipating little opposition, she was amazed to discover that a coalition, lead by slavery hard-liner, Lydia Field, and, Mira suspected, financed heavily by Mary Forbes and her ilk, came out squarely against Mira's choice. Instead, they pushed for a nominee "more closely in tune with the people being victimized by the Crown's policies of lenience toward the

rebels". In a close vote, Mira's nominee was not confirmed. Another close vote and the hard-liner choice was in.

"Fear," Mira told Caina angrily. "Fear and stupidity. There have always been slave troubles. And there will be until we kill the beast once and for all. Instead of talking punishment and retribution, we should be talking freedom and acceptance."

"Perhaps, Mira," the old woman replied quietly. "But these are no longer merely isolated instances, hit-and-run raids to steal food and whatever slaves are handy. Mainly in the north. These are well-planned, organized, large raids, designed to terrorize landowners and free as many slaves as possible. And they're spreading to every area." She paused and looked thoughtfully at the Tarsheen. "There are many people who believe that this is not just a regional revolt. That it's the beginning of a full-scale insurrection. Perhaps even civil war."

Sighing, Mira leaned back in her chair. "As ye sow..."

\* \* \* \* \*

A little less than a year later, Caina died suddenly. Massive coronary was the official cause of death although much later Lisa Elliott would comment that it may have been more a broken heart than anything else. If not an actual wall, then at least certainly, a thick curtain had descended between the Tarsheen and her Proconsul. Nothing the doctor could put her finger on exactly, but a very real chilling of the relationship, a definite distance between them that hadn't been there before.

Conversation dwindled to official business.

"Mira," Caina would nag and/or scold. "You must snap out of this ridiculous school girl funk. You have duties...responsibilities. You are the Tarsheen, for God's sake."

"Yes," she would bark sharply, "I am the Tarsheen. Not you. And you would do well to remember that."

And in those long, cold, empty voids, Caina would sometimes feel a prickling on the back of her neck. Looking up, she would find Mira watching her. The Tarsheen's face would be calm and composed, but there was something in her eyes that hadn't been there before...before that night. Perhaps not outright accusation but definitely a kind of questioning suspicion. Almost as if she sensed something hidden. Something wrong.

Once, she'd actually screwed up her courage and asked, "What's wrong, Mira? Have I done something to upset...hurt you?"

Mira gazed at her for a few seconds, her dark eyes intense in that impassive face. "I don't know, Caina," she replied simply. "Have you?"

It was the last time the subject was broached.

More and more, Mira retreated to the library, locking the door behind her early in the morning, sometimes not re-emerging until late at night. Once or twice, Caina heard



her crying behind the thick door and was tempted to knock. But always, there was that vague uneasiness and the look in Mira's eyes to give her pause.

On the last morning of her life, Caina had her usual breakfast of toast, coffee and mixed fruit, and then retired to her office. There was a pile of routine correspondence to be answered, several pressing appointments to be shoehorned into Mira's already overcrowded calendar and a much dreaded confrontation concerning a report from the Senate Budget Committee which the Tarsheen needed to review in preparation for what promised to be an ugly battle over increased expenditures for a stepped up military response to "the growing slave problem".

Mira discovered her, slumped over her desk, pen still in hand, just before a scheduled eleven o'clock meeting.

Instead of the expected lavish State funeral befitting a Proconsul who'd given her life to public service, the Tarsheen chose a small intimate service and internment in a crypt long ago prepared.

"I hate the thought of being underground," Caina had often remarked.

In lieu of floral tributes, Mira asked mourners to contribute to a charity of their choice. "Caina would not want money wasted on flowers when there is so much more that needs doing in the world."

In her short, eloquent eulogy, Mira touched on her faithfulness, her devotion to duty. "Caina died as she lived," the Tarsheen told the small assembly. "Serving the Crown always as she believed best. Always following her conscience to do what she thought right for society and the Royal House. Whatever her sins, either of commission or omission, it is my hope that in death, she be judged honestly and that she receive the same consideration and compassion that she showed in life."

\* \* \* \* \*

The mysterious illness began a little over a month after Caina was buried. After a long, frustrating day of official duties, made worse by her new, inexperienced secretary, Kelsey, Mira had picked at her dinner and retired with a small throbbing headache in her left temple.

About midnight, she was awakened by a torrent of heat raging through her body. For several minutes she lay, helpless, panting and feeling like she was pinned inside an oven. When the heat finally released her, sweating and shivering, she tried to rouse enough strength to reach the phone and Lisa Elliott. But before she could move, her body collapsed into a thin, fretful sleep.

Morning came and except for a lingering thirst and a dull ache behind her eyes, she didn't seem any the worse for wear. And in the midst of another busy day, both the fever and the headache were forgotten.

Three nights later, however, the fever returned with a vengeance. When it subsided, Mira managed to call Lisa Elliott and in a parched, hoarse voice, summon her. By the

time she arrived, Mira was in the throes of another siege, Henry, her chief house servant, putting cool compresses on her burning forehead. When she could get a thermometer into Mira's dry mouth, it read over one hundred and three degrees. Elliott was hurriedly preparing an injection when the fever "broke" as suddenly as it had begun.

After apologizing profusely for the inconvenience, Mira thanked the doctor and dismissed her.

"I'm not going anywhere," Elliott told her flatly, "until I've had a good look at you. One hundred and three isn't anything to be taken lightly. Especially considering the generally shitty state of your health anyway."

"My health is fine," Mira assured her weakly.

"Yeah. Right," her friend agreed sarcastically, pulling her stethoscope out of her bag. "You've lost thirty pounds in the last six months. Weight, by the way, you didn't have to lose to begin with. When was the last time you actually sat down and ate a decent meal? Got eight hours of restful, unbroken sleep? Just had a day off from being the Tarsheen?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, Dr. Elliott," Mira croaked in a pale imitation of her most regal bearing, "there is a great deal of trouble and unrest in my realm. Hardly the time for me to take a cruise."

To an anxious Henry and a slightly bewildered Kelsey, the doctor jerked her head toward the door. "Out," she ordered.

"Don't be clever, Your Grace," Elliott grumbled as she moved to Mira's side. "It doesn't become you and you're lousy at it to boot." Seeing Mira open her mouth to respond, the doctor put the tips of her instrument in her ears. "Take a deep breath and hold it."

"So, what do you think?" Mira asked when her physician was finished with her examination.

"I think I should call an ambulance and haul your royal ass in for some tests. Your lungs are clear and I don't see any obvious signs of infection or disease that would account for a hundred and three fever."

"I would think that would be a good thing."

"Generally, yes. But not in this case. Just from looking at you, I can see you're suffering from exhaustion. You're too thin, your heart's racing like an ill-tuned Indy car engine and the bags under your eyes are rapidly becoming steamer trunks. And that's just what I can see here. God only knows what's going on inside you. First stage malnutrition. Anemia. An ulcer even." The tone of her voice softened and she took Mira's hand. "For once in your life, be reasonable. Listen to someone besides yourself. Let me call an ambulance and put you in the hospital. Rest. IV nutrient replacement and some tests."

Mira smiled and squeezed her doctor's hand. "I know you mean well and I appreciate your concern."

"But?"

"But you know as well as I do that my coalition...hell, my entire government, is hanging by a thread. I, personally, am the only thing standing between what's left of an uneasy peace and an all-out blood bath. The hawks are screaming for war on the slaves as it is. If I'm not there to stop them, the military will be in the field tomorrow." Her voice faded. "Killing indiscriminately. Men. Women. Children. I...I can't let that happen. Not again."

"But if you're sick..."

"If I'm sick, the hawks will swoop down just the same." She shook her head ever so slightly and Dr. Elliott could see Mira was fast losing her battle with the sandman. "No," she repeated. "No hospital. I have to hang on. I have to...be here...when..." She closed her eyes.

"All right, Your Grace," the doctor agreed quietly as she placed Mira's hand back on the sheet. "It is as you command."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Please," Dr. Elliott pleaded, "let me call an ambulance. You can't stay here anymore, Mira. It's not safe." Both women heard the note of panic creeping into her voice.

"I won't be driven from my home," the Tarsheen replied, trying to muster as much regal authority as her deteriorated physical condition would allow. "By illness or rebels." She looked up at her doctor, determination in her eyes.

Lisa Elliott sighed in total frustration. Since the onset of her patient's mysterious illness some two months before, the doctor had watched it slowly but surely sapping the Tarsheen. At first, it had been confined to the night, perhaps two or three bouts, her temperature suddenly soaring past one hundred and three. Daylight would find her with a chronic listless fatigue, loss of what little appetite she'd had and a thirst that plagued her constantly but which no amount of liquid seemed to quench.

And then, about three weeks earlier, the fever had begun invading her waking hours, routinely reaching one hundred and three, but spiking occasionally beyond one hundred four to the fringes of delirium. She'd tried to get Mira to agree to hospitalization then. But she'd only mumbled incoherently about being able to find someone. Or perhaps someone finding her. The doctor hadn't heard clearly and she'd been too worried about Mira's health to pay much attention to her delusional ramblings.

Now, the fever was constant, generally hovering around one hundred degrees but still making those unexpected and unpredictable jumps. Mira was bedridden, fluids of all kinds, the only thing she could keep down. Ghostly pale, thin, her black eyes unnaturally bright with the fever's shine. Still, she was conscious and lucid and she refused to budge.

"You're sick," Elliott insisted, trying to get through to her friend and patient. "Too sick to be here. You ought to be in a hospital."

"I ought to be in the Senate chambers," she corrected sadly. "If I had been, that declaration would never have been pushed through. I...I would never have put my name to it."

"The declaration of treason against the slaves would have passed whether you were there or not," the doctor explained patiently, and for what seemed the hundredth time. "The attacks are everywhere. People are scared. They're demanding action. And even if you hadn't signed it, it would have been affirmed anyway. There's nothing you could have done. It's what people want."

Mira sighed. "What people want," she repeated.

"Yes. What people want. You know how bad it's gotten. There have been raids in your very own district, one less than five miles from here. You're in danger here. It's too isolated. Let me at least take you to your Royal Apartments in town. You'll be safe there."

"I'm safe right here. No one would dare attack the Tarsheen, either her residence or her person. Not with the cream of the Royal Guard here." Mira stopped, gulped and ran her tongue over her dry lips. Dr. Elliott leaned over and helped her with a few sips of water.

"There've already been skirmishes with the Army. If these rebel slaves aren't afraid of the Army, they're not going to be afraid of your guards. And from what I've heard, if there is an attack, it'll be hell."

The smile widened a tad and Mira looked at her almost wistfully. "I've been to hell," she answered softly. "It holds no terror for me."

For a moment, Lisa stared at her, totally lost. Abruptly, Mira reached out and touched the doctor's hand lightly.

"It's all right," she assured her doctor, "it's neither important nor even necessary that you understand. Only that you do two things for me."

"Anything, Your Grace," Dr. Elliott replied respectfully. "At your command."

"There are a pair of envelopes on my desk in my study. I want you to take them now and deliver them as soon as possible to Senator Esther Shipley. No one else. Into her hands alone. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Senator Shipley personally. As soon as I can."

"She's just about the only friend I have left down there. The last of my crumbling coalition." She gazed sadly into the middle distance for a few moments. With a sigh, she turned back to her friend. "I've instructed Kelsey to pack some things and to leave with you. Promise me you'll see the insufferable little dimwit safely to the Royal Apartments. She's so stupid I wouldn't trust her to find them herself."

"Of course."

"Well then," Mira concluded. "It's getting late and I feel the need to rest now. You should be going."

"Are...are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"You have my answer," she replied, a trace of imperial finality in her voice. "You are dismissed, Dr. Elliott."

The physician rose and dipped her head. "As you wish, Your Grace."

Crossing the room quickly, she curled her fingers around the doorknob.

"Goodbye, Lisa."

Turning, she saw Mira propped up, looking like a delicate porcelain doll, almost lost in that huge bed. She smiled weakly. "Thank you. For everything."

Tears welled up but out of respect for the crown and love for the woman, she refused to let them fall. Instead, she forced herself to return the smile.

"Thank you, Your Highness. Goodbye, Mira."

\* \* \* \* \*

As nearly as the authorities could determine later, the attack came just before dawn. After cutting the phone lines and toppling a microwave tower to silence the cell phones, the rebel slaves had apparently overpowered the perimeter guards one by one and silently infiltrated the compound itself.

Because of sporadic fighting in the area and road damage due to explosives, the first Army units didn't roll up the driveway until almost sunset.

A few bodies, slave and guard, lay along the long drive from the road to the house. It was only when they reached the main house that the full extent and ferocity of the fighting became clear.

The slave quarters were riddled with the pock marks of small arms and automatic weapons fire. A corner of the building was missing, the victim of some kind of explosive.

Bodies and parts of bodies littered every square foot of soaked, bloody ground. Hand-to-hand combat was evident. Most of the bodies had been cut down with close range gunfire. But some had long knife slashes and some bore the crushed bones and skulls of rifle butts.

The fighting seemed to have started around the slave quarters, no doubt in an attempt to swell the invaders' ranks and turn the estate slaves on their guards. From there, it had swept like a red tide toward the main house.

On the steps of the house, they found the bodies of eight guards, formed in a sort of irregular crescent, apparently in a last ditch effort to protect both the building and the Royal household. Even though they'd eventually been overwhelmed by superior numbers, the carnage of slave bodies surrounding them gave mute testimony to their determined defense.

And on the top step, directly in front of the doors, lay what was left of the mangled, mutilated body of the Royal Overseer, Jennifer Pontier. Here, she'd made her stand, nine slave bodies at her feet. When she'd finally been silenced, the slaves had vented their terrible anger and vengeance on her, ripping and chopping until virtually nothing human remained.

Inside, the house was a wreck, ransacked and vandalized. Furniture overturned and broken, mirrors and decorative pieces smashed, the hardwood floors gouged and marred, drapes ripped down, lush rugs smeared and stained with blood, urine and worse.

Seeing the destruction, the officer in charge, a young lieutenant, immediately dispersed her soldiers through the house, searching for the Tarsheen. Vaguely, she remembered something about Her Highness being ill and confined to her bed. Bounding up the stairs, she began throwing open doors.

"Your Highness," she yelled, trying not to let the growing panic she was feeling seep into her voice. "Your Highness. It's the Army. You're safe now. Please, if you're hiding, come out."

At the end of the hall, she passed through what was left of a sitting room and into the Tarsheen's private bedroom. Clothes and even underwear were strewn around the floor, mostly ripped to tatters. Perfume bottles were smashed, their contents creating such an overwhelming stench, the officer had to move quickly to open the French doors.

The bed was rumpled, the impression of a head still on the fat down pillow. Covers had been thrown back but other than that, the bed seemed undisturbed.

That they might find the Tarsheen dead, slaughtered like her guards, had been uppermost in the young woman's mind. Now, an even more chilling, more horrifying possibility reared its head. The Tarsheen, ill and helpless, taken captive by this band of murdering, thieving animals.

"My God," she murmured. "My God."

A thorough search of the house, including walls and floors for possible hidden rooms or escape passages, turned up nothing but a single, dainty peach-colored silk bedroom slipper, lying at the foot of the stairs, almost under the lip of the bottom step.

At daybreak, search and rescue teams with trained dogs were helicoptered in. Beginning in her bedroom, the dogs had bolted excitedly out the door, down the hall and stairs, toward the kitchen and out the back door. Sniffing intently, they made a straight line across the broad lawn toward a grove of huge old elms behind the house.

For an instant, hopes rose. Perhaps the Tarsheen had managed to escape the carnage of the house and reach the relative safety of the trees. A tunnel from the house. Or guards who'd seen her safely here and then rejoined the fight. She might be too weak, too sick to call out. Unconscious. In shock. Maybe...maybe...

Breaking through to a large clearing at the heart of the trees, the dogs stopped, still sniffing furiously, but obviously confused, the scent gone. Fanning out and calling, the

Army personnel and searchers began beating the bushes for the missing woman. Soldiers were even sent up into the trees on the faint hope that she'd somehow managed to take refuge in their full, leafy camouflage.

But nothing else was found.

News that the Tarsheen's own estate had been attacked and overrun and that she might well be a prisoner of these bloodthirsty monsters sent the public panic hurtling straight to hysteria. The hue and cry for war escalated to screams of "death to them all!"

More than two chaotic, panicked, rumor-filled weeks passed before the Senate came together. First to request to speak was Senator Esther Shipley.

"Fellow Senators and citizens," she began solemnly, "I come before you today, our Tarsheen's throne empty, to read to you a letter of the gravest importance and urgency, especially in light of the events of the past days." She held up an envelope. "This letter was delivered to me two days ago by Dr. Lisa Elliott, the Tarsheen's personal physician and longtime friend. The afternoon before she...she disappeared, Her Highness instructed Dr. Elliott to deliver two envelopes to me and no one else. Unfortunately, because of the unrest, I was detained longer than I intended and only just returned. If you will permit me."

The older woman adjusted her glasses, unfolded the paper and smoothed it on the podium. "This is written in Her Grace's own hand, with which I am very familiar and is dated the day she vanished." Pausing for a moment, she began reading.

"My dearest Esther, Shakespeare wrote, 'The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones.' I write this to you because I trust that you'll see these words are at least heard, if not understood, before being buried with my bones."

Her voice cracked and she had to stop again, taking a sip of water before she resumed.

"I am told that this Declaration of Treason, the military actions and the killing on both sides are 'what the people want'. I've asked myself, which people? The people who live at the expense of others? Profit by the continued misery and exploitation of those who cannot, even in the most basic sense, call their souls, their very bodies, their own? Or is it the people who want nothing more than to live where and in what manner they choose? To follow a trade of their own choosing and to profit fairly from their own labor? To love whom they wish, openly, and to share that love with their children?"

The Senator looked up into the faces before her, noting that even those who had disagreed with Mira's politics were listening intently.

"I confess that I can come to no clear-cut answer for others who must wrestle and eventually live with their own consciences. But this I do know. That the Declaration of Treason was passed and affirmed is the most damning evidence of all of my failure, not just to resolve the slave issue, but to recognize my own heinous contribution to this insanity. For my failure to understand, teach, lead, I stand guilty before God and my fellow humans, male and female, of complacency, hypocrisy and indifference. The

blood of those on both sides is on my hands. I'm prepared now to pay whatever penalty attaches to those crimes and guilt."

A noisy buzz raced around the room. Senator Shipley waited calmly while the Secretary restored order.

"I can do nothing about the bloodlust engulfing us. The fear, anger and stupidity are beyond reason and must now be fed until we're all gorged and sickened. But I see now that the end, not just to the violence but to the whole obscenity of slavery itself, must begin somewhere. If it were in my power, I would this day, declare slavery ended and a general amnesty. Unfortunately, I've come to realize too late just how impotent and puny I really am. However, there are two things which I can yet do. In the companion envelope, there is a list of the slaves, by name and registration number, that I currently own as well as a list of breeders pregnant by my slaves. You will also find my official Declaration of Emancipation, covering each of them, including those yet unborn."

Senator Shipley held up the documents so that everyone could see both Mira's signature and her royal seal.

"This document is my last official act as your reigning Tarsheen. Having failed in my duties to protect and serve all my subjects and no longer having either the will or the strength to continue in my office, I hereby relinquish my crown, effective with my signature and seal, this date. Take care and God bless, Esther. May He give you the wisdom not to walk in my footsteps."

It took several more moments for the older woman to continue. Blinking several times, she excused herself to the Secretary's desk to retrieve a tissue that she dabbed at her eyes.

"Miraelise called it 'the beginning of the end'. The place where each one of us must decide for ourselves, 'enough and no more'." She picked up another piece of paper from the podium. "Fortunately, God did give me wisdom...to follow in some very large, very great footsteps. Because I too choose to make this 'the beginning of the end'. This morning, before I came to chambers, I assembled my slaves and read them my Declaration of Emancipation. I told them that from this day forward, they would be free. If they wish to leave, they may. If they choose to stay, it will be as my paid employees, not my property."

Slowly, she looked around the room, forcing eye contact with each of her colleagues, no matter how reluctantly.

"The Tarsheen and I leave it to you and your conscience to decide when the beginning of the end will come for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the next few days, several more of the liberal and moderate members of the government freed their slaves, although hardly a majority. But the action sparked



debate, not just in the government and society, but even among the rebels. Members of the media received letters stating that they'd had no part in the Tarsheen's disappearance, that she'd been one of the few people the rebels had felt was truly on their side and that they would be willing to sit down under a flag of truce to discuss a possible settlement of the current hostilities.

Esther Shipley announced that she would be willing to meet with the rebels and try to broker a deal, but nothing was actually ever arranged.

For her "heroism and dedication to duty", Jennifer Pontier was posthumously awarded the Royal Star for bravery and buried with full honors in a lavish State funeral. Speaker after speaker extolled her as a model of patriotism, fearlessly defending State and Crown to the end. The other guards who'd stood with her were also given slightly lesser awards and also buried with honors, although not quite as magnificent as Pontier's. Slave bodies were collected, cremated in batches and dumped into communal, unmarked graves in the public slave cemetery.

Kelsey, "the insufferable little dimwit" became a minor celebrity, making television and public appearances to describe her "intimate knowledge of one of the finest women of our generation". Of course, there was the obligatory ghostwritten book, detailing not just their "great" friendship, but most importantly, the fateful day that, despite Kelsey's repeated pleas to stay by Her Highness's side, no matter what the danger, the Tarsheen had forced her to leave "so that my pitiful life might be spared". In prose, if not exactly purple than at least pale lilac, she described "the Tarsheen's regal bearing and calm courage, even in the face of such horrific peril". How she "adored" Her Highness and what a tragic loss it was personally and for the world. Needless to say, the book was a runaway bestseller.

The Senate posted a million-dollar reward for information leading to Mira's safe return. In time, the reward was amended to include an explanation of her disappearance and the whereabouts of her remains. Even an offer of general amnesty to any slave supplying reliable information went unclaimed.

But no trace of Mira was ever found.

\* \* \* \* \*

Moonlight poured through the lacy curtains at her French doors, filling her bedroom with muted light. She'd been dozing fitfully, jerking awake, listening intently to every creak and rattle in the darkness. But now, lying with her back to the bedroom door, she could feel the other presence and she knew it was real. For some days, she'd known...felt...that things were drawing to a close. If it wasn't the fever, the rebels would find her as they had so many others. Strangely, she felt no terror. It was as if her life had long been over, the actual dying a mere formality.

A large hand grasped her shoulder, surprisingly gentle, pulling up on her peach silk nightgown. Closing her eyes tightly, she took a breath and held it, waiting. *Let it be quick*, she half-thought, half-prayed.

The body bent down toward her and she heard loud breathing, imagined the face, the weapon, inching closer. Still, the fear didn't come. Only the mounting, almost unbearable suspense.

Warm breath, almost on her cheek, the hand tugging softly backward.

"Mira."

It was the voice out of a thousand shattered dreams and for a heartbeat, her whole being froze, afraid to breathe. Suddenly, she was terrified that in these last few moments, her fevered mind was playing a final, excruciatingly cruel trick.

"Mira."

The voice came again, clear and distinct, although no more than a whisper.

Slowly, she rolled on her back. His face was there, almost brushing hers.

"Robert?" she asked softly, petrified that like so many other haunted dreams, the face would disappear with her full wakefulness.

He smiled, those warm intense eyes crinkling up at the outer corners, driving the concern from his features like summer sun chasing away a brief shower. Timidly, as if afraid to believe her eyes and ears, Mira raised her fingertips to his lips. In answer, he took her fingers in his hand and kissed them lightly. A moment more and they were in each other's arms.

"Oh God," he mumbled between kisses, "I've waited...dreamed...ached for this moment."

"How?" she breathed, filling her arms and her senses and soul with him. "I thought...Caina. I felt..."

"Shhhh," he said, cutting off her words with his mouth. "It's not important."

"But..."

"There isn't time, Mira," he told her anxiously, pulling away from her just enough to look into her eyes. "We have to go. Now. The rebels..."

"I know," she replied quietly. "For days I've had this black, foreboding feeling..."

He searched her face, suddenly aware of what she was really saying. "If you knew...felt...then why didn't you go? Why are you still here? Don't you understand that being the Tarsheen won't save you? Won't mean anything to them?"

She nodded and looked away from him. "There's been very little of my life without you. I thought...hoped really, that my death might shock people, disgust and outrage them so thoroughly, that this insanity might end." Pausing, she looked back at him forlornly. "I guess I was being foolish. Again."

Robert beamed at her, his eyes shining in the moonlight. "Not foolish, love. Maybe just a little too optimistic for your own good." He brushed a wisp of curl from her forehead. "But knowing that, I'm even more glad I got here in time. I couldn't bear losing you again." Another quick kiss and he stood up. "But now, Your Grace," he teased, "we really do have to be going."

"No more, 'Your Grace'," she smiled, suddenly feeling some of her old self returning.

Raising an eyebrow, he looked at her quizzically.

"No more title. No more crown. No more slaves. Not much of anything, I'm afraid." She giggled.

"What are you talking about?"

"Early this morning...or perhaps yesterday...I don't know what time it is," she turned her head and squinted at the red numerals shining from her nightstand. "Thirty-one," she continued. "Yesterday morning then, I did one last official act as the Tarsheen. I freed my slaves. All of them. Including the ones still inside breeders. Isn't it wonderful?" He thought she sounded like a delighted six-year-old. "Just think. Over the next year, eight baby boys will be born. Free!"

The smile faded and her voice took on a sadness. "Of course, I suppose like everything else, it's too little, too late." She looked away again. "Slavery's such an enormous monster," Mira said softly. "I guess I just always thought it would take one wise, all-powerful ruler to kill it. Like St. George and the dragon. I never considered that it would take millions of ordinary people, from all sides, chipping away at it, relentlessly, to finally bring it down."

"Mira..."

"And after I signed the Declaration of Emancipation, I relinquished my Crown and with it, all Royal property. I'm afraid that, with the exception of some personal items, I'm virtually destitute." The giggle became a chuckle.

In spite of himself, Robert chuckled too. It felt so good to be with her again. Like that warm sunshine feeling he'd come to know and love and miss so much.

"Good," he finally managed to say. "That means we won't have to waste time packing. Where's your robe and slippers?"

Wiping her face on a corner of the sheet, she shook her head. "I said 'virtually'. Now if you go to my wardrobe closet," she pointed to a door across the room, "you'll find my set of luggage..."

"Mira, we haven't got time to pack your luggage."

"I know that, silly. Just my leather overnight bag." She wrinkled her nose in thought. "Now, let's see. I'll need my black wool pants and my Navy gabardine slacks and I suppose a couple of pair of jeans and my Wedgwood blue cashmere sweater and..."

"Mira," Robert finally managed to break in, "there isn't any time for that. We could be talking minutes, seconds. I'm going to get your robe and slippers, wrap you in your nice warm down comforter and get you the hell out of here."

"But —"

"No 'buts'," he told her firmly.

"And what am I supposed to do for clothes? I can't very well go about in my nightgown twenty-four hours a day."

"There'll be plenty of clothes," he assured her. "Perhaps not fine enough for a Tarsheen, but certainly good enough for plain old Miraelise."

"Please," she mewled, adopting her plaintive child voice. "At least some underwear. They're in the bureau. How long can it possibly take for you to throw a couple of bras and some panties and perhaps a slip in my overnight bag?"

Robert looked down into her upturned face and gave a deep sigh of frustration and resignation. "You know, Catherine bet me a week of washing dishes to a homemade apple pie that you'd be a stubborn little wench, right up to the end." He shook his head. "I should have known it was a sucker bet."

"Catherine?" Mira breathed in astonishment. "You've...you've seen Catherine?"

"When I was on the Railroad, I had nowhere to go but I remembered where Catherine was headed so I asked to go there. She took me in and nursed me, night and day. Cared for me all the weeks and months I was bedridden and couldn't do much more than breathe."

Pain stabbed at Mira's heart and she reached up to take his hand. "You...you were badly hurt in the fire?"

"Breathing toxic chemicals, even if you're unconscious and not breathing all that much, isn't a good thing for lungs. They got burned pretty badly." There was no reason to tell her about the gunshot or Caina, although something inside told him that if she didn't know for certain that her Proconsul had something to do with the fire, she "felt" it and that was probably bad enough. There was no reason to make it any worse.

"Is that why...why you didn't come back? At least try to contact me?"

"We need to go, Mira."

"I need to know, Robert."

"At first, I was too sick, too injured to do anything but try to stay alive. If it hadn't been for all the people who helped me...the female technician and the male orderly who risked their own lives to get me out of that burning room and the female doctor who gave me medical care and hid me in her basement for two weeks and a lot of others, male and female, free and slave...who took care of me when I couldn't take care of myself, I'd have died. Then there were months when breathing was almost more effort than I could make."

He stopped and Mira felt his fingers tighten around her hand. "Victoria Keller didn't just almost kill me. She very nearly destroyed my fortress, my soul. It wasn't that I didn't want to reach out to you, let you know I was alive. I wanted more than anything to touch you, even with my thoughts. I just couldn't."

"I'm just so glad to have you back," Mira said, tears of pain and joy welling up and falling silently.

Robert knelt beside her and ran his fingers lightly across her wet cheek. "Please don't cry. I can't stand it when you cry."

"I'm crying because I'm so happy," she told him, trying to smother the tears with a little smile. "I can't believe that after everything, God would not only give you back to me, but Catherine as well."

"And the baby," he added. "A son."

"Timothy?"

"Uh-huh," he grinned. "I held her hand for thirteen grueling, torturous hours while she cursed like a sailor. And I was there when the midwife delivered him. Almost eight pounds. Lots of black hair and blue eyes, but not like Catherine's though. They're the color of a summer ocean."

"Aquamarine," Mira said wistfully. "Like his grandmother." She looked away and Robert saw a flicker of sadness and loss across her face. But when she turned back, the smile had returned. "I'll bet he's beautiful."

Robert nodded. "But we really have got to go now. I mean it. I'll pack some underwear for you but then we go."

"Yes," she answered as he turned toward the closet. "And while you're over there, please pack my silver comb and brush set. It's in the flat rosewood case with the Royal seal on my dressing table."

"Mira..." he raised his voice but she cut him off.

"It was my grandmother's," she explained patiently. "Catherine adored it when she was a child. I used to brush her long soft hair by the hour. I promised it to her."

"No," he answered firmly.

"Oh, and in my sitting room, in the glass case by the fireplace. There's a little book. Worn green cover. *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Catherine used to sit in my lap and I'd read it to her. Now I can read it to Timothy."

"No," he repeated. "Absolutely not! Every second we stay here is another second closer to the rebels. I won't risk our lives for your panties and some Goddamn sentimental foolishness."

She stared up at him like a puppy that's just been kicked by a beloved master and doesn't understand why. Tears appeared in her eyes again. Instantly, he felt awful, even as he knew that was exactly how she wanted him to feel.

"Surely," she answered in a small, quivering voice, "you can't ask me to go empty-handed to my goddaughter and her son? Not after everything that's happened? Not when I have so little left." Her voice caught for just a moment and she wiped her eyes with the sheet again. "I mean, you helped give Catherine her independence and her son. And you have a lifetime of wisdom and knowledge to give Timothy. All I have is a treasured heirloom and a small book." Those eyes radiated misery as they looked up at him pleadingly.

"You know," he grumbled finally, "I often wonder which one of us is the bigger idiot."

As he took a step toward the closet, he caught a trace of her warm, satisfied grin.

"I need my cosmetics," she called as he lifted the rosewood case into her black traveling bag. "You can just put everything in the little case in the bottom right-hand drawer. And I'll need my moisturizers. One for day and one for night. They're in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. And as long as you're in there, could you please pick up my toothbrush and..."

The bureau drawer slammed shut.

Mira made a face, pursing her lips in annoyed disappointment. "All right for you," she pouted. "But in the not-too-distant future when you wake up some morning and discover you've declared yourself to a wrinkled old crone, don't say I didn't warn you." The last words were hurled at Robert's back as he disappeared through the bedroom into the sitting room.

"I suppose," she mumbled to herself, "that my jewel case and video camera are out of the question."

"Damn right," Robert replied tartly, as he came back to the bed.

Mira stretched out her arm to him, in her hand a photograph from her nightstand in an ornate gilt frame. "It's my mother," she grinned sheepishly at his scowl. "Please?"

Grabbing it, he threw it in the bag, zipped it shut and set it on the floor. "No more! I'll end up packing the Goddamn sofa. Now will you tell me where your robe and slippers are so that we can get the hell out of here or am I going to have to just throw you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes?"

"My robe is at the foot of my bed, under the comforter and my slippers are under the bed."

"Can you sit up?" he asked tenderly, his concern now for her.

"If you help me." But as he helped her off the pillow, the room began to swim before her. Quickly, Robert slipped her arms through the robe, tying it and sliding her slippers onto her feet. "You've lost so much weight," he remarked anxiously, "even your slippers are too big."

"I'll be fine now," she told him, patting his arm.

"We both will." He kissed her and smiled. "What you need is lots of good, clean air, warm sun and wholesome food. You'll be right as rain in no time."

"And lots of marvelous sex," she added.

"Definitely," he grinned. He pulled the covers off her and spread the comforter out on the large bed. "Okay," he said handing her the bag. "Hold on to this." Picking her up, he gently set her down on the dark green comforter and wrapped her tightly. "Now, as soon as we leave this room, you have to promise me you won't make a sound 'til I tell you it's all right. No matter what happens. If Satan himself shows up and pokes you in the ass with his pitchfork, you keep quiet. Understand?"

"Yes, but how are we going to get out of here?"

"The same way I came in." A last quick kiss. "Not another word, another sound."

Mira grinned and nodded.

Robert swept her out of bed and into his arms like a child. "You know what?" he asked.

"What?"

"When I first came in and you were asleep, it was like that first night. I remember thinking then how beautiful you were. Still are."

"I love you," she whispered.

"I'm glad. I'd hate to love you as much as I do and not have you feel the same way."

Silently, he carried her out of the room, down the long hall and carefully down the stairs. The house was dark and quiet as they moved down another hall, through the kitchen and out into the yard. It seemed to Mira that the night was much darker than in her room, as if the moon had decided to give them the cover they needed. As they hurried across the lawn, she listened to Robert's breathing, his heartbeat.

*Thank you, dear God, she shouted in her mind. And you don't have to worry. I've learned my lesson. If the stars are the only roof we ever have or rainbows the only wallpaper, I'll be happy as long as you let me share them with Robert.*

Moving noiselessly through the blackness, Mira wondered where her guards were. They routinely patrolled not only the perimeter of her large estate, keeping in touch with headquarters by cell phone, but also the compound itself. Jennifer had told her only a few days before that because of the rebel activity in the vicinity, she'd increased the patrols. But with every step, it seemed to her more and more, that they were utterly alone.

Entering into the elm grove was like going into a cave. Even the stars vanished. She was dying of curiosity but she'd promised him her silence. They walked on for a few more minutes, Robert never stumbling or seeming unsure of his direction, even when there seemed to be no light at all.

"It's just us," he called softly into the darkness.

"We were getting worried," another voice answered. "Problems?"

"A little snag but nothing serious. Have you seen anything?"

"Not a thing. Johnny's making a round now. Be back in two shakes."

Mira heard a metal door opening and the sound of feet moving.

"Okay, love," he whispered, "we're going up a little ramp. Don't worry. I've got you." He gave her a peck on the forehead, readjusted his grip and started up. The darkness got blacker and she realized they were in some kind of a closed vehicle. A truck maybe. At that moment, a pinprick of light appeared, a tiny flashlight illuminating a small circle in the dark.

"Glad to see you made it," came another voice, deep but definitely female. "Right through here."

Mira caught a glimpse of something, squealed and jerked so unexpectedly, Robert almost dropped her.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Concern gave way in a heartbeat to fear.

"Where...where are we?" she cried. "And...and what are those for?" A nod of her head toward his left shoulder was all she could manage.

Before Robert could answer, there was a throaty, rich laugh. "Don't worry, ma'am," the voice told her good-naturedly. "Caskets are all empty. Comin' from the factory. Good cover. Nobody likes to mess with 'em. I got a regular route I drive. Most cops and weigh stations know the old 'Morgue Mobile' and just wave me on through. Robert, you should have said something to the lady."

"It's all right, Mira," he soothed as they passed into another small area. Immediately, a small but brighter light came on as Robert knelt down and laid her on a thick mattress. "Everything's fine now." Gently, he raised her head and placed a pillow under it. "I want to check on a couple of things but I'll be right back. I love you." They kissed and he was gone.

Mira moved her head back and forth. It was a small space, the walls padded like the floor. On the wall by her feet, three large cardboard boxes were stacked and strapped securely. The light came from a battery-powered lamp by the door.

A familiar figure appeared in the doorway, smiling broadly as he knelt beside her.

"Henry?"

"Yes, ma'am. Robert asked me to come sit with you for a minute. Keep you company and make sure you get settled comfortable like. First thing, let's get you unwrapped." Gently, he pulled the comforter from around her, carefully lifting her enough to free the material from under her back.

"Why don't you hand me that bag? I'll put it over here by the boxes. Outta the way."

"Thank you," Mira responded as he took the bag.

"Now I'll just put this extra blanket and the comforter over you and you'll be snug as a bug." It was then he noticed her feet. "You've only got one slipper," he exclaimed, pointing at her bare left foot.

"I know," Mira giggled. "I think it slid off when we were going down the stairs." Playfully, she wiggled her toes.

"Why didn't you say something? You shouldn't be out in this night air barefoot."

"Because Robert told me not to make any noise, no matter what. Besides, what's one slipper more or less in the grand scheme of the universe?" She giggled again.

Afraid that her fever might be returning, Henry quickly covered her with the extra blanket and the comforter. "There now," he told her finally. "You and Robert'll travel just fine."



A young boy, perhaps eight or nine, thin with dark hair and eyes, peered cautiously into the little space. Henry motioned him forward and he went to the old man's side, watching her as Henry put his arm around him and squeezed. "This here is Johnny," he announced proudly. "Johnny, Miss Mira."

Mira extended her hand and the boy took it, shaking it meekly.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Johnny," she said, using the grand tone she usually reserved for diplomats and royalty.

"It's John," he corrected, gravely. "Johnny's for babies. I'm too big for that."

"Of course," Mira nodded in agreement. "I can certainly see that. Please accept my apology."

Henry mussed the boy's dark curls. "Well, John," he laughed, emphasizing the boy's name, "everything all right out there?"

The boy nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir. No sign a'nothin'. I looked real good too. Checked everywhere. Twice."

"I'm sure you did an excellent job, John. Thank you."

"He's a real good boy," Henry continued, beaming. "Wants to learn to read and write and do numbers."

"I like to draw things," he told her. "You're pretty. Maybe sometime I could draw you."

Her heart nearly broke then, she was so touched by this sad, earnest little boy. She wondered bitterly how many artists, scientists, teachers and other sorely needed help she and all the others like her had deprived the world of down through the ages.

"I...I would be humbly flattered and deeply honored to pose for you."

"Go on now, scat," Henry swatted the boy in the pants. "We'll be going soon."

"Goodbye," John said quietly. "Henry said you were sick. I hope you get better real soon."

"Thank you," she managed around the lump in her throat. "And I hope you have great success in your art career."

"Are you going with us?" Mira asked when the boy had left.

"No, ma'am. John and I are headed in a different direction. Just gonna ride with Artie 'til we can make our next Railroad station."

"Artie?"

"Real name's Artemis," Henry laughed. "Named after some goddess from way back. Built like a Clydesdale horse. Drives this truck."

"For the Railroad?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, I hope you'll come to visit," Mira said sincerely, holding out her hand to him. "In fact, I want you to be the first to know, officially, that Robert and I are going to declare ourselves."

The old man took her hand in his and patted it gently. "Well, that's just fine," he grinned, "just fine. Congratulations and every happiness to the both of you. If you don't mind me saying, you and Robert are about the finest people I know."

"And I want you to know something else, too. Yesterday, I signed a Declaration of Emancipation. You're free. And John and everyone else."

"What?" The old man was incredulous.

"It's true. I gave the papers to Dr. Elliott who'll give them to Senator Shipley to file. In a few days, all you'll have to do is give your registration number and you'll be issued your emancipation card. Then you and John can come and go as you please. Do, be, whatever you want. Even an artist."

Tears formed in the old man's eyes. "How...how can I ever thank you? I...I..."

"Just be sure you don't forget to come see us."

Robert appeared in the doorway, his smile immediately vanished as he saw the emotion in the other faces.

"Is everything all right?" His anxious eyes darted between Mira and Henry.

"Yes, dear."

"Couldn't be better," the other man added. "Miss Mira was just telling me about you and her declaring. It's wonderful. Just wonderful."

"He and John have promised to come and visit after we're settled."

Relaxing a little, Robert's smile returned. "That's right, Henry. Please come and see us. Catherine's even promised to take a crack at teaching Mira to cook if, as she says, 'I can pound anything through that thick skull of my godmother's'." He looked down at Mira, love evident in his eyes. "I think she's going to be very surprised at the new tricks this old dog's learned."

A face like a big friendly bulldog poked through the door behind Robert. "Time to get moving, folks," she announced cheerfully. "Henry, John's in the cab waiting for you. Robert, you better get down under that quilt with your lady. This box gets awful small when I close this door and stack my cargo. Not to mention that even with the padding, it can get mighty chilly. Have ta snuggle up real close and keep each other warm."

"Goodbye, Miss Mira," Henry said, kissing her hand before releasing it to shake Robert's. "Goodbye, Robert. Good luck to both of you."

"Goodbye, Henry. Same to you and the boy."

"Goodbye, Henry," Mira called as Robert moved out to let the old man pass. "Don't forget."

"I won't, Miss Mira," he answered quietly. "Not as long as I live."

"All aboard," she heard Artie say as Robert came back in and the door shut behind him with a loud click. There was barely enough room for Mira to pull the covers off and make a place for him beside her. Taking her in his arms, he squeezed her tightly and they kissed passionately.

"Sorry about the cramped accommodations," he teased.

"I think they're just fine. Except," she pointed toward her feet. "What's in the boxes?"

"Treasure," Robert replied, kissing her nose lightly.

Regal fire appeared in Mira's dark eyes. "Treasure?" she repeated. "From my house?"

"Yes." His eyes were crinkled up and he was grinning like a little boy.

"You mean that after telling me I couldn't take my clothes, my jewels, you *steal* three boxes of treasure? From my own house?"

"Those pretty rocks of yours have no value. Those boxes contain the only thing, beyond your beautiful, slightly silly self, of any worth in that whole place."

"Now see here..."

"They're books, Mira, from your library. God knows not nearly as many as I wanted, needed, but a beginning, a foundation." His eyes moved to the boxes. "How many hours Catherine and I went over the list, honing, refining. We need so much and I knew there were so few I'd be able to save."

"I don't understand. Beginning of what? Foundation of what?"

He smiled down at her again. "Your books are going to be the beginning of a real school and a real library. And they're going to be the foundation of new lives for a lot of people. Maybe even a new world."

"I love you," she murmured, snuggling into the crook of his arm, as close as she could possibly get to him.

"I love you, too." He put his lips gently on her forehead and frowned. "You're getting warm again. Too much exertion and excitement."

They felt the truck engine purr to life and a second later, lurch forward, taking them away to their new life.

"It doesn't matter," she responded, the words almost immediately swallowed up by a huge yawn. "I feel glorious. Absolutely glorious."

"It matters very much. You're exhausted. Close your eyes now and sleep. We have a long, long way to travel and you need your rest."

"I don't want to sleep," she insisted, her body already feeling relaxed and drowsy. "I want to be with you now."

"We have the whole rest of our lives to be together," he assured her, touching her cheek again with his lips.

A warm peace wrapped itself around her like Robert's body and tugged her toward the edge of consciousness. But there was one last question.

"You never told me," she mumbled sleepily. "Where are we going?"

As she slipped into a peaceful sleep, the last thing she heard was Robert's tender whisper in her ear.

“Home,” he told her sweetly. “Home.”

*The End*

## About the Author



ELIZABETH STEWART

Liz began her career at age three when she started telling her own stories to her dolls and favorite stuffed bear. Her older sister taught her to write at six so she immediately began writing down her stories and reading them to her family. At seven, she decided to become a writer. She won several creative-writing contests in grammar school and by the time she'd moved on to high school, she was working on the school newspaper and had a "lending library" of her popular stories that circulated amongst her peers. Her first paying writing job was in her teens working for the local newspaper, interviewing celebrities who appeared at the local theater-in-the-round.

Liz married, had children, and took a "real" job while she went to college at night, finally earning her degree in Business but never giving up her writing. During this time, she continued to learn her craft and hone her skills. Five years ago, she decided to devote herself to writing seriously. In that time, she's had several short stories published and finished four novels. Her work ranges over several genres from romance to the paranormal.

Elizabeth welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Avenue, Akron, OH 44310-3502.

Also by Elizabeth Stewart

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