



*Adrianna
Dane*

ZYTTARRI 1:
VIRGIN BLOOD

Loose Id

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (violence).

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Dedication

My thanks to all those who helped to make this story shine. From my critique partners, to my son, Adam, to my editors, to my brainstorming group. I couldn't have made it through this without all of you.

Chapter One

Gregor Korridian's piercing ruby eyes studied the shivering, naked woman crouched in the small iron cage on the other side of the room. He smiled with anticipation, scenting the hot blood coursing through her delectable body. Once he was in front of her cage, he reached between the bars to pet her long, silky, dark hair. She raised her head to look at him, her eyes dilated with fear and arousal.

Although she was a woman of the pleasure dens in Onyx City, Terez had been fresh, a new import from Illumata eagerly seeking riches and the security of a patron on a planet known for its wealth. Using his persuasive powers, Korridian had convinced the procuress of Gillian's Pleasure House to negotiate a contract that would be lucrative for her business. Terez was his possession to be used as he saw fit, and Korridian chose to possess her because she reminded him quite clearly of the woman upon whom he wished to wreak vengeance. Terez now lusted for what only he could provide and would be enough to appease him until he captured the original target of his desire.

"Please, Master," she begged. "I need it."

He continued to stroke her long, black tresses, thinking what a perfect vessel for his demands she had become. "Not enough."

The woman sank to her knees, pushing back her hair and at the same time thrusting forward to force her full breasts between the narrow bars of the cage. He heard her grunt of pain as she met with success, the black bars tightly embracing her pale body, constricting the blood flow, engorging the pliant spherical flesh for his use. Her nipples rose dark and needy, areolas deep violet, the veins visible and pulsing through her delicate, transparent skin. She arched her back, forcing them upward, offerings for his pleasure. They were a tempting meal to be sure.

“Very nice, Terez, very nice.” He liked her this way, with the vivid, unmistakable marks of his ownership covering her body. On her neck and scoring her breasts and her thighs were the telltale tracks of his incisors. He never drained her completely, at all times careful to maintain perfect balance, to draw out the orgasms she always experienced as he simultaneously fucked her and feasted on her blood. The drug she ingested enhanced the sensations of pain and pleasure only he could give her.

“Anything you want, Master, anything.”

“Your mouth.” He opened his heavy, embroidered cloak, and his cock sprang free, thick and hard, its swollen, ruby head oozed glistening liquid, inviting her attention.

Korridian watched as she licked her lips. He moved closer to the cage, and she dipped her head, her pink tongue snaking out to swirl over the hot, swollen plum before drawing him into the deep moist, cavern of her eager mouth, practically consuming him. Clasp ing her head firmly with both hands, he thrust his hips, forcing the bulbous tip to the back of her throat. She struggled for breath until she adjusted herself enough to find a rhythm she could manage. Her eyes opened wide, and she appeared frantic to please him, her hands working on his body.

He owned her. She was his to gift with life or death. He controlled her addiction, fed it, and when he used her, in his mind it was Leora who serviced him, Leora who begged him. Soon, it would be her beneath him, her whom he fucked, and her whose blood he consumed. Soon.

The smell of prey and the heady taste of impending victory filled him. Close, so very close. Korridian understood the nature of the Blood Hunt well. On Zadolan, he had witnessed the Blood Huntress’s victory firsthand with the devastatingly brutal deaths of his brothers, Gaylor and Tan. He had been a helpless child baptized with their spent blood, vowing there and then that Leora Saguna and all she held dear would pay for the deaths of his kin. Korridian had not known then the power he would forge from his vow, but that pain was the last weakness he had allowed himself. From that moment on, he became a different person.

His thoughts shifted momentarily as he felt Terez shiver even as she supped at him. His gaze encompassed his frigid domain, located in the bowels of the Darlinean Mountains at the edge of the polar region on Ebonnia. This was one of the few uninhabited areas on the Sangorria continent and quite useful for his purposes. Caverns spidered throughout the mountains, a myriad of intermingled passages. Although they connected at an upper level where mining caves were overseen by the Houses of the Twin Moons, Gregor knew his lair was not indicated on any known map of Ebonnia, entrenched as deeply beneath the surface of the planet as it was. Few knew how to reach it or cared to. Those who served him here were always brought in drugged and blindfolded, then virtually imprisoned within its depths, subject to his whims and demands. It was the perfect place from which to plan the downfall he had anticipated for years.

Never again would he feel the pain of impotence -- only the power of domination. His own thirst for vengeance would be sated on a much larger scale than merely one female. He had Leora Saguna to thank for revealing the path to his larger destiny -- to ultimately topple the ruling Houses on Sangorria, beginning with the House of Leah. He would ensure that the Sangorrians became an army of bloodthirsty warriors once again, that they would return to being feared by every other planet in the inhabited star system ... but they would then be controlled by him and him alone. It would take time, but time was something he had. And infinite patience.

Except when it came to the House of Leah. That victory he must have soon -- no matter the cost. He had waited long enough.

Finding his way from Zadolan to Ebonnia had required skillful deceit, but with the knowledge he had garnered over the years, he eventually arrived in Onyx City on a freighter ship. Five years he had spent in the dark underworld of that decadent city, developing his contacts, hunting lesser prey to feed his thirst, honing his skills, and studying his target -- until he discovered the essential ingredients of his ultimate success -- first, the addictive blood of the Vawndra species of dragon, the only dragon blood banned from ingestion on Ebonnia, and second was Evonne Saguna the son of Malik Saguna of the House of Favion. These would serve as springboards for him to reach into the heart of the Saguna stronghold and, eventually, overthrow all of the ruling Sangorrian Houses.

Gaining Evonne Saguna's loyalty had been the first goal. He was an angry youth looking for a cause -- any cause. Korridian had found him malleable, easily swayed, and useful in convincing others to do as Korridian wished. In fact, Evonne had proved a valuable tool for him to gain a bolt-hole through which he could pass into the core of the Sangorrian ruling houses.

The male Sangorrians were more easily approached because they were not as heavily guarded as the females. Korridian had played on the youths' need to prove their manhood -- their expertise as warriors -- and stroked their pride and latent desire for the blood of other, lesser species. Thus, it was through the Houses of the Twin Moons where he had first insidiously infiltrated the closed Sangorrian society. It was so easy, almost too easy; the young males had been hungry for someone to convince them of the rightness of bloodtaking and mating with their own kind.

Terez's mouth working skillfully on his staff drew him back to the present as she sucked him deeper, swirling her tongue, and cupped and kneaded his heavy sacs with her delicate, cold hands. He enjoyed the sensations of her hot mouth and cool grip. Yes, she had adapted well to his lair -- to the altered drug -- but he could feel her desperation had not yet peaked.

Suddenly, he pulled from her mouth and pivoted away. She screamed her frustration.

"Please, Master, I can do better. Please."

He ignored her, instead striding to a door at the opposite side of the chamber, yanking it open and racing down the steps toward the laboratory and other cages below. By the time he returned to his lair he knew she would be more than ready to service him in the manner he preferred -- aching for the drug, burning to be fucked, and acceding to his commands without question.

The dense blackness enclosed him as he descended far below the earth into the deepest bowels of the caverns. His night sight served him well in being able to traverse the darkness as though it were lit by torches. He was a predator of the night with magnified senses serving him well. Bowing his head, he removed the necklace of keys he always wore. Korridian chose one from the many and unlocked the door to his laboratory, his gaze riveted immediately on the large cage at the far side of the gigantic chamber.

A huge white Vawndra dragon was chained within. This was the one he had chosen for the current test batch of the Vawndra variant drug. The rest of the brood were contained farther down in the icy caverns below.

The polar climate made the creatures sluggish, unable to fight for their freedom, and hovering somewhere between life and death, their fire quenched by the frigid environment. The males were kept separate from the females, and they were only brought together to breed in a separate chamber where the heat was controlled to allow for a more temperate climate to facilitate the dragons' matings.

Periodically, Korridian released the weaker fledglings to serve as a continual reminder of their hated presence. Why destroy the weaker ones himself, when he could instill fear and destruction by releasing them onto the unsuspecting planet? He didn't care if they were hunted by dragon hunters or black marketers intent on selling the beasts' blood in Onyx City. After all, their blood was no comparison with those of the creatures he kept. He wanted only strong-blooded Vawndra for the creation of his particular drug. Besides, it amused him that just as the planet's inhabitants would think the last Vawndra dragon had been destroyed and they could breathe easier, he could send another one out to remind them of their vulnerability -- to Korridian.

He walked to the cage, sprang the lock, and stepped inside. The painful genetic alterations he had subjected himself to so many years ago not only made him what he was, but gave him the same powers and needs as the Sangorrians, yet with subtle differences. They also enhanced his mind-link capabilities. He was more than they could ever hope to be and reveled in that knowledge.

The Vawndra's eyes held hate and malice, but Korridian feared no one, especially not a dragon weakened by the environment that protected and empowered Korridian. The two of them shared the same blood -- he had seen to the integration of the blood into his own system early in his arrival on Ebonnia and had learned to control its effect on his emotions.

The elements of the blood made him stronger, more powerful, enhancing his own genetic alterations, rendering him undefeatable by a society with diluted Sangorrian blood flowing through its veins.

He circled the animal, could feel its heavy breath and its desire to rip him apart, and reveled in the knowledge that it was he, Gregor Korridian, who held power even over this large beast. His control reached out to the muddled brain of the creature, driving his commands into its understanding like an iron stake wedged deeply into its thoughts. As the dragon turned its gaze from Korridian, accepting of the control, he turned and left the cage, confident of his dominion, which harnessed the massive aggression inside the dragon.

Once he secured the cage, he strode across the room toward a metal box on a table, then unlocked it with a small key contained on the necklace and opened it, revealing small vials of luminescent purplish-black liquid. After he retrieved one, he lowered and refastened the lid. As he held up the vial, its contents flickered in the dim lighting of the torch-lit room; his lips curved into a slow triumphant smile. This was what Terez wanted, what she needed, and why she serviced him so well and so willingly.

Vawndra blood was illegal to harvest and sell on Ebonnia and thus very lucrative on the black market. What he had created in chemically altering the blood was more, so much more than what was currently available. This refined drug opened minds to his control alone; the users became attuned to the call of his will. The effects amplified the darkness of the soul, blurred the edges of honor and morality, made the thirst for the blood of victims overpowering in Sangorrian males, caused them to become more susceptible to his demands, and augmented their need for ever larger amounts of sensations like pleasure and pain.

In his experiments he had discovered that the recipe he had developed reacted differently on diverse combinations of blood chemistry. In male Sangorrians such as Evonne, it increased the thirst for blood and the aggressive, dominant tendencies to conquer and destroy, making it a foremost need in their minds, and driving them down to their deepest, most primitive needs.

In other species, the results varied. For Terez, a native of Illumata, it reinforced her submissiveness and magnified her desire to please her master at any cost. He could only hope it would have a similar effect on Leora Saguna.

He had yet to test it on female Sangorrians. They were guarded too closely, and he had been unable to procure one to continue his experiments. It was a lack he meant to remedy and was the mission he had sent Evonne on -- to acquire a female Sangorrian from his own House ... combined with a full-scale assassination of all the Primess mates of the Houses of the Twin Moons.

Impatiently, Korridian awaited word of the success of his plans, which had involved much thought and time, as well as the selection of the perfect assassins. Had his goals been achieved? If the surprise attacks had proceeded unhindered, the Houses of the Twin Moons would now be irreparably crippled.

Impatiently, he turned toward the exit, the precious vial in his hand. Only he knew the ingredients as no one else was allowed inside this particular laboratory chamber. If Terez begged well enough he would allow her what she needed.

Maybe.

He left the laboratory, locking the door behind him, then ascended the stone steps. Returning to his lair, he approached Terez, noting her distress as withdrawal began to shroud her. She opened her eyes, and he saw her desperation; in the tightness of her limbs, he saw her pain. She was more than ready for him now; he knew she would do anything to cut through the twisting agony to find the release of pleasure.

He unlocked the door to the cage and swung it open. Stepping forward, he dangled the precious vial above her head taunting her with it; her eyes focused on its contents -- he saw her hunger. She licked her lips, then dropped forward, reaching up with one hand as she frantically tried to snatch the vial from him, yet crouched in deference. Satisfied, he stepped back, turned, and sauntered to the chair at the other end of the room. Dropping into it, he threw his robe open, displaying his naked body and splayed legs, his attention on the quivering woman.

"You know what I want. Come to me." He watched as Terez dropped forward to her hands and knees, shoulders to the ground, and slowly crawled to him. He could feel her fear, her desire to deny him, but her need for the drug and his body drew her to him, overruling every other thought in her mind.

The unique translucent, silvery tinge to her skin caused by the drug and the effects of remaining underground for so many months pleased him. Korridian fantasized it was Leora who inched her way across the floor to him, eager to do his bidding. The pleasant image magnified to include all the women who belonged to the House of Leah by blood, eager to do as he commanded and begging at his feet, manacled to him by the power of his drug.

Terez halted, her head thrown back, crouched and watching for his signal. Her upper body was pressed tightly to the cold floor as she awaited his command. Korridian forced her to remain there for long moments as he studied her.

When he purchased her contract, her body had been flushed with the pink glow of the red sun, and her eyes were lit with an eager, yet sultry passion, full of life. She thought she was free to claim her own future and had planned to make her fortune. Korridian had felt her naive energy ... and used it.

He sensed the power as he looked at her, knowing she did not dare to move -- in fear of both his wrath and his punishment by withholding the drug she needed so desperately -- she dared not breathe unless he commanded it. He could feel Terez's stilted breaths, her uncertainty about whether he would exact punishment for the least movement he would consider reason enough to withhold the drug. Oh, yes, he had molded this silvery creature with the dark, haunted eyes and the marks of his mastery, and she would do his bidding in

any way he wished -- just as the rest of the planet would one day. Korridian would be master to them all.

"Are you ready to serve me?" he asked her.

She reached between her legs, inserted a finger into her pussy, then drew it out, holding it up for his inspection. He saw it glisten with her juices and he nodded with satisfaction.

"You may rise and mount me."

Quickly she lifted up and climbed onto his lap. "Thank you, Master."

He leaned back and smiled coldly as her slick, hot sheath engulfed him. His wide girth slid in easily, widening her impossibly, and she gasped as she quickly tried to accommodate him. He grasped her hips and forced her downward until he was completely gloved by her and could feel the entrance to her womb, then anchored her there with one hand.

"Do not move until I give you permission. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "Yes, Master." Her voice was tight.

He lifted his hand up, the sharp point of a nail slicing a line along the plump mound of a breast, drawing a thin trail of dark blood. He heard Terez's partially suppressed hiss of pain. Dropping his head, his tongue snaked out to sample the dense sweetness, its texture and temperature changed over the many weeks with the effects of the potent drug he had provided and the addiction it had wrought in her. Her blood was thin, but scorching; Korridian felt the surge of her heat inside him as he savored her taste and moved downward, consuming her nipple, tugging it with his sharp teeth.

Terez gasped again, then moaned. Her juices oozed around his cock, dripping onto his thighs even as he turned his attention to her other breast, sinking his incisors into the flesh and continuing to drink of her life.

Eventually, he raised his head and leaned back in the chair, savoring the feverish, tight glove of her pussy wrapped tightly around his cock, and admiring the new marks on her body, which drizzled droplets of livid crimson, almost black blood -- yet another indication of the changes within her. Her body remained tense, waiting for the command that would allow her to please him and ultimately be rewarded with the contents of the small vial.

He rolled the tiny glass tube between his thumb and forefinger where she could see it. His gaze locked with hers.

"Make yourself come," he commanded.

She started to rise, but his other hand forestalled her. "No, stay where you are. Use your hands."

He had trained her well, thus she knew precisely what he wanted. Her hungry gaze turned to the vial held captive between his fingers. Slowly, one delicate hand rose to finger her clit. Her other hand rose to her breast, smearing the droplets of blood over its smooth,

pale surface, then twisted her nipple. Once more, she hissed with her response to the sensations.

Her pussy clenched and unclenched on his cock; he waited for the signs to ascertain when she was close, felt the lustful tension building as her fingers became more frantic, heard the change in her breaths.

Before she could utter the scream indicating her release, he again sank his teeth into the flesh of her breast and drank her essence, intensifying her orgasm. He felt the hard spasms as he sharpened the effect with his painful claiming.

He drew from her at his leisure, prolonging her response until the last echoing vestiges of her climax had spun through her. She panted and collapsed from the force of coming, her juices copiously coating them both. Finally, he released her and shifted back, sated with the boiling heat of her altered blood and the feel of her slick pussy as it pulsed over and around him.

“Now you may ride me.” Without hesitation, her hot, slick friction slid up and down the rigid length of his shaft.

“Play with your breasts.” Her hands rose to cup and squeeze the firm, rounded globes; the muscles in her thighs tightened and released with her rhythm.

He smiled with satisfaction as she worked her body to please him; he would allow her to ride him a long time before he permitted himself to come. By that time, she would have become frantic again, her goal always focused on the vial. He wanted her desperation, needed it, fed on it.

A knock on the door drew him from his entertainment.

“Enter.” Terez slowed her movements. He pierced her with a look. “I did not tell you to stop.” She regained her momentum.

Evonne entered the room, his gaze shifting briefly to the woman servicing Korridian, then back.

Korridian set the vial on the table, then rested his hands on Terez’s hips as he repositioned upward. A quick, firm glance at Terez and she began to rotate and undulate her hips against him, building into a new, more sensual rhythm.

“What news do you have for me? I assume you were successful?”

There was something in Evonne’s eyes. “The Primess women have all been eliminated, Master.”

Korridian smiled. With all the Primess mates dead, the patriarchal leaders’ primary blood supply was cut off. Weak dragon’s blood, the main source for young Sangorrians was necessary for youth but would not satisfy the adult males for long. To ingest dragon’s blood after bonding and consuming a Primess’s powerful blood was like substituting flavored water for wine. It left a deep yearning for the genuine, full-bodied, warm drink of life. The mature males would eventually require a blood supply from other avenues as they would not be able

to replace all seven Primess mates with Secondary mates -- certainly not soon enough to save their culture.

Barring the use of the outlawed Vawndra blood, the only acceptable substitute to ensure survival of the Sangorrians were the other dragon species inhabiting the planet. Yet, for the mature males, it would be inadequate. Their eventual desperation would lead to their downfall. It was a beginning and a giant step forward in his plan.

Terez's pussy tightened, readying itself for another climax. She rubbed her engorged clit against his thick shaft.

"You have procured the Sangorrian woman?"

Evonne's gaze shifted.

"You failed?" Korridian's voice was quiet, full of deadly menace.

"I am sorry, Master."

"You knew my orders. Each of the heirs was to completely drain the Primess of their House. This was the prime opportunity while the patriarchs were all in attendance at the province gathering." He had laid his plans for the timing and execution, had in fact demanded the obedience to his will occur then to once and for all break any ties the young male Sangorrians might still have held to their sires -- and to strengthen their bonds to Korridian.

"My sister was the only unbonded female who remained with us after the Sangorrian Fostering ceremony in Onyx City last harvesting season, but we could not locate her. My mother ... saw things ... the future. She may have hidden her."

"Did you question her before taking her life?"

Evonne shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. "It was not I who drained her."

Korridian's anger mounted; he knew Evonne could feel his displeasure. "And why is that?"

"I-I." Evonne hesitated and swallowed hard.

"I am waiting."

Evonne bowed his head. "I have failed you, but I could not do it. Another took her life."

The rage continued to build. "You are weak. I should simply destroy you now and free you from your misery. Give me a reason not to do so and choose another male more worthy to be my most trusted voice."

Terez's movements became more frenzied; clearly, she was doing her best to appease his anger and to alter his attention so that she would not lose her prize, the precious vial.

Evonne held out his hands beseechingly. "Please give me another chance, Master. I will find my sister and bring her to you. I vow this."

His blood boiled. Terez screamed as she began to peak, and Korridian's attention was drawn back to her as a red haze of anger surrounded him. He needed the Sangorrian female.

As his ire burned out of control, baring his fangs, he sank them into her neck. Within seconds, before the final spasm of her orgasm faded around his cock, he had drained her of every last ounce of blood. Pulling her limp body from his, he threw what remained of her across the room. His gaze lasered back to Evonne.

"You failed in the task I set." He closed the robe over his still glistening cock and rose from the chair. "One way or the other, you will find me a Sangorrian female, preferably a virgin. Do not return without what I require. Not again." He advanced on Evonne, who retreated.

"Y-yes, Master."

Korridian paced the floor, unable to regain control of his wrath. His cold gaze settled on the corpse of the woman splayed across the floor like a rag doll and he pointed to the discarded body. "Take her to the Vawndra in the caverns below; they will be pleased by the tasty treat." He pinned Evonne beneath a glacial look. "Your failure has cost me an enjoyable plaything. You will procure me another."

"Yes, Master Korridian. Immediately."

He watched as Evonne lifted the lifeless form and slung it across his shoulders, then headed for the door. A part of him regretted his hasty actions. Terez had been well-suited to fit into his fantasy of owning Leora.

Shrugging, he turned away as Evonne exited the chamber. There would be others to take her place. Other blood chemistries to experiment with, to appease his own genetically-altered requirements.

Still, it was a Sangorrian female he most needed to test his formula. A virgin female -- one whose blood would be untainted by the blood of a mate and who had Saguna blood running through her system. Once he discerned the effects on pure Sangorrian blood, he could mimic the chemistry to match that of Leora Saguna and alter the formula to bring her to her knees.

The vision of the proud, young Blood Huntress as he had last seen her filled his mind, his memories. Fantasies of her submitting to his every whim and paying for the murders of his family again and again kept the fires alive. Although he would take a virgin as his consort to breed perfect offspring, the Saguna Huntress would serve as slave to his lusts in any manner he chose.

One day the Sangorrians would all know it was Gregor Korridian who claimed rulership of their society -- and that they were only a stepping stone he would use to conquer other worlds.

Chapter Two

Malik knelt on the floor, wave after wave of pain consuming him, as he gripped the cold, dead body of Naluet in his arms. She, who had been his strength, his balance, his love had been savagely murdered by a dark and deadly unknown force.

Naluet, his chosen Primess had always been a perfect fit for him. She had been strong, passionate, and intelligent. From his first introduction, his first taste of her sweet, spicy blood, he had known that there was no other for him. When she gave him first a strong son, then a beautiful daughter, his world had been complete.

He gazed down at her lovely, still face and raised a hand to brush back a lock of her burnished hair. Her sapphire eyes would never again look upon him with love, amusement, passion. He crushed her close, wanting to hear her heart beating strongly against his chest. The marks he had lovingly placed on her body that she had once shown proudly now burned beneath the white cloak of death.

“Naluet!” His scream proclaimed his impotence and fury, his loss and heartache.

Carefully, he lifted her, then carried her limp form to the lounging couch, laying her gently upon it. His pink-tinged tears fell onto her face, which he gently brushed away.

A movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he whirled around. “Show yourself!” He clamped a hand to his sidearm.

A small, shivering figure he recognized shuffled forward. Pink tears also shimmered on the face. He released the pent-up breath and thanked Druda that she was alive and safe.

“Father,” she sniffled.

“Aurya.” He rose to his feet and held his arms open as she rushed into them. How could he comfort her and ease the horrors of what she had most likely witnessed in their home? She was sixteen now and should have been fostered to his sister two years ago, but time after time he had relented and acceded to Naluet’s pleas to keep their child with them just one

more year. Seeing his mate unhappy when he had the power to assuage her pain was not something he had been able to do.

Aurya's face was buried in his chest. "S-she made me hide!" His arms tightened. Naluet had possessed the special gift of being able to sense future events. "B-but she would not stay with me. She said it was her duty to defend what was yours. That our destinies could not be changed." She cried harder, and shuddered against him.

Malik raised a hand to stroke her dark hair. "She loved you, Aurya, very much." His arms tightened protectively around Aurya as a servant rushed into the room. It was the messenger he had sent out. "What do you have to report?"

The man's face was pasty white, his breathing uneven, and his hands trembled.

"They are all dead, my lord! All of them!"

"Who?"

"T-the women. All of the Primesses have been assassinated. Every House is in turmoil." The information almost drove Malik to his knees, but he pulled himself together and attempted to remain rational.

"All of them? You are certain?"

The messenger nodded. "Yes, my lord."

He carefully set Aurya from him and turned back to look at his dead mate. He tore off his burgundy velvet cloak and carefully laid it over her. He needed time to mourn her loss, to find a way to go on without her. Then his gaze was pulled to Aurya. First, he must see to the safety of their daughter. His Primess had put her protection first and he could do no less.

He faced the messenger. "Where is my son?" Had he been killed as well?

"I have not seen him, my lord. Possibly one of the other servants who managed to escape ..."

Malik placed his hands on Aurya's shoulders. "I want you to go and pack. I must get you to safety."

She turned tear-filled eyes on him. "I do not want to leave you, Father."

He pulled her into his arms again. "It is no longer safe for you here. Your mother would have wanted me to see to your protection above all else. We must leave."

"Evonne always said I was safe here, that we were descended from a warrior race that did not know fear and who were always the victors in history. He told me we should never give in to fear."

Something inside Malik stilled at her words. He knew Evonne had changed in recent months, but it had simply never occurred to him that Evonne might not understand his responsibilities to the House of Favion. Malik now feared that he should have looked closer at whom his son was involved with.

He grasped Aurya's chin to gently force her to look at him. "When exactly did Evonne say this to you?"

"S-several days ago. He s-said he would come for me, but then Mother sent me away to hide. He w-would have come to protect her if he had known, Father, would he not?"

Malik had no answers for her. Suddenly, he felt he did not know his son at all. He stroked her hair. "Go now. Pack your things. You must be quick."

Hesitantly, she nodded and pulled free of him. Only after she left the room did he turn back to the messenger. "Take me to anyone who may have witnessed what occurred here."

"Yes, my lord." The man turned toward the door and Malik strode after him to the front hall where several shaken house servants hovered.

"The Primess sent everyone away before the attack. These are the only ones who returned."

The pain in Malik's heart reared up to consume him. Naluet had always cared for others before herself. If only he had not left her alone. But all of the patriarchal heads had been in attendance at their yearly meeting, which always took place at the other end of the mountain province. He had been mere hours away when the attack occurred. Had they become lax over the years, taking for granted the peace that had survived for centuries? But that did not explain how the assassins breached the walls of the compound without being discovered.

"Can any of you tell me who attacked the Primess? How did he get in?"

One man stepped forward, a spyglass clutched in his hand. "All was quiet, my lord. We did not understand why the Primess was sending us away, but we went because she commanded it. Instead of following the others into the forest, I stood watch so I could tell them when we could return. I stood on a ledge, hidden from the compound but able to see who approached." He raised his hand, indicating the spyglass.

Malik nodded. "What did you see?"

"There were three Sangorrians and ten warriors I did not recognize." He hesitated and swallowed, as though fearful of what he was about to reveal.

"Sangorrians? Did you recognize them?"

"I recognized the one who led them, my lord." Again, he hesitated.

"Who?" Malik demanded.

The servant refused to meet his eyes. "I-it was Master Evonne, my lord. He led the men who attacked the Primess."

Again, Malik was almost driven to his knees and was certain that his ears had misled him. It was not possible that they were betrayed by his own son. And, yet, he understood that no one would have questioned his son entering through the gates or would have surmised those who accompanied him were more than guests. Once inside, they would have taken everyone unaware.

If Naluet had understood what was to happen, she would have seen to the safety of the household, including Aurya. She would also have known her own death was at hand. Why had she not taken precautions? He might never know the answer and had a feeling it would lie like a heavy anchor within his breast until the day he joined her.

It was too much. There was nothing beyond the devastation of betrayal, loss, and overwhelming grief.

"Thank you for your honesty," he managed to gasp out. He glanced at the messenger. "Get word to the other Houses -- we must meet and quickly to determine the extent of the damage." Their homes had been ravaged, their females murdered, but as far as he knew their livelihood -- the mills, the mines -- all of their resources remained untouched. Whatever evil plan had been wrought, it was personal.

The messenger spun away and ran out the door.

Malik tried to stop his swirling thoughts and focus on what he must do. Without the steadying influence of his mate, it was not an easy feat; he was adrift in a stormy sea of pain with no port in sight. Everything jumbled inside his head; the desire for revenge washed through him with a tidal wave of rage. In the past, all Naluet had needed to do was lay a hand on his shoulder and all would come right.

He inhaled one deep breath after the other until he found some measure of balance. First, he must meet with the other Heads, then he had to get Aurya to safety. He must take her to his sister, Leora, in the Aurora Valley as swiftly as possible. It was the only place she had a chance of being protected and away from this devastation.

Malik nodded to one of the men. "I want you to summon the Supply Master. I need a report on the quantity of dragon's blood to make sure it is still intact." The servant hurried to follow his orders.

That supply was his only hope for survival until he could think about what to do next. Malik was aware that he eventually would be required to take a Secondary, yet he cringed from the thought of anyone usurping Naluet's place. His heart and soul cried out against the thought of another's blood, but there was no choice. The safety and strength of the House of Favion would rest on his ability to locate an adequate secondary mate. He must see to his duty.

All of the heads of the Houses of the Twin Moons were in the same predicament. Had their own sons done this to them? The very thought of that level of betrayal ripped through him.

The immediate survival of all the Houses would depend upon their surplus of dragon's blood, but would they be able to recover without sacrificing everything they believed in?

Chapter Three

“Noah, where are you?” Leora whispered to the dying warmth of the red sun. “You have been away far too long.”

Hunger gnawed at her insides like a finely wielded chisel scraping at sculpted obsidian rock. She was more than well aware of the source of the pain -- Noah’s unanticipated extended length of absence. A piece of herself was missing, and she simply existed deprived of his presence.

Leora paced before the window of her private office on the second floor of the manor that overlooked the main courtyard of the Leah Estate. Periodically, she could not help but glance out over the high walls marking the perimeter, willing her beloved Secondary Attendant to ride over the crested hill and through the ebony iron gates. He had been gone for two long weeks on the mission she had sent him to complete. She had trusted no other to fulfill it, but he should have returned within a week.

Noah was to have escorted Katriel’s future bond mate from the planet Illumata back to Ebonnia. It was meant to have been a short excursion to be completed in a matter of five days, but it had already lengthened to fourteen long days and lonely nights.

Although Noah was not Katriel’s blood sire, he cared for her as though she was a daughter born of his seed. Leora’s true Prime Alpha, Adrik, was assassinated before Katriel’s birth. Without Noah’s acceptance of the honored Secondary role in her life, Leora knew she would not have survived beyond her blood hunt to avenge Adrik’s murder.

Then again, she had not wanted to live beyond the blood hunt. The thought of taking a Secondary had sickened her, and the pain of waiting until Katriel’s birth before she could track down the assassins of her Alpha had drawn the agony out beyond bearing. She had been eager to see her vow fulfilled and end her life.

But Noah had trailed her on Zadolan, had stopped her from plunging into the acidic waters of the Sabul Sea after the Blood Hunt and forced her to live -- to want to live. She had become a different person, a Blood Huntress, and it had taken the strength of a mate such as Noah to help her regain balance.

Adrik was her first love, a peacekeeper, offering his quiet strength and rational nature to balance her and bring her light, but after she had avenged his murder, Leora had required a stronger nature to control her needs, to meet her demands. Noah was a mercenary and a bounty hunter -- he had known about the darkness and had been the one to tame that part of her desires. Without him, she might as well have died because she would not have been able to control the appetites. Indeed, his presence in her life was a truly unexpected gift -- for Katriel as well.

The crimson sun sat lower in the sky than it had an hour ago, flashes of silver-gray mist threading through the filtered glow. The burst of vibrant yellow, orange, and red streaking across the landscape usually held the ability to enthrall her, but not today, another agonizingly slow one without word from her dear Sec.

Her fangs throbbed with the need to taste the thick, spicy heat of his pulsing blood, to feel it coursing through her body, energizing her as none other could, and her pussy spasmed painfully at the emptiness she felt. She needed his body, his cock driving inside her, and his blood threading through her, pulsing heat surrounding and filling her as she fed from him.

Gripping her mound through her dress, Leora felt the wetness of her need, and she rubbed rhythmically, attempting to assuage the ache burrowed deep inside. But nothing could do that. Only Noah. All she felt was cold, empty loneliness.

The storage containers he had left for her to drink from in his absence were a pale substitute for having him here with her -- and the supplies were now depleted, leaving her with nothing to draw from or to sustain her but tepid dragon's blood. She had never been parted from Noah for such a long period.

Still, to ensure her daughter's safety, she would bear the burden of her unquenched need. Soon Katriel would know the full power of her kind through her Alpha Predom blooded protector, but until then, she was weak, with little more strength than a newborn kitten and no way to protect herself.

This last week Leora had taken to imprisoning herself behind the locked doors of her tower office, secluding herself from the temptation of the life-giving blood of those who served her. She also had not wished Katriel to see her like this, agonized with the need gnawing at her. It would only serve to frighten the girl more than she already was by the upcoming bond ceremony. To allow anyone to see the head of the House of Leah in such a condition was unacceptable. Particularly during this time of unrest.

She felt the undercurrent of disquiet on Sangorria as though a dense blanket of unidentified evil was descending across the land. It seemed like she could almost hear the voices of the earth screaming in horror inside her head at what was to come.

Then there had been Katriel's near fatal experience in Cowden, the village located outside the perimeters of their compound, where she had ridden to attend to a villager who had fallen ill. The woman was a well-respected Leah house servant, and it was the duty of the House matriarch to see to the woman and her family's needs in times of illness. However, Katriel had assumed more and more of these duties in preparation for the time when she would become head matriarch of the House of Leah.

Two masked and heavily armed creatures had burst through the door of the servant's home. They had somehow taken Katriel's personal Sangorrian guard unaware and killed him, but Noah had stopped them from dragging Katriel from the house and spiriting her away. He killed the intruders before they could escape, then brought a bruised and shaken Katriel back to the safety of the secured compound, reporting to Leora what had taken place.

Unfortunately, they were unable to determine the identity of the attackers. However, isolated attacks were not altogether uncommon, and it was possible they were after Katriel solely to seek a ransom from the House of Leah. Still, Noah thought the condition of their garments indicated that the men were paid mercenaries but not attached to any known House on Sangorria; nor had they carried identification. Someone had obviously hired them, but who?

Even so, it was not that incident alone that had precipitated Leora's decision to undertake the lengthy and involved process of locating a suitable Alpha for Katriel. Word had been received of a series of other like incidents throughout the valley, for the most part targeting young Sangorrian females. Luckily, all the attempts had met with failure. So far.

But who was behind the attacks? Until she knew, it was up to Leora to see that Katriel came into her full powers and had the advantage of her Primary Alpha close at hand to better ensure her safety. It was really long past the time when she should have been bonded.

Out of habit, Leora again surveyed the grounds of the compound as the twin gray moons rose high into the sky. The walls bordering the house and courtyard were strong, well built of the iron stone mined from the obsidian caverns in the northern regions of the Sangorrian continent, and sturdy enough to keep all intruders from gaining forceful entrance. Obsidian rock was some of the hardest material known within the Zytarri star system, and their supply was the domain of the Seven Houses of the Twin Moons, ruled by the Sangorrian males. The Houses of the Twin Moons represented the counterbalance to the Houses of the Crimson Sun -- the matriarch-ruled half of the continent.

Long ago, when the boundaries of the provinces on the Sangorrian continent were determined, it was decided by their ancestors that the obsidian mines and lumber sources in the Darlinean Mountains to the north were to be managed by the males, whereas the females would oversee the Sangorrian wine production and fertile herb and fruit crops located in the more temperate regions to the south. There, the Aurora Valley was surrounded by the protective peaks of the Arcadian Mountains. Despite outward appearances, it was an equal division of resources between the Houses to allow for growth, prosperity, and security. The

males had sought the more rugged regions because of their need for physical challenges to combat their more aggressive natures; and the females had used their special gifts and agricultural expertise for nurturing healthy plant life. Their choices had served them well over the centuries.

Leora sighed. The estate was guarded by fierce warriors, rugged beings recruited from Jotar, the war planet and sixth from the red sun. These additional warriors were necessary for the protection of all the young females of the Houses in the Aurora Valley. With the recent attacks, however, it seemed that the Sangorrians' whole way of life might be at risk.

A knock sounded at the heavy wooden door to Leora's office, and she turned from the window.

"Who is it?" she called out.

"Tish, Mistress," was the muffled response.

"Enter

She could hear the jingle of keys and then a click sounded as the door was unlocked. The door opened and a female servant dressed in a long rust-colored robe with the insignia of the House of Leah came in. Like the Alphas and compound guards, the majority of servants to the Houses also came from other planets and were screened thoroughly before being allowed to work on Ebonnia. The servants were required to sign lengthy, complicated contracts and some had ties to the Houses going back generations.

Tish, the servant who now stood before her, came from one such family. Her people had served on Ebonnia almost from the time of Leah Saguna, the first matriarch. Tish was tall with handsome features and long brown hair neatly confined in a braid that hung down her back. She carefully balanced a gold tray containing a single crystal goblet and curtsied.

"Mistress, you have not eaten anything today. I thought maybe a little dragon's blood would be welcome."

She grimaced at the need for dragon's blood, the life-sustaining drink for children and unbonded youth -- and the substitute when a mate's blood was unavailable. The supply was always kept well stocked and guarded in cooling units maintained in the catacombs below the compound.

Early in their history, the Sangorrians' ancestors had discovered that the continued bonding between Sangorrian males and females led to disastrous consequences, creating demon children who fed voraciously on any species that happened to be handy. On their home planet, they had destroyed complete villages in their search for life-sustaining blood and had thrived on the power surges of omnipotence it offered.

The first Sangorrian settlers fleeing from their own galaxy system had vowed to find a way to co-exist peacefully with other species. Breaking free of their home planet, they had traveled through a wormhole that had brought them to the Zytarri star system. Upon

reaching the silver-ringed planet of Ebonnia, the small band of survivors had determined to change the foundations of their culture.

Indeed, peace had come at a high price. To avoid repeating the past whereby other races would seek their annihilation, Ebonnian scientists worked unceasingly to find ways to overcome the constant demand for death and bloodshed. The genetic alterations that originally resulted in the creation of their species instilled the need for a continuous supply of blood that contained clean, white blood cells, which could be consumed by the genetically created gamma, or “g”, cells within their own bloodstream. The presence of the g cells ensured a successful mating with a Sangorrian female

Beyond the bonding with one mate had come the discovery that Sangorrians could survive on dragon’s blood, which served as a similar nutrient staple as that of milk in other cultures, but a mate’s blood was stronger, more powerful, enhancing and magnifying latent powers locked inside Sangorrians. The control of the Sangorrian blood supply had thus been a necessary ingredient to their survival.

Over the centuries through careful choices in bonding, it had become possible, through the dilution of Sangorrian blood, for their race to live without the unquenchable desire to feast on every living thing in their domain. By also bonding with gamma-blooded mates from other planets, they could maintain a careful balance in their society. It offered them the power to control the destiny of their species. It said a great deal for the determination of the Sangorrians that peace had been upheld for centuries because of those choices.

But the dilution only succeeded to a point. Too much dilution and birth defects and deformities became prevalent. Eventually, it was written into the charter agreements that approximately each seventh generation, one full Sangorrian mating would be sanctioned for each of the Houses in order to maintain balance.

A team of Sangorrian census takers and healers went out each year to monitor the population’s blood chemistry and to determine the residency of each Sangorrian on the continent. The official records were adjusted accordingly, and the results were brought to the attention of each of heads of the Houses, where unions were suggested as appropriate.

Yearly meetings between the heads of all the Sangorrian Houses took place in Onyx City. At that time they discussed and proposed contracts with the other planets, reviewed financial reports from each of the Houses, and considered the results of the yearly census. These meetings culminated in the Fostering ceremony for the young males and females.

Continued vigilance of their way of life had kept everyone safe and all had prospered.

Leora reached out to pick up the goblet. “Thank you, Tish. It was thoughtful of you.” She took a sip from the glass and carefully schooled her expression not wanting to hurt Tish’s feelings. Dragon’s blood was a life-sustaining requirement for Sangorrians, but it was cold and lacked the luster of her mate’s rich, red life force. It maintained life without enhancing it, and did not infuse her with the vitality so necessary for her position.

Tish nodded. Less formal than most servants because of the length of her family's service to the House of Leah, she was not afraid of speaking her mind in a more familiar fashion and often did. "You miss Sec Noah."

"Yes, I do. I am hopeful he will return soon. Where is my daughter?"

"I believe she is pouting ... I mean resting, in her room, Mistress."

Leora laughed. "You are naughty, Tish. Once her Alpha arrives, she will be in better spirits. Meeting him will calm her nervousness about the liaison."

"I do not know, Mistress. She seems quite determined against this contract."

Leora took another sip from the goblet. "Is the meal prepared?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Finishing the last of the cold liquid, she handed the goblet back to Tish. "Well, then, ask her to join me for the meal. It may be the last moment we have before Sec Noah returns with her Alpha." She hoped that sunrise would see Noah's return. Each passing day she felt her powers diminishing more and more, while the need for his presence flared stronger and stronger. Her body clenched in pain. She needed him desperately.

Tish curtsied again. "Yes, Mistress. I will see to it."

After she left Leora's office, relocking the door from the other side, Leora sat at her desk. Before the next full moon alignment, Katriel must bond with the chosen Alpha Prenom. At that time, when only one of the gray moons was visible, the heads of the seven Houses would meet in the Druda Province for their yearly communion. Leora would not allow Katri beyond the protection of the compound until she was mated and had come into her full powers and acquired the added protection of her bonded mate. None were as closely linked as a blooded Alpha Prenom to his woman, a consequence of the Blood Rite Bonding.

She looked at the ivory envelope on top of her black marble desk. Contained within the envelope were the certification documents and background information on the chosen Protector, Valyn Oзера. He seemed to meet all the stringent qualifications required.

Candidates for Alpha Predoms must be totally celibate -- pure and untainted in all respects. They must have no family or blood ties to Ebonnia in any way to assure no unanticipated contamination occurred, and they must not have been a blood source to any other at any time. Sangorrians were not the only species to require infusion of blood for survival, but they were considered the most savage and lethal -- at least at one time. That particular clause and its wording was very important because of the need for an untainted bond between the Alpha and his mate. To be tied through the exchange of blood with any other was completely unacceptable.

Leora had read and reread all the documents. The first was the certification from the Book of Lineages maintained in the Drudian Province and guaranteed that Valyn had no blood ties to anyone on Ebonnia. The Book of Lineages went all the way back to the first

settlers on the planet and the lines of all the Houses were carefully documented and maintained at the Drudian Temple by the priestesses.

The second document was the Guarantee of Celibacy, Virility, and Strength by the Eclipsian Temple on Illumata. The Eclipsian Order was a highly select society, and entry into the Order was eagerly sought by young boys and men who looked to attain wholeness of body, mind, and spirit. They were challenged in all respects equally. Some were trained as scribes for the planet libraries, others served as neutral mediators in varied capacities, or led secondary armies when required to settle disturbances quickly and efficiently. Still more, like Valyn, were suitable candidates for Alpha Pedom to a Sangorrian female or for other societies requiring their focused and exceptional abilities.

The Eclipsian Order was one of the most respected venues for locating Alpha Predoms and had been a source for bondings many times over the centuries. Leora had a special fondness for the Eclipsian Order; her own Alpha Pedom had been trained there.

She smiled as she remembered her first bonding many years ago. Eclipsian males might be celibate and untried, but they were highly skilled and well tutored in pleasuring a woman. They held no hesitancy and were eager to share their knowledge and to experiment. Sensual and thorough did not begin to describe their abilities.

Alpha Predoms were also well versed in the nature of the Sangorrian female, whose mating instincts were unique to say the least. Leora looked down at her long fingers. Well hidden beneath her nails were the black claws that extended into curved, potentially lethal lengths at interesting moments, whether it be fear, anger ... or passion.

She would make sure Katriel was knowledgeable. Unfortunately, Leora's own mother had failed to instruct her properly. It had frightened her the first time her claws had released as Adrik's cock sank into her body, driving her to heights of searing desire. But her mate had soothed and reassured her he was not hurt.

The third document was the physician's certification. Valyn was in perfect health, and he appeared to be intelligent and strong. His sperm count was high and there was no concern for impotence; his blood was untainted, showing no hidden anomalies; and his heart was strong. Most importantly, his blood plasma contained the necessary protective gamma protein that would allow him to successfully mate with a Sangorrian female without danger of turning. For a non-Sangorrian without the protective gamma protein to ingest the blood of a Sangorrian would cause them to become a mutated creature craving the constant infusion of blood to continue to survive. The worst of the Sangorrian nature was exhibited, requiring their immediate destruction. She shuddered at the remembrance of such a creature from her youth, but it had served as a reminder of the necessity for extreme caution in choosing a mate.

There was little information on Valyn's family history. When he was a mere infant, his parents were killed in an attack on their village, and there were no other living relatives to care for him. He was taken to an orphanage in the city of Celrizon on Illumata. At age ten,

one of the priests of the Eclipsian Order happened to visit and discovered him there. The priest had felt he exhibited potential and ability even at that young age, and had offered Valyn the opportunity to join the Order. The paperwork showed no indications that he was a disciplinary problem.

The last document was a full body image replica meant to show any physical deformities. It depicted a man with strong features, a determined jaw, well-defined cheekbones, and a sensual mouth designed for tasting all the secrets a woman had to share. His long gold-flecked brown hair flowed just past his shoulders and his eyes were a vivid startling azure blue. His well-muscled, heavy chest looked like it was fashioned solely for mating with a Sangorrian female. His arms appeared sinewy and strong, and his legs solid and hard as iron. His rigid cock jutted out, long and thick from his body and certainly looked fashioned for pleasuring a woman well. Even in the image replica, the thick, purple veins along its sturdy column seemed to pulse with life. Leora was more than satisfied with the contents of the file; she was confident she had chosen well for her daughter.

The preliminary information on this potential Alpha Predom had also indicated that he would be a perfect complement to Katriel. Of course, there was one added factor that had weighed heavily in his favor and of which her daughter was unaware. Valyn Ozera and Katriel were already acquainted. Although it would not have been the deciding factor, it certainly seemed that he was the perfect mate for her precious offspring. From what she had witnessed, and what her guard had informed her on that long ago night, this mating had been decided by Druda and would not be unacceptable to her daughter.

Leora had arranged for his transport to Ebonnia to see for herself how he held up to the challenges he must meet and to examine him closely for any hidden imperfections not indicated in the file. From past dealings with the Eclipsians, however, she doubted she would find any surprises that had not already been carefully documented.

It would also be the time for Katriel to become reacquainted with her new Alpha Predom. She would have a few days to become used to him before the intimacy of bonding and the concluding Blood Rite ceremony took place. This would be a Primary Union for the daughter of the House of Leah, the bonding between a Sangorrian Virgin and an untainted Alpha Predom. Never with a Secondary. A priestess would travel from the Drudian Province to perform the sacred rite.

There would be much celebrating and the Blood Rite would be attended by representatives of each of the other Houses. Arrangements were already underway in preparation for their arrival.

Leora sighed as she leaned back in her chair. She knew it was fear of the unknown that caused Katriel to oppose the contract, but Leora was mistress and it was her right to proceed with the negotiations. But in addition to being intelligent and beautiful, Katriel had always been an independent, strong-willed child.

Katri was the only child of her Primary Union with Adrik; to protect her Leora would do all that was necessary. Katriel needed her full powers, and to accomplish that she needed her Alpha Predom.

Leora was certain Katriel would find happiness in the bond. If she was at all like Leora had been at her age, she might be fearful of the intimacy but would blossom once the initial bonding was completed. Her daughter must know she loved her above all others and would do nothing that would jeopardize her safety.

Leora closed the file and rose from her chair, turning once more to gaze out the window. The twin gray moons cast a deep shadow over the aurora fields beyond the gleaming black high estate walls. How she missed Noah.

It was not only Noah's blood she craved but his presence and mind as well. Over the years, he had become an integral part of her life. His blood ran through her veins, mingling with her own, and she felt his absence keenly because of it. Her fangs throbbed to taste him, and she salivated with desire as memories flooded through her of his taste, his scent, the feel of his cock tunneling deep within her vagina. Noah helped to cage the wildness that ran rampant inside her -- a mark of her Sangorrian blood and that of a Blood Huntress.

She turned away from the dark thoughts of her haunted past.

Noah must return soon.

Chapter Four

Katriel slowly paced the perimeter of her balcony, barely seeing the private courtyard below. Thoughts of the upcoming bonding were first and foremost in her mind. It was not that she did not want a bonding, nor that she did not realize it was her duty, but she was not ready to give up her independence just yet. Although she knew the recent attempt on her life had caused her mother considerable worry, surely this was carrying things a bit too far.

Even though she knew her mother would have researched the applicants thoroughly before deciding on a proper Protector, and Katri's own observations of watching others had shown a strong connection would develop between her and her Alpha, she needed more time. It was all happening too quickly. To offer herself to a complete stranger in the most intimate manner ... she reeled from the image; it did not feel right.

And why would any man apply for such an unenviable position? They had to be crazy to do so. Away from Ebonnia, she knew her people were often referred to as bloodsuckers or blood whores, which was even worse. Many of the women, especially, were hunted like animals for the large bounties they garnered on more unsavory planets such as Zadolan, or sold on the black market.

It was one of the reasons guards were carefully chosen to defend the matriarchal compounds, particularly the savage warriors trained on Jotar. Jotar warriors were also contracted to protect the Arcadian Mountain passage that led through to the barren Crimson Border, the only entry to the Aurora Valley.

Since the controls had been set in place for unions between the male and female Sangorrians, a hard-fought, satisfying peace had reined on the planet. Outsiders -- outlaws and criminals -- were the ones who were the most dangerous. Therefore, Sangorrians were always accompanied by a contingent of guards when they left their compounds. Within the

protective walls, the requirement was for one personal guard for each female outside the house proper.

Even though she had grown up with the tight security, it sometimes made her feel claustrophobic. The only time Katri was allowed to be completely alone was in her private quarters. But when she bonded, she would lose that as well. *He* would expect complete access not just to her body anytime he desired, but to her private apartments as well. It would be his right as her Alpha and bond mate.

How did her mother bear it, to have no privacy at all? But then she had seen her mother with Sec Noah and knew she loved him without reservation. Had she loved her father in the same way?

Katriel had never had a chance to know him; had almost lost her mother to her heartbreak at his death. Or so she was told. To become a Blood Huntress usually resulted in death as well, but her mother had become a figure of legend when she returned from her Blood Hunt, Noah at her side. Eventually, he became her legal Secondary Attendant. Surprisingly, he held no ill feeling for Katriel's place in the household and had, in fact, mentored her with deep devotion. Katri held great respect for Sec Noah and could not have loved him more had he been her true sire.

She gazed up at the inky dark sky. The two moons shone with luminescent brilliance in the blackness tonight. This was her favorite and most powerful time of the evening. It was peaceful, the tranquility broken only by the lyrical calling of the night doves. She closed her eyes and listened for the sounds of nighttime, felt the echoing beats of the nightlife around her. This was also the time when she felt most restricted by the demands of being daughter to the Mistress of Leah.

What did he look like, this man her mother had chosen for her? She had often dreamed of how her Alpha would appear, what his blood would taste like. Would it be similar to that of the dragon's blood? Her fangs had never penetrated skin before. Certainly she had never tasted the blood of any man. Nor loved with one.

Her thoughts turned to the memory of one man, his image rising unbidden to the surface. A golden man, strong, yet gentle. Someone she had met in another world, far from her home on Ebonnia, and the one time she had come so close to losing her ingrained self-control to taste of the forbidden. It was only then, when she remembered him, that the yearning for a bond mate would overwhelm her. Always, she could only envision him in that capacity.

The urge to rebel and consume the blood of another had been strong at odd times, but she knew the law. The punishments were severe and no price was more exacting for drinking of any other than a chosen bond mate -- death without pardon -- even for the daughter of the matriarch. As difficult as it was sometimes, horror stories of the ancients had stopped Katri. She knew the laws were set down for good reason.

She had been told the lifeblood of her Alpha would be fresh, warm, and more potent than dragon's blood. It energized and refreshed, would be like a fiery bolt of lightning passing through her body, enhancing her strength and stamina, yet decreasing her control. The wildness it would also create would be discharged through the bonding. Thus, the title of Protector for her mate was twofold -- he would protect her from others, and others from her. The bond once created, was unbreakable and unalterable.

Katri understood how one mated -- she had read the instruction books -- but the actuality was practically upon her and she had no say or choice in the matter. She did not even know his name, let alone what he looked like. Her mother had provided no details yet. She had said she wanted him to meet his challenge first -- to prove his worthiness. She did not tell her what the challenge would be.

Katriel had never heard of a mating going bad, but what if this was the first time? What if they were not compatible? Her heart thumped in her chest. What if the wildness turned to insanity and, after everything, he did not have the ability to act as Protector? Maybe he would not be able to help her to control her passions.

Her thoughts were definitely getting out of hand. When would Sec Noah arrive? Maybe if she saw her Alpha she could think rationally about what was to come.

"Lady?"

Katriel turned toward the open doorway to her apartments. "Tish. What is it?"

"I have come to bring your dragon's blood and to inform you that your mother desires your company for the evening meal." Tish walked toward her with the goblet. The woman seemed ageless, had been there with Katriel for as long as she could remember, yet she did not look to be that much older than her.

Katriel swirled the blood absently, then drank. "Not many more days of this, I guess."

"No, Lady. Soon you will have your bond mate and come into your full power."

Katriel sighed. "So I have been told, Tish. You probably know more than I do about what is to come. Why do you stay on Ebonnia? I have always wondered."

Katriel was curious how others lived. She had never known any other way and was so secluded that there was never really an opportunity to converse with others outside her own species, except for the servants who served here.

Aside from the one time she had coerced her mother into letting her travel with her to Illumata, Katriel had never left Ebonnia. In fact, she had never ventured outside of the Aurora Valley. It was only in the last year and a half since beginning her training to be Mistress of Leah that Leora had allowed Katri to accompany her on her meetings with the heads of the other Houses.

"It is my home, Lady. I have no desire to live somewhere else."

"What about a man? How do you meet one? Is it the same for you as it is for me?"

Tish shook her head. “No, Lady. The laws for us are not the same as for you. We are allowed to choose our own mate as long as our choice is not of Sangorrian blood.”

Katriel’s thoughts drifted. On Ebonnia, silver rings circled the planet and protected the inhabitants from the full heat of the crimson sun. On other planets, including Illumata, the sun had a tendency to severely burn the Sangorrians’ skin and sap what physical strength they had. Too long without protection beneath those rays could even cause death to Sangorrians. Her people could not go out during the times when the sun rose high in the sky, keeping instead to darkened rooms. Only at sundown could they venture out, and then heavily cloaked.

The trip to Illumata had been worth it. It was unbelievably interesting to see other cultures. It was also on Illumata, that for one brief, dangerous moment she had rebelled against the suffocating rules of Ebonnia -- and it had served to change her life, making her yearn for something more than what she had previously known. She would never forget the golden man who had etched himself so deeply into her memory.

She shook her head and looked at Tish. “Is there a male you wish to mate with?”

A rosy color flooded Tish’s cheeks. Katriel was envious of the pink tinge. Until she herself mated, her skin would remain alabaster in hue, her pale pink lips the only contrast. As with all her people, the blood of dragons simply sustained her. Once she drank the blood of her Alpha, all that would change. Many things about her would change.

“I have met someone, Lady. We have walked out together a few times.”

“Do you have a chaperone when you walk out with him? Does he touch you?” Katriel remembered a certain touch that had made her burn, but were her memories simply magnified by her fantasies? She knew she would not be allowed to be alone with her Alpha until the actual night of bonding, which would take place on the evening of the black moons, when neither was visible.

“No, Lady, no chaperone is required. He has ... kissed me ... once.”

Ah, a kiss. The touching of lips and tasting of another fueled by the desire to consume. Her heartbeat quickened. “Did you like it?” Until her adventure on Illumata, Katriel had only been kissed by her mother or Sec Noah, who kissed her on her forehead.

How would it feel when her Alpha touched her? Would it sear her more than her memory of Illumata? Or would that lone memory continue to make every other touch pale beside it? How could she bear it if that were to happen? Would those stolen hours on Illumata destroy any chance at future happiness with her chosen mate? She shivered at the thought of such a bleak future.

“Yes, Lady,” Tish whispered, then looked away, as her pink complexion changed to a deeper, more ruddy tone.

Katriel realized she was embarrassing the poor woman with all her personal questions. She drained the goblet.

“Thank you for answering my questions, Tish. I will not intrude any further.” She handed her the cup, then stood up and smoothed the long skirt of her maroon silk dress. “I will attend my mother soon. Maybe she will at last be willing to enlighten me further on what is expected of me.”

Tish nodded and left her.

Katriel turned to look out over the moonlit landscape, remembering another night, so long ago, that was seared into her soul ...

* * * * *

She had been on Illumata. It had taken all of her abilities to convince her mother to let her accompany her on this negotiation trip. Her mother was in attendance at yet another important meeting and Katriel had remained in her room at the hotel, pacing back and forth with an urgent desire to explore the festivities she could hear going on in the streets below. She had stared out at the setting sun from the window, the color and sparkle of fireworks flaring across the sky, feeling suffocated by the boundaries of her young life.

The urgent need to rebel drove deep into her heart. If she wore her cloak, no one would know she was Sangorrian. Leaning over, she looked down at the ground; it was not so very far and she would never have a better chance. This might be her only opportunity to experience another culture. The guard outside her door would never realize she was gone if she did not stay away too long.

Back on Ebonnia, she had circumvented her guards before without incident, but she had never attempted to leave the compound, so guards were always around her even then. Still, if she were very careful, maybe she could manage just a small taste of freedom here. Besides, the sun had almost completely set, so she should not be in any danger from its hot rays. Of course, this was an alien world ...

Not for long, just enough for a quick memory of what real freedom felt like. She had already ingested her nightly glass of dragon’s blood, so no one would be the wiser if she just slipped out. As she inhaled, she could smell fresh-baked bread and, the sweet aroma of cooling pies, she could hear the hum of activity and music and laughter. All of it called to her.

Pushing the edges of her cape back over her shoulder and folding up the hem of her gown, Katriel swung her bare leg over the side of the window casing. Conveniently, there was a ladder that ran up the side of the building within reaching distance of her room.

Once on the ledge outside her window, she sucked in a deep breath. Excitement built inside her. She could do this. She *would* do it. She had never done anything quite as daring as this, and it felt exhilarating. Stretching as far as she could, she tightly grasped the hard edges of the ladder. Once she was convinced that her grip was firm, she swung her legs out and

over, quickly planting her feet on the flat rungs. She exhaled, then slowly began to descend to the ground.

She had done it! She was free! Twirling in a circle, her arms stretched out, she raised her face to the sky and laughed. Finally, she stopped and pulled the hood of her cloak over her head. Walking the length of the deserted alley, she focused on reaching the main street of the town where she could hear the gay sounds erupting from. She would not go far, just far enough to get a taste of the revelry and festivities, so different from her life at Leah.

“Hey, you,” a gruff voice called from behind her. She stiffened, afraid to turn around. Quickening her steps, head down, she was eager to reach the populated street, but was brought to an abrupt halt as a large body jumped out to block her path.

He offered her an evil, toothless grin “She is a young ’un, Bo. Looks to be nice and fresh. Just the way we like ’em.”

She heard a deep, ugly laugh erupt from in back of her. Katriel’s heart thundered in her chest, and the small ember of freedom suffocated and died. Why, oh why, had she been so thoughtless? She should have known this was not like Ebonnia. How had she managed to fool herself into thinking she would be safe? She had wanted to be free so badly, and now she would no doubt pay a heavy price.

Hands gripped her shoulders, yanking off her hood. She inhaled deeply prepared to scream, but a dirty hand clamped over her mouth.

“Did you see those incisors?” the man in front of her asked. “She be one of them blood whores from Ebonnia. I know someone who will pay well for the likes of her.”

Brutal hands clamped down intimately on her body, lasciviously roving over her young breasts and down across her ribs. Katriel could feel her claws begin to unfurl. If only she were older and mated, she would have the strength to fight free of them, but she could only flail helplessly against them. What she would not give right now for the cunning abilities of a Blood Huntress.

“Release her!” The demand came from a strong, deep voice at the entrance of the alley.

The pressure of the hands gripping her increased. “Who is that?”

“Bo, I think we should get out of here. He be one of those Eclipsian ‘apprentices.’”

The grip on her arms grew more painful. “This prize is worth too much. There are two of us and only one of him. We can take him.”

Suddenly, she was roughly tossed aside, and she landed painfully on the ground, the breath knocked from her. Her claws dug into the dirt beneath her, and she spit the gritty substance from her mouth. What was happening? Who had come to her rescue?

Turning her head, her eyes widened, and she caught her breath at the vision of the golden savage strength of her rescuer. Her savior moved with fluid symmetry and dangerous promise, no part of him independent from another. Elegance and muscle combined into a blend of solid sinew with the grace of a sure-footed gazelle and the lethal intent of a stalking

lionaire tracking its prey. Every movement seemed choreographed to perfection, yet there was the stillness of predatory determination.

The only sounds in the alley were grunts from the barbarians. The first one rushed him, a dangerous-looking knife in his hand; clearly he was ready to maim, to kill. Katriel's head whipped around when she saw the second man unsheathe a deadly knife as well and prepared to attack. She could not let him die.

Swiftly, she rose from the ground, claws extended, and raced forward, attacking the second man. She ripped at his shirt and sank her claws into his back, tearing deep into muscle. Katriel clung tightly as he shrieked and tried to dislodge her; she had never been more conscious of her weakness as an unbonded female than at that moment. What she would not give right now to possess the skills of her mother, the strength and knowledge of the Blood Huntress.

The man spun, ripping free of her claws, then backhanded her. For a moment blackness descended over her as she again hit the ground. Tears pooled in her eyes at her failure, knowing that the courageous golden man could not possibly win against two such evil men.

An inhuman howl erupted into the night, and the frantic footsteps of hasty retreat pounded past her. She could not bear to look.

Strong hands grasped her shoulder. She broke free and scrambled across the dirt, raising her hands, ready to make one last attempt to defend herself.

"It is all right," a gentle voice promised. "I am not going to hurt you. Let me help you." He had not been killed! Again, a hand was held out, palm upward; it was not a dirty paw like those of the men who had assaulted her. She attempted to control her fear and willed her claws to retract. Reaching out, she accepted his hand and was assisted to her feet.

The man tipped her head up, and she met the searing blue intensity of the stranger's eyes. His was the most handsome face she had ever seen. Her eyes widened in surprise. He no longer had the look of a golden savage ready to do battle for her; instead he radiated a quiet, warm sensuality that took her breath away. Her heart pounded frantically as his gentle eyes studied her intently.

"I am glad I happened to pass by. It does not look like you have sustained any lasting injuries. May I escort you somewhere?" He helped her to dust the dirt from her dress and cloak. His fingers tangled in her long hair for just a moment as he swept the dark locks clean of the clinging grit. She would have liked him to linger there forever and turned her face; his fingers grazed against her cheek, leaving a warm reminder of his touch behind.

She bit her lip and attempted to control the rush of need building inside her. "I-I am staying at the hotel."

His fingers stroked across her lower lip, and even as young and inexperienced as she was, she had the desire to consume his warm finger, to suckle at it. The errant desire shocked her. Where had it come from? Her lips parted and her tongue darted out. When it connected

with the pad of his finger, she tasted an intense maleness, his skin was salty and warm. She found herself unable to move away.

His gaze sliced into her; fire burrowed deep inside her belly. The color of his eyes had deepened as he watched her take that tentative taste. He allowed her to suck three of his fingers into her mouth, before his eyes slowly closed and he groaned, the sound needy and deep. Her pointed incisor scraped lightly across his skin, then she released him and his fingers slid from her mouth. She was terrified at the desire that had been instilled to pierce the pad of his thumb and suck his blood.

"You are Sangorrian." He opened his eyes to look at her. She thought she saw something within his expression and it touched her in a place none had reached before. It drew her closer to him, but she hesitated to answer him, especially after what had just transpired. There was danger in this intimate connection.

"You are safe. I am simply curious."

She did not know why, but she trusted him. "Yes, I am. I came with my mother. Thank you for rescuing me."

"Why are you here in the alley? And alone?"

"I wanted to see some of the city before we leave tomorrow and did not consider the consequences as I should have. There is always a guard or my mother with me, but I wanted to experience life on my own for a short time, to know just a little of freedom. I see now I should not have been so impulsive and reckless."

He lifted one of her hands to study it. She looked as well, and her stomach clenched as she saw they were tinged with blood. He brushed his thumb across her knuckles and met her gaze.

"Can you extend your claws? We need to clean them of the vermin."

She concentrated and they unsheathed. She suddenly felt ashamed of what she was and glanced away. He released her hand, tore a piece of fabric from his tan-colored tunic, then lifted it again. Carefully, he wiped at each claw.

"You have such beautiful, soft hands and you were very brave. You could have been killed." His gaze met hers as he finished cleaning the last talon, pressed the back of her hand to his mouth, then released it.

She retracted the claws and removed her hand from his, feeling the heat of the kiss. . "It is you who were in danger. I could not stand by and see you killed because of my carelessness."

He put a finger beneath her chin and tilted her head. His eyes stroked over her and she saw the crinkle of a smile. "Your life would have been worth my sacrifice. I am sorry you were worried for my safety." She noticed a trickle of blood at his hairline and hissed, grabbing the torn cloth he had used to so diligently clean her claws. Reaching up, she wiped away the trace of blood. "You are hurt. I am sorry, so very sorry."

He pressed the back of her hand to his mouth, then released it. "It was not your fault. It is minor, nothing for you to worry about. I have sustained much worse in the past -- and lived."

She looked away and stuffed the torn cloth into the pocket of her cloak, still feeling the heat of the kiss on the back of her hand.

He tilted her chin up and smiled. Katriel liked the way his eyes twinkled when he smiled. "Come with me," he coaxed. "I will be your escort -- your protector. You must see the city before you leave, especially tonight. We celebrate the birthday of the founder of Celrizon. It will not be the same as seeing it alone and experiencing freedom, but certainly much safer for such a beautiful girl. You must return home with good memories of your visit on Illumata."

Her whole body suffused with light at his words. "You would really do that?" Then her gaze flittered away. "I do not know you. I should not impose on your time."

The grip of his fingers beneath her chin became more insistent. "It would be my pleasure to escort you." He engulfed her hand with his large warm one and looped her arm through his as he guided her from the alley. He escorted her through the shops, directed her to a performance of puppeteers and pointed out some jugglers. Then he bought a slice of blackberry pie, which they shared with relish. And then, when the single full moon was high in the sky and stars glittered all around it, he escorted her to the crest of a hill that overlooked the city. They could hear the echoes of the musicians as they played below.

There were only the two of them, surrounded by the moon, the stars, and the smell of the earth. It was different than on Ebonnia, where the air always smelled of spicy, dense heat. The scent of Illumata was light and fragrant, filled with joy. Or maybe it was because he moved her in ways she had never felt before, and the happiness was inside her.

He put his strong arms around her and they danced round and round. That moment, there in his arms, she wanted time to stand still. But finally he released her, enveloped her hand with his, and they walked slowly back through the busy streets to the place where he had rescued her.

She looked up at the ladder, hating for the night to end. It had been so magical. She turned to him, unable to find the words to thank him.

He shook his head, a faint smile on his lips, as though he had read her mind. "There is no need."

A tear descended along her cheek at the impending separation. She wanted to know so much more about him, spend more time with him. He caught her tear with his thumb, then brought the digit to his mouth and sucked at it as she watched. She inhaled swiftly. Before she could think, his mouth descended and he claimed her lips. He pressed close, branding her with his taste, his scent, and she clung to him.

His hands molded her to him, and she sensed the hard presence of his sex against her own. There was an answering dampness between her legs and she wanted to experience ... so

much more. Her incisors began to throb as she sucked at him yearning to taste his blood. It became an overwhelming need -- an ingrained instinct to ingest and mingle his lifeblood with hers.

She pulled away from him, cringing against the ladder. Her hand fisted around the wood, horrified at what she had almost done. So close, so very close.

"I must go." She turned, frantic to regain her self-control.

A hand settled on her shoulder, another at her hip. "Your name before you depart," he whispered, resting his head against her back.

"Why? There is no hope for a future between us. I ache for you, but there cannot be more. We are strangers from different worlds." She felt his grip tighten, and her pussy throbbed with need, her juices coating her thighs at forbidden want.

"You will be mine. One day. But I must have your name."

She knew it could never be, but something inside her made her relent to his request -- to give something of herself -- to be remembered. "Katriel. Katriel Saguna of the House of Leah."

"Katriel," he echoed, and she felt a kiss against her neck. "I vow this, Katriel Saguna -- one day I will make you mine."

She shook her head, knowing it could never happen. Before she realized it, his touch and scent disappeared. "Your name," she cried out, then whirled around, but he was gone. The alley was as desolate as when she had first descended the ladder. Tears coursed down her face as she slowly ascended; feeling bereft.

Opening her eyes, Katriel gazed out into the Ebonnian night. When her mother had asked about the bruise on her cheek she had explained it away as an accident when she had risen from her bed in the night. She never discovered her golden protector's name, but the memory of his touch, his scent, everything about him had stayed with her over the years. Her body remembered him; even now she was slick with desire at the memory of his touch. Her only hope was that she would at least be content in the mating contracted by her mother, but she could not help but wonder where her rescuer was now. Had he made a union with another? Was he happy?

She hoped he was well. He had given her something wonderful and special to remember all the years of her life. She would never forget that night, or him, no matter what her future had in store for her.

Katriel turned and walked back into her present, away from bittersweet memories. Her mother awaited her attendance, and she must fulfill her obligations. There was never any other choice.

Chapter Five

Valyn gazed across the red landscape of Ebonnia, its fine dust settling in his throat. He had finally arrived. Seven years of preparation, of yearning, of patience, would finally provide him the opportunity to be with the woman of his dreams.

This would be his home, a place he would belong. He would have the essence of a family, a bond with another being that would tie them together as one unit. They would go from being two separate beings to sharing themselves in all ways emotionally and physically. His body tightened at the thought of the woman who awaited him.

He inhaled deeply of the foreign land's scent. Surprisingly, it tasted spicy and hot. He had never known the earth of a planet to contain such an intriguing flavor as this one did; it was similar to the tangy peppercorn spice on Illumata, yet with an undercurrent of sweetness. He licked his lips and felt the heat of the fine earth enter his system. Something inside him was already changing.

Ebonnia had a reputation for being different in every respect. Was it because of the silvery rings of particles surrounding it, or was it the strange chemistry of the earth? Perhaps it was simply the presence of the species of beings called Sangorrians that made it such a mysterious and complicated environment. Surely this planet held many secrets not covered in his reference books, ones he was eager to uncover as time went on.

He knew the Aurora Valley was filled with rich, colorful vegetation, and he was eager for his first real glimpse of the place he would settle in for the remainder of his days. He had learned as much as he could about the aurora vine and its mystical herbs, the mainstay of the Aurora Valley economy, which were harvested and sold and used in the medicines of other civilizations.

The stretch of barren, red land they now crossed was the Crimson Border, an uninhabited strip of land separating the two main provinces of the Sangorrian continent, the

largest on the planet and located in the western hemisphere. The continent's western edge held the Tauduet Oasis, the only area on the Sangorrian continent where the unusual destructive chemical makeup of the planet that defied mechanical and technological advancement was nonexistent. It was the port of entry and departure to and from other planets, and more sensual and erotic temptations within the city proper itself Valyn had never experienced.

Onyx City, a huge, domed metropolis was positioned at the very heart of the decadent Tauduet Oasis, where anything might and did happen. After the peace of Illumata and the quiet of the Eclipsian temple grounds, the colorful, sinful temptations of the oasis had been overwhelming; Valyn was glad to leave it behind. To the east lay the mystical Drudian Province, where the Drudian temple rose at the most powerful cross point of this world.

The wagon beneath him hit a bump, reminding him of his need for patience. His body hurt from the rough, long ride, so he was glad to notice the white peaks of the Arcadian Mountains in the distance were drawing closer. The enforced lack of activity over the last weeks had him battling a deep desire to jump out and run fast and far to dampen the core of energy surging through his body at the knowledge he would soon be with his woman, the mate he had wanted for seven years. He was eager to stretch his legs, but even more eager to reach their destination. He wondered if Katriel knew he was coming for her as he had promised. Had she seen the image replica contained in his file? If so, had she recognized him? Or had she completely wiped that magical encounter from her mind?

Watching the rampant fornication in the streets of Onyx City had only served to heighten his anticipation for the bonding with his Sangorrian mate. Even his years of rigid formal Eclipsian training to control the baser appetites in pursuit of inner balance and strength could not stop his body from responding to the sights in the city. It seemed his cock refused to release the memories of the scenes in Onyx City; his flesh felt like an iron spear attached to his body, ready to strike deep.

Lady Katriel Saguna, the only daughter of Mistress Leora Seguna of the House of Leah, had remained in his thoughts ever since that first moment he had realized she was in trouble. In one instant his path within the Eclipsian brotherhood had changed. He had known in a shattering moment that he was not bound for the enlightened spiritual sect.

It had been near sundown, and he was at the marketplace on an errand for one of the priests. It was pure chance that he had happened to pass the alley when she, heavily cloaked, had fought to free herself from two attackers. His Eclipsian warrior training and the instinctive need to protect took over. The reputation of the Order's fighting skills was justified, and the vermin had fled quickly.

When he had helped her to her feet and gazed into her eyes, he saw his future with a clarity that had almost destroyed him. He knew it would not be a question of controlling his appetites and his body. No, he willingly gave to her what no one else had ever received of him, or would ever have.

He had heard of Ebonnia at the temple, had studied it as part of his scholarly pursuits. He knew of the Sangorrian mating practices, their need for the blood of a mate for survival. He had not undertaken much in-depth research on the planet or their culture then, but knew after meeting Katriel that he would rectify that lack very soon. He had wanted to absorb everything there was to know about Ebonnia and in particular this delicate creature who he wanted for himself.

Remaining celibate at the temple had not meant that his desires for female companionship had lain dormant. He had struggled for the control and respected those who appeared to have mastered it. Yet when he saw her, when he had held her in his arms, those desires were savagely unleashed inside him.

She was the most beautiful creature he had ever encountered. The flash of her wide silvery eyes was tinged with fear but held a deeper hint of rebellion. Her skin was a delicate, luminous white, and her pale, pink, bow-shaped mouth had been wonderfully tempting. When she had sucked at his thumb and he had felt the light rasp of her small, pointed incisor, he knew immediately what she was. Despite the challenges that he anticipated would be set before him, Valyn had not been able to turn from her.

He had researched the House of Leah and learned Katriel was sixteen when he had first met her, too young to have been bound to a mate. If he bided his time and watched vigilantly, he knew the chance would present itself for him to apply for the opportunity to become her Alpha Predom.

A moment of panic had set in when he discovered that the Prime mates for Sangorrians must have the gamma protein in their blood. He had rushed to a healer to be tested; thankfully, his blood fulfilled the requirement.

He had breathed a sigh of relief for that was the one thing he could not have changed if it had not been so. His only other option would have been to apply as a Secondary Mate to Katriel, where a blood rite and blood exchange did not occur. From his studies, he knew there were a few unusual cases in the past, where Sangorrians had bound themselves with both a Prime and Secondary at the same time, but it would have been a distant hope that his nature would have allowed him to accept a secondary position with Katriel. He wanted to be the one to sire her children; only by becoming her Alpha would full rights be his.

He had placed his trust in the gods that they would not have put Katriel in his path if they were not meant to be together. From that moment on, he had committed himself to a future he had no real certainty of seeing. All he had was an ingrained belief that their match was predestined. He had declared his ultimate path to his mentor, then set upon preparing himself to claim what he knew was his. One small glimpse of his destiny had forced Valyn to focus on his studies and remain celibate, to hone his warrior skills.

He still found it difficult to believe he had been chosen. Not everyone was suited to become a Sangorrian bond mate and protector. Others at the temple had thought him out of

his mind. To them, it meant giving up a pure life to become a plaything and food source to a bloodsucking whore.

If he had not experienced that one magical night with Katriel, it would never have occurred to Valyn to seek out and apply to become her Alpha Prenom. He had read everything he could find on Ebonnia, the Sangorrian culture in particular, including ancient texts buried deep in the vaults of the catacombs beneath the temple. He knew its history inside and out, had familiarized himself thoroughly with their laws and customs, with the needs of the females. They were a strong-willed race and he found their strength of purpose in changing their very nature intriguing.

By the time the formal Sangorrian Request for Application arrived at the Temple, he was ready. He was at meditation in his cell when his mentor had informed him of the need to present himself on Ebonnia. Valyn had bowed his head, grateful that his wait and diligence had been rewarded. It was a slow process and had required more than patience on his part, but each time he thought he would falter, he brought her image to his mind -- remembered her touch, her smell, her soft body pressed against him -- and it firmed his resolve. He would have her, would offer her what she needed, and bind her to him. Everything he had undergone was worth it if there was even the glimmer of a chance his application would succeed.

Sangorrian women were known for their fierce loyalty, intelligence, and beauty. They were more passionate, made dedicated companions, had an equal footing with their mates, and had different needs. He relished the opportunity to bind with the one woman he knew would challenge, yet fulfill him, to thrive in an environment that would allow him to utilize all his skills and knowledge to best advantage.

He had never had a place he called home -- neither the orphanage nor the temple brotherhood. The temple members were transient in his life at best, as each new brother chose his path. Valyn had first thought that his admittance to apprenticeship with the brotherhood meant that he had found his calling and a place where he would belong. Sadly, he had discovered the one, but not the other. There had always rested an emptiness he could not seem to fill, a barren place inside his soul. Until he met Katriel. Suddenly, a warm light had filled that vacant space, an urgent need to become a part of her life. And when he had studied the foundations of their society, something had resonated inside him.

Now, the only things he had left to his name were the clothes on his back; he had been allowed to bring nothing beyond a few small personal items as a requirement, to renounce everything in his past in order to embrace his future as a Sangorrian Alpha Prenom. He had willingly done so and was without weapon, without friends, without funds. All had been purged to begin his new life. He welcomed the challenge; it was like being reborn.

He watched the Sec, Noah Chisca, who rode proudly erect on the gleaming, midnight black bronkitor ahead of the wooden cart Valyn perched upon. The man wore the dragon armor of his position, gleaming golden beneath the red sun, and carried two swords sheathed

at his back. Valyn knew he was Secondary Attendant to Mistress Leora, the powerful matriarch of the House of Leah, known and feared as a Blood Huntress of incomparable reputation, and the mother of his intended mate. It was Mistress Leora's challenge and final inspection he must pass before he would be presented and introduced to Lady Katriel as suitable. Valyn felt he was more than ready to meet her demands.

The smell of leather and the glint of steel nearby reminded him that their group was accompanied by a contingent guard of at least fifteen Jotar warriors, many dressed in black and rust-red uniforms, the sleeves carrying the gold insignia identifying them as attached to the House of Leah. Once they reached the mountain passage, it would not be much longer to the compound. He knew it was expected they would arrive at sundown and Sec Noah had set a hard pace to get there before nightfall.

Sec Noah had been obviously aggravated by the constant delays to their departure from Onyx City and to that end many gold pieces had passed hands to ensure a speedier disposition so they could be on their way to the Aurora Valley. Although he had been accompanied by five armed warriors to Illumata, when they returned to Ebonnia, Valyn was surprised that number had been tripled to accompany them back to the compound. The new warriors had recently arrived from Jotar and were contracted to serve at the Leah Compound.

Their planned departure from Illumata was delayed, pending approval and consent from the proper exit authorities. Then upon arrival on Ebonnia, there was another lengthy delay before he was issued his entrance acceptance papers and his name was etched into the ledgers. While they waited, Noah had informed him in a cursory fashion that no trip should be wasted and should be utilized to its fullest extent, so he had made several purchases of supplies to take back with them. The wagon was loaded with fabric, and food staples.

The chemical content of Ebonnia's surface affected the use of motorized vehicles or advanced weaponry, making them virtually unusable for any prolonged length of time. It had also made their journey back to the Aurora Valley much slower than would have been accomplished on Illumata.

Most of the residents of the planet preferred to maintain a simpler lifestyle, not willing to open themselves to the ravages of other civilizations that had come to depend on such devices to their detriment. Other than Onyx City and the Tauduet Oasis, Ebonnia appeared to maintain an almost feudal lifestyle, yet the keeping of slaves and serfs was outlawed.

He knew the separate male and female societies maintained strict segregation for reasons of survival of their species. Females born to the mates of the males were eventually fostered out to one of the Seven Houses of the Crimson Sun around the age of fifteen until approximately eighteen, when a protector was located. Likewise males born to the Sangorrian females were fostered to one of the Houses of the Twin Moons. Once mated, a couple might choose to live on either side of the planet.

Meticulous records were kept by the Druda of all inhabitants with Sangorrian blood, as well as their mates. All the ruling classes had agreed the history of bloodlust would not be repeated.

But old memories die a slow death. Word of their bloodthirsty history had naturally colored the views of other species. Any bloodsucker, no matter how benevolent, was still feared by others. Yet, the Sangorrians had earned their place on the Zytarri Star System Council and for centuries had been well represented there.

All the planets sought their trade goods, but not their company. This had led to many attempts by other races hungry for control of the riches of the planet to attempt to destroy the Sangorrian ruling classes and take over the planet. Hence, strict laws and controls were in place to maintain the security of Ebonnia.

Valyn's attention was diverted from his wandering thoughts as the wagon halted. Sec Noah seemed to be staring intently into the distance toward the mountain passage. The two warriors who had been sent ahead upon their departure from the boundaries of Onyx City to scout the passage were racing toward them. Valyn could see both horsemen were pushing at full breakneck speed; soon, they came to a sliding halt before Chisca.

"Mercenaries ahead, sir, about a mile beyond the entrance of the passage. They look to be about twenty or thirty and lie in wait, probably until we are well inside, then will attempt to cut off a retreat and attack. They do not seem particularly well-suited to their task as their horses are not well hidden, and they did not appear to have anyone holding watch at the entrance to the passage. Several seemed more interested in engaging in a bout of gambling, and others in consuming drink. It appears they do not expect much resistance to whatever they plan."

"Damnation! How did they get past the sentinels?" Sec Noah turned in his saddle and called to the men behind him. "Prepare for confrontation!"

Valyn examined the entrance to the passage. Not a speck of movement; it was almost too quiet. The dry air seemed to pick up speed and gathered the red spicy dust into swirling plumed spires all around them. It was as though his fierce emotions and those of the others with them were transmitted to the very earth around them.

A surge of adrenalin shot through him; it seemed he was about to be presented his first challenge. If he could not survive this, he would not be the mate or protector his Lady Katriel needed. Standing, he jumped from the wagon, ignoring the wagon driver who yelled after him.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I do not hide behind others, friend. I fight my own battles." He bit back to the driver as he strode over to Sec Noah.

"If you give me a weapon and perhaps a horse, I can assist. What position do you want me to take?"

* * * * *

Noah narrowed his gaze, shifting his focus to the young man who stood at his side, demanding his attention. His wide-legged stance was one of battle, defiant -- a fiery, young lionaire ready to destroy his opponent. A glimmer of respect shot through him for Valyn Ozero. He showed courage.

"You are certain?"

Valyn met his gaze with a glittering look. "I am eager for the encounter, Sec. It has been a long ride with little to occupy my time. I look forward to the diversion."

Noah laughed. He liked the younger man's attitude. "All right. They could be brigands looking to steal our supplies. But because of recent confrontations, I am more inclined to think they have been hired to halt your bonding with Lady Katriel. It may very well be that you are their target and they may attempt to take you for ransom -- or kill you. Stay on your guard. We will take no chances. In case you are the intended target, we are going to give them a decoy -- someone for them to focus on who is not you."

He nodded at one of the guard. "You. Exchange your clothing with him and take his place in the wagon. Keep your weapon ready." He turned back to Valyn. "You will ride his horse, and cover his position with the guard."

Valyn shed his clothing and dressed in the uniform of the Leah guard, then mounted the soldier's horse. Noah pulled his second sword from the scabbard at his back and handed it to Valyn.

"It is a good blade and should serve you well."

He turned back to the rest of the men awaiting his orders. "Most of you are new to Ebonnia, so this will be your first taste of the challenges of your position here. I hope you are ready, and I trust that you will dispatch the rabble awaiting us with speed. You are superior warriors and this small annoyance will offer me an indication of your abilities. Are you ready?"

The sounds of grunts and growls, and shouts of "We are ready!" erupted from the men. Noah nodded. "Very well." He glanced at the first two men who had scouted the passage. "Did you see any archers above? Where the sentinels should have been?"

Both shook their heads. "No, sir. There was no one, no indication of any movement above."

"All right. I want you to go back. Make certain there are no other traps. Signal when you are in position. The wagon will go into the passage accompanied by five guards. I doubt the bastards are aware of our increased numbers. We will wait for you to signal when the net has been dropped, then attack."

The men saluted, wheeled their horses about and raced back toward the mountains.

Noah motioned for the wagon to move slowly forward ahead of the warriors and stop. He then motioned to five of the warriors to move up beside it. The bronkitor he rode pawed at the earth, sensing Noah's tense energy as he focused his attention on the passage, awaiting his scouts' signal. Everything came into sharp focus in that instant.

The feel of the bronkitor between his legs, the hard bite of the handle of his sword through his gloves, and the spicy taste and smell of Ebonnia ... they all surged through him and over him, caging him in a vortex, like the dust swirling around them. He could feel his blood heating to boiling, the lust for battle consuming him.

Finally, he saw the flash from the crest of the mountain, and he nodded to the wagon driver. The small procession slowly advanced. He watched as the wagon and soldiers moved into the passage, confident they could handle themselves when the time came, but still he did not like sending men into an ambush such as this. However, there really was no other way to take the thieves off guard and finish the matter quickly. They were skilled fighters and should be able to hold their ground until the remainder of his men drew forward to assist.

The small contingent disappeared. He motioned for the balance of the guard to move out. They pushed briskly toward the path the wagon had followed. Noah gripped his sword, readying for the attack. He halted them just past a jutting rock and turned to survey his men once more. He looked for Valyn and noted his position. His sword was clasped firmly in the younger man's grip. He nodded and Valyn saluted. Noah recognized that glittering look, the anticipation in his eyes. There was no cowardice in his manner. Horses pawed at the ground and snorted, eager to run, the tense energy and anticipation of their masters transmitting to them. Hands tightened on reins, legs gripped against the sides of their mounts, hands grasped swords. He felt their surging electricity pouring out all around him.

He turned away and narrowed his gaze to watch for a second signal. There was a flash; the bait had been swallowed. Quickly, he gave the signal and his men pushed forward through the passage, swords glittering, hooves pounding, racing to meet their challenge.

They engaged quickly before the enemy even knew they had been outwitted. Noah drove his mount onward, sword raised. Better to get it done with. He dispatched the first man quickly with a parry, then a thrust directly to the heart. Turning, he veered to the left, deftly ducking beneath the rush of another man, driving his sword through the man's belly, burying it deep into his entrails, then swiftly pulling free. Dust filled his lungs, its heavy, spicy taste burning his blood, inflaming him.

Wheeling his powerful bronkitor around briskly, in a blur he met attack after attack; one small dagger narrowly missed his jaw before Noah dispatched the assailant to his death. All around him the sounds of battle raged and the metallic scent of his enemy's spilled blood met his flared nostrils. The clash of steel against steel and the grunts of physical confrontation bled into the air around him.

He lost track of time passing. When he looked up again, it was over. The enemy were either dead or in quick retreat. Several of his men appeared to have sustained wounds, but none fatal. He turned to face the men around him. "You have all done well."

He nodded in satisfaction as he wiped the stain of blood from his sweating brow.

Scrutinizing the area, he found Valyn, covered in blood, four mercenaries lying dead, scattered around him. Noah kneed his mount toward Valyn, who stood next to his horse. Halting, Noah jumped to the ground and, as he approached the other man, saw the fire of battle still blazed across his face.

"It is over, Valyn." He looked down at the dead bodies. "You have done well, and shown much courage this day. I will see that Mistress Leora is made aware." He scanned the young man quickly, noting several superficial wounds, but nothing that appeared to be serious. "Do any of your injuries require immediate attention?"

The fire slowly faded from Valyn's eyes. He blinked and shook his head. "No, Sec, they were inferior fighters with inferior weapons."

"Yes, hired assassins usually are. We have yet to put a name to their benefactor. This is the second time an attempted attack has been made in recent months. It would certainly be worth knowing if one person is behind these attacks or if they are isolated, separate incidents."

Valyn narrowed his gaze and studied Noah closely. "There have been others?"

"Yes. They attempted to take Lady Katriel when she was visiting a village near the compound. It is why Mistress Leora has arranged for the bonding so quickly. Katriel needs her protector, her mate, before the alignment of the moons occurs. It has been put off too long as it is and now must be accomplished without delay."

"Why the need for expediency? Why not just add extra guards?"

"We travel for the full meeting of the Houses in Onyx City, and Katriel is to accompany her mother. Until she is bonded, she will be without her full powers, and it will make her unnecessarily vulnerable to another attack. Her mother has waited as long as she could to contract the bonding, but the time has come."

Valyn nodded, his steely gaze meeting Noah's. "She will be protected, Sec." From Valyn's expression and tone it was clearly more oath than simple statement.

"I believe you mean that and will accomplish it. I expect you to pass Mistress's final challenge easily. I must see to my men, then we will continue our journey. I still wish to reach the compound before the sun sets."

Noah turned and strode back to his mount. After checking on each of the warriors, he found all but one well enough to ride. Room in the bed of the wagon was made for the one severely wounded man, and his horse was tied to the back.

Before moving out again, he turned to one of the warriors. "You will go to the passage sentry positions and find out what happened to them. How did this rabble get through?"

The man saluted, reined his mount around, and galloped toward a concealed path that would eventually take him to the top of the mountain. Noah surveyed the tall ridges of the passage, looking for any indication that there might be more trouble. Where were the sentries that were always posted around the clock? He wanted answers. Signaling with a raised hand, he led the contingent forward at a slower pace, vigilant and wary of another attack.

When they reached the outer perimeter of the valley, there would be a stream in which to wash and make themselves presentable before they made the final descent into the valley and to the Leah Estate. Noah was never more eager to reach the Aurora Valley than now. It was the first time he had been separated from Leora for such a long period of time since they were bonded. Much too long -- he knew she did not have enough of his stored blood for the length of time he had been away, so would have needed to resort to the supply of dragon's blood kept on hand. His lady would not have liked that.

Even as tired as he was, his cock tightened in anticipation of his homecoming; he knew she would eagerly be waiting for him. He could almost feel her mouth against his chest as she fed from him, as his cock burrowed into her pussy. It would not be gentle, neither the feeding nor the fucking -- their long separation would see to that. No, their joining would be hot and furious, demanding a heady, powerful mating. The ache of her taking would heighten his pleasure, enhance and force him faster and deeper. He hoped he could at least get her somewhere private before she tried to feed. If she met him at the steps they would never make it inside as the scent and need for his blood would override all her control. It would be up to him to get her to privacy. Others off planet did not understand the complexities of the bond between Sangorrians and their mates. It went far deeper than what others saw or could comprehend.

He hoped Valyn understood what his full responsibilities would be to Katri. Even though he was not her blood sire, she had always held a special place in Noah's heart. He wanted to see her happy as well as protected, and from what he had witnessed so far, he thought Valyn was a good choice. The man had represented himself well in the battle, showed intelligence as well as strength and bravery. He certainly exhibited the makings of a fine Alpha Predom. He was twenty-eight to Katri's twenty-two, a good age span and the prime age for mating, and obviously in excellent health and strength to serve as protector.

Finally, as the distant gleaming black walls of the outer Leah perimeter came into view, Noah reined in and summoned one of his warriors, sending him forward to notify Leora of their imminent arrival. His body throbbed with the knowledge that his own mate awaited him. He might not have ingested her blood through a Blood ceremony as an Alpha Predom did, but he still felt her presence inside him, calling him back to her.

Reaching inside the soft leathery pouch he always carried at his side, he pulled out a turquoise pill and popped it into his mouth, then swallowed thirstily from the flask he kept at his belt.

Omgavita, the source of health and well-being for the mate of a Sangorrian, was made from the omega algae harvested from the Omega Strait, a stretch of water slicing between Sangorria and the much smaller Sellion continent. The algae contained extensive amounts of nucleic acid, more than any other known source on the planet, which allowed for enhanced cellular repair and renewal, as well as the rapid reproduction of red and white blood cells. Unfortunately, it had no similar effect on Sangorrian physiology because the Sangorrian g-cells rendered Omgavita's effect impotent once ingested. But for mates, it was the drink of life or, as in this case, taken in its pill form, the food of life. He knew he would require the magnified reproductive abilities to enhance his blood before he reached Leah.

In his time away from Leora, he had not ingested the pills as there was no need for its special replenishment abilities. But now that he was close to home, he must be ready to provide for his woman, his mate, and he would need all of his health, strength, and blood, to do so.

Chapter Six

Leora rose from the bathing pool, the warm water cascading down her body, and trembled with the knowledge that her beloved Sec would be with her soon. Tish stood by the side of the pool holding up a large, soft towel, and enveloped Leora in it as she stepped from the water.

One of Noah's warriors had arrived a short time ago to inform them the contingent would reach the inner gates within the next two hours. Leora had directed the household to prepare food and drink for their arrival. Once satisfied that everything was in order, she had hurried to her own apartments to ready herself for the return of her lover.

After Tish dried Leora's body and combed her long ebony tresses until they glimmered and shone in the light, she opened a bottle of fragrant blackberry lotion to apply to Leora's body.

"Stop, Tish. Leave me. I can bear no more." Leora's skin was already so sensitized that any more of Tish's ministrations would be pure agony. Even the gentle breeze of the early evening air floating in through the window, stroking at her skin, teased her already aroused body into unbearable agony.

She waved Tish away when she would have helped her to don a burgundy silk robe. If anything else touched her body, she would scream. The only thing she wanted anywhere near her skin right now was Noah -- she needed his touch desperately.

"Is there anything further that you require, Mistress?"

She was short with Tish and she should not have been -- it was not her fault Leora's need was so great she could not bear to be near another. Taking her control in hand, she smiled at Tish and touched her hand. An aching tremor passed through her body, but she suppressed a groan and tried to focus on her loyal servant, who did not deserve the harsh edge of her impatience.

"No, thank you, Tish. If you would just see that everything else is prepared. Be certain that the room is in order for Katri's intended Predom. He will be staying in the northeast bedroom on the first floor until the bonding ceremony."

"Right away, Mistress." She turned and left Leora's apartments.

Exiting the large bathing room, Leora entered her bedroom. She surveyed the room, checking to see that all was arranged for his arrival. The bed was laid with fresh linen, new candles were placed in the iron wall sconces, and a tray of sliced fresh bread and an assortment of meats and cheeses set on a table, together with a decanter of Aurora wine. And on the table next to the bed was another decanter of turquoise liquid with one crystal goblet. Omgavita -- the vital drink of life to keep her mate healthy and well. As Noah cared for her, so must she care for him in return. She stroked a finger along the slope of the bottle, then felt liquid heat slide along her thighs from between her folds and shuddered with anticipation.

It was best she did not go down to the reception hall to meet him. He had been away too long, and her control was practically nonexistent. Who was she kidding? It *was* nonexistent. And the closer he came, the more sensitized her body was, a static of need surrounding and clinging, driving her closer and closer to the edge of splintering control.

Walking to the window, she focused her gaze on the gate, willing him to ride through it. Her breath halted in her breast as she watched the gatekeepers pull open the inner gates. Leaning closer to the window, she gripped the ledge to steady herself and her fingertips bit into its unforgiving, cool marble edge. Her sensitive, tight nipples brushed against the smooth, cold wall, and she hissed with the sensation.

Unable to help herself, she pushed hard, needing the cold pressure against her heated flesh. Her fingers drifted down to her engorged pussy, sliding through her juices. She stroked and circled her clitoris, needing release, yet it flitted away from her touch, and she whimpered in frustrated pain.

Then she saw him ride through the open gate. Her gaze drank thirstily at her first sight of him, the way an Ebonnian would after having gone months in the barren borders without food and drink. He sat proud and tall on the muscled bronkitor she had gifted him not long ago to commemorate the anniversary of their contract.

He brought his mount to a sliding halt before the steps of the house proper and threw the reins to a waiting groom as he vaulted off. Halfway up the steps, he stopped and spoke several words to a waiting servant, as he removed his gloves, then leaped up the remaining steps.

Weakness overcame her, the overwhelming, instinctive need of a Sangorrian female for her mate, and she stroked a hand over her needy breasts. Nothing was stronger, nothing more difficult to control. She felt the thick cream of her desire more heavily coat her thighs, and her vagina pulsed with the need to be filled. Oh, merciful heaven, let him be quick -- she could not contain it much longer. Her fangs throbbed painfully, the anticipation almost destroying her.

Suddenly, the door to her chambers rocked open with a bang, and he stood before her, filling the doorway. Unable to wait one moment more, she literally leaped across the length of the room. He caught her in his arms, and she devoured him with her mouth, piercing through his lips with her tongue, which he sucked into his own hot, greedy mouth, returning her fierce demand and pouring out his own passion. He tasted of long hours of travel, spicy dust, sweat, hot male, and driving need.

His hands cupped her naked bottom to lift and support her, as with one heel he kicked the door shut behind him. She wrapped her legs around his hips and ripped open the front of his dragon suit, exposing his solid, muscled chest.

Blindly, instinctively, she tore her lips from his and, baring her fangs, sank them into warm, firm skin. As the first molten spurts of his lifeblood struck her throat, she moaned in ecstasy as the energy of his blood sang through her, her body blossoming like a flower opening to the sun. So good, so delicious. He smelled of the hot, spicy land, tasted of male and fire, and she ravenously consumed the heady mixture.

"Ahhhh," she heard him breathe as he strode with her toward the large bed, where he sat, supporting her as she drank from him. "You have missed me," he murmured, stroking her long hair. "Take what you need, beloved, all that you need. I am here now."

She drank deeply, pink-tinged tears spilling from beneath her eyelids at the pure joy he filled her with. She felt his power and energy snap through her, and the wildness overtook her. Finally sated, she pulled back slowly, licking a few remaining drops from his chest. Moving lower, she suckled at a small, puckered brown nipple, tasting the heat of his flesh.

A soft chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Let me undress, my love. My need is as great as yours, I have yearned to feel your body against mine, but I want to love you properly."

She raised her head, and he wiped at the tears covering her face. "No more tears. I am here, and we will make up for all the time we have been apart."

"I have missed you desperately." She unwound her long legs from around his hips and sliding to the floor at his feet, pulled one boot from his foot and then the other. He stood and she helped him remove the rest of his suit.

Reaching up, she smoothed a hand across his broad chest and down over his hard abdomen, finally wrapping a hand around his rigid cock. One hunger had been fed, but another still assaulted her.

Obviously, he had the same need. The head of his cock glistened and throbbed, tight, silky flesh cloaking the hardness of obsidian rock, and just as beautiful. Sinking to her knees before him, she kissed the top of his shaft and circled her tongue over the engorged purple head, already wet with his vibrant desire. She tasted down the length of his shaft, over the pulsing heat and beneath to his sacs, then taking them into her mouth and sucking hard. He hissed and moaned, thrusting his hips toward her as his hands tangled in her hair, gripping and kneading.

She raised her head and met his dark impassioned gaze. Leora smiled, licking her lips. "You have missed me, too, it seems," she murmured before devouring the tip of his shaft, careful with her fangs. Again, she licked along the length of him and cupped his heavy testicles with her other hand. His flavor was tangy salt and warm velvet, hard and ready for her, mingled with the spicy, ever present taste of Ebonnia.

"More than you know," he groaned, claspings her head tightly. She felt his blood pulsing through his body as he grew more engorged beneath her ministrations, the veins clearly defined, pulsing with life. "No more, come here to me."

He lifted her and fell back onto the bed. She straddled his hips and sank down quickly, consuming his fierce, needy shaft. One swift plunge, and her wet channel sucked him in, surrounding him in her slick heat, deep inside her body.

"Oh, yes," she breathed. His thick length filled and stretched her deliciously. She arched, her breasts thrusting forward, her nipples tight and hard, as she rode him slowly, enticingly. The scents of heat and passion, blood and desire permeated the air around them, the sounds of slippery, hot bodies coming together, retreating and merging over and over again.

His hands rose to cup the heavy mounds of her firm breasts, kneading them, driving her onward, as he rolled the dusky nipples between his fingers. She whimpered and moved faster. The feel of his hard shaft sliding effortlessly through her juices, in and out, inflamed and raged through her. He knew her so well, knew what she needed, how she needed it. She loved that and so much more about him.

Noah sat up and twisted around so that she lay on the bed with him in control of their passion, slick sweat covering them both. He thrust forcefully, retreated, thrust again, and her moans grew louder. He captured her lips, pulled her tongue into his mouth, sucking her deeper.

She felt her claws extend and curve, grip into his back, and finally pierce his flesh, sinking deep. He threw back his head and shouted his triumph as she felt his hot, pulsing seed release and bathe her with his pleasure. She licked at his tight pecs and again sank her teeth into his skin, gulping at his surging, fiery blood as forceful spasms ripped through her. Her claws gripped tighter as he continued to pump into her welcoming heat.

Her own orgasm rose to swamp her and she clasped him to her, drinking deeply, then pulling free and screaming as her own potent ecstasy transported her to merge with him among the stars. As reality descended, she slowly retracted her claws, taking care not to rip his skin. Smoothing her hands down either side of his spine, she felt the tiny puncture marks that remained, patterns marking him as hers.

He withdrew his cock from inside her and drew her into his arms, kissing her forehead. "It is good to be home," he murmured.

"Never again," she vowed. "We will never be parted for this length of time again."

"Never," he agreed.

She reached around him and poured a glass of Omgavita for him.

"I fear I have taken more than I should. You must drink."

He took the glass, then leaned over and kissed her. "I am fine. I took one of the pills before we arrived."

She pulled back and studied him. "Still, I will not take chances with your health."

He sipped from the glass. "You care for me well, my love. I have ached for you."

"No more than I."

Gently, he rolled her onto her back, raining kisses along her jaw and down across the rapid pulse at the base of her neck. He slid into her slowly, and began a gentle rocking motion that she countered. He drizzled the liquid across her breasts, then smeared it with his fingers, painting across her skin over her taut nipples. His touch was searing and sensitizing even as his cock pressed into her heat, retreating, and sliding deeper still.

Apparently finally satisfied with his artwork, he set the goblet aside. Driven into a frenzy by his cock and fingers, she arched toward him and reached for release. He leaned forward and began to lap at the pale blue liquid decorating her breasts, making sure to clean every drop of the azure moisture, swirling his tongue decadently across her skin. With slow, long licks, he circled her nipples, sucking one at a time deep into his mouth, his tongue sweeping across their engorged surface. His cock continued to thrust through her cream, burrowing deep, receding and pumping hard, grinding against her throbbing clitoris.

"Ah, yes, my love, I have missed your taste." He changed his rhythm to easy, deep strokes, hesitated a fraction of a second before circling the head of his cock at her entrance, then sliding in, inch by slow inch.

A growl erupted from her throat as she thrust against him, attempting to force him to increase the pace, needing to orgasm, wanting his fierce heat pummeling through her. His firm grip bit into her hips as he anchored her to the bed and controlled the intensity of their rhythm.

"Slow and sweet this time."

Acceding to his dominance, she gripped the smooth, hard muscles of his ass cheeks, felt them ripple and tighten as he moved inside her. "You have spoiled me. When you are away, your absence pains me. I need to come. Please, Noah."

He nipped at her lips. "It causes me pain also." He reached down and circled her engorged clit. "I shall always strive to obey your command. Come for me, precious," he commanded, claiming her lips.

She gasped as gentle ripples of orgasm curled through her body and as his grip lessened, she arched toward him. "Noah," she groaned against his lips.

"Not enough. Give me more," he demanded, as again he circled and stroked her stiff bud, and thrust deep inside her.

Another undulating wave coursed through her body. Suddenly, it seemed as though he filled every crevice inside her, his cock a huge presence, pressing and widening her even as she rose and was consumed by the ecstasy of his possession.

He called again and again for more, continuing to thrust in and out, driving her mindless, until each time he asked, she gave him what he wanted without thought, one peak melding into the next.

At last the pleasure was too much. Dark spirals wove around, through, and at last consumed her, and she fell into an oblivion of pulsing feeling beyond all worlds. One that only her mate could provide her.

* * * * *

Leora awoke as the first crimson rays of the sun pierced the window. She stretched, feeling refreshed and content. The gnawing hunger that had been ever present during Noah's absence now lay dormant.

A calmness had settled over her that she had not felt since the day he left. She could feel his warm, anchoring strength against her naked back as he curled around her, as protective in sleep as when he was awake, his arms wrapped around her.

She turned to face him and nuzzled at the warm curve of his neck. His breathing altered and she could not halt the satisfied smile that rose to her lips, knowing he had awakened beneath her touch. His hand swept down across the curve of her hip and drew her against him, crushing her breasts to his chest.

The desire to taste him rose and she swiped her tongue over his pectorals, then sank her fangs through firm flesh and sinewy muscle, drawing a rush of tangy fire from his body. She felt him tighten against her, a groan vibrating through him, and his rigid shaft pressed firmly against her mound. Slowly she pulled her fangs free, licked her lips, then swirled her tongue over the piercings she had left behind.

It was hard to believe after the hours of leisurely loving the night before and her consumption of his lifeblood, he was still eager for her, or that she remained aroused and slippery enough to take him again. The need for his blood lay quieter now, satiated from the night before and her sip this morning. Vibrant energy flowed through her. He never denied her but always allowed, no, demanded, she drink her fill.

Reaching up, she traced the small crescent scars on his heavy chest, then again bent her head to swirl her tongue over the ever-present reminders of her possession of her mate. One of her legs rose to nestle between his hard, muscled thighs.

His strong fingers trailed down along her calf, to the arch of her foot, then moved to lift her leg and drape it across his hip, opening her more fully to receive him. "Take me inside you." His voice was full of the drowsy roughness of morning mingled with passion. She reached down and encircled his velvet hard length, positioning him at her wet, engorged

entrance. He thrust his hips and entered her with ease, sinking deep, then began to move with a slow, rhythmic thrust.

"Mmm," he murmured, nuzzling her shoulder. "I have missed your good mornings."

Leora shifted against him, meeting his cadence, his heat pulsing through her.

"You will like him," he said, not missing a beat.

"Will I?" she answered breathlessly, knowing whom he spoke of, but finding it hard to concentrate on anything other than his thick, steady, in-and-out rhythm.

"He will make a good mate for her." His beats changed as he ground his now slick cock against her sensitive, erect clit.

"You are certain?" she gasped.

"Yes." He thrust deep, and she growled as her orgasm swelled over her, and she pressed closer to him, her claws digging into his back, yet it never seemed she could get close enough.

She heard his hiss of indrawn breath, yet he waited, buried deep inside her, until she came back to him, then retreated and thrust once more, bathing her womb with his pulsing seed. She lay quietly in his arms for long moments enjoying the luxury of having him with her, inside her. She was loath to let the moment go.

He slowly withdrew his softening cock from her glistening folds, and she moaned in protest, at the same time releasing her claws carefully from his back. "I know, beloved. I would like nothing more than to stay here with you all day."

"But you are going to make me attend to my other responsibilities?" she teased him.

"I believe it probably would be wise. Did you hear of any trouble while I was gone?"

Leora reluctantly rolled away from him and rose from the bed. Walking across the room, she snatched a cloth from beside a basin; she then poured some water from a pitcher and dipped the cloth. "Yes, I received word that two of the other Houses were attacked. Several injuries, but no fatalities."

To have had one mate was a gift; when he had died she had never thought to find another, but she had been doubly blessed with a Secondary such as Noah. She looked at him, never tired of watching him, having him at her side. Wringing the cloth free of excess water, she returned to him and swept the wet rag across the puncture wounds on his back. When she had finished, she returned to the wash table and dropped the now crimson-stained cloth back into the basin.

Like a sleek tiger rising from a nap, Noah rose from the bed, stretched, and donned a robe. The heat in her belly soared once more. He turned to meet her gaze. "Whoever it is seeks to find a weakness. We were attacked on our return."

The flame of desire stuttered at his words and her contented lethargy dissolved. The threads of worry began to wrap around her once again. "What? You did not mention anything last night. Was anyone hurt? Do you know who was behind it? How many were

there? Were you able to question any of them?" She stalked across the room and grabbed her robe, quickly putting it on and tying the sash, then turned to confront him.

He raised a hand. "Hold, Mistress. All in good time."

She stalked back and forth. "This has to end. Eventually, they will succeed with whatever their aim is unless we find out who is behind this and what they want. These attacks are taking a toll. Is there a traitor in my household?"

"I have thought there must be. Whoever it is, they are well-versed on our activities. We must maintain vigilance, particularly now, as the Blood Rite draws near. There must be no interference."

"Their targets seem to be the unbound females. They cannot possibly think that by killing them it will gain them control of the Houses, can they? We are stronger than that. There are several trade agreements that will soon expire. Do you think someone is trying to gain an advantage by use of force? Possibly kidnap our young females to hold as bargaining chips in the upcoming renegotiations?"

Noah turned toward the bathing chamber. "We need to find out who; then we can better determine why. Come. More of this discussion later. I will be meeting with one of the men I sent out yesterday and we may possibly learn more then. For now -- I have other pressing duties to attend to first."

"You think this wise, Sec Noah?" She turned and followed him into the adjoining room.

"To attend your bath is one of my duties as well as one of my greatest pleasures, Mistress. Would you deny me the opportunity to see to my responsibilities?"

Heaving a sigh, she dropped her robe and sauntered past him to step into the warm pool. "It would certainly be unwise for you to shirk your duties. I believe you would require disciplining if you were to fail in your responsibility."

"Quite right, Mistress," he said as he dropped his robe beside hers and joined her in the water. "Possibly I do require discipline. What punishment do you think I deserve?" he murmured against her shoulder, just before he nipped at her neck, then placed a soothing kiss over the spot. He wound an arm around her waist and drew her back into the cradle of his hard thighs and again, she felt his stiff shaft against the small of her back. She smiled with satisfaction.

She pretended to consider. Having him attend her bath was always especially ... invigorating. "Hmm. Let us see how well you perform your duties here, and I will consider the proper form of punishment later."

"As you wish, Mistress." She could hear the lazy amusement in his voice as he leaned over to pick up a sponge from the ledge.

"On your knees," he whispered against her shoulder as he whisked the sponge along her arms. She pulled away, and he pushed her forward, toward the edge of the pool. Reaching out he placed each of her hands on the edge.

“Do not move,” he commanded as he arched her back and ran the soapy sponge along the curve of her spine and over the rounded cheeks of her ass, then down the sensitive length of her thighs. She shivered at the contact.

“Noah,” she breathed, an ache of need in her voice that even she could hear.

“Yes, my love,” he murmured, with no break in his rhythm. “I want you clean and ready to face the day.” She trembled beneath his ministrations as the devilish sponge traced over and around her sensitive breasts, down across her belly, and between the juncture of her thighs.

Suddenly, the sponge was gone and it was his hard, demanding fingers that thrust inside her pussy. She whimpered as her desire mounted. He removed his fingers to trace her outer lips and follow a line to her smaller, tighter passage, swirling a finger around her anal opening. Leora gasped when one slick finger penetrated past the muscle ring to burrow deep inside.

Intense heat swirled through her tightly as he thrust gently, yet firmly, inside her. “Noah,” she gasped, crushing against his invasion. His other hand cupped her mound tightly as a second finger joined the first in her ass, sinking deep. She hissed when the finger of the hand cupping her pussy first stroked her lips and then pushed into her vagina, then another finger joined the first.

Oh, gods, he drove her higher, the rhythm of his fingers heating her core, pushing her toward the precipice, faster and faster, slick, demanding rhythm sending her soaring, yet he would not let her fall. Plunging deeper and more rapidly, he played her body. Her breasts swung free, skimming the water, her nipples skipping over the wet surface of the pool, sending shafts of deep, tingling awareness across her flesh.

She felt every nuance of sensation in every inch of her body, the pleasure magnified and sustained until, at last, he brushed across her clit and she exploded, falling into the vortex of her climax, screaming with each spasm he elicited from her body.

Before she could fall bonelessly into the water, his fingers slid from both her channels, and he held her as he leaned back against the side of the pool. She did not have any strength left and lay quietly, her eyes closed and her body still tingling from his attentive demands.

The sponge again stroked across her body. She turned her head and placed a kiss on his thick arm and felt the muscle jump beneath her touch. All of his strength and gentleness swirled over and around her, surrounding her.

“What would I do without you, Noah? You are everything to me, you must know that.”

The sponge swept over her breasts and down over her belly. “I know, Mistress. You have never treated me less than your equal, your mate.” His hands on her body coaxed her back to a deep lassitude. “Relax, the days ahead will be trying, requiring all your energy. Enjoy this moment of peace.”

Every bit of tension that had gripped her over the last weeks of his absence floated away, and her mind drifted in contentment.

Chapter Seven

Two days after Valyn's arrival at the manor, a servant brought him breakfast as well as a change of clothing, battle garments. There was a note on the tray from Sec Noah indicating that he should prepare himself to meet his challenge. They would leave within the hour.

He breathed a sigh of relief, glad the time was finally at hand. This was the day he had waited for to prove himself worthy of Katriel. He was well rested and prepared to confront whatever challenge would be presented. His curiosity was roused as to what his challenge would be.

Knowing his intended mate was under the same roof had been difficult for him. He swore he could smell her scent clinging to the air all around him, stroking at his skin. It was a struggle not to seek her out when she was close. So very close.

With deliberate movements, he donned the tight-fitting brown leather pants, loose tan shirt, and long leather vest, feeling their texture against his skin, absorbing their energy. He added the leather belt and pulled on the tall brown leather boots. A dagger had also been provided, as well as a shield, and scabbards for both. He hesitated to slide the blade into the scabbard fitted to the belt. Not yet. After his meditations he would see to the weapons. Instead, he turned away, his gaze settling on the other side of the room.

He went to the table near the window that looked out on the walled garden and surveyed the meal. Normally, he would fast and meditate before an impending battle -- it made his mind clearer, sharper. Looking down at the generous portions of eggs, sausage, and sweet bread, he chose to eat the bread and drink the mead, leaving the remainder untouched. Although he prepared himself for the impending confrontation, unknowing when exactly it would take place, he thought it best to eat something, but not to gorge himself from the meal set before him. At last, he pushed the tray away, stood up, and walked through the doorway into the garden.

It was within this quiet sanctuary over the last couple of days that he had taken to continuing his regimen of focused exercise and meditation as had been a significant part of his routine at the temple. It also had helped to keep his mind from dwelling on the near proximity of Katriel.

His first day at the compound he had taken the time to examine and walk the garden, had become attuned to every vibrant, living tree, each fragrant flower, and expanse of ruby ground shrub, absorbing the essence of every life form that thrived within its borders. He had determined the exact center of the garden, that point of energy which drew from the four corners of this small patch of natural beauty.

This morning, the garden was covered in a dense, cloud-white mist, offering an even greater sense of solitude and isolation from the rest of the world -- a perfect environment in which to become acquainted with and merge his thoughts with the living rhythms of the earth.

No matter what task was presented to him, he would need to call on his learned skills as an Eclipsian apprentice in order to accomplish it; he would need to be attuned to the environment around him, making his communion and conversation almost second nature. Crossing his legs, he sank effortlessly to the ground.

Closing his eyes, he breathed in, pulling deeply from his abdomen, exhaling every particle of used breath, cleansing his inner body and soul while opening to the nuances of the pulsing earth. Eventually the oneness embraced him, and he felt the steady surging of the earth beneath him, heard the flow of life rushing under the surface, and felt the creaking growth of root life as it surged and burst. The pulse beat through him until his own rhythms matched those of the living earth, and he became attuned, a part of all that surrounded him.

Everything inside and around him slowed, matching cadence to cadence, the deep breathing increased the flow of oxygen to his lifeblood, and the power and balance threaded through him, anchoring deep inside. Opening his eyes, he centered his gaze on a close-budded flower and concentrated, coaxing her response.

Open your sweet heart to me.

He did not move, did not breathe, waiting for the response.

First one shy petal peeled back, then another followed, and another, until the blushing, fuchsia core opened completely to the morning light, the fragrance of its heady, potent nectar filling the air.

He did not alter his attention, but heard the buzzing presence of a male bee close by.

She awaits. The whispered words moved outward from his mind to the fluttering insect.

His gaze soon encompassed the descent of the drone as it settled into the heart of the shy flower, piercing deep into its moist, succulent core, eager to consume the nectar of the fragrant, delicate beauty.

Valyn released a deep sigh as he watched the earthy, instinctive mating within the garden. His cock tightened painfully against his britches. He could envision Katriel open and waiting for him, her succulent pink center welcoming him. Pain coursed through his body, and he tore his gaze away from the flower, breathing deeply in an effort to control his lust-filled desire.

After long minutes that seemed more like hours, he attained the oneness he sought, of earth, inner power, and light. In one fluid motion, he rose to his feet, turned away from the garden, and re-entered the bedroom.

Keeping his thoughts centered, he walked toward the bed, picked up the gloves, and sheathed his hands inside, feeling the slight, protective weight of the material expand to encompass him easily. He stretched and curled his fingers, noting how well the soft leather gloved his skin.

As he fitted the scabbard across his shoulders, he looked up as his door opened and a servant entered carrying a long sword. He held it out to Valyn.

“For you, sir, with Sec Noah’s compliments.”

Valyn studied the weapon presented before picking it up. It looked to be a finely made sword, with a sturdy leather-wrapped grip; the double edge and tip were well honed. He reached out to grip the hilt with both hands, and lifted it carefully, testing its weight, then turned from the servant and lunged, driving downward with the blade, testing the balance and ease of movement. Lifting it, he then thrust forward. It felt neither too heavy nor too light, and he inserted it into the scabbard at his back and turned back to the servant.

“Please thank Sec Noah for his courtesy.” The servant bowed and departed.

Although the note had said they would be leaving within the hour, Valyn was not sure what to expect next, or how long it would be before he would actually be summoned. His gaze swerved back to the door as it again opened and Sec Noah strode through it into his room. His hard, alert eyes studied Valyn carefully, then he nodded without smiling. “You are ready.”

Valyn met his examination steadily, eye to eye. “What is the challenge?”

“You have been offered the opportunity to prove your courage with a dragon hunt. It will also serve several other purposes.” Noah pivoted and headed back to the door. “Come. I will explain on the way.”

A dragon hunt; Valyn had never hunted dragon before, but he was not altogether surprised as he had expected the challenge would not be an easy one. He turned back to the bed, picked up the dagger and sheathed it at his waist. Then he turned away and walked out of the room.

“What reasons?” he asked as they strode down the hall away from his room toward the entrance hall.

"If you succeed, it will prove your worthiness to be Katriel's Alpha and provide the material for your dragon armor and shield; the dragon's teeth will be used in the bonding ceremony. This dragon's blood will not be used to replenish our supplies"

"How often is replenishment of dragon's blood required?"

"Scheduled hunts take place at regular intervals. Replenishment usually occurs about once every three months. The supply is monitored carefully by the Sangorrian Supply Master for each of the estates. It is one way of making sure all Sangorrians adhere to the strict laws of Ebonnia."

"Why are they not hunted more often?" Valyn asked.

"Dragons are the lifeblood for Sangorrian children and unbound females and males. Their extinction would mean the extinction of all Sangorrians -- or worse, a return to ancient blood practices. The survival of the dragon is linked to the survival of the native species. Much is like that on Ebonnia -- all are linked in some way."

They stepped out into the heat of the morning sun. The yard was filled with mounted guards, and Noah's bronkitor waited, pawing impatiently at the ground, as well as a fine speckled gray stallion for Valyn. He also noted there were two wagons loaded with supplies, and two more that bore a number of male and female servants.

Once mounted, they turned and headed out the gate at a brisk trot. "I do not expect this to take longer than three days at the most," Noah said.

"Three days? Is the village some distance?"

"Mt. Triton is about a day's ride, at the foot of the Arcadian Mountains near the boundary we share with the Drudian Province. The people of Mt. Triton tend the aurora vine fields in that district.

"Leah's guard and I accompany you for safety and to see to the needs of the inhabitants of the village. However, you will go into the lair of the dragon alone. Several of the men who accompany us are dragon skinners and knowledgeable about the special care necessary to dismember and skin the dragon once the kill has been made. The scales of the dragon will be provided to the armorer for preparation of your dragon armor. The more pliable ones will be used for the armor, the larger, tougher ones will be fashioned into your shield. Two of the dragon's teeth will be given to the Druda priestess when she arrives for the Blood Rite ceremony."

Valyn turned to look at him. "How are the dragon's teeth used?"

"When the time comes, you will know."

Valyn nodded, wondering exactly what he would be facing. He had read about the battles with dragons, knew they had two vulnerable spots, one at the throat and the other the breast directly over the heart. He had studied the diagrams of the dragons which indicated the exact location he must strike. It would be up to him to get close enough to

drive his sword home, and he would most likely get only one chance at it. His future with Katriel depended on his success. His life depended on it as well.

"This is not one of the regularly scheduled hunts," Noah continued, once they had passed through the outer gates of Leah. Valyn looked at him questioningly.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you heard of the Vawndra species perhaps? They exist only on Ebonnia."

"No."

"The Vawndra are more a parasite to our world than anything else, savage albino dragons that hunt Ebonnians without mercy. You know that unmated Sangorrians drink the blood of dragons for necessary sustenance, but the blood of Vawndras is poisonous to all Sangorrians. It will not kill them, but it causes reactions that are terrible to witness and, in many cases, cannot be undone. It acts more as an addictive drug, not only on Sangorrians, but to all other species as well."

Valyn shifted on the back of his horse. "How does one tell the difference? What happens if it is ingested by mistake?"

"Vawndra blood is very different from regular dragon's blood -- it is blue-black in color. There is some parasite contained in the blood that magnifies the savage hunting tendencies and enhances the need for human blood in Sangorrians. It has also been found that if other species should ingest it, it has an intense, almost hypnotic effect, similar to the more dangerous pleasure drugs that one can obtain at the Tauduet Oasis. And it is dangerously addictive."

"Yet this species of dragon still exists? Why have they not been exterminated completely?"

Noah shook his head and snorted. "We had thought they were exterminated. But every once in a while one apparently makes its way from whatever hiding place they have deep in the recesses of the earth. Finding them is not that easy. Under cover of night, they have the ability to turn their scales black, like a chameleon of sorts, allowing them to blend into the night, so they are hard to detect until they are directly upon their victims.

"By day they usually stay to ground. We have been unable to locate any lair in the mountains, but continue to search in hopes of one day finding wherever it is they hide and breed. Somehow they easily elude even the skilled dragon hunters. Those who run the underworld blood markets in Onyx City pay handsomely for the blood of Vawndras. But it is illegal to harvest or sell Vawndra blood on Ebonnia."

Noah turned his bronkitor toward the right fork in the road and Valyn followed his lead.

"The one we hunt has come down to the valley?"

"For some reason, yes. We received word late last evening. This particular Vawndra has attacked Mt. Triton and practically decimated its inhabitants. His weaknesses are the same as

other dragon species, but you will need to be very watchful. Unlike many of the dragons on Ebonnia, who live peacefully for the most part, it will not hesitate to tear you apart slowly and thrives on the blood of its prey. It is a savage, vicious beast that likes to toy with its victims and cause ultimate pain before the kill. To catch it when the sun is high in the sky and the Vawndra's energy is at its lowest may be your only advantage."

* * * * *

Katriel stood at the window of her mother's office and watched the detachment leave the courtyard. Her mother said her goodbyes to Sec Noah earlier that morning. Leora always refused to watch him ride away and never went out to see him off. At least this time, according to what Katriel had overheard, they would be away for only three days at most, making it easier for her mother to bear Sec Noah's absence. Everyone knew how difficult the separations were for the Mistress and her Sec.

She was not close enough to get a good look at her intended Alpha, who she knew rode next to Sec Noah, but the red sun glinted on his straight, proud figure, bathing him in a red aura, as he rode through the gate.

When the bonding was complete, one of the things that would change would be her eyesight. The ingestion of his blood, combining his essence with her own, would enhance her ability to see things at a distance with perfect clarity, as well as providing her with night vision.

She turned away from the window to watch her mother, who was seated at her desk. "Do you think he will be successful mother?"

Leora looked up at her, her expression noncommittal. "Noah believes he is quite capable."

Katriel walked around the desk and sat in a chair across from her mother. "Then why will you not tell me anything about him? You will not even reveal his name."

"You are too impatient. It will not be for much longer." She leaned back in her chair. "There are probably a few things I should talk with you about, though."

"Bad things? Is something wrong with him?"

Leora smiled. "No, dear, nothing that I know of." She hesitated, and Katriel saw her bite her lip as though something concerned her.

"Then what is it?"

"Intimate things. My mother never shared this information with me, and I did not understand what was happening. I was afraid I would hurt your father and I was horrified. I believe the time has come for me to share the information with you."

Katriel looked at her mother, both embarrassed and shocked. "What do you mean? Will I do something that will hurt my Alpha?" She could not believe she would do anything like that and inwardly shuddered at the thought.

"No, that is my point. I want to explain it to you, so you understand that you will not hurt him. It concerns your claws."

Katriel looked down at her hands. Beneath her nails were the sharp, ebony second nails that could extend and curve into lethal weapons, a form of self-protection nature provided to Sangorrians. They extended when she was angry or fearful. Was there more to know? "What about them?"

There were times when she felt the protectiveness exhibited by the heads of the Houses was suffocating. It was bad enough that they were weak because of the ingestion of dragon's blood rather than human blood, but knowledge was another thing her mother refused to share. It was no wonder she snuck out on rare occasions just to be free of the cloying demands and the need to discover things for herself. Sometimes her mother tried to protect her too fiercely. "They do not extend only when there is danger. They also release at moments of --" Her voice faltered and faded.

"Yes?"

She saw her mother take a deep breath. "At moments of great passion. It is instinct, ingrained from our beginnings." She hastened to continue. "They will release to grip your mate to you, nature's way of ensuring the bond. It will not actually hurt him. In fact, it will trigger endorphins in him that will enhance his pleasure."

"I will claw him?" Katriel whispered. It seemed barbaric that she could do such a thing. A vision from that long ago night when her claws had sunk into the flesh of a man came forcefully to the forefront of her mind, and she grew nauseous at the thought of doing the same to someone whom she cared about -- or was supposed to care about.

"It is not like that," her mother rushed on, concern in her eyes. "I only mention it because I do not want you to fear it. Simply be sure to take care when you retract your claws. Do it carefully so as not to tear his skin and you will both be fine. Your sire ended up with scars because I did not understand."

"Mother, I have read of the mating and how it is accomplished, but I have never heard of this particular predisposition of the act," she gasped.

Her mother offered a very mysterious kind of smile. "Not everything that gives pleasure is contained in the instruction books, daughter. You have some very pleasant surprises awaiting discovery if your mate is so disposed."

She cringed from thinking about the bonding ceremony soon to take place. If only she could forget the man that consumed her memories, her every dream, maybe then she could approach the intimacy of bonding with a chosen mate who was a stranger to her with more enthusiasm. She was also angry because here was yet another example of information withheld from her. How much more was there that she did not know?

"Why is it not in the instruction books, Mother? It seems to me it would be a rather important piece of information. Why is it you share information like a miser with his coin -- as sparingly as possible?"

"I am telling you now. That should be enough." There was that tone in her voice, one not to be argued with.

Katriel rose from her chair to again stare out the window. The tension inside her tightened like a noose ready to strangle her. Why did she not just tell her mother she did not want this bonding to occur? There was another she wanted, another she must have. She exhaled and her shoulders slumped forward in defeat.

She did not even know his name, or how to find him. Besides that, it had been seven years ago, on another world, almost in another lifetime.

She had put her mother off for far longer than was usual for a mating to occur. It was not that she was not eager to come into her full powers, but it was the price that would be exacted she fought against paying. Once that freedom was gone, there could be no turning back.

Would things have been different if she had never met the golden stranger on Illumata? She would never know, nor did she think she would have wanted to miss those stolen moments with him. He had shown her passion and caring and strength. But she also knew that she would measure any mate against the memory clutched close to her heart.

Would this man who had gone on the dragon quest to claim that right be a man whom she could love and respect? In a few short days she would know the answer.

If he gets back safely, Katriel amended silently. Then her thoughts returned to her mother's words, and she began to wonder what else was not in the instruction books.

Chapter Eight

Noah's gaze surveyed the decimated village that had once been a thriving community. Spirals of dark gray smoke rose into the sky all around them, and the acrid odor of charred wood and burned human flesh saturated the air. Ragged men and women moved slowly through the streets, their gazes fixed and staring as though inwardly replaying the scenes from the horror that had been visited upon their village.

He dismounted and indicated for Valyn to accompany him. One of the older village boys, clothes torn and dirty, ran forward to accept the reins.

"Come with me," Noah said to Valyn. Two warriors also dismounted, prepared to accompany them.

A walk through what remained of the village was the only way to determine the greatest need for the supplies and manpower he had brought with him. Leora would be devastated when he returned to report the condition of Mt. Cowden to her.

Searching for an official of the village, he finally spotted the mayor, and strode toward him. The man turned to greet him as he saw them approach and bowed his head.

"Sec Noah."

"Tomas. I am sorry for your loss." He waved toward the wagons in the distance. "We have brought supplies and healers, but will send more as soon as we know what are your most urgent needs."

Tomas shook his head, eyes bleak, face drawn. "So much destruction, my lord. It is difficult to know where to begin. So many people lost."

"Where are your wounded? We will dispatch the healers to them first. The others who came with us will assist in removal of the debris and help to construct temporary housing."

Tomas pointed to the remains of a stable on the right. "It is the only building large enough that can shield them from the weather. It is not much, but it is all that we have."

"Find the healers that arrived with us," Noah instructed one of the guards accompanying them, "and have someone escort them to assist with the injured." His gaze rose and he again studied the village streets. "It looks like most of the homes have been destroyed. Where are people sleeping?"

"We have tried to gather as many blankets and bedding as we could, then cleared and roped off an area at the eastern end of the town." He turned his head to look up toward the mountains that rose silently at the back of the village. "What men we have left take turns guarding the village at night, in case ..." Tomas did not finish the thought. He did not need to.

Turning his gaze from the mountain vista, he faced Noah. "It had been such a long time since anyone had heard word of a sighting of any dragons, let alone a Vawndra, we just never expected ..." He shook his head and looked at the ground, as if unable to find words to express his sorrow. "We became lax in our vigilance."

Noah reached out and laid a hand on the man's shoulder, wishing he could take some of the weight of the pain from his shoulders, yet knowing there was little he could do to ease him. How did one begin to assuage the terror and loss these people had suffered?

"Mistress Leora will do everything she can to help you and your people through this time of deep sorrow. Whatever your needs, send word to Leah and it shall be provided."

Leora would have come herself if he had not urged her to reconsider. It was not her way to hide behind the walls of her domain in times of crisis, but with the thwarted attack on Katriel, then the attack on Valyn, Noah had not felt it was a time for her to put her own life in danger, nor leave the compound without her leadership. It was his job as her Secondary to see to her protection. The possible cost of a visit to the devastated village at this time was too great ... and there were other needs to consider as well.

The morning after his return to Leah, he and Leora had met with the warrior he had sent out to check on the passage sentries who had not warned or circumvented the dangerous attack mounted at the mouth of the passage into the Aurora Valley. What the man had reported to them chilled their blood -- the sentries had all been dead, savagely murdered -- and completely drained of their lifeblood.

He remembered the look of horror on Leora's face that she had been unable to mask from him. That news could only mean one thing -- there was a rogue Sangorrian involved in some way, or a similar species, who was behind the brutal killings. Was he also behind the attempt to abduct Katriel? Until they discovered the truth as to whether the two incidents were connected, it was not safe for either Leora or Katriel to venture beyond the boundaries of the walled compound at the moment.

Leora had argued heatedly with him, claiming that she could take care of herself -- she was a Blood Huntress, and demanding to accompany him to Mt. Triton. He had needed to remind her of her duty to Katriel. Should anything happen to the Mistress of the House, it would leave her heir in a dangerously unprotected, vulnerable position. Katriel was not yet

bonded, did not have her full powers or the knowledge she needed to ascend to the position of Mistress should something happen to Leora. Because the attacks seemed to be centered on Katriel and Valyn, Leora should remain in the compound, close to Katriel, to maintain her vigilance over her safety.

Grudgingly, Leora had finally agreed, but only after Noah had consented to taking extra guards to secure his and Valyn's safety. Yes, the challenge must be met to prove Valyn's worthiness, particularly to anyone who would seek to thwart his Alpha position with Katriel, but there was no need to make themselves more vulnerable than necessary. Noah would see to the needs of the village and report back to her.

Noah turned his attention back to Valyn. "Follow me."

As they walked through the streets, he made note of the more urgent requirements. When they arrived at the end, near the outer perimeter of the village, he looked out over what had once been fertile fields of aurora vine, now blackened, curls of smoke still rising into the skies, the smell of charred land assaulting his nostrils. He looked to the left and noted the storage barns and sorting houses had also been leveled to the ground.

"Do you see what the Vawndra has wrought here? It must be found and destroyed." He pivoted around and strode back through the village, searching for Tomas once more.

He finally located him near the shell of the general store. "Do you know where the Vawndra has gone to ground?"

The mayor nodded. "Yes, at least we think we know where it is." He pointed to the mountains beyond the village, where faint threads of smoke swirled into the sky. "It is hiding in a cave up there."

"Is there someone you can spare who can act as guide?"

Tomas nodded. "I will find someone to lead you there."

Noah glanced at Valyn. "You will be accompanied by two warriors to meet your challenge. The rest of us will remain here to assist where we can, and to prepare a defense against another assault by the dragon -- in case you fail in your task." He did not voice the thought that there was every chance that Valyn could be killed by the beast. Few were skilled enough to defeat such a bloodthirsty monster. He hoped the young man was up to the challenge.

Valyn's gaze met his, firm and steady, and Noah felt another glimmer of respect surge inside him for this former Eclipsian apprentice. He certainly had the makings of a strong protector for Katriel -- if he survived. If anyone would be successful in destroying the Vawndra, he felt this man had the skills and determination to do so.

"Watch his eyes."

"His eyes?"

"The eyes of the Vawndra are red. Just before they attack, their eyes film over to white. Be watchful for the change, it may save your life."

Valyn nodded. "I understand."

Noah squinted up at the sky. They had left Leah just before dawn had broken, and now it was near mid-day, a time when the dragon should be asleep and at his weakest. "Now is the time you will have the best advantage -- make it count."

He saluted Noah, with a hand to his heart. "Soon, Sec Noah."

Noah returned the salute and nodded. "Stay on your guard and aim for the soft spot. Do it quickly, make the cut deep and clean, before he has a chance to gain advantage."

He watched Valyn as he mounted his stallion and turned to ascend the path up the mountain, following a young man from the village, and accompanied by the warriors. Noah whispered a prayer to Druda for Valyn's safety and success as the men disappeared from view. There was little else he could do now but wait for Valyn's return, and hope he succeeded in the dangerous challenge set before him.

He called to one of the Leah servants for paper and pen. He again walked the village, noting the supplies, clothing, and food that would be needed to help rebuild. On and on he went. This was a village that would need to be rebuilt from the ground up. And a people who would need nurturing and care to surmount the terrible losses they had suffered.

Upon his return he would suggest to Leora that she hire a dragon slayer to scour the mountains to be certain there were no others of this poisonous nature lurking nearby.

* * * * *

Valyn stared up at the yawning chasm of the cave entrance, dismounted, and handed the reins to one of the warriors.

"Wait here until I return." He swiftly walked up a small incline toward the entrance of the dark cavern, where the villager had indicated the dragon lurked.

He surveyed the ground, then picked up a small length of log. Pulling out a small packet containing the oil of flintbrush and small sticks of flintlight from his pocket, he carefully removed its contents to pour some of the oil over the end of the log, then lit it with a small stick of flintlight. Replacing his packet back into his pocket, Valyn cautiously made his way inside the cavern.

Once past the entrance, he waited and listened in the echoing silence, adjusting his eyesight to the dense, black interior. He emptied all thoughts from his mind of anything but his intended adversary, knowing that to become even the slightest bit distracted would mean his death.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, then released the breath slowly, narrowing his focus, becoming one with his surroundings. In his mind, everything beyond this cave was at rest, gone from his thoughts, his senses becoming more acute, attuned to every nuance of the cave. He heard the echo of water dripping in slow, steady beats, the faint squeak of small,

scuttling rodents, the flapping of wings above him -- all indications of the creatures that thrived in the dank, murky depths awaiting him.

The scent of moldy air assaulted him, tinged with the dense, smoky echo of a banked fire. Opening his eyes, the curtain of danger shrouded him as he prepared to step even deeper into its embrace, every nerve in his body tingling in awareness. He heard the rushing of underground water, lifted the torch as he descended deeper into the tunnel, where it spilled into a larger chamber. He surveyed the area, then moved toward another opening, traveling past blackened, craggy walls, inward toward the bowels of the earth, finally coming upon a narrow bridge of rock, flanked by channels of rushing water. His instincts told him to follow the water and it would lead him to his prey.

He stopped for a moment to listen, and heard the deep, rhythmic breathing of a gigantic animal. The heavy sound reminded Valyn of a steam-powered engine often found in the ancient grinding houses on Illumata. A loud grunt followed by a long, drawn out hiss and the pungent aroma of sulfur assailed him. The sound echoed throughout the recesses of the cavern, surrounding him with the presence of the predator. Carefully, he stepped forward, and with light movements passed into another chamber, and stopped, staring at the daunting scene before him.

Chapter Nine

As Katriel walked back into her apartments and firmly shut the door behind her, it was as though the manor and everyone in it suffocated her, and she found it difficult to breathe. Her thoughts assaulted her. She had to get out of this room, the house, away from her mother -- everything that weighed on her to accept without question her duty to her people, to Leah, and the man, who at this moment fought for the right to possess her.

For a long time she thought about her situation, until finally the sky darkened into twilight. Had he been successful in his quest this day?

She sank to a chair near the window and gazed out at the rising twin moons, unseeing. Her mind raced, thoughts tumbling over themselves, attempting to come to grips, to accept what she must do. It seemed she sat there for a very long time, unmoving as the moons rose high in the sky and the dense night enshrouded the land with its solitude.

Jumping up, she rushed over to the table next to her bed, yanked open the drawer, and pulled out her journal, flipping to the back. Reverently, she lifted the small ragged piece of folded cloth, and raising it to her face, she inhaled. A hint of his scent still lingered. She gripped the cloth tightly within her balled fist as panic tore at her.

She had to get out, to think, to be alone with her thoughts. If word was received of her Alpha's success it would mean that as soon as he returned her fate would be set. She had to come to terms with that knowledge, set her mind to it.

Turning toward her closet, she pulled out her cloak and draped it around her shoulders, stuffed the bit of cloth into her pocket and headed toward her bathing room. It was a way out she had used on more than one occasion.

She passed the trickling water toward a window at the far side of the room. Carefully, she opened it. This particular window was adjacent to the balcony of the next room -- a vacant room. As she had done many times over the years, she pushed open the window, then

lifted her skirts, reached up and climbed through it, clinging to the sill as she angled around, stepped over, and landed on the next balcony.

Walking over to the balcony door, she concentrated on the lock. It was one of the few gifts, mild though it was that she discovered she had, even without the powerful blood of a mate. All these years something had kept her from revealing this particular ability to anyone. She guessed it was something like her mother only providing her certain information when she thought she needed to know it. That might not be a fair thought, but it seemed to allow her some small bit of control over her own life.

She had discovered it quite by accident one night when she was just in this particular situation and wanted badly to bypass the guards and find some peace away from the confines of the manor.

Her concentration centered on the lock, coaxing it in her mind to relax and open. She heard a click and smiled. Reaching out, she opened the door and slipped inside the dark room. Being able to open doors with her mind was not a huge talent, but it did offer advantages.

It was odd what powers she had and did not have, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to them, she thought, as she felt along the wall to find her way to the doorway leading into the next room, which was the classroom used for general schooling. From there she would be able to access the back stairway leading down to the hallway at the rear of the kitchen, and then outside, completely bypassing her personal guard. They would never know she had even left the manor. Not since that time on Illumata had she ever thought of attempting to leave the compound itself, understanding dangers that could lurk beyond its safe boundaries. Illumata had made clear the dangers of other species to the Sangorria. But here within the confines of the compound, to take a moment without the constant shadow of a guard, she still felt safe, yet had the sense of some small freedom, that tiny bit of rebellion against the demands of her life, without actually putting herself at risk. It was not like she planned to attempt to breach the compound boundaries, after all, and run off into the night. There were still guards all around her, protecting everyone within the walls.

Silently, she hurried through the rooms and down the steps, finally reaching the small herb garden at the back of the kitchen. Quietly, she moved across to the main garden that extended between the house proper and the compound's Drudian temple, and sprinted behind the farrier's work shelter, circling around to the back door of the stable.

Out of breath, she paused for a moment, listening. All was quiet; there was no sound of alarm. Carefully, she opened the stable door and stepped into the dark interior. She heard the rustling of the horses, the soft coo of the night doves, and a fluttering of wings. Making her way to one of the empty stalls, she sat on a bale of sweet hay out of sight of the main part of the stable and pulled her legs beneath her, leaning back against the wall. The earthy smell of animals and harvest lingered in her nostrils as she closed her eyes, dropping her head back.

Breathing slowly and steadily, she felt the tension ease from her body, knowing that for this one moment she was without the constraints of her position weighing her down. She reached inside the pocket of her cloak and fisted the smooth, well-worn cloth -- her only link to the past. She knew she had to let go, had to release her memories and move on with her life. The memory of that night was just so strong. She still felt that searing kiss, the strength of his body against hers.

But she had never learned his name, and had no way of finding him. It was the vow that he would one day come for her, which he had made just before he disappeared, that kept niggling at the back of her mind. Every day she would awaken, expecting him to appear out of nowhere, to claim her. Every stranger who came to the gate had her heart racing with hope.

She had been so naive, so very young. His promise had been made in the magic of the night. She was older now, should be wiser; she should know that magic woven in the fabric of dreams such as that were not substantial and one could not build a life on the strength of it. She had to let it go in order to embrace the reality of her future.

Her hand clutched around the cloth, afraid to let go, knowing the minute she did the dream would disappear. How did she release it without ripping out her heart? How could she ever heal the wound it would leave open and bleeding?

She stilled as she heard a sound, then the murmur of deep male voices.

"Are you certain no one will come in here?" a masculine voice asked.

Slowly, Katriel leaned forward to peer between the slats of the stall. There were two Jotar warriors, one carrying a lantern that allowed her to see their shadowed features, but theirs were faces she had never seen before. Were they new to the compound? Not that she knew all the guards personally, but the one had distinctive red hair, not a common color among the warriors.

She could not allow them to discover her here, but there was no way out of the stall except through the exposed area they now stood in.

"You worry too much," the darker-haired one said.

The redhead hung the lantern on a nail over his head. "And you do not worry enough, Kon." Before his hand had hardly moved from the lantern, the dark one grabbed the redhead's arm and pushed him back against the beam. "We have not been alone since we left Jotar. The exercise today -- watching you fight steamed my blood. We should have gone on the hunt with the others, it might have helped." As Katriel watched, he leaned forward and ground his mouth against the redhead's lips.

The men were evenly matched in height and had thick, well-built frames over hard, sinewy muscle, which glimmered deep bronze beneath the flickering illumination of the lantern.

The redhead pulled at the hips of the other warrior, grinding his groin against him. She heard a deep growl erupt from one of them, but could not be sure which one had uttered it. She should make them aware of her presence. But something made her hesitate. Instead, she moved closer to the slats, peering through them, remaining quiet, as she watched.

The breath caught in her chest when the one called Kon ripped at the shirt of the redhead, tearing it from his body. He dropped his head to an exposed taut nipple as his hands moved to the britches the redheaded warrior wore.

The redhead arched back against the post, seeming to offer himself up, his hands pulling at Kon. "The scrimmage was a good one, my opponent well matched this afternoon." His hands tore at the other man's clothing even as the leggings were ripped from him savagely. "Did you want him, mate? Like this? Curse you; my cock is hot and burning to claim you."

Katriel's eyes widened at the first view of their cocks as their clothing fell away. The men were huge, and their bodies were pure rippling muscle, gleaming in the shadows.

Something inside her began to tighten and sizzle, and a wetness began to seep from between her thighs. They were strangers to her, yet she still felt their wild energy fill the air around her. She felt a passionate swelling of her intimate parts as she witnessed the primal scene being played out before her.

She had heard of the mating habits practiced on Jotar, but had certainly never witnessed it.

The redhead pushed the other away forcefully, and Katriel saw the vivid teeth marks surrounding his nipple, a glimmer of crimson blood circling it. She also saw that around his other nipple was a tattoo of some sort.

Kon fell back on the floor, then levered himself up on his hands, legs splayed, cock hard and jutting stiffly. Katriel could see the sparkle of moisture at the huge tip. He grinned up, and to Katriel, it almost seemed to be a challenge.

The primal heat surged through the room, seeming to have a life of its own. He grinned up at the redhead. "Want it, mate? Or do you want to be the one doing the fucking tonight?"

Another growl erupted, and this time Katriel knew it came from the redhead. He dropped over the other warrior, pressing his body close, grinding against the one beneath him, crushing his lips to the warrior's mouth in a deeply savage kiss, his hands locking Kon's arms to the ground.

Katriel remembered what a passionate kiss tasted like and licked her own throbbing lips. Her pussy beat with a need she did not fully understand; instinctively, she pressed the heel of her hand against the fabric covering the sensitive flesh at the juncture of her thighs.

Kon surged and the men rolled over on the floor, wrestling, one grappling for supremacy over the other, battling to dominate, gripping and demanding, pushing and stroking. Long moments passed as they dueled on the ground, the only sounds coming from

them the grunts and growls of battle. Was this Jotarian foreplay? Katriel could only wonder. It was not the foreplay of lovers as mentioned in her instructional books; that was certain. But then was life ever exactly as laid out in any manual? And had she not already learned that not everything was spelled out?

As she watched, unable to look away, Kon was forced to his hands and knees while the redhead knelt upright before him. Both their bodies were covered with bruises, long angry scratches, and teeth marks. Their chests were pumping hard.

“Suck my cock. Make it slick and ready for invasion.”

Kon leaned forward, licked his lips, and grinned up at the redheaded one. “This time, mate. Next time, be prepared.”

Suddenly there was silence, hot and thick, as the dark-haired one’s mouth swallowed the cock in front of him. Long minutes passed as the only sound in the stable was the sucking and slurping noises of the dark-haired one’s attentive mouth on his partner. Another growl erupted from the redhead as he pumped his hips, thrusting deep inside the dark one’s mouth. The one doing the sucking seemed to relish his job, and as Katriel observed he licked and tasted, his hands cupping and pulling at the heavy sac of his mate. His own cock spurted streams of liquid onto the floor beneath him, his pleasure obvious.

Katriel could only assume by the looks on both their faces and the sounds they were making that there was equal enjoyment. Was this the kind of pleasure that awaited her, this basic, intimate sharing of bodies? She itched to touch their glistening bodies, to know what their muscles felt like beneath her hands, to trace her fingers over the nipples and markings on their bodies, to feel the thick, velvet-covered steel of their male sex. Her hands clenched at her sides and her breathing increased as need dug deep inside her.

Katriel realized that the men bore matching tattoos on opposite nipples -- her attention had been drawn to the fact because the dark one had raised a hand to twist at the tattooed nipple of the redhead. The redhead pulled his cock from the dark-haired one’s mouth with a sucking pop.

“Are you ready for me?” he growled. Moving behind the dark warrior, the redhead gripped the two hard muscled globes of his mate’s ass cheeks and pulled them apart.

They were kneeling just below the lantern now and Katriel could see the small puckered entrance of Kon’s anal ring. Again, her eyes widened as the tiny hole throbbed and spasmed, seemingly ready to be invaded. A trickle of liquid emanated from the tight entrance.

The redhead lifted a hand and brought it down firmly on the dark one’s ass cheek. Kon growled, but the redhead only grinned as he centered his cock at the opening. “You are ready; your ass calls for me. It tells me you want me.”

Kon pushed his ass against the waiting cock. “Then do it, curse you. I am done waiting.”

“It will be at my pleasure, not yours. You may have the say another night, but tonight, you will await and accept me as a good Jotar stud should do for his mate.”

The redhead moved slightly forward, and the plumed head of his thick tool slowly passed out of sight into the tight channel. He stopped. The Jotar were close enough that Katriel could see the ring tightly banded around his massive tool, seemingly melding them into one unit. Was the dark one expected to accept that whole thing?

The redhead reached around and enclosed his hand around the huge shaft of the dark one and Katriel heard the dark warrior groan. The redhead began to tease him with long, firm strokes. “Want more of my cock?” he asked in a deep guttural voice. His hand continued caressing the dark one’s rock-hard length. To Katriel, the cock looked ready to burst, a huge, throbbing, purple staff jutting out of a thatch of short, dark, curly hair.

The redhead sank an inch deeper. “If you want it, say so. Ask for it.”

Katriel felt more of her own juices coat her inner thighs. Was this how a mating occurred? Oh, she knew the mechanics of what took place between a male and female, had read of male matings, but to actually witness a mating, to feel the heat and passion of it, was so different, so much more, than she had anticipated.

“Fuck me, curse you, ram it in all the way,” the dark one demanded.

Suddenly, the redhead thrust his cock into the ass of the warrior, being completely consumed. The dark-haired one let out a roar, not of pain, but somehow filled with the emotions of what sounded to Katriel like triumph and acceptance.

Again, the redhead halted his movements, waited, then, as he stroked at Kon’s powerful length, he began a slow, steady rhythm of fucking him.

“Gods, yes,” Kon yelled as he pushed against the invading presence of his mate. “Harder. It must be harder. I want to feel your cock splitting me.” It was like watching two animals in rutting season, as the redhead’s movements became harsher, faster, staccato thrusts and his hand yanked and tightened on his partner’s shaft.

Katriel watched them fuck for a very long time. Droplets of sweat sheened their bodies, and dripped onto the ground and their thrusts were fast and furious, stroking, pushing, sucking in, retreating, until she saw a stiffening of muscle. There was a rush of sound, air being released into the room like a strong burst of freedom, and then she saw the strong spurting cum of Kon’s thick cream as he erupted into the hand grasping him.

The redhead’s ass muscles tightened, and he drove deeply into Kon, pumping his body against him, clamping down on his hip tightly with one hand, until he shuddered and lay still, and Katriel knew he must be orgasming as well.

Katriel closed her eyes, pressing her palm harder against her swollen slit, feeling the shimmer of an orgasm rush through her at witnessing the heat of their violent lovemaking. It shivered through her, a taboo rush of emotion swamping her senses. She inhaled a shuddering breath, trembling, and slowly opened her eyes.

The redhead had removed his softened cock from the dark one. Kon now lay on his back, chest heaving, the other warrior resting beside him, the palm of his hand lying just above the softened cock of his warrior mate. He stroked slowly upward and began to lightly finger Kon's right nipple.

"Do you realize that we are the only mated Jotarians on Ebonnia, here at the compound?" the redhead murmured.

"I know. It is why we have to be careful. I am not in the mood to fight for what is mine with another warrior. I have a feeling our energy will be better directed elsewhere."

"But they know. They have seen the tandem tattoos and they know."

"It is your blasted red hair. You draw their eyes -- their lust. If one of them challenges, they will not win. I hesitate to battle as the contracts we have all signed with the Sangorrians specifically state no infighting of warriors or the ones found battling will be returned to Jotar in shame. I do not think the others will risk it -- at least right now. The payment is too good to give up for the chance of a fuck with someone else's tandem mate."

The redhead nodded. "You are right. But it is best to keep our tandem bonding private. I see their eyes on you as well. It is always the way, to want what belongs to another."

Kon leaned up, cupping the head of the redhead and brought his mouth down to his. "If we did not share this time," he murmured, "we would not be fit to fight, and you know it. We have been mated too long to go without. We had no choice. To lose focus would be even worse." The redhead leaned down to heatedly claim the kiss and then pulled away and stood.

"To the baths, Kon. We must return. Our shift on the wall will come soon enough. We need to be ready."

The dark one rose to his feet and nodded. They picked up their clothing and the lantern, then headed toward the main door. They were not touching, but Katriel could sense a closeness between them in the air, some linking of minds and not just a satiation of lust. Unlike when they first had entered the stable, when their bodies had been tight and battle ready, now they seemed less tense, calmer, softer in some way, yet they still exhibited the look of deadly warriors.

Katriel again leaned back against the wall thinking about what she had just witnessed. The mating had been beautiful, primitive, almost a violent bonding, yet both the warriors' needs seemed to have been met. And she had felt their tie, not just at the sexual level, but an understanding of minds -- one that melding their bodies seemed to enhance, making them seem of one mind.

Was that what mating would be like for her and her mate? Not just pleasure of the body but a closeness of thought, of goals, of purpose? Was there more to her own union than she could have anticipated?

Her hands clenched around the cloth. She would have had that sort of bonding with her golden stranger if things had been different. But they were not. She had to let go. She

was no longer a young girl with dreams; she was a woman who had a duty to her family, to her species. And a need she had only begun to realize, for a closeness such as she had just witnessed, with another.

She stood and looked down at her balled fist, slowly uncurling her fingers. The time had come to move on and set away her youthful dreams. She turned her hand and watched as the ragged cloth slowly fluttered to the ground. It felt as though she could feel something breaking inside her.

Straightening her shoulders, she turned away. She could still smell the intensity of the mating that had recently taken place here in the stable, and the aftershocks of her own unexpected climax rippling through her. How much more would it be when she truly experienced the physical closeness that existed between lovers? She had waited seven long years to be possessed by a dream lover. It was time to set it aside so that she might experience the real thing.

She had almost lost control, almost revealed herself to them, begging them to teach her about the nature of the intimacy between them. How close she had come. Her mother was right -- she needed to bond -- for more reasons than one.

She felt for the edges of the stall and found her way out into the night, past the thick echoes of warrior passion and into the crisp, clear air. Suddenly, it seemed that a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, and that a new maturity had settled comfortably into place. It had been foolish to try to keep herself cocooned in ethereal dreams. It was time to move on.

* * * * *

Light streamed down through a long, narrow aperture in the cave ceiling. A red veil of illumination spotlighted the mammoth outline of the great beast lying prone within the high-ceilinged, open chamber. Its horned head rested on the rocky ledge of a shallow pond and Valyn could see its eyes were closed. The beast was apparently asleep, most likely satiated by his recent round of destruction. He was sprawled out, a part of his body submerged in the large pool of water.

Although he seemed to fill the chamber with his presence, this dragon did not appear as large as some he had read about, for which he was thankful. It was possibly the length of a large barge ship and twice as tall, his long, spiky tail, rising above the surface of the water, stretched out and entwined around a thick stalagmite rising from the floor at the far end of the chamber.

Valyn anchored the burning torch into a notch in the wall, checked the dagger at his waist, the longsword at his back, and shifted the shield to his other hand. As he was about to step closer, he stopped, every muscle stiff, as another sound assailed his hearing. He cocked his head and listened. Turning, he surveyed the walls of the chamber, his gaze rising upward to scan the craggy face. His attention was drawn back to one spot about twenty or thirty feet above him where he saw a flash of movement.

His eyes widened in shock. There were people up there. Alive! The sounds he had heard were the cries of children.

He glanced back at the dragon, who still lay dormant and realized the creature must have somehow captured several of the villagers to consume as a tasty midday snack.

Valyn had to make a choice, and realized instantly that his first duty must be to the safety of the people trapped on the ledge. Somehow he needed to get to them before he challenged the dragon; he could not take a chance on the beast awakening and going immediately for the prey he had safely tucked away to consume at his leisure.

As quietly as possible, Valyn circled the pond and stopped just beneath the spot he had pinpointed the cries were coming from. He studied the wet limestone wall and noticed a narrow tunnel running upward. He hid his shield behind a small pile of rocks and began to climb. At least the outer walls of the tunnel would afford him some minor protection from being seen if the dragon should awaken.

Slowly, he made his way upward, using natural crevices and grooves to aid in his ascent. It was damp and slimy, requiring careful consideration, with every chance he would tumble to the hard rocky floor below if any hand or foot was not solidly placed.

At last he came to the top of the narrow funnel and cautiously looked around. The dragon still appeared to be sleeping, apparently undisturbed, below him. Then Valyn focused his attention to the narrow ledge and saw them. His heart clenched at the sight of the four children and two women clinging together. By the gods, how had they survived?

One of the women raised her head and saw him, her frightened gaze widening in disbelief. She reached out toward him with one hand, at the same time peering fearfully over the edge of the crevice to the dragon below.

Her head whipped around and she offered him a pleading look. "Help us," she mouthed as she clung to the others.

A narrow ledge ran between the opening he had just climbed through and the crevice on which the captives knelt. There was just enough of an indentation along the top of the ledge that he should be able to reach them.

He jumped up and made his way across the ledge. As soon as he landed onto the crevice of rock, the woman launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck tightly.

"I thought we were lost, that we would die in this place. Please help us."

He unwound her arms and pulled her away. "I will help you, but you and the others must be very brave. Tell me your name."

Her slight frame shook with fear and her lips trembled when she looked at him. "It is Maeve. We will do whatever you tell us to, sir."

He studied her and then looked to the others. A quick examination indicated they appeared to have sustained cuts and bruises, but he could not tell if any were in danger from

possible internal injuries. The second woman, her back to Valyn, clutched all four of the children protectively in front of her, anchoring them close to the wall and as far away as possible from the beast. She looked at him over her shoulder.

“Maeve, are there wounds you know of that would prevent any of you from climbing down and running?”

Maeve turned and glanced over her shoulder, meeting the eyes of the other woman, then she turned back to Valyn. “One of the children has a broken leg. The others should be able to manage well enough. What must we do?”

The second woman moved to the side and Valyn could see that a boy who appeared about five or six had one leg stretched out at an odd angle. A grimace of pain was etched on his small face.

Valyn knew he had to get them all out, none would be left behind. He turned his gaze back to the woman.

“You must all be brave and do exactly as I say. Do you understand?”

She nodded her head. “Whatever you say.”

“It will be dangerous, but it is your only chance. You must follow the ledge I came to you by and pass down through the tunnel. There are natural handholds along the way. You will go first, then each of the three children who are able will follow you.” He nodded toward the second woman. “She shall go after the children. I will help the young one who is injured. We must move quickly and quietly before the dragon awakes. Make as little sound as possible.”

Maeve straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “We will do whatever we must to survive.”

“All right. There is not a moment to lose. When you reach the bottom, do not wait for the others to follow, make your way silently to the passage. There is a torch there. Once you are all safely away, take it and get out as quickly as you can. Do not wait for me. There are men waiting at the mouth of the cave, they will assist you from there.”

Maeve walked over to the children and bent to the small boy, murmuring quietly and pointing to Valyn. She then turned and nodded to the second woman, who helped each of the children to their feet and one by one, as Valyn watched and held his breath, they traversed the narrow ledge and passed into the tunnel. With every breath, every step, he glanced at the sleeping dragon. Time seemed to stretch out as each one made their way down the wall and hurried across the open stretch below to the entrance on the other side.

When the second woman arrived at the bottom and had reached safety, only then did he turn to the young boy.

He knelt before him, saw the fear and tears in his eyes. “Are you ready for an adventure?”

The young boy nodded his head shakily. “My name is Aaron.”

“Well, Aaron, I know you must be in a lot of pain right now and are very frightened, but I am going to get you back to your family with your help, all right?”

The boy nodded and his tousled curls tumbled about his dirt-streaked face. “I-I want to g-go h-home,” he whimpered.

Valyn pushed a lock of hair back from his face. “Right, then. Here is what we are going to do.” He looked down at the young boy’s leg. “You must try not to make any sound, but I need to check your leg. Can you be brave for me?”

The boy’s eyes were wide with fear and pain as he looked up at Valyn and nodded again. Valyn squeezed Aaron’s shoulder, then proceeded to carefully feel along the short length of leg. It was swollen and discolored, but he saw no signs that bone fragments had pierced the skin.

He knew he was not going to be able to make it over the narrow ledge with the boy on his back, so he quickly scanned the area around him. There were deep crevices in the wall on the far side that he might be able to use as leverage to get them down to the ground. It was not as safe, there being no cover as they descended, but it was the quickest way to get them both down. Unfortunately, it would also bring them closer to the dragon in order to pass by to reach safety on the other side.

Yanking the scabbard from his back, he pulled the sword free and laid it beside him. He then quickly tore several pieces of cloth from his shirt, determined to immobilize the leg so that any further damage could be minimized. If only he had some of the numbing herb paste that would help to soften the pain. He hated the thought of causing this child more distress.

Swiftly, he strapped the leg to the scabbard and wiped the tears from the brave boy’s face. “Your parents should be very proud of you. Now, I want you to put your arms around my shoulders, grip the front of my tunic, and hold tight. Do not grab my neck, hold fast to my shirt.”

He picked up his sword and shoved it into the leather belt at his waist. Assured of its placement, he turned away from the boy and leaned back. “All right, Aaron, grab on tight. Be mindful of the sword.” Once the boy had his arms around Valyn’s neck and his hands fisted into his tunic, Valyn picked up another strip of his shirt, wrapped it around his waist, above his belt, and pulled Aaron’s one good leg around and anchored it to his body, by slipping it beneath the cloth strip at his waist.

Then he reached for the first handhold and levered away from the ledge. His thoughts moved in two directions as he slowly descended, keeping a tight grip on the boy and the wall, and making sure the breathing of the dragon did not alter, indicating he might be awakening. It was an agonizingly slow process. He knew each minute brought him closer and closer to the time when the dragon would arise.

As his foot touched the ground, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was short-lived as he heard a frightened whimper escape from Aaron, and a puff of hot air flowed over him. He knew exactly where it came from.

Whipping around and shooting a hasty glance across the cavern chamber he found himself eye to eye with impending death. The great albino beast was awake and curling smoke swirled around his nostrils, his burgundy eyes focused on Valyn and Aaron.

Valyn frantically surveyed the area, spotted a small crevice of rocks just large enough for a boy to crawl into, ripped the cloth free anchoring the boy's foot, pulled Aaron from his back, and thrust him inside.

"Do not move," he ordered. "Stay there until I come for you. Do you understand?" The boy nodded, pulling himself more deeply into the narrow enclosure.

As long as the boy stayed there he would be safe. Valyn whipped back around, pulled his longsword from his belt and sprinted along the wall to where he had left his shield. Grabbing it up quickly, he turned and raised it just as a blast of fiery flame burst all around him. It was a long, intense flare, and the shield was no match. As the last bit of fire receded, the shield folded like a drooping flower and melted in a puddle at his feet.

Dense, black smoke filled the air around Valyn. He dropped the hot leather that had once held the shield and vaulted around the small pool. He had to come up behind the dragon, stay on the move before the beast mounted another attack.

Very little was visible as he circuited the pond, using his senses as best he could to find his way. Smoke filled his lungs, burning deep inside. Suddenly, he was thrown into the air by the force of the long, slithering tail he had forgotten to take into account.

It drove him to the edge of the pond, but he recovered before falling in, rolled, and shoved to his feet. He had lost his sword, then had no more time to think as he grabbed onto a tail spine that slashed toward him and pulled himself up onto the dragon's tail as he turned and twisted. Slowly, he made his way, using the spines as anchors to drag himself up along the dragon's back. He needed to get to his head, to disable him somehow, if only for a short time.

The dragon craned his neck, and Valyn saw white eyes search for him. The beast bared his fangs diving for him. Searing pain lanced along Valyn's right arm as one of the small teeth dug into his flesh, through the shirt and sliced a long ragged line down his arm.

For one moment, Valyn thought he was lost as his grip on the spine loosened, but he held tight with his uninjured arm, pulling to one side of the spines and using his legs for more leverage. The dragon again tried to sight him, but Valyn was now at the apex of his neck, and the creature could not crane around far enough to see him.

He roared and spat fire, as Valyn dragged his body upward, flaying more of his skin against the razor-sharp scales, but refusing to give up. Blood dripping from his filleted arm, from the small cuts over his thighs and hands, he finally reached the head horns, only then

did he stop. Holding fast with his left hand and gripping the last spine with his legs, he reached inside his pocket with his other hand.

Pulling out the packet containing the flintoil, he poured the rest over the head of the dragon, who roared again and tossed his head. Hanging on desperately, Valyn waited till the creature's movements slowed, then carefully pulled out a flintstick, struck it against a particularly coarse scale, and dropped it onto the head of the dragon. He knew it would not last long, but it had to be enough. He jumped from the now blazing head, the dragon's screams echoing through the chamber, and plunged into the pond below.

Quickly surfacing, ignoring his pain-wracked body, he pushed for the ledge, to where he knew he had dropped his sword. He would have only one chance to defeat the monster. He knew the spot to aim for, could see it even now. The dragon thrashed, body low to the ground as his head blazed, flames shooting toward the ceiling.

Raising a quick hand to his eyes, Valyn wiped away the water, blood, and sweat, and grabbed for the sword. Centering all his energy, he pointed the blade at the vulnerable patch of skin over the dragon's heart, where he could see the steady red glow of the heartbeat against the thinner covering of skin, the most vulnerable spot on the dragon.

It was good it was so close to the surface as he did not relish the need to enter the innards of the beast to end his life more quickly, especially with the danger of this particular species' blood.

He hesitated a brief moment, visualizing in his mind the diagram he remembered of the dragon, praying he would strike true at the throbbing organ.

Taking a deep breath and centering all the strength he could muster, ignoring the agony of his wounds, he lunged forward and plunged the blade home into the unprotected white flesh. The huge reptilian eyes of the dragon rolled open, dark smoke emitted from his flared nostrils, as it dropped its blazing head and stared eye to eye for one long moment, each, predator and prey, focused on the death and hatred for the other, before the beast again raised his head and bellowed long and loud, echoing throughout the mountain, spitting sulfur-laden fire and smoke from his mouth. Snarling with pain, he bared his glittering, long, jagged fangs, and Valyn saw the filmy white of his eyes through the brilliant red-gold flame. With pounding heart, Valyn quickly yanked his blade free as dense, black, steaming blood poured from the wound, and he jumped back as the dragon lunged upward, wings flapping, howling in pain, his ragged claws seeking purchase on flesh.

Valyn sprang to the side behind a huge boulder as one last great gust of suffocating smoke and fire erupted from the mouth of the monster, in his direction. As it dissipated, Valyn jumped out from behind the rock, leaped high, and again drove forward, sinking his sword deep into the throat of the dragon, yanking downward in a long jagged cut, and pulling back just as quickly to avoid the slice of a talon that came within a breath of his shoulder, flaying the cloth of his shirt.

With angry, flapping wings another roar erupted from the dragon, but its ferocity sounded with less strength and this time no blazing inferno raged forth. Valyn sidestepped, then lunged again, thrusting his sword back into the throat of the beast's smoldering head as the creature writhed, the sound of sucking flesh echoing keenly as he withdrew the sword from the bowels of the monster.

Pulling back, he moved away quickly, and narrowly missed being ripped to shreds as the great monster made one last swipe for him with its deadly talons, its filmy white eyes focused on Valyn with intense hatred.

As the dragon lunged, blood poured from his wounds in large pools of thick, blue-black liquid. He staggered and fell forward into the pond with a last snort and grunt, tempests of water gusting upward into the air. The earth shuddered beneath the intensity of his great weight. Finally, the white film covering his eyes dissipated, reverting back to the color of blood rubies, then to a dark, almost black mahogany, as he rolled to his side, uttering a last long gasp.

Warily Valyn watched the beast, planning to take no chances by underestimating it. Many had lost their lives by lowering their guard at such a time. He again wiped the sweat and blood from his eyes and sank his sword into its chest. Not even a flicker of movement was evident from the animal. Another stroke directly to the heart one last time and Valyn was confident he lay dead.

He leaned forward on the hilt of his sword for a moment, gasping and stared at the huge, still beast. The pond was now tinged with obsidian blood.

Finally, moving closer to the dead destroyer, he studied the corpse. So much deadly power and strength. The blood splatters of its victims stained its huge fangs. Valyn remembered the villagers, those who were dead and others who had barely survived the creature's attack. The beast had deserved to die.

He grimaced as he stepped away from the dragon and searched for where he had left the boy. Limping over, he stopped at the narrow crevice.

"Aaron, the beast is dead. Can you come to me?"

He waited, hearing the rustling inside the protective enclosure as Aaron crawled to the entrance, looking up hopefully. Then he raised his small arms and Valyn, using his uninjured left arm, lifted him up.

"Thank you, sir," the boy said as he hugged Valyn.

Using his longsword as a crutch, Valyn limped across the chamber to the passage on the other side. His eyes widened as he saw the woman standing there.

"Why did you stay? Where are the others?"

She opened her arms and pulled the boy into her embrace. There were tears in her eyes. She clutched the boy close and lifted her gaze to Valyn's.

“Thank you, sir. The others are gone, but Aaron is my son. I could not leave him. Nor could I let you face death alone. I stayed to bear witness to your courage. You are very brave and you saved our lives.” She unwound one arm from around Aaron and held it out to him. “Let me help you.”

“I am not sure how we will find our way out. I have no more flintbrush oil to spark a torch.”

“Rest for a moment. I am sure someone will come. Dinah will let them know and they will send help.”

Valyn dropped onto a rock, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. He could do that. A few minutes respite certainly could not hurt.

Upon exiting the cave, one of the warriors removed his own shirt to create a makeshift bandage for Valyn’s wounds. Valyn refused to ride despite his injuries, instead offering Aaron and his mother his mount. The men accompanying him could do no less than offer their own mounts to the other woman and children. They traveled back to the village at a much slower pace than they had arrived.

It was a bruised, weary, and ragged group who returned to Mount Triton.

As they entered the village, Valyn heard someone scream and others rushed up as they halted before the stable. A number of people descended on the woman and boy as they were helped from his horse.

Valyn wandered away in search of Noah, whom he found kneeling down to speak with a crying child. As he watched, Noah wiped the tears from the child’s face and handed him a loaf of bread. The child smiled, clutched the loaf close, and scurried away.

The tableau made him wonder about Noah’s position as Secondary Attendant to Mistress Leora. He knew what that meant -- that there had been no exchange of blood -- and, because of it, there could never be children born of his seed from his union with her. Witnessing the man’s strength and honor in battle and seeing him with the young boy now, Valyn felt that he would have made a good sire. He must love Mistress Leora very much to have accepted a Secondary position in her household.

Valyn limped over to where Noah stood watching the child. “It is done,” he said tiredly, and Noah turned toward him.

He took his time in studying Valyn without speaking, his attention turned to note each of the wounds Valyn had sustained in the battle with the dragon. His gaze then returned to his face. He brought a hand up to carefully rest against Valyn’s shoulder.

“I had faith you would succeed. From the look of you, it does not appear to have been an easy battle. We will dispatch the dragon skimmers to complete their task. You have done well, but you could use a healer, some food, and rest. Come with me.”

Valyn wanted to deny it, but those were exactly the things he required and in that order. But so much chaos had erupted when he had returned to the village; he had just wanted to get away to somewhere more peaceful. As he watched, Noah turned to survey the village, and Valyn saw a bleakness enter his eyes. "There is little else we can do here. The craftsmen and healers we brought with us will stay; several of the warriors will also remain. When we return to Leah, I will provide a list of other needs. I wish there was more we could do for these people, but at least the Vawndra is now dead. It will offer them some hope as they rebuild."

Valyn continued with him as he walked along the main street. Noah turned and pointed to a spot at the other end of the village. "I have had our people prepare a camp for us near that outcropping of trees. We will rest here tonight and return to the compound tomorrow."

Valyn looked forward to the return to Leah. Hunting and killing were not something he enjoyed, although he knew there were times when it was necessary. He did not shirk from it, nor did he run from his duty. In this instance it had been necessary. Even without the need to prove himself to Mistress Leora, he would have faced the Vawndra after witnessing the ravaged people left in its destructive wake.

Upon their arrival back at the stable, he was surrounded by villagers who wanted to thank him personally for saving some of their people and for killing the Vawndra. The mayor pushed through the crowd and stood before him, his eyes moist. He reached out to grab Valyn's hand.

"Thank you, sir. I had thought they were dead. Two of the people you saved were my daughter and grandson. If there is ever anything we can do, you only need ask."

"There is obviously more to the story than you have said thus far, Valyn." Noah said from behind him.

Valyn glanced around at the other man and saw a speculative gleam in his eyes. He shrugged, then limped past the crowd into the stable, which became silent as he entered. Aaron's mother rushed up to him, took his hand, and led him to a chair.

"I will clean your wounds so the healer may assist you." She hurried away to obtain a basin of water and a cloth.

A ripple of awe went through the building when the healer removed the small piece of dragon tooth that had become imbedded in his arm. He held it up for the people to see and then dropped it into Valyn's hand before stitching the wound.

"For good luck, sir."

After being tended to and fed, Valyn walked down to the stream on the other side of the village and washed thoroughly to get rid of the stench of the Vawndra from his body, then he donned the clean clothing that Noah had provided him with. Once dressed, he walked to the camp, was directed to a tent, and dropped onto the bedroll. Right now his

aching body could think of no better place to be -- other than a soft bed with his mate beside him. He sighed and turned onto his good side -- if there was such a thing.

There was no question that he would face any challenge to have his heart's desire. He would have willingly faced the blazing, deadly fires of ten Vawndra if it meant he would possess Katriel at the end of the battle.

Chapter Ten

On the third morning after the contingent left for Mt. Triton, Katriel opened her eyes, pushed the hair back from her face, and looked through the window at the position of the sun in the sky. Rolling away from the window, she groaned. Once again, she had not slept well and morning had arrived all too quickly. She had come to the only decision possible, but thoughts still tumbled around in her head all through the night.

Throwing back the covers, she rose from the bed. As a consequence of her sleepless night, it was past her usual time to arise. She was in the process of tying the sash to her robe when Tish breezed in carrying a tray containing her breakfast.

“Good morning, Lady. Did you sleep well?” Her voice had a lilt to it.

Katriel frowned. “How can you be so cheery, Tish? Sleep well? Not likely. They returned last night did they not?” She watched Tish set the gold tray on a side table.

“Yes, Lady. It was very late.”

Katriel huffed. “I thought I heard an unusual amount of activity.” She swung around to face her, hands on hips. “And?”

“The word is that the village was destroyed by the Vawndra, and a dragon hunter will be hired to be sure there are no others in the area.” Tish gave her a wide grin. “The warriors say your Alpha presented himself well and was very brave.” She picked up the crystal goblet and turned back toward Katriel holding it out to her. “For you.”

Katriel eyed Tish suspiciously, then stared at the goblet. Something was different; she was not quite sure what it was. Was it the way Tish held the glass, cradling it between her hands as though afraid she would drop it? Maybe it was the deep ruby contents that almost seemed to bubble with life within the glass. She glanced again at Tish. Something told her that this morning was very different, and everything in her life would be changed from this moment on.

"This is not dragon's blood, is it? It is his."

Tish nodded. "Yes, Lady. It is diluted with wine, of course, not full strength."

"Already?" she whispered, before advancing across the room to gaze out the window. "It is all happening too quickly. I am not sure that I am ready." A sense of panic overwhelmed her, suffocating her. Yes, she had come to terms with her duty the other night, but admitting that she had no other course and actually knowing that the next step she took would unalterably lead to her future with no hope of retreat was a separate thing.

The bonding was no longer some distant occurrence, like some annoying bitebug that could be swept out of sight. No, not this time. It would happen here and now, this very moment, once she sipped from the goblet.

"Lady, it is time. It is past time. You are twenty-two. Most are long married by that age. You know that your mother has been very lenient. Come, drink," she coaxed. "He willingly offered it for you this morning. It is fresh. He said to tell you that whatever you need he will gladly provide."

Katriel pulled her gaze from the window and turned back to Tish, her attention again drawn to the goblet held in Tish's hands. The liquid shimmered in the morning light, and suddenly she could not look away, as though she were mesmerized by the warm ruby essence.

"What is his name? Mother has not told me yet."

"I do not know, Lady. Your mother has kept his identity secret from most of the servants in the household. It is the usual security for a potential Alpha, new to a household."

"Is he handsome, Tish? He looked handsome when I caught a glimpse of him riding out. But what is he like? Inside. Will he be someone I can learn to love?"

She wanted to know everything about him. For goodness sake, she was about to ingest the lifeblood of a man she had not even met. Although it was their way, something inside her balked at the custom. Once she drank his blood she would be forever tied to him, his sanguine essence would begin to mingle with her own. Once started, it could not be undone.

An unexpected flare of fire began to curl inside her at the thought. The scent of his blood teased at her nose, calling her from across the room. There was something about it that she could not quite grasp, some sense of -- familiarity. Need started to unfurl -- the need to taste of him, to feel the heat that would saturate her. She could feel her heartbeat thundering inside her chest and remembered the mating she had witnessed in the stable, the closeness and desire. With halting steps she moved away from the window and toward where Tish stood waiting expectantly.

Tish was right. Her mother had allowed her much more freedom than many of the matriarchs would have done. And she had already accepted the need for this union to go forward. What was the point in hesitating any longer?

“Yes, Lady, I believe he will be everything you desire in an Alpha” Tish proffered the cup again. “Please, you must drink this. Your mother has given her approval. It will begin the assimilation and make the bonding easier for you.”

She had never ingested fresh blood before. Not from a dragon, and certainly not from a man. With a shaking hand she accepted the goblet from Tish. Cupping the globe with both hands, she swirled the contents, and watched the thick, tantalizing substance coat the sides of the glass.

A sharp ache throbbed in her loins, spearing through to the center of her womanhood, a steady pulsing that sliced upward inside. She thought once more of the mating of the Jotar warriors in the stable the other night, the bond they seemed to share. The goblet felt warm against her palms, as though exuding life force, trying to reach out to her from inside the glass. Her mouth watered as she studied the liquid, and she was overcome with the desire to savor the contents, to feel it slide down her throat and enter her system, mating his blood with hers -- a prequel to the true mating of their bodies and souls at the bonding.

Unable to resist the seductive call she slowly began to raise it toward her lips. She hesitated, fighting the pull, but knowing it was a losing battle as she caught his scent and it infused her with such vibrant longing she could not resist.

She slanted a frantic gaze at Tish as her hands tightened their grip on the glass. “I am frightened at what effect it will have on me. It is not the same as dragon’s blood at all is it?” She brought it closer to her mouth, the smell was so warm and enticing, spicy and male. Suddenly, her incisors began to throb and it seemed to be in response to the intense masculine aroma of the blood and wine, that essence of unexpected familiarity. That had never happened before.

“No, Lady. It is the lifeblood of your Alpha. From what I understand, dragon’s blood sustains you so you will not die, so you can live and be productive. But the blood of your Alpha is an entirely different substance. It is much more complicated, more than simply a drink containing nutrients to keep you alive.”

“I know.” Simply from holding the glass containing his vital fluid she sensed the difference. Her body’s instinctive response to this diluted libation told her it would be far different than simply a nutrient-giving drink. “I think I am beginning to understand, and it scares me to think what it will mean,” she whispered as she brought the glass closer still. “This will bind me to him in the most elemental way.”

Finally, unable to resist any longer, she sipped from the glass. It tasted thicker, warmer and richer than the dragon’s blood, like the difference between cheap watered-down wine and full-bodied priceless Aurora wine. It held a subtle bouquet of flavor her usual sustenance did not. She needed more and raising the glass to her lips, drained it completely. It flowed smoothly down her throat, thick and life-giving. A feeling almost of powerful euphoria enveloped her.

It was slightly warm as she swallowed; the dragon's blood had always been cold, reptilian, she had never felt emotion when she drank -- it was strictly something she required for her health, to feed the g-cells in her bloodstream. She handed the empty, red-tinged glass back to Tish before she gave into her urge to lick the glass clean of any remnants.

Suddenly, a searing heat zinged throughout her body, bolts of energy that seemed to tear her apart, bringing her to life as though she were arising from a long, deep sleep. Visions of her golden savior of long ago sprang up before her eyes, and it was like a star had burst apart inside her scattering sparks in all directions. She gasped and wrapped her arms around her middle, trying desperately to hold at bay a rampant, unrestrained desire inside she had never felt before. She recognized the scent of that blood. It was an aroma deeply etched inside her long ago. But it could not be. It simply was not possible.

"Tish, help me," she cried out as she fell to her knees, a painful, driving need encompassing her. "What is happening to me?" Her vision wavered and then she saw them in her mind's inner eye. Two bodies, naked and entwined on the bed. She rose above him, baring her fangs, sinking them deep into his flesh as his cock blazed a heated path deep inside her.

Oh, gods, what was happening to her? Her whole body pulsed and throbbed in response to the vision playing out in her mind. Tingling desire flashed through her, making her feel as though she had been dropped into an ocean of surging hot water. It curled around her, vibrated through her. She arched upward and threw her head back, eyes closed as for the first time the burning flames of overpowering lust seared and scorched a path through her.

Panic seized her as she lost control of her body, of her mind. She opened her eyes and looked at Tish. "Where is he?" she growled between clenched teeth, trying to hold the emotions at bay.

Tish knelt next to her. "It must be the potency of his blood, Lady. Allow his blood to meld with yours. It is unusual for you to feel it quite this intensely with the first glass."

Katriel jumped to her feet. "I need more. I must know his name. Oh, good heavens, I need more ... this will be an addiction I cannot control. What will I do?" Fear tangled with arousal, overwhelming and confusing her. She had heard stories that once the bond blood had been ingested and integrated with her own, everything would change, but she had never imagined it would be like this. Undeniable desire coursed through her, controlling her.

It was as though some instinct that had been in hibernation suddenly awoke with the roar of a wild, untamed tigress. The passionate craving consumed her, whipping her emotions into a frenzy of uncontrolled demand that must be assuaged.

"Take deep breaths, Lady. It is very potent, but the desire will ease somewhat. It will be better next time, since you will know what to expect and be able to control it."

Katriel doubted it, but tried to follow Tish's instructions, to rein in the urgency, but her body was not responding. A thrumming had begun inside, and she must answer it. She was

shocked when she felt the juices of female desire release onto her thighs, and a fire of arousal burn hotter at her core. It was like she had been given some kind of powerful aphrodisiac.

She grabbed the front of Tish's robe. "Where is he?" she gritted out, desperation spiraling inside her.

"I-I do not know, Lady." Katriel was aware of a certain level of fear in Tish's voice, but she did not care. "Please eat something," she pleaded. "Dress, and then you can talk with your mother. I am sure she can help you through this."

Katriel did not want to hear any of this. She needed. Now. She must find him -- it was the only thing in her mind. Like she was looking through a long tunnel. There was nothing else that mattered but finding him, touching him. Mating with him.

Oh, gods, her whole body was out of control. And she knew the only way to get it back was to find him. Only he could help her.

Spinning in a circle, she wound her fingers in her hair and was unable to hold back a scream, as desire again arced through her. He was the only one who could help her. A part of her was frightened by the out-of-control primitive woman she had become, another part did not care. Her body had recognized his blood and demanded more. She knew only one thing, she must be with him or she would go insane.

She stopped circling, turned and glanced at Tish wildly, then raced past her before Tish could stop her. She needed to find her mother. Quickly, before her whole body burst into flames and nothing was left of her but cold ash.

How could one glass of diluted blood have affected her so deeply? Did they realize what it would do to her? She raced down the hall, past amazed servants who scurried out of the way of the wild-eyed young woman. Her mother would know where he was. She must tell her. She would force her to tell her. Then she would be fine. Once she saw him, it would pass and she could return to normal.

Chapter Eleven

Valyn breathed easier now that the challenge had been met. For the most part he was still confined to his room and the gardens beyond, but from what he had seen when he had first arrived he was impressed with the layout of the compound. At this point he had little control over his movements and called on his training and patience to await the summons of Mistress Leora. Sangorrians were not a trustful race and he knew Mistress Leora would be cautious before allowing him free access to the compound. He awaited that final approval as patiently as possible.

Although his body continued to remind him painfully of his confrontation with the dragon, he was also restless and eager to have the remainder of the preliminaries over so he could claim Katriel as his mate. It was her he came for and her he would have. One last meeting with Mistress Leora was all that remained.

This morning a servant had awoken him earlier than unusual. He had served him breakfast and, with it Valyn had noticed a goblet containing turquoise liquid. He had inquired as to what it was and was informed that it was a fortifying drink called Omgavita and that he should drink all of it. The servant had also related that he should prepare as he would be meeting with Mistress Leora.

An hour later an apprentice healer accompanied by a female servant arrived to accomplish the first bloodletting. Valyn had read about the process and knew what to expect. Before proceeding, the healer had inquired if Valyn had ingested Omgavita, and had also informed him that from now on he must partake of it daily either in tablet or liquid form to ensure his health.

The healer had first checked all his wounds. Apparently satisfied, he had then begun the bloodletting with the assistance of the servant. It was a simple and relatively painless

procedure; his abdomen throbbed only slightly where they had taken his blood. Obviously, the healer assigned the task was skilled, and he only drew enough for a small vial.

He was informed that these small doses of his blood would accustom Katriel to his taste and her body to its presence, so she might slowly become acclimated to his blood and her needs. His chemistry would also be changed when the Blood Rite was completed. Without the changes in both of them, there would be no chance of creating children from their union. He would be the only male to ever share this intimacy with her.

The fact that his blood had been drawn told him all that he needed to know. He had been accepted as Katriel's Alpha. The meeting this morning with Mistress Leora would be strictly formality.

Katriel. He had yet to see her, but he knew she was near. He could feel her presence.

Turning away, he walked out into the garden, inhaling the fresh, fragrant air. Remaining celibate did not mean he was not knowledgeable. He had absorbed information from every textbook available, had even gone to some of the lust houses on Illumata to unobtrusively observe the matings. For a price, the women of pleasure had been willing to teach him many things about pleasing his mate, and he made very certain that he would be able to please Katriel in every way. He had also learned a great deal about his own boundaries for self-control, how to use them to advantage, and when not to push his limits.

When his application had finally been accepted by Mistress Leah, he had gone to his mentor and requested approval to begin sensual training outside the boundaries of the Eclipsian Temple. He was required to sign in and out for each visit beyond the temple and to report to his mentor after each session.

One session had almost cost him everything he wanted.

Her name was Terez and she worked at the Palace of Delights. When he had first caught sight of her, he should have been warned he would be in danger of losing his self-control. She was an exquisitely sensual creature with silky black hair and gray eyes -- and she resembled Katriel. Thus, he had been drawn to her in particular. He had wanted to know what gave her pleasure, wanted to believe he could offer the same to Katriel when the time came, and that by watching this woman, he would have better insight into what would please his mate. Valyn was honest about his needs and when she acquiesced to his request, he had handed her several gold coins and followed her.

She wore a diaphanous gown that clung to her body as she walked ahead of him, her hips swaying erotically, and he had noticed the smooth, rounded flesh of her bottom outlined by the material. She reached a door and opened it, motioning him inside. Valyn saw a bed covered with pink satin sheets, a wardrobe to the side containing what looked to be silky lingerie, and a chair in the corner.

Turning to look at him over her shoulder as she had walked to the bed, she had pointed to the chair. "You may sit there. Pull it closer, so you may see everything you might wish to learn."

He had done as she suggested, little realizing how naive he had been to come to this place, and how sorely he would be tested before he left the pleasure house on this particular night.

She had stood at the side of the bed, studying him as he sat in the chair.

"Why have you really come to me, priest? Do you like to watch? Or do you want more?"

He settled uncomfortably into the chair; his body already hardened in response to her appearance. "I am not a priest. I am an apprentice. I leave for Ebonnia soon to become Alpha Predom to a Sangorrian female."

He saw interest spark in her eyes. "Ahh, Ebonnia. I have heard many things about the planet, that it is very rich, and one can earn very well there." Her eyes dropped to the front of his robe. "You are virgin?"

"I am celibate and have never been with a woman. I wish to learn from you so that I will please my mate when we are bound -- no more. I have been truthful in telling of my reason for coming here."

"To learn from me -- a whore. What remarkable, self-control you must have, apprentice." She lifted the gown above her head, and he sucked in a rush of air at the vision of pleasing curves, round, upthrust breasts, and the pale, rosy woman's center revealed to him.

He wanted to touch her but drew on his self-control and attempted to remember his reason for being there. Yet his cock was thickening insistently against his leg.

Terez leaned back on the bed and opened her legs, her long fingers splayed against her inner white thighs and showing him her pussy. "I am assuming you have only read about a female and her needs before this, am I correct?"

He could only nod, his voice suddenly having disappeared. He could not take his eyes from the mound of succulent flesh. Plump pink lips surrounded a moist glistening hole that seemed to beckon his cock to enter her, to take what she offered. Her mound was clean-shaven, unlike others he had seen, and appeared soft as silk and inviting. His hands clenched on the arms of the chair.

As he watched, she swirled a finger over her clit, which seemed to bloom and engorge with her ministrations. "You will want to taste her, apprentice. With your mouth. Pleasure her with your tongue." She widened her legs and pulled her pussy lips open. Riveted, he stared when she sank a finger into her moist core, leaned back, and closed her eyes. "You will like her sweet taste, and you will want more. You will become addicted to the flavor of her creamy flesh and suck her juices. If you please her, there will be more, until finally she is ready to be fucked by your stiff cock."

As she spoke her skilled fingers worked her clit until it stood erect, firm and glistening, almost like a tiny penis. Her other fingers were driving inside her, first one finger, then two,

and finally three. She thrust in and out, her fingers wet with her juices, her hips undulating against her hand, pushing upward. He could not remove his gaze from her body as the dark, glistening channel of her vagina sucked at her fingers; he wanted those digits to be his cock burrowing deep inside her.

Suddenly, she screamed and spasmed hard, as she buried her fingers inside. He saw the pulsing of her intimate channel as wave after wave of obvious pleasure consumed her. His cock was a fiery, tight shaft of steel against his thigh, and it hurt to look at Terez. The need bore down on him to know what it would be like to feel her feminine pleasure grasping his shaft, milking him inside her slick pussy.

She removed her fingers and brought them to her mouth. She smiled, then she opened her lips and sucked her fingers inside, seeming to savor their taste, then pulled them out with a pop. Her lazy gaze rose to his.

"That is what it will be like if you pleasure her well." She laughed as she looked at his cock tenting his apprentice's robe. "Are you sure you do not want to try it and get a little firsthand knowledge?" Rising up onto her knees, she leaned forward on her hands, her breasts dangling enticingly. "You want it. I can see you want to know what it would feel like. Your arousal rises impressively between your legs."

"I will not touch you, nor may you touch me. It is forbidden," he managed to grind out.

She sank back on her legs and cupped her breasts, tweaking at the nipples. "Very well, apprentice." She looked over at a timepiece on the table next to the bed. "Your coins have bought you a little more time. "Are you allowed to touch yourself?"

He nodded slowly.

"Then take out your cock. I want to see it. Stroke it for me."

He needed relief, and so he did as she asked revealing the massive, painful stalk of his erection.

Her smile grew wider and she licked her lips. "Very nice, apprentice. It is a worthy weapon you sport between your legs. You will certainly please your woman." Once again, she leaned back on the bed and opened her legs. "Let me show you what you will do to your woman with a massive instrument like that."

He had begun to stroke his hot flesh as he listened to her words, observing her sensual movements on the bed. She reached inside the drawer next to the bed and pulled out a long, thick object that was shaped like a phallus and she held it up in front of her.

"Hmmm, a worthy match to your impressive prick, I would say. But there is nothing like being filled with hot, human, flesh. After you have sucked her, prepared her," she leaned back on the bed and opened her legs, bringing the tip of the phallus to her opening, "you will make her hunger for your cock. The first time you will go slowly so as not to tear her. Swirl your tip over her clit and make her want you." She used the phallus to show him exactly what she meant. "Then you will press inward, opening her to your thick, steely flesh. If you

have done it right, her body will be more than ready to receive your cock. And, oh, the pleasure that will wrap tightly around you when you are finally buried inside her snug channel.”

His heart pumped fast and hard inside his chest as he saw her pussy suck the phallus deep inside. His own cock was harder than it had ever been before as his hand worked along its stiff, hot length, needing to bury it inside the glistening body of the image of the woman he loved.

It was Katriel he fantasized about making love to, but this woman looked so much like her, so very much. Finally, she had the leather phallus buried to the hilt inside her, her pussy gloved tightly around its circumference, and he found he could not catch his breath.

Her heated gaze met his and he saw the pleasure in her dilated eyes. “What a full feeling she will have with the girth of your cock. Her pleasure, and yours, will be well worth the time you take in preparing her well. She will be wet and willing, wanting your power, needing the orgasm only you can give her. Begging for it.”

His gaze was riveted to her hand as she began thrusting in and out with the huge phallus. He mirrored her actions with his hand on his prick, pre-cum coating his fingers as he envisioned driving his cock into the glistening heat of the woman he loved. His cock hardened even more as his attention focused on the now wet phallus as it powered effortlessly through the juices of the woman on the bed as she undulated her hips, moaning loudly. She threw her head back and screamed once more as she came, her hips rocking with spasm after spasm.

His seed spurted into his hand, gush after gush of cream, and a groan erupted low in his throat as he watched the woman in the throws of wild abandon on the bed. Finally, he quieted and dropped forward in the chair. Shock coursed through him at what had just occurred. He glanced up at the woman.

She had removed the phallus, placing it on the bed next to her, and now sat cross-legged, watching him, a look of triumph on her face. Her pink pussy was open, engorged, still shimmering from her climax, and as he watched, her hand slid down and she began to stroke the lips again.

His gaze rose to meet her sly one. He felt shame at his lack of control. It was not Terez he truly wanted, but he had been pulled unwillingly into the vortex of her passion, surrounded by a haze of lust. He had come here to learn how to pleasure her, and almost come away losing everything.

Terez smiled knowingly as she sank a finger into her greedy pussy one last time. “Your time is up, and the lesson is over, apprentice. I hope you have learned something from our little encounter.”

She withdrew her finger, then licked it clean. Rising from the bed, she walked over to a basin, picked up a wet cloth, and returned to him.

“Here,” she said as she held it out to him. “I will not touch you. If you were any other, I would take the time to wash you, or maybe lick every speck of cream from your body. But you have not paid for that, have you?”

His cock spasmed at her words and he knew he had to get out of there before he truly did lose all his self-control. Quickly he had cleaned himself, refastened his robe, and stood. She took the cloth and walked back to the basin and dropped it in, then turned back to him.

“If you should require another lesson, do come back. I am always willing to help a well-endowed man in need. There is a great deal more I can teach you.”

“Thank you. I will remember your words and what I have learned today.” But he knew he would never return to this place, or to the woman who reminded him so much of his future mate.

Valyn had tried to look at his sensual lessons as no different than gaining the knowledge he needed as in other areas, such as hand-to-hand combat or the history of Ebonnia, although, he was certain he would take much more pleasure in the loving than the battles or the history.

He had been very wrong about the lessons of sensuality, and after that meeting with Terez, he had chosen to continue his studies through books and at a distance when he visited the lust houses. His body had never forgotten the impact of that intimate lesson in lust, and there were times when he wondered about the woman who had taught him things about himself he had never understood before. Thank the gods for his Eclipsian training in self-control.

He pulled his thoughts away from the memory of Terez, gazed out over the garden and inhaled deeply. His body may have responded to the likeness, but at least his mind had known the difference and stopped him from doing something he would have regretted the rest of his life. He now called on the balance of his nature, continuing to breathe in even, deep breaths, until his body softened and was calm once again. He could not go to a meeting with Mistress Leora with the image of another woman in his mind, even if she did have the look of Katriel. He forced the memory of Terez away -- it did not belong in this place, on this world.

He turned and walked inside his room just as a knock sounded at the door.

“Enter.”

It was a male servant. “The Mistress awaits you in her office. If you would follow me?” Valyn accompanied him down the black marble hallway. He wondered if Katriel had breakfasted yet. Would she ingest his lifeblood before or after she ate? Would she feel a difference when she did? Would she sense him?

Katriel. His chest throbbed and his nipples tightened at the thought of their mating when she would sink her fangs into his chest as he took her virginity. His cock hardened at the thought.

He tried to think of other things. He did not need these particular images running rampant through his mind when he met with Mistress Leora. He needed to be clear-headed and make a good impression despite the fact that he had already in essence received her approval when his blood had been drawn.

They mounted the stairs in the entrance hall and ascended to the second floor. The servant stopped at the first door, opened it, and stepped aside.

His future was tied to the reception he was about to receive here. Valyn entered the room. The interior was spacious, with a lounging chair to one side and a large ebony desk at the center. The rays of the crimson sun filtered through the long window behind the desk.

Mistress Leora sat behind the desk dressed in a black figure-hugging gown that accentuated her pale skin. Sec Noah hovered protectively behind her chair in an attentive respectful stance, legs spread, hands clasped behind his back, at ease, yet alert and ready to defend.

Valyn halted before the desk and assumed the stance of submissive respect with hands clasped at the elbows behind his back, deferring to her position as head of this House. "Good morning, Mistress."

Leora looked up from the papers she was perusing to survey him. Her expression told him nothing. Nor did Sec Noah's.

"Good morning, Valyn. You slept well?"

"Yes, thank you, Mistress."

"My Second Attendant, Noah, has informed me of your bravery on the day of your arrival, as well as your encounter with the dragon, and recounted your concern and assistance with the people at Mt. Triton. You have earned his respect and that is no easy feat." She smiled. "I must say I have also been hearing some very interesting retelling of your battle with the Vawndra from the servants."

He glanced quickly at Noah, but was met with an emotionless mask. He returned his gaze to Mistress Leora. "The mercenaries were not difficult to defeat, Mistress. The guards from Leah certainly outmatched them and there was little I was required to do. The garrison of Leah is well trained."

"I understand you are educated on Ebonnian history." Her black gaze seemed to be attempting to penetrate his soul.

He remained steady beneath her hard look and tried not to appear unsettled by her abrupt change of subject.

"Yes, Mistress."

She sat back and steepled her hands, her elbows resting on the arms of her chair. She exuded beauty and power as she studied him. He knew her background and respected her for the hard choices he knew she had been required to make over the years as Mistress of Leah.

"So tell me, what do you know of the history of the Aurora Valley?"

"Where would you like me to begin, Mistress?" he asked as courteously as possible.

"What is your understanding of the governing body of the Valley?"

"The Aurora Valley is ruled through the Seven Houses of the Crimson Sun. It is a matriarchal society handed down mother to eldest daughter in each House."

"Very good. Can you name the Seven Houses?"

"The Houses are Allegra, Briana, Cleantha, Corinne, Electra, Galatea, and Leah."

Her posture seemed to ease somewhat when he did not hesitate in his responses. "Well done, Valyn. It is good to know you will not require a tutor to instruct you on Ebonnian politics. Now, what about the bonding ritual and Blood Rite? How familiar are you with the requirements for an Alpha Predom?"

"I have made myself thoroughly familiar, Mistress. But I understand there are customs that are not generally shared in the history books, and I am ready to do whatever is required."

"Do you understand your mate will need your blood to survive? That you are responsible for her well-being at all times? That you will be expected to be totally loyal in every way to your mate? As she will be to you?" She leaned forward, examining him intently. "Do you realize there are those who would attempt to bribe an Alpha to gain the secrets of the Aurora Valley? Some have been put to death for their disloyalty. And then --" Her voice faltered, and he saw a flicker of pain cross her face.

Noah leaned forward as though sensing her unease and placed a hand on her shoulder. She reached up to touch him, seeming to gain strength from him.

"There are others," she continued in a strong voice, "who would attempt to murder the Alpha to the Matriarch in an effort to destroy the leadership. You will need to be on your guard at all times. Are you prepared for that as well?"

He nodded. "I understand completely. I have already made that commitment to the Lady Katriel. It may not yet be official, but my resolve is unwavering."

Leora again studied him silently for a long time. Slowly she rose to her feet and walked around the side of the desk. "Disrobe, please. I wish to confirm the replica was not altered concerning your suitability and lack of abnormalities."

He had known this was coming. A part of him rebelled at being ordered to disrobe before her, but he raised his hands and unbuttoned the brown robe, allowing it to drop to the floor at his feet. He then returned to the stance of respect and waited, focusing his attention on the window just past where Noah stood.

Leora walked toward him. He felt her assessing gaze as it roved over him and refused to let it shake him or respond to it.

She slowly circled him, apparently studying him from every angle. She stopped to examine the long slashing wound on his arm, seemed to assess each bruise and cut, categorizing every nuance of his body.

Finally, she halted in front of him and nodded. "Your wounds are a reflection of your bravery. It is my opinion that you are well-suited as a mate for my daughter. Your conduct and bravery have already shown you will be a good protector. You may ..."

The door to her office burst open, interrupting her words.

"Mother, please ..." a frantic feminine voice spoke from behind him, then stopped abruptly.

Valyn, unashamed of his nakedness, turned his head to see who was there and was shocked to find himself staring into the startled gaze of his soon-to-be mate. She was everything he had remembered, and more so. Her long dark hair fell in dishevelment about her face, her breasts heaved with agitation, and her pale pink lips were rounded in apparent shock. But what surprised him most was the dilated dark smoky depths of her eyes. Darkened with what could only be lust.

She had eyes for no one else in the room once she saw him standing there. He saw tears pool within their depths, the startled recognition. "What is your name?" she whispered hoarsely.

He turned toward her, and her mouth gaped wider; her eyes dilated more intensely, and he saw her hands clench at her side.

"My name is Valyn, Lady. I have come for you as I vowed I would."

"Valyn," she repeated. Her small pink tongue licked at her succulent lips, tears trailing down her face. He felt his cock take on a life of its own. "You have come. It is truly you? How can this be?"

"I made you a promise, and it has led me to this path."

"Katri, you should not be here," her mother protested.

Katriel turned to look at her mother with panicked, glazed eyes. "I need him, Mother. How you found him, I do not know, but I need him desperately." She glanced back at him.

He took a step toward her and stopped, not wanting to frighten her. Instead, she stepped to where he waited. Valyn could smell her arousal as she neared him. He cupped her face and lowered his head. She closed her eyes and sighed as he dropped forward to capture her lips. Nothing and no one else in this room mattered. Only the woman who offered herself to him -- the woman he had yearned for all these years, and for whom he had prepared himself to take.

Had anything ever tasted as sweet, and had any woman felt like such absolute bliss? Deepening the kiss, she opened to him, and he felt her hands inch upward along his bare chest, felt a sharp prick as her nails dug into his flesh. *Ah, sweet pain.* Unlike the ache of battle, this intensity of feeling was far different. He wanted more, needed to feel her fangs piercing him as he sank his cock into her pussy.

Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, he tasted her, grazed against her petite incisor and tasted his own blood as it filled her mouth. As though galvanized, she sucked, then

sucked harder, opened her eyes wide, staring at him as his lifeblood spilled into her. She curled closer to his body, her nails digging deeper into his chest.

Yes, oh gods, yes. If only we were alone. It was not true pain he felt but an aching need to claim her, to burrow his cock deep inside her hot, tight channel. He wanted to feel her pulsing around him, clasping him, wanted --

He lifted his head to gaze down at her. She moaned, her claws retracted from his chest, and she collapsed in his arms, her eyelids fluttering closed. He caught her and lifted her into his arms, carrying her to the lounge chair he had seen upon entering the office.

"Katriel," Leora cried from behind him and rushed to her daughter's side, followed quickly by Noah. Valyn laid her gently on the lounge and brushed her silky hair away from her face. He glanced quickly behind him before returning his gaze to Katriel. Noah hovered behind Leora, a concerned expression on his face.

A disturbance in the air followed by a gasp, informed him someone else had entered the room.

"Mistress, what has happened?" a distressed female voice cried out.

Leora had come to kneel beside Valyn and responded. "You tell me, Tish. What occurred this morning to put her in such a state?" Quickly she looked at Valyn. "Valyn, please clothe yourself or you will send the servants into palpitations."

He rose and stalked over to his robe, quickly donning it, returned to Katriel's side.

"You need not stay. I will take care of my daughter."

His fierce gaze met hers. "With respect, Mistress, I will not leave her while she is in such distress. When you approved her ingestion of my blood, you gave her into my care. She may have need of me, and I will not fail her."

"You are not her fully blooded mate yet, she is not your responsibility."

Valyn looked down at Katriel and smoothed a hand along the side of her face. "I accepted responsibility the moment I made application, Mistress. Even before that. In fact, I accepted it long ago."

He saw something in her eyes, then it was gone. Noah placed a hand on Leora's shoulder but said nothing.

Leora sighed and her posture softened. "Very well. Tish? What happened?"

The servant stood in the doorway, wringing her hands. "I do not know, Mistress. She drank the goblet of diluted lifeblood, but it was apparently more potent than anyone anticipated. She became very anxious and agitated. I could not calm her down, and she was determined to locate him."

"I see. How unusual that it should have such an intense effect so quickly."

She leaned closer to Katriel and touched her cheek. "Katri, wake up. You must wake up, dear."

Katriel's lids fluttered and finally lifted, a look of confusion on her face. "What happened?" She tried to sit up, but Valyn gently forced her back.

"Do you remember where you are?" Leora asked.

Her gaze landed on Valyn. "You are my Alpha. I have longed for you so -- had given up hope."

"I told you I would come."

"At last, I know your name. They would not tell me. When I drank your blood, I knew your taste, recognized it, but could not believe it was possible. I had to find you."

He nodded. "I am Valyn, and I am here for you at last. I shall protect you always. We shall be bound. Soon."

"Yes." She licked her lips. "I needed you. The feeling was so painful, so uncontrollable. I have never felt that way before. I should have known immediately that it was you."

"How do you feel now?" her mother asked.

Katriel's gaze seemed to move reluctantly to Leora. "I am fine. I was just overcome, I think, because I have never experienced such intense emotions." She again tried to sit and he helped to ease her up. She wavered a bit, and he put a steadying arm around her shoulder.

"Maybe his blood is not compatible. Perhaps we should look to another." There was a frown on Leora's brow.

Valyn saw Katriel's eyes widen with panic as she reached out for him. He took her hand and raised it to his lips. Her luminous gaze rose to meet his and the most beautiful smile he had ever seen lit up her face. Then she turned to her mother.

"No. That is not the problem." Her gaze turned again to connect with Valyn's and a faint smile again curled her lips. "I believe we may be too compatible." Then her attention returned to her mother. "How did you know, Mother? How did you know this was the one man I longed to be with?"

"He applied as others did, but he seemed most suited to be your mate. There is no more to it than that." Valyn looked at her, there was something in her eyes, her voice, that indicated more than what she was saying. Had she somehow known of their relationship before the call for applicants went out?

Now was not the time to press for more answers, but something told him Mistress Leora knew much more than she admitted.

Chapter Twelve

The incident with Katriel in Mistress Leora's office had shaken him and had him pacing his room like a caged panther. His body throbbed from the close physical contact with Katriel. He needed to be engaged in some activity other than cooling his heels here. It gave him too much time to think, and he was not used to such prolonged inactivity.

At the temple on Illumata there was always something to occupy his time and his mind, whether it was battle practice, studying in the library, or apprenticing with one of the herbalists. There had rarely been days of idleness.

After he had returned to his room, he had been visited by a tailor, then the armorer had attended him. Each one had come with a more magnified story of his battle with the dragon and hungry for details of the encounter. He had shaken his head at how a story turned in the recounting. He also marveled at how quickly it had spread between the actual confrontation, a mere two days ago, and the story the armorer had wanted him to confirm. It seemed that in the intervening time, he had acquired a full set of magical abilities he could only hope no one ever required him to demonstrate.

Another knock sounded at his door. Who could it be this time? Anything to alleviate the tedium of his own company was welcome.

"Enter."

A servant entered with a stack of clothing and a pair of tall, brown leather boots. He held them out to Valyn. "For you, Sir. Sec Noah said to tell you he will come for you shortly."

Valyn took the pile of clothes as the servant bowed, then left. Pivoting toward the bed, Valyn spread the clothing out. There were breeches, a shirt, leather gloves, a thick, sturdy leather belt, as well as leggings and the boots.

As quickly as his aching body would allow, he shrugged out of the robe they had provided him, and donned the outfit. Although his wounds appeared to be healing quickly, his arm still burned from the presence of the stitches and was particularly tender at the juncture where the healer in Mt. Triton had removed the piece of tooth. Valyn had placed the fragment in a small pouch the healer had provided. It now resided in the drawer of the small dresser next to his bed.

He was just fastening the belt at his waist, when another, stronger knock sounded and Sec Noah strode into the room. Noah surveyed him with a narrowed, assessing look, and nodded, his expression giving nothing away. "You are ready. Good. Come with me." He began to turn away.

"Where are we going?"

"It is too soon for you to engage in training practices. How are your wounds today?"

"A healer examined them this morning, and they are better. Everything seems to be mending as it should."

Noah nodded. "Good. Then come."

He strode out of the room and Valyn followed the man as he turned left, then made another sharp turn, heading toward the front of the house. "It is time you learned your way around the compound so you can get your bearings. It is a large place, and it will take you time to become completely familiar with its layout. If something should occur, you will need to be able to find your way around quickly."

Valyn felt something indistinct pull at him. He stopped walking. "Where is Lady Katriel? Is she all right?"

Noah halted and looked at him. "She is well. I believe she is resting. I expect you are beginning to feel the first twinges of the bond that is being formed between you. It pulls at you, does it not? Something you cannot see, but you can feel."

Valyn nodded. "Yes. Like I am forgetting something important and I need to go back."

Noah resumed walking again. "You will become accustomed to it. The fact that she ingests your lifeblood connects you. It will become an even tighter bond once the Blood Rite is completed."

Valyn gazed around him as they continued down the hallway. Smooth, black marble walls were relieved only by scarlet wooden doors with polished gold handles. Noah stopped before a door at the end of the hallway.

"This door leads to the East Tower. At the top is the ceremonial suite and, as its name indicates, is used only for special occasions." He walked past the bowed, circular wall, toward a door around the side. He pulled out a key and unlocked it, revealing a pathway, which they followed to the front of the building. Noah pointed to the left.

"That is where the stables are located; the farrier is set further left of the stable. There are four levels to the house proper. You are lodged in the guest quarters in the northeast

wing on the first floor. The second floor's southeast wing is where Katriel's apartments are located and where you will reside once the mating is complete. Mistress Leora's quarters are located on the third floor. The West Tower," he pointed to the tall circular tower at the opposite side of the house, "contains the library. The two buildings beyond the manor are where the Jotar warriors and the personal Sangorrian guards are housed."

Valyn focused his gaze on the tall buildings at the other side of the compound where Noah indicated, noting the solid structures. "And the fourth floor of the manor house?" Valyn asked as he returned his attention back to Noah.

"The fourth floor is where some of the single household servants reside. It allows them privacy in their off time. Some of the guards are housed there as well in the opposite wing. It is especially maintained for those on night watch, and for the personal guards within the household."

Valyn nodded, visualizing the layout in his mind.

They continued walking around the front of the manor, past the West Tower, then came to the back at the southwest corner and stopped.

"Beneath the house are the catacombs where the storage rooms are located, as well as the large cooling chambers where the dragon's blood is kept in a frozen state for emergencies."

"Is that what Mistress Leora ingested while you were on Illumata?"

"Not completely. I provided my lifeblood and it was preserved to accommodate her need. We had not been parted for that length of time before. It was difficult -- for both of us. The women can survive on the nutrients of the frozen blood, but it does not contain the same energy as fresh. Similar to when we fight a battle and survive on dried meats and vegetables. It is not the same as fresh meats and succulent vegetables. Do you understand?"

"Yes. How long can they survive on the substitute blood once they have ingested the blood of a mate?"

Noah shrugged. "No one knows for sure; it has not been something we wanted to find out -- at least not in recent generations. My trip to Illumata was unusual. Sangorrian females and their Alphas and Secs are usually not parted for long periods of time once bonded. The longer the separation, the weaker the female becomes. It leaves them vulnerable. Your position as Alpha to Katriel is to never leave her vulnerable."

"I understand. It was not by choice I left her this morning."

"I know it was difficult for you, but tradition must be adhered to first. The formal introductions will be made this evening before witnesses. A number of representatives are already here from the Seven Houses. What happened this morning was a breach of protocol, but obviously it could not be avoided. Luckily, Mistress Leora had already approved the match, so it will not be a problem."

Valyn breathed a sigh of relief. He knew custom and tradition was of utmost importance on Ebonnia and that his meeting with Katriel could be called unexpected at best. Yet, although he understood the need for maintaining protocol, the urge to return to the manor and locate Katriel was overwhelming.

Noah opened the door and stepped inside. "Come."

Valyn noticed a staircase to the side of the hallway that went in both directions. Noah placed a foot on the first step heading upward, and pointed to the stairs going down.

"You know the location of the main, front staircase. The formal entry goes all the way to the fourth floor. These stairs are used mainly by the servants and extend down to the catacombs and on up to the roof. On the fourth floor there is another short set of stairs that lead from the fourth floor up into the observatory dome on the roof."

He began to ascend and Valyn followed. When they reached a thick, very solid door, Noah opened it, and they again walked out into sunlight. Valyn saw the dome at the very center of the roof and realized that once past the door, they were on what probably was a low-walled, defined pathway that circled the complete perimeter of the manor.

"With me," Noah directed as he began to follow the narrow path around to the front of the house and stopped.

Valyn looked out over the compound and the surrounding landscape, surprised at the expansiveness and beauty of the Leah Estate.

"From here one sometimes feels they can almost see beyond the horizon. As long as things are quiet, there will be four guards posted here on the roof. On the outer wall circuiting the compound, there are normally ten guards; that number has been doubled since the recent attacks. There are two main gates into the compound, as you probably noticed when we arrived. The first remains open during the day. Visitors stop at the second to state their business, then are allowed to pass into the compound." He faced Valyn. "As future Alpha to Katriel, you must become familiar with the routine of the compound and become acquainted with the faces and the names of those who serve here."

"I understand."

Noah smiled. "You will be formally accepted this evening. As of today, you are free to move about the compound as you will, but with a guard in attendance, of course. Go ahead and explore, become comfortable with your new home. Let us return to the other side of the wall."

Valyn accompanied him toward the back of the house. The Arcadian mountains formed a natural protective barrier at the back of the estate. Just below where they stood, he saw lush gardens and a temple at the end of a path.

"Below us are the formal gardens. To the left are the combat exercise yard and the weapons room. The Drudian grounds temple is at the end of the garden path."

One of the house guards strode up to them and Noah turned to him.

“Sec Noah, Mistress Leora requires your presence in her office.”

Noah nodded. “I will go to her immediately.” He turned back to Valyn. “I must attend Mistress Leora, so I will leave you to continue your exploration.”

“Thank you for taking the time to show me around, Sec Noah.”

Noah placed a hand on his shoulder. “I think you will do well here, Valyn Ozero. The protection and nurturing of Mistress Leora’s beloved daughter will soon be in your hands. Treasure her well.” His eyes turned to pinpoints of hard rock. “Or you will answer to me, not only our Mistress.”

Chapter Thirteen

Leora sat at the desk in her office reviewing the contract that Katriel and Valyn would sign at the Blood Rite ceremony. Noah was correct in that Valyn had all the makings of an excellent Alpha for Katriel. She breathed a little easier knowing she had chosen well for her daughter. Yet, had she really been the one to do the choosing? She had to wonder.

It had been so long ago that she had first seen him on Illumata. She had returned earlier from the meeting than she had anticipated and had been standing at the window when she had seen them in the alley.

Her first instinct had been fear for her daughter's safety. She had spent her life trying to protect Katriel from danger. But something caused her to pause in issuing orders to the guard and instead she watched the interchange, and at this moment she was glad she had.

Instead of raging at Katriel when she returned to her room, she had sent one of the guards to follow the young man when he had finally left. She discovered he was an Eclipsian apprentice, that his name was Valyn Ozero, and she had received a report of his background -- and then filed the information away.

Katriel had never mentioned her encounter with the Eclipsian apprentice and Leora had not pressed her to reveal it.

All these years Katriel had fought against mention of a union, and turned any conversation to other matters. Leora had her own, selfish reasons for not pursuing the necessary union more vigorously. Had it been wrong to do so?

Katriel was her last tangible link with her Alpha, Adrik. When Katriel mated their relationship would alter, and she would lose that last part of her first love. She had known it was not in Katriel's best interests to ignore the need for the bonding, but at the thought of losing her child to her maturity, to her own power, was more difficult than she ever could have imagined.

She had not realized the full extent of her failure to Katriel until she had seen them together earlier today. Only then had it struck her that this bonding between them had been cast by fate long ago.

A knock sounded at the door and she looked up as Tish timidly entered her office. "Mistress, there is a visitor below demanding to meet with you."

"Who is it? Did he give you his name?"

Tish shook her head. "No, Mistress. But he said it was urgent he meet with you -- a matter of life and death." Tish reached out and placed a gold ring on the edge of her desk. "He said to give you this and you would understand."

"Really." She closed the file on her desk, set it to the side, then reached across to pick up the ring. "What does he look like?"

"I could not say, Mistress. He wears a cloak with a hood. But he is very tall."

Leora glanced down at the ring and her eyes widened at the familiar seal etched into the wide signet ring. "Have him wait and send someone to locate Sec Noah and ask him to attend me. At once."

Tish curtsied. "Yes, Mistress. Right away," and she turned and hurried out of the room.

Leora stood, walked over to the window and looked out, the ring clasped tightly in her left hand. All seemed quiet. Nothing was amiss. Maybe it was too quiet. There had been no word of any new attacks in recent days and an uneasy calm had seemed to settle over the estate.

Who was their visitor? He apparently carried a message from Malik as the ring was engraved with the seal of Favion. After all these years, what could be so urgent as to merit an unplanned visit from across the borders?

She turned as her door again opened and Noah entered.

"What is amiss?" he asked as he reached her side.

"We have a visitor below stairs, but he will not give his name." She held out the ring to him and he accepted it from her, studied it, and then look at her questioningly.

"What insignia is it?"

She turned back to gaze out the window. "It is Favion -- Malik's house. He told Tish it is a matter of life and death. I thought you should be here when I meet with him."

"Assuredly, Mistress. There is too much danger around us for you to meet with anyone alone. Trust no one."

She nodded and then sighed with exasperation. "I know. I wish I knew the identity of our latest scourge." Turning, she walked back to once again sit behind her desk.

"Maybe this visitor will have information we can use, but tell him nothing," Noah cautioned.

She hit a button embedded in the side of her desk. After several seconds Tish appeared. "Yes, Mistress?"

"You may show our visitor in now."

After Tish left on her errand, Leora turned to look at Noah. "Valyn?"

"Is occupied in an exploration of the compound. I thought he needed to work out some of the soreness and get a feel for the layout of the estate."

Leora nodded. "Good idea. He will need to become familiar quickly. I sense whoever is below does not bring us good news. Having so many people housed on the grounds not of Leah makes me nervous enough."

"All are on alert."

"Katriel? Should I summon more guards for her? At least until we determine who this unexpected visitor is?"

Noah cupped the side of her face with his large hand. What would she do without his strength? She closed her eyes and inhaled his scent.

"All is well, Mistress. This visitor would not have gotten past the inner gate without proper identification. You know that."

Releasing a deep sigh, she opened her eyes and turned away. "You are right. These attacks have me on edge. And until Katriel is mated she is not as protected as I would like." She sighed. "I have put it off too long. She is so vulnerable, and she has no idea what dangers await. It is why I allowed the ingestion of his blood so soon. I feel time is running out and she must be protected." She felt his strong hands on her shoulder.

"Valyn is capable, Beloved."

The door opened to admit the tall, cloaked figure. Noah removed his hands and assumed the position of attendance. Leora could feel the change in him the moment their visitor entered the room. Gone was her lover, and in his place stood a lethal warrior prepared to do whatever was required to defend her and keep her safe.

The stranger halted before her desk and threw back the hood of his cloak. She gasped in recognition.

"Malik!"

He stepped closer to the desk and Noah took a defensive step forward, his hand resting on the hilt of the sword in the scabbard at his side. "No further," he growled in warning.

Malik stopped and offered a feral smile, baring his deadly fangs, but his hands were extended, palms upward in a gesture of peace. His black eyes were focused on Leora.

"Leora. Sister. It has been a long time."

She reached up to touch Noah's arm to stay his hand. "It is all right, Noah. This is my brother, Malik, Patriarch of the House of Favion."

Malik had been fostered to the House of Favion when he was fourteen. The patriarch of Favion had sired one male heir who had been killed in the mines, and eventually Malik had ascended to the head of the house.

Malik's gaze shifted, assessing Noah. "Your Alpha, Sister?"

"Noah is my Second Attend."

"Ah, yes. I remember hearing your Alpha was killed some time ago." His words seemed to dismiss Noah as unimportant and he shifted back to Leora. "You disappeared for a time, if I remember correctly. Brought home a stray with you, did you?"

Leora felt Noah stiffen at the slight, and she tightened her grip. "Heed my words, *Brother*. You will give my Secondary Attendant all the respect you would expect to offer my Alpha. Any disrespect to him is disrespect to me." She removed her hand from Noah's arm and leaned forward over the desk. "Do we understand each other?" she hissed.

Malik's expression betrayed nothing, but he nodded regally. "As you wish, Sister. My apologies."

She relaxed back in her chair. "Very well. Please sit." She waved a hand toward the chair on the other side of the desk. "What brings you all the way across the planet after all these years? I assume it is not strictly a familial wish to see your sister."

Malik was second born; she had seen little of him over the years, except at the formal gatherings in Onyx City once a year. She knew he was mated, had been formally introduced to his mate. She had received the announcement of the births of his children. Yet, there was little direct, ongoing contact usually between the Houses of the Crimson Sun and the Houses of the Twin Moons, forestalling problems. So this visit by Malik was unexpected at best.

He nodded and folded himself into the chair. "I hear your daughter is to be bound soon."

"Your spies keep you well informed," she conceded.

"Ah, well, it pays to be cautious in this world of ours. Do you not agree?"

"Indeed. Continue."

"You were attacked recently, as several of the other Valley Houses have been attacked."

"Yes. Do you know something about that? Do you know who is behind it?"

He was a master at keeping his thoughts hidden, had been so even in his youth, and she could glean nothing from his expression. What did he know?

"We believe we might have an idea of who the instigators are."

"And that would be?" she asked impatiently. Was he going to make her pull every last bit of information out of him word by word?

"Believe it or not the threat comes from our own people. Young ones who do not believe the stories of our ancestors. And they are now led by a bloodtaker of another species

named Korridian who has harnessed the lethal strength of the Vawndra and its blood for his own evil purposes. He thinks to gain control of Ebonnia by using our own people against us.”

“What are you saying? That there is a group of insurgents out there who think the horror was a fantasy? That Sangorrian did not prey on Sangorrian, as well as other life forms, that our species was almost entirely exterminated because of it?”

He nodded. “That is exactly what I am saying. Korridian has warped their way of thinking. He has a silver tongue that apparently makes every word out of his mouth seem like truth, at least to our youth. At his direction, they are hunting for breeding-age Sangorrian females to achieve their goal of pure blood. And they will continue to attack until they are successful in obtaining what they seek.”

“They cannot possibly think we will allow them to succeed?” she gasped. “Our trade contracts with the other planets, everything hinges on our maintaining the dilution of Sangorrian blood. Generations of matings have proven we can maintain the balance and interact with other species. They would destroy us all with their demented plans.”

“You are right,” he said. “They must be stopped. At all costs. My feeling is that once he has brought our world to its knees and we bend to his rule, he will use our people to gain control of others.”

“Why have you come here, Malik?” She was certain there was something he was not telling her.

“They are demented, yet cunning.” She saw something flash across his face and she felt a shadow walk through her soul.

“What has happened, Malik? What would bring you speeding across the planet like this? How do you know so much about this Korridian? There have been problems before -- you have handled yours and we have handled ours. Why come to me now?”

A look of utter devastation crossed his face. “They attacked the Seven House of the Twin Moons. They have weakened us beyond recovery.”

“What are you saying? Have they killed the other patriarchs?”

“No. It is worse than that.” She saw him glance quickly at Noah then back to her. “They have destroyed all seven mates to the patriarchs. All of them. They had spies planted in each of the Houses we never expected and then waged a full attack when we were at our yearly communion.”

Leora reeled backward in her chair. Noah leaned down to her in concern, but she waved him away. “How could it have happened? All of them?”

He nodded slowly. “Brutally. It was apparently a statement of hate for the peace our ... females brought us. You cannot know what we found upon returning from our council meeting -- the horror ...” He stopped speaking and she saw him swallow hard.

“What will you do? How will you survive without them? How will you fight?” He was right; they had been crippled beyond belief.

“How are you surviving?”

“Dragon’s blood. They think to force us to drink other human blood. They bait us with wine laced with Vawndra blood, leaving decanters of it at our doors, hoping we will weaken and drink them, making us a part of Korridian’s brethren, unable to think or do for ourselves. Seeking only the power and corruption of the blood. But we will not resort to that. Loyalty to our species and our way of life goes much deeper. It is why the others have sent me to you. To warn you. We must band together to fight for our way of life, or see it destroyed forever. We have come too far to lose everything we have gained. Your females are not safe. Trust no one in your household. No one. They were unsuccessful in capturing any of our females, thank Druda. But it was close. We have trackers out trying to locate their hiding place.” He paused for a moment, but seemed to have more to add.

“What else?” Leora coaxed gently.

“There is something else -- a favor I would ask.”

“What is it? How can we be of help?”

“I have brought my daughter, Aurya, to you. She is sixteen and I should have released her to you in the recent fostering ceremonies. It is no longer safe for her in the Darlinean Mountains. We are crippled and ... I am unable to protect her. Will you allow her to foster with you?”

“How did she survive the attack?”

“Her mother apparently was forewarned in some way. Naluet had a special gift of sometimes being able to see future happenings. I can only surmise she saw what was to come and hid Aurya away where they were unable to find her. Communication has been sporadic between the Houses since the attack -- none know she has survived. We no longer can be certain of whom to trust.”

“Yes, of course she may stay, we will protect her as best we can as we would our own. Did you find out who the traitor in your household was?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “I found out his identity, but he got away before he could be captured.”

“Who was it?”

He raised a tortured gaze to hers. “It was my son, Evonne. In each of the Houses, they gained access through one that was least likely to be suspect.”

“My god! Matricide?”

He nodded. “Beware, Leora. Trust no one. All is at risk.”

* * * * *

Katriel sat before the dressing table as Tish combed her hair. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment of quiet. “Mmmm, that feels good.”

“Did your rest help, Lady?”

“Yes, thank you, it did. I am much more refreshed.”

“I think you will enjoy the evening. You will have a chance to talk with your Alpha and get to know him better.”

“That is if he wants to know me. After this morning’s fiasco I would not be surprised if he might entertain second thoughts about this union.” Hot embarrassment flooded her as she remembered the mad dash into her mother’s office. She still was not sure exactly what had come over her to make her do that. The fiery emotions still swirled beneath the surface, but she felt more able to control her reactions as she became used to the more powerful presence ingesting Valyn’s blood seemed to have created.

“Do not be distressed over it. The first infusion of his blood affected you more powerfully than was anticipated. You will be more prepared the next time.”

“I practically attacked him. He will be rather leery of coming around me after that episode.”

Tish giggled. “No, Lady, I hardly think so. He seemed very taken with you.”

She swiveled around to look up at Tish anxiously. “Do you really think so?”

Tish nodded. “Yes, indeed. He did not appear sorry for the bargain he made. It appeared to me he was taking his position as your Alpha very much to heart. Now turn back, please, so I can finish your hair. You look lovely, and he will think so as well.”

Katriel wondered if he would. She looked at herself critically in the mirror. The ruby and gold silk dress was new and fit her to perfection. The sleeves draped down to a point and touched the floor. The bodice clung to her breasts emphasizing their youthful, firm roundness, dropping down to emphasize her narrow waist; the back of the dress draped low, exposing the smooth, alabaster slope of her back.

At her neck she wore a black onyx choker, and her hair was left free and unadorned to fall in silky waves reaching to the backs of her knees. She studied her reflection in the mirror. Would he think her pretty?

She remembered the kiss he gave her that morning. Reaching up, she touched her lips, remembering the hard pressure of his. Again she tasted his blood, felt him graze his tongue against her incisor. He had somehow known what she needed, and he had provided it without question.

She still could not believe it was her golden savior, the man she had longed to be with over the intervening years. It was like a dream. The reality still had not seemed to quite settle in.

What would it be like to make love with him? To sink her fangs into his chest and to feed on his warm, rich lifeblood? Her body tingled at the thought. She licked her lips, hungry for something she had never had before. What would he do when they were alone? How would he touch her?

Valyn Ozero. She liked his name, and it held such strong meaning for her. It was the name of the man who shortly would belong to her. It was a strong name. And Tish had been right. He was a very handsome man. He had made her a vow so many years ago, and he had kept it. Somehow he had made it real. One short magical night had led to this. How could that one chance meeting have forged a bond so tight that seven years later it still felt as powerful, if not more so, than it had back then.

Tradition required that they not be allowed to be alone until the bonding. Tonight they would meet formally for the first time and be allowed to spend time together. Tomorrow, again they would spend time, but always with a chaperone. The next day would mark the beginning of the nights of the dark moon and their bonding would be consummated.

She was glad he had succeeded. A pulsing heat spread through her at the thought of the bonding that would take place. Then the Blood Rite the following day.

One would expect the Blood Rite to occur before the bonding, but it was Sangorrian law that the compatibility be established before the contracts and exchange of blood occurred. When they signed the contracts, they would already be mated for eternity. The contracts were strictly a formality. Once signed they would be kept by the Druda priestesses in the temple at Druda Province.

It frightened her and it excited her. She had already tasted his blood, and tasted him. And she was eager for more. She had seen her mother and Sec Noah together and wanted to experience what they shared.

A pall settled over her as she remembered her own sire had died before she was born. Her mother's Alpha had sacrificed his life saving both of them. Her eternity was short-lived. Katriel's heart beat faster. She did not want Valyn to die. But how did one go about protecting the protector? If there was a way, she vowed she would find it.

There was a knock at the door and Tish set down the hairbrush and went to open it. She returned carrying a goblet.

"It is time, Lady."

Katriel looked at her anxiously. "Are you sure?"

Tish nodded. "It will be fine. Your Alpha awaits. He sends a message to you with his lifeblood. If you have need of him simply send word and he will come to you with haste." She nodded her head toward the door. "A servant stands outside the door just in case."

Katriel picked up the goblet and brought it to her lips and drank. Oddly, she trusted him to do exactly that. The drink was warm and silky, the taste now familiar, as she swallowed. She felt it work its magic, felt a powerful surge of heat radiate through her as his blood combined with hers.

By the heavens, she felt like she was ready to explode. She inhaled deeply and worked to control her desires. If he were here before her, she would be compelled to sink her fangs into his chest and take from him, to possess him and be possessed by him.

The blood inside her screamed for completion. Need sang throughout her body, his blood calling her to him. She could control this on her own, she would control it. The inner turmoil of vibrant emotions swirled inside as she battled for control, determined to win.

Finally, she turned and glanced at Tish's anxious face. "It is all right." She smiled and handed her the empty glass. Although a slow simmer burned inside her she did not want to worry Tish. "I must be with him, but I am in control -- for the moment. Send word to him that I will see him later. Thank him for his concern."

"Yes, Lady. You have done well."

Yes, she had controlled it this time, but for how much longer? She knew what to expect now, but each time the need was more intense. Three more days she must survive. Each day would bring the driving need closer to a fever pitch she could not control. It was enough of a taste to make her burn for him.

That was why they did it. So the mating would be easier on her, so she might have some idea what to expect when they came together. But, by heaven, she needed him now.

Chapter Fourteen

As Katriel descended the main stairs, crossed the entrance hall and proceeded down the corridor leading to the formal ceremonial hall, her stomach tightened with anticipation, as well as dread at the thought of being the center of attention.

She knew many of the representatives from the other houses had arrived earlier today. Several of the vacant bedroom suites on the second floor near her own apartments were now occupied and the house guards along the hallway seemed to have tripled in number.

She hesitated at the door of the ceremonial hall, then nodded to the footman, who opened the door. The hum of a crowd of voices filled her hearing as she entered the formal reception room. Katriel could not believe the number of people in attendance for the Formal Presentation.

So much formality made her nervous as she was used to a much simpler, quieter atmosphere in their home. She had attended only one ceremonial gathering at a meeting with the other Houses in the Aurora Valley with her mother earlier this year, and it would take some getting used to as her duties would require her to make such formal appearances on a more regular basis.

Living in such a protective atmosphere as the daughters tended to be made the presentation into the outside world that much more difficult. She made a promise to herself that she would not do the same to a daughter of hers. She would have more freedoms; there simply had to be a way to allow for that and to reform some of the suffocating barricades that now existed for Sangorrian females.

Glancing around the room she searched for Valyn, studying each face and then moving on. He had not yet arrived. Her stomach fluttered in anticipation.

“Katriel.” She turned at the sound of her mother’s voice.

"I am here, Mother." She walked to where she stood at the front of the room, Sec Noah in attendance at her side. Katriel thought he looked quite dashing dressed in formal attire, his long dark hair pulled back with a golden chain.

His black and gold clothing complemented the dress her mother wore -- a long flowing creation of black shimmering with gold threading throughout. The sleeves hugged tightly to her arms and the long skirt swirled around her lower body.

Her hair was braided and crowned her head. Delicate golden chain was threaded through the braiding that matched the chain Noah wore. Although Leora looked every inch the powerful matriarch she was, her figure and face were that of a much younger, very beautiful woman, appearing not much older than Katriel. In fact, she seemed ageless to Katriel.

She walked to her mother's side. As she reached her, there was a murmur in the room and she turned to see what caused it, catching her breath as Valyn entered the room.

He wore an outfit that seemed designed to complement her dress. The black silk pants stretched across his thickly muscled legs, the crimson silk shirt flowed effortlessly across the breadth of his broad shoulders, and tall, flawlessly polished black leather boots completed the look.

His long golden hair was caught back with a black silk ribbon at the nape of his neck. He was flanked by two guards escorting him. She watched as he stopped at the doorway and searched the overcrowded room.

Katriel noted the envious looks of the women, many of whom were her own age, seeking a mate for themselves. A sense of possession filled her, knowing he would soon belong to her in every way.

Finally, his gaze rested on her and she noted the blue fire of recognition and she heated beneath that look. She could not look away from him.

"He has arrived, Katriel. We will begin the ceremony of Formal Introduction and then you will have time to speak with him in order to become better acquainted."

She watched him stride toward her across the room as though nothing would stand in the way of his reaching her side. Did she say she would possess him? It was more like he possessed her with that look.

"Katriel, did you hear me?"

"Yes, Mother, I did. Let us get this formality over with. I have waited long enough. I want to be with him."

He reached her side and lifting both of her hands, brought them to his lips. A shaft of lightning passed through her and she shuddered at its power.

"Lady, you are as beautiful as I remember," he murmured and his deep, rumbling voice washed over her.

She broke eye contact, and looked away, embarrassed by the emotions surging inside her. "You are most gracious."

"Come with me," her mother's voice directed behind them. "Let us get the formal introduction over with before you both sing a hole in my reception hall." She turned with a flourish and Noah escorted her to a platform at the corner of the room. Katriel followed with Valyn at her side and two guards trailing after them.

There were two footmen at either side of the raised red platform who held sets of golden bell chimes. Leora nodded to them as she walked past and mounted the dais. They rang the bells drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Silence reined in anticipation of the forthcoming announcement.

Katriel and Valyn followed Leora and Noah onto the platform and the guards waited nearby.

"Welcome everyone. Thank you for coming. You have been invited here to witness and share with us a happy occasion. It is with great joy I announce the bonding of my daughter and only child, Katriel." She turned toward Katriel and motioned for her to join her on her left. Katriel stepped forward, her stomach aflutter.

"I have approved the application of Valyn Ozero of Illumata. He has met the challenge and proven himself a worthy protector and shall become Alpha Predominant to Katriel, bound in Primary Union three days hence to be formalized in the Blood Rite Bonding ceremony immediately thereafter." She turned to Valyn.

"Welcome to the House of Leah, Valyn of Illumata." She reached for his hand and placed Katriel's hand in his. Then she looked at Katriel. "Katriel, beloved daughter of the House of Leah, this is your intended mate, Valyn of Illumata. May you find joy in your bound futures. Let us rejoice on this happy occasion."

A surge of voices rushed through the room with murmured approval and accompanied by a clapping of hands in agreement. Shouts of "happiness" filled the air. Leora motioned for quiet once more. "Musicians proceed. Let us celebrate." She stepped from the platform with Noah at her side. Katriel and Valyn followed them.

Valyn turned to Katriel. "Would you dance with me, Lady?"

Unable to find her voice, she nodded and he clasped her hand and led her to the dance floor. As they twirled around the floor, his firm hands guiding her, she mused on how skilled he appeared to be in all ways. He had obviously been well taught at the temple on Illumata.

He spun her about the dance floor, never missing a step, and when the tune came to an end she was breathless, yet he was not even breathing hard.

"A walk in the garden perhaps to refresh you?"

"Yes," she gasped, "that would be wonderful."

He touched her elbow and guided her through the doorway and out into the torch lit, walled garden. She heard the steps of the guards as they followed them outside, knowing she would not have an opportunity to be alone with him, but wishing it were otherwise.

The twin gray moons were almost totally shrouded in the sky, and Katriel knew it meant they would soon be hidden from view. It also meant the time of mating was not far off. The night air was fragrant with the scent of evening flora mingling with the ever present hot spiciness of Ebonnian earth. The knowledge of Valyn's blood weaving its spell and running through her veins only served to heighten her senses. What a heady mixture it all was.

"Would you care to sit? So we can talk and get to know each other better?" he asked.

"Yes, I would like that."

He led her to a black marble bench that overlooked a small reflecting pond.

She took a deep breath. "I must apologize for this morning."

"You have nothing to apologize for." He linked her fingers with his. With his other hand he tipped her chin upward. "I am here to provide for you. You had a need and you sought me out. There is nothing wrong in that. It is my right to offer you solace. May I always be there when you need me."

His intense, searching gaze held hers a long moment and then she looked away toward the pond. He made her want things she should not want -- not yet anyway.

"I still cannot believe you are here -- it feels like a dream."

"Did you think I would not keep my vow?" His eyes burned through her.

She tore her gaze away and looked down at the ground.

"I know what they call us on other planets. Why would you want to come here knowing others will turn away from you? Or knowing the danger you put yourself in." She turned her head to look up at him. How handsome he looked sitting there beneath the flare of the torchlight. She found it difficult to maintain her calm.

He smiled. "I did not make my vow lightly, Katriel. I knew the moment I saw you that I could not dedicate my life to the brotherhood as was expected. You were my future. I did not know why, or how, but I knew it would be so."

She had also felt the connection, but had not understood how deeply he was affected also. "Yes, but I was quite young. I never expected to find you there. I should not have slipped out, but it was as though I needed to be free of the confines of that room. I was suffocating, yet once I got to the alley, I knew I should not have done it. Then you came, and everything changed."

He nodded. "I was meant to be your mate, Katriel. Everything I have learned at the temple will be put to good use on Ebonnia, to protect you, to love you."

"My sire was an Eclipsian apprentice. I never knew what that meant before. I mean, is it not like a priesthood where you dedicate your life to some higher purpose?"

He nodded. "Yes, the majority do seek oneness with a higher purpose. For the most part, it is not a sequestered order, cloistered away from the world. It teaches that we learn from the world and people around us, must not judge the tests that are presented to us. Each test faced and surmounted empowers us to be and to serve the greater good of civilization. We learn from all sectors of life so that when our true purpose is revealed we have a better chance of recognizing it, and following." He looked down at her and brushed his fingertips down the side of her face. "I knew my purpose when I saw you. There was no question of another course for me. I expect the same was true of your sire."

"You took a chance that my mother would accept you?"

"I prepared for acceptance. And I had faith in the higher power that had drawn us together that one night."

There was much more to this man than she could have imagined. Not only was he brave and intelligent, but he was very determined.

A gentle breeze blew an errant silky lock of his hair forward. Instinctively, she reached up with a hand to brush it back into place. Capturing her gaze, he raised a hand to hers and brought her palm to his mouth and placed a kiss at its heart and a sharp, electrical tingle raced up her arm.

She traced a finger down the side of his face, remembering the trickle of blood she had wiped away that night. "I kept it," she murmured.

He raised a golden brow, questioning. "What did you keep?"

"The piece of cloth you ripped from your tunic that night." She looked down at her fingers. "The one you used to wipe the blood from my claws -- and I used to wipe the blood from your face."

"You still have it?"

Heat suffused her body as she remembered when she had released it, assuming it represented a past she would always long for, but never have. She had envied the bond between the Jotar warriors, primitive as it had seemed on that night. She had craved for the warmth of another, not just a memory.

Turning her face upward, she drank in each shadow and nuance of his expression. "It seems that at the very moment when I gave up any hope of having you and released that last vestige that tied us together, the memory was replaced by the reality of you being here."

He lowered his head, his lips, like the flutter of wings, whispered along the curve of her cheek.

"How long did you keep it?" he breathed against her lips.

"Apparently, as long as I needed it. It contained your scent, your essence, all I had of you. I could not bear to part with it. But then my mother arranged the union. I never knew your name. You took mine, but before I could ask for yours, you were gone. I only remembered you as my golden protector. All these years I fought union with another

because of my memory of you. I had to release your memory in order to move forward. It was the night before you returned from the challenge.”

She traced a finger along his smooth shaven jaw, as though trying to memorize him. “When I drank your blood, I knew then. And I had to find you. My body recognized your scent and responded so fiercely because of it.”

Her fingers trailed down his neck to rest at the pulse beating there. Her gaze riveted to that spot as though drawn there by something unseen. She licked her lips, then smoothed a hand across his silky shirt to rest on the muscles of his chest. “I will take from you there. Above your heart,” she whispered. “You know what I am. You know what I need.” She felt the muscles of his chest ripple and tighten. Her fingers curled and fisted in his shirt and she raised her gaze to meet his. “I will pierce your skin and drink your lifeblood.”

He nodded, his solemn, intense blue eyes fixed on her. “I am eager for the time I will feel your mouth upon my skin, to feel the sweet ache of your possession. It pleases me to know that my taste and scent will become part of you. Forever.” His eyes darkened. “But, remember, I shall possess you as well. And rest assured, I ache to know that possession.”

Her breathing increased at the deep, hypnotizing quality of his voice. “How can you want this? How could anyone want to be linked with a woman who needs his blood to survive?”

He cupped her head with both his hands and leaned close. She could feel his breath against her skin, could almost taste his skin. “Because,” he whispered, “I want you, and only you.”

She closed her eyes, her breath whooshed from her lungs, and he pulled her closer. His warm hands against her naked back sent shivers down her spine. “The need frightens me,” she whispered. “What if I lose control? When I took your blood this morning, a wildness consumed me like never before, something I could not restrain.”

He stroked her hair. “I should have been there for you. No one knew it would affect you so deeply the first time. When we are mated, I will help you harness the power my blood brings to you.”

She looked up at him. “I do not want to hurt you. I worry that my ancestors’ penchant for killing runs through me and I will not stop.”

“It will not happen,” he assured her. He stroked his fingers along her neck, then gently pulled back from her and stood. “I think we should go back inside.”

“Why?”

“You are too much temptation for me out here. It is going to be a long three days as it is,” he offered her a crooked grin. “It is a good thing I can work off some of this energy with battle practice.”

She stood up and her expression sobered. “You were hurt in the battle with the Vawndra. I saw your wounds.”

"They are healing rapidly."

"You were very brave to defeat the dragon and save those women and children. I hear the servants speak of your feat."

He smiled. "From what I hear they have expanded on the tale."

"Possibly, but the fact still remains that you did save those women and children from certain death."

He reached into a pocket in his pants and she looked curiously at a tiny satchel he withdrew. He opened it and something small and white dropped into the palm of his hand. He reached for her hand and dropped it into her palm.

"What is it?"

"A piece of the dragon's tooth."

Her eyes widened at the reality of what she held in her hand. A fragment it might be, but still as large as her smallest finger. "You brought it from the cave?"

"In a manner of speaking. The healer removed it from my arm before stitching it up. He gave it to me for luck." He gripped her hand with his and curled her fingers over the object. "I give my luck to you for safekeeping. My life is yours."

Tears pooled in her eyes at the enormity of the gift he offered her.

"I will care for it with all that I am, Valyn Ozero. I would want no other as my protector and Alpha."

She reached up and placed a soft, lingering kiss on his hard lips. After a moment, he lifted his head.

"It really is time for us to go inside." He took the tooth fragment from her, placed it inside the small bag and handed it back to her.

Some devil made her place the small satchel in the valley of her breasts, well hidden beneath the bodice of the dress. She heard him inhale sharply.

"You will most certainly serve as a harsh test of my will power."

He pulled her arm through his and strode toward the doors to the ceremonial hall.

She pulled back just a second before they entered. "I am sorry. Is it difficult spending time with me?"

He reached for her hand. "It is an exercise in self-restraint, but I would not have it any other way. I have become an expert over the years." He guided her inside. She blinked at the bright light, trying to accustom herself to the change from the quiet of the garden.

As they entered the ballroom a servant approached with two glasses of wine. "Sir, Lady. Mistress thought you might like a glass of refreshment." He carefully handed Katriel one glass and then the other to Valyn.

An odd feeling swept through Katriel and she studied the servant intently. He seemed to be watching Valyn closely as he raised the glass toward his lips. There was almost a look of ...

"Wait, Valyn," she cried out and thrust her glass toward him, spilling some of the contents onto the floor. "This is too much for me. Your glass contains less, please switch with me."

Looking at her in confusion, the glass hovering near his lips for a brief second before he nodded and handed it to her. "There does not seem to be much of a difference to me, but if you think there is, you are welcome ..."

"No!" the servant shouted and knocked the glass from her hand before she could raise it to her mouth.

A surge of anger like nothing she had ever experienced before raced through her. In a blur, she whirled away from Valyn, struck out, and grasped the servant by the throat, her claws penetrating his skin, her lips drawn back in a feral snarl.

"What was in the wine?" she hissed. "Who do you serve?"

He choked, grabbing at her hand as with superhuman strength she began to lift him from the ground. He fought to breathe as his lifeblood trickled past her fingers and down his neck. His eyes rolled back in fear as he frantically fought to release her grip on his neck.

She felt rather than saw the fear of the guests as they hurriedly stepped away from her. All she could think was that she wanted this traitor dead. He had meant to kill her mate; she had seen it in his eyes.

A firm hand gripped her shoulder. "Let him go, Katriel," Valyn commanded in a low voice. "If you kill him, he can tell us nothing."

"He would have killed you," she snarled, her gaze locked with that of the servant. "He is a traitor, a spy sent to live among us. An assassin like the one who killed my father." At that moment she knew the blood of her ancestors raged through her body. She wanted desperately to drain this traitor's blood from his body and to see him lifeless at her feet.

"We cannot find out who hired him if you do not let him go."

His hands reached around her to grip her wrist. She felt his breath near her ear. She blinked, then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. His voice finally penetrated the thick haze of red rage that clouded her from thinking clearly.

Her claws retracted and she released him. The servant fell to the floor, grabbing at his throat and wheezing for air.

"Take him to my office," she heard her mother command. "Hold him until I get there."

The adrenalin rush that ran through Katriel evaporated quickly. She shook so badly that if Valyn had not been supporting her, she would have fallen to the floor. Powers that be, Valyn could have been killed. She had never felt such all-consuming hate overtake her and it frightened her, nor had she ever had the power to lift someone from the ground. She would

have killed the servant without a thought or the least bit of remorse. Is that what ingesting Valyn's blood did to her?

She turned in Valyn's arms unable to face the people in the room. She would have killed the servant right there and then if it had not been for Valyn. He bent toward her, stroking her hair with his hand. "Are you all right?"

She took a deep, cleansing breath and nodded against his shoulder. His gentle touch and voice soothed her, and she felt her control returning.

"You are certain?"

Slowly she pulled back from him. "I will be all right."

"What happened, Katri?" her mother asked.

She turned to look at her. "He brought us wine and said you had sent him. But there was something odd about the way he looked at Valyn. I sensed something was wrong." She shuddered.

Leora placed a steadying hand on her arm. "You did well, daughter. Noah will accompany me to question him. Maybe finally we can find out something useful."

Katriel wanted to protest. It was Valyn, her Alpha, the servant had intended to kill. She should be there to hear what he had to say. "I should come with you."

Her mother shook her head. "No, you have been through enough. Valyn would you be so good as to escort Katriel to her apartments? The guards will accompany you."

"But, Mother ..."

"No," her mother halted her protest. "Enough for tonight. We will talk in the morning. For now, you will do as I ask. Trust me in this." She turned and on Noah's arm she swept out of the ballroom.

"Come," Valyn urged, "Can you walk?"

"Yes, I will be fine." Without looking at the other people in the room, on shaking legs she made her way out, her arm linked securely through Valyn's.

Chapter Fifteen

When they reached her apartment, as protocol demanded, Valyn would have left her, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Please," she whispered, "do not leave me yet. I do not want to be alone with my own thoughts. I do not want to be without you. Not right now."

He hesitated, then nodded. Holding the door for her, he allowed her to precede him into the room.

Torches burned low and Tish awaited. She rushed toward them when they entered. "Lady, are you all right? I heard what happened."

"I am fine, Tish. Would you bring us some Aurora tea? I feel dreadfully cold all of a sudden." She rubbed her hands along her forearms. She knew it must be reaction to the incident, but she could not seem to get warm.

She wished she were stronger -- more like her mother. Because of the ingestion of small amounts of Valyn's blood, she could feel her power growing, but it was not enough. He could have been killed. She could have lost him just as they had found each other again, and that was something she could not have borne.

Tish hesitated, bit her lower lip, and looked at Valyn.

"Oh, send in one of the guards if you are worried about leaving us alone and breaking protocol," Katriel said in frustration.

Tish nodded and hurriedly left the room. One of the guards from outside entered. Katriel huffed and turned away.

"Come sit down," Valyn encouraged her.

"I cannot," she said, pacing the room. Abruptly, she stopped and looked up at him. "I am a monster, how can you stand there so calmly? I would have killed him. With no regret."

And do you see now how your life will be in danger every second because of your association with me?"

His eyes did not judge her, his look quiet and supportive. "Katriel, you did what you needed to do. You did not kill him. You let him go. And I have made my own choice to be here."

She shuddered, remembering. "Only because you stopped me. If you had not stopped me, I would have ripped his throat out. I know I would have. I was that filled with rage. That has never happened before."

He enfolded her in his arms. She wanted to resist, but could not -- she needed his warmth. "You did stop -- for me. And that is part of the bonding. You stopped because I asked you to stop."

"But what if you had not been there -- what if the next time you are not there?" She trembled at the thought of this part of her nature. It was a part she did not want to acknowledge and was not sure she could control. A part of her wanted the power, knowing she would need it when it came time for her to take her place as Mistress. But she also feared it. She had never needed it before, and it frightened her that she required it now. There had been some value to remaining cocooned by the strength of her mother's protection. By remaining swaddled in the safety of the compound for much of her life, she had never been faced with these types of decisions before. It rattled her to be confronted by them now.

The world as she knew it was changing, and she did not understand it. Someone had tried to kill her Alpha. She looked up at Valyn, and for the first time understood the immensity of the bond they would make -- had already made. And understood to some extent why her mother had taken the blood oath. Yet, even that had been a controlled hunt, not the red rage that had consumed Katriel earlier tonight. How had she continued without her Alpha? Yes, she had gone on because of Katriel, but to have known the oneness with him and to have had it torn from her.

She had found love with Noah, but what of the intervening years when she had been so alone? She had never wondered how her mother had survived, had picked up the pieces of her life and managed to go on. She had simply taken her strong presence for granted, never questioning, never asking.

She vowed to herself that she would be vigilant when it came to Valyn's safety because she did not think she had her mother's brand of strength to survive if he should die.

"You gave me your luck and your life, Valyn, mere moments ago." The feral need to protect what was hers rose inside. "I vow to you, Valyn, I will protect what is mine. I may not have the power yet, or the knowledge to control it, but I will, and anyone who threatens the people I love, will know my wrath -- as my mother before me. I never understood, but I am beginning to. I do not know how you can possibly love the person I will become, because if your life is threatened, I know I will use what I am to protect you, in any way necessary. I will not hesitate. And I do not know that you can protect me from myself."

His arms tightened around her. "In three days' time we will no longer be parted. I will be here for you. Once we are one, you will understand the power of our love."

"I need you, but how can you want to be anywhere near me, knowing what I will become? That I have the ability call forth the savageness of my ancestors?" She looked down at her hands and for the first time understood and saw them for the lethal weapons they really were. She released a sob and would have turned and fled from him, from herself, but he caught her to him.

"You would never hurt me. I do not fear you, nor will I ever. You sought only to protect me."

"I do not understand this -- any of it. I am changing and I do not know what to do. What if we fight and I get angry? Will those urges make me tear into you? I could not bear that thought." Panic filled her and she struggled against him.

Valyn swept her up into his arms and carried her to the long lounge chair and sat with her cradled against him. "You are safe with me, Katriel," he soothed. "Try to relax. You will never hurt me. You will learn self-control as the powers grow inside you. Even if you do not know that, I do." He smoothed a hand over her long hair. "It will be all right. I am here. I will not leave you alone."

He kept repeating the soothing words to her until she finally felt her body relax and she curled more closely against him. His scent surrounded her as she spiraled into the dark world of her dreams, his deep voice threading through her, keeping her safe from her nightmares.

* * * * *

"Who do you think he serves?" Leora mounted the stairs with Noah keeping pace at her side. She was furious but managed to hide her emotions. This should not have occurred. All the servants were screened thoroughly. The knowledge that someone had achieved loyalty from Leah's servants was cause for serious alarm.

"I do not know," Noah answered. "That is the problem. We have not been able to determine who the leader or leaders are. It may be this Korridian that Malik spoke of, but we cannot be certain. What is occurring here in the valley could be unrelated to what has happened in the Darlinean Mountains. Or they could be connected."

"This cannot continue. Until the bonding is completed, I want the guard doubled around Valyn and Katriel. Someone is obviously desperate to stop this Blood Rite."

Noah nodded. "It will be done, Mistress. Once this interrogation is completed I will speak with the commander of the Jotars. You pay them well, and they have their own code they serve by. To bite the hand that pays them is punishable by death."

They had reached the door to her office. Leora stopped and turned to him, reaching up to stroke the side of his face. "You are my strength, you know. Do not put yourself in the line of danger needlessly."

Noah caught her hand and brought it to his lips, then cupped it with both of his hands. "What makes you think I will put myself in danger?"

She smiled. "I know you. How many years have you been at my side now?"

"A long time."

A sudden regret filled her. "I wish I could have given you a child, Beloved."

He halted her words. "What brings this on, Mistress? I knew the laws when I agreed to become your Secondary Attend. I carry no regrets. Nor should you. I care for Katriel as my own, you know that as well."

Yes, he did. It was not often a melancholy such as she felt right now came over her. She should not have regrets. She was not exactly sure what caused it now. "There is danger. More and closer than ever before. Malik's news has me unsettled, I guess. But I feel doom hovering above us. We have always been at risk from other species, but never from our own. But this time ... something is different. And it could very well mean the destruction of our culture, of everything our ancestors worked so hard to create."

"That will not happen. We will not allow it to happen. We know the dangers now and will be more vigilant."

She bit her lip and turned back to the door. "Why is it I feel we are missing something. And whatever it is will be the means of our destruction."

Noah opened the door for Leora to precede him into the room. Two guards stood over the servant who was on his knees in the center of the room, shoulders hunched and head lowered in an attitude of defeat.

She stared down at him, still unable to believe one of her own servants had betrayed her house in such a fashion. That had never happened before. It was usually someone trying to gain service and in checking their history closely, they would find he or she actually served another.

"Leave us," she said to the guards. "Wait outside and I will call you when I need you."

The guards bowed and exited the office. Noah moved to a stance of protection slightly in front of her, ready to defend any action by the servant against his Mistress.

"What is your name?" she demanded.

She waited moments for him to respond. He did not look up and she saw the slight trembling of his hands tightly clasped before him in supplication.

"Please, Mistress ..." he whispered.

"Your name," she demanded.

"Glyn, Mistress."

“Who do you serve, Glyn?”

“I-I serve the House of Leah, Mistress.”

“You lie.” She started to bend closer, but Noah stopped her. She knew he worried for her safety. “Who do you serve? Who directed you to serve the poison to my daughter’s intended Alpha?”

“I do not know, Mistress.”

Noah leaned forward and grabbed the man by the back of his shirt and pulled him up. “Answer your Mistress,” he ground out threateningly.

Glyn shuddered. “Truly,” he gasped out, “I do not know who it was. They have taken my daughter. If I did not do as he asked, they were going to kill her. Please, I had no choice.”

“What did he look like?” Leora asked.

“H-he was Sangorrian, but he gave no name. He was dark and had the Sangorrian incisors.” He stopped for a moment and she saw him swallow hard. He raised his head and looked at her. His eyes were dilated with fear. “H-he took my blood, Mistress.” He reached up and pulled the collar of his shirt open, and she saw the jagged marks of penetration. He had been taken violently without concern or care.

Shock and anger surged through her that such an abomination should occur in her own domain. Taking the blood of this servant would have bound Glyn to the Sangorrian. It was something all had agreed among the Houses never to do after the early years of horror and fear. It was one of the reasons such care was taken in choosing a mate.

To use that power indiscriminately was forbidden and punishable by death. It was tantamount to rape.

Their ancestors had escaped to this planet to begin anew, had created a civilization that could interact with other species without fear. What was happening now would jeopardize everything they had sacrificed so much to achieve.

“Release him, Sec Noah.”

Noah let him go and returned to Leora. Glyn sank back to the floor, a quivering bundle of fear, begging for mercy, hands clasped tightly before him.

“Tell me the rest, Glyn. What of your daughter?”

The servant looked up at her, tears pooled in his eyes. “He took her blood. He said if I did not do as he directed, he would make her drink his blood as well, get her with a Sangorrian child, and sell her on Zadolán to one of the harlot dens. Do you not see? I had to do what he said.”

The nightmare of what the servant related to her was beyond anything she could imagine. How could any true Sangorrian threaten such a thing? Whoever had done this was

a savage rogue, nothing more than a rabid animal that must be destroyed. And all of his kind with him.

“Where is your daughter now?”

“He took her with him. As security he said for my obedience. He told me he would know whether I was successful or not.” He reached out for her hand. “Please, Mistress,” he begged, “help me get my daughter back. She is a good girl.”

Pain and anger coursed through Leora. Something told her the girl was as good as dead. Particularly now that the plot had been foiled.

She looked at Noah and saw the same understanding reflected in his dark eyes. But how did she tell this man his daughter would probably soon be dead if she was not already?

“See that he is secured, Attend. Then send guards for the rest of his family. They have been compromised and must be removed from Ebonnia immediately.”

Noah nodded. “Yes, Mistress. It will be taken care of with all expediency.” He pulled the man to his feet and forced him to the door.

“Mistress, please. My daughter.”

Leora met the man’s urgency with regret. “I am sorry, Glyn.”

“No,” he cried, struggling against Noah’s grip. “I will not let you sacrifice her.”

“There is nothing I can do. He has bound you and your daughter to him. I doubt he ever meant to return her and was certain you would be killed one way or the other. The best I can do for you and your family now is to get you off Ebonnia so you can start somewhere new. The bond he formed with you has corrupted you from any further service on Ebonnia.”

Her ears were filled with his cries of anguish as Noah ushered him from the room. She walked to the window overlooking the courtyard and gazed up at the twin moons.

The bonding would take place in three days. If she accepted the information her brother had revealed to her earlier in the day, she knew it was not Katriel’s death they sought or a ransom to be acquired if they should succeed in taking her. They wanted to mate her with one of their rogues. And they would do anything to acquire her. She heard the door open and close softly and she turned around.

“This is a nightmare, worse than we could have imagined. All of the servants must be examined for piercings.”

Noah nodded, his expression solemn. “It will be done.”

“We must try to locate the girl. If there is any chance of saving her, we must try.”

“We will do what we can, but we have no clues to the identity of the vermin who took her. Nowhere to start looking.”

“I know. Try the Arcadian Mountains. The caves would be a likely hiding place. It is the only place I can think of they might hide without immediate detection. Few go there because of the dragons. And double the guards on the outer walls.”

She began to pace the floor, agitated and trying to cover every possibility, but knowing she would miss something, that she *was* missing something. Noah's arms encircled her, halting her progress.

"It was not your fault. There was no way you could have known what would happen."

She placed both hands on his chest and looked up at him. "I feel responsible. That family has served this House for generations, and now I have to send them away. How will they survive?"

He pulled her to him and stroked her back. "You have done all you can. They will have a chance to rebuild their lives on another planet."

"We need guards placed on Cowden. It is unprotected outside the compound and vulnerable. So very vulnerable."

Noah began unbuttoning the front of his shirt and she looked up at him questioningly.

"You need, Beloved, and you must take. I sense your weakness." He pulled his shirt aside. "You must stay strong."

She smoothed a hand over his warm, naked skin, felt the pulsing life beneath the surface. "Noah, I cannot. Not after what he said ... after what was done to him. It nauseates me to think about it."

He cupped her face. "You have no guilt. I love you and give you my lifeblood willingly. It is my right -- one you have given me."

Her fingers curled against his chest, her incisors throbbed with hunger. "Katriel must not know. She is not ready for this," she whispered. She must protect her daughter at all cost.

"She will not," he assured her, pulling her to him.

"I must meet with Valyn in the morning. He must be made aware of all we have learned today in order to protect her."

"Agreed. First thing in the morning, I will see he is brought to you."

Her fangs scraped against his naked chest and she swirled her tongue over his tight brown nipple. A fire stirred through her, hunger and pain, until finally she sank her teeth deep into his flesh and drank from him. Energy consumed her and she gripped him fiercely. Nothing could ever take him from her. He was her life.

His hands soothed her as she drank her fill. "Yes, Beloved, there is no guilt in our desire. Your need. Never. I vow to you, the abominations will not touch you, Katriel, or this house."

She wound her arms around him beneath his shirt. Only Noah understood her so thoroughly, gave of himself so unstintingly. Like this moment, he had known of her need for him before she did.

Slowly, she retreated and licked at the few remaining drops lingering at the small puncture marks. She knew he took pride in carrying her marks. He had said so on many

occasions over the years. She lifted a hand to his chest, then closed her eyes and pressed against him, soothed by the strong steady heartbeats she could hear beneath her ear. In her mind she saw the jagged piercings on the servant and shuddered at the thought.

Noah's arms tightened around her. "No more tonight," he admonished her. "Think no more of it. Come, you are tired. Tomorrow you will be able to consider more clearly. We will be able to better determine the damage that has been done and shore up security."

He re-fastened his shirt and led her from the office. Again, he was right, she was exhausted. His lifeblood had energized her, but the day's events had taken their toll. She let him lead her from the office, knowing she would need all of her strength to face the coming days.

She lifted her head. "I need to get word to the other houses to let them know what has transpired."

"You have representatives here. You can meet with them tomorrow. Then you can send word to the others."

She nodded tiredly. "You are right, of course. I do not know what I was thinking."

"You are thinking too much right now. You are exhausted. Tomorrow, Beloved. Tomorrow will see it done."

Chapter Sixteen

Valyn was not surprised when he received the summons to meet with Mistress Leora before daybreak. It was not that he had actually done much sleeping; he had far too much on his mind.

Dressing quickly, he had followed the servant up the stairs and down the hall to the Mistress's office. He took note of the fact that there were now two guards rather than the usual one standing outside the door.

Having stayed with Katriel long after she had fallen asleep in his arms, it had been very late by the time he had returned to his own room the previous evening. Yet he had been unable to sleep. Instead, he had gone into the garden and meditated in an attempt to calm his mind enough to gain rest.

His years with the Eclipsian priests served him well at times like this, having taught him the value of a calm mind. Answers would come in their appropriate time and manner; he could not force the hands of the gods into revealing his path to him any sooner by attempting to force answers, as much as he wanted them. He needed information in order to protect Katriel and it was difficult to bide his time. This had represented a second attempt -- first with the attack on the Crimson Border, and now this.

The servant accompanying him this morning along the silent hallway knocked on the door and a muffled voice bade them to enter. As Valyn passed through the doorway to the office, the servant stepped back and closed the door behind him.

As before, Mistress Leora was seated behind her desk and Noah stood at attention at her side, arms folded across his chest. She pointed to a chair.

"Sit, please. We have much to discuss and I wanted to accomplish it before Katriel rises." A shadow of a smile flitted across her face. "She will seek you out today. Although the disturbance last night was not to my liking, I was pleased to see a strong link has already

been established between you. She responds to you, and it bodes well for your future. I am pleased with my choice for Katriel's mate."

"Thank you, Mistress. I will protect her in all ways necessary for her safety and well-being." He meant every word of his vow. Katriel was already more important to him than his own life.

Mistress Leora nodded. He studied her, noting that her manner appeared tense and ill at ease. He glanced up at Noah, but his expression offered no answers.

"The servant. Did you learn anything useful from him?" He might as well try to get to the root of why he had most likely been summoned.

"Yes, we did learn some very distressing information. It will require us to become even more vigilant than previously as the day of the bonding approaches."

"You require my help. And you do not want Katriel worried by whatever it is you discovered from the servant."

He saw something flitter across her expression. Surprise? Admiration? "Very good. But then I should not be surprised. I would not have chosen you if I had not thought you intelligent and capable."

He shrugged. "It was not difficult. Calling for me at this early hour could only mean one thing and that was that you did not want Katriel to know of our meeting."

"Yes, I fear it would frighten her. She would not understand or she would attempt to do something foolish because she does not understand."

"What did you discover, Mistress?"

He saw her tense, her hands tightened into fists. Something obviously disturbed her greatly.

"A rogue Sangorrian, we still do not know his identity, made contact with the servant and planned to use him and his service to Leah to his advantage." She hesitated a long moment before continuing. "So that you will watch for the signs you need to know he did what no Sangorrian should ever do and that is to drink of the blood of not only the servant but his daughter's blood as well."

"But I thought that was --"

"Forbidden? Quite right. But that is not the whole of it. My brother paid an unexpected visit to me and provided more very disturbing news. He resides in the Darlinean Mountains and is head of the House of Favion. He offered us some insight into our enemy. At least I am assuming at this point we face the same foe. Apparently there is a group of young male Sangorrians led by an offworlder known as Korridian who seek to destroy everything our ancestors accomplished on Ebonnia. They want to take us back to what we were before the laws were created. They seek to regain the power of the full-blooded Sangorrian. And I doubt it is just Ebonnia this Korridian wishes to control."

The blood in Valyn's veins froze at the thought of what it could mean if that happened. "Who is he? Why has he chosen Ebonnia?"

"Ebonnia is a rich planet. Not only that, apparently Korridian is a bloodtaker not of our kind, but one who has a silver tongue and the youth listen to and think he will lead them to power and control, a false pride in twisted heritage. I believe the males have been easier for him to approach, and now he wants our females. He also uses the blood of the Vawndra to control them."

"If they gain what they want and forget the laws there will be chaos. There is no way to protect the other species on the planet if they gain the upper hand." Valyn could only see turmoil and civil war in the future.

Mistress Leora nodded. "They have already begun. They killed the mates of all the Sangorrian males in the Darlinean Mountains hoping to force them to drink from others to sustain life. They taunt the patriarchs with the evil power of the Vawndra blood. My brother assures me that will not happen. They are as committed as we are to maintaining our way of life. They will seek new Secondaries, but have been required to go on a dragon hunt to replenish their supplies and to help sustain them in the meantime. Time is of the essence for them. You are aware locating one mate is a lengthy process, but seven?" She shook her head. "It will be very difficult, especially if word gets out as to exactly what has taken place there. Fear will be instilled in the non-Sangorrian population not only on Ebonnia, but if word leaks out, to the other planets as well. Our trade agreements will be in jeopardy, our peace agreements with other worlds. We will be in danger of not only a civil war, but planetary as well. That cannot happen. The implications are devastating if we are unable to stop them."

"What do you want me to do? How does this affect the House of Leah in the immediate need? I assume you believe these rebels were responsible for the attempt on my life."

"Yes. I think they are after the young virgin females. To use them to mate with the Sangorrian males. So far, they have been unable to capture any of the females they have targeted, but if things continue it is only a matter of time. We cannot let that happen. So far, they have been unable to gain access into any of the compounds in the Aurora Valley -- at least as far as I know right now. Last night was the first breach I am aware of that has occurred. Glyn and his family lived in the village outside the walls so it would have been easy for anyone to get to them. It is not as easy to get past the gates, and those are secured by Jotar guards who trust no one. As of last night I have also added guards around Cowden."

He jumped to his feet and saw Noah immediately move to a stance of defense. "Katriel." His heart almost stopped beating in his chest. "Have you increased security for her? The servants -- are they being interrogated? Obviously, someone has managed to get to them."

"Sit down, Valyn," she commanded.

Slowly, he returned to his chair and Noah stepped back to his resting stance. "I am pleased your first thought was of Katriel."

He nodded. "Of course." His own mode of defense was on alert. He should be with Katriel, not here. The bonding was now set for two days hence, and he was not sure he could wait that long. Leaving her protection to others did not rest well with him.

"What do you plan to do?" He now knew the only reason they sought to assassinate him was to gain access to his bond mate. "What do you want me to do?"

Leora leaned forward, placing her hands on the desk. "We do not know if other spies are within our walls. Until the Blood Rite is completed, I do not want her involved or worried by the precautions we must undertake. There will be time for her to assume the weighty responsibility and knowledge for her position as my heir soon enough. I want her to be able to focus on the ceremony and to be able to enjoy and prepare for the time when she comes into her full powers and enters companionship with her Alpha." Valyn saw a brief spasm of pain cross her face.

"For these few days," Leora's voice lowered to a harsh whisper, "I want her to know happiness, for I fear a time of sorrow is soon to follow. In the meantime, prepare yourself, become intimately familiar with the layout of the compound. Immediately after the bonding we will journey to a meeting of the houses to best determine and plan a strategy to combat this new threat to the well-being of our society."

Valyn nodded. "I understand, Mistress. What will you tell Katriel about last night? She will want answers."

Leora turned to Noah. "Would you summon them, please?" She turned back to face Valyn as Noah bowed and left the room. "She will be informed the matter has been handled, that there are those after her wealth as the heir to the estate and thought with you out of the way it would be easier to get to her, possibly to hold her for ransom. That will also offer an explanation for the doubling of the guards until you are bound."

"Do you think she will accept that explanation?"

"She will have to. It is close enough to the truth without scaring her with the specifics. As far as the guards go, I have appointed two new personal guards for her safety and yours. They are a tandem unit recently arrived from Jotar."

He nodded. "This is a paired unit? I have read of their unusual mating practices."

"It is their way and I do not question it. If it assists them in performing their responsibilities, so be it. It is not often that tandems are assigned to Ebonnia, usually we have solitary warriors. But this pair is highly skilled and uniquely mind-linked according to the Jotar commander, making them more effective and efficient in their positions and ideally suited for this particular assignment. I have chosen them especially as guards for Katriel ... and you because of their ability to psychically communicate."

"I do not need a guard, Mistress; I can take care of myself. Katriel is the one at risk."

"I understand your feelings, but remember, once you are bound to Katriel, if something happens to you -- someone gets through our defenses--it would affect Katriel. It has

happened before.” A bleak look came into her eyes and suddenly Valyn remembered the stories of the death surrounding her own Alpha.

“Very well, Mistress, I will accede to your request.”

She looked up at him quickly, a hard look returning to her eyes. “It is not a request, Valyn; it is a command. I am Mistress here, and you will follow my orders.”

Wisely, Valyn did not respond but simply bowed his head in respect.

The door behind Valyn opened and he turned to look as Noah entered the room followed by a pair of Jotar warriors. They looked somewhat familiar. If they were new to the compound as Mistress Leah suggested it might be that they had journeyed with him on his own arrival. He had not looked closely at the warriors who had accompanied them from Onyx City.

They were two huge males who looked like they were made of solid bronzite with many battle scars between them. Even though he was skilled in battle, they certainly were not a pair he would like to attempt to take on by himself.

Noah returned to Leora’s side and the two warriors moved almost in synchronized movements to either side of Valyn’s chair, making him feel uncomfortable by their lethal presence.

“Valyn, these guards will remain with you at all times in personal attendance. Their names are Kon and Trinian. Kon is the dark-haired warrior to your left, and Trinian is the red-haired warrior to your right. Kon’s main duty is to guard Katriel, and Trinian will accompany you. Their psychic connection will allow them to track both of you.”

Valyn felt dwarfed by the tall, burly men to either side of him. He knew something of the war planet, knew because of their warlike nature and the lack of longevity of females on their planet, warriors usually mated with other warriors, both for companionship, and the need for sexual release, an equal in all ways.

Often a bonti, or bond tie, female was chosen to mate with the pair if they chose to procreate and produce offspring. Again, from what he had read, those matings were unusual as well.

Like the Sangorrians, theirs was a closed society, mainly because of their aggressive, warlike tendencies. The only way to maintain peace among their people was to procure assignments such as on Ebonnia, offering an outlet for their aggressive, dominant tendencies. They certainly had a reputation for being the most lethal and effective weapons for protection. It was also known that once they contracted to serve, they would remain loyal for the length of the contracted allegiance.

To fail in their duty or turn on their employer, meant death according to the Jotar Code, and their own kind would hunt them down to carry out the task. They were known to conform to the Code to the letter.

Leora stood up and she nodded to Kon, who immediately left the room, Valyn assumed to attend to his new duties. Then Leora looked at Valyn.

"I believe that is all we need to discuss for the moment. Stay on your guard, Valyn. If we learn anything else, I will send for you. In the meantime, take these next couple of days to gain Katriel's confidence and trust and to become comfortable with the layout of the estate. And remember to trust no one. I go now to meet with the other House members, who are gathered here, to inform them of the danger. They will not like what I have to tell them. Not at all."

* * * * *

Noah's patience was at an end. After the meeting with Valyn, he had accompanied Leora as she met with the House members, and messengers were dispatched to the other Houses, as a date was set for the meeting. He had then attended her as she met with a contingent of Sangorrian house guards, healers, and upper servants instructing that an inspection was to be commenced immediately to determine if there were any others who had been contaminated and exhibited odd piercings on their bodies.

She had been like a woman possessed as she made her way from one meeting to another without a break until long into the night. She had directed that the dragon blood supply in the catacombs be inventoried again and set two Sangorrian house guards to assist the Supply Master and to oversee that duty and maintain vigilance over the supply. Then she had gone to the containment enclosure to inspect the enhanced security measures. She had then ascended to the roof to inspect the surrounding area and the number of warriors now set to guard.

There came a point when Noah saw the weariness in her eyes and her body, that he had finally made her call a halt and escorted her to their apartments. He had to point out to her forcefully that her collapse would not assist in the protection of Leah or Katriel. She needed her rest. Finally, she had agreed.

Late into the night, Noah turned to reach across the bed to draw Leora closer and found nothing but empty space. He threw back the covers and jumped from the bed.

"Leora!"

Dragging a robe around him, he stalked toward the door and yanked it open. Only one guard stood there.

"Where is your mistress?" he demanded.

"I believe she has gone to the training room, Sec."

He turned away, slamming the door shut behind him as he stalked back across the bedroom floor, shedding the robe and reaching for his shirt and pants. *The training room. Why in the blazes would she choose to go there at this time of night?*

The day had been exhausting for her, beginning well before her usual day and going long past when she should have retired. Nor had she slept well the previous night.

This did not bode well. It had been many years since she had last used the training room. He marched down the corridor toward the staircase, taking the stairs two at a time, trailed by his guard and quietly opened the door to the exercise room on the first floor. He saw her and stepped inside, motioning to his guard to remain outside.

Dressed in the red leather of the huntress, she was engaged at the middle of the room in a sparring exercise using her warrior guard as her opponent.

"Leora," he called. She turned toward his voice and the guard felled her to the mat. He stepped back and bowed his head. "Leave us," Noah instructed him.

Once he had exited the room, Noah turned back to Leora who had risen and was staring at him, hands on hips.

"Why did you do that?"

He advanced toward her, knowing she was ready for a battle, but not understanding specifically what was in her mind. Was she simply expending energy from the stress of the meetings today?

"What are you doing here? You need rest. You have been pushing yourself too hard and you will become ill."

He reached her side and she tilted her head to look up at him, her dark eyes fierce and combative. "I give the orders here Sec, not you."

He grabbed her arm and she shook him off. "Leave me. I must train."

Grabbing both her arms, he yanked her toward him. "For what, woman? What is the meaning of this?" He wrapped one hand into the single thick, black plait of hair hanging down her back. "Have you heard something else you have not shared with me?"

She struggled against him. "Let me go!" She pulled away from him, turned, and he tugged with his hand in her braid, halting her efforts to get away from him. He had a feeling he knew exactly what she needed right now.

"No," he ground out, yanking her hard against his chest.

"Ouch," she screamed, growling deep in her throat, fighting to free herself.

"Stop it, Leora. Stop, now. I will not let you do this."

She turned flashing eyes on him. "I must be ready to protect Katriel and our people." He saw panic begin to consume her, a panic he now understood she had hidden from him, and he knew what he had to do.

"Valyn is here to care for her. And the new guards will protect them both."

"It is not enough. I cannot take the chance."

The wildness in her eyes worried him. He had seen the same look so many years ago on Zadolan when she had been about to throw herself into the poisonous Sabul Sea.

“Enough, Leora, stop it.” He kept the grip on her hair, and using his other hand he ripped open his shirt. He drew her head inexorably closer to his chest. “You are allowing your emotions to control you. You have not fed, and you are not thinking clearly.”

She struggled harder. “Let me go.” She pounded her fists against his hard chest, but he would not release her. “I must be ready. I have allowed myself to grow complacent over the years, weak and now look what has happened? If you are not here to help me, then leave me.”

“Is it a fight you want?” he pinned her with his sharp gaze, his voice low and lethal. He whirled her away from him and then crouched low in the stance of attack.

She mirrored his movements and he saw the fire of challenge in her eyes. He knew what she asked for, what she needed, and he would see that she received it. There was only one way to give her the peace she required this night.

“You think you will have me,” she baited him as she circled warily around the room. “You think you know me so well, that you have the right to command me. I am the one who gives orders here.”

Yes, he knew exactly what she needed. Her words were a challenge thrown at his feet, a cry to be taken, to be dominated, for him to show her the man he was. She needed the expenditure of sexual energy to ground her, to give her back the control.

He waited and watched, knew she was coiled tightly, saw the glitter of her eyes, the threat of her teeth as she snarled. She launched herself into the air straight at him across the breadth of the room, her hands curled into the lethal claws he knew so well, but he was ready for her and thwarted her attack efficiently. His own years of training served him just as well.

Swiftly spinning her away he clamped her arms to her side, holding her in a tight band as he lifted her into the air. She first kicked out with her feet, then arched and flailed back, trying to maim him. He grimaced in pain as her heel connected with his shin. Her hot need swirled around him; he felt her fire.

Bending his head, he nipped at her ear. “I am going to give you exactly what you want, my love. You want to be fucked, and that is exactly what you are going to get. In exactly the way you need it.”

Yes, she wanted to be fucked, not made love to. She did not want it gentle; she needed it hard and fast, sucking the darkness and fear from inside her, making him take from her, so that she would be forced to surrender to him. She needed a hot, searing domination.

He felt the angry, sparking emotions surge inside her, the need for that very release. She would not be able to ground herself unless he helped her expend that angry energy. He would not hurt her, but he would give her what she needed as was his right and his duty.

Walking to the padded exercise mount at the end of the room, he dropped her forward over it. He reached in front of her and yanked down the zipper of her suit and quickly peeled it down over her shoulders, binding her arms.

"No. You will not do this. You will not win."

The smile that curved his lips was determined. "I have already won," he gritted out.

Quickly, he pulled each hand free of the suit and bound it to a corner of the mount with the dangling strips of long leather that hung at its underside, normally used as grips for various maneuvers; they served his current need well.

He knew she had allowed an easier win because she understood her own needs. He loved her spirit, her energy, and her devotion to the people she protected. But right now she needed protection from herself, in a more forceful way, a more elemental need. The fight she had offered him had been superficial at best. She knew what she needed as well as he did, but she would continue to fight against the recognition of it until her energy was finally expended and her passion wrung from her.

Once he had bound both her hands he quickly stripped her of the short boots and suit she wore, tossing them to the side.

"You will not feed, you will not listen. But in this you will obey. I am your Secondary and will always provide what you require, Mistress. Never doubt it."

"Release me," she yelled as she struggled against the bonds holding her.

"Soon enough, my love, soon enough." He felt the sexual energy zing and snap in the air all around them. He scented her lust.

She wiggled her rounded, beautiful ass at him as she struggled and he felt his cock tighten. She kicked back with her feet.

"You will not do this."

"Oh, but I will. Be still and you will enjoy it all the more."

"You will not win."

As he watched her struggle against the bonds that tied her to the mount, saw the sweat glisten on her skin, he shed his clothes quickly. Walking back to her, he spread her thighs, saw the slick heat of her need thickly coating her skin.

Raising a hand he brought it down sharply on the firm, rounded flesh.

She screamed. "You will not. I order you to stop this immediately and untie me."

He smoothed a hand over the warmed spot on her ass. "Stop moving and I will give you the pleasure you require, Mistress."

"I will not."

She kicked out at him again. He knew she was weakening with her struggles, yet he admired that she still refused to give in to him. He brought his hand up again and brought it

down on her other flank, causing her to stiffen and scream in frustration yet again. Again, he smoothed a hand over the creamy, flaming surface.

Again and again he disciplined until her flesh was hot and red, and she stopped squirming in an effort to be free, her breathing raspy and fast.

“Noah,” she groaned and he heard the need threaded through his name.

He brought his fingers to the entrance of her pussy, felt the engorged entrance bathed with her cream, slid his fingers through the rich nectar and stroked back to the pucker of her tight anal ring.

“What do you want, Leora?”

“Please, Noah.”

He sank a finger into her tender hole, past the tight muscle to embed itself inside her. He would not take her there without preparing her well, but tonight he needed to feel her tight ass gripping his cock.

Lubricating her with her cream, he thrust his finger back and forth, added another as her narrow passage gradually relaxed to take them. He positioned his cock at the entrance to her pussy, and slipped inside easily, her slick juices coating him thoroughly, her channel expanding to embrace him. No longer were her movements an attempt to break free, to avoid his touch. She undulated with her passion, a growl of need erupting from her throat. Penetrating deeply, retreating, forcefully sinking deep again and again, his cock now painfully hard and slippery. He quickly pulled from her greedy warmth, and he heard her protest.

Then he centered his readied shaft at her tight sphincter.

“What do you say, Leora? What do you want?”

She thrust her ass back, and he felt her dark lust consume him as she bent to his will. “I am sorry, Noah,” she gasped, “I need you inside me. I need it fast and hard. Help me, Noah, please.”

Gripping the globes of her blushing warm ass cheeks he pulled them apart, gazed at the sweet puckered bud awaiting him, positioned his cock, and began the slow descent into her hot, tight channel. Watched as her body spread to take him, surrounding him.

“Yes, oh gods, yes, Noah. More.”

He felt her tremble and shudder as he burrowed deeper and deeper, until he was fully embedded inside her. Like a tight fist she gripped him, sucking from him and then he began the steady, firm rhythm she needed, that they both needed.

“Help me, Noah. I cannot -- cannot ...”

His own need shimmered hot and hard inside him, wanting to come, but he controlled it because she needed more. He brought a finger around to circle her stiff clit, driving her higher, felt her at the brink, stopped, holding her there, forcing her passion to teeter at the edge without flying free.

She thrust her ass back and forth, forcing his penetration. Her hot flesh slapped against his, time and time again. Again, he circled her clit, thrust a finger in her pussy, then two, and three. Retreated and pummeled into her hot ass again and again.

Sweat glistened on both their bodies; sleek, hot lust dripped from them, mingled and blended. He gripped her hips firmly, holding her still as he tunneled and ground against her.

She screamed in primitive demand, her body tightening and releasing, her muscles flexing beneath his demands, pleading for the release he kept just out of her reach.

He felt her sobs of frustration, her acquiescence to his command of her body, his domination of her dark desire. Again he thrust his fingers inside her, four of them buried deeply as his thumb swirled over her clit and felt her spasm as her pounding, tumultuous orgasm gripped her and he drove her over the edge of the chasm. He felt her body tighten and then she was spasming fluid beneath him. He thrust deeply inside her and his climax swallowed him as well, pulsing deeply, as spurt after spurt of his hot fluid filled her body.

When the swirling vortex finally released them and the heady heat of aggressive passion reduced to a slow, quiet simmer, he pulled from her body and released the bonds binding her to the mount. Lifting her into his arms, he carried her to the other side of the room near a table containing a washbasin.

He bathed her body slowly, attentive to each curve. Then he washed himself. He sat on the mat, his back against the wall and pulled her into his arms, stroking her as she curled next to him, the angry, tense muscles now softened with the tumultuous release he had bled from her.

Finally, he broke the silence. "Nothing has occurred here yet. We will be ready when the time comes." He leaned closer, tilted her face up. "I will never lose you to your fear, Beloved. I am here for you, just as I was on Zadolan. You were not alone then, and you are not alone now."

He saw tears pool in her eyes, her fingers curling into his skin. "I would have died without you, Noah. If anything happens to you, or to Katriel, I will not be able to go on. Both of you are my life. And I know, I feel the danger that surrounds us, and it will try to defeat us and take you both from me. I feel the darkness hovering near me."

He wrapped his arms securely around her and pulled her closer. "I vow to you, my love, we will not be parted. Do you believe me?"

When she looked up, he caught his breath, seeing the weariness in her pale complexion and dark circles beneath her eyes. She worried about them all, feared for them, and took everything upon her own shoulders.

He pulled the tie from her hair and feathered the ebony locks out. "I love the feel of your hair, Beloved. No more fighting, no more fear. Not tonight."

"Noah," she moaned, her hands clutching at his broad shoulders. "Oh gods, Noah, I need you so much."

"I know, my love. I know." This time it was not a fucking she needed, but the loving, the oneness of two souls bound together. And he would offer her that as well. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and straddled his hips widely to either side of him. His thick cock sank easily into her slippery channel.

"Oh, Noah," she moaned as she threw her head back and bared her incisors.

He allowed her to control the thrusts, to ride him. Leora leaned forward and licked at his bared chest with her tongue, long strokes matching their momentum and rhythm. As he slid through her juices, her heat consuming them both, the closer he brought her to the summit, and as it was reached, as his seed again poured into her, her fangs sank into his chest.

Pain of the piercing shot through him, magnifying the impact of his orgasm, and he threw back his head, shouting his pleasure. He cradled her head to his chest, felt the blood pumping through his body, offering her life, giving her what she needed, that which only he could provide.

His semen continued to pour into her welcoming pussy as she fed, until finally he pulled her close cradling her in his arms, still fully entrenched in her body.

When she had drunk her fill, she lifted her head to look at him.

Her eyes filled with tears, and he reached up with one hand to wipe them away. "It is all right, love, it is all right."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "I am so tired, Noah, so very tired," she mumbled.

He stroked her hair. "I know you are."

"I am sorry."

He lifted her from his lap, his cock pulling free of her body. "There is no need for that. We will return to our room and you will sleep now. You will need to be alert when the morning arrives."

They rose and dressed, and he led her from the training room, his arm firmly encircling her waist, supporting her. She looked up at him tiredly when they entered their room, leaving the two guards to stand sentry in the hallway.

"I love you, Noah. You are my life."

He gently helped her to undress, picked her up and carried her to the bed. "As I love you, Mistress. Always."

He shed his own clothing and climbed in beside her. She snuggled against him, and he heard her utter a deep sigh. There was no knowing what tomorrow would bring. It could be death, or life. But he would see to her safety no matter what happened. He wrapped his arms around her and anchored her close.

No matter what, this he vowed.

Chapter Seventeen

“Do you see him, Aurya? Is he not magnificent?” Katriel stood on her balcony, which happened to overlook the exercise yard below.

The men, including Valyn were engaged in mock hand-to-hand combat, their exertions adding a gleaming sheen of perspiration to their skin beneath the early morning sun.

Since ingesting Valyn’s blood, her eyesight had become extremely acute and when she focused, she could almost see each droplet of water on his skin.

“My sight is not as good as yours, Katriel, but they seem very, ummm, virile, indeed.”

Virile. Now there was a word she would definitely associate with Valyn. But he was also so much more. He was not like the others. Maybe it was because of his upbringing in the Eclipsian Order. His strength was quieter, something inside, not strictly the more obvious manly traits. And she was hungry to find out more about him, everything.

Her gaze traveled beyond the gated walls to the expanse of land. It all seemed so peaceful today. Out in the fields, she could see people tending the aurora vine.

Immediately upon rising the morning after the incident when the servant had tried to poison Valyn, she had met with her mother to ascertain what had been discovered about him. There had been something in her mother’s manner that sat oddly with Katriel, an instinct that said she was not sharing the truth of the incident.

Maybe it was because of the new guards her mother had insisted on, or maybe the increase in sentries in the hallways and those she saw around the wall perimeters. Did her mother think she would not notice? Would not question?

Maybe she would not have done so a week ago. The power of Valyn’s blood seemed to make her more alert to undercurrents within the manor she had never been aware of before.

Her mother had made it clear that she wanted Katriel to focus on the upcoming union and her preparations for binding with Valyn. Katriel could only hope that once the union was formalized, her mother would be more forthcoming on the state of unrest she could feel in the air.

When she had been introduced to her new personal guard, Kon, who would accompany her at all times, she had been almost unable to mask her shock of recognition. Her mother had informed her that Kon's psychic tandem mate, Trinian, would accompany Valyn. Katriel knew better than to question her mother's actions, particularly at a disquieting time such as this.

Yes, she had been particularly pleased that she had managed to hide her shock when she was introduced to Kon, having first seen him in such intimate surroundings on another occasion.

Now she knew the identities of both Jotar warriors she had witnessed in such passionate intimacy in the stable. How could she have ever known that her midnight adventure would come back to haunt her in such a way? She had all she could do to keep her eyes fastened on his face rather than dropping to the front of his tight britches, remembering the look of that long steely shaft as it burrowed into the ass of his warrior partner.

Heat flooded through her at the memory, and the decisions she had come to because of witnessing their mating. She was glad it would not be much longer before her own mating took place, because the longing was getting stronger and stronger each day with each sip of her Alpha's blood.

The surprises had not ended there because her mother had then taken her to meet their newest houseguest, her cousin, Aurya, whom she had taken to immediately. They had then turned to the tasks to be completed, including preparation of the bonding candles.

Although Aurya accompanied Katriel and her mother, and was able to help her with the preliminary work, Katriel needed to be the one to actually dip the candles and prepare enough of them to be used during the bonding and the Blood Rite. No one else was allowed to touch the finished candles except the Druda priestess, who would also bless them and place them at the appropriate ceremonies.

When afternoon finally approached, she was surprised when Valyn appeared with a servant walking behind him carrying a basket. It had been a delightful afternoon for a picnic. They were not allowed to leave the walled confines, but there was a lovely garden attached to the house where they could be assured of some privacy.

Well, semi-privacy, because her mother had assigned the two new, very imposing Jotar guards to them. Adding to Katriel's discomfort was her very intimate knowledge of exactly what their clothing covered and the passion that seemed well cloaked by hard, emotionless facades today. But she had enjoyed the afternoon, getting to know more about Valyn and his past. She did find her mind wandering as she looked at Valyn, wondering exactly what attributes were cloaked by his clothing.

Watching him now, with little more than his tight pants molded to his body, sweat sheening his hard chest, it seemed like time passed with excruciating slowness as she anticipated the time of their bonding.

The moment she discovered the identity of her intended mate it ceased to be strictly a formal mating contracted by her mother. Her mate was her golden protector, and it was not a question of coming to know him and learning to like him. She already loved him, and the feelings fueled years ago were now magnified because as his blood began to mingle with her own inside her body, she found she grew impatient for the intimacy the bonding would enforce.

Studying him in mock combat on the ground below, seeing the glittering droplets of moisture on his muscular well-toned body, she found herself wanting to taste his skin, to lick each drop from his massive chest and then to sink her teeth into the hard muscular pectorals and taste his essence.

Last night her incisors had begun to throb at just the thought of being with him in the most intimate manner, where before it had frightened her, now she was eager to be one with him.

With each goblet of his diluted blood that she drank, she became more powerful, each day made her realize how truly helpless and incomplete she had been before Valyn had arrived at Leah.

The sensual heat that had started to simmer the first time she had taken his blood was now a constant burn that radiated inside her, as though her body's temperature constantly bubbled just below boiling, ready to erupt the moment he touched her.

She longed to fondle her aching breasts, as she watched him battle, to put her fingers inside her throbbing vagina and gain some release from the burgeoning desire she would be unable to consummate with him until tomorrow night. Only the knowledge that she was not alone right now kept her eager hands at bay. It was not her intent to shock Aurya with her unbridled sensual lust.

She ran her tongue along her pointy incisors, tasting her own blood. A haze of lust seemed to descend on her, and her sharpened emotions throbbed painfully at the recognition of the emptiness she felt inside. She whirled away from the sight before her, prepared to run to the exercise yard. She needed to touch him, to be touched by him.

"Lady."

The haze slowly receded and her attention was diverted away from Valyn as she focused on Tish, who stepped onto the balcony carrying a tray with two goblets.

She raced toward Tish and frantically reached for the one containing the darker, richer, lifeblood of her chosen mate. She had no doubt it was his; she could smell his heady essence contained in the glass. Lifting it to her lips, she emptied the contents, felt the warm, rich mixture slide down her throat, felt it mingle with her own and a charge of electricity raced through her.

She arched, threw her head back and ran her tongue over her lips savoring the very last drop of his essence. Her hearing was now magnified and closing her eyes, she isolated *his* sound.

His voice came to her, the grunts of battle, the clanging of swords, the intensity of his breaths, all washed over her. She felt his intense concentration on his opponent. She absorbed them, as she absorbed his blood. The storm of emotions collided inside her like a thunder funnel crossing the land amidst a summer heat storm.

“Lady, are you all right?”

Again, she was forced out of her sensual haze and drawn back to the present on the balcony, where she stood, still clutching the goblet. She focused on Tish, who stood in front of her, a worried frown on her face.

Katriel smiled in an attempt to reassure her and carefully placed the empty goblet back on the tray. “I am fine, Tish, do not worry. I have controlled the need. It is much better than it was the first time,” she lied. It would never be better until she consumed him in the intimacy of mating.

“How can you do it?”

She whirled around to meet the frightened gaze of Aurya.

“What do you mean?”

“What does it do to you? It is like you change into something -- someone, I do not know, some other creature when you drink his blood. Is it like the Vawndra blood? What does it taste like to drink human blood?”

Tish walked over and offered the remaining goblet with the dragon’s blood to Aurya, who took it and sipped at it daintily.

At that moment, Katriel felt years older than Aurya. The difference really resulted from only a matter of days, the change beginning from the moment she became aware she would no longer drink dragon’s blood for sustenance as a mainstay to her diet. It came from the infusion of her mate’s blood mingling with her own, of new knowledge it allowed her to have. It was a maturity she had feared, yet now owned, and certainly relished.

Valyn would bring her a completeness she had never experienced before and now looked eagerly to consummate -- with him. His blood enriched her, made her more, but how did she explain that to someone as young as Aurya? Someone who held the same fears she once had held.

She now knew the dragon’s blood might sustain them, but it dulled their senses, made them less, the colors of life muted and dull. Everything was so much more intense when she consumed Valyn’s blood. She could more easily understand the temptation to taste other blood, to become addicted to the magnified sensations.

"The day will come when you will know and understand. I once thought there would not be a time I would welcome the bonding contract I knew my mother would negotiate. I feared it and put it off for as long as possible."

"You no longer feel that way?" Aurya took another sip from the goblet and looked up at her.

When had she truly felt the change come upon her? She had been frightened of the emotions after that first introduction to Valyn's blood. She had wanted to run as fast and far as she could. But now, as she looked back over the last few days, after having come to terms with the changes, it was as though she truly had become another person. Stronger, more powerful, more sure of herself.

She smiled at Aurya. "No, I no longer feel that way."

Aurya turned to gaze out at the landscape. "I miss my home."

Katriel's mother had informed her of the death of Aurya's mother and that an attack had been mounted against the House of Favion, and her heart broke for the young girl who looked longingly toward the horizon.

She had not known her blood sire, but still she had felt his loss through the years. How much more had it been for Aurya to witness her parent's assassination?

"I am sorry for your loss." She walked across the length of the balcony and laid a hand on her shoulder, trying to offer comfort. "But I am glad you are here. It is nice to have the company of someone nearer to my age. When the time is right, my mother will assist your sire in negotiating for a good mate for you; you will see. But there will be time for you to become accustomed to us. And no one will force you to do anything."

When she turned to look at her, Katriel caught her breath at the pain she saw there.

"You did not hear the screams, the knowledge that your mother was dying and there was nothing you could do. You do not know what that is like -- the impotency of it."

Katriel reached out instinctively to take the young girl in her arms. "I know," she tried to soothe her, as she stroked the girl's hair. "I know the pain I would feel at the loss of my own mother. I wish I could do more for you, but know that I am here if you need to talk."

Aurya looked up at her; a flicker of something crossed her expression and was gone before Katriel could identify it. A sad smile rose to her lips.

"Thank you, Katriel. You have already helped me so much. I do not have a sister, but if I did, I would want her to be like you."

Katriel released her and stepped away. "Thank you. There are tasks to be performed and a bonding to prepare for. You will accompany me to the temple. The Druda priestess arrived last night, and we must deliver the candles to her that we made yesterday so that she may bless them."

* * * * *

Valyn spit the red dust from his mouth, leaned back in the dirt, hands raised in the air.

"I concede," he groaned, "you are the better warrior."

Trinian lowered his sword to his side and reached out a hand to haul Valyn to his feet.

He just caught a shadow of a grin beginning on the usually grim warrior's face.

"You are a worthy opponent, Valyn. Your mate should be well pleased." He glanced up to the now vacant balcony above. "If you had not lost your concentration, you would still be on your feet."

Surprisingly, Valyn had sensed her presence, and for one brief split second, his concentration faltered, just long enough for his opponent to gain the upper hand.

"You are right, warrior. But you have certainly gained my appreciation and respect for your skills."

Trinian nodded in acknowledgment. "Few have been as worthy an opponent. Only Kon has ever been able to meet my challenge with such skill."

"I doubt he would have lost concentration for even a second."

Again Trinian nodded. "That is true," he answered soberly. "It is one of the reasons we are well matched."

Valyn leaned down to pick up his sword and they both headed over to a nearby shaded area of the courtyard to quench their thirsts after such a robust encounter. Grabbing goblets from the table, they dropped onto a wooden bench beneath an overhanging eave.

"Why are you here Trinian? What made you decide to come to Ebonnia?" Valyn leaned back against the side of the building, easing his sore muscles.

"Kon and I had just returned from Zadolan after assisting in defeat of yet another uprising. Kon was about to do battle with his blood brother when I heard of a call for reinforcements for Ebonnia. I convinced him we should take the assignment before he did something he would regret."

"Like kill his brother?" Valyn still could not understand the culture of Jotar where every second one seemed to be thinking of fighting if not engaged in it. The only reason they managed to have some sort of government on Jotar was because the ruler was strong enough to defeat all others in battle, hence earning his right to command.

Trinian nodded. "His brother is not well matched to do battle with Kon. Yet, he never ceases to challenge him when we are on Jotar."

"How do you manage to have any type of relationship when you are always at each other's throats like that?"

Valyn saw Trinian turn his gaze to study those men still in battle practice. "That is how tandems are formed, such as Kon and myself. We are equally matched in thoughts, strength, and battle-heart. Only when that happens can there be acceptance and respect. It is that

respect of equal strength that binds us. It is as though we are of one mind -- in all things. It gives us double strength and stronger heart."

Valyn had to respect that kind of relationship. He might not agree with the full logistics and relationships of a war planet such as Jotar, but they held to their own code and stuck by it.

"What will you do when your contract is up on Ebonnia?"

"We will return to Jotar. Before we left, our commander made clear that upon our return this time we must seek out a bond tie woman to form the triad alliance. As with every species, it will be our time to do our duty to ensure children will be provided for a new generation of Jotarian warriors."

"You do not sound enthused by the idea."

Trinian shrugged. "It is our duty. It will change our tandem. I have seen it. Some bond tie women create havoc within the alliance so whatever peace could be found in a family unit is destroyed. It is hard enough on Jotar without the added aggravation of a female."

Valyn stood up and stretched his tired muscles. "I hope you will find a woman for your alliance who will make you happy, Trinian."

Trinian stood as well. "Happiness is not among our needs, nor is love as other races seem to require. Moments of contentment and satisfaction would be good. Women do not survive long on our planet, so if she brings too much discontent to us, luckily it will most likely be short-lived." He placed his empty goblet on the table. "If you are rested, shall we engage another round?" He grinned at Valyn. "Perhaps this time you will defeat me."

Valyn also placed his goblet on the table and picked up his sword. "Fighting. Is that really all you think about? Are all Jotarian warriors of your mindset?"

"It is what the Ebonnians and all others contract with our leader for." He puffed up his chest. "There are no others to rival our abilities to defend those we contract with, nor who offer the same loyalty and commitment in service."

Valyn turned to him. "That is true, but I am curious. What stops you from conquering other planets? If you thrive on war, what allows you to keep the peace instead of just conquering instead?"

"Maybe that answer is why we serve the Ebonnians so well. Like the blood hunters, we once did just that, sought to conquer everything and everyone in our path, instilling only fear, never respect. Until a new commander came into power and taught us a different way. By learning to live within other civilizations instead of conquering and subjugating others solely because we thrive on the battle, eventually there would have been none left and we would have had to battle ourselves into extinction. He found a way for our kind to survive and maintain trade relations with those around us. The same as the Sangorrians have done."

"Someone is eager to change that for the Sangorrians."

Trinian nodded. "Those are the rumors we have heard since arriving. That is why Kon and I chose to accept this particular assignment to guard you and your bond mate. If the Sangorrian civilization topples, what might be in store for Jotar? And where might the blood hunters end up next? We figured this is as good a place as any to battle an adversary who seeks to consume power. Containment works best."

He grinned at Valyn and raised his sword. "Speaking of battle ..."

Valyn groaned. "Where is Kon when you need him," he muttered as he followed Trinian onto the practice grounds.

Suddenly, Trinian whirled around, and Valyn saw death and determination in his eyes.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"There is trouble. Come with me."

"Where?" But his question was left unanswered as Trinian shot off at a dead run. Valyn had no choice but to follow, his heart pounding in his chest. An inner instinct told him that it had to do with Katriel. What was it Mistress Leora said? That Kon and Trinian had some sort of strong psychic connection?

That thought made his blood run cold because it meant only one thing. Katriel's life was in imminent danger.

Chapter Eighteen

Katriel picked up the bundled candles on the side table near the door and exited her room, Aurya and Kon following close behind her.

The purple candles would be used for the bonding and the burgundy candles were for the Blood Rite on the following day. Their mixture contained the ancient herbs of desire and they were all tinged with a spicy, cinnamon scent of the earth. Her mother had stood by to instruct her as she had prepared and combined all the ingredients required to make them. Aurya had assumed the task of crushing the necessary dried herbs to be included in the mixtures.

She walked down the staircase, then rather than following the circuitous hallway around, she chose the shorter route through the waiting room and the formal presentation hall bringing her into the back hallway and out the back door to the formal gardens. The temple was at the end of the garden and a long walkway made of ground obsidian stone connected the main house to the temple.

Katriel smiled as she followed the path. Here was where Valyn had taken her for their small impromptu picnic the day before.

They halted at the temple steps and Katriel turned to Aurya.

"Come with me, Aurya, I would like you to accompany me inside. Kon, please wait out here. This should not take long."

"Lady --"

"No, Kon. Not inside the temple. I must have some measure of privacy from your constant male vigilance, and this is a sacred place. We are inside the compound and well guarded. I should be safe enough inside the temple with the priestess. Wait here," she instructed. He looked as if he might disagree with her. As she waited, he surveyed the grounds, then reluctantly took up a stance outside the temple.

Katriel mounted the steps with Aurya following. It was cool and quiet inside. Her footsteps echoed as she walked toward the far end of the candle-lit entry and down a narrow corridor on the left to reach a small room at the back of the temple.

She knocked at the door, then stepped back and waited for a summons from within. Nervously, she clutched the candles. Her mother had instructed her on what the priestess would expect from her, and she hoped she would be brave enough to comply.

"I have never gone beyond the main altar room of a temple before," whispered Aurya.

Katriel glanced at her from the corner of her eye. "This is only the second time I have been back here. I accompanied my mother the first time, and I was very young. It was a long time ago." She reached out and squeezed Aurya's hand. "Thank you for accompanying me. It is rather a daunting prospect to meet with a Druda priestess. I am grateful for your presence."

Aurya offered a shy smile. "I am honored to be here with you."

"Enter," a voice called from inside the room, interrupting their short moment of sisterly camaraderie.

Inhaling deeply, Katriel released Aurya's hand and reached out to open the door.

Gazing around the room curiously, she recognized it as a solitary meditation room; there were no windows and the only illumination was the flickering light of the many candles mounted in various positions around the room. Their long shadows glimmered over the walls providing an ambience of dense solitude and isolation.

The sole occupant was a small figure garbed in ghostly white robes, a hood shadowing her face. Katriel had a sense of pale glittering eyes staring out at her.

She stood quietly, with head bowed, waiting for permission to speak. Aurya had stepped back into the shadows against the wall, near the door.

"You have something for me," the priestess said in a low, musical voice.

Katriel dared to glance up. "Yes, Priestess, these are the candles for the bonding and Blood Rite. They require your blessing."

"You prepared them yourself as required according to Druda commandment?"

"Yes, Priestess."

"Very well. Remove them from the wrappings and set them on the altar." She pointed to a long, narrow table off to the right side of the square room.

Katriel walked over to do as the priestess directed. Setting the bundle on the floor, she carefully unwrapped them and placed each candle reverently on the altar. When she had finished her task, she picked up the fabric and stepped away from the altar to await the priestess's next command.

The priestess walked to the altar and seemed to take a long time studying each of the candles resting there. Then she turned back to where Katriel stood.

"You have done well; they are finely crafted. That bodes well for your future."

She turned and walked toward the back of the room, opposite where Katriel stood, toward where another smaller table sat. She picked up a small bowl and a dagger, then turned back to Katriel. "Come to me, child."

Katriel quickly turned to hand the cloth to Aurya. Her mother had told her what to expect, but she was still nervous. On shaking legs she moved to the hooded figure and stopped in front of her.

"Kneel," she directed.

Katriel did as ordered, bowed her head in respect, and waited, finding it difficult to breathe.

"You are accepting of this bonding your mother has contracted for you?"

"Yes, Priestess."

"Is your blood pure? Have you partaken of any other human than that of your future bond mate?"

"No, Priestess."

The priestess nodded and held out the glittering dagger to her. "I hand to you the sacred dagger of Druda. This blade has been blessed by the ancient god of our people. You must now willingly provide your blood, which will be interwoven with that of your Alpha for the anointing of the candles to take place at the densest hour of the night when the world is silent. Do you agree to this?"

"Yes, Priestess." With her left hand, Katriel reached up to accept the dagger. The cold metal bit into her shaking hand. As she curved her fingers around the hilt, the precious stones embedded into it dug sharply against her grip, the smooth golden blade glimmered in the candlelight. Did she have the courage to do what needed to be done here?

The priestess held the smooth ebony wooden bowl out. "You may begin."

Katriel knew what she had to do; her mother had tried to prepare her as best she could. But the actual fact of being here now made her hands shake.

The priestess reached out from beneath the folds of her robe to press a thin hand to the side of Katriel's face. It was cold as ice, yet Katriel did not dare to pull away, fearful of slighting the powerful priestess in any manner.

"Relax, child," the priestess said as she stroked Katriel's cheek with long, bony fingers. "Breathe deeply and then make the cut; make it cleanly, without hesitation."

Katriel closed her eyes and attempted to calm her mind in an effort to control her shaking limbs. She wanted to be with Valyn, and she wanted their union to be blessed by Druda.

A vision of Valyn rose before her. She again saw the mark of the dragon on his arm, the long, angry tear that could very well have ended his life. She could do no less than follow his example of bravery. This was but a small ache compared to what he had faced.

Taking a deep breath she held out her arm, pushed her sleeve back, and made the swift cut. A searing pain sliced through her arm and into her chest, but she did not falter.

She held her arm over the bowl and watched her lifeblood slide down her arm to spatter into its depths. With her other hand, she offered the dagger back to the priestess.

The priestess accepted it and laid the dagger on the table behind her. It seemed to Katriel that all of her lifeblood was draining into the bowl, until finally the priestess wrapped her arm in a white cloth and removed the bowl.

Turning back to Katriel, she unwrapped the blood-stained cloth, grasped her arm firmly with both hands, placing her cold palms over the heart of the wound created from the blade cut. She closed her eyes and bowed her head.

“Ancestors, channel your healing energy through me to heal the wound of this brave child who gives of herself to consecrate the lifebond she will embark upon on the morrow eve. Let her enter the bonding pure and without pain, without the scars of her childhood.”

Beneath the cold grasp of the priestess’s hand Katriel saw a faint glow emanate. Then a warm tingling traveled along the length of her arm and an ache seemed to spiral through her limb and then disappeared completely.

The glow slowly faded and the priestess released her arm. Katriel was amazed to see that the clean slice she had made moments ago had completely disappeared. She blinked and looked up at the priestess.

Again, she turned back to the table behind her, picked up a gold pitcher and poured a measure of what looked like wine into a goblet. She turned and offered the goblet to Katriel. “Drink child. The loss of your lifeblood has weakened you.”

Katriel accepted the goblet and drank the wine. Her head spun for a moment and then the world righted itself again as a spurt of energy zapped through her. She handed the goblet back to the priestess.

“You may go, child. Your union will be blessed by the gods, never fear.”

Slowly, Katriel rose to her feet.

“Thank you, Priestess. May you be blessed with peace for your aid.”

“And so I shall be. Now go.”

Katriel turned away and headed toward the door. Upon discerning they were done, Aura quickly moved to open the door and stepped outside. Katriel followed without looking back. Her mother had told her to never look back over her shoulder at a priestess after a blessing as it was bad luck. She wanted to, but she fought the urge and left the room.

Katriel breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door. Again, she lifted her arm and pulled back the cloth of her sleeve to look at its smooth, unmarred surface, still unable to believe it was so perfectly healed.

Aura also leaned in close to study her arm. “There is no mark,” she whispered. “I saw you cut your arm, and the blood drain into the bowl. How could this be?”

Katriel pulled the sleeve down. "One does not question the ways of the Druda. It must be enough that my union will be blessed. Come, we need to get back to the house; there are other tasks to be completed."

They were about to enter the main devotion room from the hallway, when Katriel halted, noting with surprise, their path was barred by a crouched figure. Who else would enter the temple at this hour of the morning? This was not the time of devotion. For that matter, how had anyone gotten past her guard?

She pushed Aurya behind her, a sense of foreboding assailing her. Whatever was before them exuded evil; she could smell it in the air.

"Stay behind me," she ordered.

"What is it?" Aurya asked, her voice tinged with fear.

"Who are you?" Katriel called out cautiously.

The creature raised its head to pin her beneath a mesmerizing, glittering look of fanatical fiery red. Its lips drew back in a parody of a smile. Long white hair fell dankly around its face, touching the ground, its naked grayish, decaying flesh made Katriel shudder. It reminded her of a dead animal left to rot in the heat of noonday.

"I am here for you," the creature hissed as it rose from the crouched position to its full height.

To Katriel, it looked to be an abomination that had once been female but had become twisted and mangled in some way. The thundering of her heart seemed to shudder to a halt in her chest at the figure of death that barred their way.

She swiftly glanced over her shoulder, but there was no way out behind them. They were trapped by the creature.

"Kon!" The enhancement of her powers magnified the range of her voice and she hoped it would be enough to reach him. She felt her claws extend and she raised her hands in an instinctive attitude of attack, to defend both herself and her young cousin.

"Do whatever I tell you, Aurya. Do you understand?"

"Yes. What is it?"

She felt the girl cringe against the wall behind her.

"I do not know, but we must find a way past it. We cannot let it back us into a corner."

Katriel felt the boiling blood of the primitive huntress rise inside her. She would not allow this creature to defeat them.

With Aurya close behind her, and forcing her back against the wall, she inched closer to the threatening creature.

"What do you mean you are here for me? Who are you?"

The creature sidled closer, like a poisonous serpent prepared to strike.

"The Master has sent me for you. You will submit to him as I have, as the others have. He is supreme."

"Druda is supreme. Who do you serve?" She heard the echo of pounding footsteps coming from the front of the temple. The creature whirled around to confront the new threat.

Kon had apparently heard her cry and raced toward them, battle-ready, sword raised, and prepared for confrontation. Katriel did not lower her guard, all her senses honed in and alert to the danger to both herself and to Aurya.

The creature now crouched low, ready to spring as Kon drew closer. Suddenly she seemed to fly through the air, long, curved claws outstretched toward him.

Just as Katriel was certain Kon would be torn apart, he shifted to the side and plunged his sword upward catching the creature through the heart.

The screech of anguish from the creature echoed again and again throughout the walls of the temple, as dark, almost black blood pooled beneath it. It fell to the floor and attempted to slither away. Kon brought the bloody sword up and drove down through the creature's back pinning it to the floor like a bug caught by a thorn. It fought and struggled to free itself.

Katriel could no longer watch as the creature kicked and clawed at the air, trying to be free, screaming in the final death throes before succumbing to whatever black world awaited it. She turned away and hugged Aurya close, shielding her young cousin from the bloody, agonizing death scene before them, understanding she had seen far too much of death already.

The door to the meditation room opened and a long white arm reached beyond to grab Katriel's arm and drag both her and Aurya inside. She pushed them into a corner, where they crouched on the floor.

"Stay there," the soft voice commanded. "Do not leave until someone you will recognize returns for you. Do you understand?"

Katriel clutched Aurya closer to her and nodded her head. "Yes, Priestess."

In another second she had vanished, Katriel had not even seen her open the door to leave. It seemed like they waited there for hours, huddled together, not knowing what was occurring on the other side of the door. Katriel would not allow her claws to retract, prepared to defend their lives if need be should another attack ensue.

Aurya looked up at her, and Katriel saw the terror lurking there.

"There is no safe place for us," she gasped.

Katriel stroked her hair. "You are safe here with me. I will not let anything happen to you."

She felt the girl shudder against her. "There is no safety anywhere," she repeated.

Katriel wished she could assure her, but in a flash of clarity she felt the undercurrent of evil surrounding them. There was a moment of regret for the lost innocence of her youth,

before the knowledge Valyn's blood now provided her. Mere days had passed since Valyn's arrival, yet it seemed a lifetime.

This new understanding also bespoke the fact that her mother had not shared with her the complete truth of the dangers surrounding them. That was something she planned to immediately rectify once they returned to the manor.

She looked up as the door opened. Pushing Aurya behind her, she raised her claws in readiness to defend them. Her eyes widened when she saw who stood there.

"Valyn," she breathed as the adrenalin that had sustained her until this moment seemed to drain out of her. Her claws retracted and she sank back against the wall, eyes closed.

She felt his presence, felt him pull her into his arms and his powerful scent surrounded her.

"Thank the gods you are safe. When Trinian said you were in danger I feared we would be too late." He tipped her head up and looking into his eyes she saw the concern and anger lurking there.

"Who was it, Valyn? How did it get in here?"

He helped her to stand. "We do not know yet. I want to get you back to the house. Until we find out how the creature gained entry, you should not leave the safety of the manor again."

"Nowhere is safe," Aurya cried out. Katriel turned to look at her, saw the fixated stare and bent to her.

"Aurya, the creature is dead. It cannot hurt you."

Aurya's gaze slowly focused and lifted to meet Katriel's concern. "This one is dead, but there will be others. They are too powerful. You will be unable to stop them. *He* is too powerful."

Katriel shook her gently. "Aurya, we will not let them win. You must believe that." She helped her to her feet. "Come, we will return to the safety of the manor. You will feel better once we get there."

The young girl had already suffered the murder of her mother, the loss of everything familiar, and now this. It appeared she teetered at the brink of sanity. Katriel's newly acquired insight told her the girl was about to break if they did not help her.

"Valyn," she said quietly, "we need to get her back to her room quickly."

Taking the full weight of Aurya against her, she felt Valyn's steadying strength encompass her as he guided her out the door.

She stiffened, preparing to see the gory remains of the creature, but when they reached the main devotion room, there was no sign of the battle that had taken place. Kon and Trinian were deep in conversation, but paused when they saw them approach.

Katriel looked up at Valyn questioningly. He returned her steady gaze, but kept them moving toward the entrance of the temple. The priestess was nowhere in sight.

“Where is ... it?”

“The creature has been taken care of,” was all he said, guiding them out into the crimson light. Kon and Trinian flanked them as they descended the steps, hands at their swords, gazes watchful.

With another burst of clarity she knew Valyn was also aware of more than he was telling her.

“You cannot continue trying to protect me. I am no longer a child, Valyn.”

His steady grip forced her to continue walking. She looked up at him, determined to have answers. He returned her gaze, then nodded at Aurya. “Now is not the time. Let us get her inside and away from the danger. She needs quiet and rest.”

Grudgingly, she admitted he was right. Aurya was not strong enough to be able to handle any more stress. She must be protected.

“Very well, Valyn. But it is only a matter of time. I will have answers from you and from my mother.

Chapter Nineteen

Leora looked up from the document she was reading as the door to her office opened. The frown lines on Noah's face did not bode well for whatever information he was about to share with her.

"How is Katriel?" The attack inside the compound worried her. Someone within the estate had obviously provided access, but who? She had sent Glyn and his family away, and the others had been checked for signs of punctures. There had been none.

"She is sitting with Aurya at the moment. They are being guarded.

"What of Valyn?"

"He and his guard, Trinian, have taken a contingent of men to inspect the outer walls for any signs of unauthorized entrance. He also plans to question the gatekeepers."

"Do you think that wise?"

For the first time she saw him smile. "Valyn is not a man who will sit back kicking his heels while there is danger afoot. You would not have chosen him as a worthy mate for Katriel otherwise, Mistress, and you know that."

She sighed. "You are right, of course." She sat back in her chair. "I have had word from several of the other houses." She picked up the top letter. "It appears Briana was breached and one of their unbound females was taken. The intruders left no trail to follow." She picked up the bundle of papers setting on her desk. "And there are other incidents. They have gained entrance differently in each instance."

Throwing the papers back on her desk, she whirled away to gaze out the window, and she felt Noah approach from behind her. His hands rested on her shoulders.

"If we cannot see the enemy, how do we combat him? If it were a full out attack, that is something I could prepare for. But this insidious invasion, not knowing who we can trust -- this is something wholly different. Who is this Korridian anyway? How does he gain the

power to convince our own people to turn on the old ways that have continued to keep us prosperous? I do not understand how this could have happened. We must prepare to leave immediately after the bonding is completed; we can waste no more time. They are finding ways to infiltrate our Houses, and we must discover a way inside their group. We need more information from the Twin Moons.”

His fingers tightened, and she felt his strength. She lifted her own hands to place them over his and squeezed. How would she ever have coped without him at her side, his ability to equalize her turbulent emotions during crises such as this? But then, had there ever been such a crisis as this?

She dropped her hands and shifted. His hands fell away and she turned to face him. “Have you spoken with the healers? Have they been able to discern who, or what, the creature who attacked in the temple is?”

He nodded and walked to the other side of the room to sit on the lounging chair setting against the wall. “I have just come from them.”

“And?” she prompted as he hesitated to continue.

“The girl’s blood matches the family of Glyn. We can only assume she was his daughter.”

“I see. I must see for word to be sent to Glyn and the girl’s family. I wish it could have ended differently for her.” She was silent for a long moment before continuing. “There must be more. The condition of her body --” As Matriarch it was her duty to be informed of all that occurred within the boundaries of the estate. But this had been one task that had instilled her with a true feeling of horror.

She was thankful Glyn had already departed the planet. To see his daughter, and what had become of her, would have been too much for any parent to handle.

She had gone to the shrouders’ quarters in the catacombs and viewed the remains. A shudder passed through her as she remembered what she saw -- the creature that had lain on the slab of granite. No being she had ever encountered, even as a Blood Huntress, had been so twisted, nor exuded so dense an evil.

“There is more. The healers found evidence of altered Vawndrian blood in her system - large amounts. It was almost as though every ounce of her human blood was overtaken by the presence of the Vawndrian blood.”

Remembering what she had seen, she was not surprised to hear of the atrocity. “Malik told us they had harnessed the Vawndra for their evil purposes. It is most likely why a Vawndra suddenly appeared in the Aurora Valley. Someone drew him here purposely. These followers of Korridian must be close -- closer than we had at first anticipated.”

She studied Noah intently. There was something he had not yet revealed to her. He rose from the lounge chair and began to pace the length of her office.

“What else?”

"The healers say there is some element in the blood that should not be there. It is neither Vawndra nor Sangorrian. It is something the healers have never encountered before, an aggressive, savage strain that somehow attacks the human blood cells and converts them to the Vawndrian variant. It also acts as some sort of hypnotic they are still trying to identify. Hence, the creature that confronted Katriel today."

"What are you saying? Genetic research is outlawed on Ebonnia except under the most extreme supervision. Are you saying this Korridian is also involved in genetic experimentation?"

He stopped and turned to look at her. "I think right now that is what we must assume. If the healers cannot identify the makeup of the component, they cannot begin to create a serum to combat its effects."

"I need to find out what research is ongoing right now. See if any of the scientists brought in may be involved in outlawed experimentation. I will also need to be advised as to the testing we are doing now to combat what the healers have discovered. It will take time. What are we to do in the meantime?"

"We cannot wait for approval, Leora. Time is of the essence. What our healers will try to do is come up with a way to test for its presence. All of our people must be prepared to submit to the test. There is no telling who within the compound has become susceptible to this Korridian's power. It could very well be that we are looking for the wrong thing. It may not be the piercings that identify our spy, but what is contained in the blood -- something we cannot see. I have recalled the census healers to begin a new round of testing. Once we have a full report from our own healers as to what to look for, they will be sent out to gather information as quickly as possible. You will need to send word to the other Houses to do the same."

"Have the healers come up with something usable that might identify and counter the effects?"

"They are at work on it as we speak." He shrugged. "It is like any drug, there are limits to what they can do. I am informed that testing for its presence will be a far easier chemical to create than finding an antidote to detoxify its effect. We must find this Korridian and stop him."

"But where do we start? There are too many variables here. Their leader apparently stays well hidden. What we must do is capture one of his followers. It is too bad Malik was not able to find out something from his son. I will send word to him to see if he has learned anything new that might be useful to us and inform him of what we have found thus far."

Leora paced the floor, head down. "We need to know how Malik's son became involved. We also need to send someone into Onyx City to see if any information can be gathered from that direction." She halted and looked up at Noah. "With any luck when we meet with the others, we will have something concrete to share. It is imperative we stop this before it gets any worse. And I must send word to the Houses of what you have discovered

thus far so they may take their own precautions. Too little time and not enough information.”

The door to her office burst open and slammed back against the wall. Katriel stood in the doorway, her face dark with determination.

“Katriel, what is the meaning of this?”

She stepped into the office, her back straight, hands on hips. Leora realized she had been so focused on circumventing the danger around them that she had missed the changes that were being wrought in her daughter.

“You have tried to keep things from me, Mother. I will accept no more of it.” She raised her chin determinedly. “I want the truth of what is happening here.”

“Katriel, where is your control? Is this how you handle your growing powers? By abusing them?”

“You lied to me about the servant who attacked Valyn, Mother. I want the truth. I deserve it?”

“Where is Aurya? Did you leave her alone and unprotected?”

Katriel crossed her arms over her breasts. “You treat me like a child. I am no longer a child. I have ordered Tish to stay with Aurya. And there are two guards posted outside her door. Tell me the truth.”

Leora looked up at Noah helplessly. She saw him nod imperceptibly. “She has a right,” he said in a low tone. “And the danger is too great. It is time she knows what we face so she may protect herself.”

Wearily, Leora indicated for Katriel to sit and then lowered herself into the chair behind her desk, facing Katriel. “You are correct in that I have not told you everything. But I have done it to try to protect you. Soon enough you will be faced with the full responsibilities as heir to this house. I wanted your bonding to be a time of happiness for you, untinged with the turmoil that surrounds us. And I thought as long as you stayed within the walls of the compound you were safe. Apparently, I was wrong.”

She saw the look in Katriel’s eyes soften. “Mother, I love you for always trying to protect me.” She turned to look at Noah. “And Sec Noah for acting as the sire that I never knew.” She again looked at her mother. “But you contracted for the bonding with the knowledge that it would bring me enhanced abilities. You allowed me to become accustomed to Valyn’s blood knowing what the result would be. You must now tell me what I need to know to utilize my growing abilities to best advantage, not only for me, but for my bond mate and for the House of Leah.”

Leora marveled at the young woman who sat across from her and spoke so vehemently. What a brave woman she was to have confronted the creature in the temple. She was correct; she had earned the right to be treated as an equal.

“Very well.” Noah walked over to stand beside Leora’s chair. “But it would be best if you do not share this information with anyone else, especially Aurya. We do not know who we can trust.”

“What of Valyn? He must know as well.” Again, she raised her chin. “I will not keep secrets from my bond mate. If I cannot trust him, then all is lost anyway.”

Leora smiled. It was good that Katriel had such trust in Valyn. If she had not, their union would have traveled a rocky road indeed.

“Valyn is aware of the danger.”

She saw the fire begin to build in Katriel’s eyes again. “You saw fit to inform him, but not me?”

“Katriel, he is to be your protector and must be informed of any danger that surrounds you. He is trained and knowledgeable in war strategies.”

“I will not allow you or him to treat me as a child or someone without a brain. No more, Mother; I will not stand for it. I cannot begin to learn if you continue to try to protect me from having knowledge.”

Leora felt Noah’s steady hand on her shoulder. “That is not how you are being treated. It has only been my wish that your bonding be a happy time for you and that you are able to concentrate on harnessing the new, more powerful emotions you are experiencing. Your thoughts should be focused on Valyn and bonding with him, not on matters of the estate -- that is my responsibility. Your strength will come through the bonding.”

Katriel jumped to her feet and paced the room. “And exactly how do you expect me to do that with all of the danger that seems to surround us? It is no longer a matter of it remaining outside the safety of the compound, but is inside as well. How can I protect myself and those I love if I am not aware of all the facts?”

“Sit down. Can you not feel how out of control your thoughts are right now? You are not ready to be burdened with other issues. You are protected here, can that not be enough right now?”

When Katriel looked at Leora, she saw the deep, swirling conflict inside her. “What is happening to us, Mother?”

Leora indicated the chair. “Sit down and I will share with you what we know. It will be difficult, but you must promise me that for the next two days you will concentrate solely on the bonding and leave the matters of the estate to me.”

“You ask a great deal.”

Leora gave her a hard, penetrating look. “I will ask a great deal more of you in the days ahead. Our world is in dangerous turmoil, but unless you focus on bonding with Valyn, you will be at a disadvantage to help us fight the enemy that seeks to overtake us. Your duty to

Leah will be achieved through the union with Valyn and absorbing the power that it will bring to you. And learning control and patience.”

When she saw understanding and a grudging acceptance in Katriel’s eyes, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Very well, Mother. It will not be easy, but I will do as you request.”

“Your promise, Katriel. For the next two days you will focus your energies on your future bond mate.”

“You have my promise.” She sat back in the chair across from the desk. “Now please tell me what I need to know.”

* * * * *

Leora walked the quiet corridors, unable to sleep. She had been restless since Glyn’s attack on Valyn. For now, all was silent in the house.

She stopped at the door to Katriel’s apartments and tuned her hearing. She caught the steady breathing that indicated sleep from within.

Satisfied, she walked on, pausing at the door to Aurya’s room and listened. She felt the girl’s uneasy shifting within the boundaries of her sleep. She had been through so much already for such a young age. Leora began to wonder if she would truly be any safer here than back in the Darlinean Mountains.

After her meeting with Katriel, she had written messages to be sent to each of the Houses informing them of the new dangers presented and advising them of the urgency of the meeting to compare notes on what they knew. Other notes went out to the genetics research agency in Onyx City advising them of the situation and requesting approval for the research her healers now undertook.

The fact that the Sangorrian species was a result of genetics testing that had gone terribly awry had culminated in one of the first laws enacted on Ebonnia, outlawing such testing except under the watchful tight control of the Sangorrian Genetics Research Foundation, whose base was located in Onyx City and who answered to the Sangorrian Council of Elders encompassing the heads of the fourteen houses in Sangorria.

Katriel would accompany her to the emergency meeting of the Crimson Sun Houses. By then she should have gained full power, at least enough to protect herself if the need should arise. Travel to the meeting could make them vulnerable to attack, and it would take all their vigilance to maintain security on the trip. There were just too many loopholes at the moment. She knew there was a spy in their midst, but who was it?

Leora traversed the quiet corridor and descended the staircase to the first floor where Valyn resided. She stopped outside his door and listened.

He was not asleep, but paced the room. She heard the crackle of papers. She could not have chosen better for her daughter's mate. That thought alone eased her mind somewhat, particularly with the unrest that surrounded them all.

She continued her travels toward the back of the house and up the back stairs not halting until she reached the roof. Mounting the final winding steps slowly, she reached the top and opened the door that led outside.

Stepping through, the fierce wind swirled around her sending her long hair twirling and pulling at her. She clutched her crimson robe closer. Walking farther out over the loose obsidian gravel, she stood looking upward at the dark sky. The moons were almost obliterated from view. They would converge on the morrow and the bonding would be completed. A dinner would take place beforehand to celebrate the union, then Valyn and Katriel would retire to the west tower ceremonial bower which would be prepared for them.

It would be a place of solitude, a time for them to get to know each other in the most intimate fashion of body, mind, and soul. The following day the Blood Rite and signing of the contracts would take place that would put the final seal to the union. Leora could only pray that they would be allowed these next two days.

She looked over the side to the courtyard far below, where guards paced in ready watchfulness. There was not a sound that should not be there. But deep inside, she knew it was only a matter of time before the next attack, and they must be ready for it in whatever form it should take.

Leora caught a familiar scent from behind her. It was not her guard, who she knew stood at a distance, giving her privacy, yet remaining vigilant.

Strong arms encircled her and she leaned back against his broad chest.

"I did not mean to cause you unrest as well," she said.

"Did you really think if you left our bed I would not notice?"

"I have found it difficult to sleep lately. I needed to be sure all was well." Again, she looked up at the almost moonless night. "She is no longer a child, and I guess I am trying to come to terms with that."

She felt his arms tighten. "She is a fine young woman. And Valyn is a good man. You need have no worries for her union."

"It is not that. Our world is changing; I feel the presence of the evil lying in wait. It is close and growing thicker all the time. Everything we have known is about to alter."

She felt his hands release the sash of her robe, felt his hot, callused palms at her breasts and she moaned with aching pleasure.

He dropped his head to place a kiss on her neck. "Come with me," he whispered as he reached for her hand and drew her further into the darkness, shadowing them from the view of the guard who stood in the distance.

"Noah --"

“Shhh. The healers have successfully created a chemical to test for the Vawndrian blood variant. I have passed the information on to the census healers and they will begin testing immediately. For a time, we have done all that we can, and the night is peaceful. Come with me, my love.”

She followed as he moved into a small, hidden alcove in the roof courtyard and sat upon a wooden bench, drawing her with him. She straddled his lap.

He drew her gown up along her legs, the heat of his hands searing against her naked thighs. The moist, cool air of night teased her skin into ready awareness.

He pushed the robe down her shoulders, the straps of her gown followed binding her, exposing her to him.

Pulling her closer, she felt his burgeoning cock beneath the material of his pants and reached forward to release it from its confinement.

Her hands encircled his needy, rigid staff, as his mouth captured her lips, driving his tongue deep inside. She caught his moan, tasted it with her tongue. Her hands slid along the length of him and she felt her cream drench her thighs at the thought of all that heat filling her.

His hands pulled her thighs wider, as his mouth descended to her breast, to suckle there. One hand moved to the entrance of her pussy, and a finger sank deep inside. She arched, feeling the pleasure sear her. Undulating her hips against his questing finger she dropped her head back and closed her eyes.

How she loved him. Her fingers curled into the front of his shirt as her fangs began to throb. He added another finger to the first, widening her channel, then retreated. He pushed the gown up over her thighs so it gathered around her waist as he lifted her.

“Guide me inside you,” he directed as he positioned her over him.

She clasped his cock and centered it at her weeping entrance. He guided her as she settled over him, opening for him, and she felt his piercing presence inside her, widening her, filling her.

With no more thought, she sank her fangs into his chest, drew of his lifeblood as he filled her so completely. With little more than one deep thrust, she felt him pulse inside her as his seed filled her, felt his blood mingle with her own.

Ripping the shirt from his body, she pulled him to her, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders and sank her claws cleanly into the tight muscle of his back as she orgasmed in deep, pulsing waves of release.

He held her shuddering body, molding her tightly to him as they rocked with the force of climax. Finally, she lifted her head and slowly retracted her claws as the echoes of her orgasm receded.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she refused to allow him to retreat and curled into him. Just for this one moment, within the shadows of the night, she felt at peace.

Adrik had been her Alpha, her first love, and she had loved him completely. But Noah had seen and knew the worst of her, and the best, had filled her life all these years with his steady, quiet protection, his loyalty, and devotion more than she deserved in a Secondary Attendant. Her love for him filled every crevice in her body.

The knowledge of impending doom again unfurled its ugly head. She tightened her arms around him, trying to ward off the vicious grasp of the evil hovering at the gates ... waiting for one moment of lax vigilance. She could only pray that it did not find purchase. At least not tonight.

Chapter Twenty

“You should not be nervous, Lady, he seems like a good man.”

Katriel pulled the sash of her robe tighter as she looked at the shimmering silver and black dress that lay spread across her bed. For the next two days there would be festivities celebrating the bonding and Blood Rite for her and Valyn.

She had attended several for others who had been fostered at Leah, but this would be decidedly different. Not only was she the heir to the matriarch, but an aura of danger clung thick to the air. Everyone was tense with concern for what the next hours might bring.

Promising her mother to keep her focus on the upcoming bonding was a difficult task at best. Knowing the danger that surrounded them was cause for great concern. Yet she also knew her successful bonding with her mate was important for many reasons. Not just for herself, but for her mother as well. Insight told her that her mother worried for her safety, worried that she did not have her powers and was therefore vulnerable. If she could focus on the bonding, soon her mother could turn her whole attention to the matters of the estate and not worry about Katriel because she would then have not only her powers, but Valyn as her mate.

Messengers had been arriving and departing at regular intervals throughout the day, bringing news from the other Houses, as well as delivering reports of the conditions at Leah.

It was not the way she would have wished to begin life with her bond mate.

She walked to a side table to pour herself a glass of wine in hopes of settling at least some of the concerns swirling inside her.

“I am not nervous about the bonding, Tish. I am concerned for the danger that seems to have settled in our midst. I realize there has always been some concern for our safety and protection and times when I have felt suffocated by the need for guards. But it has never been like this.”

Tish walked over to her and led her toward the dressing table. "Sit. Tonight is not for worrying over matters of the estate. Now you must focus on your future with your bond mate. Your mother will see to it that the manor is secure tonight." She picked up a brush and began to attend to Katriel's hair.

Katriel looked at her reflection in the mirror. Was she so different from the uninitiated girl of a few days ago? The one who had struggled to circumvent the advent of this day? It seemed years had passed since Valyn's arrival at Leah. So much had occurred -- not only for the province, but for Katriel as well.

Tish's rhythmic stroking with the brush helped to soothe her nervous tension. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the image of Valyn.

Soon they would come together in the most intimate way a man and woman could be together. Her blood heated at the thought of being sequestered with him in the bower for twenty-four hours. At the end of that time, morrow midnight, the contracts would be signed and the final ceremony sealing the union would be witnessed.

She and Valyn would not be able to have the usual two-week journey of seclusion that most newly bonded mates were allowed -- not with the unrest and danger prevalent. Instead, they would be journeying with her mother and Noah and a large contingent of guards for a meeting of the heads of the Houses in the Druda Province. This meeting would not include the more routine discussions of cultivation and sale of their crops for the coming year -- this time it would be about their survival and protection.

Opening her eyes, she again looked at her reflection. Tish was right, there would be time to worry about the future, but tonight and tomorrow belonged to her and to Valyn. It was not only for herself, but in the larger scope, for Leah. Completion of the bonding would bring her into her full powers, making her more effective in her future role as matriarch of Leah.

She could not sit still any longer.

"That is enough, Tish. Thank you. It is time to prepare."

Tish laid the brush down. She then opened the containers setting on the table and began to apply enhancements of cosmetics. First the lotion to protect her skin, the black eyeliner and shadow to enhance her eyes, a hint of rouge to emphasize the elegant lines of her face, and a touch of glitter powder used discriminately. Finally she painted on the deep red burgundy lip color to complete the picture.

Katriel started to turn to look in the mirror.

"Not yet. First, the dress," Tish said as she hastened to the bed. Katriel stood up to follow her.

Tish carefully lifted the confection from the bed. It shimmered beneath the light. It was made of the finest hand-woven silk and designed especially for this occasion.

Katriel unfastened the belt and allowed the robe to slide from her shoulders to the floor.

"It is a very beautiful dress, Lady," Tish said as she helped Katriel to dress.

It floated over her like a morning cloud settling over the Aurora Valley, a wispy presence that might disappear with the dawn. Tish walked around behind her to tighten the black lacing and fasten the waist. The front dropped to a wide low-cut vee dipping to her waist, baring the pale valley between her breasts. The sides were merely thin black laces of fabric holding the dress together, as was the back, which would mold the gown tightly to her slender figure. The silky skirt fell in a straight line with slits up the sides revealing tantalizing glimpses of the tops of her milky white thighs and the thigh-high black silk stockings she had donned earlier that caressed her legs.

Tish moved around to the front to lace up the long, tight sleeves that ended in a point over the tops of the backs of her hands. Tish then turned and picked up the short, black shiny boots and helped her with those. Her thick, ebony tresses were left free to hang straight down her back, curling seductively at the ends.

Tish straightened to look at her. Katriel saw tears glitter in her eyes.

"Oh, Lady, you look so beautiful."

Katriel smiled. "Then why are you crying?"

Tish dashed a hand across her eyes and sniffed. "Because you are no longer a child." She waved toward the mirror. "See for yourself. He will be unable to resist you."

Katriel turned and walked over to the mirror and inhaled sharply, her dark eyes widening. "Are you sure that is me?" she whispered.

It was Tish's turn to smile as she walked up behind her. "Yes, it is most definitely you."

Who was that seductive woman with the glittering silver eyes in the mirror? It was certainly no one she recognized. "Tish, you are a magician."

Tish shook her head. "You have always been very lovely. All we have done is enhance what was already there."

Suddenly, she was afraid. What would Valyn think? A slow burn began in the pit of her stomach. The woman in the mirror looked like a skilled seductress. But underneath, when it came to charming a man, she really had very little skill. Oh, she had studied the books, all right, but when it came to actually putting what she had learned from the books into practice, she had a feeling there was quite a bit she still did not know. Would she be able to please him?

She wanted to please him in all ways. Her hands began to shake at the thought of what exactly that might entail, and she felt a heat begin to swirl between her thighs as a vision of the Jotar warriors came to mind. Would the heat they shared be as primitive as what she had witnessed?

"No more waiting, Tish. Thank you for your help. It is time."

"I wish you much happiness, Lady."

Katriel leaned over to hug her. "You are more than a servant here, you know. You have been a friend."

People aged differently in the Zytarri Star System than on other yellow sun worlds. She was not sure of Tish's exact age, but she had always seemed to be there for her.

"I hope you find happiness one day with a bond mate. Do not let your duties here stop you from finding someone to share your life with."

"One day, Lady. Right now I am content. Now go. Your mother and your bond mate are waiting."

Tish walked over to the door and opened it. Katriel stepped into the hallway, but then turned back for an instant, studying the room she had just left. When next she came back to these apartments, Valyn would be with her. Everything would be different. In that moment she silently bid farewell to her childhood and prayed that the future would hold just as much happiness as her girlhood had. She knew with what had happened over the last few days alone, all her strength would be needed in the days ahead.

She turned away and started down the hallway toward the staircase leading to the first floor. Kon accompanied her to the grand ceremonial hall. She could hear the murmur of voices as she approached and could feel the dampness of nerves on her palms as she curled her fingers into loose fists.

Two servants dressed in formal Leah regalia stood at the door. Two Jotar guards stood to either side of them.

As one of the servants leaned in to open the door, she panicked. "Wait."

He looked at her questioningly.

"Give me just a moment." She smoothed her hands along the silk of the skirt, fidgeted with the points of the sleeves, and then stroked a hand over her hair. Taking a deep breath, she straightened, jutted her chin upward, then nodded to the servant. "All right, I am ready."

The servant opened the door and stepped inside. She saw him lift the bell chimes and ring them. The murmuring in the room subsided.

"Her Ladyship Katriel Saguna, heir to the House of Leah, daughter of Leora Saguna, Mistress of the House of Leah, bond mate to Valyn Ozero, formerly of the Eclipsian Brotherhood of Illumata." After making the announcement, he replaced the chimes and turning, opened both doors for her to enter.

She could only hope the quaking she felt inside was not evident to the audience before her who were now all looking her way expectantly. She stepped into the room, her eyes searching frantically for a familiar face.

The tension seemed to whoosh from her lungs when she saw him. He was there, waiting for her to enter. She devoured him with her eyes.

He wore a flowing black silk shirt, with silver lacing threaded across the opening, exposing a massive amount of his muscular chest beneath. The black leather pants he wore offered a tantalizing glimpse of his hard thighs and legs. As with her dress, the only thing that seemed to be holding the leather together were the crisscrossed thin silver laces accenting the golden flesh beneath. He wore tall, gleaming black leather boots.

She was mesmerized by the flexing of his muscular frame as he strode across the floor to greet her, his intense sapphire gaze locking with hers. The breath stifled in her chest as she waited for him to reach her.

He clasped her hand, lifted it, and then bowed. She felt the touch of his lips and the whisper of his golden locks as he turned her hand palm up and kissed the center.

"I have waited a lifetime for you, Lady. It was worth every second."

He released her hand and she lifted it to stroke the side of his face. "I am glad you waited. I would want no other than you."

When he smiled she felt heat rush through her. She was eager to be alone with him. This ceremonial dinner was going to be one duty, at least this evening that she would rather have foregone.

He stepped to her side and linked her arm though his, escorting her to where her mother and Noah stood waiting.

Her mother's eyes seemed to have that same glittery sheen that Tish's had contained earlier.

"Good evening, Mother."

She blinked rapidly and then smiled. "You look beautiful, Katriel. I am so proud of you." She leaned over to embrace her.

Katriel hugged her. "Thank you, Mother."

Leora studied her closely. "You are content with my choice, Daughter?"

"I am very happy. Do not fear. I am eager for this union with Valyn of Illumata. One day, I will ask how you knew of him."

She saw her mother's expression shift away for a brief second and when she looked back at Katriel, she felt a curtain had dropped hiding her mother's emotions.

"All is well then if you are pleased. Perhaps another time we will have the discussion you seek." She turned to Noah, accepted his arm, and they walked through the adjoining doors into the formal dining room, toward the temporary raised dais at the end of the room. Valyn followed with Katriel. They would share a velvet covered bench at the dining table. He helped her to sit and then sat down beside her.

The bell chimes were rung and everyone quieted as Noah stood with a wine goblet in his hand.

"To Lady Katriel and Lord Valyn. Much happiness and long life."

An echo sounded round the room as everyone repeated the toast and raised their glasses. Valyn lifted his wine goblet and held it to Katriel's lips, and she repeated the gesture by raising her wine goblet to his as they each drank in acceptance of the toast.

This dinner would serve as a minor foreplay to the bonding as they fed each other the ceremonial dinner of roasted meat and succulent vegetables. She had been tutored on the traditions of the bonding dinner. Knew that to touch and be touched in the ordinary routine of eating and drinking would serve to heighten the anticipation of the night before them.

As he fed her with his fingertips she tasted him on the food and knew he could probably taste her as well. When she drank it seemed he was infused in the wine and her incisors throbbed with the knowledge that later she would partake of him in more ways than one.

As the dinner wore on, her body became more sensitized to his presence, his touch, his smell. It surrounded her with his sensual, masculine energy. Suddenly she found herself reaching for his hand and bringing it to her lips.

She felt the heat of his gaze as she pressed the hard, callused palm to her mouth and used her tongue to swipe a line from the heel to the tips of his fingers. Heat blazed in his eyes as she licked the end of his index finger, tasting honey and wine, and sucked it into her mouth.

He allowed her to have her way and with his other hand he cupped her cheek. She closed her eyes and savored the taste and feel of him. Slowly, she released his finger and he used that hand to frame her face and captured her mouth with his.

The hot taste of him sent her blood pulsing. There had been no ingestion of his blood on this day as she had drunk each day since shortly after his arrival at Leah. She could hear his heart thundering in his chest, a steady, pounding rhythm.

When his tongue plunged between her lips, she sucked and consumed. He teased her with his tongue, abraded it against the sharp tip of one fang and that one taste almost made her forget everyone else in the room.

He retreated and looked down at her intently.

"It seems a long time until midnight."

A slow smile spread across her lips. "I agree. Since your arrival it feels we have waited an age to be alone."

Servants began to clear away the dishes and the musicians tuned their instruments and began to play.

Katriel rested back against the cushions of the bench and tried to regain her composure. Another hour and they could depart for the seclusion of the bower apartment. There they could take their time to learn about each other. But first they must do their duty.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

"I think we must. It would be impolite not to do so."

He tilted his head as he held out his hand. "You do not wish to dance with me?"

She placed her own small hand in his as she rose and smiled as she drew up next to him and felt his heat. "It has nothing to do with not wanting to dance with you. I would love to be in your arms. But I would rather do it alone than here among so many."

He escorted her to the cleared dance floor and took her in his arms.

"I am a patient man. But even my patience is wearing thin."

She looked up at him and laughed as he whirled her around the dance floor in the intricate steps of an Ebonnian waltz.

"I am not a patient woman, so you can imagine my anticipation for an end to these formalities."

He twirled her around and brought her back close to his body. "You are a bold woman, Lady."

She circled around him, close to his body, back to back as she circuited him, then whirled in front of him. Expertly, he drew her back into his arms. And this time she felt the obvious presence of a very hard bulge against her stomach.

"Are you saying you do not like bold women, Predom?" she asked him breathlessly.

He held her hand firmly as they promenaded with the others who circuited the floor. When they had circled the room, he pulled her back against him and when his warm hand splayed across her abdomen she felt a heavy flutter of what felt like dragon wings flapping in the pit of her stomach.

His moist breath teased at the curve of her ear. "To see you open to me as the bloom of a shy cimmian rose opens to the welcoming warmth of the red sun each morn has been my pleasure." He twirled her around until she was against his hard chest and rigid cock, and she felt the essence of her womanhood damp against her thighs. "You are a ravishing beauty I yearn to savor. Yet I already know, having only tasted your lips, that I will quickly become addicted to your vibrancy, your passion. And your boldness pleases me."

If she had been required to stand on her own just as that moment, she knew it would not have been possible. His words melted her.

"For an untried male, you seem very sure of yourself."

The crystal blue fire of his gaze blazed through her. "I may be untried, but I have not remained unknowledgeable. I have learned everything there is to learn in order to bring you nothing but pleasure this night and all others to follow."

"I fear I will not measure up to your expectations."

He pulled her closer. "You already have lived up to my dreams through the years. And you have surpassed them. You please me, Lady. Very much. It can only become richer."

The music came to an end and the chimes rang again. Katriel turned in his arms to look expectantly to her mother who stood on the dais.

"It is time," was all she said before accepting Noah's outstretched hand and descending to the main floor.

Katriel began to tremble and she felt Valyn's grip tighten.

"Do not fear, I will not harm you. I only wish to give you pleasure."

"It is not fear that makes me tremble so." She was afraid to look at him and kept her eyes on her mother and Noah who waited for them at the entrance to the dining room.

"I am glad to hear that," he murmured as they reached her mother's side. They would be escorted by her mother and Noah until they reached the staircase leading to the bower in the east tower.

Two servants walked in front and two more behind, all bearing lighted tapers as they traveled the corridors to the other end of the house.

At the bottom of the winding staircase, the party halted and her mother turned to her.

"This staircase leads you to a new dimension of your life, Daughter, with new beginnings. It is a path you will not travel alone." She leaned forward and kissed Katriel on both cheeks, and then did the same to Valyn. "Care for her well, I give her safety into your hands as her prime protector."

She stepped aside to stand beside Noah as Valyn escorted her up the winding staircase, Kon and Trinian trailing behind. As they mounted the stairs, she was reminded that generations of the House of Leah had made this same journey to the bower for the first night of their union. Her mother and blood sire had done so.

When they reached the top of the stairs, there was a long, torch-lit corridor. Kon moved ahead of them to be certain all was as it should be. They waited as he walked through the door at the end of the corridor. Finally, he returned to them and nodded, indicating they might proceed and that all was as it should be.

They reached the door at the end of the hallway; Valyn opened it and then stepped back for Katriel to precede him. Taking a deep breath, she willingly entered upon the unknown path to her primary union with Valyn Ozero, henceforth from this night, Valyn Ozero of Ebonnia.

Chapter Twenty-One

Katriel had never been inside the bower before. She looked around and her eyes widened at what she beheld.

Numerous candles illuminated the circular room. The walls detailed a colorful panoramic mural of erotic images of people in many settings and positions.

The floor was covered with a thick dark blue carpet. The bed at the center of the room was a massive swirling wrought iron piece of furniture littered with numerous midnight blue and burgundy pillows in all sizes and shapes and a deep blue velvet spread trimmed in magnificent burgundy braiding covered the bed.

There was a long ebony table to one side covered with an assortment of trays of mouth-watering delicacies and decanters of wine. It seemed everything was provided that they might require over the next twenty-four hours.

It was the most decadent atmosphere she had ever been in. Not that her experience or travels really amounted to much that she could judge.

Her nervousness drew her to study the mural more closely, unsure of what to do next. She was scared and excited all at the same time. In that moment, she felt like a girl poised at the threshold of womanhood, yet not quite certain how to unlock the door.

Then she felt his heat at her back. He swept her long hair to the side and feathered kisses along the sensitive arc of her neck. She shivered and exhaled on a sigh of pleasure. It would be all right.

“We should light the ceremonial candles,” he whispered.

She turned to face him and he lowered his head to possess her lips, making her dizzy with the sensations of his taste. He took her hand and led her to the low table at one side of the bed where one of the purple pillar candles the Druda priestess had blessed awaited. There were crimson flower petals scattered around it.

Valyn helped her kneel before the small makeshift altar, then walked around the bed to kneel at the table on the other side of the bed that contained an identical candle. She turned to look at him, and she felt herself melting as he smiled. She reached to pick up the flintlight lying next to the candle, struck it against the flint resting there as well, and it flared to life.

Again, she looked over at Valyn and noted his actions had mirrored hers and he held the flintlight poised about the flint.

She returned her gaze to the candle in front of her and lowered the flintlight to the wick.

“Druda, bless this union. It is my will to join with this male, known as Valyn Ozero, to accept his protection, bear his children, and partake only of his lifeblood into my body.” She reached forward to light the candle. “I dedicate myself to this bonding with my mate.” She closed her eyes and bowed her head, waiting to hear the echo of her oath.

She heard Valyn strike the flint. “Druda, bless this union. It is my will to join with this female, known as Katriel, to give my life for her protection, to be sire to her children, and offer her alone my lifeblood for her health and well being.” There was a pause and she assumed he lit the other candle. “I dedicate myself to this bonding with my mate.”

The silence of the room was complete as moments passed while she knelt there, waiting. The anticipation of his touch began to spread through her and it felt as though she radiated heat from every pore of her body. Her incisors throbbed with her need for him.

She felt his presence behind her and he lifted her to her feet.

“You are mine, Katriel. You have given your oath as I have offered mine.”

She looked up at him. “A few days ago I would not have thought it was possible for a dream to become a reality.” She lifted her hands up to press against his chest, felt the thunder of his heartbeat. “Everything is changed. I have yearned for you -- for this moment -- for so many years. I never believed it could be possible.”

Slowly, he turned her away and she felt his firm, warm hands begin to unlace the back of her dress.

“I serve you in all ways, Lady.”

She felt the bodice loosen, yet he did not divest her of the dress immediately. She sucked in a surprised breath when she felt his hands slide over the naked curve of her hip beneath the delicacy of the dress.

She heard him sigh. “Such warm, silky skin. I knew you would feel like sunshine on a springtide day. A kiss of heat, the tantalizing breeze of promise, the blush of sensual beauty.”

His warm hands curved to rest over her abdomen. She absorbed his heat, felt a tingling in her pussy, wanted him to touch her most sensitive spot, and her juices coated her legs with the need to have him there.

“Valyn,” she groaned, arching back against him.

But his hands did not move downward to that secret place of aching need. Instead, she felt them rove over her ribs, upward and then she felt the exquisite touch of his hands again, this time at her breasts. He stroked lightly, driving her desire higher, plucking at her like a fine instrument. She felt her nipples pucker into tight, needy buds, and she shuddered with the exquisite pleasure of his touch.

He was building the fire inside her, stoking her to a heady, steep summit. He kneaded her breasts, swept his hands down, cupped them, claimed them with his touch.

"You are mine," he whispered against her neck. "I have waited and longed for this moment."

Again she moaned and his fingers danced over her sensitive nipples. "H-how do you know how to do this? You are as virgin as I, yet your hands speak of knowledge. Oh, gods, I am burning up inside." Instinctively, she tried to turn around, wanted to touch him. His hands gripped her waist and he held her fast, pulled her closer and she felt his rigid erection against her.

"Let me touch you," she begged.

"We have all night," he answered as his grip loosened and again she felt his hands travel downward across her stomach, this time toward the apex of her thighs. "I have prepared myself to serve you in all ways. I have watched and learned what strokes might pleasure my woman. Tonight I will learn which ones will provide you with the greatest source of pleasure. And we will learn about and from each other."

She felt his fingers explore the entrance to her pussy and the fire inside her raged out of control. "Please," she begged. She had studied as well, but nothing had prepared her for this assault of erotic sensations.

One of his fingers eased into her passage. "Ah," he said. "I have waited so long. Your body is virgin, but it welcomes my presence. Like a velvet glove, made to accept only me. So beautifully tight, you surround me with your female heat."

His finger began a gentle rhythmic thrust inside her, as another of his fingers teased at the bud of her clitoris, until her body moved against his hand with its own rhythm and she felt her juices dripping, lubricating his fingers, making his penetration easier. He worked a second finger inside her; her knees grew weak, and his other hand tightened around her waist, anchoring her to him.

She felt like she was running fast and far across the aurora fields and he urged her onwards, up the summit of the steep paths to the Arcadian mountains.

She breathed in his scent, let it surround her. When she was just about to fly free, he stopped and slowly retreated from inside her body.

"No ... please."

“Not yet, but soon,” he promised her. He brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked. “You taste of the finest honey cream, as I knew you would. He lowered his hand and dipped between her sensitive labia lips once more, then brought them up to her lips. “Taste.”

She opened her trembling lips and sucked at his fingers as she had done at the ceremonial dinner earlier in the evening. It was not the wine she tasted this time, but the creamy essence of her own passion.

He trailed his fingers over her lips, down the curve of her neck and across the angle of her shoulder to lower one strap of her gown. He kissed the curve of her shoulder, bared one of her breasts as the dress fell forward, his hand holding the other side of her dress in place. He swept his fingers over her exposed pale, rounded flesh.

At last he turned her to face him, allowing the other strap of her dress to fall away and he pushed the dress over her hips and it pooled to the floor at her feet.

“So beautiful.” His hands feathered over her skin, down her arms, up over her breasts. He lifted her and laid her on the velvety comforter.

The sensuous feel of the fabric was beneath her as his hands learned her body.

“I want to see you,” she moaned.

“Soon, love, but first, I must sample my midnight snack.”

“What? Ohhhh ...” she arched upward as his mouth clamped over her pussy, his tongue twirling amongst the dark, silky curls covering her mound, sucking at her, teasing her, and then delved deep inside her channel. His hands stroked her silken-clad calves up across her knees and trailed along her inner thighs, pressing them open.

She complied with the pressure of his palms and splayed her legs wider, allowing him deeper access. He raised his head and she felt a puff of breath against her hot, needy center. She arched and screamed at the wispy, erotic whisper.

“Please, Valyn, I cannot take much more. I feel ready to explode.”

His fingers opened her, as his tongue stroked along her engorged lips, teased at her clit and sank deep inside her yet again, drawing out her pleasure.

She felt her claws extend as a furious tide of sensual passion swept her away. They anchored into the velvet bedspread. She ripped and clawed as the tidal wave of sensation swallowed and spit her into the sky as bolts of pleasure consumed her and her whole body spasmed as her claws tore at the bedspread beneath her.

She screamed and convulsed as Valyn sucked her orgasm from her. She fought for control, which he would not allow her. Instead, he lifted her hips higher and instinctively she draped her long legs over his shoulders and thrust harder against his seeking mouth.

Another shattering of release drove through her until finally he allowed her to collapse against the bed. But it did not last as he came over her and again possessed her lips, laying claim to the inner moist chasm of her mouth.

She again tasted the intriguing essence of her own passion. It was as though she had ingested some drug sensitizing her to his every touch, and as she looked up, she saw him through a red haze of intense, needy desire.

She raised her hands to cup the sides of his face, to touch him, but he again moved away. He leaned down to remove her boots, then sat up and began to remove his own clothing.

“No,” she said as she sluggishly rose up. She slid across the velvet bedspread, the friction against her sensitive pussy lips causing her to shiver with sensation. She dropped to the floor and knelt before him. “It is my turn to learn the secrets of your body.”

He lowered his hands, allowing them to drop to his sides. “I am at your service, Lady.”

First she removed his boots and tossed them to the side. Then she rose up to unlace his silky shirt and helped him to remove it. She leaned back to study the huge muscular chest presented before her as she tossed the shirt behind her, mesmerized by the golden image of a god presented.

She pressed her palms to the hard muscle of his thighs and inexorably allowed them to travel along the leather-clad length toward his abdomen. Her attention was transfixed on the growing bulge cloaked by the tightly bound leather.

But not yet. Upward she traveled over his hips, along his ribs, only stopping at the tightly peaked nipples. She licked her lips, and then lowered her head to taste of his skin for the first time.

She felt his moan as she licked and swirled her tongue over his chest. She could smell his scent and it filled her with the same driving need she had felt as he touched and tasted her. The ache in her fangs accelerated, throbbed with the demand to sink into his skin to consume his lifeblood.

A haze of lust washed through her. Her hands worked at the lacings of his pants, ripping them open. She started to push them down over his hips; he arched upward to offer her easier access.

As she lowered them, her mouth and tongue tasted the skin of his abdomen, and as his cock sprang free she could scent his musky maleness.

Quickly, she pulled his pants free and tossed them to the side. As she straightened, her gaze encountered the proud, stiff shaft, oozing with life, seemingly calling to her for attention.

She reached out to embrace his cock with her hands, caressed the satiny sheathed heat, felt the life pulse, strong and hard against her palm. She salivated with the need to taste the flesh of this man who was now her bond mate, her Prime Alpha.

She had seen the possession in his eyes as he had learned her body and now she felt it grow inside her as she meant to know every inch of his.

This was a significant length of hard flesh she anticipated becoming intimately familiar with. She stroked the burgeoning purplish head, saw more cream ooze from the slit and lowered her head to lick at the liquid, tasting the intriguing essence of her mate for the first time.

A wash of lust filled her and she sucked the head of his cock into her mouth. So very large, it required inventiveness on her part not to bruise him with her fangs.

It spasmed and grew more engorged as she swirled her tongue over the sensitive skin beneath the smooth curve of its head. Her attentions served to make him slippery, easier for her to suck her way down the long column of his staff.

He would penetrate her pussy with this steely cock, and she would expand to accommodate his width and length. The books told her this would happen, even though now as she learned each nuance of his passion, she marveled she would be able to accept such a massive intruder.

Each stroke of her tongue seemed to enhance his breadth. With her other hand she cupped his heavy sacs, the source of life and pleasure. She eased a finger along the underside, felt him groan and arch, his hands cupped the sides of her head as she continued to stroke him with her hands and her tongue.

She felt him building, felt the powerful force of his climax as it drove him higher and higher, until suddenly her mouth was bathed with a flood of his exotic cream. She sucked and pulled, encouraging him to expend fully into her waiting mouth.

Knowledge prepared her, instinct drove her, pleasure consumed her, as he spasmed again and again. Only when his cock began to soften did she release him and she kissed the inside of his thigh before rising to join him on the bed.

He rolled her onto her back and brought his mouth over hers. His heavy thigh notched tightly between her own, rocked against her pussy. She arched and responded, finally twining her legs around his leg, and driving his presence hard against her clitoris.

Primitive desire burst free inside her as she fought to bring him closer, to absorb all of him inside her. His hands became more insistent on her body, possessive, demanding, pulling the passion from deep inside her soul.

He unwrapped her legs from his, pulled her thighs wide and positioned himself above her; she felt the wide tip of his shaft at the entrance to her vagina.

Slowly he entered her in short, shallow bursts. He did not seem to tire as he swirled and circled, stroking her clit, sinking bit by bit into her channel.

Her body responded to the seductive encouragement as it opened for him, welcoming him, deeper and deeper, need for him rising higher and higher.

She felt the hunger mounting as he came closer and closer to the thin veil of her virginity. Felt his cock touch, then retreat, again press forward and retreat as she sheathed

him tightly. Her passion coated his cock, and she felt his slippery presence drive deeper, the friction spiraling her higher, as her body accustomed itself to his penetration.

A primitive rhythm, and haze of need, drove her to undulations against him. At last the hunger would wait no longer. As she threw back her head, her claws unleashed, and as she dropped forward to sink her fangs into his chest, her claws anchored in his back. As she drew upon his untainted blood, he thrust deeply breaking through the veil and claiming what was his right to possess -- her virgin blood.

The pain of the tear was infinitesimal compared to the intensity of the orgasm that rocked her as he locked himself deep inside her. And as she drank of his blood, she felt him spasm as his orgasm consumed him.

The fire of his lifeblood zinged through her, energizing her, enhancing the magnitude of her climax, and empowering her in ways she had never known before, and would only know in future within the embrace of this one man.

Locked in the clinches of primitive passion as ancient as time, she felt him wrap his strong arms around her, binding her to him as closely as possible, merging them almost as one being. She felt the acceptance of what she was, what she needed from him. Felt him absorb her into himself just as completely as she took from him and bound him to her.

Finally, as the last spasms echoed through her body, she carefully retracted her claws, and pulled her fangs from his chest.

He gently eased from inside her body and she felt such emptiness when he was gone, like a piece of her torn away.

She reached out for him, desperately needing to feel him against her. He rolled to the side and pulled her on top of him and stroked her hair.

“Are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

She lifted her head and looked at him. Her gaze caught the drops of blood on his chest, just above his heart, where she had penetrated. She reached up a hand to press the palm over the puncture marks.

“And you? Turn over, let me see the marks on your back.” She tried to lift away from him, but he drew her back tightly against his chest. “If there was pain, it was exquisite pain indeed.” He kissed her lips, her neck, her eyelids. “And I would willingly experience it again, and again, and again.”

She relaxed against him and stroked his chest with her hands, loving the warm, supple strength. The heat of his blood pulsed through her body and she felt the stirring of his emotions inside her.

She glanced up at him, surprised. “You want to love me again?”

He chuckled. “Did you doubt me? What stops me is your discomfort.”

A smile spread across her face. She reached down to caress his cock, which was hardening again beneath her touch.

"The pleasure was only enhanced by the enjoyment of your possession. I want to feel you inside me again. And again. And again." Her words deliberately an echo of his earlier ones.

He rolled her onto her back and slid deep inside her with one long stroke, filling her completely. He leaned down to claim her lips in a kiss of possession. "I shall never cease to want to be claimed by you, Lady."

She undulated her hips. "Nor shall I cease to yearn to be possessed by you, Alpha."

He stroked in long, deep strokes and she moaned and twisted beneath him, felt his passage eased by their consummation of moments before.

"I will never be parted from you, Valyn, never. You are embedded deep inside me, your essence entwined with my own -- and I mean more than just your cock filling me at this moment. To be parted from you would be to lose a piece of myself. I understand now the love of my mother for Noah. And the fear."

His thrusts grew faster. "I am forever yours, Katriel. In all ways," he vowed as the driving pulse of release swallowed them into its seductive chasm and her claws drove into his back punctuating her avowal and determination.

She clutched him tighter as a shadow of unease pressed against her. A presentiment of doom awaited them outside the doors of the bower. But not tonight. This night was theirs, and she would not allow the shadows of the morrow to take these moments of happiness from her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Noah spun around and met Leora's downward thrust, effectively halting her offense. They both lowered their weapons and stood glaring at each other.

"Are you satisfied yet?" he ground out, tossing his sword aside and dragging a hand down the side of his sweating face.

"Not nearly. Pick up your sword," she demanded, as she bent forward, sword raised, ready to parry his attack once again.

"No, Leora. Your skill has not diminished over the passing years. What do you hope to gain by driving yourself to exhaustion?"

"The danger has not passed. I must be ready -- I must be fit. Now pick up your sword."

"No, Mistress."

"You would ignore my command, Sec?" Noah heard the veiled threat beneath her soft-spoken words. But tonight was not a night to force her to expend the fear in another direction.

She had reached beyond the point of exhaustion. After the dinner, they had returned to their apartments and while he watched, she had donned her huntress attire and he knew what to expect.

She had slept little since Malik's visit; it was only when he pushed her limits could he get her to sleep for any length of time. Again, she left their room to prowl every inch of the grounds and finally had gone to the exercise room to prepare herself for a battle he would do everything in his power to protect her from.

But he was her Secondary and he stayed with her through the long night. With this last exercise, he knew it was too much. She would not stop until he forced the issue. Again. She would collapse if he could not find a way through to her, to reason with her.

"Everything has been quiet since before the dinner. There have been no further indications of any kind of attack at least for now. You have heard the reports from the guards. You need to rest or if it comes to a battle, you will be unable to stand let alone defend yourself from the enemy or anyone else for that matter."

He saw the weariness in her eyes, the lines of strain around her mouth. The tension in her body softened and he stepped to her. Reaching for the sword, he gently tugged it from her grasp.

Her dark, worried gaze rose to his. "Will he protect her, Noah? Is he the right mate for her?"

He stroked the side of her face, pushed several unruly wisps of hair behind the curve of her ear. "You have done well in your choice of Alpha for her. I have watched him. He is able and will protect her with his life. Already he loves her -- you can see it in his eyes, in his manner."

She nodded, then leaned against him. "I am tired, but I cannot sleep," she murmured. "When I sleep I see death all around us, a black mist that engulfs everything we have worked so hard to build." Her eyes lifted to his and he saw the pain. "This is atonement, is it not? For the deeds I committed when I took the blood hunt. But Katriel must not be allowed to pay for my choices."

He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. They had never spoken of those months on Zadolan, or what he knew of her survival on the hunt. He had been a bounty hunter at the time and the price on the Blood Huntress's head was extremely tempting, a large enough amount to keep his belly full for quite some time. He had tracked her, been only one step behind her, until that last bloody battle.

Having been brought up on Zadolan, also known as the Criminal Colony, he had little scruples about what he would undertake to earn a living. His mother had been a whore, his father a thief, and they had been the ones to teach him to survive. He had done it well, with little conscious thought, until he caught his first sight of Leora Saguna. And he had never regretted one moment of his life since that day. That mercenary on Zadolan, the Huntress he had tracked, were no more. It was as though it had been another time, other people who had lived those lives.

Turning, he led her from the exercise room. When she stumbled going up the steps, he picked her up in his arms and carried her the rest of the way. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I should have won. There was a time I would have."

He looked down at her and smiled. "You are the most desirable woman I have ever known. And the most lethal. I remember watching that last battle on Zadolan. I think it was at that moment I fell in love with you. I have never seen anyone move so quickly, so effortlessly as when you severed his head and thrust the sword through his heart before he

even realized you were behind him. He was dead before he ever understood he should stop breathing.”

“He was the one who struck the final blow to Adrik. I wanted him to suffer.” She sighed. “But in the end, I just wanted him dead, so I ended it quickly.”

“You are almost as exhausted now as you were then.”

“No, then -- after I killed him -- there was nothing left, and I just wanted to end the pain inside me.”

“I lusted for that passionate huntress, but I soon learned to love the soft woman hidden beneath that lethal veneer. I saw your pain and I had no thought but to soothe your agony. When I saw you at the edge of the Sebul Sea ready to jump into its deadly acidic waters, I knew what you meant to do and I could not allow it. I would not lose you.”

“I did not think I could go on. I knew what I had become and I could not face Katriel learning of it someday. Nor could I face a life without my mate.” She reached up to cup the side of his jaw and he lowered his head to caress the center of her palm with his lips. Her fingertips hovered over his lips. “You brought me back from death and made me want to live again.”

“And you fought me. You were unable to win then,” he said softly, “so what makes you think you can best me now?”

He saw the pink shimmer of tears in her eyes. “I love you more than I ever thought possible, Noah. I could not bear to lose you. I will not go through that again.”

One of the guards opened the door for him and he strode through and placed Leora gently on the bed and stripped off her clothes.

“You will not lose me. But I will protect you, even from yourself, as I always have.”

He saw her shudder. “I am cold, Noah, so very cold.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her into his arms, enveloping her in his heat. “I will always be here to warm you, my love.”

“You brought me back to life,” she whispered against his neck. “How did I ever deserve a second, richer love in one lifetime?”

“Adrik did his duty as your Prime Alpha in protecting you and your child. Maybe he found a way to send me to you so that I would be here to protect you both. We can never know for certain. But I know I was destined to find you. You are my heart and soul.”

“Hold me, Noah; help me keep the dark visions at bay, at least for a little while.”

He rocked her in his arms, shared his warmth with her, until finally she closed her eyes and her even breaths told him she slept.

He laid her beneath the coverings, then turned and shed his own clothes. Lifting the covers, he stretched out beside her. He shared her concern for the future, for Katriel, and for Valyn, but his first priority was to care for her. She required this rest, and he needed to hold

her. He felt the danger as well, and he knew that every second he was able to hold her in his arms became more precious as the trouble drew closer.

She was right in her thought the air around them reeked of an evil that would seek entrance. It was closer, much closer, than he cared to consider.

The final phase of the bonding would be completed in a few hours and Katriel and Valyn's futures would be indelibly tied. Katriel would come into the full powers she was meant to possess and Valyn would protect her in all ways required of her bond mate Alpha. Hopefully, with the powers and with Valyn as protector, it would be enough. It had to be enough.

* * * * *

One would think she would be sore after the time they had spent in intimacy. One would think he would be too tired to maintain the hard erection that filled her so completely right now. Neither belief was true.

She reached over and picked up the goblet of Omgavita and held it to his lips. Their gazes tangled as he swallowed the life-giving nectar.

"You will need your strength."

He grinned and thrust and she almost dropped the goblet. He rescued it from her hand and chuckled as he set it back on the tray.

She felt the tip of his thick penis at the entrance to her womb as she sat straddled across his lap, speared by his rod.

His hands kneaded her breasts as she slid along his length, enjoying the feel of him in a steady, undemanding rhythm. She tore off another piece of sweetbread and fed it to him. He sucked at her fingers, before grasping the morsel with his teeth, chewed and swallowed.

Soon they must prepare for the Blood Rite to finalize their union. As she watched, he reached over to the tray they had set on the bed and picked up a plump, juicy blackberry and held it to her lips.

She bit into it and juice dribbled down her chin, droplets falling to color her breasts with the liquid residue.

His gaze caught hers and she saw a twinkle in his blue eyes. "My, my," he said, "we cannot have that, now can we?" He dipped down and sucked her nipple into his mouth and she gasped as electricity arrowed downward.

"Valyn, oh gods."

He released her nipple and looked at her. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she breathed. "No. Don't stop."

Instead, he leaned toward her other nipple, nipped with his teeth, and then sucked it into his mouth. She rode him slow and easy as he suckled her, threading her fingers through his long silky mane.

Had she really lived before he had come into her life? No, that had been someone else. The woman she was now felt powerful, vibrating with electrical energy.

His mouth pulled on her tight nipple sending shafts of desire coursing downward to her pussy and she arched toward him. Shudders of aching pleasure throbbed through her body. She felt his hands trail along her spine and settle at the curve of her rounded buttocks. He gripped and kneaded as she slid along his rod, her slick cream easing his entrance.

He brought a finger down to her opening, moistened in her dripping essence and traced along her crease to the smaller, puckered opening of her anus.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

He raised his head and looked at her, his eyes dilated with passion. “Relax, love. Ride me, Katriel.” She did as he asked, as he gripped one of her cheeks and as she was about to climax, he sank his finger past the tight ring, burrowing into the small virgin hole.

Her climax rippled through her, magnified with the added erotic penetration and she screamed, fighting for breath, riding through the red haze of pleasure, until his pulsing seed bathed her channel.

He pulled her close, thrust his finger deeper, gripped her cheek tighter, driving her into primitive abandon. Her claws gripped him tightly as she allowed the pleasure to completely consume her.

When she had calmed, and retracted her claws, he retreated from her body, lifted her from his cock, and pulled her close. She leaned her head against his chest.

“Your back is going to be very painful. Let me get some salve.”

His arms tightened around her. “It is aching pleasure I feel. I will carry your marks, and am proud to do so.”

“Valyn, I do not want this time to end. Once we open that door, the world will come crashing around us. And I fear what tomorrow will bring.”

“I will be by your side, Katriel. Whatever it is, you will not face it alone.”

She stayed in his arms for long moments without saying anything until finally she stirred. “We must prepare,” she said as she reluctantly freed herself from his embrace.

“You are right.” He jumped up from the bed and pulled her with him. “We will bathe. It is one of my more pleasant duties.”

“Your duties?”

He grinned. “Why, to attend your bath, Lady. It is one of the duties of your Alpha. To see to your comfort in all matters.”

She followed him into the bathing chamber. The room reminded her of one of the reflecting pools in the garden. There were vines and potted trees all around. The tub was really a pool made of gleaming obsidian stone, reminiscent of a fountain with a spout of running water.

She stepped over to the side, reached in, and found the water to be pleasingly warm to the touch. Suddenly, Valyn lifted her and deposited her into the pool.

"Your servant, Lady," he said as he reached for the container of fragrant shampoo. "Lean back and we shall begin. Put yourself into my hands."

"Capable hands, I am sure," she murmured as she tilted her head and closed her eyes.

"Loving hands, my lady."

Loving hands, seductive hands, strong hands. His fingers massaged the shampoo into her wet locks. She sighed and gave over to him, reveling in his pampering touch.

He was hers, she had claimed every sinewy muscle, every tasty measure of flesh, and his lifeblood flowed through her body attuning her more closely to his emotions -- his passions.

She must remember to thank her mother for her choice of mates for he, above any other, was truly her chosen Alpha. Her instincts about him had been right when she had first met him and at this moment she could not imagine a future without him in it.

Before his arrival, dragon's blood offered her mere sustenance and a colorless world in which she existed. She had never realized how much she was missing. How different it all was now. And she would let nothing take him from her.

* * * * *

She was a vibrant beauty and she belonged to him. At last he could say that with the knowledge of his possession of her body. In the last twenty-four hours he had acquainted himself with every nuance, every breath, and had given all of himself to her.

As they now walked down the hallway to the ceremonial hall, his hand tightened possessively on her arm. This was the last hurdle.

He looked at her dressed in the form-fitting scarlet silk dress and all he could think of was to peel it from her body and drink of her creamy essence again and again.

Patience. One more ceremonial trial to wade through and then he would settle into a future at her side. It was a future eagerly embraced no matter the unexpected unrest of the province.

The servants opened the door ahead of them and rang the chimes announcing their presence. Their time in the bower had been all too short.

The room was filled with people as the dinner the previous evening had been. Kon and Trinian halted at the door as Valyn and Katriel proceeded down the aisle to the altar where

the Druda priestess stood waiting. The temple would have been too small to hold this number of people for the ceremony.

Mistress Leora and Noah stood to one side dressed in full formal regalia. Noah wore his full dragon armor and Mistress Leora wore a complementing gold velvet and satin dress. When they reached the steps of the altar, they stopped. Mistress Leora walked over to Katriel and kissed her on both cheeks, then turned to Valyn.

He leaned down to accept the same greeting. Then she moved away and they proceeded to the altar.

The priestess handed them each a flintlight, and they walked to where the burgundy candles set on the altar, lit them, and blew out the flintlights. A servant stepped forward to accept them and then walked away.

"Mistress Leora of the House of Leah," the priestess called to her mother.

She approached and the priestess turned toward her. "You have agreed to the bonding of Katriel and Valyn?"

"I have." She proffered several documents to the priestess, who scanned the papers and then placed them on the table next to her. She turned to Valyn and Katriel.

"You carry marks proving the consummation?"

Valyn nodded. "I do."

"Show them," she commanded.

Katriel helped him remove his ceremonial robe. The only thing he wore beneath were black leggings, which at least kept him from being totally naked in a room full of people.

Katriel accepted the robe once he had removed it and stepped away. Valyn turned and faced the priestess to reveal the puncture marks on his chest, then turned away from her so she could see his back. He knew the fresh marks stood out prominently against his skin.

"Proof of consummation is accepted by Druda. You will both sign the contracts of union."

Both Valyn and Katriel moved to the table, accepted the proffered pens, and signed the documents. He knew the priestess would take the contracts with her back to the Drudian Province for safekeeping.

"Lady Katriel, it is time."

He watched as Katriel walked to the priestess, who handed her a small decanter. Katriel poured from the decanter into a goblet. The priestess took the goblet from her hand and held it up to the assemblage.

"This is the blood of Katriel, which shall be ingested this one time by her Prime Alpha, Valyn." She turned to Valyn. "Will you accept the blood of your mate, Valyn?"

"I will," he responded firmly and reached for the goblet. Once he drank of her blood he would be forever tied to her, and she to him. The gamma protein in his system would allow

for the presence of the Sangorrian g-cells without altering his own chemistry appreciably, simply allowing enough compatibility to allow him to sire children with his chosen mate.

There would be no going back. He raised the goblet to his lips and drank the mixture of aurora wine and blood, emptying the glass.

The priestess took the empty goblet from him and returned it to the altar. Katriel moved to stand by his side. He reached for her hand and found she was trembling. He gently squeezed it in an effort to let her know he was there at her side and his strength would always be hers.

The priestess returned to them carrying two necklaces. She placed one around Valyn's neck and one around Katriel's.

"These amulets contain the tooth of the dragon that you fought. It is a reminder of your bravery and commitment. A drop of Valyn's blood has been mixed with a drop of Katriel's blood marking the strength of your ties. The amulets have been consecrated by Druda. They are a symbol of your commitment to your bond mate."

She retreated and two servants came forward carrying the albino dragon armor and the sword and shield made from the scales of the Vawndra he had slain.

Katriel draped the robe over a table behind her and assisted him in putting on the armor. He looked into her eyes as she handed him the sword and shield and all he saw in their silvery depths was love and honor, and he knew he would give completely of himself to protect her in all ways.

He felt heat course through his blood and knew her blood mingled with his own. He felt the amulet that lay against his chest pulse with reflected warmth. The molten silver of her gaze burned deep inside him and seared a path directly into his soul.

When she lifted a hand to grasp the amulet tucked in the valley between her breasts, he knew she had also felt the same zap of energy pass through her, tying them as one.

The priestess motioned and drew Valyn's attention. Katriel moved to his side.

"Katriel and her Prime Alpha, Valyn, have completed the bonding and blood rite and are blessed by Druda. Welcome them and celebrate their union."

The priestess stepped to them, clasped their hands together and raised their entwined hands upward. A shout echoed around the room. It thundered and roared around them.

It was complete. The priestess stepped from the altar, Valyn and Katriel descended after her, and Mistress Leora and Noah followed them as they proceeded down the aisle.

Many shouts of congratulations followed them as they left the ceremonial hall.

He was surprised to find that the armor did not feel as heavy as his old uniform had. It fit him perfectly and allowed him to move with ease, almost like a second skin.

He turned to look down at Katriel and she tilted her head upward and graced him with a luminous smile that put the sun and the moons to shame. He leaned toward her.

“I have my heart’s desire this night.”

He saw the tears shimmer in her eyes. “As do I,” she responded softly.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A pounding sounded at the door to their apartments and a piercing scream rent the air. Valyn grabbed for the dagger lying on the table, and vaulted out of the bed.

He turned to see Katriel sit up and snatch the covers up to shield her nakedness.

"What is it?" she asked sleepily.

"I do not know. Stay there." He strode to the door, but before he reached it, it burst open and Kon barreled inside.

"We are under a full-scale attack. Somehow they have breached the gates and are already inside."

Valyn turned to quickly put on his dragon armor. Katriel had swiftly donned a robe and ran to assist him.

"What is it?" she whispered as she handed him his sword.

"I do not know yet." He looked down at her. "Get dressed as quickly as possible." He turned to Kon. "Where are Mistress Leora and Sec Noah?"

Kon shook his head. "I have not seen them, but the alarm has sounded."

Valyn turned back to Katriel. "Do as I say and get dressed. I will see if I can locate your mother." He turned back to Kon. "Wait for me outside. I will be there shortly."

Once Kon had left, Katriel hastily dropped her robe and began to dress. "It will take me but a moment. I will come with you."

He shook his head. "There is no time. If they are already inside the gates, it will not be long before they breach the manor, if they have not already done so. I will return quickly."

"Please, let me come with you. We should not be separated now."

He picked up the dagger from where he had set it on the chair as he dressed. He pressed it into her hand, closing her fingers around it. "You are safer here. We do not know

what the situation is outside this door. Use this if you must. Do not leave this room until I return for you.”

He released her and moved to the door.

“Trinian! Kon! To me. Now.”

Both guards entered the apartment, hands on their swords. “At your command, Predom,” Trinian said.

Valyn nodded. “You will both stay here and guard Lady Katriel until I return. Do you understand? No one gets through that door.”

“One of us should go with you, Predom,” Trinian said.

“Not this time. It is imperative you stay with my bond mate. I do not yet know what danger confronts us. Until I return, guard her with your lives.”

“It shall be done.”

Valyn turned back to Katriel, saw her worry, felt it clutch inside him. He could not take the time to allay her fears. First, he needed to discover what he must protect her from and how best to do it.

He took a moment and walked over to her, enfolding her in his arms. He kissed the top of her head, and then released her.

“Do as I have said and wait for my return.”

He felt her nod her assent. Releasing her, he turned and left the room swiftly.

The corridors were filled with mass confusion as servants were rounded up by house guards in an effort to get them to safety. He seemed to be trying to travel against the flow as he mounted the stairs to the third floor. He raced toward Mistress Leora’s office, but found it, as well as her apartments, empty.

He then bounded toward the roof, knowing it would probably offer her the best vantage point from which to determine the most pressing need.

That was where he found her, along with Sec Noah, as they surveyed the area. Both were dressed for battle, Leora gripped a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. She and her Sec seemed to be arguing.

He joined them and Leora glanced up. He turned to peer down into the courtyard below and found the danger was indeed at the very doors to the manor, with the outer gates gaping open wide as a mouth uttering a scream, releasing hoards of mercenaries into their midst. There were archers all along the perimeter of the manor roof targeting the mercenaries below. Each one that fell seemed to be replaced by another, just as quickly.

“How did they get in?” he asked, as he tried to assess the situation and their chances of defeating the enemy within.

“It looks like someone inside let them in through one of the secondary gates. This is not simply a rabble of mercenaries, there are Sangorrians among them. Somehow during the

night they managed to kill the wall guards and the gatekeepers without raising the alarm. It had to be the Sangorrian rebels that crippled our forces. Once they opened the gates, it is now the mercenary forces we contend with as well.

"This is a full-scale attack. I do not know how long we can hold them off. They killed half our guards before they even opened the gates."

She turned to look at Valyn and he saw something in her eyes.

"You must get Katriel out of the compound. And quickly."

"There is no chance to stop them? You are certain of defeat?"

"We will hold them off as long as possible. I will not leave my people. But Katriel's survival will be their only hope of any kind of a future. I have already sent out messengers to the other Houses. They may send reinforcements, but I doubt they will reach us in time, and that is only if they are not under attack as well and the messengers get through. But we cannot take the chance. I will not endanger Katriel's safety. From everything they have done prior to this, it is the Sangorrian women they want, and the mates they will try to kill. You as well as Katriel are at risk. You must leave."

"She will not leave you." He already knew his mate well enough to know she would never agree to leave the compound while her mother was in danger.

"You must make her go." She hesitated for a fraction of a moment. "There is a way for you to get her out safely."

"I cannot leave you in the face of battle."

A smile flitted across her face. "You are a brave man, Valyn, you have proven yourself. But this is not the time for you to stand your ground. Your duty lies with my daughter. She will need your knowledge and expertise to help her rebuild what may remain from this battle and to defeat the enemy that seeks to tear our people asunder. This you must do."

He did not like it. He should remain. He should stay to fight. But he also knew his first duty was to his mate and to her protection.

Her gaze turned to meet Noah's. "My duty is here. It is my responsibility as Mistress to see to the protection of my people. I will not leave until the last one is safely away."

Noah's gaze locked with hers and Valyn saw the devotion and commitment to her. "She will not leave," he said, "and I will stay to protect her as long as she does."

Leora broke the connection and turned back to Valyn.

"You must descend to the catacombs. Take your guard and leave immediately." She removed a ring from her finger and held it out to him. "This is the seal of Leah. It is also the key to the door to the catacombs that leads to safety. Use it to get my daughter out of here and then you must give it to Katriel. Look at it closely, memorize the markings. There are many passages in the catacombs. The right passage, only those marked with the seal, will lead to the caves in the Arcadian mountains and freedom. It is the only way out."

He accepted the ring, looked down at it, studying the design. "The catacombs are littered with passages. Have you a map?"

She shook her head. "There is no map -- the secret has only been shared mother to daughter over the centuries to be used strictly in dire need. I share this with you now because there is no choice and it is a matter of life and death and the survival of Leah. You will find the correct passages will be marked with the same inscription as on the ring. Follow only those passages with the mark. Even Noah did not know of this."

He saw her glance up at him and she reached up to touch his face. Love and commitment blazed between them, fusing them together.

"What about you?"

She turned back to him. "My duty is to ensure the safety of the line of Leah. In providing you as her bond mate, I have seen to her protection. You must see to your duty. Katriel and you are the future of this land, you must get to safety."

"Katriel will not agree to this."

"You must get her out. From what we know, she is the reason they are here. No matter what occurs, get her out. Noah would have me go with you, but I stand firm. I will not leave him to defend what is mine. And that is what he would do."

"You are a foolish woman," Noah growled behind her. "I am your protector, it is my right to defend you and what is yours."

Again, she turned to look up at him, and Valyn saw a small, sad smile on her lips. "And it is my right to be at your side. I told you I would not have us parted again." She turned back to Valyn. "This is not just my wish, it is my command. Now go."

"It does not set well with me to leave you, Mistress, but I will see to Lady Katriel's safety and will defend her with my life."

Leora nodded. "Go swiftly."

He kissed her hand and raced toward the stairs. A sense of foreboding surged through him as he drew closer. When he saw Kon and Trinian at their posts, the pain in his chest eased somewhat.

The feeling did not last long. The fist in his chest tightened when he opened the door to the apartments and was only met with silence. He raced through each of the rooms, but they were empty. By the gods, where was she?

He hurried back out into the hallway.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "She is not in here."

Kon and Trinian pivoted around and hurried into the room Valyn had just vacated. They also searched.

"She was here. She tried to leave several times, but she did not do so. We are sorry, my lord, we heard nothing and the only one who passed through was the woman, Tish. She left almost immediately, and alone."

Valyn walked back inside. Frantically, he circled the room. Think. Where could she have gone? There were no indications of a struggle.

He pulled the amulet out from beneath his armor and gripped it tightly in his hand. He allowed the intermingled blood to call out to her. He let the emotion wash through him. His eyes flew open. She was in grave danger; he felt her fear and her determination. The call of the amulet pulled him toward the bathing room. And then he saw the open window. He ran to it and looked out and understanding dawned, knowing who resided in the rooms bordering these apartments.

She should have waited. But knowing her impetuosity and impatience had yet to be bridled and her concern for her young cousin in the face of danger, he should have thought to bring Aurya to her before he left. Why had she not asked Kon or Trinian to fetch her? There was no time to question, he needed to act.

Whirling about, he raced from the room, only one thought in his mind -- to rescue his woman.

* * * * *

Katriel finished dressing hurriedly after Valyn left the room. She paced back and forth across its length, the dagger tightly clutched in her hand. She needed to do something -- anything -- she could not just stay here. Patience might be a virtue well instilled in Valyn, but it was one foreign to her.

If she had trained as a Huntress, like her mother, he would not have needed to leave her behind. But there had been no time for such training, not since she had come into her full power. Warrior training would have commenced as she became more comfortable with her mate. It would have been his duty to undertake her training. So instead, she waited, feeling helpless.

Every time she attempted to step from the room, the guards stopped her from leaving. Frustration and fear collided inside her. She walked back into the bedroom and peered out the window to the courtyard below. She could see guards attempting to push back a swarm of men trying to fight through to enter through the back door and seeking to climb the outer walls.

One by one she watched them fall, feeling impotent in her witness of the bloodbath taking place below. How long could the warriors hold them off?

Turning away, she scanned the room. There must be another weapon as one small, lone dagger would not hold anyone off if they broke through to this room. Where was Valyn? Was he safe? Or had he gone on to assist in the defense of the manor?

Tish burst through the door, her eyes wild with fear. "Lady, you must leave. The enemy is at the doors of the manor."

Katriel hurried to Tish and grabbed her shoulders. "Who is it? Who leads the attack?"

Tish struggled against her. "I do not know. They look like mercenaries, but not all of them, some are Sangorrians. I have seen what they do -- killing and consuming the blood. You must leave."

"You go, Tish. Get yourself out."

"I cannot leave you or the Mistress."

A calmness settled over Katriel. "Tish, look at me." She shook her and forced her to meet her gaze. "Get yourself out. Valyn will come for me. I will be fine." She turned her around and pushed her toward the door.

When they reached it, Tish suddenly whirled around and embraced Katriel. "Be safe, Lady, and may the gods watch over you." Then she was out the door and racing through the rush of people in the corridors until Katriel lost sight of her.

Visions of Aurya broke through her thoughts. She would be terrified. Katriel knew this would only be a horrible reminder of the attack on her own home. She must get to her. She would bring her back here and they would both wait for Valyn to return. It would save time, when Valyn finally did come back for her. Aurya was a Sangorrian female under the protection of Leah. Whatever happened, they could not leave her vulnerable at a time like this.

If Katriel attempted to leave her apartments again, the guards would only stop her, following the orders of her bond mate. She did not have time to argue with them. But there was another way. They would never know she had gone, yet she could see to her cousin's safety and be ready when Valyn returned for them. Aurya would be so frightened with the memories of the attack on her own home. Katriel could not leave it to Kon or Trinian to persuade her to leave her rooms. Aurya trusted her and she had to be the one, and she could not wait unknowing of how soon the mercenaries would succeed in breaking into the manor.

Racing into the bathing room, she unlatched the window fastening and opened it. It was but a short distance to Aurya's balcony, she had done this many times, and with her enhanced strength it would be less difficult than when she pursued this avenue of escape on other occasions.

Thrusting the dagger into the pocket of her dress, she climbed onto the sill and vaulted across the small space, landing lightly on Aurya's balcony.

She could not expect her cousin to come back the same way, but by the time they left through the main door to her room, there was nothing Kon or Trinian could do and they would see she was safe. At least she would have been able to accomplish something more than simply sitting by and waiting for others to protect her, feeling useless.

She had expected to need to unlock the balcony door in her usual manner, but was surprised to find it already unlocked. Turning the handle, she stepped inside, but was brought up short by the scene that confronted her.

"Who are you?" She demanded of the figure hovering over Aura.

Both the girl and the stranger whirled around to face her. Katriel pulled the dagger from her pocket and raised it threateningly.

She hovered warily. There was a smile on Aura's lips but she noted it did not reach her eyes, and her stance was stiff. "It is all right, Katriel. This is my brother, Evonne."

Katriel did not lower her guard. "How did you get in here?"

The smile Evonne gave her was not pleasant, nor friendly. "I have come for my sister. She does not belong here. If she stays, she will die as the rest of you will today."

"She will not go with you. I know who, and what, you are."

His grin turned into a snarl. "Aura is my sister and the Master awaits her presence. Our sire should not have taken her away. She is to become consort to the most powerful being on the planet."

Aura held out her hands, pleadingly. "Katriel, he is my brother. He will not harm me. Our people must take back their heritage. We are of the blood and must consume the blood to grow in strength. Our own ancestors have made us weak."

Katriel did not turn her attention away from Evonne. She sensed the danger of his presence. Insight also told her he was but a minion to some darker plan.

He began to move toward her and she unsheathed her claws. "How did you get in?" she repeated her earlier question.

He stalked toward her. "My sister is loyal to her kind. She knows what needs to be done."

Aura had moved to the other side of the room, away from her brother. "I found a way to get him in. It was the night of your bonding. I received word he was close by. Many people came and went through the gates that night. No one thought to stop and question a priestess when she left, nor when she returned accompanied by a Sangorrian house guard. I stole a uniform and carried it to him and I have hidden him in my room. My father was wrong. Our people must mate with our own kind to regain our strength."

For one split, lethal second, Katriel's attention was drawn to Aura, in horror at her betrayal.

"How could you? My mother only sought to protect you. We gave you sanctuary. Your actions have destroyed us, do you realize that?"

Evonne sprang across the room. Katriel raised the dagger, but it was a second too late.

“She is mine!” he screamed as he rushed at her, driving her to the floor. She struggled against his grip, managed to twist, screamed as she fought to claw free of him, attempting to reach the balcony.

An arm encircled her neck from behind, pulling her back into the room, and fire splintered her back. The dagger in her hand clattered to the floor. “You will serve Korridian as well, offworlder slut.” Again she felt the thrust of a knife into her back. The pressure of his arm fell away and she dropped forward like a rag doll with no strength to save herself. She felt the blood pump from her wounds and wave after wave of pain coursed through her body.

She rolled on to her back and reached out a hand toward the wavering figure of Aurya, saw the shadow of Evonne pick her up and vault toward the door to the balcony, out of sight.

Searing agony shot through her, yet it was more than the pain of the wounds. An evil darkness began to descend upon her from inside. She rose to her knees, grabbed a table and brought herself to her feet, weaving, seeking balance. Darkness rushed to gain control of her soul from inside. She fought against its mastery as she made stuttering progress toward the door.

Opening it, she stumbled forward. A pair of strong arms encircled her, halting her descent to the floor. She recognized his scent.

Her eyelids fluttered open. “I am sorry; I should have waited. He has taken her. I could not stop him.” She had failed not only Aurya, but Valyn and her mother as well. Her lids again fluttered closed as she lost consciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"It is time. We can wait no longer." Leora said as she turned toward the stairs, her gloved hand gripping her sword tightly. "The archers are almost out of arrows."

Noah reached out and grabbed her arm, yanking her around to face him.

"There is still time for you to leave," he gritted out, his eyes burning into her.

Sheathing her dagger, she reached up to touch his face with her gloved hand.

"I would tell you the same. I cannot leave Leah. Valyn will see to Katriel as is now his duty. The least I can do is slow the mongrels down so they have a chance to survive. Their day will come. Mine is here."

"We cannot win this one. There are too many and they have crippled us before we were even awake."

"I know that as well. I underestimated the evil. I expected them to do as they did with the Twin Moons. I thought they would attack when we would be more vulnerable, on the journey to meet with the other Houses. I did not understand their determination. I was wrong and I will pay for that mistake. But Katriel will not. If the gods will that we shall survive, then so be it. It is in their hands now."

Noah leaned down to kiss her. The savage desperation of that kiss arrowed through her, piercing her heart.

"I love you, Leora. Much of my life counted for very little until I met you. You are my life. Whatever sacrifice you command is yours, but I will not leave your side."

She nodded, turned away, and looked up at the sky. Whatever came, she would not regret a moment of her life, even the darkness.

"It is time to let our guests in." She turned and walked over to the captain of the warriors who commanded those who still fought on the roof. "Come with me. We will engage them below. It is time. We must hold them off for as long as possible."

He nodded. "As you command, Mistress." Then he turned to give the order. She strode toward the stairway and down the steps to the first floor and into the Entrance Hall, Noah at her side. The house servants were gone and it was house guards who stood at the barred entrance. What remained of the Jotar warriors from the roof entered the hall and flanked her, their swords drawn.

She turned to the warriors and the house guards. "This may be a battle we cannot win. Before the doors are opened, I give you the choice. You have the chance to leave now; I would not force you to give up your lives this day." As she looked at each one, they nodded, their expressions fierce, hard granite, and watched as each one raised his sword in salute.

She could not look at Noah, could not bear it. Finally, she turned toward the door, sword ready, drew her dagger, and nodded to the guard at the door who watched and waited for her command.

"Very well. It shall be a fine way to die if that is the plan of the gods. Better than in our beds," she said. "Let them in," she called out.

They struggled to lift the bar from the door and it burst free of their restraint as the force of mercenaries swarmed inside.

They engaged quickly. The Jotar warriors fought with skill and savage determination. Screams and the hot smell of battle surrounded Leora. They might have had a chance if not for the vicious bloodsuckers among them. As the mercenaries engaged in hand-to-hand, rogue Sangorrians would come from behind and sink their fangs into the necks of their adversary, clamping tightly and draining them completely.

Noah's back was to her, close enough for her to feel his heat, as they fought on, surrounded by their warriors, by the mercenaries, and by the traitorous Sangorrians. There was nothing in her mind but to engage each one as they came at her and to keep going, yet there seemed no end.

She heard Noah yell, a mingled sound of rage and pain and she whirled around.

"No," she screamed, as she felt the clutches of death overtake them. His left arm had been severed and his lifeblood poured from the wound. As she watched, he staggered, raised the weapon in his other hand to defend yet another vicious attack. She tried to reach him, but it was too late, as a mercenary's sword savagely plunged through his heart. He dropped first to his knees and then fell face forward to the floor.

All around her was death, her Jotar warriors and house guards. Her mate lifeless at her feet, mutilated before her eyes. She turned hate-filled eyes to the bloody scene around her. Five Sangorrian traitors descended and surrounded her. She raised her blood-drenched weapons, turning as they moved closer.

"He wants her alive," one said, his black eyes riveted on her, blood of his latest opponent dripping from his mouth.

"How much alive?" another asked, then chuckled with savage pleasure. "I would like a taste of the Blood Huntress's blood. See if it is different than all these others."

Their words pressed into her. Was it not Katriel they wanted? Or did they think she was the virgin bride? Had she misunderstood all the signs of their true target? Slowly, they pressed forward.

Her gaze clung to her dead mate. It truly did not matter because they would have neither Katriel nor her. These curs would not have their wish and their Master would be thwarted.

Her home, her life, all destroyed. But not her child. She had done everything she could to protect her from this. She knew Valyn did not thank her for commanding him to leave. But she had brought him here specifically to protect her daughter. His destiny lay in a far different direction than death this day. He would have another chance to face these traitors. Today was not his. Today was hers. And Noah's. No worse, no better than any other.

Her eyes on her fallen beloved, she turned the deadly dagger. Her gaze met those of the Sangorrian who had first spoken, then she smiled as she thrust fast and deep. Ah, sweet pain. Take me to my love.

"No," she heard someone yell, before the dark silence descended.

Her gaze rose upward and her vision clouded. These bloodsuckers would not defeat her. She had prevailed. *Be well, my darling child, be strong. You are the future. Wait for me, Noah.*

* * * * *

Valyn pulled Katriel's limp body close as he screamed out in denial. She would not die.

He looked up at Trinian and Kon. "How did this happen? Why was she not in her apartments? What was she trying to do? Why did she not stay where I told her?"

Kon and Trinian searched the apartments, and swiftly came back to Valyn. "The apartment is empty, my lord. Her cousin is gone."

Valyn could not worry about that now. She had obviously been concerned for her cousin's safety, but she should have waited for him.

"Help me. We must staunch the flow of blood." He lifted her and carried her toward the bed, placing her gently on it. He ripped a cloth off a table and tore it apart. Then he ripped open the back of her dress. There were two deep gashes from which blood seeped steadily. He bandaged her as best he could, bundled her in a blanket and again picked her up in his arms.

"We leave. There is a way out and we must get her to safety and a healer's care quickly. Follow me."

She was light as a feather in his arms, hardly any weight at all. As they traversed the hallway Trinian and Kon cleared the way for them to descend to the catacombs.

Once past the fury of chaos above, they moved swiftly through the echoing dampness.

"Find the healers," Valyn commanded to Trinian. "Have them pack what medicines they can put together quickly and bring them with you." Trinian nodded and raced toward the laboratories contained within the recesses of the many cavernous rooms littered below the surface of the compound.

They had been unprepared for a full-scale attack. He knew, from meeting with Leora that she had anticipated an attack on their way to the meeting. They had been so careful -- how had this happened? They had been taken by surprise and Leah would suffer for that underestimation. He wondered if the other Houses shared their fate.

"How do we find a way out? This place is riddled with passages, many probably leading to dead ends," Kon questioned.

"There is a way. It will lead us to the Arcadian Mountains. We must get Lady Katriel away from the compound, and the healers can tend to her once we reach safety. Her protection must come first."

He stepped further along, checking each of the myriad of passages for the signs Mistress Leora told him to look for. He should be back there, at Leah, helping to ward off the attackers. Not racing away through a maze of tunnels.

He looked down at Katriel's still, unconscious face. But Leora had been right; Katriel's safety was why he was here. But was he too late? Would she survive? He had not been there when she most needed him. In that, he had failed her and he would not do so again.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he found the first marked passage. Shifting Katriel in his arms, he pulled out the ring and pressed it into the mark on the apparently solid wall. A doorway appeared and slid open. "This is the way. We wait here for Trinian to join us with the healers. Then we move quickly."

They waited impatiently for what seemed like an eternity, but at last Trinian turned the corner, hustling two of the healers clutching satchels against their chests before him.

Valyn turned and headed along the passage. There was no time to lose.

"How do you know where we are going? We could be lost and die within these catacombs. Many have done so," one of the healers whined.

"I know where we are going. You will not die here, healer."

"How can you be so certain?"

He turned impatiently to face the healer. "Would you have preferred to die at the hands of an enemy who would turn you into a creature like that girl?"

He saw the healer shudder and turn from his gaze. "Lead on."

Hours and days seemed to pass as they followed the marked passages. At one point Kon offered to carry his precious burden. Katriel had not awoken through all that time.

"She is mine," he ground out. "No one shall take her from me, not even death shall have her." He increased his pace, determined to get them to safety so the healers could attend to her.

It felt like they were ascending upward, within the mountain. Finally, he blinked as he saw a glint of what appeared to be the reddish cast of sunlight. He stopped walking. "I think we have reached safety." Shifting Katriel in his arms, he slowly made his way forward and out into the descending sunlight. He released a heavy sigh as he looked down from a ledge to the waters below. They were on the other side of Leah.

He turned to face the men with him. "We are safe for the moment. We must set up camp quickly, inside one of the caves. First, we attend to my mate, then we try to determine what is happening at Leah. If we can offer assistance, we must do so. Kon, gather brush to build a fire and to lay as cover on the ground. Trinian, locate a source of fresh water."

They set to their assigned tasks immediately. He gazed down at the still face of his bond mate. She would need his blood, a lot of it. He walked back into the cavern, passed through into another chamber. Looking around he thought it would suit their temporary purposes. They must find a way to dissipate the smoke that would result from a fire without alerting anyone to their presence here.

He lay Katriel down gently, making sure the blanket was between her and the cold, damp earth. Rising, he stepped back and turned to look at the healers.

"You will see to her needs and tend her wounds."

One of the healers knelt beside her and unwrapped the blanket. "Help me turn her over so I can see the nature of the wounds."

Valyn knelt back down again and gently turned her. Pain raced through him as he saw the savage cuts more clearly.

The healer bent closer. "They will need to be cleaned and I will then be able to discern the extent of the damage."

Valyn could hear her labored struggles as she fought to draw breath. Her skin felt exceedingly hot to his touch.

"There is something very wrong here," the healer said.

Valyn pinned him with a hard look. "What do you mean?"

"There is more to these wounds than mere blade penetration. Can you not smell it?"

Valyn leaned closer and inhaled. The healer was right. The smell was more that of singed flesh. Something was not right. The smell was the stench of evil.

It was a smell he remembered well. The blood within his veins froze. The last time he had scented it was when he had made his dragon kill. The smell was that of poisonous Vawndra blood.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Someone supported her shoulders and lifted her from her prone position. A searing pain ripped down her back and a moan escaped her lips.

“Drink,” a voice commanded as she felt the rim of a cup pressed gently against her mouth. A heady, potent liquid passed between her lips filling her mouth with the taste of ... Valyn. She gulped greedily as though attempting to quench a year’s long thirst, then the cup was lowered.

A thick narcotic of evil seemed to weigh heavy in her chest. It felt like a living thing fighting for dominance. She fought a tug of war, trying to combat its strength.

It seemed as though she was losing but then a red haze washed everything in a heated glow and the evil receded to wallow in a dark corner of her soul, waiting and watching for another opportunity to succeed.

Her eyelids felt heavy, like leaded weights held them down, and the pain in her back never seemed to ease completely.

“Katriel, wake up. I know it hurts, but I need you to come back to me. I cannot follow where you have gone. Come back to our world.”

She heard him and she fought to do as he asked. She felt the weak tears slide down her face. She was so very tired.

“I know you can hear me,” the voice was more firm this time. “Wake up. You are needed here.”

Gathering her strength, she forced her lids to open and found herself staring up into the worried, drawn face of her bond mate.

More willpower, and she raised a hand to touch the deeply grooved lines etched about his mouth and eyes. She tried to offer him a smile, to assure him she would live.

A sharp pain drove straight through her heart, causing her to arch and cry out, as the pain built and shattered inside.

"Do not let it take you from me, Katriel. Fight its control. I love you, feel my love and protection. See me, love, see me."

She tried to focus, to see him through the deep wedge of agony. Finally her vision cleared and she fought the evil call, driving it downward, deep into the darkness.

"I ... am ... here," she answered him in a voice she did not recognize.

Carefully, he lifted her into his arms and cradled her there. She thought she felt tears that were not her own wet against her face.

"Thank the gods," she felt his words whispered near her ear. "I was afraid I would lose you."

She blinked and it became easier to focus on him. "What happened?"

"What do you remember?"

She tried to think, but her memories were fuzzy. She looked around, tried to get her bearings in hopes that it would help to ground her and make her remember.

"We are in a cave? How did we get here?"

"You mother commanded me to get you out of the compound. She told me of a way to escape through the catacombs into the Arcadian Mountains. That is where we are now. Above the sea."

She licked her lips. "How long?"

"The attack was two days ago. We have been trying to get information on the province since then."

"Where is my mother? And Noah?" She was afraid of what he was going to tell her because she knew her mother would never leave Leah -- not if there was danger to the land and to the people.

"There is no word yet. I have sent Trinian to see if he can find out any news."

"Here is some soup to help you gain your strength back." She looked up as a man she recognized as Donovan, one of the healers at the compound, held out a bowl. Valyn shifted her to rest against the wall of the cave, then turned to take the bowl.

"I do not know if I can eat anything," she said as her stomach roiled at the thought of consuming food.

"You must keep up your strength. Ingestion of my blood is not enough." He held up a roughly carved wooden spoon and then dipped it into the bowl. "I am afraid we have had to make do. We could carry little with us when we left."

He held the spoon to her mouth. She sipped at the liquid. "Vegetables?"

He nodded. "Wild ones that we have been able to harvest nearby."

She winced as she attempted to change position. "Two days without word." She looked up at him worriedly. "What about the other Houses? Anything from them?"

"Nothing. Once we determine what has occurred at Leah, I will send someone to see what we can find out."

He continued to feed her the soup and she sipped it slowly. When she was done, he set the bowl aside and pulled the blanket up more closely around her.

"How do you feel?"

She tried to laugh, to somehow ease the tiredness and worry lines she saw in his face. Unfortunately, the pain would not allow for such relief.

"I feel like I have tangled with a wild lionaire, and come out the worse for it."

He did not smile. She sensed there was more to his worry than he was saying.

"You will heal."

"I know. I went to get Aurya. I was simply going to bring her back to our apartments to await your return. Nothing more than that. I thought to save time."

"Who was there? Was it Aurya who attacked you?"

She shook her head. "No. It was her brother, Evonne." She looked up at him, again feeling the shock and pain of that moment. "It was Aurya who let them in. The things she said -- what she believes ..." She hesitated, trying to control the panic building inside her at the memory of what had occurred. "So much hate."

"It is all right," he said as he again lifted her into his arms careful of her bandaged shoulder. "Take your time."

She looked up at him. "Did you carry me out of there? All this way?"

She felt his arms tighten around her. "I would allow no one else to touch you. I was not there when you needed me; I shall not fail you again."

She met his gaze. "Is that what you think? That you should have been there?" She lifted a hand to cup his jaw. "If you had been there, he would have killed you. His last words confuse me. I do not think he meant for me to die or I would probably be dead."

"No, it was not his intent to kill you."

She was right, there was more. "You must tell me the rest. He did not just stab me, did he?"

"We will find a way to fight it."

His words frightened her. "What do you mean? Fight what?"

"The dagger was dipped in the Vawndra drug according to Donovan. You have been poisoned with it."

She clutched at his shirt. "How long do I have? Will it make me like Glyn's daughter?" She shuddered at the thought. "You must kill me before it overtakes me completely." That accounted for what was taking place inside her, the evil she felt trying to gain control of her.

She stared down at her exposed arm, looking for the signs of contamination similar to what she had seen on the creature.

"It will not come to that. What the healers have discovered over the last few days is that the drug is unstable and reacts differently on the various body chemistries."

"What are you saying?"

"In Sangorrians apparently it consumes the blood cells at a slower rate. But they also found, when you ingested my blood, it halted the advance altogether. There is apparently something, either in my lifeblood, or in the combination of yours and mine that may be able to be used to contain the effects of the drug or at least render it harmless."

She knew there was more to it than what he understood. She felt the changes occurring inside her body. The inner battle to fight this thing would not be easy.

She wound her arm around his waist. "I fear that if it is so unstable we will not know the full ramifications of it until it is too late."

"The healers have set up a makeshift laboratory in one of the other chambers. They are doing what they can to find an antidote. That is one of the reasons I sent Trinian back to Leah to see what the conditions are and if we will be able to return. The healers need more equipment."

She heard the sound of echoing footsteps and then Trinian surged into the chamber.

"Trinian, you bring news?"

His gaze shifted away from her and met Valyn's. A tight fist clutched at her heart.

"What did you find?" Valyn asked quietly.

"They are all dead, sir."

"Everyone?" gasped Katriel. "No, it cannot be, not everyone."

"Those who were not killed were taken prisoner. We do not know yet where they might have been taken. The aurora fields have been burned, as have most of the dwellings and the village outside the compound."

"Oh, gods, no!" Everything gone. Katriel looked at Trinian. "My mother? Sec Noah?"

Again, he looked away from her. "They are dead, Mistress."

She struggled against Valyn's tight hold, screamed and pounded her fist against his shoulder. "No! They cannot be dead." Finally, she wound her arm around his neck, and buried her face against his chest. Her tears would not stop. For her mother and Noah, for Leah, and for herself. Their world was gone.

For a long time, Valyn just sat there holding her, allowing her to vent her pain and loss. What did she do next? She felt so lost. Where did she go?

Her mother was dead. The anchor of their lives -- gone. She was not prepared to bear such enormous loss and responsibility.

* * * * *

Two days later he watched as he stood beside her before the funerary pyre upon which the bodies of Mistress Leora and her Secondary, Noah, were laid out. They had been wrapped in the finest cloth and Noah's dragon shield and sword lay next to him.

When he had returned to Leah and had seen the condition of the bodies, he vowed Katriel would not see her mother like that. It was obvious they had fought valiantly side by side to the end.

Yet, she would have none of it and had forced him to take her to see them. It had changed her dramatically. Since that day, she had exhibited no emotion and had been determined to assist with the preparation of their bodies for the rites of passing.

Kon now offered a lit torch to Katriel who accepted it. Since word of her mother's death she had mentally retreated from Valyn. She had shed no more tears since the outburst upon first hearing of the deaths and razing of Leah. Even now, she stood holding the torch, dry-eyed and expressionless.

And the only way she would accept his lifeblood was if he offered it to her in a cup; she would not allow him the closeness of consuming directly from him.

He watched her step forward to light the pyre and it erupted into bright, hot flames. She doused the torch in a bucket and walked back to stand beside Valyn and watch the surging fire consume them.

She was still not fully recovered from the attack and her arm was bound in a sling with thick padding over the wounds on her back. Yet she refused to wait any longer to see to the needs of her people. Many had made it to the woods and then into the mountains beyond and were slowly returning to Leah. But their world had been ravaged.

Word had come that this attack had actually been a fully mounted attack on Leah only. Its messengers had never made it beyond the estate boundaries. All of the Leah Estate lay in ruins, those that lived, but were unable to escape, were taken prisoner, and what there was of any value had been taken by the mercenaries. There were pockets of survivors throughout the valley, but at this point, no one knew who could be trusted.

Once Katriel was past the initial period of mourning, then he would approach her as to what she planned to do.

They stood there until the last of the flames had turned to dying embers.

"She would not leave him," he finally said.

She did not look at him. "I know. She loved him very much. She would not have been content to go on without him. And he would not have run from his duty to her and her people. He understood her dedication to Leah and would not have surrendered it or left it undefended without a fight."

"She loved you as well, Katriel. She saw to your safety and protection before she died."

"I know. She would have attempted to stop them from following us and the others who managed to escape." He heard the stifled sob in her voice and his heart broke at the sound.

Yet, he also knew she would not accept the comfort he offered. Something inside her had shut itself down.

She turned and walked away toward where Trinian and Kon stood. He followed her.

"You are released from your contracts to Leah," she said abruptly.

They looked at each other and then back at her. "We do not wish release, Mistress."

He saw the flash of pain that crossed her expression at their use of the title of honor.

"It is too dangerous. This world has entered into a civil war that may eventually flood to other worlds. I cannot ask you to endanger your lives in a war we may not have a hope of winning."

Valyn could almost have laughed at the look of disbelief that crossed both their faces.

"You cannot be serious, Mistress." Trinian sighed. "In case you are unaware, Jotar is a war planet. We live to fight. We breathe to fight."

"And we fight to mate," Kon interjected blandly. Trinian turned to glare at him, then turned back to Katriel as though he had not spoken.

"A good battle is what we dream of. To fight as a warrior to our death is our purpose." He crossed his thick arms over his broad chest. "We stay."

Kon copied the gesture. "We stay," he repeated.

For the first time in many days, Valyn saw the ghost of a smile cross Katriel's face.

"Thank you," she said softly and turned away. Her gaze rose to meet Valyn's for a split second and then drifted away as it tended to do lately. She walked away from him, a solitary figure bent on remaining that way, and pushing everyone away.

The situation could not remain as it was. He understood her melancholy at the loss of so much and the very changed circumstances of her life. He had a feeling it was going to take an unpleasant confrontation to pull her emotions out from behind the walls she had fled behind.

He had made a vow to love her and protect her, and that meant even from herself. He would allow her time to grieve for her loss, but eventually, if he did not break down the wall separating them, it would destroy them all.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Katriel stuffed clothing into a bag in a haphazard fashion, not particularly caring about the neatness of the contents. Two weeks had passed since the destruction of the compound, and it was time to make plans.

“What are you doing?”

She whirled around at the dark tone in Valyn’s voice. Ever since the attack she had tried to distance herself from him, knowing that eventually the drug would consume her, and she did not want him affected by the same tainted blood she now sheltered inside her body.

She knew he did not understand why she had drawn away and probably had put it down to her grief. But it was more than that. She feared for his life. If anything happened to him, if the effects of the drug were passed to him in some way, and he died, she would no longer have the will to fight its effects.

He did not know the battle that raged inside her and she could not find the words to tell him. She knew he would willingly sacrifice himself for her, and in this instance she could not allow him to do that. She turned back to stuff more of the clothing into the bag.

She did not fault her mother for staying with Noah to fight at his side. She would have done the same, even without the knowledge of battle her mother had.

“I asked you a question.”

She could not look at him again. He would try to dissuade her from her plan.

“I am leaving.”

“What did you say?”

She stopped what she was doing and stared out the window at the ravaged, blackened land. For some reason the torch had not been set to the manor itself. The mercenaries had

apparently been satisfied with simply ravaging and taking anything they thought had value. The manor was now quiet, no one remained -- she had sent them all away for their own protection. There was not really much left to house anyone in anyway. It was more ruin than house at this point.

Not that she wanted it rebuilt -- at least not right now. She wanted their enemy to think they had won. What had occurred at Leah had been more than a rebellion against the Sangorrian way of life. It was personal. The condition of her mother's body told her that. The fact that the attack had been centered on Leah and none of the other Houses screamed it. But why? And who was behind it? Who would be next? So many questions that she needed answered. And it was now her responsibility to find the answers and one day rebuild Leah.

Mere weeks ago, she had been so young, so naive. It was the way of their kind to protect the young females, to prepare them slowly for the weight of the power of their species and to harness the thirst.

She had never realized how secretive her mother had been, how little she really knew of her parent. But it was being brought home to her now. And the weight of this new responsibility lay heavily on her shoulders.

What she had learned of her duties as the future mistress of Leah was true no more. Everything had changed and she must find the strength to battle the enemy.

What had happened to Tish? Had she made it to safety? So many lives lost, and more if someone did not find a way to stop them.

After centuries of peaceful existence, Leah was no more -- hers would be a different battle that must be fought in a different way from merely the protection of a way of life their ancestors had created.

She turned away from the sight and finally met his demanding stare. "I am leaving on a journey."

"And you did not think to talk with me about it? Just where do you think you are going?" His tone was deceptively soft. She knew he was angry and trying not to show it.

"I am going to the Drudian Province. I plan to seek training as a Huntress."

"You what! And you thought to make this journey without me? That is what you planned to do, is it not? How did you expect to survive this journey without your mate?"

She turned away from him and bent to close the bag. "I need their teachings. I have to go."

"I did not say you should not, but what I want to know is why you did not inform me of your decision? Why did I have to find out about it this way? You are not thinking clearly."

She heard the door shut firmly and then his steps behind her, felt his hands on her shoulders as he forced her attention.

"No more, Katriel." His eyes blazed through her.

"I do not know what you mean."

He shook her. "You will not shut me out of your life. I am your Alpha, your bond mate, we took oaths. You will not cast me aside."

"I -- I have not done that."

His eyes blazed out at her furiously, his jaw set, lips thinned. She had never seen him so angry.

He reached up and ripped open his shirt. "Then feed the way you are meant to feed from your Alpha."

"No." Oh gods, he could not ask it of her.

"Why?"

Such a simple question that she could not find the words to answer, fearing his response.

Again, he shook her. "Why?" he demanded.

She began to tremble as the pain and fear overwhelmed her. "B-Because I could transmit the effects of this hated drug to you," she blurted out. "I will not take the chance. I could not bear to see you turned into a creature of death and know I was the cause of it. I could not survive if I caused your death or had to watch as its effects change you into some horrible monster."

And the tears she had failed to shed finally erupted as great, heaving sobs overtook her. Valyn pulled her into his arms.

"Ah, love, you should have told me of your fears." He stroked her hair. She had fought the need for him over the last weeks, fought to stay away from him, at least emotionally, fearing the result.

Suddenly, she could not fight it any longer. She needed him desperately.

"Did you not listen to me, when I told you whatever is contained in my blood appears to be toxic to the variant? You will not infect me."

He tilted her face so she looked up at him. "Do you understand what I am saying to you this time?"

She sniffed. "I think so; it is just that I have been so afraid. I could not bear to lose you as well."

He leaned down and kissed her. "You will not lose me. If you wish to go to the Druda Province, I will accompany you. We will take our small band of survivors with us and maybe the healers will discover more by working with the priests there."

His hands released the laces of her dress and pushed it off her shoulder. His lips traced a path along her shoulder blade and swept down to the valley between her breasts.

"I have missed you," he whispered against her skin.

Her fingers pulled at the laces of his shirt. Gods, she needed to touch him, to have him inside her. It had been so long.

He pulled the dress over her head, and then she pulled his shirt over his. He leaned down to kiss her like a man who had fasted for a month.

She unlaced his pants and pushed them down his thighs. She was ready for him, more than ready and her juices coated her thighs. He pushed her back on the bed, separated her thighs and entered her swiftly.

"Oh, gods, yes," he groaned. "Hot and tight and wet. For me, all for me." He thrust and retreated, in and out, over and over. She felt him grow larger, filling her, grinding against her clitoris, driving her toward the summit.

For the first time in two weeks her claws extended in passion. She threw her head back, then sank her fangs into his chest as her climax rippled through her, surging again and again.

She drank from him deeply, pulling his hot, pulsing lifeblood from him to meld with her own. She heard him moan, then embed his thick cock completely inside her, the tip nestled against her womb as he erupted in spasm after spasm of release.

She eased her fangs from his chest and her claws from his back as the pleasurable sensations began to subside.

"I love you, Valyn."

"I love you as well. You will not force us apart ever again. I do not think I will have the patience next time, if you try."

"It will be a hard battle ahead of us. Our world as we knew it is gone. And the attack was not just savage, but personal."

He was silent; his hands warm as he stroked her skin.

"I wanted to protect you from seeing their bodies at the end."

She turned into his arms. "I know you did. I love you for wanting to protect me, but it was my right to help prepare them for their journey."

The horror of what she had witnessed when she had first viewed them would be something she would never forget.

"You are a brave woman to face all that you have. You will be a good leader to your people as your mother was before you."

"She was a Blood Huntress. There were none who matched her skill. Maybe it was an enemy from that dark time of her life who ravaged her so." She turned to look up at Valyn. "They cut out her heart and drained her blood. It was a vicious violation, and I mean to avenge her death."

He pulled away to look down at her, his eyes blazing with searing blue diamond intensity. "You will do nothing foolish. To make this a personal vendetta of hate will weaken your ability to achieve victory."

"I will do what I must." She would say no more than that. He could not possibly understand the emotions swirling inside her. The dark evil trying to weave through her to take control.

"I am at your side always, but I will not let you destroy yourself." He eased from inside her and moved up next to her on the bed.

"I will learn from the Druda. I must learn the ways of the huntress, but there is more. I must find a way to fight this disease inside me."

He smoothed her hair away from her face. "I know. But you must also realize that the variant buried inside you will help us to combat the enemy. You will learn from it as well as how to combat its effects."

Of course, he was right. Why had she not seen it before? She could turn this understanding of the variant into a strength for their battle.

She stroked a hand across his hard chest. "He uses our people against each other. He preys on their weaknesses. Listening to Aurya, I realized what he was trying to do. He makes our people think he wants what is best for them, but he will use them for his own gain."

"We will find a way, love." He reached over and pulled something from a pocket in his pants and held it out to her. "This belonged to your mother, and now belongs to you, as Mistress of Leah. She knew, love. She knew what was to be her fate before we left the compound. And that you would carry on in her place."

Katriel saw what it was and again tears threatened. Valyn reached for her hand and placed the gold ring on her finger. She looked up at him and then wrapped her arms more tightly around him.

"My mother has given me much in my life that I shall be forever grateful for. But the greatest of her gifts is one I shall always treasure and hold close to my heart."

"What is that, love?"

She looked up, met his searing blue gaze, and smiled. "She gave me you. With you by my side, and your love to give me strength, we will not fail."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Korridian stroked the head of the naked female crouched next to his chair. He felt her shudder beneath his touch. She was a pretty thing, rather different than his usual pets. But his real interest in her lay with her knowledge rather than her looks.

He turned his head to smile at the young man who stood in front of him. Evonne had done well this time. He had brought him exactly what he needed. It was a shame the huntress had chosen death, but maybe what Evonne had brought him would be worth far more. The young man certainly showed promise in his inventiveness and insight with the gifts he had brought back.

"You have done well, Evonne. The estate was completely destroyed?"

Evonne nodded. "Yes, Master."

Korridian twirled a lock of the female's hair around his finger, studying how the light glinted on the tawny strands.

"Any word of the girl?"

"The only thing we know right now is that she survived. As did her Alpha."

"Good. It will be interesting to see what effect the drug has on her over time. Find someone -- trustworthy -- to get close to her. I want to know every move she makes. When we take her, the timing must be right."

Again, Evonne nodded. "Yes, Master. It shall be as you command."

Korridian felt no particular, urgent need to have the daughter just at the moment. Like an insect imprisoned inside a container, he wanted to watch her, study her -- see the changes the drug would induce in her.

He caressed the leather collar around the female's neck, stroked a finger along the fine chain that bound her to his side. He tilted her head to study her face. Her eyes were wide

and dilated. His cock surged when he saw the fear and desire swirling within their depths. His marks were vividly displayed on her neck and her breasts. She had once served Leah and now she would serve him.

Her nipples were small hard nubs, her breasts heavy with need, her skin pale, yet still contained an echo of pink, a faint shadow of her former life above ground, beneath the heat of a crimson sun.

He scented her desire, one he had instilled in her and that she could not deny. Again, she shivered and he touched her mind with his. Soothed her with his touch and she stilled beneath his power.

With his mind he stroked her body. He knew she could feel his hands caress her breasts, her neck, her hot, tight channel. He heard her soft whimper. He controlled everything about her.

Pleasure yourself, but do not come. He pressed the command into her mind.

As he watched, she lifted her hand and brought two fingers to the heated entrance of her pussy. Slowly, she slid them inside. For a moment he watched her fuck herself and smiled in satisfaction as she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, concentrating on her actions. She had been a virgin when he had taken her upon her arrival in his domain. She had taken to her lessons well and with enthusiasm.

He removed his hand from beneath her chin and stroked her hair. He turned back to Evonne.

“And your sister? What does the scigenecist report?” Genetics research was outlawed on Ebonnia, but he had managed to smuggle in the one scigenecist who could accomplish what he wanted. He was the man who had assisted in altering his own body chemistry to become the powerful being he now was. He could not trust the procedure to just any ordinary healer, he wanted the best, the most unethical, who would not question his direction, but would discover a way to do exactly what he required.

Rodat was just the man to accomplish the task. His own genetic laboratory of horrors was on Zadolan and it had taken much “persuasion” to get him to agree to come to Ebonnia. Of course, the paralyzer drug had assisted in transporting him here without incident.

“He says the blood transfusions are going as he predicted. He sees no problems. He wishes to monitor for a time before proceeding to the next step.”

Yes, everything was going exactly right. His perfect consort was in the making, being altered to his specifications exactly. And when the transformation was complete, he would begin to mold her. He again looked down at his new pet. Her fingers as they slid in and out of her pussy glistened with her juices. Her breathing grew more labored as she sought to claim an orgasm that he withheld from her. When he did allow it, it would be powerful and her pussy would be wrapped around his cock as he sucked her pleasure from her.

He stood up, wound the chain around his hand and lifted her to her feet, her fingers still buried deeply in her pussy. Using a key from the necklace of keys hanging around his neck he unfastened the lock binding the chain to his chair.

"Now, Master?" she looked up at him pleadingly.

"Stop what you are doing and go into the other room," he ordered. As he watched she removed her slick fingers and hurried to do his bidding. Then he turned to the young Sangorrian. "You have done well, Evonne. Join me."

They walked into the bedchamber. The female was at the center of the massive bed, on her knees, thighs splayed wide, her engorged pussy glistening with invitation, her hands clasped behind her back, her breasts thrust out.

Korridian leaned forward and possessed her lips, driving his tongue deep inside, claiming her mouth. She sucked at his tongue, arching toward him. He pulled away as she still thrust herself upward, her moan of need clinging to the air between them.

He looked down at her as he unbuttoned his robe and let it drop to the floor. The chill air swirled around him, yet his body burned like a roaring fire. Soon his possessive heat would claim her as well.

He mounted the bed, leaned back against the pillows and spread his legs.

"Prepare me, Tish. That is your name, is it not? Tish?"

"Yes, Master," she answered him in a deep, needy voice. As she turned and lowered her head to engulf his thick, rigid cock, she arched her back, her ass high in the air. He sighed with pleasure as her mouth consumed him, licking along his length. In the short time she had been here, she had come to service his needs with surprising enthusiasm.

He threaded his fingers through her hair, guiding her mouth, sinking his prick between her hungry lips.

"You were personal servant to Leora Saguna, were you not?"

He pulled her head up from her attentions to look into her eyes.

She licked her lips. "Yes, Master."

His fingers tightened in her hair and he saw her wince. She knew better than to complain. "You have much intimate knowledge about the Mistress and her daughter, do you not?"

He pulled her head back, until her neck was stretched taut. He liked the look of her this way, saw the veins pulsing along her neck, her blood flowing, hot and ready for him.

"Yes, Master," she managed to gasp.

The power was his, within his grip. This female would be the key. As with the keys on the necklace he wore, she was his possession as well to use as he deemed fit.

He felt the bed shift as Evonne came up behind her. He shifted his gaze to the naked young man. He owned him as well, yet in a different way. Every time he included the young

man in these more intimate encounters, he drew him further and further beneath his domination. Evonne knew his role, relished it, was a perfect mouthpiece for the commands of the Master, a perfect weapon to be wielded with skill.

“Prepare yourself to take her,” Korridian instructed. “And prepare her to accept you. I do not want her damaged by your carelessness.” He released her hair and she lowered her head once again to engulf him with her mouth.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, enjoying her attentive sucking, feeling his cock tighten with each enthusiastic swirl of her tongue.

He felt her inhale sharply, a groan of sound emitting around his cock and knew Evonne had penetrated her tightly puckered anal ring with his fingers, preparing her for his penetration.

After long moments he felt the tension in her ease as she began to undulate her hips, riding the fingers thrusting deep inside her. Korridian brought his own hand down to her engorged pussy lips, felt her cream dripping from her cunt, coating his hand as he shoved two fingers inside her.

She began to moan as her mouth began to work frantically, sucking and licking with abandon and he tunneled into her soaking, slick heat. She worked him as Evonne worked her, hard and hot, her breasts swaying with her undulations between the two men.

Finally, Korridian pulled her head up, her lips were moist, red, and swollen. He rose from his half-prone position, pushing her backward until she was upright. His gaze imprisoning her passion-filled, dilated attention.

He reached out and cupped her breasts, pinched her hard nipples and twisted as he pulled her to him. She gasped and arched, whimpering. His throbbing cock was now poised at her opening, sliding the engorged tip across her labia lips, teasing at her clitoris. He sensed Evonne moving into position behind her. Her breath shuddered in her chest, as she prepared herself for their joint invasion of her lust-driven body.

He released one of her breasts and reached over to the table for the small vial of purplish-black liquid. Her hot gaze turned to follow his hand. He allowed the tip of his cock to breach her entrance, her cunt widening ever so slightly to accept him. He relished the knowledge that her channel would still be virgin tight when he thrust deep inside her, and he planned to draw out the moment of complete possession.

Evonne met his gaze and he nodded, knowing that he would match his movements, slowing, easing into the tight sphincter of her ass.

He lifted the vial above her and she tilted her head to follow the movement. As he watched, she licked her lips. Already, she had become addicted to the drug. She was like any well-trained pet seeking approval of its master and eager to receive the treat that awaited.

“What do you want?” he asked, twirling the vial beneath the subdued lighting in the room, allowing his cock to sink deeper inside her, and her body accommodating his girth.

She groaned. "Please, Master."

"Tell me," he ordered.

Her eyes never left the vial. He owned this one and she would serve him well. Her knowledge would prepare his consort to be the woman he craved above all others. The perfect foil to his power.

"The drug, Master, I need it."

"What would you give to receive it?" He cock sank deeper inside her and she undulated against him. He twisted her nipple and she made a hiss of sound.

"Anything, Master, anything you desire."

"What else do you want, Tish?"

Again, she licked her lush lips. "Your cock, Master. I want to be yours, to please you."

He released her nipple and uncapped the vial. As he watched, she tilted her head back and opened her mouth, ready to receive his gift. Slowly, he poured the contents of the vial into her mouth. He watched her throat undulate as she swallowed the addictive liquid, then licked her lips to be sure she had consumed every last drop. Then he set the empty vial on the table. He grabbed her hips and rammed deep inside her.

Her eyes opened wide, he felt the heat consume her, the need magnify inside her, heard the growl begin deep in her throat. She hissed as Evonne possessed her completely with his young cock, his hands at her breasts, cupping and kneading.

Korridian pushed into her mind, saw the haze of lust, of desire, of submission to the men who speared her between them. He felt the walls around her soul shatter. Only then did he begin to move, taking her fiercely, and Evonne countered his thrusts, both the girl and the young man eager to please their master.

They gripped her sweat-glistened body, tunneling into her hot, tight depths, counter movements of desire and he felt them twine around and inside her.

She whimpered and mewled as they used her, her will no longer her own, shrouded by the drug, imprisoned by the Master.

He felt his climax building inside him, the knowledge of how close he was to everything he wanted, closer than he ever expected to be.

This female had been an unexpected gift, one he would not squander. Her knowledge was like discovering the key to a lost treasure. His gaze turned from the gyrating woman, from Evonne caught in the throes of his pleasure and landed on the glass container at the other side of the room, the one highlighted with a single glimmering light. The contents pulsed rhythmically inside. Just the sight of it caused his body to pulse to climax; the throbbing of his cock inside the female matched the beating of the heart in the glass container attached to the wires. Nothing would ever surpass the intense pleasure he felt at the possession of the throbbing symbol of the woman that would be his.

“You may climax,” he finally said to the woman as his seed spurted inside her. And she came with a force unparalleled, with intensity as her body was thrown into the stratosphere, her mind and soul possessed by Gregor Korridian. She screamed with her completion, he heard Evonne groan as his seed poured into her body.

Korridian’s vision arrowed to the wound on the pulsing heart. Once the small fissure was healed, the heart would be ready for transplant into his virgin consort, who even now had the blood of the huntress coursing through her body, albeit slightly altered by the scigenecist.

And the daughter would continue to change, to be drawn closer and closer to the darkness, to the need for blood. When finally they met, she would already be his.

His seed pumped into the female. His power and confidence flooded him. Nothing could stop him. The control of Leah and all its women would be his key to possessing all of Ebonnia. He sank his fangs into the pulsing vein at the base of the woman’s throat drawing deeply of her hot, pulsing lifeblood.

All mine.

 THE END 

Adrianna Dane

The first defining love story Adrianna read back in junior high school was “Wuthering Heights” by Emily Bronte, and that set her on the road to her long standing love affair with the romance genre. Her inspiration in writing often can be found by listening to song lyrics and reading poetry by such poets as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ranier Maria Rilke, but finding inspiration for her stories truly has no boundaries for Adrianna. She freely admits she is a romantic by nature and adding sensual heat to romance with a dusting of suspense is her motto. With the release of Adrianna's first book in 2004, and her subsequent books, she has firmly established herself as a voice within the sensual/erotic romance genre.