

The book cover features a close-up of a man's bare, muscular chest and shoulder. A tattoo of a stylized snake is visible on his left shoulder. The background is a dark, ethereal space with a green and yellow nebula or galaxy. The author's name, 'Laura Bacchi', is written in a green, gothic-style font across the upper part of the chest.

Laura  
Bacchi

The  
Heart  
of a  
Man

## THE HEART OF A MAN

...Prince Casvian tried to lift himself from the floor, but Imari sank all his weight onto his opponent's lower back. Casvian's sac swayed when he slipped nearer to the cushiony floor. Tempting morsels...Imari grazed the bare balls with two fingers. The prince shivered. Further exploration told him that the royal was completely hairless.

"Why do you shave, or whatever you do?" he asked.

"I like the way it feels."

Imari tested the weight of each ball in his palm. So smooth. And big. He wondered if he could get one of those suckers into his mouth. *Guess there's only one way to find out...*

He slapped Casvian's ass playfully. "On your back."

The royal rolled over and watched him through narrow slits. His nostrils flared. Casvian apparently hadn't expected to lose, to give up control and let Imari take the lead. Imari wanted to laugh out loud. Casvian's erection, however, was no laughing matter. It looked as angry as its owner, with a head tinged purple with blood. The snake tattoo curled over the flesh where hair should've been. Imari followed it with his finger. The colorful tail wrapped around the root of Casvian's cock.

"That must've hurt like hell."

The prince smiled. "Not if someone sucks you off during the process. The pain was... sweet. Exquisite even."

Imari's cock lurched at the thought of the soft crown now in his fingers being sucked by someone else. He touched the length of him, and it twitched away from his hand.

"Come back and play..." he whispered...

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*Relic of the Heart*

# THE HEART OF A MAN

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BY

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THE HEART OF A MAN  
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

This book is a work of fiction.

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*To Amelia June.*

*Thank you for your time and thoughtful feedback.*

# CHAPTER 1

Tight.

Everything felt tight—the starched collar around his neck, his smile, his balls. The balls he'd have to take care of soon or else they'd explode or implode or do whatever that body part does when you don't have time to get in a quick hand-job between ceremonies and treaty signings.

And executions.

Imari stretched his lips wider and pushed aside any thoughts of death as he raised his glass. Tonight was supposed to be a happy occasion, and he could see without a doubt that his matchmaking for his younger brother Asher would be another success—and not because he was telepathic. Ash and

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Raine literally radiated love. Even the usual assholes sitting down to feast wore joyful expressions. The happiness should've been infectious, but tomorrow's journey to the Nebai Colony loomed. Made him anxious...

Imari stood. Hundreds of crystal goblets lifted into the air at his cue, and the roar of the celebrating crowd softened.

"To my brother and his new bride. May your love last longer than all the stars in the universe."

*Love.* He drank from his glass, but the mere thought of the word made his stomach grow tight as well. A very expensive swallow of Jurian wine threatened to flow back up into his throat as the masses clinked glass against glass, filling the hall with sounds of celebration. The newly pledged couple kissed and glanced his way in gratitude. Then pity.

Imari wanted to look away, but couldn't. He simply sat back down at the head table while toast after toast droned throughout the evening. The sleeves of his dress uniform constricted around his wrists, holding in the heat of his body beneath the warm lights above. He snuck a finger into one cuff and worked it in deeper as Raine's words from yesterday ran through his head.

"Now it's your turn," she'd said. "You've found someone for every member of your family, and I just met a nice woman who—"

Imari had cut her off with a wave of his hand. "I'll find the right person when the time is right," he assured her.

But Raine turned out to be more stubborn than a Hubrai canine from the outer ring planets. She wanted to know his

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tastes. “Big boobs or small?” she’d asked. “Or maybe somewhere in between?”

“No comment, Raine.”

“Oh, come on. Blonde? Brunette? Redhead?” *Damn, she was persistent...*

He laughed. “We don’t have redheads on Turma. I believe that’s a variety of female only available on Earth.”

“Well, Asher could find one for you if that’s what you like.”

When Asher joined in, the teasing had become unbearable. Imari had stood, hoping to escape the inquisition, but Raine’s next words stopped him cold.

“Imari, I’m beginning to wonder if perhaps you don’t want a woman at all.” She stopped smiling. Then he heard the words in her head before she even said them. Sometimes being telepathic sucked.

“Are you gay?”

“Are all Earthlings this blunt?” he’d shot back.

“Some of us.”

He wanted to ask if Earthlings were telepathic as well. He and Raine hadn’t known each other long, and she’d rarely seen him outside of the usual family gatherings. Had he slipped up somehow? Stared too long at someone or said something that gave it away?

His silence was damning; if he didn’t say something soon, he’d never recover. “I’m a very busy man, Raine. I don’t have time—”

“To find the right woman? Or the right man?” She grinned.

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“I knew a lot of gay guys back home, and there’s just something about you...”

Asher chimed in. “And you were checking out that waiter at last night’s banquet pretty intently.”

*Thanks a lot, brother.* Imari opened his mouth to protest, but let out a sigh instead. With the exception of Asher, they all had the gift. Hell, most of his family had probably known for years. So what if his family knew the truth? He had more important matters on his mind.

Matters of life and death.

Vice Admiral Denari nudged him when the last toast of the night ended amid cheers and applause.

“Ready for tomorrow?” asked Denari.

“Ready as I can be,” he replied.

## CHAPTER 2

The bastards came early to the execution. Imari came late.

Well, not too late. The man he'd come to save still lived, but due to an impassable ion storm, Imari had arrived late enough to pay extra—a helluva lot extra—to file the stay of execution. He'd meant to arrive early as well, to shake up those damn Lower Council princes a bit. Make 'em sweat in their barbaric leather pants and boots... They could at least pretend to act like royalty. Wear a fucking robe or flight suit for star's sake.

Imari mounted the stairs to meet his rivals. They looked fresh from their travels because they'd gotten in last week—time enough to make secret pacts and establish new alliances.

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As Commander of the High Council, Imari couldn't squash these arrangements; in fact, they played a major part in continuing the in-fighting that weakened the royals, but should they ever get on the same page... A true, level-headed alliance could wreak havoc on the peace so hard-won for the inner ring planets that Imari ruled.

*Shit!* Imari's shoe caught on a rough stone as he climbed the palace steps. He didn't fall on his face, but he came pretty damn close. The princes waiting on the landing above smiled. A few were rude enough to snicker.

Rage and embarrassment heated his stubbled cheeks. *I probably look as barbaric as they do*, he thought, and ran a hand over his neglected face. He hadn't had time to wash or change—just get to the local magistrate in time to file the necessary paperwork and pay the outrageous fees to stop tomorrow's execution.

He watched his step as he continued his ascent, even though keeping his head down projected weakness. When he finally reached the ten princes—and their grins of ridicule—he felt the warmth in his face spread with a vengeance, but not from humiliation or any form of anger.

*Oh, my...*

The black-clad prince on the far right was new. Imari couldn't tear his gaze away. It was pathetic, really, the way his eyes studied every inch of gleaming leather and how the snug material covered well-made thighs. The man grinned, and straight white teeth peeked out from full lips.

Imari's eyes carelessly dipped back down for a quick

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glance at the man's crotch. He wasn't disappointed.

The prince let out a deep, throaty chuckle. Imari's cock sprang to life.

"Sizing me up, High Commander?"

*You have no idea...* "You're new."

The prince who forced Imari's cock to fill beneath his dress grays held up his palm in greeting. Imari matched his palm to the man's and waited for his name.

"I'm Prince Casvian, of the Temuri line. I'm sure you remember my older brother."

"Yes, I do."

*How could anyone forget an asshole like Harbren Temuri?* He wondered if Casvian were anything like his brother. Reluctantly he removed his hand. It still tingled from the contact as he went down the line of leaders, pressing palms. The man's touch had been soft enough, yet rough in all the right places. And the ring of violet around his eyes... Mesmerizing. Tonight's long overdue hand-job would be incredible.

The small talk was stilted, but comfortable enough considering the circumstances. And Imari's Vice Admiral, ever the diplomat, laughed at the right times and exuded heartfelt concern when needed. Imari retreated to the periphery of the trivial conversations taking place and turned all his thoughts on the man who would die in three days' time if his well-worded pleas did not work their magic.

"Are you always this quiet, High Commander?" It was Casvian. Imari's bones ran liquid at the deep hush of his voice.

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"I'm merely contemplating the fate of my fellow citizen."

"Ah, *him*. I thought you had someone else on your mind. A female back home perhaps..."

"No."

"Well, since there's little you can do, I suggest you take your mind off the proceedings. Maybe see the sights our colonial planets have to offer, or partake of the travelers' concubines—"

Imari met those stunning eyes again. "I'll be personally seeing to the defense of the man you and the rest of the Lower Council have imprisoned without a fair trial. There is no time for fun."

Casvian ran his fingers through thick waves of black hair before tilting his head. In derision? In invitation? Imari couldn't read him. Couldn't pick up any trace of feeling at all.

And he found that intriguing as hell.

"You're wasting your time, Imari. Better to put on a good show of things and enjoy yourself. The whores of this planet are said to be exquisite..."

"I'm sure you have plenty of experience with them, so fuck away, young prince. Enjoy yourself to your heart's content. I must take care of more important pursuits."

He left his rival standing there on the verge of more conversation and headed for the one person who may see to reason in the coming days. "Greetings, Prince Vaneck. I have a favor to ask."

The older man grunted, but Imari knew better than to be dismayed by his gruffness.

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Imari bowed his head. "My father sends his respects."

Vaneck nodded with another grunt and gestured to a bench at the side of the large hall. They sat, and Vaneck spoke. "How is the old man?"

"As spry as ever. He still has his ship, but he misses the hunting. Do you miss it as well?" Imari asked.

The elder stared down at the rugged stone floor, probably remembering his own days as a hunter, on the prowl for criminals who'd disappeared before their trials and people who'd gone missing.

"Good times, those," Vaneck said. "Never dull."

"Politics simply can't compare, can they?"

Vaneck leaned in close. "If it weren't for my age and the royal blood running in my veins, I'd be back out on a ship chasing down the wanted until I died."

The man laughed and Imari joined him. "At least this trial has stirred up some excitement."

Vaneck stopped laughing. "And you're stirring up excitement of your own by working for this monster—"

Imari held up his hands. "I'm not working for him. I'm merely making sure a Turmian citizen gets a fair trial. We were never allowed to view the evidence. Hell, no one even followed protocol by notifying us of his arrest." *If it hadn't been for the faint cry for help...*

"This is a bad thing, Commander. A heinous crime. No good will come of your efforts."

"All I want is a chance to review the evidence and talk to the man. The documents should arrive tomorrow morning. I

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need a quiet place to study them, a place to spread out.”

Vaneck narrowed his eyes. “A place like the royal library.”

“Exactly.” Imari grinned. “If the courts of this planet had the technology to run a data-dump, I could use my digital, but...”

“Don’t say it. We ‘barbaric’ types may take offense.” At least Vaneck was laughing again. “I’ll make all the arrangements.”

Imari inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Vaneck stood and walked away, but not before sharing some parting words... “Once you see the evidence, Commander, you may revoke your gratitude and curse me instead.”

*That’s definitely not what I wanted to hear.*

After saying his good-nights, he hurried to his room, threw open all the windows, and stripped out of his formal attire. Nebai was a temperate world—too temperate for his liking—and even its most luxurious estates went without centralized air or heat. Yet more proof of its lack of civilization.

He stretched out on the bed. At least the covers were soft, silky almost, beneath his perspiring body. He closed his eyes, but they didn’t stay closed for long, for Casvian’s disarming grin appeared instantly. Those gorgeous purple eyes narrowed into naughty little slits. Something about the man—the way he carried himself, his scent?—unnerved Imari. Made his mind wander.

Staring at the ceiling didn’t help either. The prince’s presence lingered. Imari imagined his hands exploring the

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black leather covering Casvian's body as his own hands did some exploring of their own, thumb at the base of his cock, middle finger stroking the skin on the underside. The wild forest of crinkly black hair framing his shaft gave way to the spongy flesh above, and by the time the pad of his finger reached the crown, a bead of pre-cum was waiting. He played in it, coated the head. Then he envisioned Casvian's wicked teeth gleaming in the darkness.

Imari scraped his nails over his cock's tip and pretended the prince was nipping at his sensitive dick. Tugging it with rough fingers and sucking it in to the balls.

"Come here," he'd say, and catch the royal's muscular thigh. "I want to suck you as well..."

*You wish.* The juice from his anxious cock leaked freely now and covered both hands, one squeezing his balls while the other pumped like a fiend. He wanted the prince's cock deep in his throat, thrusting hard, pinning him to the bed.

He wanted to taste him.

Imari dragged a finger through the slickness coating his prick and brought it to his lips, suckled it dry, and went back for more. *Would he taste like me?*

He pressed the salty finger farther into his mouth and slowed the hand on his erection. His tongue teased the digit like he wanted to tease the haughty prince. But he had a feeling Casvian wouldn't like to be teased. No, Casvian radiated strength and dominance—he'd probably control every detail of their lovemaking if Imari should ever be that lucky. Maybe the royal would bind him to the bed and take him

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roughly in the ass or even give him a spank or two. No harm in wishing...

The hand on his shaft went lower and sought the hole below. His mouth clamped down on the finger against his tongue as he probed his own ass. *Right there... Fuck. Oh, fuck!* He found the sweet spot. Nudged it just right. Cum bubbled through the slit of his unattended cock and splattered onto his stomach.

*Yeah, wishing is all you'll ever get.*

He didn't bother to get up. Not yet anyway. He lay there motionless and covered in semen, too depressed to move. It was pathetic, really. Leader of the largest federation of planets in the system, jacking off in the dark, too afraid to seek out the love he wanted.

The burden of his responsibility to everyone else but himself felt like a stone in his stomach. A large stone, twenty *decars* strong. If he didn't find relief soon, it would certainly crush his insides. And his spirit.

## CHAPTER 3

Imari sat down to the morning meal amid whispers and laughter. Apparently the documents had arrived for him as promised, but were delivered on the back of a small, smelly beast. A wretched creature known by the unfortunate name that translated into something like, “it who must pay for sins of a past life.”

The message from the magistrate was clear. No one believed in the innocence of this prisoner. No one save Imari, and even his faith was fading fast. Before falling asleep last night, he’d downloaded several news archives concerning the case from outlying planets to get their take on things. And since they tended to be more unbiased in their reporting, he

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found their stance disturbing, for the consensus held that Jorick di Ork of Turma was guilty.

He stabbed at his egg fritter and swallowed it whole. Washed it down with gorum juice and excused himself. Vaneck's keys had been delivered in the early hours, and Imari was ready to get started.

"Surprise, surprise." He let out a low whistle of appreciation and closed the library door behind him. A pale chalky stone made up the floor, walls, and bookshelves, and lent a lightness to the chamber that didn't permeate the other rooms of the palace. Tall narrow windows perforated the rock at regular intervals, increasing the light and giving the space an airy feel. He'd expected something dark and dreary, and given the nature of the case he'd be studying, any lightness to dispel the gloom would help him meet the coming challenge.

*Time to get to work.* He found a large desk located in a corner, hidden behind some shelves, and sorted through the magistrate's parcels to find the first binder of evidence. When his fingers rested on the flat white surface of it, he could feel the slight thrum of forewarning. He cracked it open.

"What the..."

It took a moment for the visual before him to coalesce into something recognizable, and when it did, he couldn't find a wastebasket fast enough. Egg and gorum pulp splattered the smooth ivory stone at his feet. He'd even hit his shoes.

Now he was thankful for the archaic ways of Nebai—had he seen the gore displayed on a high-definition digital he would've ruined the screen.

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The library had a small room off to the side with a urinal and running water, and after cleaning up both himself and the floor, he returned to the chamber to rinse his mouth. *I'll never eat egg again*, he thought and stared into the mirror.

Whoever had committed the crime in red on Imari's borrowed desk deserved to die. Slowly.

He took a deep breath and then another. Wiped his moist palms on his morning uniform. Dark handprints were left on the light gray fabric; they reminded him of the small scarlet prints pressed onto the floor and wall in the image he'd just seen. Small, because the victim was a child. And he'd been very much alive while he'd been opened up, the insides of his body brought out for display. He'd become tangled in them, a glistening rope of intestines wrapped round a pair of thin legs. Imari could almost hear the young boy's pleas to stop, *please stop*, as the man turned him inside out. Had the boy tried to put himself back together? There was no blood from the neck up, and Imari knew without a doubt that the child had touched his organs as the monster freed them from his small pale torso.

At some point the kid had tried to sit up, maybe put a hand on the wall behind him to slink away. Crisp red handprints gave way to clotted smears as the boy apparently tried to put some distance between his bleeding body and the killer. But this panicked victory would be short-lived as the victim became sport. Did the killer talk to the child, say things like, "Oh, no! He's getting away. I will catch you, Atika..." Or had the killing been cold and methodical, or perhaps steeped in ritual? A lamb for the sacrifice at the altar of death.

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Atika. The boy's name was rich in meaning. *Surrender to the gods.* But he'd surrendered to a mere mortal, and he'd had no choice in the matter. Imari loosened the top snap on his jacket and took a deep breath. *There, that's better.*

But the pictures in front of him only got worse with each close-up. He made it through the next three images before bolting for the urinal, emptying his fluttering stomach again until there was nothing left to bring up. The jacket came off. He threw it across the room instead of fitting it tidily on the back of the padded leather chair. Then he touched the photos, one by one, and felt the slowing of young heartbeats and the acceleration of the older ones. And if he concentrated, really concentrated, he could hear faint screams, breathless begging for mercy, and cries for a mother unaware that her only son would soon leave this life...

*Focus on the killer.* It was harder that way. There was no physical trace of the perpetrator, no tell-tale signs left behind. He'd been careful, this asshole. Imari's own eyelids shut like young Atika's had probably done before being sliced off. *Don't crush them closed, Atika. You need to see this...* If he focused, Imari could step back in time for a few horrible seconds to listen.

*They will pay,* said the madman's voice. *They will come together over your lifeless body and pay.*

Imari reached for his stylus and wrote down everything that he heard, even when most of it didn't make sense. The babbling of a lunatic or the confession he needed to nail the bastard, Imari had no clue. He just kept writing as if his life—

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or Atika's or the guy rotting in a cell who felt so goddamn innocent to Imari—depended on it. And what seemed like only a few minutes afterward, when his stomach rumbled with hunger and no longer tasted of bile, he'd filled three tablets with notes. He pushed the binders and papers away to lay his head on the desk. His undershirt was soaked. Footsteps sounded in the room, but he was too tired to lift his head.

*Go away*, he wanted to shout. *I don't want to be disturbed.*

The booted feet sought him out and slowed as their owner halted at the left side of the desk.

"You look like you could use a break."

The voice haunted him. Made him almost want to look up, but he didn't need to. He knew who it was.

Imari sighed. "Greetings, Casvian."

He found the strength to look to his left and nearly groaned. Casvian must be hot as well, because he wore no shirt, just those tight leather pants riding low at the waist. The hint of hips caught Imari's attention as did the elaborate serpent tattoo slithering out of his waistband to snake above the shallow belly button. He wanted to tease the leather down, if only a little. There had to be hair somewhere down there, and he needed to see it, see where it led and how it surrounded Casvian's cock.

*Stop staring. He'll think you're an idiot...or worse.* Imari looked up. Casvian's smirk was waiting. Imari lowered his eyes and studied the vibrant amber stone at the man's neck. Unusual, just like its owner. Then Imari glanced down again, but not as low as before. The crimson sliver of the tattooed

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creature's tongue kissed the space above Casvian's belly button. In the silence of the vast library, Imari could almost hear the hiss.

The prince leaned down. The movement broke the stillness of the room and sent a waft of the man's scent his way. Imari forced himself to stop breathing—otherwise his cock would tear through the seam of his trousers.

"You need a break. Come with me."

Imari shook his head. "I've got too much to do." *And I don't want to leave this stuff spread out for anyone to see...and if I go with you, I may never want to return.* That last thought made him feel guilty. A surge of possessiveness welled up inside him, fierce and warrior-like, as if he wanted to protect young Atika and his family. He didn't want anyone to gawk at the horror, get some kind of sick thrill from viewing the carnage laid out on the table.

Casvian's hand touched his shoulder. The heat in Imari's pants went molten, and lust muddled his thoughts. *Is he touching me in a friendly, brotherly way? Or is he seeking something more?* He couldn't get a reading on the prince no matter how hard he tried.

"You missed lunch," Casvian said quietly, then nodded toward the images. "And you need some time away from that."

"*That* happens to be a child's life, and another innocent life will be lost if the courts have been wrong thus far." Imari stood up, knocking the heavy chair flat on the floor before turning away from the desk. "I don't take this lightly—"

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"I didn't mean it that way. Calm down."

*How can I be calm with you in the room, so close?*

"You need to eat," continued the prince as he circled around to face him. "And a short game of breakers will do you good." He stepped closer, and Imari made the mistake of backing up to the desk. What was it with this guy and personal space? Anything closer than a forearm's distance between men was not appropriate. Not appropriate at all. The proximity of the royal caused blood to pulse through his temples at an alarming rate.

He gulped and stayed focused on their conversation. "A short game of breakers?" Was there even such a thing? The shortest game he'd ever seen had taken six hours. And a man in his position sure as hell didn't play games like some carefree youth.

"Only one hour. I swear it."

Imari was tempted, but not because he wanted to play the game. He wanted to feel the prince's salt-slicked muscles slide along his. He wanted thigh between thigh and hot breath at his neck as the prince pinned him to the floor. He'd be a fool to pass this up... Or a fool to take the bait. All afternoon pressed against the prince, however tempting, would not prepare him to plead for di Ork's stay of execution.

Imari laughed. "A Temuri who tells the truth? I remember your brother well. That man," he tilted his head and fixed his gaze on the sleek serpent tattoo, "was a lying snake. And I expect his sibling inherited the trait."

Casvian stepped closer. Imari could practically feel the

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heat of the man's crotch against his own.

"I'm nothing like my brother. Take it back."

Imari opened his mouth to say *no*, but something made him hold back. The vibes rolling off the man told him this was a serious offense. He wanted time to probe Casvian's mind, to find out why he felt this way—and so strongly.

But Casvian rushed him. Put his supple lips close enough to kiss had Imari possessed the balls to do so. "I said, 'Take it back.'"

For some reason, he did just that. "My apologies, Casvian."

The prince muttered his thanks, but didn't back away. Then Imari felt it. A brush of steely flesh against his own erection, the leather and *zorban* fabric slipping against each other.

"Game?" The royal's question was a hoarse whisper.

*Hell, yeah.* Imari managed a nod.

Casvian looked over Imari's shoulder at the violent images splayed out on the desktop. "One hour, I promise. Do you wish to pack this up?"

He nodded again. Casvian backed away and helped tuck the papers into the proper binders, then stack the binders into the crate. "We can take these to my chamber and lock the door."

Imari didn't know what to say, but finally decided on, "That's very kind of you."

Casvian lifted the crate. Muscles bulged in his arms. "My pleasure, High Commander."

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Imari's cock twitched at the word *pleasure*. An hour alone in the prince's chamber. The door locked...

He could hardly wait.

## CHAPTER 4

Casvian's room was a haven of coolness in the oppressive afternoon humidity. Black and amber silks kept the sun's rays out, and the same colors decorated the low bed. Tasteful yet decadent, Imari conceded, and most definitely masculine.

A rich aroma of *kipso* berry oil scented the room. He inhaled.

"Nervous?"

Imari turned to the prince. "No." *Not yet.* "I was merely savoring the smells, the sights—"

"Yes, we 'barbaric' types are so exotic."

"That's not what I meant, Casvian." He pictured his own bedroom, overflowing with books and papers, awards and

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reminder boards. “You have exquisite taste.”

“Yes, I do.” Casvian looked him over with a grin, then walked into the next room. “Come on. If we keep talking, our hour will be up.”

Imari followed like a cock-whipped female *forug* beast in heat. The spongy floor gave way with his every step, and a large circle marked the center of the room. *Who the hell has their own breaker court in their bed chamber?*

“You must like breakers a lot.”

“Doesn’t every man?”

*Well, no...* Imari winced as he thought of his feeble attempts at the sport while in school. The bruises, the scrapes—maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. He began to get nervous. His empty stomach shifted about with anxiety, and moisture weighted his undershirt with each passing moment.

“A quick game, like I said.” The prince eyed Imari’s crotch. “Then we eat.”

He squelched a whimper in his throat as Casvian’s hands shot to the snaps of the leather trousers. Imari looked away and pretended to stretch. *I can’t play this with a hard-on. I can’t. Maybe I can ask to use his bathing chamber or something...*

\* \* \*

“Do you have a pair of breaker shorts?” Imari asked nervously.

He had to be joking. This man, the most astute leader of

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the civilized world actually thought they'd come here to play a game?

Cas laughed. "Why bother? The clock is ticking and surely the High Commander wears conservative underwear." *And it will be off soon enough...*

He chuckled again—this time to himself—when Imari turned away to undress. *You need to get out in the sun more often*, he wanted to say. *Turn that moonstone skin bronze.*

The Commander was built. And tall. An irresistible combination in Casvian's opinion. But it was the region below the belt that he most wanted to see, and if the earlier bulge Imari had sported was any indication, he would not be disappointed.

Formal trousers hit the breaker mat, giving him a tasty view of Imari's ass. *Turn around, dammit.* Cas repositioned his erection while sneaking glances at the strong hairy legs kicking the pants away. He didn't want to seem too eager. Not yet.

When the Commander bent to unfasten his boot, he lost his balance. Not a good sign for someone about to play a master of the game. If you couldn't maintain equilibrium on the squishy breaker floor, you'd lose in no time.

Imari stood and turned, his feet now bare. He was clearly embarrassed. A ruddy blush splotched over his neck and face. He seemed so vulnerable, nothing like the leader-type. Cas checked out the eager cock tenting the clingy white fabric of the Commander's underwear. Imari had no reason to be embarrassed. Hell, with a dick that huge, he should be proud,

## THE HEART OF A MAN

dancing from the castle rooftop even.

Cas went down in a stretch to keep from leering, but he still peeked. A damp halo surrounded the thick cock, and the dark shadows visible through the thin material showed that Imari didn't shave. That would have to change...

"Well," said Imari. "Shall we?"

*Yes, we shall.* Cas entered the ring in the center of the room and edged off to one side. Imari joined him, but looked at his watch. *So uptight...* The Commander even punched a few buttons on the timepiece to schedule an alarm. Cas rolled his eyes at the series of beeps and flexed his thighs in anticipation.

"You, my dear Commander, seriously need to loosen up."

"I stretched—"

"That's not what I mean, and you know it." He hoisted his weight onto the balls of his feet for balance and stepped briskly around the interior of the ring. A very flat-footed Imari followed his lead while struggling to stay upright. *That's it. Keep it up. Because once I pin you, we'll have time for other things...*

He moved in toward the circle's center, ready to pounce, but a beep sounded.

*Shit.* Cas rolled his eyes. "Um, it hasn't been an hour."

"I know," said Imari. "I have it set to beep every minute--"

"Take it off."

"But this'll help me keep track..."

"Take the fucking thing off."

Imari huffed a bit, but he did as Cas commanded. The

## THE HEART OF A MAN

silver timepiece bumped over the soft floor and slid into the bed chamber beyond.

“‘Take it back. Take it off.’ Take, take, take.” Imari pounced unexpectedly, knocking him to the floor. “Maybe it’s time you learned to give a little.”

*Most unexpected, Commander...* The feel of him, the weight. Cas was truly dazed, and not from the pinning. He’d never had a man feel so right in his arms. The way Imari stayed on his body had his balls ready to blow. He needed to gain the upper hand—and quickly.

His pelvis twisted in an attempt to get some kind of leverage, but that only made things worse. Imari slid down, cock to cock, balls on balls. No matter how hard he pushed at the leader’s chest, the man wouldn’t budge. And when the watch’s next shrill beep sounded in the other room, Imari rolled off.

“Thanks for the quick break. I’ll be heading back to—umph!”

Cas knocked him flat on his ass. “I neglected to mention that I play the Nebai way. You’ll need two out of three to win.” He caught Imari’s hands and pressed them deep into the floor.

The nervousness Imari displayed earlier became edgier, different. Like he was worried about what would happen next—and whether he’d like it or not.

“What does the winner get?” he asked.

Cas licked his lips. “The winner takes all.”

The Commander’s pupils grew wider. “Define ‘all.’”

## THE HEART OF A MAN

Imari's neck was salty-sweet. Cas lapped at the liquid rolling down the skin in tiny beads. Laved the frantic *tick-tick* of the vein there and caressed a dark freckle above his collarbone. Imari didn't struggle. At least on the outside. Inside, Cas knew it was another story.

"I've studied you for a while now, Commander." He released his wrists and scooted lower to tongue a stiff nipple. Imari didn't move his arms.

"Never married. No bastards. No female friends. So I looked deeper. Spent a lot of money tracking your every move. You weren't visiting the man-whores down in the Latrain District of Turma, and they weren't visiting you. For a while I wondered if your doting Vice Admiral sucked that luscious cock of yours."

Imari shook his head.

"But you wished he would, didn't you?"

"I have nothing but respect for my next in command—"

"That doesn't keep you from dreaming about coming in his mouth, does it?"

Imari suddenly bent forward and knocked Cas to his side. "What exactly do you want?"

## CHAPTER 5

Imari's eyes bore into Casvian's. He got nothing. Not a clue about how the other man knew what he knew or what other valuable nuggets of information he'd gleaned using what had to be dubious methods.

He carefully stood and extended his hand. "Okay, Casvian. Two out of three."

Cas took it, but he didn't pull any dirty tricks as expected. He backed away and squatted low, legs spread wide, in preparation for the next round. Imari mirrored his movements as best he could.

"I know what I plan to take, Imari. What will you seek as your winnings, should you get that lucky?"

## THE HEART OF A MAN

“My choice might just surprise you.” Leave him hanging, he thought to himself. Make him want more. The horny guy in him disappeared, leaving a ruthless ruler in his place. He lunged. They fought until the alarm wailed away in the other room. But time held no meaning now—they were all muscle and motion, curls of the spine and panting and clever little tricks. Imari even amazed himself with his strength and agility. Casvian looked shocked, too.

In a move meant to surprise, he fisted Imari’s shoulder-length locks and wrenched back his head to surprise him with a gentle kiss. Both men stopped.

“Foreplay,” Casvian whispered with a smile.

“I...” *I’m not ready for this. Not really*, he wanted to say. Another unbelievably soft kiss shut him up.

But the bastard used the second kiss to shove Imari back. If it hadn’t been for all the sweat, he’d have been a goner.

“So you like to play dirty?” Imari asked.

“The dirtier the better.”

That was all the encouragement he needed. He grabbed the prince’s long hair with one hand and ran the other into the back of his shorts. The entrance to his ass was slick with sweat and yielded to Imari’s finger without hesitation. Once inside, it was easy to force Casvian onto his stomach. Hell, he practically slid wherever Imari wanted him to. His finger stayed put—and went deeper.

“Dammit!” Casvian’s body went rigid. “The rules...”

Imari bent low and gave his captive’s ear an agonizingly slow fuck of the tongue. Casvian moaned into the floor and

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ground his hips into the flexible surface.

Imari chuckled. "This is how we play on Turma."

"Liar."

Imari reluctantly removed his finger from the hot asshole.

"Yeah, you got me. But I did win."

"Yes, you did." Casvian turned to face him.

*Such beautiful eyes.*

The prince shimmied off his shorts and raised his ass.

"Lube's by the bath. Second drawer on the right."

"I don't need it."

Casvian's head snapped up. "But I do. No lube, no fuck."

Imari laughed. "Who said I was going to fuck you?"

The prince tried to lift himself from the floor to argue the point, but Imari sank all his weight onto his opponent's lower back. Casvian's sac swayed when he slipped nearer to the cushiony floor. Tempting morsels...Imari grazed the bare balls with two fingers. The prince shivered. Further exploration told him that the royal was completely hairless.

"Why do you shave, or whatever you do?" he asked.

"I like the way it feels."

Imari tested the weight of each ball in his palm. So smooth. And big. He wondered if he could get one of those suckers into his mouth. *Guess there's only one way to find out...*

He slapped Casvian's ass playfully. "On your back."

The royal rolled over and watched him through narrow slits. His nostrils flared. Casvian apparently hadn't expected to lose, to give up control and let Imari take the lead. Imari

## THE HEART OF A MAN

wanted to laugh out loud. Casvian's erection, however, was no laughing matter. It looked as angry as its owner, with a head tinged purple with blood. The snake tattoo curled over the flesh where hair should've been. Imari followed it with his finger. The colorful tail wrapped around the root of Casvian's cock.

"That must've hurt like hell."

The prince smiled. "Not if someone sucks you off during the process. The pain was... sweet. Exquisite even."

Imari's cock lurched at the thought of the soft crown now in his fingers being sucked by someone else. He touched the length of him, and it twitched away from his hand.

"Come back and play..." he whispered.

Casvian relaxed against the floor. "Grab it. Show it who's in charge. But first..." He held out his arm.

Imari hid his surprise and held out his own arm. They both watched as the small plate beneath the skin of their forearms lit up, flashed for a few seconds, and gave off solid green lights. Imari chuckled. "Safe sex in the outer colonies? I never would've imagined this, not in a million years."

Casvian pulled his wrist away.

*Shit. When are you going to stop insulting him?* "Sorry. I just... I didn't mean to make light of—"

After a quick shrug, the prince didn't seem too offended. "I'm working on a lot of changes for the colonies. You'd be surprised. Sexual health implants are a great idea. I was the first on my world to get one."

"Leading by example—something every good ruler does.

## THE HEART OF A MAN

Now about that cock of yours...”

Imari grabbed it—with his lips. Gave it a suckle, then a pump deeper into his mouth. His eyes watered when he tried to take it in to the base. Here he sat, the cock of his dreams waiting to be sucked, and he couldn’t get it even halfway down his throat. He tried again and had to stifle a gag.

Casvian gently touched his jaw. “You don’t have a lot of experience with this, do you?”

Imari closed his eyes in embarrassment. “That obvious, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“Usually someone does me.”

He opened his eyes, and the prince smiled but not in ridicule. “You’re the winner, remember? Maybe you should let me do you.”

Imari didn’t answer. He crawled over the man he’d won, a man ready to fulfill his obligation as the loser in this sham of a contest. His lips sought neck and chin and mouth. His tongue danced along teeth and tangled with Casvian’s own. He could get lost in this sensation, if only for one evening. For tomorrow would bring more research, more responsibility... He rolled them both to their sides and let his fingers play at the base of the prince’s neck.

*Take, take, take. Take it off.* The other prize he wanted for his efforts—Casvian’s necklace—unlatched easier than expected, and when it did, a torrent of thoughts invaded Imari’s brain. All Casvian’s need and lust and...something deeper. And as he began to filter through the strength of the

## *THE HEART OF A MAN*

prince's emotions, he found something downright disturbing.

He held the golden charm aloft in victory. Casvian gasped and charged for it. But Imari was quicker.

Casvian's face showed anger—and panic. "Give it back!"

"You said winner take all, and I want this."

"It's the only way to keep you out of my head!"

"So you want to have sex with me, but not let me into your mind? I'm not sure I like that."

Casvian went for the necklace again, and this time he meant to win it back no matter what. But Imari prevailed. He surveyed the scratches on his arms and chest. "Are you afraid to share your mind with me?"

Disappointment filled him. His own, and Casvian's.

"I want you to get to know me...the normal way. When I found out you were telepathic, I bought the shielder stone."

"Must have set you back a bit." Even for a prince, the cost would've been outrageous. And just for that sham of an excuse? No, the prince had other reasons...

Casvian looked away and held out both hands. "Please?"

He didn't seem like the vulnerable type. "Such beautiful hands," Imari whispered. "Perfect for touching me. For sticking in my mouth while I..."

The prince winced, then looked away, and Imari almost broke down and handed back the necklace. But he didn't. Casvian was trying damned hard not to think of something. Something involving his royal prick of a brother.

Imari ignored the aches of his body and stood. "I'll give it back after you tell me what you're trying to hide."

## THE HEART OF A MAN

Gone was Casvian's tough exterior. He looked hurt, really hurt. Or maybe torn in some kind of way that gnaws deep into the gut. Imari knelt down to kiss him, but the prince turned away.

So he kissed his cheek instead. Light pecks to the hollow beneath the high cheekbone, then lower to the obstinate jaw. He could feel Casvian trying not to think of anything.

Imari's lips slid to Casvian's neck. "Don't be like this. Please?" After a quick suckle at the base of the royal's throat, he could feel the man soften, give in. "I want to get to know you. And I think you want to get to know me. I'm trusting you here, and if your only purpose today was to distract me from this case, I'm going to be very disappointed."

Casvian swallowed. Imari reached around to massage the source of the gulping sound. His finger trailed up from there, up to a determined chin and lips still swollen from their kissing. When Imari ran the finger from nose to brow, he felt the wetness.

"Tell me. Tell me what it is you hide." *If it's causing you so much pain, then tell me.*

Another gulp. Then finally words. "They've got the wrong man."

*I know.* He held Casvian tighter. "Who's the right man?"

Hollow laughter filled the chamber. "You'll have to fuck it out of me."

"My pleasure." His reply came out like a growl. He turned Casvian around to face him. "But I have a feeling you'd tell me whether I fucked you or not. Some secrets are light, like

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little pebbles. You can carry those around with no consequence until you die. Others become burdens. Heavy stones that you need to share.”

*This one’s a boulder*, Imari heard Casvian say to himself.

“Then let me shoulder it with you.”

“If I tell you now, you’ll spring from my side like some valiant warrior of old, ready to do battle. I want you to myself for a bit. A fair exchange, is it not?”

*Yeah, probably.* Imari’s erection waned as he thought about little Atika and the man wrongly imprisoned. He wouldn’t be shirking his responsibility if he stayed an hour or two longer, would he? Hell, even the people in his position deserved a break. Right?

Tired of denying his own pleasure, he nodded and pushed the guilt aside. He couldn’t bring the boy back. Not now. And di Ork wasn’t being mistreated in prison—Imari would’ve sensed it if he was. He nodded again, more adamantly. Casvian rose and offered his hand. The princely silks of the bed cooled the stickiness of their skin, wrapped them in blacks and golds, and made the sliding easy. Hands slipped over muscles, threaded through hair, and fingers disappeared between ass cheeks. The subtle aroma of *kipso* perfumed the chamber and blended with the scent of their sweat. His young prince sighed, his body fluid and graceful in the sheets, always in motion. Always wherever Imari wanted him to be.

“Oh, Casvian,” he moaned.

“Call me Cas.”

“Cas?”

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“Yeah...” A royal finger traced the swirl of Imari’s asshole. “Rhymes with *ass*.”

Imari started to chuckle, but the tentative finger between his cheeks grew demanding and pressed dead-center into his entrance.

“So how experienced are you, Commander?” The finger went deeper.

Imari nipped his neck. “Please don’t call me that in bed. Here I’m just Imari, nothing more.”

“You’re avoiding my question.” Cas removed the finger and laid his head back on the heap of pillows. He stared into Imari’s eyes...or perhaps his very soul. The prince’s thumb grazed his lips, seeking entrance. “How many cocks has this sweet mouth sucked?”

He didn’t want to release the thumb to answer. His tongue circled over it a few times before letting it loose. “Just a few. And none as big as yours. That’s why I gagged.”

“Care to try again?”

Imari closed his eyes and nodded. “I want to put my mouth on you so badly—”

“Then show me.”

He gazed down at Cas. Saw the mock challenge in his violet eyes.

Imari’s cock jumped at the thought of pleasing this man. He placed a wet kiss on a nipple as he made his way down the bed, and soon the heat of Casvian’s shaft scorched his cheek. He wanted to inhale it. To take it all in with one swallow. But he didn’t want to make a fool of himself again. His lips

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quivered against the smooth cap of Casvian's cock. He cradled it in his hand, kissed the tip. The deep slit of the head offered a hint of what would come soon. Imari tasted the nectar, pure male and earthy. Cas groaned.

The length of him deserved to be worshipped, and Imari pressed kisses into the firm cock until his lips reached the soft pouch of balls below. His fingers groped the cockhead, spun around it until fresh fluid leaked from the opening, but his lips opened for a testicle instead. It filled his mouth. He suckled. Tongued it with delicate precision. Cas went rigid in the bed, his body curling up, then uncoiling, as if it would snap if it didn't stay in motion. The coolness of the sheets became clingy and damp and warm.

*Dance for me, Prince. Sing for me...*

He slowly rolled the ball against his tongue and released it to capture the other. His fingers kept up their torment. Tiny rubs became wide, sweeping gestures of agony—at least he hoped. He peeked up at Cas. His hands gripped the ornate metalwork bed. In an attempt to keep still? To prolong the fun and delay the orgasm?

Cas caught him staring. He grinned and let go of the headboard. "Give me yours," he commanded. Imari got to his knees and began to climb up to him. Cas shook his head while twisting sideways in the bed.

Imari lowered himself back down to the mattress. *Here you go. Take it.*

Cas took it. He took it all. Imari shivered as lips wrapped around his dick and sucked it deeper and deeper, past teeth

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and tongue and into the soft chasm of hot, wet throat.

Imari worked Cas's cock, caressing his face against it, then letting it slide down his throat—thankfully with no gagging this time. Everything Cas did, Imari did his best to mirror, then he made some moves of his own. When he wanted a taste of teeth, he raked his incisors along Cas's crown. Cas pulled back to do the same. When he wanted a finger in his ass, he found Cas's pucker. He played the game well, and soon Imari lost himself in the steady rhythm of their fuck, his cock against the fleshy insides of Casvian's cheeks. His mouth sucking, tongue lapping and laving as his fingers enclosed the shaft and stroked.

*You've had much more practice...* Imari groaned and tried to hold back, but Cas was too damned good, and the finger wiggling just right in the tight space of his ass triggered a chain reaction. The pad of Cas's fingertip played against Imari's prostate, forcing his rectum to pulse uncontrollably. His balls drew up higher, and the pressure built until Imari had to give in. He wanted to offer Cas fair warning, and reared back to say he was coming, but the prince shoved his head back into place.

His mumbled apology hummed along the dick filling his mouth. Then he opened up, felt the rush. He shook. Whimpered. Let weakness and strength ebb and flow through his body as every nerve became a pinpoint of bliss. Soon cum pumped out with each new throb of sensation, then shot deep and full into Cas's waiting throat. When Imari finished, the prince's talented mouth let him loose and wet his balls with

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gentle kisses.

Slender hips begin to thrust and grind in earnest now, and the beast tattooed on the perfect belly before him moved as Cas's muscles flexed, then relaxed. The effect was hypnotic, and Imari stole glances at the serpent. He imagined that he'd caught it by the tail. *Let me taste you. Let me swallow the thorn of your tail.*

He forced the cock deeper. It was Cas's turn to shake and make the tiny sounds that would announce his climax. Cas gasped. The burst of air blew hot against Imari's sac and stirred his softening penis to life again. A splash of semen hit the back of his throat.

Casvian cried out, plaintive and low, then clutched Imari's thighs. When he finished, all was still except the twitch of their cocks, uncertain whether to rest or start anew.

"Come here. Lie with me."

How Cas found the energy to speak, let alone move, Imari didn't have a clue. But he clambored up into the pair of waiting arms as if his life depended on it—and in a way it did. For the first time in too long, he felt free. Free to love as he pleased. Free of the burdens a person of his rank must bear. So he savored the passing moments as best he could, because he knew he wouldn't feel this way for long.

The crates by the chamber door waited, and although they could wait a few minutes more, he'd have to get back to them sooner or later.

*Later, he thought. Much, much later.*

"I want to trust you, Imari."

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“Then trust me.”

Casvian’s mouth opened, but not for words. His tongue invaded Imari’s mouth like a desperate blade—unyielding, leaving no space untouched by its needy slashes. Imari didn’t try to stop him; he sensed the secret Cas held at bay would arrive at any moment.

And it did, just as the castle shook and an avalanche of pale, polished stones lurched free of their masonry...

*Brother, what have you done?*

## CHAPTER 6

The canopied bed literally saved their asses—and various other body parts.

“I’m so sorry, Imari—”

“Apologies later. Facts now.”

Another blast rocked a wing farther within the castle walls. Cas watched helplessly as Imari covered his head with a dust-covered pillow as the screams rang out. His body squirmed in what appeared to be pain while the moans and wails of the innocent competed with the next barrage of explosions. *Being telepathic must have its disadvantages...*

Imari peeked out from his hiding place. “You have no idea.”

## *THE HEART OF A MAN*

“Can you stop it?” Cas asked. “Can you block the thoughts?”

“Never been in a situation this...intense. We gotta get out of here, but I can’t...”

The Commander began to shiver. Then he began to shake violently. Cas cradled him in his arms. He needed to get him out of here. But where to?

He left Imari to check the hallway and barely caught himself as he stepped out of the room—and onto a churning cloud of pale dust. The rest of the castle wing was no more. Chunks of white stone were all that remained of this part of the ancient structure. Bodies, furniture, famous relics centuries old—all of it crushed. Reduced to a legacy of rubble and ashes.

The bombs had stopped. At least for now. Imari sat up slowly, holding his head and looking dazed.

“Clothes?” he asked.

Cas gathered them from the breaker court and helped the distraught Commander dress in silence. When the last boot was on, Imari managed to stand. Cas threw on his clothes, then surveyed the damage from the window.

The castle hadn’t been the only thing hit. “Looks like the Medic Center is gone. He got the colony law, too.”

“Great. No medical help. No police.” Imari turned to him. “What exactly is your asshole brother up to?”

Cas looked away. “I’m not sure anymore. I knew something was wrong. I mean, he’d always been cruel... But when I realized he’d killed the child, I knew he needed help.”

## *THE HEART OF A MAN*

He leaned against the wall and let sadness weigh down his bones. “And I tried to get him help—good help. But my family wouldn’t hear of it. They sent him to the high hills for a ‘vacation.’ I was furious. And scared.”

Imari lifted his face. Kissed his forehead. “This would be a good time to tell me everything you know. Think of anything you can to stop this while I try to get help.”

Cas listened while the Commander tried to contact his men using the communicator on his belt. No one answered back. Then he tried to reach forces back in Turma. Nothing but static. He peered out the window again.

“The communication towers are gone, too.”

“That’s my brother. Sick but smart.” Cas pushed aside these thoughts—regret would get him nowhere now. He rummaged in his closet. “We can use these shirts for wounds. I have a household medic kit.”

Imari stepped closer. The muscle in his cheek twitched harder with every footfall. “If I had the right training, sure, I’d be out there rescuing everyone who had a fighting chance. But I’m no healer. And neither are you. Our best bet is to find your brother and stop this madness. Do you have any weapons?”

“Council banned them years ago due to in-fighting.”

“Great.”

“Wait a sec...” He ran back to the closet. “I’ve got these.”

Imari followed him in. “And we’ll, what, knight them to death?” He unsheathed the ceremonial sword and tested the blade against the sleeve of a hanging shirt. “Actually, that’s not too bad.”

## THE HEART OF A MAN

“Yeah, if you’re a shirt. That was one of my favorites, by the way.”

Imari grinned. “I like you better shirtless anyway.” He pulled out a leather vest and tossed it to him. “Here. Maybe this will offer some protection.”

He found one for himself and made for the door. Then he turned back. “Just a thought,” he said and found the shielder stone and put it on. “I’ve never tried it but I hear it works both ways. Maybe it’ll keep the screams out of my head while we hunt for Harbren.”

“And just how do you expect to find my brother? He’s not exactly gonna jump out from behind a corner and say, ‘Here I am. Take me into custody.’”

“True. But I’ve got the one thing Harbren apparently cares enough about to keep safe.”

“What’s that?”

Imari smiled a sad smile and brushed his thumb over Cas’s lips. “You.”

“I guess I would make good bait.” He tested the weight of his sword’s hilt in his hand.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Imari promised.

Cas looked at the shielder stone and chuckled to himself. *Yeah. My sociopath brother is on the loose, you’ve got a sword older than the colonies themselves and no fighter training. Safe? Not a chance in hell.*

Imari raised his eyebrows in question. “Ready?”

“Sure. Just let me gather these scrolls.” He headed for his desk. “I can’t take them with me, but I can hide them or—”

## *THE HEART OF A MAN*

The Commander caught him at the waist. “No time for that. We need to go.”

“But these are the new laws passed since I took the throne. I just need the Council’s seal and—”

“Cas? The Council’s probably dead. Forget the papers.” Imari clutched his hand.

*Shit.* All that work, all the maneuvering and deals made so his people would lead a better life. An end to slavery, voting rights for everyone... And all of it based on Imari’s rule. After a moment’s hesitation, he stopped pitying himself and thought about the people out there. The ones he needed to save.

“All right. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 7

They lowered themselves down through the windows by sheets still damp from their lovemaking. The streets were quiet. Too quiet. Imari removed the necklace, handed it to Cas, and listened. The wounded and those unharmed had gone into hiding. Not a bad idea. A few moans rang out, filling the empty roads with despair. Dust and ashes had settled near the ground to envelop the men from the knee down in a haze of swirling particles.

“Let’s get back inside the castle,” Imari whispered. “See if anyone is alive. Everyone out here is either dead, dying, or okay. Harbren’s not out here that I can sense.”

Cas tilted his head to the north. “There’s a hidden entrance

## *THE HEART OF A MAN*

up ahead.” He took the lead, and Imari followed. A tiny pump house would be their way in, but once inside, Imari hesitated.

“The valves were shut off,” he whispered.

“Someone probably shut ’em down once the bombs—”

“No.” Imari put his hand on the pipes and levers. “Harbren did this. What’s worth saving in the palace? Besides you?”

“Just symbolic things. Scepters, Council documents, stuff like that.”

Imari wasn’t too convinced that Harbren would risk showing his face for those kinds of things. But then again... “Come on.”

Cas led him down stairs and through a tight, winding tunnel.

“Watch your step.”

The smell of mold invaded his nostrils. Burned like hell. Imari’s dress boots slid on the slimy fungus coating the stone floor. He and Cas took turns muffling their sneezes until stairs appeared. Cas tried the door and entered the cellar. Harbren’s bombs hadn’t damaged the huge stockpile of wine.

A flurry of dove wings startled them both. “Shit!” Cas half-whispered, half-screamed. He backed Imari into a barrel. The white bird settled onto a rafter as another entered the broken cellar window high above at ground level.

“Shhh. It’s only a bird,” Imari whispered, his hands stroking Cas’s sweaty locks.

“Sounded just like a flutter.”

Imari stopped his stroking. “What the hell’s a flutter?”

“A homemade bomb. My brother’s got some strange

## THE HEART OF A MAN

hobbies...”

“No kidding. Torturing kids, building bombs—didn’t your parents know something was wrong early on?”

Cas headed up another set of stairs. “My parents did the best they could.”

They peeked into the kitchen. It was in shambles, but a basket of bread sat untouched on a work table. Imari grabbed a small loaf, then spotted the corner of something red and familiar.

“Hey, Cas. Help me lift this rock.”

They rolled it to the side, and Imari yanked out his personal chef’s knife roll. It had been a bitch to get through customs, but his chef insisted that it come along for the ride. “Thank the gods for stubborn cooks,” Imari muttered while unwrapping the bundle.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. Think you can do any damage with this?”

Imari tossed the small knife by the blade and Cas caught the handle. “Um, sure. If my opponent was a ripe *kevi* fruit that I needed to peel...”

“Here.” He worked it through the prince’s leather pocket so the blade poked out but the hilt was accessible. The fillet knife and a cleaver he kept for himself.

“Thanks. I think.”

Imari winked. “When this is all over, I’ll buy you a new pair to go with that shirt I ruined.”

Cas leaned in. For a kiss? No, for a warning. “Footsteps.” He pointed to the ceiling.

## THE HEART OF A MAN

They padded as quietly as their boots would let them through the debris. Part of a back staircase remained. He pushed Cas behind him. "One at a time," he whispered.

Cas jerked him back. "He's my brother. I go first."

Imari didn't sense that Harbren waited on the landing above, but he stepped back. The prince climbed stealthily upward and disappeared after a sharp turn to the right. Imari dashed up behind him. Stone crumbled to the landing below. The staircase swayed. He slowed his movements and held tight to the wall-mounted banister, praying it would hold. He didn't breathe until he reached the top.

Cas waited flat against the opposite wall. "Looters," he mouthed.

*Great.* Imari didn't want to waste his energy on these guys, or risk being heard by Harbren if they fought. Best to let the thieves have at it. But the efficient little bastards—well, they were little. They dumped their finds out a window, probably into the waiting arms of another young kid, and when they did, Cas snuck up behind the young boy giving orders to the ones below. His palm clamped down on the kid's mouth as he scooped him up and held him tight.

"Shhh. It's not safe to be here."

The child struggled. Cas clutched him tighter. "You understand me? The bombs..."

The boy rolled his eyes and nodded. He gestured to his accomplices, and they climbed down a gutter spout to the carnage below. Cas checked out the next room, the grand dining hall, and motioned him forward.

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“See that?” he whispered. “The central hall is untouched. He knew what he was doing when he bombed the palace. Let’s see what he took.”

Cas guided him through the blasted remains of the structure, up and down, through this doorway and that. They passed the dead bodies of servants, of princes and palace whores. No matter their station in life, they all died the same way. When Imari recognized the deep scarlet robes of Vaneck, he knelt. Cas noticed and double-backed to pay his respects as well.

“He and my dad...” *Dad*. Imari dropped to the floor and shook his head. “What an idiot I am.”

Cas rubbed his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I could reach out to my family. Hell, they probably already know something’s up. But should they come? I mean, they could help. Or they could get hurt.”

“It’s your call, Imari.”

“Give me a sec.”

Cas took his hand from his shoulder and backed off to the far side of what was left of the room. After clearing his head, Imari gave the distress call his best shot, shared every detail he could think of.

“Okay. I did what I could.”

Then he said a few words from the Turmian *Book of Mourning* while standing over Vaneck’s body and hoped it’d be ceremony enough.

## CHAPTER 8

*When the body is no more,  
Let my spirit rise and meet the Maker  
And my heart meet those I love...*

Cas watched Imari recite the words. The Commander's eyes were closed. Cas closed his as well, but his thoughts weren't on the dead royal hidden beneath the boulders.

He wondered who he'd meet after death, if there even was such a thing. His lovers? Hell, no. They never stuck around long enough for any kind of emotional commitment. And his parents, disappointed with their firstborn or maybe too preoccupied with his unnatural behaviors, hadn't shown Cas

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much in the way of love. He'd spent his childhood looking after a brother three years his senior. A brother obsessed with hurting small animals on the palace grounds...and children he could easily manipulate.

Cas shuddered while Imari continued his tender words. He glanced down at his hands. Clenched them over the hilt of his sword and willed the memories away. But they hung around to taunt him, or perhaps fuel his anger in preparation for the battle to come. *Such perfect hands...* He'd cringed when Imari had said those words. *Of course they're perfect*, he'd wanted to say. *When you've had your real ones blown to bits just so your brother could have a laugh at your expense...*

*Is it the yellow wire, Casvian? Or the red? Choose wisely. Remember that little rhyme I taught you?*

Yes, he'd remembered. He'd remembered perfectly. Cas had idolized his brother back then. He copied his expressions, even sang the little rhyme to get to sleep at night. Too bad Harbren had taught him the rhyme backward. He didn't recall much about the blast, but Cas's new hands were strong—the graft had taken well and looked natural enough—but they couldn't feel the same way his real ones had.

After the explosion, their parents kept the two sons separated. Tutor after tutor moved into the Temuri castle, but none of them stayed. Harbren needed more help than they could ever give.

“Casvian?”

Imari stood staring at him. When his eyes slipped down to his hands, Cas charged out of the room. He didn't need his

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sympathy. Not now.

What he needed at this moment was revenge.

Imari stormed out after him and made the mistake of catching him by the hand—and then released it, which only made things worse. When Imari caught it a second time, Cas tugged the synthetic appendage away.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Imari.

Cas gave him a smile as fake as his hands. “I’m sure we will after all this is done.” *You’ll think it’s fascinating at first, then you’ll think it’s a little weird. Can you feel this, you’ll ask. What about this? Then, you’ll wonder... how can you really love me without the real thing?*

“I won’t think those things, Cas. Really.”

Cas turned on him, and shoved him back with a palm to the chest. “And how the hell will I know if you do or not, Imari? I’ll never be inside your head, not like you are in mine.”

Imari took a step back. “Listen, now isn’t the time. Your brother—he’s close. I just picked up on his movements.” He passed Cas, their shoulders bumping as he moved. “So get your wits about you. He’s looking for you down there.” Imari flashed his sword toward the main entrance of the central hall and kept moving.

Cas felt paralyzed. He couldn’t follow, couldn’t feel. He heard Imari slow down. Stop and turn. His eyes shut to hide the tears.

Imari caught Cas’s wrist, then trailed his fingers lower. The artificial hand registered pressure over the mound of his

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palm. He had to look. Piercing green eyes locked onto his before the softness of Imari's hair wisped over the not-quite-dead parts of his wrist. The kiss was soft, too. And it lingered. For a moment, there was no Harbren, no chaos or death. There was only the supple press of lips on his skin, and it meant the world to him.

"Like I said, we'll talk. After all this is over—and you're ready." Imari took Cas's hand completely in his.

This time he let him keep it.

## CHAPTER 9

Climbing down through the rubble was a bitch. They had to fight for every toehold, and it was impossible to do it quietly; debris clattered to the piles below in a regular rhythm that would surely signal their arrival. When another crash sounded on the east end of the compound, Cas used the distraction to give up and drop to the ground. Imari worked his way to the side of a shelled-out building and slid down a gutter spout like the looting kids had. But Imari was quite a few stones heavier, and the spout broke free. He swung for a few seconds before it tore from the rooftop and dumped him onto the rocks with a dull, painful-sounding thud.

“You okay?” Cas helped him up, brushed him off, and

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checked for any injuries.

“I’m too old for this.”

Cas grinned. “No, you’re not. You just need to get out more. Exercise. You should take up breakers.” They both laughed quietly.

The polished stone door to the central hall hadn’t lost all its sheen in the explosion. But it hung from its hinges precariously, waving back and forth in the early evening breeze as if beckoning them in. Cas took a deep breath and headed forward. Imari, ever the protector, yanked him back by the waistband and forged ahead.

They were too close to Harbren to squabble, so Cas let him go. The main corridor was dark. Support beams creaked under their new loads and increased the tension filling Cas with dread. Imari stopped.

Harbren sat in the middle of the Council thrones. On his head was the ancient crown, the one used when only a single man ruled the colonies. Cas wanted to enter the room, but his feet refused. A cold sweat pilled over his body. Who knew how many booby traps lay in wait for their steps? He wanted to call out to Imari, to warn him.

“I’m surprised to see you, High Commander.” Harbren stood and gave a sweeping bow.

“And I, you.”

“When I heard you had arrived to save the day, I had to delay my coronation. Having all the Council here to blow to bits was a perfect opportunity. But when I got the news you’d shuttled in, well, I couldn’t believe my luck.”

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*So there was a method to his madness after all.* Cas shook his head. If only his parents had listened to him. Done something...

Harbren relaxed back into his seat. "What's the weather like on Turma this season? I want to be dressed appropriately when I meet my new constituents."

"How about something lightweight but formal? That's what most men wear for their burials these days."

Harbren chuckled. "And I suppose you're going to do me in with that old sword?"

"If I have to." Imari's next words were a mere hiss. "God knows you deserve it."

With a jaunty step, Harbren descended the dais and came close enough for Imari to strike. *Do it, dammit! What are you waiting for?* Something, obviously. Cas would've given anything to be psychic at that moment. To know what made Imari hold back. Any other man would've run Harbren through by now.

Cas could barely hear Imari's whispered words in the dark hall. "Even if you kill me, Turma won't be yours. You know that. One man taking the entire inner ring by force would never work."

His brother nodded. "You're absolutely right. I've thought about this for a long time. And—given your fondness for my dear brother—I think I've come up with a solution."

Harbren motioned for Cas to enter. He did so slowly, letting each footfall echo up to the vaulted ceiling before taking the next step. Maybe this would give him time to calm

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his frantic heartbeat or maybe come up with a plan. But in truth it only allowed his pores to pump out more sweat. It dampened his shirt and ran like a river down his back. The hilt of the sword would've swum in his hand like a fish had the flesh there been real. He gripped the weapon tighter and closed the distance between kith and kin.

Imari's jaw was set in a harsh, untrembling line. His eyes held a message, probably something like, *Get out!* But Cas needed to be here. Harbren placed his hands in his pockets and waited. Cas wanted to lay down his sword and beg for Imari's safety, but he knew better. Begging only gave Harbren more pleasure, made the torture that much sweeter.

When Harbren narrowed his eyes, Cas dragged his blade on the floor to signal submission or perhaps surrender. But it didn't stay there long; he tapped the sharp silver point on the tiled floor twice before slicing the air between his sibling's legs. His aim had been accurate, but Harbren had been quicker, and as he jumped back, one hand left his pocket. A cluster of metal went airborne. It looked like a child's toy, all shiny parts and colored string as it whirled the distance from Harbren's palm to Cas's body.

Imari must have sensed the attack, because he lunged forward to push Cas out of the way, but the device caught him as he tried to turn.

*Fuck!* The word reeled through Casvian's mind, but the pain wouldn't let him speak it. The curse continued to spiral around in his head as fiery spikes buried themselves in the muscle above his shoulder blade. Then the sharp pricks of hot

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agony went deeper, and he stumbled forward into Imari's arms.

*Oh, Cas. Oh, gods. I'm sorry. If only I'd been faster...* The words whirled through the coherent parts of his brain.

*It's okay,* he wanted to say. *I've dealt with worse. I'll be fine.*

But he didn't feel fine as the throbbing in his back began to beat in time with his pulse. The floor swayed. Opened up to him. He tumbled into a chasm of darkness and could only pray that Imari would meet his spirit in the afterlife should this be death.

## CHAPTER 10

“You know what they say, Imari. In politics, men must always watch their backs. So about this plan of mine...”

Imari wrapped another thin blanket around Casvian’s limp body, careful not to disturb the bomb. Cas lay on his stomach on a passenger bench, his body literally weeping with perspiration, even in the cold shuttle compartment. “I’ll do anything,” he gritted out. “Name your price. Just get this thing out of him.”

When he realized Harbren had a clutch bomb in mind for Cas, he’d wanted to take the hit. But the asshole’s aim was true. Imari did everything Harbren asked—dropped his knives, got onboard the shuttle, called his Lesser Commander and told

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her he'd chosen a new co-ruler... Imari agreed to it all, clinging to the faintest hope that it would save the prince's life. His Lesser Commander knew he'd been overwhelmed lately, and Imari had done a damned fine job of convincing her that he spoke the truth about having someone from the colonies partner with him to rule. Harbren had been a Council prince, after all, Imari told her, and this would bring stability to the outer reaches.

"This will strengthen our bonds with the colonies," he'd told her.

"I don't know about this, High Commander..."

"I'm not asking for your approval. I'm telling you to make preparations to receive your new boss."

That seemed to do the trick. He'd apologize later. Right now he had Casvian's ass to save. And his own.

The maniacal demeanor of their captor seemed to grow calm after his demands were met, but Imari refused to let his guard down. He watched Harbren return to the pilot's chair, prop his feet on the control panel, and relax—but not before removing a remote from his vest pocket. He glanced over his shoulder and lifted the small rectangle.

"One false move," he said, "and *boom!* We all go down." He dropped the remote on his lap. Imari gasped...and waited. No quiet click. No explosion.

*Careless bastard.* "Watch it!"

Harbren laughed and fiddled with a control on the console. The metallic screech of purge music filled the cabin. Dissonant beats vibrated through the craft and rattled Imari's

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eardrums.

He rolled his eyes. "I hate this shit," he mouthed.

Cas didn't respond. He seemed to stare right through him. Imari chanced a whisper. "Can you hear me?"

A faint moan escaped from Casvian's pale lips. Imari pressed the most tender of kisses to them, and felt relief wash through him when Cas responded in kind.

"He's gonna kill me anyway," Cas chocked out. "Take him. I still have a knife."

Imari shook his head. "Patience." He smiled. "In breakers, making the first move counts. Not so in a situation like this."

Cas worked a shaky hand out from the swaddle of blankets to caress his face. His fingers weren't soaked in sweat like the rest of him. Imari kissed the fingertips and closed his eyes as the hand moved lower, tracing the contours of his neck, dipping beneath the neckline of his shirt.

Imari's breathy laugh disturbed the dark locks plastered to Cas's cheek as the hand groped lower still. "What are you doing, silly?"

"Most people never know when their last chance for some sex will be. I know this is mine."

"Are you always this pessimistic, *chevuri*?"

Cas blinked twice at the Turmian term usually reserved for longtime lovers. Committed lovers. Imari had never spoken the word before. To anyone. He liked the way it rolled from his tongue, the way it forced his lips to curl into a smile at the end. He opened his mouth to say it again...

"Don't say things you don't mean, Imari. Even if it is the

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end.”

“Yes, you are a pessimist,” he teased.

“I’m a realist.” Cas closed his eyes again. “Touch me.”

Imari stilled his hand on Cas’s forehead. “I am touching you.”

“No. Touch me where it counts. Last chance, remember?” He shifted beneath the covers.

“You can’t be serious.”

“As serious as the bomb on my back.”

Common sense told Imari to soothe his sweet prince with words. To ply him with possible escape plans and thoughts of the future. But what if his plans fell through? He didn’t dare deny him. Not now. Not with a grisly death hovering over his lover’s shoulder waiting to destroy bones and... He shook his head. He didn’t want to think about it anymore.

He reached under the blankets. Unfastened Cas’s fly. He was only half hard, but that would change. Cas worked his knee upward to give Imari better access. Imari stroked the cock lightly, fumbling for its base and rubbing, rubbing... The shaft plumped. He worked his fingers up along the length to catch the rapidly expanding head. His thumb circled round the ridge of the spongy helmet, then found the sensitive hollow of the glans below. Cas sighed.

It was the sound of angels.

“You’re beautiful, my sweet prince.”

Cas smiled through his tears. “No one’s ever called me beautiful before.”

“Well, they should have.” *And when this is done, I promise*

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*to tell you every day.*

The cock in his hand thrust forward past his fingers to push against the bench cushions. Imari's fingers played the game of catch and go until Cas shivered and weakly worked his hips to come. When the thick wetness emerged to coat his hand, Imari cupped his own cock, his eyes darting back and forth from lover to captor. But fear and wariness couldn't overcome his lust. He stopped touching himself and gathered Cas's cum. He wanted to taste it again.

Cas watched from beneath heavy lids as Imari ran his tongue along the salty strands of white and drank him like wine.

"You're beautiful and delicious," he said.

"I can die a happy man now."

Imari reached back under the covers. "I already told you, you're not going to die." He found the knife Harbren had overlooked. Pulled it free. Hid it in his palm.

"So how did that rhyme go again?"

Cas frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The song Harbren taught you about the wire colors."

The prince didn't answer. He didn't breathe either. Not for what seemed like an eternity. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I want to disarm it. Your brother has a remote. I want this thing off you."

Cas shook his head so violently, Imari had to hold him still. "Careful."

"Even if I tell you and you do everything right, he may have sabotaged it, like he did back when..."

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“Shhh. Please let me help you.”

Cas groaned. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Trust me.”

The prince tried to take a deep breath, but the bomb dug deeper as his lungs expanded. Imari placed a hand on the other side of Cas’s back. “Easy. Shallow breaths.”

“‘Pick the yellow, lucky fellow. Pick the red, bang you’re dead.’ But he could’ve switched them, like he did before...”

“Um, what about the blue one?”

“There’s a blue one? Shit!”

Imari whispered, “I take it that’s a new development.”

Cas nodded.

“Maybe we should ask your brother for help?”

The prince’s eyes went wide. “Are you nuts?”

“I’m getting that way fast—if I’m not there already. Can you get up?”

“If it means saving my ass, then, yeah. But what are planning to do?”

Imari grinned. “I’m thinking your brother needs a little love about now.”

Cas gave him a funny look. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Me, too.” Imari helped him stand. “Even though your brother’s crazy, he doesn’t want to die, right?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Good.”

It was awkward, and it took forever, but they made it to the pilot’s seat, Harbren banging his head to the beat like a snot-

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nosed juvenile. Cas grabbed his brother as best he could in his feeble state. Harbren jerked away.

“What the fuck? Get off me!” He fumbled for the bomb’s remote, but stopped short of pressing the button. “Get back—or else!”

“Hit that and we both die,” said Cas. Harbren made an attempt to free himself from his brother’s deadly embrace, but Imari brought the small paring knife out of hiding.

“You can’t do any damage with that!” Harbren laughed, albeit nervously. “Amateur,” he muttered.

“Yeah, but it’ll do the trick.” Imari decided not to mention that neglecting to tie them up was pretty amateurish, too. “Hand me the remote.” Surprisingly Harbren did as asked. “Now, how do I get this off your brother?”

“Well, that depends.”

“Depends on what, asshole?”

Harbren shot him a glare.

Imari held the blade flat against Harbren’s cheek. “Look, I’m running low on patience at the moment. Stop stalling.”

“It depends on whether I want to live or die, Commander. Let’s say I tell you how to disarm my little toy. Cas is free, I still get the business end of your knife.”

“No.” Imari pulled the blade away slightly. “You’ll be incarcerated, but I’ll make sure you get the help you need.”

“So I get sent off to some place with every intention of making me better? I won’t get better. Ever. So many thoughts...”

Harbren’s hands lifted as if aiming for his temples. But

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they kept going and gathered speed. The tip of Imari's blade speared a knuckle right before Harbren's fingers grabbed a wire.

"Don't you dare."

Harbren's hands dropped into his lap. "Cut the red one," he whispered.

Imari's thigh pressed into Cas. He saw the prince's breathing quicken. Harbren's slowed. He was waiting.

Waiting for the end.

Imari steadied his hand and wove the sharp steel through the cluster of wires. "Here goes." He filtered out the turmoil running rampant in Cas's head and listened only for the quiet thoughts of a man ready for death. No, the red wire would kill them all. His blade caressed the length of the yellow wire. It didn't feel right either.

"Pick the yellow, lucky fellow," he whispered. "Pick the red, bang you're dead..."

Harbren looked up and grinned. "Ah, you caught me. It's the yellow."

*Yeah, right.* The blue wire beckoned. Practically called his name. He worked the knifepoint under its thickness and, with a rapid flick of the wrist, sliced through the wire. Lights flashed on the device, made the hair on Imari's entire body stand on end. He prayed he'd chosen wisely.

*When the body is no more...*

A few heartbeats later, the lights faded. The metal spikes withdrew from Cas's flesh. He shrieked in agony, but the only thing Imari could do was hold him. So he held him. He

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dropped the knife, wrapped his arms and soul around his *chevuri*, and told him everything would be okay.

The chunk of metal hit the shuttle floor with a thud. Harbren hit the floor as well, and caught the knife. But he didn't turn it on Cas or Imari. He plunged the blade into his throat and jerked the handle to the right, severing his windpipe and slicing through tissue. A sheet of red stained the front of his shirt and sprayed out over his body.

Imari was ready to close his eyes in sympathy—until he spotted the remote in Harbren's other hand.

*Oh, shit!* Harbren's finger was searching for the button, and missing...missing. But it would hit eventually. The bastard's life force ebbed from his body, but not before a wicked grin crossed his lips. A button had been pushed. The bomb's lights flickered to life.

Imari grabbed Cas by the waistband and scrambled on hands and knees to the rear of the shuttle. *Please let there be a pod. Please...*

He relaxed enough to inhale when he spotted it, but could they reach it in time? He shoved Cas inside and fired up the controls. Harbren had fallen over, his thumb still wavering over the remote.

He pounded on the console. "Come on! Come on, dammit!"

Cas pulled himself into a chair and surveyed the thruster levels. "Almost there." He weakly grabbed Imari's arm. "It'll be okay."

The pod's thrusters finally roared into action, and the

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disembark warning sounded throughout the shuttle. As the pod pushed away from the main craft, a blast rocked their tiny ship and accelerated their departure. Hopefully the pod had missed the brunt of the explosion.

Cas looked back through the small pod window, his face briefly colored by the red flames before the lack of atmosphere squelched the fire. Imari watched the emotions on his lover's face. He saw the relief and the sadness. Cas met his gaze. "It's over."

Imari walked to him and bent down. Pulled him into the circle of his arms once again.

"That Turmian prayer you said when you found Vaneck..."

Imari clutched him tighter and said the words Cas needed to hear.

## CHAPTER 11

“Just how bad is it?”

Imari winced at the question and double-checked the levels on the pod console. “You sure you want to know?” He continued to study the dials as his lover pressed into him from behind. “We have enough air for at least another day. No communication system, no navigation, no SOS. The blast did a lot of damage. Speaking of damage, how’s your back?”

He turned around. Cas reached over his bare shoulder for the bandage, and Imari helped. “The swelling’s down, but it’s still sore.” He gave his arm a little stretch and wrapped it around Imari’s neck to draw him closer.

Their foreheads touched. That’s when he noticed fresh

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tears on Cas's cheeks.

"It'll be okay, babe."

The look in Cas's eyes was unbearable. "Everything we went through, and we're still not safe."

"Shhh. It'll be okay. I swear it. I've got a feeling..."

Cas tilted his head. "Don't hold out on me. If you know something—"

"If I know something, I'll tell you."

"The only thing I know for sure is that I've got another shot at one last orgasm."

Imari could tell he was being sarcastic, but he couldn't resist. "Then what are you waiting for?" He grinned and gave Cas's bottom a playful tap. "Get that tight ass in the bunk."

The tiny bunk groaned under the weight of the two men, but they didn't care. Once their cocks were free of clothing, Imari and Cas lay on their sides and let loose their own groans. The wet slits of their cockheads kissed. Taut balls brushed against each other, the soft pouches of skin gently bumping.

"Are you okay to be on your back?" asked Imari.

"I think so. If I don't move."

"Then don't move."

Cas laughed. "The naughty gleam in your eyes tells me that's going to be tough to do."

"Don't worry, you'll enjoy it. I promise." He cupped Cas's crotch. "Now stop stalling and roll over."

When Cas did, Imari savored every bit of flesh before him. He painted the dark nipples wet with his tongue, then suckled them and tugged at each one tenderly with his teeth. He

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followed the curve of ribs with fingers and worshipped the supple skin above hips. His teeth rasped over the tender insides of thighs. Cas gasped in pleasure and surprise. The sound was music to Imari's ears, and his hands burrowed under Cas, seeking the muscular ass hidden from his view. His nails dug into the cheeks, scraped the surface of them until Cas cried out louder.

*More. Louder. I want to hear you to scream my name.*

Imari's mouth fed on his shoulder, little nibbles at first, then sinking deeper to get a reaction. His tongue laved the places he'd nipped before tracing a path to a nipple, the hard brown bead like a berry he needed to taste. He raked the sides of it with the edge of his teeth, captured the whole of it, his tongue flicking away at the tip. Cas's hips rolled. Imari lifted his head enough to say, "No moving," then rubbed his unshaven jaw into the sensitive nub. Cas moaned. His hips lifted for contact.

"You give me no choice," Imari said with a chuckle. He pulled out a hand from beneath the prince's ass and whirled a finger through the puddle of pre-cum drenching the snake tattoo. Then he worked himself between Cas's legs and spread him wide. The heat of his own cock intensified as their two shafts met, dueled, then became crushed beneath his weight when he bent low for a kiss. His wet finger sought the opening buried between Cas's firm ass cheeks. The small entrance contracted at his touch.

After kissing his way down to Cas's cock, Imari kissed that as well, then caught the bobbing head between his lips.

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His tongue lapped at the dripping head, gathered the moisture, and glided over ridges and veins. He went deeper, took it to the back of his throat, then pressed his finger into the hot, tight sheath of Casvian's ass.

This time, when Cas tried to writhe, Imari held him in place with the one finger. He released the cock filling his mouth. "You're not going anywhere now."

"I don't want to be any place but here."

Imari spun his finger around in a slow tease until it made contact with the small gland deep inside. He crooked his finger to get at it better, to push it gently and rub while the shaft of Cas's cock got even harder. It pulsed with every motion of Imari's fingertip, the shiny skin of the head becoming darker as the moments passed. Pre-cum emerged from the slit and pooled there before plunging down one side to slick his groin. Imari licked the wetness with only the point of his tongue, going up and back down in painfully slow strokes.

"You're killing me..."

He twisted his head to grasp Cas's length with his teeth, then nudged the erection with his rough cheek. "Want me to stop?"

"Hell no." Cas rose up on his elbows and spread his legs wider. "I want you inside me." He gathered up the mess they'd made on his abdomen and reached for Imari.

The slick sweep of fingers over Imari's cock made him shudder. "Easy. I'm about to explode." He removed his finger from Cas's ass.

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Cas's hand gripped him hard and gave an unhurried yank from base to head. Imari collapsed onto his lover, dizzy with lust. When his cockhead invaded the crevice behind Cas's sac, Imari pulled back and waited for the throbbing to subside.

"Tease," Cas whispered.

Imari laughed and rocked his hips forward. The seeping tip of his penis made contact with pure heat. Cas opened for him, each contraction of his rectum welcoming him in. Inviting him deeper.

He pushed slowly and savored the velvety friction of Cas's walls. The only thing missing was a kiss. He bent low and captured lips and tongue, breath and sighs. Cas clenched down on Imari's cock, the muscles holding him still, locking him in place. He fumbled for Cas, strangled his dick with fervent, sloppy motions until the prince bucked beneath him. Cas hooked his legs around Imari's ass and thighs, hungrily inching more cock up his greedy hole.

Imari surged forward, gave him all he had, and opened up to the sensations surrounding him. His cock, encased in a ring of heat. His heartbeat, rattling his throat and eyeballs and groin. Mind reeling, teeth colliding with Casvian's...he drove his tongue deeper into the royal's sweet liquid mouth hoping to touch his soul.

Cas shivered, then exploded. He filled Imari's hand and kept going, bathing their chests in splashes of white. "Fill me," he moaned. "I want a flood." And Imari gave it to him, pumping furiously as Cas's ass relaxed, grew supple and let him slam into the tightness. Stretching it. Becoming one with

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it. He emptied his shaft into the scorching hot tunnel of muscle and felt himself slipping. Slipping into Cas's sweat-soaked arms. Into a place he never wanted to leave.

\* \* \*

“Imari?”

Was he dreaming? His father's voice was faint, but it was real. Imari sat up in the bunk and realized where he was.

“Hey, Dad! You have no idea how happy I am to hear your voice. Where are you?”

“Close enough to haul you in. But I'm sensing that you may not be ready to be rescued. Am I reading you right?”

Imari chuckled. “Have you ever read me wrong?”

“Nope. Not that I know of. Sometimes having a bunch of telepaths in the family sucks, doesn't it? No privacy at all.”

“It can't suck but so much—it's saving my ass right about now.” Imari glanced down at Cas. “But as much as I'd love to see you, I would like a little privacy at the moment. We've got about ten hours of life support left...”

“No problem, kiddo.” His dad paused for a few moments before adding, “So you found the one?”

He snuggled back down with Cas and stroked his hair. “Yes, Dad. His name is Cas. I hope you like him. You're not upset, are you?”

His father paused. Imari waited for him to pass judgment on his choice of lovers. Seconds stretched out into eons.

“Son, I don't care if you seek the heart of a woman or the heart of a man. I just want your happiness. If he's the one,

## THE HEART OF A MAN

then I'm sure I'll like him. We all will."

"Thanks, Dad."

"No problem. See you in a few hours, son."

Imari smiled and nuzzled his nose into Cas's ear. "Hey, sleepyhead. A ship is trailing us. We're going to make it."

He gave a groggy smile. "After this is done I want a vacation."

*Me, too.* The thought of returning to his role as leader of the free realms began to fill him with dismay. But when he ran his fingers over the stubbly flesh of Cas's jaw, his smooth chest, and then lower to the where the hair around his lover's cock was growing in, he realized maybe he wouldn't worry so much with the man beside him in his life. Maybe the burdens of his many responsibilities would seem lighter.

For once, he was looking forward to the future—and to helping the colonies get back up on their feet after the loss of so many leaders. Cas stirred and nestled deeper into the warmth their bodies were giving off.

Imari had a feeling Cas would be the one shouldering more responsibility in the days to come: rebuilding the Council, making his people feel safe while mourning the death of his brother...

"I can't bear the burdens of the days to come for you, but I promise to help you every step of the way," he whispered.

Cas didn't open his eyes. "I know, Imari."

## CHAPTER 12

“Ready?”

Cas straightened his coronation robe and risked a quick kiss to Imari’s smiling lips while the valet behind him fluffed the flowing amber train.

“I think so.” He grabbed Imari’s hand. “With you by my side.”

“I’ll only be here every other month at first. Until my nephew gets the hang of things on Turma.”

“And then?”

Imari grinned. “And then I’m all yours.”

The valet cleared his throat and began to make his exit after an elegant bow. “Should you need me, Your

## *THE HEART OF A MAN*

Highness...”

Casvian nodded to the man, then turned back to Imari. “All mine, eh? To do with you whatever pleases me?” When Imari nodded, Cas opened his arms wide. Imari stepped into the embrace. “Oh, the things I want to do to my new ambassador. Wicked, wicked things.” His lips sought his lover’s neck. The scent of his cologne roused his senses...and his cock.

Imari stepped back. “But first you have an empire to rebuild.” A serious note entered his voice, but a smile remained in his words. “The colonists love your new laws. They’re looking to you to be everything the Council wasn’t. That’s an awesome responsibility.” He kissed his forehead. “But you’re up to the challenge.” Then he pressed a light peck onto his cheek. “And you’ll make an awesome king.”

“Now I’m ready,” Cas whispered.

They shared one last kiss before Imari opened the door. “To the future of the colonies.”

Cas passed by, his next words both a whisper and a promise. “And to our own.”

## LAURA BACCHI

Laura Bacchi is an award-winning author of erotic romance who can usually be found at the computer maniacally typing out plots before they evaporate from her brain or bribing the muses to please, please come back so she can finish what she starts. When she's not writing, she's busy coaxing her husband into assisting with any "research" she may need to conduct.

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\* \* \*

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