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DIPLOMATIC  
RELATIONS  
LYNDI LAMONT

## ALLIANCE: DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

...Shayan's hands found their way to Rulik's hips, then his buttocks, pulling their lower bodies close. Rulik rubbed his groin, feeling Shayan's erection, as large as his own.

"Clothes...off," he gasped between kisses.

Shayan fumbled with the buttons of his tunic as Rulik toed off his shoes, glad he hadn't worn his boots tonight. His shirt and pants followed the tunic, hurriedly tossed over the back of a chair. Then he turned his attention to Shayan, slowly undoing the buttons of his white linen suit jacket and shirt. He pushed off the clothes, running his hands over Shayan's broad shoulders and down his smooth brown chest.

Rulik paused to kiss his way back up to Shayan's mouth, up the corded column of his neck, along his jaw, bristly with short black hairs, to his sensual mouth. As they kissed, Shayan ran his hands over Rulik's sides, back and buttocks, lingering in the sensitive area above his anus. He groaned into Shayan's mouth and pressed his groin against the crisp linen of his pants, enjoying the rasping sensation.

Breaking the kiss, Rulik dropped to his knees, unbuttoned Shayan's pants, and pushed them to the floor. His cock stood out proudly, long and slender as the man himself. Rulik took it in his hands, eliciting a groan from Shayan.

"Magnificent," Rulik whispered. "I wonder if it tastes as good as it looks..."

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# ALLIANCE: DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

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BY

LYNDI LAMONT

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## DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

This book is a work of fiction.

All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

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*Dedicated to the owners and senior staff  
at Amber Quill Press for giving me the freedom to leave my  
comfort zone and follow my muse into new areas.  
You guys are the best!*

*And to Barbara Karmazin whose Alien Sexuality  
class provided the inspiration for this story.  
Any mistakes I've made are my own.*

# CHAPTER 1

“Captain Rulik, I’m receiving a distress call,” Ensign Vavro said. “It appears to be coming from Mhajavi space.”

Rulik clenched his fists. “Those damned raiders.” He turned to his navigation officer. “Ensign Kovar, plot a course to intercept.”

Kovar hesitated, but at Rulik’s glare, he bent over the nav console, his fingers flying over the controls.

“That will take us into Mhajavi territory,” Behrin, his second-in-command, pointed out with a frown. “A violation of interplanetary law isn’t a very good way to begin an alliance.”

Rulik felt a muscle twitch in his jaw. “I know. But letting one of their ships be captured by raiders is no better,

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especially if they learn we received their distress call and did nothing.”

“It would make clear the need for a military alliance.”

“That’ll be evident either way. My order stands. I won’t stand idly by and watch another civilian ship attacked. Your objections are noted for the record, Behrin, but we will proceed. I want you at weapons.”

Behrin grinned and moved to the fire control console. “Good! Let’s go get the bastards.”

Rulik threw back his head and laughed. “Ensign Kovar, is that course plotted in?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Vavro, signal Captain Zadok in the *Bodul* to follow us in, at maximum speed. And signal the Mhajavi ship that we’re on our way.”

“Yes, sir,” Vavro said.

“Proceed at top speed,” Rulik ordered.

As they sped through the blackness of space, he paced the deck of the *Borivoy*. Too many ships—both Ziganese and Mhajavi—had been lost to the raiders. If he got in trouble for violating Mhajavi space, then so be it. It would be worth the trouble if he saved one ship.

This alliance had been his idea, one reluctantly embraced by his father. Trade with Mhajav began six years ago after they threw off the dictator who had ruled their world for nearly fifteen years. While Havir was in power, Rulik’s father had refused to have any kind of relations with Mhajav, and the borders of Ziganese space were diligently protected. As long



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as the raiders stayed on the other side of the border, Zigan was safe. Until his father's enemies had joined forces with the Mhajavi raiders. Now no merchant ship was safe.

If this attempt at an alliance failed, it would be but one more incident in the string of failures in Rulik's life. He'd long ago given up any hope of pleasing his father, but a successful outcome of the upcoming diplomatic talks would go a long way toward assuaging his bruised ego.

He caught Behrin's eye and stopped pacing, forcing himself to relax in his captain's chair. His agitation would do the crew no good, especially since it had nothing to do with the present situation. His ship was more than a match for anything the raiders possessed, preying as they did on commercial shipping.

"Captain?" Vavro's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes, ensign?"

"You're the only one I know who has been to Mhajav. Are the rumors true?"

Rulik grinned. "What rumors?" As if he didn't know.

Vavro's fair face flushed slightly. "About the women, sir. Are they as...amazing as I've heard?"

"From what I saw, they're quite lovely, but I won't comment on the rumors of their sexual responsiveness." How could he when he'd stayed at a men-only resort? "But I'm glad you brought up the subject."

He signaled for a ship-wide communication. "This is the captain speaking. We're presently on course to answer a distress call from a Mhajavi ship being attacked by raiders.

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We may be the first crew to come face to face with our new prospective partners. I expect every man to be on his best behavior and to show the Mhajavi the respect they deserve. Especially the women.

“I take full responsibility for our incursion into Mhajavi space. But if any man on this ship is the cause of an interplanetary incident, he will answer to me.”

When the men on the bridge crew nodded, Rulik ended the communication.

\* \* \*

Shayan stood by the door of the captain's office on the *Anila* and studied the faces of the three women sitting around the conference table. Captain Chaitani appeared worried, the wrinkles around her mouth more pronounced than usual. She'd run her hand through her short, graying hair several times in the last few minutes. He'd never seen her so discomposed.

His boss, Arpana Toryl, and her assistant, Fala, sat across from the captain. As their Protector, it was up to him to keep them safe. Not an easy job where Arpana was concerned. She maintained her usual composure, her face set in a beautiful mask. What she was thinking was anyone's guess. Fala, on the other hand, looked terrified. She glanced nervously at him, fear apparent in her large green eyes, and he sent her a reassuring smile. He wanted to go to her, draw her into his arms and comfort her, but this was not the place. Since they'd become lovers, he'd learned too well the fears and insecurities

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she normally hid so well under her cheerful smile and loving nature.

“The raiders are closing more quickly than I anticipated,” Captain Chaitani said.

Shayan tensed, knowing what was coming. If he knew his boss, she’d never agree to run.

“It’s time for you to activate the shuttle,” Chaitani said. “The cloaking device will protect you from the raiders. You should be able to navigate safely to Ziganese territory, while I decoy the raiders in another direction,” Chaitani concluded.

“It’s a good idea, Arpana,” Shayan urged. “You’re too valuable a prize for the raiders.”

Arpana tossed her mane of black hair, her brown eyes flashing. “I am not a coward to run at the first sign of a fight. Can we not defeat them?”

The older woman bristled. “The *Anila* is a science ship. Our defense capabilities are minimal. This is why I wished to wait for the fleet to be assembled.”

Arpana had the good grace to look embarrassed. “And I insisted we leave early, just to satisfy my impatience to reach Zigan as soon as possible. Forgive me.”

Chaitani waved off her apology. “There’s no time to waste. You must go now.” She turned to Shayan. “You are qualified to pilot the craft, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he answered tersely.

He was interrupted by a voice over the intercom. “Captain Chaitani, we’re receiving a response to our distress signal.”

Chaitani stood and headed for the door. “On my way.”

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Shayan and the other two women trailed after her to the bridge of the *Anila*. The crew went about their work efficiently, but with worried expressions. He silently damned Arpana for her high-handed manner and headstrong ways.

“Report,” Chaitani demanded.

Ensign Yamal looked up from the communications console. “The message is from a Ziganese military battle cruiser. We’re tracking a smaller vessel as well.”

“Contact them immediately,” Chaitani ordered. “I can’t imagine what Ziganese war ships are doing in our territory.”

“Do you think they’ve been hijacked by raiders?” Shayan asked. “They have become bolder of late.”

“I hope not. We’ve heard of no such incidents.”

“A link has been established. Shall I put it on speaker?” Yamal reported.

Chaitani nodded.

“This is Captain Rulik of the Ziganese vessel *Borivoy*,” a voice announced in Ziganese.

The deep masculine tone sent a shiver down Shayan’s spine. Like many Mhajavi, he was bisexual, but, in truth, he preferred men. He wondered what this Rulik looked like. The Ziganese were as fair as the Mhajavi were dark, so his skin would be pale, perhaps with a ruddy tone, his eyes some variety of blue, and his hair blond or reddish in tone. Shayan’s heart rate increased with anticipation.

“Greetings, Captain Rulik,” Chaitani answered in the same language, mandatory for all Mhajavi venturing into space. “This is Chaitani of the science ship *Anila*. What are you

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doing in our space?”

There was a deep chuckle, sending more shivers through Shayan. “If all goes well, saving your hides. How long can you hold out?”

Just then a blast shook the ship. The raiders were within firing range.

“Evasive action,” Chaitani ordered, set her mouth in a grim line. “Captain Rulik, with rescue at hand, we will hold out as long as possible. If we do not survive, promise me you will fry the bastards.”

Rulik’s laugh had a reckless quality to it. “With pleasure. But I hope it won’t come to that. Over and out.”

At Chaitani’s nod, Shayan urged Arpana and Fala off the bridge. “Come on, ladies, time to head for the shuttle.”

“Is that necessary?” Arpana asked.

“Yes,” Shayan said shortly, his hand on her arm. “As I said before, you’re too valuable a prize to lose to the raiders. Havar would love to get his hands on another *ujela*.”

Arpana’s hand went to her abdomen where she carried the *ujela* symbiont, an ancient being full of wisdom and information. “You’re right, of course. It’s my fault we’re in this situation. But I have a good feeling about this Captain Rulik.”

“So do I,” Shayan said. If they survived the attack, he had every intention of meeting Captain Rulik. And if anything interesting came of their meeting, so much the better.

\* \* \*

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By the time the *Borivoy* arrived, the Mhajavi science ship was dead in space. Rulik ordered Zadok to pursue the raiders in his faster ship, the *Bodil*, then opened a communications link with the *Anila*.

When Captain Chaitani answered, she sounded distracted. “Chaitani here. We have sustained considerable damage to the ship, but casualties are minor.”

“Glad to hear the latter,” Rulik replied. “When do you think you can be underway again?”

“Not for two days. There has been extensive damage to our engines.”

Rulik swore under his breath.

“What was that, Captain Rulik? Please repeat.”

“Nothing of import. I’m afraid I can’t delay for two more days. My presence is required at the diplomatic talks day after tomorrow.”

Chaitani chuckled. “You are not the only one. We carry three members of the Mhajavi delegation, including Arpana Toryl, our official historian who is to document the talks.”

“What?” Rulik roared. “Why was she not with the main fleet?”

“You will have to ask her that yourself, captain. She is here over my objections. She can be very persuasive.”

“One moment, captain.” Rulik closed the channel and turned to Ensign Vavro. “Signal Captain Zadok and tell him to halt pursuit and return to this position.”

Vavro’s eyebrows flew up. “He won’t like that, sir.”

“Just pass on the order, ensign.”

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“Yes, sir.”

Rulik reopened the channel to the *Anila*. “Captain Chaitani, please tell Arpana Teryl and the other members of the delegation to prepare to transport to this vessel. I’ll send a shuttle.”

“No need...ours is undamaged, and her protector is a qualified pilot. We can pick up our shuttle when we arrive on Zigan. There will be three on board, two women, one man.”

“Excellent. I look forward to meeting them. Good luck, Captain.” He closed the link, only to find an infuriated Captain Zadok waiting on another frequency.

“Calm down, Zadok. I know you’d rather go chasing raiders, but we have a diplomatic crisis here.” Rulik explained the situation, then continued, “I need you to stay and guard the *Anila* while her crew makes repairs. Give the Mhajavi any assistance possible to speed up the process.”

“Yes, sir,” Zadok bit off.

Rulik managed to contain his amusement. He’d been in Zadok’s position a few years ago, in command of his own vessel, but not of his destiny. The younger man was competent and ambitious and would go far.

Rulik stood. “Behrin, I’ll go meet our guests. Make sure the guest cabin is ready to accommodate two females, and our male guest can use your quarters. You’ll be bunking with me until we reach Zigan. And tell the cook to prepare a meal fit for a diplomat. I expect all officers not on duty to be there to welcome our guests.”

“Yes, sir,” Behrin said.

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As he left the bridge, Rulik noticed the smile of anticipation on Ensign Vavro's face. In truth, Rulik was just as excited to be meeting the Mhajavi in a less formal setting. He hoped something good came of this for his world, if not for him personally.

\* \* \*

Rulik waited impatiently in the enclosed viewing area overlooking the shuttle bay. It was taking longer than he'd anticipated for the Mhajavi delegates to arrive. Then he remembered they'd have to pack up everything needed for the talks, and relaxed. From the little he'd already heard of Arpana, he doubted she traveled light. She sounded spoiled and headstrong, and he reminded himself to be at his diplomatic best, even if she tried his patience.

He was anxious to meet all of them. From his one brief trip to their planet, he knew the Mhajavi were darkly beautiful and exotic looking next to the fair Ziganese. Outwardly, the two peoples appeared much the same, except for their coloring, but there were differences, both internally and, once the clothes came off, externally. Like the almost complete absence of body hair below the neck.

He grinned. That was one of the "rumors" Vavro had alluded to, that Mhajavi women lacked pubic hair. He'd been unable to verify it personally, but he'd seen pictures. Not that he was personally interested in investigating that particular phenomenon. He'd known from an early age he was only attracted to other men. Unfortunately, few other Ziganese men



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shared his predilection.

The Mhajavi were much more open about alternative sexuality, as he'd learned to his delight when he was there. That fact was one unstated reason why he'd suggested a formal alliance between the two worlds and volunteered to act as liaison to the Mhajavi military. Perhaps there he'd find someone he could truly care for to fill the hole in his heart. On Mhajav, two men could even marry, something that would probably never be allowed on his home world.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of the shuttle. Rulik watched, with approval, as the pilot maneuvered it into the shuttle bay with expert competence. When the outer doors were completely closed and the oxygen level restored, he entered the bay and stood by the door to the shuttle.

When it opened, a dark beauty stepped out. She was dressed in traditional costume. A short blouse fit snugly over her impressive breasts and a loose, flowing skirt in shades of deep purple swirled to her ankles. She had a mane of black hair, dark eyes and golden-brown skin.

"Arpana Toryl?" he asked.

She smiled and held out a slim hand. "Yes, and you must be Captain Rulik," she said in perfect, if slightly accented and formal, Ziganese.

He took her hand in his and bowed over it, grateful he would not have to attempt to speak her language. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"The pleasure is mine." Her voice was husky as her gaze roved over his body.

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Rulik kept his smile impersonal. She would cut a swath through his crew, of that he had no doubt. Vavro wouldn't have a chance with this one.

"You speak my language very well," he said. "My Mhajavi is rusty, at best."

She smiled. "There is no need to worry, captain. Every member of our delegation speaks your language fluently."

Another woman, dressed in green, stepped out hesitantly. She was taller and fuller figured with streaked, dark brown hair and lovely green eyes.

"Ah, there you are, Fala," Arpana said. "This is our rescuer, Captain Rulik."

He held out his hand and Fala grasped it in both of hers.

"Oh, captain, I cannot tell you how pleased I am to meet you. If you had not come to our rescue..."

He felt a shudder pass through her, and he squeezed her hands before releasing them. "It was my pleasure. Even though I did have to break interplanetary law to do so." He glanced at Arpana to see her reaction.

"Do not worry, captain," she said with a wave of her hand. "I will see you suffer no consequences. This episode was a perfect example of why we need an alliance. I must thank you for making this point clearer than ever. I doubt there will be any objections now."

Rulik eyed her, wondering if she'd set herself up as a target deliberately. *Surely not.* He opened his mouth to ask why she was on the science vessel when a figure dressed all in black stepped out of the shuttle. Rulik closed his mouth and

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stared at the man who'd just emerged. Tall and slender, with black curly hair and deep dark eyes, he was quite probably the handsomest man Rulik had ever seen. Dimly, he heard Arpana introduce the man as Shayan.

"You must be the pilot," Rulik stammered. "I was impressed by the way you maneuvered the shuttle into a strange bay." He held out his hand.

Shayan gripped Rulik's lower arm in the Mhajavi fashion, and Rulik did the same. Hands and arms clasped, Rulik looked into Shayan's liquid brown eyes and saw curiosity and interest radiating there. Oh, gods, why had he ordered Behrin to vacate his cabin? If not, he'd be bunking with this magnificent stranger, and who knew what might happen.

"Welcome to the *Borivoy*," he managed to say as he let go of the stranger's arm.

"Thank you. For the rescue and the offer to convey us to the talks. It would have been disastrous had Arpana not arrived on time," he added, throwing her a critical glance.

She glared back at him with a pout to her full lips.

*Oh, yes, this is a lady well used to getting her way.*

"We have one guest cabin on board for you and Fala," he said to her. "My lieutenant has offered his cabin to Shayan. He'll be bunking in with me."

"I hate to throw a man out of his usual berth," Shayan said. "I will be happy to bunk down anywhere."

"Shayan can share with us," Arpana said, casting him a flirtatious glance. "It would not be the first time."

"As you wish," Rulik replied, disappointed by her

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suggestion. "Please allow me to escort you to your quarters. My men will bring your things later."

He held out his arm. When she'd placed her hand in the crook of his elbow, he led her out the door and into the corridor. Shayan and Fala fell into step after them.

As they walked, he asked quietly, "What were you doing on the *Anila*? Weren't you aware of the danger of traveling without an escort vessel?"

"Of course I was aware of the danger, but most ships arrive at their destinations with no trouble."

"Yes, and for a private citizen, the odds are worth taking the risk. But you're an important member of your government."

"And I should not have taken the chance. Yes, I realize that now, captain. What is it they say on your world? After sight is perfect." Her tone told him the subject was closed.

"Something like that," he said. "You may not realize this, but the alliance was my idea."

"Yours, captain? I did not think starship captains had the ear of the king."

"Ormin is my father," he said.

"Ah, so you are his heir?"

"No, merely one of the spares," he retorted, with a grin.

"Yes, I had heard the king has more than one son."

"The early years of my father's reign were filled with strife, and he feared his enemies would attack him through his eldest son. He made certain he had others to take the place of Myrek, my oldest brother, should something happen to him."

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“Your father sounds like a wise and prudent man.”

“Yes, if a bit old-fashioned.” It had taken more than a bit of persuasion to convince Ormin this alliance was a good idea. Had Myrek not sided with Rulik, he doubted the king would have agreed. But Myrek had always been the favored son, for more reasons than simply being the heir.

“I look forward to meeting your father,” Arpana said.

Rulik grinned at her. “And I know he’ll be delighted to meet you. He’s always had an eye for beautiful women.”

She smiled back. “Are you flirting with me, captain?”

“Just stating the obvious,” Rulik replied, guiding her around a corner. “Your quarters are just down this corridor.”

When they arrived at the guest quarters, Shayan gently moved Arpana aside and went in to inspect the main chamber and lay. When he nodded his approval, Arpana and Fala entered, followed by Rulik. The large cabin had two double-sized berths, one separated by a screen for added privacy.

“Very nice,” Arpana murmured. “I did not expect such spacious accommodations on a battleship.”

“The *Borivoy* is one of the largest ships in our fleet.”

“What does it mean, *Borivoy*?” Fala asked.

“Fighting warrior.”

“How fitting for you,” Arpana replied. “I think you like a good fight, captain.”

“I’ve never walked away from one,” Rulik replied, “but I prefer peace.”

“As do we all,” Fala said fervently.

“Indeed,” Shayan echoed.

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"I'll leave you now to settle in," Rulik said. "I'd like you to join me and some of my officers for dinner tonight. Someone will come to escort you."

"Thank you. Dinner sounds delightful," Arpana replied.

"May we bring some Mhajavi delicacies?" Fala asked.

"Of course. I look forward to tasting them." The only delicacy Rulik was truly interested in tasting was Shayan's mouth—and his cock—but he kept that to himself. "Until later."

He bowed and left the room, full of anticipation for the evening.

\* \* \*

Shayan watched Rulik leave the cabin, enjoying the sway of his tight buttocks. The captain was a fine specimen of Ziganese manhood. Fair-skinned, with light auburn hair, bright blue eyes and a lean, sculpted body.

"You can stop drooling now," Fala said dryly. "Both of you."

Shayan turned to see Arpana staring at the door. "Did you find him attractive?"

She shrugged. "Of course. He is very nice to look at, but also very strong-willed."

Shayan relaxed. "I sensed that, too. I think he is not easily manipulated. Not at all your usual style."

She tossed her head. "I like a challenge now and then. Otherwise, I would have fired you long ago."

"Please," Fala begged, "may we have peace between us?"

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It's been a difficult day."

"So it has." Shayan went to Fala's side and drew her into his arms.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his shoulder, her soft curves molded to his body. Ordinarily he would enjoy the sensation, but right now he couldn't take his mind off the handsome captain. Not for the first time he regretted allowing himself to get so close to her. It wasn't that he didn't care for her, but she had needs he'd been unable to satisfy. He'd thought about breaking off their relationship, but feared hurting her.

"You are so tense," he murmured as he kneaded the tense muscles of her back.

"With good reason," Fala said.

"True," Shayan murmured, glancing at Arpana over Fala's shoulder.

Arpana threw him an amused smile and moved to examine herself in the mirror.

*She has nerves of steel, that one.* Shayan had to give her credit for that. At least she didn't complain when her impulsiveness led them into difficult situations.

When someone knocked on the door, Fala pulled away and smiled at him. "That must be our luggage. I'd better unpack. Arpana will want to dress up for dinner, won't you?"

"Yes, of course," Arpana replied quietly.

While Fala dealt with their luggage, Shayan wandered over to where Arpana stood in front of the mirror. "You look fine."

She grimaced at him. "Men have no sense of fashion."

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“It’s just dinner on a battleship, Arpana, not a state function. Or are you trying to impress the good captain?”

She shrugged and smiled. “Perhaps. As I said, I do like a challenge.”

“You may have met your match this time,” Shayan warned.

“Or perhaps you have. He seemed quite unsettled when he first saw you.” She slanted a glance at him. “Of course, it would be unusual for a Ziganese male to prefer his own sex, but it is not unheard of. Would that please you?”

“You know it would,” Shayan said in a low voice. “But I have no wish to hurt Fala.”

“Don’t worry about Fala. If you have a chance with the captain, take it. If not, I will.” The smile curving her lips was blatantly sensual. “Either way, one of us will give this Rulik a night to remember.”

Shayan stared as she sashayed away to survey her wardrobe. He was startled by how much he wanted to be with Rulik.

\* \* \*

At the appointed hour, a blond, baby-faced ensign named Vavro arrived to escort the Mhajavi to dinner. Shayan watched with amusement as Arpana cast her spell over the young man, reducing him to stammers and furious flushes of his fair skin. She had changed into a low-cut, high-waisted gown of diaphanous red material that showed her generous breasts to full advantage. The long skirt was draped in front to reveal a



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glimpse of her shapely legs.

“Another conquest,” Fala whispered in his ear.

She was still in the same green dress she’d worn earlier, but Shayan had changed from his working clothes into a white suit more suitable for dinner.

Shayan smiled at her words. “Yes, but I fear Captain Rulik will not be so easily conquered. This should be an interesting evening.”

“Come, Fala,” Arpana cried, one arm through the ensign’s.

Vavro gallantly offered his other arm to Fala, and the trio headed down the corridor. Shayan picked up the box of promised delicacies and followed them to the officers’ mess. A large table occupied the center of the room. Six padded, comfortable-looking chairs had been placed around the edge, with additional chairs sitting by the inner wall. In the corner hung the flag of Zigan, its pale blue background and silver edging the only touch of color in an otherwise masculine room. Large windows along the opposite side provided a spectacular view of space.

He set the box on a chair and stepped back as Fala and Arpana placed the Mhajavi foods on the long, oval table. The women set out herb-flavored flat bread and two flagons, one containing *kashu* oil and the other a tangy marinade. Arpana set out bowls of nuts and dried fruits, while Fala cut chunks of soft cheese. Its pungent odor mingled with that of the bread and his stomach rumbled, reminding him of how hungry he was. Lastly, Arpana set a bottle of palm wine near the head of the table.

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Then Rulik entered the room, and Shayan remembered what else he hungered for. Instead of the utilitarian gray uniform of earlier, the captain wore what was obviously a dress uniform. The light blue jacket trimmed in silver flattered his fair looks. Dark blue pants that skimmed his muscular thighs and black shoes completed the uniform.

“Good evening,” Rulik said.

Arpana spun and smiled at him. “My, my, captain, you do look magnificent tonight.”

He flushed slightly. “I thought formal dress fitting to honor my guests.” He cast a look at the ensign. “Apparently Ensign Vavro didn’t receive my message.”

The young man flushed to the edges of his blond hair. “My apologies, captain. I was just relieved a few minutes ago.”

Arpana smiled at the ensign. “Surely such devotion to duty excuses him.”

“Of course,” Rulik said, moving to the table set for six. He offered his arm to Arpana. “Will you do me the honor of sitting next to me?”

“Of course,” she replied.

Rulik assisted her into her seat next to his place at the head of the table. Shayan and Fala moved to the other side, and Shayan found himself sitting next to Rulik and across from Arpana. Ensign Vavro seated himself next to Arpana, leaving the place at the end of the table free.

“Lieutenant Behrin will be joining us shortly,” Rulik explained. “He went to change into dress uniform.”

“Shall I go and change, uncle...I mean, captain?”

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“No, cub, it’s not necessary. You can check on the status of our dinner, though.”

Vavro got up and went to the intercom beside the door.

“You are his uncle?” Arpana asked. “Surely you are not old enough.”

Rulik smiled. “Vavro is the second son born to my eldest sister. She’s twelve years my senior.”

“I had heard your father has many children,” Arpana said.

“Yes. When his first wife gave birth to five daughters in a row, he married my mother. Among our people, it is the mother who determines the sex of the child. I believe the reverse is true for you,” Rulik explained.

“Yes,” Fala answered, “that is correct, which reminds me of something. I was speaking to a member of our medical team. They would like to do a comparative analysis of Ziganese and Mhajavi DNA. If your leaders agree, of course.”

“I’m sure my father will have no objection to that,” Rulik said. “Our scientists are eager to exchange information with yours, especially our medical researchers. Some of our people suffer from hereditary illnesses. They’re hoping your scientists will provide a fresh perspective on how to end or cure the diseases.” No one was hoping for that more than Rulik’s brother, Myrek, whose only son suffered from a disorder of the blood.

The door opened and a dark-haired man in dress uniform entered the room. “Forgive me for being late.”

“Ah, here is Lieutenant Behrin,” Rulik said, introducing him to his guests.

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Tall and strongly-built, Behrin had dark brown hair, gray eyes and a darker complexion. He greeted each guest, then took his place at the end of the table just as Vavro returned.

"Dinner will be delayed another ten minutes," he reported.

"Why do we not start with our offerings?" Arpana asked. "Shayan, if you will open the wine, we can toast a successful alliance."

"With pleasure." Shayan stood to open the bottle of white wine and pour some into the waiting glasses. While he did, the others passed around the cheese, bread and condiments, as Arpana explained how to pour out a small portion of oil and marinade in which to dip the bread.

When Shayan returned to his seat, Rulik stood and held up his glass. "To a long, peaceful and prosperous relationship between our peoples."

The others added their assent, then sipped the sweet wine.

As they ate, Arpana's gaze kept straying to Lieutenant Behrin.

"Did you wish to ask me something?"

"Forgive me, but I thought all Ziganese were fair. Your hair is almost as dark as mine."

"Ah, yes, I can see why that surprises you. I come from Algott Colony in our Southern Hemisphere. The original inhabitants had darker coloring than most of our people. Most of them died out years ago, but some of their blood runs through my veins."

"How fascinating," Arpana said. "Tell me more of these people. How did they die? What of their culture?"

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Behrin laughed and held up a hand. "Slow down. I am afraid I don't remember all the details."

"Not now," Shayan murmured.

"Forgive my enthusiasm," Arpana said. "I am a historian by trade, but I agree this is neither the time nor the place for this talk."

"There'll be a delegation from the colony at the talks," Behrin told her. "I'm sure they will be able to answer all your questions."

"May I propose another toast?" Shayan asked.

At Rulik's nod, he stood. "To our rescuers, the crew of the *Borivoy*."

Arpana gave him an approving nod as he sat. "Yes, it was very lucky for us you were in the vicinity."

Behrin snorted. "Who said we were in the vicinity? We pushed the ship to its limits to get here in time."

"Well, we are very glad you did, lieutenant. Thank you again."

"Why were you traveling on such a small vessel? If you don't mind me asking. Surely the risks outweighed the benefits."

Arpana sighed. "Yes, I see that now. I have been thoroughly scolded by everyone, including Toryl."

The Ziganese looked puzzled.

"But I thought you were Toryl," Ensign Vavro said.

"How much do you know about symbiotic relationships?" she asked.

"We are familiar with the concept, of course—" Rulik

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began.

“But you do not know exactly how it works in my case.”

“Perhaps you will explain it to us.”

“Of course. The symbionts, the *ujela*, are ancient beings who collect the wisdom of the universe. As long as an *ujela* is in a living host, it can survive indefinitely. When one of our people takes a symbiont into his or her body, he, or usually she, becomes two people. Before I was joined, I was simply Arpana. My symbiont is known as Toryl. They are always inside us, but they do not command us. My personality is dominant most of the time—”

“Unfortunately,” Shayan interrupted.

She flashed him a dark look. “What is unfortunate is a protector who does not know his place.”

“This is not the time...” Fala warned.

“I apologize,” Shayan said quickly. “It is an old argument and a futile one.”

Rulik flashed him a look of understanding just as the door opened and two crewmen with heavily laden trays entered.

The crewmen placed platters of food and a bottle of red Ziganese wine on the table, then withdrew. The diners passed the platters around the table. Shayan took a small portion of each dish. Ziganese food was rumored to be heavier than what he was used to, but he was still hungry.

As he passed the platters to Rulik, their hands brushed, sending a sensual awareness through his body. He looked into Rulik’s eyes and saw that awareness reflected there. His heart rate increased. The rest of the dinner passed in a haze as his

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focus reduced to one thing.

Seducing Rulik.

\* \* \*

Rulik surveyed the table with satisfaction. The dinner with the Mhajavi delegations had gone well. The dishes had been cleared, all except for the wine glasses and bottles. Arpana flirted shamelessly with an obviously besotted Vavro, while Fala hung on every word Behrin uttered about his homeland.

Rulik smiled. Behrin must be thrilled to have found someone so interested in every detail of life in Algott, both now and in the distant past.

Shayan's deep voice with his musical accent interrupted his thoughts. "What is so amusing?"

Rulik turned to him. "Nothing. I'm just pleased the dinner has gone so well."

Shayan grimaced. "With the exception of my earlier faux pas. I should not have said anything to Arpana."

Rulik took a sip of wine. "Is she always so headstrong?"

He nodded. "It is not easy being her protector."

"By that, I take it you mean her guard."

"Yes," Shayan replied. "It is not just a matter of her personal safety. She draws men like flies. Part of my job is seeing she is not used by someone with ulterior motives. Havir still has agents on Mhajav."

"I can imagine. He was in power for many years."

Shayan's eyes narrowed. "He was a brutal dictator, responsible for many deaths, including my father's."

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Without thinking, Rulik laid his hand on Shayan's forearm and felt the muscles tense. He quickly withdrew his hand. "I'm sorry to hear of your father's death."

The other man let out a sigh. "We assume he is dead. No body was ever found."

Rulik shook his head. The same fate could have befallen his people had the coup led by Ludosh succeeded in overthrowing his father's rule. "And now our would-be usurper has joined forces with your dictator to terrorize the solar system."

"Must you two be so serious?" Arpana interrupted.

Rulik turned to smile at her. "I beg your pardon. Perhaps it's time for us to retire."

"Perhaps you are right, captain," she agreed. "Thank you for a lovely dinner. Ensign Vavro, will you escort me to my quarters?"

Vavro leapt to his feet. "I would be honored to do so."

Shayan started to rise, but Arpana waved him back. "Since you are in such a serious mood, why do you not stay and discuss security for the diplomatic talks with Captain Rulik."

"As you wish," Shayan agreed.

"Come, Fala," Arpana said as she rose from the table. Taking Vavro's arm, she headed for the door. Behrin rose and offered his arm to Fala, still discussing Algott lore as they left.

Rulik turned back to Shayan. "What questions did you have about the security arrangements?"

"None. Arpana was just giving me permission to linger and enjoy your company."



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Shayan's smile caused Rulik's heart to race. He picked up his wine glass and gulped it as he tried to think of something to say.

Shayan's smile faltered, and he rose. "Please excuse me for a moment."

After he disappeared into the small lav connected to the officers' mess, Rulik stood and gazed out the window at the black reaches of space. He wanted Shayan in the worst possible way. His heart was pounding, every nerve felt alive, and his cock was at half staff already. He was glad his long tunic jacket hid the evidence of his need.

The question was, did Shayan feel the same way? Many Mhajavi men were bisexual, so there was no taboo against them being together. But given the way Shayan had tensed earlier when Rulik touched him, he wasn't sure if his advances would be welcome.

When Shayan finished in the lav, he walked up to Rulik and stood close beside him, shoulder to shoulder, but not quite touching. Rulik stared at their reflection in the window. Shayan was half a head taller, and dark to Rulik's fairness. Rulik imagined what it would be like to lie with him, to see the contrast in their skin tones. Longed to kiss and fondle and fuck the other man. His cock grew longer and heavier.

"It is a magnificent sight," Shayan remarked quietly. "So vast, so empty, so awesome. The universe in its entirety."

"Yes," Rulik whispered. "It dwarfs all of us."

"So it seems. My people believe we are all part of this universe, brought to a mortal existence to experience life, to

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learn, to suffer, and to rejoice. Most of all, to learn to love.”

Rulik glanced at him in the window. “Have you learned to love?”

Shayan turned and looked directly into Rulik’s eyes. “I am still learning. Will you help me?”

Rulik felt relief wash through him. “I thought you’d never ask.” He reached up to pull Shayan’s head down to meet his mouth, tangling his fingers in the black curls. Their mouths met, lips and tongues exploring and melding.

Shayan’s hands found their way to Rulik’s hips, then his buttocks, pulling their lower bodies close. Rulik rubbed his groin, feeling Shayan’s erection, as large as his own.

“Clothes...off,” he gasped between kisses.

Shayan fumbled with the buttons of his tunic as Rulik toed off his shoes, glad he hadn’t worn his boots tonight. His shirt and pants followed the tunic, hurriedly tossed over the back of a chair. Then he turned his attention to Shayan, slowly undoing the buttons of his white linen suit jacket and shirt. He pushed off the clothes, running his hands over Shayan’s broad shoulders and down his smooth brown chest.

Rulik paused to kiss his way back up to Shayan’s mouth, up the corded column of his neck, along his jaw, bristly with short black hairs, to his sensual mouth. As they kissed, Shayan ran his hands over Rulik’s sides, back and buttocks, lingering in the sensitive area above his anus. He groaned into Shayan’s mouth and pressed his groin against the crisp linen of his pants, enjoying the rasping sensation.

Breaking the kiss, Rulik dropped to his knees, unbuttoned

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Shayan's pants, and pushed them to the floor. His cock stood out proudly, long and slender as the man himself. Rulik took it in his hands, eliciting a groan from Shayan.

"Magnificent," Rulik whispered. "I wonder if it tastes as good as it looks."

He cupped one hand around the base of Shayan's cock and took the head into his mouth. Shayan groaned and grabbed Rulik's head, tugging slightly on his hair.

Rulik was filled with a sense of power. Getting this self-contained man to lose control would be an accomplishment. One he intended to achieve.

He licked the underside of the head, while running his fingers up and down Shayan's cock, then pausing to fondle and cup his balls. Shayan's hips thrust forward, pushing his cock further into Rulik's mouth. He started to suck harder.

"Yes," Shayan moaned. "More."

Rulik took as much of the stiffened rod in his mouth as possible, using his hands to stimulate the base until Shayan came.

When Rulik rose, Shayan pulled him close, still trembling slightly. Rulik rested his head on the man's shoulder and smiled to himself. *One mission accomplished. One more to go.*

After a moment, Shayan let go and stepped back to stare at Rulik, admiration in his expression. He cupped Rulik's face and ran his thumbs over his jaw line, then dropped his gaze lower.

"You have hair all over your body. I had heard it was so."

Rulik laughed. "I'm not as hairy as some of my people. I

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hope it doesn't displease you." His gaze roved over Shayan's body. He was as beautiful as a classical statue, all smooth brown skin and lean muscle.

"Nothing about you displeases me," Shayan said, leaning forward for another kiss.

"What are you going to do about it?" Rulik whispered between kisses.

Shayan laughed. "Is your cock feeling neglected?"

"Yes, very." By now, his erection was huge and nearly painful.

Shayan took the needy part in his hands, causing Rulik to groan aloud. He thrust into Shayan's grasp. "Finish it now," he rasped.

"I have a better idea," Shayan said, letting go. He moved to the table and grabbed the flagon of vegetable oil. He handed it to Rulik. "I want you inside me."

Rulik's heart pounded at the thought of his cock pounding into Shayan. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. If that is what you want."

Shayan turned, spread his legs and leaned over the table, giving Rulik a view of his muscular thighs and rounded buttocks. Slowly, he moved toward Shayan. "Oh, I want," he whispered.

Rulik opened the flagon of oil and poured some into one palm, then set it down. He rubbed the oil over his hands, then placed them on Shayan's buttocks. He spread the butt cheeks, then trailed a finger along the sensitive skin of the crack. When Shayan grunted his approval, Rulik inserted one oiled

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finger into Shayan's anus and waited for it to relax. When he could slide it in and out easily, he added another finger. With his free hand, he upended the flagon of oil into his palm, not caring when some spilled on the tablecloth. He used the oil to lubricate his cock, then slowly entered Shayan.

"You're so tight," he groaned. He paused to let Shayan's body accommodate itself to his girth. "That's better."

He inched his way in, withdrew slightly, then pushed in farther until he was thrusting, quicker and quicker. His need was too great to hold back any longer and he accelerated his pace.

"Yes," Shayan urged. "Faster."

Rulik complied, until he could hold back no more. He came, jetting his seed into Shayan. Tremors spread from his cock through his entire body until he collapsed against Shayan's back and waited for the trembling to cease.

He kissed Shayan's neck, then moved back to let him up. "That was incredible."

Shayan stood and smiled at him. "Yes, it was. We will have to do that again."

Rulik laughed. "Shall we adjourn to my quarters then?"

"An excellent idea."

After they dressed, Rulik grabbed the flagon of oil in one hand and Shayan's hand in the other, then led him out of the mess. "You know, we probably should've locked the door."

"Next time," Shayan agreed, laughing.

Rulik smiled, feeling lighter than he had in months. *Next time* had a nice ring to it. Could this be the beginning of a real

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relationship?

\* \* \*

Early next morning, Shayan returned to the guest quarters to find Fala sleeping by herself in the outer room. She woke when he closed the door.

“Are you just coming in?” she asked.

“I spent the night with Rulik.”

“I figured that out,” she said dryly. “How was he?”

“Fantastic. You don’t mind?”

She shrugged, but he sensed her sadness. “How could I? We never made any commitments to each other. I knew I’d never be able to hold you for any length of time.”

He sat beside her on the bed. “I never wanted to hurt you. You’ve known all along what my preferences were. I’m just sorry I wasn’t able to help you achieve your desires.”

Her hand went to her abdomen. “I’m barren, Shayan. There is nothing you can do about that.”

“The doctors aren’t always right in these matters.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to let my feelings for you grow, but they did.”

He pulled her close and held her. “You’ll find someone special. It’s just a matter of time. What of Commander Behrin? You seemed to be getting along well last night.”

She pulled back and grimaced. “We spent most of the night talking. He took me to the cartography room and showed me maps of his homeland. It was interesting, but it’s clear he has no real interest in me. I think he’s infatuated with Captain

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Rulik.”

Shayan frowned. That seemed to be catching. “I got no sense they are a couple.”

“No, I think it’s one-sided.”

“There may be a rule against fraternization between officers,” Shayan speculated. “I’ll ask Rulik, though. I don’t wish to poach on another man’s territory.”

“Please don’t mention Commander Behrin by name,” Fala advised. “If Rulik is unaware of his feelings, it’s best to not say anything.”

“Is Arpana still asleep?”

“Yes. The young ensign was here until an hour ago. I don’t think they got any sleep at all.”

Shayan chuckled softly. “No doubt. We had best let her get her beauty sleep then, or she won’t be at her best when we arrive. I think I’ll do the same. May I join you? Just to sleep.”

Fala moved over to let him slip into the bed, then curled up next to him, her head on his shoulder. She soon drifted back to sleep, but Shayan was unable to relax.

He stared at the woman in his arms. They’d slept like this many times, after first making love. He’d enjoyed their affair, but it hadn’t thrilled him the way his night with Rulik had. He was looking forward to spending more time with the handsome captain during the diplomatic talks. Too bad their time together would be so short.

## CHAPTER 2

Shayan stood at the side of the great hall with the other guards and protectors as the diplomats droned through their opening speeches. He glanced around the crowded room. The main floor was filled with rows of chairs, where the cream of Ziganese society sat to hear the opening speeches by the king and the diplomats. Many of them would be at the welcoming reception afterwards.

He had to admit the hall was quite impressive, at least two stories high with galleries ringing the room on three sides. The galleries were full also, with respectable members of the middle classes—factory owners, merchants, and everyone else who ran the wheels of commerce and manufacturing, but who



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had little say in the government. At least that was what Rulik had told him.

Shayan glanced around, looking for Rulik, but the man was nowhere to be seen. He hoped Rulik hadn't gotten into trouble for the violation of Mhajavi space. If he had, Arpana would have to intercede on his behalf.

He looked at her where she sat in a line of chairs on the dais at the front of the hall. Her turn to speak would come toward the end of the opening meeting. Her face was schooled into a polite mask, but he knew she was impatient to have this over and get out of the cold, drafty hall. The women of the Mhajavi delegation had to be freezing in their cotton gowns. He was cold enough in his white linen suit. At least it buttoned up to his neck, but the material was too light for this climate.

His first impression of Lodur, the capital of Zigan, was one of gloom and cold. It had been drizzling when they'd arrived yesterday, and the scenery was anything but impressive. The buildings of the city were made from gray and beige stone, the sky was gray, and the temperature freezing, at least by Mhajavi standards. He, Fala and Arpana had huddled together for warmth in the back of the hover car that took them to the palace. The only bright notes were the red tile roofs and the red, orange and gold of the leaves on the trees.

At least the suite of rooms they'd been assigned was comfortable and had separate heating controls. He'd cranked up the thermostat until they felt warm again. He didn't know how the locals stood it, but, of course, they'd grown up in this climate.

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He heard movement to one side and turned to see Rulik moving toward him. He looked magnificent in the traditional Ziganese clothing worn for formal occasions. Shayan had seen pictures of the style, but in person, it was much more impressive. The bright blue of his tunic intensified the color of Rulik's eyes, the silver sash emphasized his narrow waist and the tight-fitting pale gray pants clung to his muscular thighs. Black knee-high boots trimmed in fur lent the outfit a jaunty air.

"How is it going?" Rulik whispered.

"Fine. Boring."

"Has my father spoken yet?"

"I believe King Ormin will speak last." Shayan glanced at the fair-haired man sitting in the center of the line of chairs. He was tall and imposing, but older than Shayan had expected, his blond hair liberally streaked with gray. Shayan could see no trace of the man in Rulik. "You must look like your mother."

Rulik blinked. "What?"

"I was just thinking you do not resemble your father."

Rulik laughed. "No, not in any way. Perhaps that's why we do not get along."

"I wondered if you would be here today."

"I went to see the ship off. This is Behrin's first time in command, and I wanted to go over a few things with him. I hope he gets the ship if I leave."

Shayan raised his brows. "You are giving up your command?"

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Rulik shrugged. "I'd hoped to be assigned to our embassy in Mhjav, but Father is furious with me for violating your space. Now I doubt he'll give me the post. He's nothing if not stubborn."

"Do not give up hope," Shayan advised.

Just then Arpana's name was announced and she stepped to the podium, to more than the usual polite applause.

"I will keep my general remarks brief," she began. "I am proud to be part of such an important moment in the history of our two worlds." She turned to Rulik's father. "King Ormin, thank you for hosting the conference.

"Today, I would like to make a special presentation."

Rulik looked at Shayan with a curious expression, but Shayan just smiled. "Wait."

Fala walked out onto the stage, holding a box, as Arpana continued, "As most of you know, our ship was attacked on its way here. If not for a certain daring starship captain, I would not be here, and you would all be dealing with a diplomatic crisis instead of a possible alliance."

She looked around the hall. "Will Captain Rulik please come forward?"

Shayan nudged Rulik toward the stage. "Go on."

"You knew about this and didn't tell me?"

Shayan grinned. "It was worth it to see the look on your face."

Rulik walked toward the stage in a daze. What was Arpana up to? This was not the best of times for her to call attention to his disobedience.

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When he reached the stage, Arpana held out her hands to him. Hers were icy, and he squeezed them. Was she nervous or just cold?

“Captain Rulik, the Mhajavi government wishes to thank you for your act of gallantry by awarding you our Medal of Honor. You are the first foreigner to receive this award.”

While Fala held the box, Arpana reached inside and removed a gold medal on a black ribbon. He ducked his head so she could place it around his neck, then she kissed him on both cheeks.

“Thank you,” he stammered to thunderous applause. He glanced at his father who gave him a nod.

Rulik looked back at Arpana and smiled. “Thank you,” he said again, then kissed her hand before leaving the stage.

He was still in a daze when he reached Shayan’s side at the back of the hall.

The other man smiled. “That should take care of your father’s reservations about you entering our space.”

“Was this your idea?”

“Not at all. Arpana thought of it. She did not want you to get into trouble because of her rash behavior.”

“I see,” Rulik murmured. Perhaps his initial impression of her as spoiled, headstrong and self-involved had been somewhat hasty. Thanks to her, he now had a chance to go to Mhajav. He glanced at Shayan. Realizing that goal was more important than ever.

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Shayan was grateful for the fireplace in his room, not to mention the warm fur rug in front of the hearth. He was sprawled in a large, comfortable armchair with his feet stretched out toward the flames. He wasn't sure they'd ever be warm again. As magnificent as the palace was, it was also cold and drafty. He hated being so cold. It made him feel weak compared to the vigorous Ziganese.

*Like Rulik.*

Now there was as fine a specimen of manhood as Shayan had ever seen. Though shorter than Shayan by half a head, Rulik's body was toned and heavily muscled. The body of a man who exercised hard and often. Of course, all military personnel were required to stay in shape, as were protectors. It was part of the job. But that was all they had in common.

It was not just that they were from two different worlds. Rulik had grown up a child of privilege, while Shayan's family was middle class. Rulik had attended a prestigious military college and received the best training, while Shayan had come of age in the resistance, hiding in caves and learning to fight with guerrilla tactics. Hard years, those had been, with fear, hunger and hardship his constant companions.

By rights, the two of them should never have met. *Destiny must have had a hand in this.*

A knock on the outer door of his room set his heart pounding with anticipation. It had to be Rulik. Fala or Arpana would have knocked on the door that led to their suite. Besides, they were at a meeting about organizing a joint archeological dig in Algott, Behrin's home colony. Fala had

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been so excited about the idea. It had been nice to see her enthused about something again.

He opened the door to find Rulik holding two large bags.

“Come in. What do you have there?”

Rulik entered the room and strode to the bed, where he deposited the bags. “Some things to keep you warm.”

Shayan stiffened in the act of closing the door. “I cannot accept gifts from you.”

Rulik turned and flashed him a smile. “They’re not from me, but my parents. Every member of your delegation will be getting the same things tomorrow. A robe and a pair of boots for everyone, warm shawls for the women, and fur-lined vests for the men. We can’t let our guests freeze. I know you’re all used to a warmer climate.”

“I see. That is very kind of your father.”

Rulik waved him over. “I had to estimate your size. Come, see if they fit.”

Shayan moved slowly to the bed and ran his hands over the robe and vest. They were warm, indeed. He tried on the vest. “Thank you. This is very generous.”

Rulik grinned. “Father can afford it.”

“Was it truly his idea? Or yours?”

“Does it matter?” Rulik asked with a shrug.

Shayan clasped Rulik’s chin and stared into his eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes with their fringe of auburn lashes. “Only to me. It is a thoughtful gift. I doubt your father noticed our discomfort.”

Rulik took Shayan’s cold hand in his warm one. “Yes, it

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was my idea, but Father and Mother were appalled when I pointed out how cold you all are. They've never been to Mhajav, so had no point of reference." Rulik let go of his hand. "Now go sit by the fire and warm up."

Shayan did as told, stretching his arms toward the warmth. "I had forgotten you have visited our world. What did you think of it?"

Rulik hung Shayan's new robe in the wardrobe. "I found it fascinating, and surprising. I thought a planet farther from our star would be colder, but instead the climate is much warmer."

"Not really. The difference is we live primarily in the tropical zone, while you inhabit the temperate zone. Our northern lands are too cold for comfort, and the growing season too short to be of any value. I am surprised no one lives in the tropics on this planet."

"Our tropical zone was inhabited long ago, but not for many years. Not only is it quite hot, but it's geologically unstable. Whole cities were destroyed by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The people who survived migrated north or south."

Rulik brought Shayan's boots to him. "You need to try these on."

"All right."

Shayan sat, but before he could remove his sandals, Rulik knelt in front of him and took one foot in his hands. "No wonder you're so cold! Your feet are like ice." He placed that foot on his thigh, while he removed the other sandal, then slipped on one of the fur-lined boots. "How does that feel?"

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“Marvelous,” Shayan answered, sliding his bare foot up Rulik’s thigh to his crotch.

Rulik stopped him and massaged his foot with brisk movements. “I’m not getting into bed with you until you’re warmed up. I have no desire to sleep with an icicle tonight,” he teased as he put the other boot on Shayan’s foot, then rose.

Shayan laughed. “I think we can heat things up in here.” He was elated Rulik planned to spend the night with him. He hadn’t been sure if that would be possible here in the palace.

“Now stand and see if you can walk in them.”

Shayan obeyed, walking around the room. “They are a bit loose, but will do as long as I do not have to run.”

Rulik delved deeper into one of the bags and removed a pair of heavy stockings. “Add these tomorrow and you should be fine.”

Shayan took the stockings and put them in a drawer. “You think of everything.”

“There is much at stake, for both of our worlds.”

Shayan turned to look at him. “And for us?”

Rulik smiled. “Yes, for us, too.” He glanced at the fireplace. “I see you have a fire lit.”

“Yes. Come, let’s sit and enjoy it.” Shayan suggested, moving back to the armchair. When Rulik followed, Shayan tugged the smaller man onto his lap. The minute Rulik’s thighs came in contact with his, he felt his cock respond.

Rulik laughed. “I can’t remember how many years since I sat in someone’s lap.”

Shayan wrapped an arm around his back. “I can picture



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you, a little, red-haired tyke dangling on your father's knee."

Rulik's smile faded. "Not my father. He never had time for us, and if he did, all his attention was for Myrek. The heir."

"Your mother then."

"My nurse," Rulik said quietly. "She was more of a parent to me than anyone. My parents were too busy with their obligations."

Shayan frowned. "It doesn't sound like you had a happy childhood."

Rulik shrugged. "It was all right. I had my brothers to play with, and my older sisters to torment."

"Snakes in their beds," Shayan guessed with a laugh.

"Something like that," Rulik said with a devilish grin. "What about you?"

Shayan closed his eyes as memories flooded back. Good times before his father was taken.

"Bad memories?" Rulik asked quietly.

"Some bad, but a lot of good ones, too. Do you mind if I do not talk about it right now?"

Rulik leaned forward, his lips hovering close to Shayan's mouth. "I can think of better things to do. How about you?"

The first kiss was slow and leisurely, followed by more urgent ones, while Shayan unfastened Rulik's clothing. When he broke the kiss, Shayan tugged the tunic over his lover's head, leaving his chest bare except for its fine mat of auburn hair. Shayan explored the muscled expanse, grazing the flat male nipples with his fingertips, then following up with his tongue.

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“Um, feels good,” Rulik murmured.

He stood to remove the rest of his clothing and Shayan followed suit. In moments, both men were naked and fully aroused. Shayan sank to his knees on the fur rug and took the head of Rulik’s cock into his mouth.

“Gods,” Rulik gasped as Shayan licked and sucked on it. “Slow down,” he warned. “I’m about to explode.”

Shayan pulled back and grinned up at him. “That would be a bit premature.”

“Where do you keep the lubricant?”

“In the drawer.”

“I’ll get it.”

Shayan watched Rulik stride across the room, enjoying the bunching of muscles in his ass and thighs as he walked. When he returned, he joined Shayan on the rug.

“This is cozy here.”

“Yes.” He pushed Rulik down on his back and took the lubricant from him. “Relax. Let me take care of everything tonight.”

He straddled Rulik, then leaned forward until their chests and groin were touching, but kept his weight on his arms and legs. He started with a series of long, slow, wet kisses, while gently rubbing against Rulik’s groin. When he thrust upward, Shayan broke the kiss to whisper, “Easy now.”

He dropped kisses on Rulik’s cheek, then licked down his neck to where the pulse pounded in his throat.

Rulik grabbed Shayan by the hair and pulled him up for another deep kiss. When it ended, both were breathing

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heavily. Shayan looked into glazed blue eyes and smiled. "What do you want?"

Rulik bucked his hips. "I want to fuck you."

Shayan chuckled. "All in good time."

Rulik stared at him for a moment, an intense look on his face, then he relaxed. "All right. We'll do it your way."

Shayan dropped a quick kiss on his lips, then sat up and turned his attention to Rulik's chest and arms. He ran his hands over the expanse, feeling the strength of the muscles. As his hands moved lower toward Rulik's groin, his cock twitched.

"My *egon* needs some attention."

"*Egon*?" Shayan asked.

Rulik laughed. "It's slang for cock. It really means the point of a sword."

Shayan took the aroused shaft in his hand and caressed it. "An apt euphemism."

He picked up the lubricant and spread it liberally over his fingers and Rulik's cock. Then he reached behind and inserted a finger in his own anus and waited for the muscles to relax. When he was ready, he eased himself down on Rulik's erection, letting his body adjust to being filled.

"Oh, gods, that feels good," Rulik moaned.

He reached for Shayan's hips and helped him maintain a rhythm, thrusting up as Shayan rocked back and forth, his cock ready to explode. He clasped hold of it, waiting...waiting, until he felt Rulik start to come.

One last jerk of his cock and the spasms started inside him,

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building and spreading, until it exploded throughout his body. He fell forward onto Rulik's chest, now wet with his semen.

Rulik wrapped his arms around Shayan and held him close for a few moments. When his breathing and heart rate had slowed, Shayan slowly stood and helped Rulik up.

"We'd better get cleaned up."

"Good idea."

In the lav, they took turns washing each other, then climbed into bed. Rulik was asleep in a few minutes.

Shayan stared at the man in his arms. Rulik's head was nestled on his shoulder, his eyes closed in sleep. Gently, Shayan brushed the hair off his forehead. He was in danger of falling for this man in a serious way. Rulik was a born leader—brave, capable and daring. He was also intelligent, kind, thoughtful and a good lover. What more could one hope for?

\* \* \*

Three days later, Rulik was called to a meeting in his father's audience chamber. The talks were going quite well, and he was hopeful the alliance could be formally drawn up and signed by the end of the week.

He'd been allowed to sit in on the military meetings, though he'd had no voice. It had quickly become clear not everyone in the defense forces approved of his violation of Mhajavi airspace, but so far he'd suffered no adverse consequences.

After intense discussion, the admirals of both worlds had

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finally agreed to joint patrols in border space. In addition, all merchant ships were to proceed in convoys protected by fighter ships. It was hoped these tactics would frustrate the raiders enough to bring them out into the open, where they could be finished off.

Rulik entered the room to find Shayan again standing in the back and was pleased to see he was wearing the fur-trimmed boots and vest Rulik had given him.

“How are things going on the military front?” Shayan asked.

“Good. We have an agreement.”

“Is that what this meeting is about?”

Rulik frowned. “I have no idea.” He knew this meeting had not been planned in advance, and it gave him cause to worry. What was his father up to now?

He glanced around to see who was present. Myrek stood behind their father. Next to King Ormin sat his two wives, Queen Yerina, and Rulik’s mother, Lady Dahnya. Rulik bowed to his mother, who smiled warmly at him. She was still lovely, with only a few gray strands in her auburn hair. Rulik had inherited her coloring, while his brother looked just like their father, with dark blond hair and gray-blue eyes.

The senior Mhajavi delegates sat in a semicircle facing the royal couple. They were talking quietly among themselves, and Rulik wondered if they knew what this was all about.

They quieted as the king stood. He spoke briefly of the initial success of the discussions and thanked the diplomats for their sense of purpose and compromise. When he began to

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speak of tradition, Rulik started to worry. Which of the many archaic Ziganese traditions was his father going to suggest?

“My people have many traditions,” the king said. “Some go back many hundreds of years, to the days when our noble landowners fought amongst themselves. In some cases, they would ally themselves with other houses through the marriage of their children.”

“Oh, no,” Rulik groaned. “Not this.”

“These dynastic marriages cemented the houses together and ultimately resulted in a stable monarchy. Therefore, I suggest we consider a similar type of arrangement. A marriage between my son and a woman from Mhajav.”

There was a gasp from the Mhajavis. Narin, the head of the delegation, stood. “We are honored you would ally yourselves with us through your son’s marriage. However, we are not certain how to respond. This is outside our experience. May we have time to consider the matter?”

“Of course,” Ormin replied. “But I do hope you will come to see things my way.”

The Mhajavi exited the room, leaving Rulik with his parents and brother. He walked toward them, his jaw tense with anger. “Why, Father? Things are going so well. Why should we complicate matters like this?”

Ormin turned to look at him. “Ah, here is my unworthy son, once again questioning my judgment.”

“Rulik,” his mother warned.

Rulik flushed, but refused to back down. “I don’t mean to be insubordinate, sir, but I think this idea is folly. What

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possible purpose can it serve? And why wait until now to spring it on the Mhajavi?"

"That's my fault," Myrek said. "I have only now agreed to the marriage."

"But why? If you don't mind enlightening your unworthy brother."

Myrek ran a hand through his hair. "You know what is happening among the *elaf*."

"Yes, the birth defects and diseases." Myrek's only son suffered from a blood disease.

"The scientists believe it comes from too much inbreeding."

"Then let Myrek marry a common woman," Rulik said.

"I will not have a peasant crowned as queen when I'm dead," his father thundered. Rulik winced. "I didn't mean a peasant. I meant a daughter of an *annar*. A well-bred, healthy, middle-class girl. New blood is needed if our line is to continue."

"With no thanks to you," his father snarled.

Rulik laughed. "As a younger son, my offspring would be as irrelevant as I am."

"Enough!" his father said. "Leave me."

"Please go," his mother said, taking Rulik by the arm. "Leave him to me," she whispered. "I'll try to calm him down."

"Good luck," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"How is the heir to the throne?" Rulik asked, as he and his brother left the room.

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His brother glared at him. "Do not jest, Rulik. Vilem remains weak. He may not live long enough to inherit."

"I wasn't jesting. I know how worried you are about him."

"Forgive me. This has been a difficult time for me. I've spoken to the Mhajavi doctors in the delegation, and they've agreed to examine him and see if anything can be done."

"That's good news. They're far ahead of us in medical research. But that doesn't explain why you agreed to this travesty of a marriage."

Myrek shrugged. "I must marry again and produce another son. If Vilem's weakness is a matter of too much inbreeding, then a bride from an entirely different people makes sense." He laughed. "Talk about bringing in new blood."

"Fine, but was a dynastic marriage necessary? You could've traveled to Mhajav to find your own bride. Now you'll be stuck with one chosen by politicians. For all we know, they may set a spy amongst us."

Myrek paled. "Do you truly think so? I hadn't considered that aspect of the matter."

"No, not really. I believe the Mhajavi are honorable people. But their culture is so different from ours. I'm not sure how this will work. I foresee real problems."

"For instance?"

Rulik spread his hands. "Where do I start? To begin with, you're required by law to marry a virgin. I can pretty well assure you there are none among the Mhajavi delegation."

"I don't care about that," Myrek said.

"Perhaps not, but I suspect Father will insist upon it. And



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from there, he'll come up against a quaint Mhajavi law that prohibits virgins from marrying."

Myrek gaped at him. "Surely you don't mean that."

"I do. I bought a book on Mhajavi customs before I went there, and I've been rereading it. Under Mhajavi law, virgins of either sex are prohibited from marrying. In the distant past, all Mhajavi females were required to spend several months in a brothel, learning the art of sex, before they could marry. When a Mhajavi woman entered the brothel, her virginity was auctioned off."

"That's barbaric," Myrek protested.

"Yes, and it's rarely done any more. Now all virgins, both men and women, are required to spend some time at a kind of summer camp where they learn about sex. Only afterwards are they allowed to marry. So, you see, our laws are completely incompatible with theirs."

"Oh, gods," Myrek moaned. "We have to tell Father about this."

"Be my guest," Rulik replied. "He'll take it better from you than from me. I'll have the book sent to your room. Good luck."

\* \* \*

After sending a servant to his brother's chambers with the book, Rulik went to see if Shayan was in his room. He found him deep in discussion with Arpana and Fala.

"Come in, Rulik," Arpana said. "We have some questions, and some information, for you."

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“Did you know what your father was going to propose?” Shayan asked, arms folded across his chest.

“No. Believe me, had I known, I would have tried to talk him out of it. And knowing what I do about marriage law and customs on both our worlds, I believe I might have succeeded in dissuading him. Since he has announced the idea publicly, he will now be harder to influence. He hates being wrong, and never admits to it in public.”

Arpana frowned. “What did you mean about marriage law and customs? Is there a problem we are not aware of?”

Rulik sat in an upholstered chair and crossed one ankle over his knee. “I’m aware of your custom of not allowing virgins of either sex to marry. In most cases, that wouldn’t matter here either, but my brother is *elaf*, the first born son.” At their puzzled expressions, he sighed. “How much do you know of our aristocratic traditions?”

“Very little,” Arpana confessed. “I find it difficult to understand.”

“We all do,” Fala added. “On our world, everyone is equal under the law.”

“Oh?” Rulik asked. “What of the *ujela*? Are they not given special status?”

“Not under the law,” Arpana replied. “We may be ‘special’ in some ways, but an *ujela* who commits a crime is tried like anyone else.”

“I stand corrected then,” Rulik said. “Our society is more stratified. At the head, is the king, of course, then come the noble families, headed by a *dyrin*.”

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“Yes, we have met many of your noblemen here,” she said.

“The problem comes from the fact that all *dyrinni* and their eldest sons, the *elaf*, are required to marry virgins. In the old days, it was the only way a noble could be certain his first child carried his blood.”

“And this law applied to the king and his oldest son?” Shayan asked.

“Yes. So we’re at a standoff immediately.”

“Indeed we are,” Arpana agreed. “Especially as I have been asked to play the part of sacrificial bride.”

Rulik gaped at her, then started to laugh. No one could be further from the virginal bride his brother expected. “Oh, gods, I can’t wait to see my father’s face when he learns—”

Arpana glared at him, eyes narrowed and nostrils flaring. “Am I so unsuitable to be a queen?”

Rulik managed to swallow his laughter. “I think you would be a magnificent queen, but you are not exactly what my father imagined when he concocted this cork-brained scheme. I cannot imagine him going through with it now.”

She tossed her head. “If he rejects me, the Mhajavi delegation will leave immediately, alliance or no alliance.” After delivering her threat, she swept out of the room.

Rulik exchanged a look with Shayan. The cancellation of the alliance would mean they might never see each other again.

“Am I correct in assuming your brother will expect his new wife to give him children?” Fala asked.

“Yes, of course.”

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“Then you may have an even bigger problem.”

Rulik frowned. “What am I missing?”

She leaned forward. “As you know, Arpana is a joined being.”

“Yes, host and symbiont. What does that have to do with this matter?”

“In the joining process, the host is rendered sterile. She will bear no children. Ever.”

Rulik’s head was reeling. He swore under his breath. “Damn it, this just gets more and more complicated. Father will have to back out now. I don’t look forward to telling him.” It was about time his father learned traditional ways were not always best, and this was a perfect example of why. Unfortunately, Ormin was likely to blame the messenger.

Shayan followed him to the door. “Will I see you tonight?”

Rulik caressed his face with one hand. “I’ll come to your room if at all possible.”

“Until later, then.”

Rulik smiled and left the room. He had some thinking to do before he met with his father and brother again.

\* \* \*

“What do you mean there’s a problem with the marriage?” Ormin demanded.

Rulik stood in front of his father’s desk in his study, while Myrek sat to one side. “Earlier today I spoke to some members of the Mhajavi delegation. They’ve chosen a bride from among their delegation—Arpana Toryl.”

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His father gasped and his face turned red. "That whore? She spreads her legs for every man who pursues her. No, I'll not have it. She will never be queen. Never!"

"Don't call her a whore, Father. She has done nothing wrong by Mhajavi standards."

"What standards?" his father muttered. "They don't seem to have any when it comes to sexual behavior."

Rulik glanced at his brother. "How do you feel about this?"

His brother's face flushed. "She's a beautiful woman, but..."

"Not your type, eh, brother?"

Myrek sighed. "I don't think that matters."

"No," his father insisted. "I'll never agree. Our law demands a virgin bride for the heir to the throne."

"That you won't find on Mhajav," Rulik said. "We have a dilemma here. If you reject Arpana as bride, the entire Mhajavi delegation may leave, without an alliance. If you allow Myrek to marry her, there'll be no children from the union."

His father frowned. "What nonsense is this?"

When Rulik explained about Arpana being a joined being, and how that rendered her sterile, his father slumped down in his chair. "What have I done? We must find another bride."

"That may not matter, Father," Myrek said. "I, too, have been speaking to some of our guests, specifically their scientists. They have analyzed the DNA of both our peoples and found a slight discrepancy."

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Ormin waved a hand. "It's the little differences that make life interesting."

"This little difference may make it impossible for our two people to interbreed naturally."

Ormin rested his head in his hands. "What else?"

"The scientists might be able to manipulate the DNA in the lab to produce offspring, but there's a chance they'll be sterile."

Ormin looked up to stare at Myrek, then Rulik. "I know what you're thinking. That I'm a foolish old man, too tied to tradition for our times. And if you think that, you're right."

Rulik had thought he would feel satisfaction at seeing his father humbled in this way, but he didn't. And in that moment, he knew what he must do.

"No, Father, not foolish," he said gently. "Old-fashioned, perhaps, but I know you want what's best for our people."

"I know that, too," Myrek said. "I'll go ahead with the marriage, even if it means no more children."

"No," Ormin and Rulik said simultaneously.

Rulik turned to his brother. "I can't let you do that, Myrek. You must produce a healthy heir for the throne, or there may be a challenge to our house."

"Perhaps that is best," their father said. "That whoreson Ludosh tried to usurp my throne once before. Let him come back and try again. Once he's dead, we'll have no need of an alliance. The raiders will leave us alone again."

Rulik threw up his hands. "Is that your solution, Father? More fighting, more deaths among our people? What if

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Ludosh is successful next time? He now has the support of Havir and his raiders.”

“What else can we do?” Myrek asked.

Rulik fought for control. “I may have a solution. When you announced the marriage, you said it would be to your son, but you didn’t name him.”

“Everyone knows he meant me,” Myrek said.

“Perhaps, but there were two sons in the room that day. I’ll marry Arpana.”

The look of astonishment on his father’s face was almost comical. “But you don’t even like women...”

“I don’t dislike women,” Rulik said. “I just prefer to sleep with men. Arpana is an intelligent, sophisticated woman. She knows this will not be a love match.”

“She’ll cheat on you,” his father warned.

Rulik shrugged. “She’s a passionate woman, and I am who I am. I doubt either of us will be faithful.” He hoped this wouldn’t end his relationship with Shayan, but the man had an honorable streak. He might object to sleeping with his boss’s husband.

“Do you think the Mhajavi will accept this substitution?” Myrek asked.

Rulik turned to face him. “I don’t think they’ll care which son marries Arpana, as long as they don’t feel slighted by what we say.” He turned back to his father. “If you show her any disrespect...”

His father rose, walked around the desk and took Rulik by the shoulders. “I’ll show her the respect due a younger son’s

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wife.”

“And the respect due a high-ranking diplomat,” Rulik warned.

His father smiled. “That, too. Thank you, my son. Your actions today warm my heart.”

“I’m willing to do what is best for Zigan,” Rulik said. “When I donned this uniform, I swore an oath of loyalty.”

“This is above the call of duty, brother.”

Rulik smiled. “I don’t mind. I like the Mhajavi people. Am I still to go as military liaison?”

“Yes, indeed,” his father said, dropping his hands from Rulik’s shoulders. “I’m proud of you, my son. Proud of the man you’ve become. I know I haven’t said it enough.”

*You’ve never said it. Not until now.* Rulik had waited his entire life to hear those words, but they had come at a terrible price. He’d finally found the one man he thought might be his partner for life, and he had to tell him he was marrying someone else.

\* \* \*

Rulik paused by Shayan’s door, wanting nothing more than to get lost in the man’s incredible lovemaking. But first he had to speak with Arpana. If she refused to marry him, his relationship with Shayan need not change. If she accepted him, he would deal with the consequences, whatever they might be.

He moved on and knocked on the main door of the suite.

When Fala answered it, he asked, “May I come in? I need



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to speak to Arpana.”

“Not Shayan?” Fala asked, with an arched brow.

“Not yet,” Rulik replied.

Arpana came out of her room. “Why it is Captain Rulik again,” she said. “You have been a frequent visitor today.”

Rulik bowed. “I’m here on official business. May I speak with you? Privately.”

“Certainly,” she said, sinking onto a sofa as Fala left the room. “How may I help you, captain?”

Rulik took a deep breath. “I’ll get right to the point. You can save the alliance by accepting a substitute bridegroom.”

“Oh? And who would that be? Your father said the marriage would be with his son.”

“He has more than one son.” Rulik moved to the sofa and sat beside her. “Will you marry *me*, Arpana?”

“You?” She stared at him in amazement. “But I thought...”

He leaned forward. “Yes, you thought right. But this alliance will be of great benefit to both our peoples. We have surplus crops and natural resources your people need. You have advanced technology that will help my people. A dynastic marriage is one based on mutual benefit, not love. You would be free to seek your pleasures elsewhere. I promise you that.”

“So there would be no consummation?”

“There would have to be, at least once. Ziganese law requires it.”

She took a moment to study his face. “How many people

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know of your homosexuality?”

“Only a few. I’ve tried to be discreet, and I will continue to do so. You will not be publicly embarrassed by the marriage, at least not here.”

She ran a hand along his jaw. “You are a handsome man, captain. I would not be embarrassed to be seen on your arm. And who knows? You might even come to enjoy the pleasures of my bed.” She leaned forward to give him a better view of her cleavage. “I am very skilled in the art of love.”

He placed a kiss on her hand, then let it go. “I have no doubt of that, but you must realize your seductive charms may not have the desired effect on me. I won’t be led around by the cock.”

She laughed. “Perhaps I have met my match in you after all, captain. You will be an interesting challenge. But where will we live? I have responsibilities at home.”

“That poses no problem. I am being assigned to our new embassy on Mhajav as military liaison to your defense forces. I look forward to getting to know your world and people.”

“That is satisfactory,” she declared. “Very well, captain, I will marry you. I just hope we do not both live to regret this decision.”

“As do I,” Rulik said as he stood. “Now I must explain all of this to Shayan.”

Her expression sobered. “I wish you good luck, captain. I fear he has become very fond of you. I would not see him hurt.”

“I’m fond of him, too, and believe me, the last thing I want

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to do is hurt him. But my duty to Zigan must come first.”

She smiled and stood. “Perhaps we are more alike, you and I, than I had supposed. Good night, Rulik.”

“Good night.” He watched as she disappeared into her room before heading for Shayan’s door.

\* \* \*

Shayan stood by the window staring out at the lights of the city. It was a cold, clear night, and he’d hoped to see the stars, but the lights of the castle grounds were too bright. He huddled deeper into his warm robe. He’d waited, hoping Rulik would come to him tonight. He wasn’t sure how many more nights they’d have together.

If, by some miracle, the alliance went through, Rulik would return to Mhajav with him where they could be together, perhaps even marry. But if King Ormin cancelled the alliance, the Mhajavi delegates would go home, and he might never see Rulik again.

Unless he stayed here. With his language skills, he could easily find a job as an interpreter. Trade between the two worlds would continue, with or without an alliance, as long as the merchant vessels could evade the raiders. He shivered. The thought of living in this harsh climate held little appeal for him, but staying with Rulik did. For that chance, he would give up his job, his home.

A harsh laugh broke from his throat. What a lovesick fool he’d become. Would Rulik even want him? Male love was not as widely accepted here as on Mhajav, and with Rulik being

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the king's son, they would have to be very discreet. Not to mention his duties as a starship captain would take him off world for weeks at a time.

A knock at the door had Shayan rushing across the room. When he opened it and saw Rulik, his heart lightened. He grabbed the other man by the arm, pulled him inside, and backed him against the closed door.

"I thought you'd never get here," Shayan murmured, right before he closed his mouth over Rulik's.

Rulik kissed him back, matching him kiss for open-mouthed kiss, until Shayan drew back gasping. "Come to bed," he urged.

"Not yet," Rulik said. "We need to talk."

Shayan saw the set to his jaw, the unsmiling lips, and knew bad news was coming. "All right, we may as well get it over. What's wrong?"

Rulik ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know how to tell you this. It affects us both."

Shayan sighed and pulled him to the bed. "Sit and give it to me straight."

Rulik sank down on the foot of the bed and Shayan joined him. "Is the alliance off?"

"No, but there has been a change in plans," Rulik said. "I am to marry Arpana."

Shayan felt the impact of his words like a blow to the solar plexus. "I do not understand. I thought your brother..."

"That was Father's intention, yes. Until he learned Arpana is barren. He was ready to chuck the whole thing until I—"

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“Volunteered,” Shayan guessed.

Rulik stared at him with a steady gaze. “I had to. Father had already offered his ‘son’ as bridegroom. He just neglected to name which son. I’m the only one who can do this.”

“But you do not love her,” Shayan said.

Rulik laughed. “I wasn’t sure I even liked her, but she’s growing on me. We have one thing in common. We’re both willing to sacrifice our personal happiness for the good of our worlds. I have to respect that. I hope you can, too.”

Shayan closed his eyes. *Rulik married to Arpana*. The idea should be laughable, but he was in too much pain to see the humor. He opened his eyes and turned to Rulik. “Will you be faithful to her?”

“I don’t know. For the most part, it’ll be a marriage in name only, but I will do nothing to disgrace or embarrass her.”

“What do you mean by ‘for the most part’?”

“To be a valid marriage under our laws, the union must be consummated.”

“I see.” The thought of Rulik in bed with Arpana filled him with a jealous rage. By all that was holy, it should be him and not Arpana. Then another thought struck him. “Will you be able to perform your marital duties?”

Rulik ran a hand through his hair. “I will have to. Gods, what have I done?”

Shayan held out a hand. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Rulik reached for him. “Just be my friend. The gods know I will need one.”

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“Of course, but how often will I see you? I imagine your ship will be busy patrolling the border.”

“It will do so without me. I have already told Arpana we will live on Mhajav. I will be attached to our embassy there. Once things have settled down, perhaps we can be together now and then. I have already promised Arpana she will be free to pursue her pleasures where she will.”

“What a travesty!” Shayan protested. “What kind of a marriage will this be?”

“A short one, I hope. I’m thinking, once the alliance is firmly cemented, we can quietly divorce. That is possible on your world, is it not?”

“Yes, though our divorce rate is quite low.”

Rulik moved closer to cup Shayan’s face. “I’d give anything I own to take away the hurt I see in your eyes. But I have to do this. Too much is at stake for the desires of two or three people to stand in the way.”

“I know,” Shayan murmured. “And I love you more for being so honorable.”

Rulik’s face broke into a smile. “You love me?”

“Yes, heaven help me.”

“Gods help us both because I love you, too.”

Shayan’s joy was tempered with sadness. “I had not dared hope you felt the same way. Will you spend the night? I want one last chance to be with you.”

Rulik drew Shayan’s head down until their lips nearly met. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said, before his mouth closed over Shayan’s in a bittersweet kiss.

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As lips and tongues met, retreated and explored, Shayan pulled Rulik close, savoring the feel of the taut, muscular body. He ran his hands down Rulik's spine to his tight buttocks, then tugged on his tunic. Both men stripped quickly, clothes flying in all directions, then Shayan tumbled on the bed, Rulik on top of him, their groins pressed together, both cocks fully erect. Shayan looked at Rulik and saw the anguish in his expression. "How could this happen? Are your gods conspiring against us?"

Rulik smiled ruefully. "I don't know, but I *will* fix it, I promise. It may take a while, but I'll fix it."

Shayan cupped Rulik's face. "I know you will try, and that is all I can ask."

"I want to look into your eyes while I fuck you. It may be the last time, though I hope not."

"Yes, I want that, too."

Rulik pulled out the lube and opened it, then knelt between Shayan's legs. He raised his ankles to rest on Rulik's shoulders, his knees to his chest. Rulik applied the lube liberally to Shayan's anus, inserting one, then two fingers. He entered with his cock slowly, waiting for Shayan's muscles to stretch, then eased in the rest of the way. He leaned forward for a kiss before he began to thrust, first slowly, then faster and faster. Shayan grasped his own cock and moved his hands up and down in rhythm with Rulik's thrusts. It was bittersweet to look up at Rulik's face, contorted with pleasure and anguish, and know this might be the last time.

"I can't hold on much longer," Rulik gasped.

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Shayan tightened his rectal muscles around Rulik's cock and they climaxed together.

Afterward, Shayan found himself unable to sleep. His life had changed irrevocably since coming to Lodur, perhaps not for the better. He tightened his arm around Rulik's waist as they lay spooned together. He could hold on tight for a little longer.

\* \* \*

Rulik knew he was the envy of every man in the temple as he exchanged vows with Arpana. It amused him their wedding attire reflected the colors of their country's flags. He'd dressed in blue and silver, while she looked stunning in a red silk gown with black and gold trim. What a pity he was the last one to appreciate his bride's beauty and sensuality. But the die was cast, and he would live with the results of his choice.

For a few days, it had looked as if the wedding might be cancelled because of a dispute over who would perform the ceremony. In a final compromise, he and Arpana had agreed to a combined service presided over by both the Ziganese high priest and the Mhajavi Minister of Religion, who was part of their delegation. Rulik was beginning to wonder if he was cut out for diplomacy. He'd never seen so much fuss over inconsequential matters.

When the long ceremony ended, he led his bride through the cheering crowd to the grand ballroom for the wedding feast. As he greeted the guests, most of them the cream of Ziganese society, and introduced his bride, he tried not to



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think of the haunted expression on Shayan's face these last few days.

Fala, who was next in line, greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. "I wish you and Arpana the best."

He squeezed her hands between his. "Thank you. You must be pleased to be returning home soon."

She smiled and withdrew her hands. "I thought you knew. I am staying here. I have joined the archeological expedition to Algott."

He was unable to hide his surprise. "No, I had no idea."

"Arpana and Shayan must have forgotten to mention it. The last few days have been so hectic. I have always been fascinated by ancient history, and it seemed like a good opportunity. One I could not resist actually."

"Then you should go. I hope it will be a rewarding experience for you."

"Thank you." She moved on to exchange a warm embrace with Arpana.

Rulik couldn't help feeling relieved. His one worry had been that Shayan would turn to her to ease his pain. He truly hoped the expedition would be good for her. Not just for her sake, but for his own.

The next few hours passed in a haze of delicious food, fine wines, cheerful music and dancing. By the time he'd drunk numerous toasts to his marriage and the alliance, Rulik was slightly tipsy.

"I believe it is time for us to leave," Arpana suggested. "I do not wish for my bridegroom to fall asleep before he can

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pleasure me.”

Rulik reached for his wine goblet, but Arpana put a hand on his to stop him. “I’m not that drunk,” he joked.

“Not yet, at any rate.”

When she stood and held out a hand, he took it and rose to his feet. Placing her hand in his elbow he led her through the hall while the guests cheered or called out lewd suggestions.

“Are all Ziganese weddings so lavish and raucous?” she asked.

“Not always. This is a particularly auspicious occasion. Be glad some of the old customs have been abandoned, or we’d find ourselves with an audience tonight.”

“I might not have minded that, under other circumstances.”

“Oh?”

She smiled enigmatically. “This will not be a typical wedding night.”

“No, I don’t suppose it will, but this is hardly a normal marriage.”

“Just wait, husband. I have arranged a surprise for you.”

Rulik tried to get her to say what the surprise was, but she refused. He didn’t know whether or not to be alarmed. Who knew what kind of surprise Arpana might come up with?

\* \* \*

When they reached her suite, Arpana asked for a few moments alone in her bedroom to change. Rulik was happy to agree. He wandered around the outer room. Now the time had come, he was more than a little nervous. Would he be able to

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perform? He must have been insane to think he could satisfy this dynamic, sensual woman.

He moved to the window and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. Gods, so much could go wrong. She might back out when she saw him. She was used to men with dark, smooth skin. What if she found his hairiness offensive. Or, more likely, he wouldn't be able to summon an erection.

"What have I done? No matter what happens, this is a bad bargain for both of us."

"What is?"

Rulik wheeled to see Shayan had entered the room. He was dressed in his formal white suit, setting off his dark coloring to perfection. Rulik drank in the sight of the man he loved. "What are you doing here?"

Shayan smiled and walked slowly toward him. "I am your surprise."

"What?"

"Arpana asked me to join the two of you. It will make for an interesting wedding night."

Rulik stared at him, unable to believe his eyes and ears. "You mean there will be three of us?"

"If that does not offend you," Shayan said, his smile fading.

Rulik took a deep breath, hoping to slow his pounding heart. *Thank the gods. And Arpana.* The very idea had his cock hardening. "I've never done this before. But no, I'm not offended."

"But does the idea excite you?" Shayan asked, moving

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closer.

Rulik felt as if he were being stalked by a predator. A large, hungry predator. “Yes,” he said, his voice husky with need.

Shayan stopped scant centimeters from him. “Good. It excites me, too.”

Rulik reached for him and then they were kissing, holding, clutching each other, as a drowning man grabs onto a life preserver.

*This can't be real. Please, gods, let it be real.*

When the kiss ended, Rulik opened his eyes and saw that it was real. Shayan was in his arms. His large, dark eyes were dilated with passion and his breathing fast. “Gods, I’ve missed you these last few days.”

Shayan rested his forehead against Rulik’s and let out a sigh. “And I you. I was in despair until Arpana approached me. It was very unselfish of her to do this.”

“Nonsense,” she said.

Rulik and Shayan turned to see her standing in the doorway to her bedchamber, dressed in a snug-fitting gown made of a white diaphanous fabric that hid none of her womanly attributes. Her nipples were visible through the thin fabric, as was the apex of her thighs. “I expect to be well-loved tonight, gentlemen.”

“You will be,” Shayan promised.

She held out a hand to each of them. “Come, shall we get started?”

Rulik reached her first, scooped her into his arms and

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carried her into her chamber.

She let out a delighted laugh. “Oh, so I have an eager bridegroom after all.”

He set her on her feet and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her ample breasts to his chest. He cupped her firm buttocks and pressed her to his groin, so she could feel his growing erection.

She pulled back to look at him. “You are full of surprises, husband.”

“As are you, wife. You couldn’t have given me a better wedding present.”

She stepped aside and looked at them in turn. “Undress me, both of you.”

“Your wish is our command,” Shayan said, moving to her other side.

Rulik fumbled with the lacings in the back of the back of her gown. Shayan joined him and they took turns kissing her, and each other, as they unlaced her. When her gown was loose, they pushed it off her shoulders, letting it pool at her feet.

Rulik studied her naked form. Her breasts were large but firm and high, her waist small and her hips ample. He knelt and ran a hand down her soft stomach to her pussy. “So it’s true. No pubic hair.”

She parted her legs so he could delve further. Her clit was already distended and slick with her juices. Her thigh muscles clenched, trapping his hand.

Shayan moved behind her, clasped her breasts in his hands

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and ran his thumbs over the nipples, which hardened instantly. She gasped and threw her head back.

Rulik explored her pussy with one hand, his thumb grazing her sensitive clit. With his other hand, he massaged her buttocks, then teased the sensitive skin above her anus. Her breathing quickened under their ministrations, then the spasms started. Rulik steadied her, his head pressed to her belly, and felt the tremors still shaking her body.

When he stood, she pulled him close for a kiss. “Lovely,” she murmured.

He led her to the oversized bed, large enough for four people. He pulled down the covers and she climbed into it, scooting to the middle.

“Now it is your turn to undress each other,” she directed.

He and Shayan exchanged a smile. There was no doubt who was in charge tonight. Not that Rulik had any objections. He unbuttoned Shayan’s jacket and shirt, shoving them off his shoulders and down his long, muscular arms, while Shayan toed off his sandals. Rulik ran his hands down the smooth, broad chest to Shayan’s narrow waist, then went to work on his pants, pushing them down his legs. His cock sprang free, and Rulik wrapped one hand around it. With the other, he cupped Shayan’s balls, eliciting a gasp.

Shayan gripped his wrists, pulling his hands away. “Not yet, *priya*.”

Rulik’s heart lurched on hearing the endearment. *Beloved*. He stared into Shayan’s dark eyes, mesmerized by the love he saw there.

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Arpana cleared her throat, reminding them they were not alone. He heard her get off the bed. She stopped behind Rulik and pressed her body against his back and buttocks. Her arms circled him, stroking his chest and groin, while Shayan stepped free of his pants.

“Your turn now.” He tugged at Rulik’s sash and untied the knot. Working together, Arpana and Shayan pulled Rulik’s tunic over his head, then backed him up to a chair. Rulik sat long enough for Shayan to tug off his boots, then stood and pushed off his own pants. His cock was fully erect.

When she stroked his chest, teasing his nipples, Rulik sucked in a breath. “I’m not too hairy, am I? I know you’re not used to that.”

She laughed and rubbed her breasts against him. “Not at all. Now join me.” She stepped back and led the way to the bed.

Rulik moved to lie on one side of her, while Shayan moved to the other side. Rulik turned her head toward him and kissed her lips. She opened her mouth to admit his questing tongue. When the kiss ended, he opened his eyes to find Shayan’s mouth hovering close to his. Rulik kissed, him, too, indulging in a quick taste of those firm lips.

Before Arpana could object, he kissed his way down her neck and shoulders to her breast. Shayan mimicked his actions on the other side until each man was suckling on one of her distended nipples.

Her breathing quickened. “Oh, yes, don’t stop.”

Rulik let his hand explore her smooth, golden skin and soft

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flesh, so different from Shayan's hard-muscled body. When he cupped her mound, she gave a soft mew.

"Which one of you is going to kiss me there?" she asked, her voice husky with need.

Uncertain, Rulik looked at Shayan.

"Shall I?" he asked quietly.

When Rulik nodded, Shayan moved between Arpana's legs, spreading them wide for his view, while Rulik looked on. Shayan kissed the soft skin of her inner thigh, moving closer and closer to her mound, then blew gently on her distended clit. A small shiver passed through her. He lowered his head and licked her genitals slowly up and down, then circled around the head of her clit. When he pressed the tip of his tongue to her clit, her hips bucked.

He broke contact and glanced at Rulik. "Kiss her," he urged.

Rulik slid one arm under his wife's shoulders and kissed her, while he used his free hand to tease her nipples and run his fingers down her stomach. She gripped his head, her fingers tangling in his hair, pulling on it as she kissed him back. He heard her breathing quicken, then she cried out her release.

"Did you enjoy that?"

"Yes," she said, pressing against his mouth for another wet kiss. Then she fell back on the pillow and let out a sigh.

"Time for a break?" Shayan asked.

She turned toward him and buried her head on his shoulder "For a few minutes only."



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Rulik got up and walked around the bed to Shayan's side and lay beside him. He brushed the curls off Shayan's forehead and kissed him, letting one hand trail down his torso to brush his nipples. As Rulik scooted lower, licking his way down Shayan's chest, Arpana took over in the kissing department. Rulik grinned. *Nothing like team work.*

Shayan's cock was hard and fully erect. When Rulik touched it, he felt the shivers that shook Shayan's body. He pulled his hand away, not wanting to end things too quickly, and stroked Shayan's inner thigh. His testicles pulled up in response.

Shayan pulled his mouth away from Arpana's long enough to say, "Stop tormenting me."

Rulik laughed and took his lover's cock in his hand, wrapping his fist around the base, while he cupped one testicle with the other. He licked the underside of the shaft to the head, savoring the drop of salty liquid on his tongue.

Shayan moaned softly in response.

Rulik grinned, then took the head of Shayan's cock in his mouth as he squeezed gently up and down the shaft. When Shayan's body tensed and his hips bucked slightly, Rulik started to suck on the head of his cock, then drew it into his mouth. Shayan thrust upward and Rulik increased the stimulations, until Shayan came in his mouth.

Rulik crawled back up the bed to kiss and embrace Shayan. Then he glanced at Arpana, who was looking pleased with herself. Rulik kissed her hand. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, husband. And speaking of my pleasure, I

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believe it is time for you to take care of me.”

Rulik laughed, stood and gave her a mock salute. “Yes, ma’am.” Thanks to her “gift,” his cock was at still at attention and ready for action. What he’d thought would be just a duty had turned out to be more pleasurable than he’d ever imagined because Shayan was with him.

He walked around the bed and lay down beside her. She straddled him, taking his cock in her hands. “Very impressive.”

“So glad you approve, milady.”

She stroked his cock, running her warm hands up and down.

He groaned. “Arpana, if you want this marriage consummated...”

“Oh, I do.”

Shayan climbed up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He kissed her earlobe and neck while he caressed her breasts. At the same time, Rulik ran his hands up her inner thighs to her sex and cupped her mound. She responded by pressing into his hand. He used his fingertips to trace the folds of her vulva, avoiding her clit, large and rosy with her arousal. She squirmed, rubbing her buttocks against Shayan’s groin. Rulik used his thumb to gently stroke her clit and delved a finger inside her. She was wet and soft and ready for him. He added a second finger, then a third.

“What are you waiting for?” she panted.

“Excellent question,” he panted. His cock was truly ready to explode. She lifted her hips and he guided it inside her. She

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pressed down as he thrust upward, her large breasts bouncing with each movement, her breathing quick.

Rulik looked at Shayan, saw the love and approval in his eyes, and let go. "I'm going to come." The contractions started at the base of his penis, then spread through his body as he pumped his semen into her warmth.

Shayan reached around to tease her clit, and she came, too, a look of pure ecstasy on her face.

She collapsed on Rulik's chest and he held her while their breathing returned to normal. She was his wife now, for good or ill.

After a moment, she climbed out of bed and headed for the lav.

"Shall I leave you?" Shayan asked.

"Gods, no," Rulik said, holding out his arms. "The bed is large enough for three. Who knows, Arpana might get frisky again in a few hours, and then I will really need you."

Shayan chuckled and climbed in next to Rulik, pulling the covers over both of them. "I would say you rose to the occasion admirably."

"Thanks to you being here." Rulik turned on his side and studied Shayan's face. "This is not how I expected things to turn out when I met you. I'd hoped we could be together."

"I know."

"Will you stay on as Arpana's protector?" Rulik asked.

"Yes, as long as it means I can be close to you."

Rulik smiled with relief. "This isn't exactly the kind of

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alliance I had in mind, but for now it'll do." He reached for Shayan. "Oh, yes, it will do nicely."

*To Be Continued...*

## LYNDI LAMONT

Lyndi Lamont is the racy alter ego of author Linda McLaughlin, who writes historical and Regency Romance. Since becoming Lyndi Lamont, she has discovered that writing erotic romance is a license to be naughty, and at her age, those opportunities don't come along very often!

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