



# *Midnight Showcase*

Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 06-20 ISSN 1555-5496

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*Taming The Tiger by Laura Bacchi*

*Star Tyger by Sultry Summers*

*The Hare of Chandor by Ann Morgan*

*Forbidden Love by K. Melton*

# **MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**

## **Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 06-20**

### **Jaded Beasts II**

### **Tiger - Rabbit**

**MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**  
**[www.midnightshowcase.com](http://www.midnightshowcase.com)**

## Jaded Beasts II – Tiger & Rabbit

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## **Jaded Beasts – Tiger & Rabbit Erotic-aah Digest**

### **The Jaded Beasts Collection**

Ancient and mystical symbols, like that of the Chinese astrology, have been around for centuries. According to various sources, twelve animals presented themselves before the ancient deities and heavens, and these are: the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig, coming in that particular order. The jade gemstone became useful for different things in oriental cultures; like money, symbols of power, jewelry, and so on. Many of the astrology symbols were made from jade pieces. Each sign and animal represented has its own unique abilities, individuality and characteristics.

In six digests, Midnight Showcase proudly presents two symbols and four novellas per digest with four authors giving their unique spin on these tales. However, as mystical as most of the stories are in some aspect, “jaded” and “beasts” have many meanings. Read them all to find out.

**Jaded Beasts II, Tiger & Rabbit**  
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**Tiger** – Confident in their beliefs, tigers possess ferocious characteristics that easily hide their responsive and easy-going natures. They take many risks in life, but are often rewarded with love and happiness through others they emotionally win over.

**Rabbit** – The hare is a loving, accommodating person, but they will dodge situations where they are at odds with others. Over-emotional and hasty they may be, but they are guarded in their traditional ways, besides being very calculating.

**Taming The Tiger – Laura Bacchi**

Summoned by a dream, Ju Hua joins the leader of the Tiger Clan to defeat a brutal foe. Who knew war could be so fun?

**Star TyGer – Sultry Summers**

Astronomer Sapphire Lee accidentally discovers evil Myng's ship in outer space, battling Prince Tyger's. With Tyger's help and Sapphire's unknown powers, can they defeat Myng?

**The Hare of Chandor – Ann Morgan**

Shaylara Evanos must work with the notorious Valas Chandor, but couldn't allow him into her bed, for fear of losing her heart.

**Forbidden Love – K. Melton**

When Adrian meets his forbidden love, he goes against family and tradition. But will Sophie's love be enough for two races to co-exist as one?

**Taming The Tiger**  
**By**  
**Laura Bacchi**

Summoned by a dream, Ju Hua joins the leader of the Tiger Clan to defeat a brutal foe. Who knew war could be so fun?

[www.laurabacchi.com](http://www.laurabacchi.com)

## **Taming the Tiger**

**By**

**Laura Bacchi**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

He'd been in her head again.

Ju Hua stumbled out into daylight and shielded her eyes from the morning sun. If she didn't get some sleep soon, she would surely lose her mind.

That man—that beautiful man—haunted her dreams last night as he had for the past twelve nights. At least she enjoyed looking at him in her mind's eye. She wanted to touch the muscles rippling over his smooth, bronze chest. And the part nestled against his thighs? She wanted to touch this, too.

Over a year ago, before the Xie conquerors destroyed her village, before her father left to talk with the Mountain Spirits, the Dui had visited her clan. The warrior tribe warned of the Xie and offered to stay and protect her people. For a price.

Unfortunately, the people of the Sheep had little silver to offer, and leather-clad warriors needed no wool. She watched them ride away, each strong body becoming one with his stallion. While fear swept through the hearts of her people, she could only think about one of the Dui taking her as his woman. Riding her like he rode the horse beneath him.

The dream-man had the body of a Dui fighter. Was he a protector, too? Or perhaps a Spirit hoping to lure her to the mountains to join her father? His mouth moved during the dream, but so far she'd understood no words. Perhaps tonight she would ask him what he wanted. If he told her, maybe she would finally get some rest.

She called to her fluffy white companions. A bundle of wool named Mei trotted toward Hua and bumped her leg with affection. She threaded her fingers through the oily fuzz of her favorite ewe and

laughed. “Maybe if I speak sheep to him, he will understand.”

Mei bleated in agreement, and Hua thought aloud some more. “He might be the Sheep Spirit trying to tell me where my father is or warning us of the Xie. What do you think?”

The ewe left her side to join the others heading deeper into the valley. Hua sighed. “I guess I’ll have to figure it out on my own.” She trudged up to her favorite spot and dropped her pack to the hard ground below. The wide expanse of sky offered few clouds and plenty of blue. It would be a good day for thinking.

Her mind wandered back to the man. She shut her eyes and conjured up his form. Dark, sensual eyes locked with hers. Today, during her waking moments, he seemed closer. Clearer. She could even see an amulet of some sort around his neck.

“Can you hear me?”

Hua jerked to standing and looked around for whoever had spoken. She was alone.

*I am losing my mind.* She pressed her fingers against her temples to make the deep male voice go away.

“I can’t go away,” said the man. “You are the one.”

*The one for what?* She closed her eyes again, unable to resist the mystery of his words.

“I am Li of the Tiger Clan.”

The vision in her mind became crisp and lucid, and she noted with dismay that the most intriguing part of him disappeared from view as he stepped nearer. To see a real man’s cock would be worth the insanity she experienced at the moment.

He laughed. “You are sane. It takes a strong mind to receive my Dream Presence. You are Sheep Clan, no?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good. Then you are the man chosen to mend our clans’ differences and help me defeat the Xie.”

Hua frowned. “Can you see me, as I see you?”

“No.”

“And my words. Do you hear my voice?”

“No, brave one. I sense you are young and strong, but I can only feel some of your words of reply.”

Hua quickly thanked the Spirits that her thoughts about his cock apparently went unheard. *This should be interesting...*

“And dangerous,” he added, completing her sentence. “But together we can do this.” He reached for the amulet at this neck. Hua



## Jaded Beasts II – Tiger & Rabbit

gasped.

She could see it clearly now. The broken, weathered medallion dangling from a leather strap resembled the one her father gave her last year before heading to the high hills. Together, the two pieces would make a whole.

What had her father said that final morning? *When the two come together, so will two peoples.*

Li interrupted the memory. “It is time for the Sheep and the Tiger to walk side by side. You will know where to find me.”

And the sureness in his voice told her he spoke the truth.

## CHAPTER TWO

Elder Chang rolled his eyes. “Females do not call council.”

Hua crossed her arms over her chest and hoped he could see the defiance in her stance. When he attempted to move around her and enter his home, she blocked his path.

Chang threw his hands skyward. “My wife’s good food grows cold. Stand out here all you want.” He side-stepped her quickly before disappearing behind the skins that covered the entrance to his hut.

Hua let out a low whistle and watched her herd draw near. When a little lamb peeked into the Chang’s home, Hua urged it forward. The Elder’s voice rumbled from inside the hut.

“Ju Hua!”

Naturally, another member of the herd became curious. The shepherdess gently persuaded it to follow the first. Soon, the dirt path emptied of sheep. Hua peeked into Chang’s small mud house and laughed at the curious white creatures nosing into clay pots and relieving themselves on the dirt floor.

“My sheep like to sleep in a shelter, Elder. Since I’ll be up all night, waiting for you to change your stubborn pig-mind, they might as well get some rest.”

Chang’s wife stared at the wooly invasion in disbelief. Her husband tried not to trip while he made his way outside to shake a finger in her face.

“If your father were here—”

“If my father were here, then my life would be much easier.” Hua narrowed her eyes. “There is no man to represent our family. Why the Spirits do you think I am so pig-minded myself?”

“I’m sorry about your father.” A twinge of sympathy softened his ruddy face, but his kind words didn’t last long. “Let’s hope he returns soon to take you in hand. Better yet, maybe I can find a village boy to do the task.”

Hua drew herself up to full height and stepped close enough to

bite his nose. Chang reared back as if she would.

“Show me a man in this village, and I will marry. The frightened lambs who fled to the hills while the Xie attacked last season do not interest me.”

“They were keeping their parents safe and hiding the sheep.”

“They couldn’t even ring the bell of warning? While those in the village center escaped harm, we in the valley lost everything.” Tears of rage burned her cheeks. “My grandmother will limp for the rest of her days.”

“If only your father had stayed...”

“If only the ‘shepherds’ of the village had tended their herd.”

Chang hung his head. “I feel shame for that night.”

“Then give me an audience.” She whistled and a swarm of sheep trotted out into the chilly night air, threading through her legs and Chang’s. He wobbled, but Hua stood still, her bones fortified by tenacity and purpose. “It’s the least you can do.”

The Elder sighed in defeat. “Get your sheep home, stubborn one. I will gather the council and light a fire at Sheep Rock.”

\* \* \* \*

Men were so easy to read, Hua mused as she faced the council. The leaders’ eyes spoke to her. Told her the tales of their souls and the intentions of their hearts.

The lustful ones raked her body with slow leers that left little guessing as to what parts they liked most. With her jacket discarded, her breasts rose and fell with each anxious breath, and the bulk of her winter dress did little to conceal the fullness hidden beneath. Elder Jing’s eyes preferred to wander lower in search of the important parts.

Chang’s gaze, however, showed remorse and a touch of embarrassment. No doubt he would suffer for this outrageous favor. She sensed anger and boredom from the older married men.

The anger she could not dispel. Their boredom however...

She gave a quick bow. “The leader of the Tiger Clan would like to unite our two clans in defense against the Xie.” She waited for their laughter. It never came. Instead, the men looked at each other or glanced at the ground.

Chang cleared his throat. “We know this. We’ve had the dreams.”

“Did Li choose one of you to go also?” she asked.

The men seated on the sacred rock shifted nervously or became quite interested in their boot lacings. Hua lost her patience.

“Can someone please explain?”

Jing spoke up. “It is a message from Zhong Li. I saw him at the river market many years ago and remember his face.”

“But did he ask you to travel to his village?” Hua asked.

The young man shook his head. “The dreams stopped coming a few days ago. During the last dream, he said a strong leader had been chosen. Then he walked into the fog.”

Hua’s hands settled on her hips as her confusion grew. “Anyone else?”

Chang rose. “The same thing happened to us all. We were not chosen.”

A sneer twisted Jing’s face. He gestured to Hua. “Apparently you were.”

All the males except Chang filled the air with cackles of ridicule. Jing pressed on. “You must be more man than all of us. No wonder you aren’t mated yet.”

She waited for the laughter to die down, then spoke. “I need the council to send a runner to Zhong Li. He has chosen the wrong person.” When no one responded, she added, “I can’t leave my grandmother, and I’m not a leader.”

Jing’s mirth started up again. “You *are* a leader, Ju Hua. A leader of sheep.” Male laughter returned in full-force. If she had a horn and ballocks between her legs, she would have smacked the amusement from his face.

“Protecting ourselves against the Xie is nothing to laugh about,” she said, but no one save Chang acknowledged her remark. He nodded his agreement.

There was nothing more she could say. All she could do was hope they’d vote to send a message to the Tiger Clan.

Hua bowed her thanks to Chang, gathered her coat, and headed into the night where a sliver of moonlight illuminated the narrow path leading to her home. She had no idea what to do. Would Li become angry with her people when she didn’t arrive? An opportunity for an alliance between the two clans was not something to push aside lightly. Tigers possessed strong fighting skills and would prove useful should the Xie return.

In the distance, her family hut appeared, its smoke hole puffing gray shapes into the silvery night. Wispy curls of smoke drifted toward the clouds above. That’s when she noticed the snow.

Large, irregular flakes dotted the darkness and wafted to the

ground. She held out her hand. The shapes collecting in her palm melted slowly, and a frigid gust stung her face with the promise of more. Much more.

In the darkness, the male named Zhong Li called out to her.

“Hurry. Messengers warn of a blizzard. And I am anxious to meet the one who will help me.” The image of Li smiled then vanished.

*Hurry?* Hua clenched her fists into tight balls and stifled a roar of frustration. Why was her life path never easy? And who will watch over the sheep and her grandmother if she leaves?

“Ju Hual!”

She turned back to see Chang huffing down the hill, his breath a fog of white.

“Yes, Elder?”

“The men have voted.”

“On sending a runner?” she asked. “Or on which of them should go?”

“Neither. They’ve decided that you must go. You must heed the dream.”

The roar she’d held back earlier broke free and unleashed its fury on the wind. The gusts grew stronger in response, as if feeling her anger.

He closed his eyes. “But I must tell you, the vote was six stones to one. I could not send you to do a man’s task.”

Wetness gathered in her eyes but she refused to let it spill. “What about my grandmother? Our family herd?”

Chang dropped to his knees and bowed his head. “Since I failed you, I will take care of your household.”

Her household? The honor he’d just bestowed upon her with those two words set her heart free. It fluttered under skin and bone like a bird released into the openness of sky.

She sank down to join him and waited for him to look up.

“Thank you, Elder Chang.”

“The braveness of your soul belies your womanhood. And it will do your grandmother good to stay in the village.”

“Yes. Not as far to fetch water and firewood.”

“Woman Chang will do that for her. And I think the two will keep each other company.”

Hua smiled, then looked back to her hut. “I should say good-bye tonight.”

They both returned to standing. “I would walk with you, you who are chosen.”

The rest of the trip, made in silence, weighed heavy on her mind. Grandmother was awake when they entered, and she cradled a cloth-covered bundle in her frail, trembling hands.

“*Nai nai*, I have some things to tell you.” Hua joined her grandmother on the bed pallet.

The old woman smiled and patted her granddaughter on the arm. “Old women have one foot on the Earth and the other in the Spirit world.” Chang and Hua exchanged glances. “You are special, Hua, and a quest awaits you. I have packed your things. And this.” She held out the object in her hand. “Did you know it belonged to me before I gave it to your father?”

“No, I didn’t.” Hua opened the parcel and slipped the medallion around her neck and under her hair. “Where did you get it?”

“It’s a long story, and one I promise to share when you return.” Her grandmother’s eyes twinkled as she changed the subject. “What do you know about tigers, daughter of my son?”

“The tiger is brave. Respected. Li’s people will be loyal to him until death.”

“What else?”

Hua sifted through her mind for more. “A sharp mind?”

*Nai nai* nodded. “But also quick to act. Too quick, sometimes. Li is wise to choose a sheep.”

“Why?” Hua asked.

The elderly woman chuckled. “Tigers are good at leaping into the air, but they forget the ground will be waiting. A sheep understands what lies beneath her feet and moves with the powers of Spirit Earth. She knows how to climb the rocks without falling and how to cross a fast-flowing creek. It takes a patient ewe on sure legs to make the tiger see when he is wrong.”

Hua flopped back onto the pallet. “I have a feeling we will have much conflict between us.”

“Of that I have no doubt, but with conflict comes understanding. And I think a union between a sheep and a tiger will be good for you both.”

Hua sat up and frowned. “You mean, for our people.”

Her grandmother eyes grew distant, as if the future or maybe the past gave her pause, but she hugged Hua tight. Then she patted the amulet and tucked it beneath Hua’s thick clothing. “That, too.”

Her eyes stretched wide. “Are you matchmaking, *nai nai*? Because I have no need for men.”

Grandmother lowered her voice. “I know what you carry in your pack, but the day will come when you will want a real man, and not some piece of horn.”

Chang coughed, reminding them of his presence. “The Chang household would be honored if you waited for your granddaughter’s return at our hut.” He turned to Hua. “Do you have an old blanket?”

She searched through the folded pile of cloth at the edge of the pallet. After making her selection, Chang pulled his blade out and sliced the worn blanket she held aloft. When the blanket was no more, she and Chang gathered up the strips he’d made and headed for the sheep hut.

The clouds had been busy. Snow already covered most of the ground, and the two figures crunched their way to mark the sheep. When Hua bent low to tie a strip around Mei’s neck, she buried her face in the animal’s fleece, then inhaled, burning the memory of the ewe’s scent onto her heart.

“I’ll be back in the morning to lead your herd to my shelter,” Chang whispered.

She heard him leave his mark on the fresh-fallen snow. Mei rested against Hua’s chest until the chill became unbearable. After a cautious bleat and a quick lick of her mistress’s cheek, the sheep nudged her. Hard. The shepherdess fell back laughing.

“I’m going now. Really.”

Then she brushed herself off, thankful to have avoided any sheep piles, and headed back home to finish the packing for her trip.

### CHAPTER THREE

The packing was easy, the leaving hard.

Grandmother and the family of Chang said their good-byes. Chang's wife gently held Mei's neck to keep the ewe from following her favorite human. Mei bleated in protest, but Hua refused to look back.

Elder Chang had even been kind enough to lend her his only pair of snow boots for the two-day journey, and, although heavy, the boots kept her feet and calves warm while she trudged into snow drifts hiding the landscape. Without them, she wouldn't have made it up the rocky face of Tiger Hill.

When she reached the top, a path became visible amid the white flakes, and soon she faced an enormous gate. A carved image of a ferocious tiger stared her down, daring her to pick up the metal ring in its mouth and knock. Hua called forth her courage and clapped the knocker down onto wood three times strong and clear.

She heard footsteps on the other side of the gate, then the sounds of someone climbing. But no head appeared above the gate. Her eyes dropped back down, and she worried they wouldn't allow her into the village.

"Who are you, and why have you come here?"

Hua jumped at the voice and looked up. There, in place of the tiger's eyes, were two human eyes peering down at her. She cleared her throat. "I have come to deliver an urgent message to your leader regarding the Xie."

The gate flew open, and two men escorted her through a maze of busy streets. She followed with an open mouth and tried to take it all in. So many people! They bartered and begged. They yelled out to Hua to buy their goods. And what wonders they offered for sale: colorful bolts of cloth, clay pots filled with spices, dried meats and more nuts than she'd ever seen in her life. She wanted to ask her escorts to stop and let her look, but reminded herself she had nothing



to trade and certainly no coin.

Zhong Li's huge home made of baked clay tiles sat in the middle of the city, and the men at her side took her directly to the leader's inner sanctum, then left her there. She questioned their trustful nature at first, but realized their ruler must have told his people to expect a visitor from the North. Perhaps, with her hair hidden and her tall form, they'd mistaken her for a man...

She put her hand on the wooden door separating her from her future battle partner. What if he asked her how many men her village would supply for the fight? She could count on a few people, but this wouldn't be very impressive to a man in charge of a hundreds, maybe even thousands.

Her sweaty fingers slid down the door while she thought. The field-tending clan of the South would be too far to reach, and the Xie didn't bother those peoples much anyway. Nomads who roamed the Western Plain loved to fight, but loved to fight amongst themselves as well. An unruly lot like those tribes would not easily follow the dictates of others.

Her stomach tightened. She could offer so little to a man who would expect much. Only one local tribe remained, and no one cared for them at all. She wasn't sure why, but the clan of Outcasts to the Northeast would have plenty of men available for battle. And rumor had it that the Outcasts hated the Xie as much as the Xie despised them.

It was her only hope, and she knocked quietly on the door. After her third round of knocking, she eased the door open and stared down at the man who roused, and aroused her, night after night. He slept beside a tiger, its paw on Li's chest. The man's hand rested on the beast's striped head, which unfortunately covered parts she wanted very much to see.

She pulled off her hood, and sent the bells of her long braids jingling toward the floor.

"Wake up, tigers," she said. "This is not how one prepares for battle."

\* \* \* \*

The beautiful woman in Zhong Li's dream faded into oblivion, and in her stead loomed a thick shadow that appeared to be female. Two long braids the color of pine soot dangled past her knees, and the breeze coming through the door she disrespectfully left open gave the plaits life. Tarnished brass bells at the end of each queue chimed

cheerlessly against her fleece-lined boots, but all else about her remained silent and still.

He regarded her silhouette while his eyes adjusted to the low lights of his chamber. She was of sturdy stock, tall with shoulders as broad as his younger brothers. At least with her clothes on. Who knew what secrets lay beneath the padded *wei* coat and leggings? Maybe one day he'd find out. Red blotches stained her high cheekbones, perhaps chapped from her work in the fields. Then he remembered his state of undress and wondered if she wore a blush.

Bai stirred on his lap. Li grinned and wondered what she'd do if his pet tiger rose to reveal his meager loin covering. Her eyes darted to the orange and black fur draped over his privates, but not in fear or even expectation. She seemed to be assessing the situation, preparing her next move. A woman with a keen mind could be difficult—or lots of fun in the pallet.

"I take it you have business with me. Are you here to trade?" His gaze traveled over her form. *And if so, can it not involve those dreadful clothes?*

"I am Ju Hua of the Northern peoples—"

He waved his hand in frustration. "You interrupted my nap to talk sheep? Woman, the Tiger Clan hasn't traded with your kind since... Since before my father was born."

Who the Spirits let her barge into his room to discuss wool? He'd been up late training his troops. His household always obeyed the sanctity of his naps. Li shut his eyes again and groaned.

"Perhaps you and I can change that," she said.

His eyes flew open when he heard the sound of jacket ties slipping loose. She teased a length of leather from beneath her high collar. A jolt shot through him when the amulet came into view, his movements rousing Bai from her slumber. With the weight of the animal gone, he jumped up to hold the metal charm in his hands, but jerked to a halt when a terrible odor slammed him in the face.

"You stink, woman."

"It's sheep fat, mixed with herbs. To protect against the wind." She offered him a blinding grin and added, "And to repel the remaining men of my village."

He laughed. "Ju Hua of the North, your potion is very effective." *And your smile most unexpected.*

One slim eyebrow lifted on her well-formed face. "That's good to hear. I had worried it only worked on Northern men."

Li laughed again, harder this time until his belly ached. The woman intrigued him, and her sharp sense of humor only added to her mystery. He pointed to a basin of water on the other side of the room. “Well, since you’re inside and we know it works, please take it off.”

Her smile vanished. She stepped closer, close enough for him to know that something sweeter existed beneath the rank concoction on her face. Something female and strong. Intelligent brown eyes dipped down to explore his unclad body. Even her stench and the cloth over his groin couldn’t defeat the stiffness growing in his cock.

“I should probably keep it on. For your own protection, of course.” She raised the amulet higher. “The time for banter is over, Zhong Li. You called me here for a reason. Although we hail from rival clans, we are connected in some way. Are you willing to set our clans’ differences aside and work together to defeat the Xie?”

His mouth rolled into what he hoped was his sexiest grin. “For you, I am willing to do many things.” Her eyes grew steamy. He could easily lose himself in their warm depths as he buried himself in her wetness. “After I pleasure you, send in your chief and I’ll be glad to share my strategy—”

“If you are capable of pleasuring me, which I doubt, you’ll be too tired and muddled-headed to hear *my* strategem. I come alone, and I solely represent the Sheep Clan in this matter.”

Li rested his palms on her shoulders. “The men, if you can call them that, have sent you here after telling you of the dream. I need to call forth a warrior to fight beside me. Apparently the Sheep have none to offer.”

“I had the dream,” she said. “I had more details than any of the others, and you told me I was the one. I am meant to go with you.”

She had to be joking. He tried to make his words sound gentle. It took a lot of courage for her to come here, and he didn’t want to bruise her spirit. “You are a woman. Women tend fields, become wives, and have babies.”

Her eyes narrowed, and his hand cradled her chin. “These are all necessary things. Noble things. But females don’t herd sheep, they don’t travel beyond their village to answer a quest, and they certainly don’t spill blood. Go home, little flower, and keep safe.”

His hands found her shoulders again and tried to turn her back toward the door. The woman was a rock. He added more force to make her budge but still failed to move her.

“With all respect due you, Leader Zhong, men don’t leave their

daughters to herd sheep like my father did. Men don't send a woman out in the midst of a savage blizzard to save themselves like the spineless ewes of my village council did. And men don't attack a female's hut like the Xie did last season and cripple a woman of eighty and three." She lifted her chin. "From my point of view, I'm more man than most I've known."

He couldn't argue with her logic. "All right, *Master* Hua. Let me share my plan to conquer the Xie."

"I'm listening."

"My runners have spied them at the Three Gorges Rock preparing for a new raid. The men of the Tiger Clan excel at the long spear, and you will ask the men of your clan to come here to train."

She shook her head. "The men of my clan are cowards. I can talk maybe five into joining us."

Li's eyes went wide at this bit of news. "This is not the time for humor."

"I do not joke," Hua said, "but I know where to find many men. Men who hate the Xie."

"I'm listening."

"We will ask the Outcasts."

Li's jaw dropped in disbelief. "Now I know you jest."

"The Outcasts will fight with us. We will have to be persuasive, maybe offer them a chance to trade with us twice each year." She turned to wash her face and added, "It's only fair, and there is strength in numbers. As a leader and a warrior, you should know this well."

The woman had a good point. "I guess it couldn't hurt to ask."

She folded the washing cloth and set it down by the bowl. "Are you going to send me to do it alone like my clansmen would?"

"Oh, I plan to go." *I wouldn't miss this for the world.* Did she know about the Outcasts? What they did behind closed doors and why they were exiled in the first place? Li pictured the shock on her face when she learned more about her choice of allies.

"Let's say the Outcasts agree, Hua. You'll have your men—"

"*Our* men," she corrected.

"We'll have our men. But can they fight?"

"I'm of the mind that a person with a purpose, with a true desire to defeat the scourge of the Xie, will find the means to succeed. Once we speak with them, we can determine if they have any ideas."

"Ju Hua of the Sheep Clan, do you always take things on faith, placing hope in possibilities and dreams?"

She studied the wall behind him. “I suppose I do. Is that so bad?”

Li shook his head. “I find hope in dreams as well. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” She nodded. “I think you and I will do this thing and bring our clans together at the same time.”

“Then you accept me to battle by your side?”

“Yes, Hua.”

She smiled, and they bowed slowly and deeply to seal their agreement. When she rose, the bag on her shoulder hit the ground, taking her jacket with it.

He grinned. “I can show you to a chamber, Warrior Hua.”

“Hair as it is or loose?” she asked.

“What?”

Her hands went straight for the silken ties of her tunic. “Earlier, you spoke of pleasuring me. Is this to be our first misunderstanding?” Her beige tunic wafted to the floor, leaving her in braids and boots and leggings. He stepped back in surprise—and to enjoy the view.

A delicate patch of dark curls hid her sex. Her breasts, however, sat high and proud like their owner. Taut, crimson nipples perched on paler circles that covered almost half of each breast. She ran a hand along her neck then sought the little nubbin nestled between her legs. When her middle finger worked back and forth against the swollen ridge, his cock threatened to explode.

He willed himself to take a breath. “Perhaps this would be a good time to close my door.”

“I agree, unless you prefer an audience.”

He waited for her to do the task, but she didn’t move. “You opened it. Aren’t you going to shut it?”

She snorted. “It’s your door.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Li sprinted to the door like a submissive chamber girl and latched it shut. Thoughts reeled through his head. What kind of woman ordered full-grown men about like servants? And what type of female dared to demand sex in such a manner? His prick twitched when the answer came to him: the type of female he wanted fighting by his side—and for his own. Underneath him. Yielding yet strong. She removed her boots and leggings.

Li’s mouth went dry. His hands hovered around the cloth at his waist in uncertainty. What woman gives herself so quickly to a man she’d just met? He wondered for a brief second if she could be an assassin sent by the Xie, but the need to possess her and the sincerity in her eyes pushed those thoughts aside. She could be trusted.

He gathered a thick braid between his fingers. The tie came undone and set her tresses free. After both queues were no more, she tousled her locks with both hands. The movement forced her breasts to jut out and sway, tempting him to take a nipple into his mouth. She drew him close and guided him to the plump tip, still in control, still in command of their sensual dance.

Then she tore away the cloth between his legs and leaned over to gaze at what now poked out. She sighed.

He released the warm nipple in his mouth. “Don’t be afraid, Hua. Its length has caused many women to tremble, but not in fear.”

“I fear no part of you. I was only sounding my disappointment.”

He started to reply but hesitated when she bent low and wrestled something out of her bag. Something long and shiny. A ram’s horn?

She held the object up for his inspection. “The male sheep of the Qin Be region are prized by women throughout our clan. Do you know why?”

Li shook his head.

“Look closer.”

The horn had been carved. Did his eyes deceive him? The thing looked vaguely like a shiny, gray cock. One of substantial proportions.

“These sheep have thick, straight horns.” Hua walked to the low bed and sat on the edge. Her legs fell open and a moist strip of pink came into view. The horn, held steady by her strong hands, pressed into the entrance of her sex.

“I carved it myself. It fits me perfectly.” The horn slipped deeper. Li’s heart thundered in his chest. “How will you fit me, Leader of the Tiger Clan?”

When he knelt down and took hold of her hand, she relinquished her grip and fell back against the bed. The woman took almost every bit of the object, then pulled her knees up to open wider for each new plunge in. His cock wept for its own turn. After one last dip of the horn, he dropped it, flipped her over, and slammed into her slick heat.

“I will fit you just fine, Hua.” And the whimper she so sweetly murmured told him that he did.

\* \* \* \*

Li’s cock wasn’t as large as her horn, or as wide. But it was flexible, and the spongy tip of it rubbed steady against the sensitive places deep inside her sex.

Maybe a man *was* good for something. She’d never tried to

pleasure herself from behind—she'd never even thought of it, although she'd watched her rams do this countless times. Hua wondered what other erotic skills he possessed. And whether he'd share them all with her.

His strong fingers dug into her hips and jerked her back. The sac beneath his cock crashed into her, fanning her damp heat with their swaying. She savored each slap of its fuzzy texture against her cunt and impaled herself on his shaft again and again until he teased her away from him with a slow rhythm that drove her insane. He moved inside her, twisting his hips at the perfect moment, with the perfect amount of pressure. Then he crashed their bodies together fast and needy. Impatient. Demanding.

Her mouth became a desert, her sex a river. Juice from deep inside her slicked his erection and made their joining easy. He glided in and out without friction, filling her, probing her to the womb and back until a shiver racked her limbs. Her head went light, and her vision lost focus.

She covered her mouth when the moans and grunts began. At any other time, the sounds she made would've set her to laughing. But now, here, in his warm bed, she didn't care. Couldn't care. The noises needed to come out and mix with his own groans of bliss.

His fingers crept over her thigh and down past her mound. He barely touched her, but the spot he found made her soar like a bird in spring. She ground her lips into his blankets and sang in earnest, each shove of his hips sending her higher into the sky. And just when she thought she'd explode, he pressed her into the pallet, rolled her over, and licked her tender folds.

A hot tongue went wild against all of her secrets. It explored her slippery hole and trailed along the fleshy peak of her mound. The flickering of his tongue's tip sent a shudder through her body until the next quiver came, sharper and sweeter than anything she'd ever felt. Her sex clenched tight with all the strength of a fist, then relaxed and tightened one final time.

In that moment, she fell from the heavens, and the center of her being drifted down with a fierce trembling, as if the wind coiled inside her stomach like a whirlwind. She prayed the sensation would never stop, but the mouth between her thighs slowed and the glorious feeling subsided.

She looked down. He smiled up at her with dark shining eyes while his lips placed soft kisses where he'd lapped and thrilled her

moments ago.

He crawled up the length of her. “Can your horn do that?”

She shook her head. Li grinned in conquest. His hand caught hers and brought it to his plump cock. “I want to watch your face while I fuck you.” She spread her legs wider in welcome.

He eased right in and wasted no time in finding a rhythm to make her coo and sigh. The release his mouth gave her made her insides ripe for the pumping, and pump he did. After working his way onto his knees, he clutched the back of hers and lifted her legs high until his teeth scraped at her ankles and nipped her heels.

The dual assault on feet and cunt left her giddy. Blood drained from her calves and made her tingle everywhere below the waist. At this angle, he could deliver thrust after powerful thrust, and he lowered both her legs to his right to enter her from the side. His spirited strokes left her breathless, and the knob of his cock shoved into her like a ram claiming a ewe. And just when she thought it’d never end, he gasped and shook and filled her with warm spurts of his seed.

He dropped onto her body and slid behind her, holding her near. She took a deep breath, then wriggled free of his arms.

“Where are you going?” he asked. “We’ve just warmed the bed...”

“Enjoy it for a few minutes more, then get up, Tiger. We have an army to gather.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Li looked back on his village. Most of his people returned home after saying their farewells, but his father and mother remained by the gate, watching with sad eyes.

“Come on, Tiger. I miss my family, too.” Hua gave the pack on his back a quick tug. “Our journey will be hard enough with the snow.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. It would be a difficult trek. He wondered to himself if she’d be wrong about anything. True, the woman was smart, but Li decided to give himself some praise for their alliance—his ability to summon her in dreams spoke highly of his mind’s capabilities.

When his grandfather first told him of the power of Dream Presence, Li had been young, stupid, and skeptical. Under his grandfather’s tutelage, he’d pretend to practice the channeling of energy while fantasizing about the young women of the village. He’d sit by his grandfather’s side and mimic the man’s serene pose while the cock in his pants grew stiff and eager for the wetness of a woman. Finally, after two months of meditation and training, he did have an amazing dream, one so real it woke him in the midnight hour with its intensity. But it had nothing to do with the Tiger Spirit or the wisdom of his elders—it concerned a very naked trio of village girls and a puddle of his sticky semen.

Much to Li’s happiness, this sort of dream began to come with great frequency. He’d lie to Grandfather about receiving messages from the ancestors, but the wise old man knew better and eventually grew tired of his grandson’s untruthfulness. To teach Li a lesson, the elder sent him a dream so vivid, so frightening that he woke with a scream and another wet spot—this time, of his own urine.

Grandfather must have known the boy would come to the cooking room to find water and clean up. He sat in the shadows and nearly caused Li to piss all over himself again. Thankfully, his

bladder had been emptied with the nightmare.

“Now do I have your attention, Zhong Li?”

Li bowed his head. “Yes, Grandfather.”

“Even the most fearless leaders believe in dreams, my son.”

“I know that, Grandfather.”

“Do you? Let me tell you a story. A warrior with many troops once prepared for battle. A peasant with the magic of Dream Presence gave him a dream the night before the war, a nightmare so real and bloody the warrior woke up in his own feces. Do you know what happened the next day?”

“No, sir.”

“The warrior, filled with cowardice from what he thought was prophecy, stalled the next morning and made the mistake of sharing the vision with his aides. His men grew restless. They saw his terror and lost confidence.”

“But the peasants of Luan-Ji marched to the field where the battle was to take place. Without armor. Without real weapons. They raised stones and the tools used in tending their crops, and they made not a sound. One hundred poor, untrained men closed their eyes and sent out images to the warriors, their horses, their dogs.”

Li listened with reverence while the elder continued his tale. “The animals became unmanageable. Some grew wild and ran off. The sky went dark with thousands of crows. And a hundred simple men sent ten times as many brutes fleeing back to the land from whence they came. That, my child, is a force to respect. Lie to me again, and your training ends.”

A shiver danced up Li’s spine as he remembered his grandfather’s closing words. Before leaving this afternoon, he’d paid a visit to his mentor’s bedside. He wanted to say good-bye and give thanks for passing on this skill to him. But he also went to ask Grandfather how a woman could receive his dream messages.

“She’s a special soul, my son, blessed by the Spirits and strong of mind. Heed her words well, and try to teach her what I taught you.”

Li stared out at the snowy mountains ahead, but what he saw in his mind was a tiger leaping straight at them. He conjured up this image and concentrated on it, letting it grow more fierce and menacing. Then he projected it into Hua’s mind.

She stopped in her tracks, panting and wide-eyed. “Get out of my head. And don’t you ever do that again.”

He took hold of her arm. “Sorry. My grandfather suggested I

teach you about Dream Presence.”

“Then teach me. But don’t make my heart explode. You could kill a person with that power!”

“I don’t think my skills are that strong.”

Hua quirked an eyebrow at his words. “I beg to differ. So, Master Li, how does one throw a dream into another person’s head?”

“Well, you think of some things. An image. An emotion. You mix the two together and focus with all your energy. Use your breathing. Tighten every muscle in your body and then relax as you imagine the person receiving your vision.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

He laughed. “You can’t do it here, while walking.”

“But you just did.”

“I’ve been doing this for years. You’ll need to practice at night with darkness and quiet.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yes. And I think you’ll do well with it. You’ll probably be able to send short visions within a month or two. Maybe an image of your face saying words like, ‘Danger,’ or ‘I’m safe.’ That kind of thing.”

“Then I will try.”

He smiled. “Great. I look forward to teaching many things to you tonight—ahhh!”

\* \* \* \*

Hua knelt down and loosened his thick coat. “Are you okay?”

He blinked several times and propped himself up on his elbows. “Spirits, you have a strong mind.” His finger caught a braid to pull her near. “And if you *ever* do that to me again, I’ll...”

She grinned. “You’ll what?”

“I’ll punish you soundly. On the bottom.” He grinned back. “You won’t be able to sit without wincing until the new moon.”

She offered a hand and helped him rise. “I should like to see you try.” Then she looked out onto the horizon. “How far until we reach the Outcasts?”

“We should be there by sun fall, if all goes well.” He didn’t let go of her fingers when they started to walk again. Hua didn’t mind. She ran a thumb along his broad, smooth palm and was glad for the warmth he provided to her numb digits.

He felt good, this man beside her. Everything about him—how his eyes laughed when she made some cutting remark in jest, how those same eyes pierced her with an intensity not found in the gazes

of her clan's men. Li possessed a strength and intelligence she could respect, and a depth she wanted to dive into headlong and trusting as she explored the untapped measure of his soul.

“Li?”

“Yes?”

“What do you know about the amulets we wear?”

“The head of our clan wears it as a symbol of his leadership. It has been in our family for many generations. In the past, a matching half was given to the mate of the leader's choosing, and the two halves make a whole somehow. But the woman's half disappeared many years ago. The Zhong household doesn't talk about it.”

“If two pieces become one when a leader is mated,” she asked, “is the amulet split when the leader steps down?”

“Yes. It's thrown into a ceremonial fire, and the next morning, after the ashes have cooled, the medallion returns to two pieces. The new leader keeps them both until he finds a mate. At least that's how it went for centuries, until my grandfather's intended ran away. With her half.”

Hua's curiosity grew. “What was the woman's name?”

“I don't know her name. In fact, just talking about her and what happened is forbidden within the Tiger Clan gates.”

“I'm sorry to hear this.” She was sorry, and not only for the hard feelings the incident had caused his family. She wanted to know more, but now wasn't the right time to press him.

“Well, you should be,” he said. “The woman joined your people, and our clans haven't spoken since.”

“We're speaking now. Maybe this is all that matters. Maybe we can heal this wound between our two tribes.”

He smiled down at her. “I'm hoping for this as well.”

She squeezed his hand and hiked up the next blinding white hill. And the next. Soon the hills became little mountains, and those rolled up into real mountains. The sun dipped low behind the snowy peaks and cast the horizon in blue shadows. Li pointed, and she squinted to see what he had found. It was a bridge of wood and jute barely visible in the torrent of pale flakes.

He tested its strength, then reached for her hand. With careful steps, they slid on the icy crystals covering their path. More than a few times, one or both of them lost their balance and clutched at the other or the rough rope on either side of them. A wind rose up from the gorge below and slashed at them, cutting them cold to the bone

and pushing against their bodies with the weight of many stones.

When they stood in the center of the bridge, Hua stopped moving. She shook her head. “Too hard,” she yelled over the gusts.

“You can’t give up now. We’re almost there.”

“Just a quick rest.” The wind roiled up from the gorge underneath them and buffeted the bridge back and forth like a leaf in autumn. They held on tight, but the gale had them beat. Hua lost her footing and dropped to the planks underfoot, each hand lashing out to grasp a board. That’s when she thought of it, an image of fire strong and warm enough to melt the treacherous ice beneath them.

She stared straight ahead, between his legs, and thought of nothing but flames. Big, roaring flames that shot down from the sky and appeared on the planks themselves. Her efforts at conjuring forced her temples to throb, but she couldn’t massage them, couldn’t move at all. Energy drained from her being and focused on the small graying puddle before them. The puddle grew larger with every breath she took as the melting snow pooled on the bridge, but the wind worked hard at refreezing the icy path in front of them.

“Are you all right, Hua?” He turned toward their destination and gasped. “Did you do that?”

She wanted to answer him, but her thoughts stayed on the task at hand. The wind continued to thwart her, and anger rolled through her chest carrying with it the sounds of frustration. Out came the noise.

And down went the wind.

Li was too shocked to speak. From the puddle several strides away grew a thin line of smoke and a trickle, then a wave of water. The smoke leaped into flame. She concentrated with all the power of her mind, and the ice lifted into tiny droplets and plunged off the bridge. Hua returned to standing and walked forward to inspect her accomplishment.

She realized he hadn’t joined her and looked back. His expression was unreadable. “Are you not pleased with what I’ve done?” she asked.

He snapped out of his shock. “So is this something you do often?”

“No.”

A breeze whistled in the air and set the bridge to swaying. Her eyes stayed on his, but her hand darted out to confront the weak puff of air. It stopped.

He frowned and gestured to the ragged rope. “What can you do to

this?”

She caught one side of it in her hand and smiled to try to lighten his mood. “I can use it to hold onto.”

“I’m being serious.”

She gave him her back and leisurely made her way to the other side of the gorge. But as she walked, the frayed ends of rope came to life, snaking up and out and every which way to sprout strange leaves and thicker strands of itself. When she looked back again, Li was busy fighting off the new growth with both arms. She laughed and promptly imagined the vegetation the way it had been. The forest retreated into the jute.

“Wait,” he said. “You can’t just go knocking on the gate.”

“Then I’ll ring the bell.” She reached for it, but he ran to her side and grabbed her arm.

“You can’t do that either.”

“Why not?” she asked.

He lowered his voice. “Because you’re a woman.”

Hua opened her mouth to ask what difference that made, but a movement to her right distracted her. A tiny man who looked strangely feminine gathered up his crimson robes and hopped down from a snow-capped stone. Hua glanced at Li for his reaction.

“Not only are you a woman,” said the smaller man. “You’re an Elemental. And here, you are welcome.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Hua whirled back to the stranger. The slim, graceful man moved with stealth and swiftly closed the distance between them. She took a step back.

“I’m a what?”

He barely reached her chin and gazed up at her with a childlike smile. She couldn’t help but smile back.

“You’re an Elemental.”

He pressed his wooden staff into the flesh below her jaw to lift her head, to study her and gauge her reaction to his scrutiny. She indulged him until the muscles in her neck twisted and cramped, then reared back to free her head.

He inclined his head in greeting. “My name is Dou. Welcome to our humble home.”

She bowed in return. “I am Ju Hua of the Sheep, and this is Zhong Li, leader of the Tiger Clan. We have come to discuss the Xie.”

Dou gestured toward an ancient iron gate encased in ice. “Yet another reason to welcome you.” He pushed on the heavy entrance to his tribal home and led them into a cave.

Li looked uneasy, and Hua reached for his hand. Was he upset about what she’d done on the bridge? Or was he still worried about meeting the rest of the tribe. He clutched her fingers as she thought of the latter. The man up ahead gave her no reason to fear. What about the lithe little figure gave a warrior like Li the quakes? Maybe, in time, she would understand his anxiety.

When they were deep in the bowels of the cavern, Hua began to feel warm. The stone walls kept the chill away, and the passageway beyond glowed with flickers of amber and orange.

Dou stopped. “This is our mid-day ceremony. Outsiders may not understand our rituals. Should they offend, we can pass by quickly.”

“Do you practice sorcery?” she asked. The fingers on her own gripped tight to stop her questions.

“No,” said Dou. “But many outsiders liken our rituals to witchcraft.” His eyes passed over Li’s body with what Hua perceived

as admiration. “In our tribe, we celebrate the body.”

The rough hewn rock of the cave opened into a chamber lit by flames. Golden statues flanked the walls and depicted body after body intertwined with trees, serpents... and each other. The sunken floor of the chamber displayed interwoven bodies as well—real bodies. Male bodies. Very naked male bodies. Dozens of hairless men with oiled chests and legs and cocks writhed like the snakes decorating the walls. A small gasp passed through her lips, and Dou smiled at her reaction.

This she had to see. She advanced toward the wiggling piles of male flesh, but Li pulled her back.

“What?” she asked, hoping she’d stifled the grin twitching at her lips. The look on his face told her she’d failed. Li narrowed his eyes. She jerked his arm forward and took him to the edge of the room.

“Don’t you find this... interesting?” she asked.

“Not one bit.”

“Look,” she said and pointed at the trio of men closest to them. “I wonder what it feels like. See where they put their cocks?”

“Oh, I see. I don’t want to see, but I see.” He turned away.

Hua lifted up on her toes to whisper in his ear. “Would you do that to me?”

“You would want it, um, there?”

She glanced back to the orgy of happy, horny men. “They seem to be enjoying it.”

\* \* \* \*

Li couldn’t believe the squirming mass of bodies in front of him doing unspeakable things. He couldn’t believe anything, really.

Not only had Hua mastered Dream Presence; she possessed the gift of Elemental powers and could unleash these talents at will. And since when had an Outcast allowed a woman into their preserve? The wanton woman tempting him to fuck every orifice she had was unlike any female he’d ever heard of—in legend or real life.

The head of his penis strained against the confines of his clothing while he watched a young man’s lips capture the tip of another man’s thick cock. An image of Hua doing the same to his prick threatened to slick his garments with seed.

He tugged her away from the edge of the room. “Business first. Pleasure later.”

“Promise?” Her expressive black eyes were playful.

“Promise.” As he led her down the corridor, he passed a stone



column and took another peek at the men. “What if it hurt you?”

Hua laughed. “Then I’d tell you to stop.” She looked over her shoulder, squinted into the dim room, and gestured to a man reclining on a heap of pillows. He watched while another man suckled his sac and yet another feasted on his cock. “Would you like it if I took you in my mouth?”

“I’m not sure,” he said with a chuckle. “Guess you’ll have to try it tonight and find out.”

The edge of her tongue traveled over her bottom lip. “Oh, I intend to.”

He ignored the stretching of his cock and the mess saturating his clothing. Dou waited by an open door.

Five men sat on the floor with eyes closed and bodies at rest. Dou bowed. “I’m sorry to disturb your meditation, but we have visitors.” One by one, the men raised their heads and stared at Li.

The two newcomers bowed deeply, but it was Hua who spoke. “We have come to ask your help in defeating the Xie.”

When the seated men turned to her, Dou smiled at the eldest man of the group. “She’s an Elemental, like you, Master Cao.”

“Then she is welcome here. And we all know he is.” The men laughed, and Li looked away.

“Zhong Li, the leader of the Tiger Clan, and I would be honored if you could consider joining us in battling our common enemy.”

“And what is your name?” asked Cao.

“Ju Hua.”

Cao studied the floor before saying his next words. “The Xie hate us, but every other tribe of the land hates us as well. Why should we help you do this when we will remain hated when the battle is done?”

“Because we will open trade with you in the spring and autumn seasons.”

“Ah. This is very tempting, Ju Hua. But what of summer when the fruits are ripe and the fish are fattest?”

Hua glanced at Li. Summer trade brought together tribes from the four corners of the land. Li shook his head. “I can’t guarantee your people’s safety during this time.”

“But...” Hua ignored the elbow of warning making contact with her ribs. “...perhaps we could arrange for runners to make trades for you.” When Li cut his eyes at her, she added, “There would be a small fee for this service, of course.”

Cao grinned. “To taste a peach at the peak of the season is worth

whatever you would charge. We've tried to grow them ourselves, but the soil here is too harsh."

"Then it is agreed?" Hua asked.

"Yes, if you're sure you can use us. The inhabitants of our enclave are good with slingshots. The hurling of stones cannot compete with weapons where distance counts, but we will help any way we can."

The men then stood and sealed the agreement with hearty hugs. Li's spine was straighter than a long spear when his turn came. She laughed to herself and wondered if he doubted his masculinity among these lovers of men.

Cao rubbed Li's shoulder until he bristled "Tonight we will celebrate, Outcast style. I hope you both will join us."

Hua grinned. "We certainly will." She grinned even wider when Li's boot pressed into hers.

Cao clapped his hands with delight. "Dou, have a bath prepared in the spare room. And bring food. When the gong sounds, please meet us in the central chamber."

Li looked faint. Cao noticed and added, "You can watch if you'd like. But we hope you'll join in."

Hua hoped so, too. She nudged the pale warrior at her side to follow Dou to their room. Sparsely decorated, but warm and clean, the chamber offered a bed pallet large enough for several bodies, and when Dou left, she flopped down onto its softness.

"Do you have any string," she asked.

Li quirked a brow her way. "Yes, but I'm afraid to ask why."

She wrapped her legs around his and pulled him on top of her. "I'm not going to tie you up and force you to attend tonight's ceremony, if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm not so sure I believe you." His teeth nibbled at her earlobe. "Forget the ceremony. Stay here with me. Under me."

"We can always do that later." She struggled to get under the layers of his clothing and check his pockets. "Where is the string?"

He rolled off her and fished a ball of thinly woven jute from the inside of his coat. Then he held the twine beyond her reach. "I still want to know what you'll be using it for."

Hua sat up and searched through her satchel. Out came her horn. "Everyone will have a cock but me tonight, and I don't intend to be left out."

## CHAPTER SIX

“Stop worrying and get naked.”

Hua pulled her tunic over her head and waited for Li to comply. When he crossed his arms and glanced back toward the hallway, she added, “As guests of this enclave, I think it’s best to do what they do. Show them we respect their customs and accept their way of celebration.”

The Outcasts surrounded the sunken area of the chamber. Following their lead, she reached down for a warm ball of wax from the basket at her feet. The translucent sphere filled her fist, but it was too hot to hold for very long. The men tossed their balls, hundreds of them, into the shallow pit where they broke open against the stone floor and oozed honey-like fluid. When the balls were no more, a few Outcasts waded into the golden mess to scoop up the leftover wax.

“I don’t know, Hua.” He winced when her fingers gripped his shaft through his clothing. “I mean, do you really want a bunch of strangers in the room while we...” He pointed toward a man taking another man’s cock into his mouth. “Watching you as you do *that*?”

She knelt to loosen the sash at his waist. “I don’t think they’ll be watching me at all.” *They’ll be watching you.* “Take off your tunic.”

He reluctantly pulled it over his head, and the leather strap holding his dark hair fell to the floor. By the Spirits, he was beautiful. Apparently the cluster of men nearest her thought so, too. They drank him in from chest to hip, practically begging her to roll down his breeches and expose the bulge beneath.

When she did, his cock rose like the morning rooster: eager, proud, and ready to crow to whoever might listen. The men surrounding them were all ears. They looked on with unrestrained interest as her fingers wrapped around his girth and her thumb found the spot below his dripping tip. Her tongue, however, sought the soft, hairy pouch below.

Li stumbled back into a chair and clutched the arm supports in a

death grip. Hua laughed. She'd never seen him so nervous, so unsure of himself. This would be a good test. A means to find out how secure his masculinity was while sitting among a throng of men-lovers. Part of her wanted the men to worship Li's body—the thought of him being loved by a dozen males made the hole between her thighs damp with desire. She crawled to where he sat, hoisted his legs over the chair arms, and resumed licking his sac. And when he least expected it, she gobbled a tight testicle into her mouth and suckled it gently.

“Oh, Hua! Stop... I'm going to...”

She gave the nugget on the right the same treatment. He panted and squirmed above her. His cock nestled at her cheek, and when a spasm shot through him and threatened to cut short their fun, she removed her mouth and offered up her hand.

He took it and joined her on the floor while holding onto her fingers with a shaky grasp. Lower and lower they went until they slipped amid the slick bodies closing in around them. She pushed him to the tiles below and covered him in oil. The ends of her hair waded into the oil as well and came out looking much like calligraphy brushes loaded with ink and ready for dancing on silk or bamboo slats.

The men wasted no time in exploring his muscles—and his prick. He caught her head in his hands before she moved away. “Do they expect me to reciprocate?”

“Why don't you ask them?”

He cleared his throat. “It's very nice of you to, well, touch me like this, but I wasn't planning to offer anything in return.”

The bodies around him released a collective sigh of regret. Finally, one of them spoke. “It's okay. But if you change your mind...” The man stopped talking to take Li's cock deep into his mouth. The Leader of the Tiger Clan relaxed against the floor and moaned.

With her lover preoccupied, Hua jumped up and collected her horn. After she secured the rough string around it with knots, she tied two ends of jute around her waist. A thick string dangled between her legs, and this she pulled between her folds and ass to fasten it to the knot at her back. The horn was heavy and sagged like a man who possessed length but lacked enthusiasm. Perhaps once inside a willing Outcast, it would work like she hoped.

Her creativity earned her a few smiles and several belly laughs. One man chuckled so hard, he jerked free from the male behind

him—much to the displeasure of said partner—and ended up with a come-covered bottom. His partner laughed and punished him with a sloppy, playful swat.

She waded into the fray and was pleased it didn't take long to find a curious mind. With a good view of what was happening to Li, she scooped up a palm full of oil and drizzled it over the cleft presented to her for the taking. Take it she did, slowly at first, then faster—like a man would take a woman. His asshole was pliant and experienced, and she savored the ride as if it *were* her cock inside his tightness.

\* \* \* \*

He watched her as she fucked the man, her long hair drenched and shimmering with fragrant oil, her body aglow in the candlelight. She twisted her hips in and out and kept watch on what she was doing to the poor man's ass. For a moment, Li wondered if she was meant to be male. The natural movement like a man with plenty of practice, the pleasure she took in ramming an inanimate object in that taboo place—she couldn't feel a thing really—but her eyes burned with bliss like she would come any second. Was she putting on a show for him and the others? Or did she truly enjoy this?

She must like it, he mused. Spirits, how he envied her. She could dive into an orgy of strangers with no worries, no second thoughts, as if she did this every night in her dreams. She was the most fascinating woman he'd ever met. Would she grow bored with him after their fight with the Xie ended? Or would she seek out other men to warm her pallet while still sharing her body with him?

He closed his eyes. Fingers and tongues teased, prodded, even tickled. Another mouth found its way to his sac as Hua had done, and the sensation, coupled with the mouth sucking furiously on the head of his cock, brought him to the edge of surrender. It no longer mattered that the finger exploring his asshole was male or that the tongue on his jaw belonged to another man. The only thing of consequence was the pressure building inside his balls and shaft, pulsing deep in his gut and ready for release. Hands quickly replaced mouths, as if in anticipation of his coming eruption.

He exploded. Come left his penis in ropy white strands, and the men made a game of collecting it with their hands and mouths. Li couldn't help but laugh, and his prick shuddered with his mirth until it waned to normal size.

After catching his breath, he tried to crawl toward the wall to

watch and recuperate. Hua had other ideas. She latched onto his arm and called him over with a tilt of her beautiful head. Then she pointed to the ass taking every inch of her horn.

“Want to try?” she asked.

“Um. No.”

“Not on him, silly. On me.”

“But you have a place for my cock. A place that works just fine. Why resort to the other?”

“Because I want to feel you inside me there. It seems like it’d hurt, but they obviously like it.” She cupped his crotch. “You might, too.”

His sac grew taut with the aggressiveness of her touch, and his shaft grew firm. He positioned himself behind her.

“Are you going to do him while I do you?” he asked.

“Yes. Every motion you do to me, I’ll do to him.”

“This could get complicated...”

“We’ll find a rhythm.”

“No,” he said. “The strings holding your, uh, manhood are in the way.” He tapped the man beneath her, mumbled an apology, and waved him away. The horn slipped out of its hiding place, and Li rolled the strings down her hips until the horn splashed down into the oil.

She reached down to slick her fingers and coated the skin between her ass cheeks. Crinkly flesh the color of weak tea glistened and beckoned with a widening pucker. The sight of it added another inch to his penis. When her middle finger disappeared into the brown mouth, he nearly sprayed her bottom with come. He doused his parts with golden oil and poked the tip of his cock into her slippery crack. It would not yield.

“I don’t think this will work.”

“Push harder.” She wiggled her bottom against him, and he fell back onto his heels.

Maybe she needed more oil. He collected a handful and carefully fed it to her hole with dripping fingers. “Open for me, Hua,” he whispered against her ass. “If you want me to fuck you there, open wide and take my fingers.”

The shiny slit below her asshole pulsed, perhaps to draw attention to itself. He offered it his thumb and hooked the digit against the greedy hole’s back wall. A little rubbing there, and the hole above sucked his finger in knuckle by knuckle. He pinched thumb and finger

to together with care to ride along the flesh separating them, fucking each hole soundly until Hua arched her back higher.

He added another finger to her ass. She took them both with no resistance. His cock twitched when he imagined it in place of his fingers—her ass would choke his prick without mercy in the tight, heated passage. He could wait no longer.

After removing his hand, he dragged the tip of his cock along the tawny cleft and aimed for the pulsing brown bud. Several tries later, he felt her muscles open to him. He went deeper into the constricted walls of her rectum and groaned with surprise—and delight—when her muscles squeezed him hard.

“So hot, Hua. So good and tight.”

“I’m jealous.” She peeked over her shoulder and gave him a pout. He responded with a swift, strong thrust.

“Tell me how it feels,” he said.

She crouched lower, and he tunneled deeper still. “It feels full. Smooth but with friction. I like it.”

He was glad. He didn’t want to hurt her, and he loved knowing he could satisfy her lust. But he wanted to see the satisfaction in her face, in her eyes. He carefully lowered her to the floor and turned her onto her side. With her top leg bent and flush against her chest, he could still fill her ass.

As the bodies around them wriggled and squirmed, small waves rippled against her face and set her long locks in motion. He watched her watching him, her hair floating in the oil like an alive thing, like a water beast he’d heard tales of as a child.

She reached for him. Droplets of the sea they all swam in ran down her free arm or plunged back to the oil below. Sparkling like tiny golden jewels from the sun itself or pieces of amber from traders he’d met, the drips left a blazing trail of warm color over her pale forearms. A few crashed onto her hip and cascaded over her belly or back, depending on the angle of his thrusts.

His fingers untangled the hair guarding the peak of flesh above the mouth of her sex. Precise circles dissolved into sloppy strokes, and within seconds Hua gasped and cooed. His cock savored the intensity of her orgasm as she clenched him snugly, moan after moan, in the forbidden heat of her ass. A quiver raced through him. His cock flexed in spasms to force his semen into her depths.

When he could manage to stand, he lifted her, carried her to their quarters, and laid her tenderly on the pallet. After cleaning off what

he could of the oil with a cloth, he massaged the rest into her skin. She returned the kindness, then tugged him into the bed. But Li couldn't sleep.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“You can't tell?”

“Not really.” For the first time since he'd met her, she looked unsure of herself. “Are you upset about what happened tonight? About all the others?”

Li shook his head and pulled her near. “When a person lives out her dreams in daytime, what could she possibly think of at night?”

“I don't understand.”

“You have unbelievable powers. You're fearless. If I gave my heart to a woman like you, how long would you keep it? You can accomplish anything. Have any man you want.”

One lovely black eyebrow lifted on her face. “Are you trying to tell me the leader of the Tiger Clan is losing his heart to a simple shepherdess from the North?”

Momentarily, he framed her face with his hands, before rolling onto his back. He worried he'd made a fool of himself. “You're anything but simple. Maybe we should talk about this after the battle is done.”

“As you wish.” She burrowed closer to him and lowered her voice as the final moments of wakefulness escaped from his mind. “But if you choose to give me your heart, I'll keep it safe and forever and always.”

At least that's what he thought she said. Perhaps he dreamed it.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Li had never slept so well.

A night of invigorating sex, a warm woman awakening at his side... He lacked only food to make his morning complete, and the smells entering their chamber promised to fulfill this last desire.

He roused the sleepy blossom beside him. "Hungry?"

"Yes. All that sport last night..." They both laughed, and he helped her stand. Then he hugged her, his hand tracing a path to her pear-shaped bottom. "I hope you aren't too sore today."

"I'm of sturdy stock, Li. I'm fine."

After giving her a small pat on one luscious cheek, he led her naked and giggling into the hallway to retrieve their clothes. Then they followed the scent of nourishment to the eating chamber.

Their newfound friends bobbed their heads in greeting. Li and Hua bowed and joined the council where they ate rice and salted river fish until their stomachs ached. When the bowls were empty, it was time to leave.

The council escorted them to the gate. "We will meet you at Three Gorges Rock tomorrow morning as promised." The elder handed Li a sack of shelled nuts for the journey. "Until then, travel safe."

"We will," said Hua. "One more thing—can your men bring the balls of oil as well as stones for slinging? A lot of them?"

Li shot her a strange look. "To celebrate our victory?"

"No. I'm thinking to use them in battle. The Xie cover their body with thick leather hides and metal. If we fight them on the hills, perhaps a slippery slope will do more damage than a well-aimed rock."

"A good idea, and one that can be arranged," said the elder, and he bowed with the rest of his enclave until Li and Hua reached the bridge.

Li clasped her hand. "Today is a good day for a journey."

Sometime in the night, the blizzard stopped its white fury. The wind was calm.

“I agree.”

She didn’t speak again until they had crossed the bridge. “I suppose it is time for you to meet my people and see who among them will join us.”

When she turned toward the North, he wrapped an arm around her and kissed her temple. “I had another idea.”

“Tell me, Tiger.”

The way she said those words made him want to growl. Her teasing lips lifted, and her eyes connected with his, pupils wide and concealing nothing. He could see to her soul.

When he bent to take her mouth, she turned her head. “It’s bad luck to kiss in the cold.”

“I don’t care,” he said, and swooped down for a second try.

She eluded him again and grinned. “Our lips will stick.”

“Is that such a terrible thing?”

Hua giggled and soothed him with a peck on the cheek. “No, but my lips are raw enough from the weather as it is. And from last night.” They both laughed. “I promise to make it up to you tonight.”

“I want to be stuck to you many ways tonight.”

She nestled into his embrace and started North again. He steered her South.

“My idea, remember?”

She followed his lead as they headed down the right side of the hill. “I’m listening.”

“We’ve seen the men. Now let’s visit the women.”

Hua stopped and faced him. “You’re serious?”

“Why not? The Nu Shi-Mien are famous for their fighting skills. Even the Xie won’t provoke them.”

“But they hate men. My grandmother told me stories as a child... She said they killed men on sight and ate them for dinner.”

“I’m not afraid. Besides, everyone said the Outcasts hate women. They accepted you. And it wasn’t because of your, ah, horn.”

“Do you think they welcomed me into their colony because I’m an Elemental?” she asked.

“Possibly.”

“What do you think about that?” she asked.

“I think it was most hospitable of them—”

“No. I meant, how do you feel about me having those powers?”

“Stunned. A little jealous.” He watched her as they walked and tried to gauge her reaction to his reply. “And I think a part of me felt hurt that you didn’t share this with me.”

“I can’t share something I’m not aware of.” It was her turn to watch his expression. He didn’t conceal his surprise.

“You didn’t know?”

“Not really. There were hints all along, but I didn’t catch on. After yesterday, I wondered how this could happen. This power, it seemed so strong, so sudden. Then I remembered summer days when I wished for a breeze to cool me. It came. And when brutal winters forced my family to burn many sticks, I hoped the wood would last and the fire could burn hotter. These things happened.”

She smiled. “I thought it was my childish imagination playing tricks on me.” Her smile vanished. “But now as I think on this...”

“Yes?”

Moisture pooled on her bottom lashes. “Before my father left us, the lack of rain had devastated the valley. Our small crops wouldn’t grow, and our sheep were in peril. A few families even moved away to find water for their flocks.”

“I took a walk one night. High into the mountains to where my father often went, to where the spring water used to spill forth and feed our clan’s creeks. I wept. The lambs were growing weaker, and my favorite ewe had passed that morning. As I cried, the spring cried with me, releasing tears of renewal. Giving us life once more.”

“The shock of what happened still rattles my spirit when I think on it. Most people wouldn’t believe me.” She glanced up at him with unreadable eyes. “Do you believe me, Li?”

“Stranger things have happened in this world. I believe you, Hua.”

This seemed to comfort her. She leaned into him and picked up her pace as they headed to the all-female enclave of the Nu Shi-Mien.

\* \* \* \*

The leader of the women’s tribe stood proud and unclothed from the waist up while she screeched her welcome. Arms covered in goat fur waved frantically in the air.

“How dare you! How dare you bring one of these to our colony! Truly, sister, are you out of your mind?”

Li tried not to roll his eyes and waited for Hua to explain her purpose for bringing him, a man, to the Nu tribe’s home. But his eyes were the only things he could move—the rest of him was bound to a

tree by a rope thick as his arm. Look-outs from the all-female clan had swooped down from the hillsides and attacked him when he and Hua approached the colony's entrance. Upon his capture, the half-naked women took his short blade and stuffed a filthy rag in his mouth. Their nudity stunned him into stillness, and, as a warrior, he admired the surprise tactic. He'd never seen nipples so hard...

He wasn't sure what the females were trying to prove by going unclad in winter—that they were tough?—but he enjoyed the view nonetheless. When they pounced on him during the attack, more than one dark peak had grazed his face, tempting him to take a little lick. Only the Spirits knew what would happen to him if he did sample a bud. Thank goodness for the rag in his mouth.

The women sat on him before tying him to the tree. With one fragrant mound by his chin and another flush against his crotch, the women sat there for a long time, pressing into him, checking him for hidden weapons. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on his part, but he wondered why their gyrations continued long after he'd been subdued.

One woman thrust her hand inside his pants during the search, and the careful exploration of his length and tightening balls told him she sought more than weapons. She amused herself with his swelling cock until the leader clapped her hands.

“Enough! Tie him!”

Hua didn't seem intimidated by the woman's anger, but she also hadn't answered her question. After securing the rope, the women backed away, and their leader ran toward him at full-speed with a wooden club.

“He belongs to me!” Hua's possessive words stopped the leader in mid-swing. Li exhaled in relief.

“I apologize deeply for disturbing you and the others of your enclave. And, yes, I am out of my mind.” She stepped closer to the leader.

The woman frowned at Hua's strange response. A few of the others even waved her off and returned to tend their animals or crack nuts. Hua's next words, loud and clear, snapped them all back to attention.

“I am out of my mind because of what the Xie did to my village and my family. I am out of my mind because I believe a simple shepherdess with no battle training can defeat the Xie with less than a hundred warriors, both male and female. And I am out of my mind—

truly out of my mind—because I thought I could bring four neighboring clans together to do this task, make peace, and open trade between them all.”

The clan women grew wide-eyed and spoke excitedly among themselves. Their leader, however, didn’t seem too convinced. “And with trade comes acceptance of our way of life?”

“What is your name?” asked Hua.

“Zu Ming.”

“I cannot lie to you, Zu Ming.” Hua placed her hand upon the woman’s shoulder. “I cannot promise any of this, but I will do everything in my power to make it so.”

Ming shook her head. Two women near her took her aside. Whispers rose into fervent arguments, and although their tribal dialect was difficult to understand, he swore he heard them discuss the need for men. The leader and a few other women escorted Hua into a shelter on the other side of the camp. She glanced back over her shoulder, a look of concern etched into her face. He nodded to reassure her that he could handle this.

So the Nu needed men? He grinned. Tonight would be *his* turn. He pictured himself in a pit of oil while being worshipped by dozens of naked women. Lust charged through his prick as he thought of himself fucking hole after hole of neglected sex. Sure, they probably had horns like Hua, and most likely they pleased themselves with tongues and fingers. But to live without a real man for so many years? He would be glad to come to their assistance as long as Hua didn’t mind.

The thoughts running through his head fueled his excitement, but a sudden giggling broke out among the working women and interrupted his fantasy of an orgy with the ratios in his favor.

A young woman padded through the snow and stared at this crotch. He looked down and groaned. His pants must have been torn during his capture, and a very cheerful cock poked out vulnerable and pulsing for the scrutiny of all the villagers.

Several other women joined the adventurous one, and soon he was surrounded by more than a dozen curious females holding the tools of their work. One held an awl, another a long, dull blade for cutting thrashes. He felt dizzy with fear for his unprotected cock. Sweat saturated his clothing even in the frigid air, and he shook his head to ward them off.

“Qian, you be a look-out,” one said.

Qian protested. “That’s not fair. I want a go at him.”

“You’ll get a turn,” the other replied.

Qian looked at the stone in her hand for pounding wheat and considered this. “No. Here’s how we’ll play. We each get one go at it, to see how long he’ll last. Let me go first, then I’ll keep watch on Zu Ming and the woman who owns him.”

Li eyelids fluttered with panic. His poor prick did a fast retreat as images of torture and mutilation played out in his head. *Spirits, please have mercy...*

“Agreed.” The women nodded and thankfully cast down their tools. Qian smiled and stepped forward.

“Come back out, little snake.” Her voice was soft, her hands softer.

Hesitant fingertips found the base of his cock and gripped him with care. With a tiny squeeze, she slid her hand along his shaft to cup his cock’s tip.

“It’s much smoother than I thought,” she whispered. “I wonder what it would feel like inside...”

A tall woman punched Qian’s shoulder. “Don’t even say that! Zu Ming will ban you forever.” The giant’s face softened. “Touching is fine, but nothing more.” With those words, she announced her turn.

Calloused fingers grabbed his prick gently, and the woman dropped to her knees.

“Wei! What are you doing?”

Wei smiled. “There’s no rule about tasting.”

Li’s chest rumbled with laughter, and the women laughed with him. Wei removed her hand and swallowed him whole. Fingers studied his sac by touch while her lips pinched tight around the root of his length. In one agonizingly wonderful move, she sucked him from base to tip. Li groaned in appreciation.

Fifteen mouths and hands later, he was close to bursting. His chest heaved against his bonds while the women talked among themselves.

“He’s holding out much longer than I thought.”

“Yes. I’m most impressed. But we need to hurry up and make him spill. We don’t want to get caught.”

Another tall woman came forward, placed her hands on her hips, and gave him her back. “You all should be ashamed of yourselves.”

There goes my fun, he thought. Then she unfastened her pants.

“Nowhere in the laws of Nu Shi-Mien does it say we cannot take

a man inside of us for our pleasure.” With that, she bent forward and wiggled her cunt against his hardness. Spirits, she was slick!

It took a few tries, but in he went. Her moist heat gripped him fiercely, and he said a silent word of thanks when she didn’t move. The others noticed her stillness as well.

“Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to take your turn?” one asked.

The woman’s heat strangled him tighter, then relaxed. Over and over, she performed this trick, crushing him with hot flesh only to relent a few seconds later. He closed his eyes and let the feeling overtake him. His bliss didn’t last long—another woman grabbed his current partner and slid her away from him.

“Enough, Ti Lo. Others are waiting.”

When he made it through all of them, the next round of play started, this time with two strokes or licks or pumps each. And this time, Li was forced to surrender.

The winner was an older woman with gentle eyes and gray strands shining in her braids. But she didn’t look at his prick when she took her turn; she chose to stare into his eyes, to show him how much she enjoyed doing this. A hint of something bittersweet broke through on her face, as if she’d been in love with a man once. The twisting of her wrist and the fearlessness of her touch told him she wanted his release, his pleasure. It also told him that she’d done this before. He wanted to come at this moment. For her.

Spasms flexed in his erection, and she moved just in time. A pearly jet of his seed melted shapes into the snow. The women cheered quietly.

“Jia won!”

Jia didn’t seem particularly happy with her win. He glanced away from the haunted look now gracing her eyes and worried about the memories he must have stirred up for her. Had a man broken her heart and driven her to this place? He cursed the cloth in his mouth and wished he could console her, or at least ask why she looked at him so. Jia tucked his penis back into his pants as best she could within the rip, then walked away.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Night fell, and the woman called Jia returned to build a fire near his tree. She worked quickly, and when she'd finished, she removed the saliva-soaked cloth from his mouth.

"Thank you, Jia."

She nodded. "Your woman and our leader are close to reaching an agreement." She offered him a bite of dried meat. "Someone will be back soon."

"Jia?"

"Yes?"

"Earlier today, when you won, you looked unhappy. Why?"

She smiled sadly. "I came here to live when my husband died fighting the Xie. Many of us came here to live for this same reason. With no men to watch over us, we banded together to survive."

Li struggled to find the right words to say. All he could come up with was, "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. Zu Ming may not decide to fight, but I will. I will be right by your side, bladed shaft in hand to take from them what they took from me many years ago."

"We will be glad to have you with us."

She didn't respond and slipped into the darkness. The moon rose high above him, but Hua did not return. He missed her, and he'd wanted to be with her when she convinced the Nu to join them. He wanted her beside him as he slept tonight—and every night.

He hoped she wouldn't be upset when he told her about the "contest" he'd unwillingly participated in. Not that he had any control over what had happened, but the fact remained that he'd done it without her knowledge.

The moon descended in an arc above him, marking the passing hours. His modest fire cooled and dwindled. He dozed for a while, but his head fell forward every time he did so and woke him with a start. The next time he shut his eyelids, he willed himself to rest, not sleep.



Fingertips brushed over his lips.

He half-expected Jia, but smiled in relief when Hua's nose nuzzled his.

"I missed you," he whispered.

"I missed you, too. But they're keeping me busy."

Her perspiration dampened his nose. "And how exactly are they keeping you busy?"

She noticed his arched brow and laughed. "We're not in there having sex, if that's what you're thinking. The Nu Shi-Mien are a serious bunch, not anything like the Outcasts."

"Oh." The disappointment must have shown on his face, and she chuckled again. "And here I was out in the cold," he said, "imagining you and your horn having all sorts of fun in their shelter."

"I think I left my horn with the Outcasts." She stroked his cock. "I don't really need it anymore."

"That's good to hear." He moaned as her strokes grew rougher. "So how did you get sweaty?"

"They're teaching me to fight. I'll show you everything tomorrow. And they've agreed to join us against the Xie."

"They agreed but they won't let me come inside?" he asked. "I want to learn their way of fighting tonight."

She shook her head. "They don't want a male in the main shelter. Unless he's a eunuch."

"Ah. I believe a night under the stars will have to do."

Hua laughed and fondled him again. "I have permission to bring you inside, though. We'll be sleeping in a side shelter."

"Then cut me loose. I'm freezing."

"I'm not sure I'm ready to free you yet." She knelt to take him in her mouth a few times before asking, "I heard the women made sport of you this afternoon."

"I was planning to tell you tonight—"

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I felt guilty without you here, but I cannot lie. It was fun."

Her nimble fingers pumped him hard. "The women were very impressed with your stamina. How long will you last with me, Li?"

"Not long." He let out a moan when her tongue swirled over his tip and probed the opening. "You undo me, shepherdess. You make me crazy."

His cock nudged the back of her throat, and he went limp against his bonds. The warmth of her mouth sent fire through his limbs.

When a groan sounded in his chest, she backed away.

Her fingers dropped to brush against his sac. “I’ve been thinking...”

“This is not the time for thinking. This is the time for action. Lots of it. Please take me back into your mouth.”

She gave the underside of his prick a lick. “You know, the women have been talking about men all night. How males like to give orders. How they like to be in control.”

He grinned. “As a man should be.”

She grinned right back. “Who’s in control now?”

“Well, you are...”

“I could walk away and leave you here all night, couldn’t I?”

“Yes, Hua. This I cannot deny. But I’m begging you...”

“I like the sound of that.” She rewarded him with a long, slow suck. His numb toes curled in his woolen leggings. “Beg some more.”

“I’m dying here, Hua. Please finish me. Please.” She worked him with both hands, tugging at him, sending ripples of need coursing through his veins. “Oh, sweet Hua.”

“Tell me what you like, what pleases you most.”

“Spirits, woman. I like it all. I like the suck of your mouth and your tongue wrapped around me. I like fingers and palms and the fleshy insides of your cheek coaxing me to burst like a dam. And I liked hiding my cock deep in your ass. But your cunt, tight and wet around me while I pound into you, while I make you mine—*my* woman—that makes me whole.”

She’d stopped pumping.

“What? Did I say something wrong?” he asked.

She rifled through her clothing and brought out his short blade. After the rope lay in a heap between them, she pulled him close. “When you speak like that, I want you to stop and not stop. I’m so confused. And about fighting the Xie... I’m afraid. I worry if something happens to you.”

“I am afraid, too.”

“I thought warriors knew no fear.”

He chuckled. “That’s a myth. Fear gives a fighter courage. Makes his heart beat faster and his limbs move faster, too. But do you know what my biggest fear is?”

“No.”

“Losing you.”

“You won’t lose me, Li. I think I’m stuck with you.” She reached

## Jaded Beasts II – Tiger & Rabbit

in her tunic and brought out the amulet, then sought his. “We were meant to be together. Can you not feel it?”

“I mean, I don’t want you to get hurt tomorrow.”

She tinkered with the two halves of the amulet and tried to make them fit perfectly. “I won’t get hurt.”

No, you won’t, he thought. *You can’t be hurt in battle if you aren’t there to fight.*

## CHAPTER NINE

Hua gave up on the two pieces of ancient metal and took his hand. The shelter was nearby, and she'd started a pit fire before coming to get him.

"I have food."

She offered him dried berries, nuts, and water before removing her clothes. He ate quickly and did the same. Their pile of blankets was small and lumpy, but his skin against hers felt so right.

"It's you I want to taste."

He didn't waste time kissing his way over her breasts or down her belly. His hands went straight to her bottom, and he lifted her like a cup to his lips, drinking in her juices while she stretched wider to offer him more.

His tongue spun over her peaks and valleys. It hid in the slick passage of her sex before twisting out then back in to wiggle and tickle and make her blood sing. It even caressed the brown bud of the hole below before he blew on the wetness he'd left behind.

"Oh!"

"You like that?"

"Very much."

He lowered her, then spread the outermost lips of her sex wide and gently blew some more onto her pinkness. Shivers of delight racked her body until she could take it no longer. She grabbed his head and positioned his mouth at her clit. He complied eagerly, lapping where she needed it most before circling the stiff ridge with a tongue that wouldn't stop.

His cock, soaked in its own juices, made for little friction. He filled her over and over, harder and harder, while the two amulets clanked together with the fierce rhythm of their coupling. When he lowered his head for a kiss, a rush of heat burned her chest, and she cried out in pain.

“Did I hurt you?” Li pulled out, but didn’t get far. The two halves of the amulet, now fused together by some unknown force, kept the two lovers together. Hua rubbed the raw circle marking her upper chest, and when he yanked the cord over her head and braids to keep the metal from branding her further, the heavy disc smacked into his chest.

“Ouch!” He tore the leather cord around his neck and sent the medallion flying across the shelter.

He turned back to Hua and inspected the damage, careful not to touch the redness where she’d been injured. “It doesn’t hurt now,” she said. “But the mark... I think it stays.”

A quick glance at his own brand told him she was right.

Her next words were quiet. “Does this mean...?”

He smiled. “It means you are what I already suspected. You are my life mate.” Then his smile vanished. “It also means I am now charged with protecting you. I cannot let you fight tomorrow.” He saw the storm gathering in her beautiful black eyes. “I’m sorry, Hua.”

\* \* \* \*

Her silence gave him chills. He half-expected the pit fire to flare up with her rage or the wind to invade their shelter and blow him away. But she simply turned toward the corner of the shelter in search of the charm.

“Come look,” she said. “The center of the medallion is filled with jade.”

“Jade?” He’d forgotten about the jade, and the magic of the stone appearing must have made Hua forget about what he just said about her not fighting.

“Yes. It’s beautiful. See for yourself.”

When he didn’t make a move to do so, she returned to his side. He ignored the necklace for now and focused on her feelings. “I hope you understand why I don’t want you to go tomorrow.”

“Other women are fighting. Women whom I convinced to join us. It wouldn’t be right for me to back out now.”

“Those women do not belong to me. You do.”

She threw the padded blanket over her with a huff, but he kept on talking. “Take a good look at the jade created by our union. The rare orange jade in the center is proof that I, leader of the Tiger Clan, rule this mating, but this isn’t about who is in control and who isn’t. I care for you too much to let you put yourself in danger. Is this understood?”

Hua surfaced from beneath the covers. “Not exactly.”

“I think I was perfectly clear. What did you not comprehend?”

“The part about the jade being orange.”

Li rubbed a hand over his face, afraid to ask his next question. “What color is the stone?”

“It’s a creamy green.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not.” She held the amulet up for his inspection but he turned away in anger.

“Then I guess you can fight tomorrow if you want.”

He leapt up from the blankets, got dressed, and stamped off toward the door. Too angry to feel the cold, he cursed his bad luck.

The Spirits had a strange sense of humor, first gifting him with a woman of his own—a woman he wanted by his side more than anything. A strong female capable of helping him rule over his thriving clan and brave enough to not blink in fear over their impending battle with the worst enemy this land had ever known. Then the Spirits made it clear that his new mate will rule their union and his clan.

For the first time in his life, Li felt alone. What would his family say when they learned of this? Would his people laugh? Worse yet, Hua was not a Tiger at all. What if the village refused to accept her as leader?

Li stared up at the stars. “Why me?” The heavens winked back in answer, yet gave no answer at all.

## CHAPTER TEN

Last night had been rough, but today would be rougher.

With little sleep and terrible morale, Li faced a strange gathering of tall bare-breasted women, small red-robed Outcasts, his own skilled spearmen, and two—yes, two—men from the Sheep village wearing white wooly coats and armed with what appeared to be metal-tipped walking sticks. Li massaged his throbbing temples and wondered why he even bothered sending runners a Dream message to get the Sheep men in the first place.

At least the women had weapons made for distance, and the muscles peeking through goat hair told Li they could use the strange elongated slingshots they carried. The Outcasts had the same method of offense, only shorter, but Hua's idea to use the warm balls of wax left him anxious. Would a splash of hot oil keep the Xie at bay as they charged down the mountain—if they charged at all? Their tactics changed each season, and their weaponry evolved as well. Li wasn't sure whether to marvel at their ingenuity or pretend to mock it. Other tribes tried to duplicate the Xie's means of attack with little success.

He took solace in two things, and both concerned no physical weapons at all. Between their power of Dream Presence and Cao's elemental abilities, the odd assembly of characters just might have a chance.

Li glanced over to Hua, but she wouldn't look him in the eye. He probably deserved that for leaving her last night to sleep alone. In the morning, he lied and said he'd tried to project fearful thoughts into the head of the Xie's leader. But his worry about her being injured or worse during battle and his dismay over the jade color left little energy for messing with their enemy's mind. Maybe the jade was right; Li wasn't the right man to protect his people.

But as dawn approached, one thought comforted him, resonated through him. He'd found his mate. And he'd do whatever it took to keep her from harm.

He climbed onto an outcropping of rock and faced his troops half-hidden by the mists of early dawn. Hua didn't join him.

"We want to thank each of you for coming here, for joining together despite our differences to defeat an enemy who needs to be taught a lesson. The Xie must learn we will no longer tolerate their raids, and they must learn that they, too, can be attacked." Li jumped down to walk among the men and women.

"We may not win today, but at least our enemy will know we can lead the offense. They will know we are enraged enough to form alliances and support other tribes. And, if we do this thing right, they will know fear."

A Tiger runner sprinted into the crowd. "Our long spearmen have attacked. They will be upon us soon."

"To your places!" Li yelled, and everyone save Hua scrambled into position behind the stony crevices of the Three Gorges Rock.

"And where is my place, Master Li?" she asked. "By your side, or with my clansmen?"

"Neither. Your place is anywhere but here. Anywhere safe." He glanced away.

She didn't struggle when two of his men gently took her arms. "Don't you dare look away, Li. You know this is wrong!" But she began to resist when the men dragged her toward a secure location down the other side of the mountain as planned. He made the mistake of looking back before she disappeared. Dark furious eyes pierced his heart like a short-blade.

*I'm so sorry, Hua.*

With her safely down the other side of the hill, perhaps Li could actually concentrate. He spotted the Xie across the river and reached deep inside his mind's eye to project an image into the heads of his enemy.

His foe's voice echoed in reply... across the gorge? Or inside his own head? "That won't work, Zhong Li. I, too, have the power."

A tall, thick man clad in brown leather raised his lance in greeting from the opposite hillside where bronze chest-plates glinted with the sunrise. "Our battle will take place in the open, not inside my head," he said. "And I will enjoy drinking your blood when I kill you in front of your people."

Li grabbed a spear, but stopped when Hua spoke inside his mind. "Release me," she whispered. "Together we can beat him."

The leader of the Xie laughed. "Leave her tied, tiger cub. It will



make it easier for my troops to fuck her during the victory celebration.”

Li’s spear whistled through the air, but his target moved. The spear wasn’t wasted, though, and entered the throat of a Xie to the man’s left. Tiger clansmen perched throughout the craggy face of the hill followed his lead, and soon, several men in leather rolled down to the frozen river below, their fall slowed by the spears sticking out of their bodies.

The Xie’s hilltop stood higher but lacked the protection of the stones. Li sensed confusion among the men across the river as they debated whether to pull back and ignore Li’s fighters like they were annoying ants not worthy of battle or whether to proceed down the hillside to attack at close range.

Thankfully, they chose the latter. If they retreated, the odd gathering Li and Hua had assembled would stand little chance at winning should they follow and attack the Xie encampment.

Li reached for another spear and shouted for the Outcasts to sling the wax balls. The Xie expected stones, and the warriors climbing down the rocks pulled something from behind their backs the likes of which Li had never seen.

His comrade in arms was too stunned to launch his next spear. “What are they?”

“Protection of some sort.” The enemy used their large leather rectangles to deflect the oil-filled waxen balls with amazing success.

Li remembered Hua’s strategy and called out over the din. “Aim lower! Slick the ground!”

The Outcasts responded as he asked and sent dozens of men tumbling into each other and onto the river below. Unfortunately, the Xie further up the hill slowed their approach to avoid the oily spots. Seconds later, dozens of men braved the icy stretch of river ready to breach Li’s stronghold.

“Smash the ice with rocks!”

The troops did as Li commanded, and a torrent of stones pelted the frozen water without mercy. The two sheep men dug their staffs into the frozen earth and created a stone avalanche until one Xie after another lost their footing and sank into the frigid waters. The surviving fighters ran back to their side of the riverbank, where a multitude of spears rained down upon them. Some men were quick enough to grab their shields, but others made easy targets for the skilled Tiger warriors.

The reprieve was short-lived. Within minutes, the leader of the Xie headed up a second attempt at crossing, this time holding an elderly man bound with rope. Urged forward, the man gazed at damaged spots in the ice... and healed them.

Cao dodged over to Li's rock in a red-robed flurry. "Where's Hua?"

"Safe."

"The Xie have an Elemental. We need her."

"I need her as well. Alive." He took his eyes off the battle below and frowned at Cao. "You're an Elemental. Do what you have to do to make him stop."

"One Elemental cannot defeat another. It takes two." The smaller man pointed to the scene below. "And he's obviously being held captive. We can't harm him. We can only subdue him."

"This is a battle, Cao. We can hurt anyone we need to in order to win."

"Did you know that Hua is the first Elemental I'd met in twenty years?"

Li shook his head.

"It wouldn't be right," said Cao. "Where is she?"

"Down there." Li tilted his head down the backside of the mountain. "My men tied her up and hid her out of harm's way."

Cao glanced over to where Li had indicated. Then he smiled and patted Li on the back. "Tying up an Elemental with rope. Good idea."

It took a few seconds for Li to realize his mistake. "I'm an idiot." He turned to Cao, but he was gone. Hua, however, had turned up... on the ice down below.

\* \* \* \*

Hua couldn't believe her eyes. "Father?"

The man before her nodded. She ignored the short-blade pressing into his neck courtesy of the hulking brute in brown holding him captive, and gave her *ba ba* a huge smile. He smiled back, but the brief, bittersweet moment of their reunion was interrupted by Cao sliding into Hua and knocking her off-balance.

Li joined them just in time and grabbed her waist. "Have you gone mad? You can't simply walk out into the middle of a battle and—"

"I just did," she said. "Now is not the time to argue. If you haven't noticed, I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment."

It took all her strength to cocoon the Xie in air, to still her

enemies with an invisible iron wind. With the warriors locked in position, she stepped toward to her father. Cao reinforced her efforts with his own energy, and added splashes of water from beneath the unhealed places in the river ice. Frost gathered on the armor and faces of the Xie, encasing them in a wintry prison from which they could not break free.

Rocks and spears hovered in mid-air as those not distracted by the events unfolding on the river strove to continue the fight. With a wave of his hands, Cao sent all the weapons clattering back to the water's shores. The knifepoint at her *ba ba's* neck pressed into his flesh.

“No!”

The leader of the Xie laughed. “I would hate to kill him. He protects me so. Even the power of two Elementals cannot keep my blade at bay.” He was right—she and Cao had no effect on the Xie's leader.

Hua heard Li unsheathe his knife. Worried he'd strike her father by accident, she willed the wind to wrap her lover tight.

“Let me loose, Hua,” he whispered.

Her father edged away from his captor.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked, then yanked hard on her father's bonds.

The elder man lifted his chin. “If you kill me, you will die as well.”

“Good point,” said the Xie. “Then I guess I'll have to kill her first.” He went to toss his dagger, but stopped. Hua could see a scheme forming in the man's mind, and a chill wrapped round her bones in premonition.

He laughed. “But she is powerful. I've never seen eyes this willful in a female. I could use an Elemental like her—in more ways than one. Perhaps I should kill her protective Tiger instead.”

“Release me,” Li hissed. “Let me fight him.” Hua shook her head. “At least let me defend myself!”

She shook her head again, and in that instance, the Xie flung his weapon through the air. Hua didn't have the power to protect herself and shield them all from the attacks above. The only thing she could do was exhale and hope her efforts would stop the knife.

The blade slowed, but still possessed strength. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Xie punch her father's gut. Breath sailed from his gaunt cheeks, altering the knife's path, and when it lurched to the

left, the weapon went straight for Li's neck.

She stretched out to block it, and it sliced into her palm like a comb parting hair. A flood of red spurted from her flesh and colored her coat sleeve before she jerked out the knife to take aim at her foe's head.

"Hurry, Hua! I can't hold them back much longer..." Cao shouted.

"No, Hua. Let me shed his blood," said Li. "He hurt you, and this I must avenge."

But Li couldn't persuade her. Here stood the man who had stolen precious time from her father's life. A man whose disregard for humanity had left her grandmother limp and her village in shambles. "No, Li. The pleasure of his death will rest with me."

She sent the Xie's blade spinning back at him, but he shifted to the right. Behind her back, she clasped the short-blade Li held at the ready with her injured palm. When she lunged at the Xie leader with the new weapon, his heavy boot slammed into her stomach.

Dazed by the blow, she staggered back. Her knees hit ice. As sensation drained from her muscles and her brain, she stood back up quickly, and then charged her adversary. Li's dagger pierced the man's neck, slid in until the hilt disappeared. Like a butcher bleeding a sheep for slaughter, her aim was true, and Xie blood joined hers on the ice beneath their feet.

The people on their side of the mountain cheered while those on the opposite shore stared in disbelief. It was over. Li's men stormed down the mountain to kill or maim as many stunned Xie as possible, and to everyone's surprise, the Xie ran like cowardly dogs toward their camp. Soon, the sounds of hoof-beats on snow filled Hua's ears.

Cao gently took her wrist and wrapped it in the hem of his robe. "Thank you, Ju Hua of the North. Your name will now be legend." He nudged her with care into Li's embrace. "Take her home."

Li nodded to the Outcast and attempted to lift her into his arms. She refused. "I'm fine. Really." She reached for her father's ropes. "You can free yourself now."

Her father chuckled. "I only have the powers of air and water."

Hua gave the jute around his wrists and ankles a cursory glance, and the twisted vines unraveled.

"Very good, my daughter. Can you also control fire?"

"Yes."

He touched his palm to her forehead. "What a talent you are."

“What happened, *ba ba*? Why did you leave?”

“I never left. I would go deep into the hills to practice my powers, powers I thought could defeat the Xie. I was wrong.” He looked down. “I approached the camp one night ready to kill them all, but their leader had powers of his own. He knew I had come and captured me. I’m ashamed to say my talents have caused many people harm.”

She hugged him. “Don’t say that. You couldn’t help it.”

“Is your grandmother still alive?” he asked.

“Yes, *ba ba*. And she will be thrilled to see her only son.”

“I will go to her.” He inspected her hand. “The bleeding has slowed. Enjoy your victory, then return home. I have much to tell you.”

She nodded and reached for Li. He bristled against her touch, so she ignored him and sought the company of others. The Nu Shi-Mien presented her with a slingshot and goat-hair arm cuffs while Li’s men-at-arms raised wooden cups of sorghum in her honor. The Outcasts offered her a robe of her own, but when they invited her to take part in their evening orgy, she declined and found Li.

He rode her home on a horse his men had stolen from the Xie, and the bad mood he’d shown hints of earlier had festered. It was a silent, bumpy journey until her village appeared in the distance.

“How did you learn to ride the beast?” she asked.

“I grew up with tigers, remember? In my youth, I rode upon their backs.”

“Very impressive.”

“This isn’t the time for idle conversation, Ju Hua.” She stiffened at his use of her whole name. “I’m so angry I can barely see. Could you not let me hold and comfort you after your wound? At least let me pretend to play the hero once today.”

“But my father—”

“I know, I know. But you belong to me now.”

“You act like you want no part of me.”

He slowed the horse as they approached her village gate. Hua gasped when his hands gripped her waist and lowered her none too tenderly to the ground. She held fast to the horse’s mane to keep him near.

“You feel war-lust, Li. The fear, the courage—these things beat in our veins for the moment. I feel them, too. Even if I ran around your village ten times tonight, I would not tire.” Her good hand

caressed his hip in an attempt to ease his temper. “Use this energy to love me. To wear us both out until the dawn.”

His heels dug into the horse’s side, and the stallion trotted beyond her reach. “You risked your life. And you made me look like a coward in front of my men. Leave before I say something I’ll regret.”

“I’m beginning to wonder which bothered you more—the possibility of losing me... or losing face.” She drew back and hugged herself. Her heart ached for him, for his pride. But her heart ached for herself as well.

She glanced away so he wouldn’t see her tears.

“You’re acting like a stubborn tiger who needs to be tamed.”

“So you wish to tame me and make me even less of a man?”

“I merely want you to be reasonable.” She wiped her face and relaxed her jaw. “I would never crush your spirit.”

After hearing those words, he left her there to stand alone under clouds spitting fat flakes of snow. The wet crystals mingled with her tears, and the mix of hot with cold burned her wind-scorched cheeks. When he and the animal vanished from the horizon, she turned homeward. The trip to her family’s dwelling took little time.

Anger made a person walk very fast.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Look, Grandmother.” She held out the amulet. With her father snoring soundly in his old corner pallet, she could finally talk about what bothered her all through his tearful, tale-filled reunion.

Her *nai nai* studied the necklace and smiled. “Did Zhong Li not break it when he saw the circle of green?”

Hua shook her head. “Why would he break the charm when it finally became one again?”

“Green jade is the stone of woman. It means you will rule this union.”

“Between the Sheep and Tiger clans?”

The elder woman narrowed her eyes playfully. “That too.”

Hua blinked back tears. “I think I’ve ruined everything. During the battle, I hurt his pride.”

“Pride will heal.” But her grandmother’s eyes grew misty as well. “Unless he is like his grandfather.”

Hua saw the sadness in the heart of her father’s mother. “You and his grandfather...?”

“Yes. Come, have some tea. It’s dried chrysanthemum, your favorite.”

The tea was delicious, but the story told by the older woman made Hua forget her thirst. In the end, Hua knew why the two clans feuded.

When Li’s grandfather was a youth, he’d fallen in love with her grandmother, herself a member of the Tiger people. During their courtship, he gave her the necklace as custom prescribed, and matched his half to hers. The cloudy green stone triumphed over the usual fire-orange jadeite, and as a result, their new home—and the clan itself—would be ruled by a woman.

“We were meant to be together and would have been a strong union. But he ripped the leather from my neck and threw the amulet against the rocks. It broke, just like my heart.” The woman’s laugh

was hollow and full of bitter melon. “Some leader I was. I grabbed my half, said good-bye to my family, and ran away to join a distant cousin in the Sheep village that very night. What a foolish young woman I was, shaming my family like that.”

Hua cried with her whole heart now. Wiping her face was pointless as she thought of her grandmother’s pain, and her own. Selfishly, she wondered if she’d ever see Li again.

“I’m so sorry, *nai nai*. If I could control time, I would take you back to him and make him see how wrong he’d been. I’d make him accept you as his bride.”

“Hua, if you did that, I would not have met your grandfather—or had you for a granddaughter. You didn’t know your *zu fu*, but he was a kind man. Sensitive and loving, exactly what a strong-willed woman needs.”

Grandmother must have seen Hua flinch at those words. “Well, this strong-willed woman,” she added. She patted the fingers on Hua’s throbbing hand. “Different women need different things, just as different times call for new types of leaders.”

Nothing her *nai nai* said cheered her up. She lay back on the pallet listless and bleary-eyed until a bony finger poked her thigh.

“Get up, Hua, and stop feeling sorry about what you did. What would have happened if you hadn’t killed the Xie’s leader yourself?”

“One of us would be dead. Or maybe both of us.”

“Then be happy in your actions.” She tugged Hua to a sitting position, then gently pushed her off the pallet. “And go find your tiger, tigress.”

“Maybe tomorrow. Tonight my father has come home, and I want to sleep knowing he’s safe and near.”

“All right, granddaughter. Tomorrow then. And no excuses.”

Hua wiped her cheeks on the back of her tunic sleeve and gave her grandma a swollen-eyed, snuffy-nosed smile. “After what I’ve been through, I don’t think I’m capable of making excuses.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Hua clutched the necklace in her hand before opening the door to Li's sleeping chamber. Sweat slicked her palms, and her heartbeat trembled beneath her ribs like an injured dove. She prayed for the charm to give her strength—strength she obviously didn't possess at this moment no matter what the green jade implied. One ragged deep breath later, she entered.

He and his pet tiger lay side by side. He didn't look up when she came to stand at the edge of his bed. But he did speak.

"Are you here to tame a tiger?" he asked.

"I suppose that's why I'm here. To try yet again to make you see what I did was right."

"You mean, to make me apologize and feel bad and beg your forgiveness like a spineless Sheep village boy."

Ignoring the insult to her clan, she stretched out on his pallet and waited for Bai to growl or paw at her body. The animal simply licked her from ear to forehead. "I think she likes me. She's probably wise enough to know I saved her master's life in battle. Hopefully someone else in this chamber likes me as well."

Li stopped petting Bai's striped coat. "I think you know how I feel about you."

"Do I? All I feel is your anger."

"The anger is there, but the other feelings remain."

"Then why be stubborn? The Xie are no more. We should be celebrating our victory, not arguing and sulking like angry children."

"You're not sulking, Hua. I am."

She grunted in frustration. "I will be if you don't stop this." She reared up and plopped the amulet on his bare stomach. "Here. You wear it. Find some orange mud and cover the green. I don't care. As long as I'm with you, I don't care about who's in charge or anything else."

He nudged Bai. The sleek cat reluctantly climbed over him and padded out the door. “Earlier today, my grandfather told me the story of his youth.”

“My grandmother had a few tales of her own last night.”

“I’m glad my *zu fu* did what he did.” Li’s solemn words cut to her core. She felt worse than when she’d been kicked in the gut at the battle.

Hua started to roll off the bed, but his hand caught her shoulder and pushed her back down. His body covered hers, and after a short but steamy kiss, he said, “If he had married your grandmother, we would be related. Cousins or maybe even brother and sister. This I could not live with.”

His mouth captured hers again. She felt the bruising of her lips and the ache of her jaw. Pain never felt so good. When he broke the kiss, she tried to pull him back.

“No, Hua. You wear the green outside this chamber. Inside my room—our room—I am in charge. Know this.”

She didn’t mean to giggle at his arrogance, but she couldn’t help herself. Her good hand found his cock. “Do you think it’s wise to challenge me? I know all your weaknesses, Li. How you like your flesh caressed and how you love my mouth right... here.”

Her fingers slipped into his breeches and teased the tip of his swelling cockhead. Then she sought the bulge of sensitive skin between his sac and anus. “One touch from me, and you will be tamed. I’ll have you crying out my name for more, mewling like a kitten until I suck you dry.”

He growled like the tiger he was. “Are you ever wrong, woman?”

“I’m wise enough to admit that, yes, I’ve been wrong. Many times.” She pulled his face close. “But this is so right.” He nodded his agreement. “However...”

“Yes?”

“You’ve been leading your clan for a few years now, and I think you should continue to guide your people. Green stone, orange stone, who cares? If you need any advice, I’ll be glad to give it.”

He beamed at her offer. “Once again, I concede to your wisdom, Ju Hua of the North. But my people respect you after everything you’ve accomplished, and I’d like you by my side at council meetings and when tribes come to trade and...”

Her fingers pressed his lips shut. “I’ll be by your side whenever you call me, whenever you want.”

“I want you there all the time, sharing in every adventure life brings our way.”

“You know what they say about sheep. We’re loyal. With you, I will not stray.”

His eyes searched hers.

“Do you doubt me?” she asked.

“You are a very sexual creature, Hua. Half-tigress, remember? Did our lone night with the Outcasts satisfy your carnal curiosity for other men, or did it whet your appetite?”

“I enjoyed those things because I was with you. Without you, they’d be no fun at all.” She tickled the nipple nearest her. “You know, it takes a strong man to handle a strong woman. The green jade is not a sign of your weakness.”

He considered her words for a few moments then grinned in triumph. “So maybe it is *I* who tamed the Tiger.”

She grinned right back. “Yes, Zhong Li. You tamed me. I now belong to you and your people—”

“*Our* people.”

“Our people. And I will hold your heart safe inside mine every day of my life.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“Good,” she said with a smile before losing herself in the depths of his warm brown eyes. “Because I intend to say it every day.”

The End

**Star TyGer**  
**by**  
**Sultry Summers**

Astronomer Sapphire Lee accidentally discovers evil Myng's ship in outer space, battling Prince Tyger's. With Tyger's help and Sapphire's unknown powers, can they defeat Myng?

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**Star TyGer**  
**by**  
**Sultry Summers**

**CHAPTER ONE**

“My God, they're fighting!” Sapphire exclaimed in excited amazement, not caring the observatory was empty. Fearing she would lose important data, she hurried to focus the delicate equipment controlling the University's mammoth telescope in space. One of several areas of the galaxy she studied for her Doctorate in Astrophysics, to her extensive knowledge nothing like this had ever been seen before. Usually peaceful and tranquil, it was now a bizarre battle zone.

As always she recorded her work on her lap top and backed it up on the University's computer for later assessment. On a normal night, because of these back-ups, she could use this time to study other subjects, if the need arose. Or, in the privacy of the isolated and deserted observatory, enjoy an erotic fantasy, but not this evening, the explosions captivated her attention.

At first, she believed the bright flashes to be blurs of refracted light on the eyepiece. Then fearing the worst, Sapphire quickly ran diagnostics to rule out damage to the giant lenses of the state of the art telescope thousands of miles high in stationary orbit. Seeing the same flashes on the screens of the computers confirmed that wasn't the case. Chin, the astronomer who used the equipment before her, acted strangely when she arrived to relieve him. She assumed, at the time, he was in a hurry to get home to his new wife. Now Sapphire wondered, perhaps he detected a problem and he'd left it for her to *uncover*? But Sapphire found the equipment functioning perfectly.

Because of the delicate equipment's superb magnification she clearly watched a raging battle between two opposing forces. Assisted by the newest technology, though the ships were small, she could discern the differences in the two forces and their designs on her computer screens. One force was made up of possibly thirty attack ships, quick, maneuverable and seemingly undetectable by the other force. The second force radically different; one large ship housing even smaller fighters, possibly one man ships, this large ship itself capable of great destruction. The term *Destructor* came to Sapphire's mind while she watched the battle.

"They swarm like bees," she gasped aloud, undisturbed that there was no one to share her excitement. Bright yellow and red flashes of explosions replaced the glowing subdued hues of blues and whites of the nebula.

Sapphire jerked away from the intensity and brilliancy of the explosions when she looked through the eyepiece. Incredulously, her curiosity drew her instantly back to gaze at the concentration of the unexpected battle and watch it on the computer screen. As spectacular as any science fiction movie she ever watched, the ships maneuvered at unpredictable angles. Thanks to the new technology, though the size of erasers, the ship's differences were easily discernable on her screen. Sleek and maneuverable, quickly dodging the return fire from the larger ship, occasionally one would be struck and destroyed. With the dramatic background of the stars, yet without sound effects or dialog, she only needed popcorn and it would have been like watching a movie.

A dreaded crackling sound distracted her. Immediately Sapphire looked up from the screen, her attention drawn away from the captivating battle she became entranced by, to see the forgotten manifestation. Blue electrical charges began to form and dance on some of the metal surfaces in the room. Why, she wondered, did her long suppressed powers manifest now? Along with the electrical charges came the accompanying dreaded and intense, sexual arousal. Sapphire looked at her hands in awe, feeling the tingle begin there, in the tips of her fingers. In some manner it was connected to the events she witnessed, she felt the power of it deep in her psyche. With the tingle of what felt like electrical power building inside her lithe form, centering inside her belly, a wave of sexual arousal washed through her as the electrical energy crackled in her breast, giving her an energizing, shocking jolt. Yelping loudly, she gasped for air as a

sexual climax, accompanied by the stimulating electrical shock, wracked her virginal body. In abashment she trembled, thankful she was alone, amazed at the pleasure of the sudden release of sexual energy. She stared in astonishment, watching the beam of electrical energy she created compact into a ball and flow through the eye piece of the telescope.

No longer trembling, and entranced by her here-to-fore unrecognized powers, she watched on the computer screen as the enlarging ball of pure energy gained speed, going faster than any craft of earthly design. The beam located the larger ship, suddenly splitting into several small beams and impacted the larger ship, doing sizable damage.

“Oh no!” Sapphire exclaimed in a whispered voice. Realizing the damage her powers just caused. Her fear returned, clouding out the exuberating feeling of her powers. She knew by intuition the larger ship was the epitome of evil, and she just attacked it.

Sapphire watched the battle, the beams she generated impacting the giant ship, astonished when the attacking smaller force backed away. First in awe, then fear, and lastly – strangely, erotically as her body began to react to the stimulation, in heated arousal.

“No, not again,” she sobbed as her body generated another rush of power and with it came undeniable, pleasurable release. Her nipples hard, she caressed them through her shirt to finally reach beneath and touch each with her hands, the electrical charge jolting her as it would if she touched her car door on a cold, dry evening. Still looking through the eye piece, a hand moved to her clit, and a jolting of the same affect. With her touch came another shuddering orgasm, achieved in the cold of the observatory. From her next climax came a more powerful beam that traveled through the eye piece and swiftly journeyed into space, making damaging contact with the great space ship. Positive now, her sexual arousal and climax were directly connected to the beams. Terrorized, she realized she couldn’t control them or her recalled powers.

Her “abilities” as her parents called her powers, when they would speak of them, never manifested in a manner such as this. The sudden memory of her childhood struggles to subdue and hide her powers, fearful the Chinese government would take her from her family, flashed through her mind. Another wave of charged energy began to build, blocking those thoughts from her mind. She lost control over what was happening. Another wave of energy discharged from her body to follow

the others into space, leaving Sapphire breathless, and wanting, clueless as to the reasons.

\* \* \* \*

“Milord, Myng's ships are registering on our far range sensors. His flagship, the Destructor, and his accompanying fleet is secluded on the back side of our third moon,” TyGer's helmsman informed him.

“Excellent, lieutenant, remain cloaked. Have they detected our approach?” Prince TyGer inquired, his golden eyes narrowed slightly in anticipation of the coming battle.

“No. Our cloaking devices and the shields installed by our new allies are working well, as expected. We are undetected,” the lieutenant informed TyGer.

TyGer saw a grim smile on the man's face, though his underling didn't look up from his instrument panel, but kept a vigilant watch. TyGer, learning that Myng conquered their world, taking his fiancée and his only sister as prizes, swore revenge in clear language. Catching the conqueror unaware in such a manner was a sweet coup of vengeance. Yet he held little hope of saving his betrothed from neither Myng's attentions nor his sister as a prize, given by the cruel conqueror as a gift to a high ranking commander he wished to favor.

Legends traveled swiftly as the solar winds from one subdued system to the next of Myng's ways with women. Once taken, they would never willingly lay with another man. Despite his cruel manners of public debasement and degradation before his crew with his chosen, his power to control their minds, bodies, and souls was so great they became his willing slaves. Worse were the tales of his disposal of unwanted or “used” women, only keeping twelve women at a time in his harem, taking new ones from each newly enslaved world. After he tired of them he would “retire” them to the pleasure quarters of his massive ship. As if he enjoyed seeing them beg to remain in his service, many crying at his feet to remain with him, he would then give them to his crew, to serve them, against their wills.

TyGer considered Myng's customs disgusting and wanted him dead. He planned on seeing him that way, and being the one to bring about his death.

“Direct all ships to bring weapons on line, prepare to fire on the main fighting force, and concentrate on Myng's flagship, Destructor. Before we attack the fighters, prepare a drop of net charges on the



Destructor. Set the explosives to discharge just after the ship attempts their next jump to hyper light drive,” TyGer ordered.

In swift and cloaked anonymity, TyGer, and twenty of his remaining ships, dropped the charges over Myng's prize ship. The small, undetectable bombs electronically connected; the explosives formed an invisible mesh of waiting destruction. Each charge, capable of blasting a small breach in a section of the outer hull of Myng's main fighting vessel, Destructor. They were programmed to detonate seconds after the ship engaged hyper light drive, not strong enough to destroy the battle cruiser, but leave it stranded somewhere in their journey.

TyGer wanted Myng away from his world. He hoped the repairs caused by the mesh charges, would delay the cruel despot in the void of a hyper jump long enough to allow his small squad of men to safety and get his people back to their world.

“SyVar,” TyGer hailed his commander in his ship nearby, “when I de-cloak follow me, all other ships remain hidden. Myng will think we are the only ones who have returned and attack us. Our attack should draw Myng’s main battle group away from the transport ships containing the people he has taken from our world. None of the transports are to be targeted or damaged. Our attack will separate them from the Destructor. Myng will be too busy with his ship to worry about the captives.” TyGer’s face reflected his pain and concern for his people, “The captives, in the transports at least, should be safe.” he said, but thought about his sister and his future wife. He didn’t know her well. Their marriage was political, but he wouldn’t wish the fate of being one of Myng’s sex slaves on any woman.

“Yes milord,” SyVar answered over his communications link, unafraid to follow his Prince.

“Now,” he commanded. His tone calm, almost as if it were a daily event. Both ships de-cloaked, all their weapons firing on the ten fighters on normal patrol duty around the Destructor. Their sudden attack took out eight of the enemy’s fighters before TyGer and SyVar re-cloaked, disappearing into the star pattern of space. A successful attack, the transports were free of Myng’s fighters and moved back toward their home world. However, their attack resulted in a larger number of fighters emerging from the Destructor to fly protective cover. Fifty fighters now took up defensive positions around Myng's massive ship. TyGer ordered his ships to attack, remaining in their cloaked status.

Before Myng's fighters understood what attacked them, half of his ships floated in space, disabled or disintegrating, but not by TyGer's forces. Before TyGer's forces could carry out their attack, a series of unexplained blue beams materialized, seemingly from the vastness of space. They ignored Prince TyGer's forces, concentrating their attack on Myng's vast flagship, Destructor. TyGer watched from a safe distance, amazed by Myng's forces impotent attempts at defense against the beams impacts, nor could his smaller ships intercept the beams. They appeared suddenly from unpredictable directions struck only the ships under Myng's command and were gone.

Astounded, TyGer ordered his forces to withdraw. Without a full understanding of what was happening, where the strange beams originated, and fearful the powerful beams might damage his precious, small force, he sought to protect his armada. Unable to afford a single loss he split his forces, sending over half to escort the transports home and defend them if needed. Retaining six ships, he gave orders to his strategists and navigators to find the origins of the beams. Yet, without knowledge of the perpetrator who fired the blue beams, friend or foe, TyGer set his course for the small planet in the spiral arm of their galaxy where they originated.

Bolts of intense power like TyGer had never seen before appeared from the darkness of space where no other ship was detectable. TyGer and his forces watched in amazed silence, awed, none of the beams harmed his ships. One beam appeared out of the darkness of space, intent on impacting the Destructor. It first encountered SyVar's ship and attempted to avoid being hit. Though cloaked it was, nevertheless, in the beam's trajectory as it closed on its target. TyGer watched in awe as the beam penetrated the cloaking of SyVar's ship to bend around the seemingly doomed vessel, leaving it unharmed to fully impact the Destructor.

TyGer, who stood seconds before the beam's appearance, dropped, sitting in stunned relief into his command chair, an astonished look on his face. He watched the beam rock the Destructor, followed by masses of voices requesting, begging for information on the beams.

TyGer's tactical scientists desperately worked to triangulate a fix on where the beams were originating from. At last his tactical team signaled they had the location of the planet where the beams originated. TyGer ordered six of his ships to quickly prepare to make the jump to hyper light speed with him; the others he ordered to

remain in defense of their home world. He hoped the charges he and SyVar placed on the Destructor would cause more damage, combined with the damage the mysterious beams caused, delaying Myng long enough to allow him to contact those who generated the beams. Hoping to find the person or persons who generated the rays already hostile to Myng, perhaps they could be secured to continue to help against Myng. With power like the conveyor of those beams, it could sway the entire situation. If they didn't help TyGer against Myng, they most certainly would be Myng's next target. From Myng's history, if a person or persons with such power was unwilling to devote themselves and their powers to Myng, he would simply take what he wanted by force and leave the inventors behind him, dead or enslaved. Either way TyGer couldn't allow such power to fall into Myng's possession.

"All ships," TyGer said over his open communications channel, "signal ready to make the jump to light drive." Within moments, each ship signaled battle worthy and ready. TyGer paused as one last volley of beams struck. Already cloaked, invisible to the naked eye and to Myng's instruments, their enemy never knew how many of them there were or how many had attacked. At the moment, TyGer gave the command to make the jump to hyper light speed. He, and the six fully equipped battle ships, journeyed toward Earth to find the person or persons who controlled the beams.

On a far away, small, blue-green planet an astonished astronomer could see them; the cover from their cloaking devices deteriorating over such a great distance, losing its integrity. Watching as the blue electrical flashes faded, Sapphire knew her first impression of evil from the ship to be real. She could not explain her knowledge or intuition, despite the space and time, she knew. Just as she knew the group of smaller ships were headed for Earth.

Considering answers to her unspoken questions, she sat back in the Astronomer's chair and looked around the room. To her bewilderment, a blue glow now brightly lit the room, and small static currents danced on some of the lesser metallic surfaces. Sapphire knew the surfacing of her abilities now was connected to the evil ship she saw engaged in the space battle. *But why now?* she asked herself once again, after the years she worked to suppress and hide her abilities, never learning to control her powers.

Only one thing affected them and brought them uncontrollably to the surface, the space battle. Before her shocked eyes, blue electrical

charged particles caressed her body, swirling around her, creating a sensuous tingling sensation that caused her to gasp in arousal. She no longer needed to touch her body. The glow grew to form a blue swirling stream that surrounded her, wrapping her in ecstasy, flowing like a stream into the eyepiece of the telescope. She shuddered in climax as the stream left her body, leaving her strangely weakened yet strengthened at the same time.

The high tech telescope acted as a magnifier and the blue beam of charged energy now flowed through it from her, broadcasting into space toward the area where the battle was fought. Terrified, shaking, and panicked, Sapphire covered the lenses' eyepiece with her hand, hoping to stop the beam.

Looking fearfully at her lap top computer's screen, she realized the beam of blue laser light didn't stop, but became concentrated and more focused, flowing through her hand into the eyepiece. She jerked her hand away. It wouldn't help her cause to directly transmit her location to these two combatants, especially when one had been damaged by her powers from such a great distance.

To her knowledge, no other astronomer had ever been in such a predicament before. It occurred to Sapphire that even now, in 2102, when Earth was at peace and all nations shared and exchanged scientific information freely, this event, her government or any other would never share.

Sapphire faced the truth; the small group of ships were coming to find her, whoever they were. Although Earth was on the edge of their galaxy, in a nondescript arm of the galaxy, far from where they fought, the beams drew their attention. She shrugged, mentally calculating how long it would take the warriors to reach Earth using light speed technology, realizing it was moot point. She didn't know their travel capabilities.

She placed the lens cover on the eyepiece to stop the flow of energy into the telescope. She looked around the room, astounded; it was now filling with the blue energy, growing brighter without an outlet, building in the enclosed space. She was unable to release or contain the energy building in the room. The very air came alive with static electricity dancing uncontrolled on the metallic surfaces of some equipment.

She went outside seeing the dawn lightening the sky, hoping it would soothe her frayed nerves. Sapphire realized this was a mistake. The column of energy stayed with her, no longer needing the

telescope as a conduit. The particles bonded together into a solid column of energy that streaked straight up into the still starry night sky to disappear. Leaving her feeling the same as before, *Oh please*, she prayed, *don't let this happen in public*.

Sapphire's first guess proved correct; she no longer needed the telescope. She rushed back inside to look at her lap top focused on the same area, linked with the telescope in time to see the beam make destructive contact with the huge war ship. She watched in awe as her energy fields traveled a great distance in space in a short span of time to impact with the Great War ship. As the sun blazed over the horizon announcing morning, the tingling and energy stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

For the first time in hours, Sapphire breathed an easy breath. It was over, for now. It threatened to be a very long day and she no longer looked forward to the night. Sapphire knew, if not by this night, but by the next, she would be a hunted woman. If not hunted by her government, then by one or both groups of aliens, possibly by all. It was but a matter of days, maybe hours.

The larger ship, though damaged, hadn't been disabled. She felt sure, as soon as it was repaired, the commander of that huge ship would be looking for the one who did the damage. She didn't want to be hunted by any of them, him least of all.

Her relief by the dawn's arrival, and the next students to take her place, let her leave the astronomy building quickly. She left without recounting what she encountered in the night. They would never have believed her. While she waited on their arrival, she changed the hard drive on the school's computers to reflect a normal night, and loaded her stuff into her car. Driving to her apartment in Peking, she showered and tried to rest, but she woke from fitful dreams of what she saw and strangely, what was to come. Her powers were back in full force. She called the school and told them she would be gone for a few days.

## CHAPTER TWO

Material spun from gold accented Myng's brawny muscles, and tapered to a snug fit about his hardened abs and slender waist. Intricately embroidered in red silk, each suit bore designs sewn by the hands of the women of his elite harem of twelve concubines. When he added a new one, he sent one to the Rooms of Pleasure to serve his men, each one a high ranking woman taken as a trophy from their home world after he conquered it.

Each concubine was given the task of depicting his epic victory over their world while in service to his needs. It was their duty to sew the golden garments for his daily wear. Each suit defined in threads stained in small amounts of their blood. The garment, hand made, proof of that world's final submission, and of his total victory over that world. As the highest-ranking female of her world, her subjection symbolized his complete victory over that world.

Comfortable in the form-fitting garment and assured of his command, Myng rested back on his command throne in the center of his Destructor space cruiser. With long, lean fingers, he shaped his silky black mustache, following his well-contoured whiskers to stroke his perfectly trimmed beard. Watching the practiced operations of his bridge crew with large, dark, cold eyes he tilted his head causing his braids, heavy with jewels worked into his long black hair, to make the slightest noise.

At his feet, on the thickly carpeted steps of the raised dais, sat Myng's latest acquisition; Solana, former fiancée of Prince TyGer of Zantari, now his woman, and his world. Each of his concubines served at his feet from time to time. His bridge crew had important tasks to perform; his concubines took care of his *needs*, what ever those might be. He looked down at the beauty and grinned, thinking of the erotic gratification she brought him several hours previously when her training began. She'd resisted him strongly, which he

enjoyed, and she had not. Solana's pride was great, and humiliation was a powerful tool against highborn women.

“Solana,” he addressed her, not using the prefix *lady*. She had lost that title when taken as his captive. He smiled, remembering the valiant fight she had fought. “Continue your work.” Myng indicated the garment she embroidered commemorating his victory over her home world. Her training, not yet complete, her eyes flashed her hatred of him, but soon she would sing her adoration of him. Myng laughed at the fire in her amber eyes and slowly drew her to him by the golden chain connected to the golden collar around her slender neck. Then he laughed at the sob that escaped her control as his hand wove through her long honey brown hair. He drew her lips to his own, his mouth crushed hers, forcing her lips to part, allowing his tongue to slowly explore her delicate mouth. His hand caressed her firm breasts held restrained in a thin gauzy rose fabric decorating her flesh but hiding nothing.

On his ship, all women decorated their charms, visible for all to see, except the few women warriors in his ranks, those wore what they chose, challenged by none, and they chose to wear little. His thumb caressed around the areoles of her rose bud nipples. He released her, yet held her close relishing the tremble that swept through her,

“Now back to your work, Solana.” Myng watched the reaction of his bridge crew. Most grinned openly to see the highborn woman known to be a fierce warrior capable enough to command the ranks of his women warriors; but now she sat, apparently humbled, at his command. He saw open lust in many eyes, noting those for future use in Solana's training. He drew her close again and pricked her thumb ever so slightly with the silver Thorn of Discipline he wore on his left thumb. “Now, you have enough of your own blood to color the threads for your embroidery of my new suit.” He caught her hand before she could put it instinctively into her mouth. “No my dear, the rules have been explained; your blood as the highest born captive is used to dye the threads to decorate my Suit of Victory over your world.”

Solana, with a sudden drugged look on her face, took the white silken threads and dropped a few drops of her bright red blood onto the strands watching them turn the same hue as her blood. This was special thread - so little of her precious blood dropped but enough to color her threads and finish her work. A special thread, which would

not allow the color to oxidize, instead caused it to retain the same bright red hue of her life's fluid. She returned to her sewing, the threads already dry. The slight drug on his Thorn of Discipline also went instantly into her bloodstream, keeping her slightly docile and under his control without his having to use restraints.

Myng chuckled. He was disappointed, at first, at not having killed Prince TyGer. He didn't like leaving living enemies behind. However, it was only one prince and thirty or so other pilots. A small force compared to the hundreds he controlled. They had only their ships and the arms they carried on board, not enough to do serious damage to his Destructor cruiser if they all crashed into his ship at the same time. His shields would protect the craft. Actually, the delight and enjoyment of knowing Prince TyGer lived and knew he now had the man's former fiancée and his sister also a captive, was as delicious as any confection he had ever eaten, including Solana's drenched and excited sex during her training. That brought to mind, again, the erotic nature of her training.

Myng eased his large and obvious growing cock to a more comfortable position in his form-fitting suit as he observed the girl concentrating on the delicate stitches of his next suit. She was good at her work but that wasn't what interested him now.

Her long hair, brushed to bring out the heavy, long waves she had pushed over one shoulder and out of her way to do her stitches. Her breasts rose and fell with her breathing, their nipples hard in the cool air of his bridge, her mouth open slightly in a pout. Without warning, he slid his hand over her breasts; she jumped, startled, unused to such a touch.

"Solana, when I touch you, my dear," Myng said with an evil grin, "you will never pull away." She dared to look him in the eyes, her hatred clear seconds before she masked it and dropped her eyes. But he saw and would punish her for her defiance. Had she been further along in her training he would have punished her on the bridge and before all there, but she was yet a virgin and that delicate treat he would take in private. "You dare look your conqueror in the eyes?" he asked. Silence fell on his bridge, all waiting to see how Myng the Cruel would punish his new concubine.

"Ah..." Solana could say nothing, she had never been in such a situation and didn't know what to say, "am... sorry..."

"You must demonstrate your regret, Solana," Myng smiled at her cruelly. "Stand!"



She stood on shaking legs; Myng noted the swirl of the same translucent fabric covering her breasts covered her from the waist down. A simple skirt that rode low on her hips held by a golden chain around her waist and attached at four-inch intervals by a short gold chain to keep the material from sliding off. The skirt revealed no underclothes and she wore no shoes, his women were allowed neither. With a stern face for show, he pulled her slowly towards him, drawing her closer with the golden chain connected to her collar. She was an exquisitely beautiful woman and Myng reveled in the satisfaction of knowing Prince TyGer must truly be grieving her loss. *Yet, what was the loss of a female to the loss of his world?* the conqueror thought. Never having known love, only lust for control and power, he didn't know nor care.

“Last night was a taste of what is to come for you, princess. Do not anger me greatly. You know who I am, and what I am, and what I will do with you, or rather, to you.”

Solana tried to draw away.

Myng smiled at her attempt, “Where would you go?” He laughed at her attempts to avoid his caresses. “Solana, you are now my slave, embrace it. When I tire of you, you will be retired to the Rooms of Pleasure, where the remainder of your days will be spent giving comfort to my men, and the few women warriors I have. You will satisfy their needs. That is if you are lucky. Your predecessor,” he smiled in a deliberate, evil chilling manner, “was not so lucky. Perhaps if you learn to enjoy your fate you can survive it.”

His hand caressed her entire body without thought to those who watched with eager eyes, looking forward to the day she would be retired to the Rooms of Pleasure. “Should you fail to please my men, they will see to your...ah...fate.”

The entire bridge laughed, the frightened look on her face revealed she had heard the story of the last woman who had done such a reprehensible thing. He drew her face close to his. “Then again Solana, your station in life is high enough that I might sire a child on you. Then, of course, you would have a...” he paused to grin, ...“different fate.” He shrugged and his hand caressed her breasts again. It pleased him that a shiver passed through her. Breeders, highborn women, knew a sad life; forced to bare children they rarely saw and had no influence over.

“Yes milord,” Solana whispered, her voice trembled.

“Captain!” Myng said in a commanding voice, Solana jumped, “you have the helm. I will be in my chambers.”

“Yes milord,” the Captain saluted and came to stand behind the Throne, no one sat on Myng's Throne, anyone left in temporary command, stood behind it.

“Come, Solana, it is time for more training,” Myng said with a tug on her golden leash. “Leave your sewing, we will return shortly and you may then continue.” He laughed at the red hue her face turned. He saw pleas for leniency in her eyes, but she didn't give them voice.

\* \* \* \*

Solana hated Myng, as did all the women of his harem. However, unlike the dozen women he kept there at any given time, she had not yet completed training and her mind was still her own. She knew it was slipping away with each training session. Now she knew why he was called Myng the Cruel, and he used obtuse ways to abuse his captives. The prick of her thumb had introduced a mild drug into her system, temporarily she had fallen under his influence.

Solana knew he would compel her to do his will; he was cruel but not brutal. He enjoyed more subtle methods, even enjoyable to his women, but his pleasures took a heavy toll on their souls. He would punish, but not violently so. He whipped her, with a flail, one that while it stung left no marks nor damaged her skin. She realized afterwards that the strands introduced a substance into her skin making her desire him, the wetness from her innocent body flowing down her inner thighs from his *training*. When he had not taken her virginity, she became so aroused as to beg him to do so, debasing herself in anyway he suggested. Her mind seemed to think of nothing else as they walked toward his bed chambers.

Solana was sick, remembering how he had compelled her to his will. Myng always had servants present, and on her knees, at his feet, her mouth red and bruised from sucking his enlarged penis she had begged to be taken by him. He had refused. “You do not deserve my mighty cock inside you slave,” he said, holding her head back by a hand full of her long honey brown hair.

“Please master, I burn for you!” She was ashamed remembering her own words.

“Hmmm, perhaps,” he said, and smiled down into her hopeful face. “I will lie on the bed and if you wish to lose your virginity to

me I will allow you to amuse me in such a manner, but be warned, Solana, if you displease me, I will stop you at any time.”

“Thank you milord,” she had said, the remembrance made her sick, and wetter. He had done as he said. As she was prepared to impale herself on his massive cock he stopped her, the head at the entrance to her tight, wet canal. She still remembered the feel of the purple head touching her delicate flesh, a gush of arousal swept through her as she followed him toward his quarters, sticky, wet fluid spread down her inner thighs.

“No!” he had protested and flipped her over. Suddenly two of his bodyguards held her to the bed while Myng began to suck and nibble at her clit, “For now I've changed my mind, I wish to taste you,” and he had *eaten* her for what seemed like a life time. She climaxed, the first one was glorious and humiliating at the same time for the bodyguards who watched did so with greedy eyes. Myng had forbidden her to close her eyes, forcing her to look into the hungry eyes of those who held her to the bed. Condemned to watch such a private emotion reflected in their lust filled eyes. He kissed her with the musk of her own cum on his breath and mouth. “Was that good?” he asked afterwards.

“Yes, please take me, I ache for you,” she had begged him and squirmed, grinding her hips on the bed, hating him for his control over her body, crying out when he smacked the insides of her legs for her responses. Remembering the sting of those smacks made the fluids of her virgin body run wetter even as they walked, she tried not to remember but it was like watching a recording in her mind.

He laughed at her. “No, you may not in anyway satisfy yourself,” and he looked at the guard who held her, “Would you like to taste?” she remembered he asked the guard. Of course the guard said, *yes*, as did the other one when invited. Remembering, he'd forced her to lay on the bed, the feel of their mouths on her used, bruised, and aching with need nether lips. Swelled and sensitive, each time they began their torturous assault on her body she would climax again, crying out her ecstasy in humiliation, their tongues thrusting deep inside her tight canal, her body straining for the ultimate release of Myng's hard cock, yet denied. Myng had ordered in two other women and had taken them while the guards played with her, allowing them the solace of his cock. When his bodyguards were finished with her, she was forced to watch them take their ease with the other girls. Solana wondered if Myng would *train* her again in the same humiliating manner now.

Solana was quickly realizing to survive on Myng's terms she would have to use her intelligence. All the others in his harem fell at his feet, and the drugs assured him of their compliance. Some way, some how, she must avoid the drugs, convince Myng she truly wanted him, and was as evil as he. Her prince, TyGer, likely dead, would not have wanted her back after she had been the property of Myng. That life was gone. A plan was forming in her sad, brokenhearted and now warped mind. She would become his chief woman, all he desired in a woman, so he would sire a child with her. But unlike previous women, she would be his Queen, her son would be his number one heir. She knew there was already an Heir. She watched the young Myng strut on the bridge, a ten-year-old boy and knew the horrible fate of the child's mother. Solana swore it would not be her fate, and that boy would never replace Myng. Her child would. She would be the mother of the Heir and her son would protect her.

"Now Solana," Myng's voice broke her shameful memories of the earlier events. "On the bed." He dropped her leash now that they were in his private chambers and undressed.

Solana looked around. There were no guards in the room, or servants and they were alone. Immediately, she complied, watching her captor, masking the terror only moments before that had filled her eyes. Myng was a warrior, his body scared over the muscles.

He pushed her down on the bed, expecting resistance, finding she gave none. Myng ripped her top from her breast and began licking her breasts. She cried out when he bit her nipple, his saliva entering her body through the slightest nick in her delicate flesh. She was *his* now and never would belong to any other man. Solana wasn't aware when it happened only that it occurred. She made her decision before the physical change transpired, knowing it was her only salvation to live. Now she gave herself over to him and her plan. From now on she would become his favorite, she would never go to the Rooms of Pleasures, and when she bore the Heir the other heir would not live long afterwards, if he lived that long.

Deep in Solana resided an evil as intense as Myng's, the sexual *training* had brought it to the surface. She was the female version of Myng, his true soul mate. Their offspring would be a true curse on the galaxy.

Her arms slid around his neck, pulling him closer, her lips met his to fence with his tongue. Myng startled when a delicate hand smoothly reached inside his loose silk shorts grasping his cock; that

too had never happened. He drew back slightly to look into eyes that reflected deep desire and something kin to the evil in his own heart. A smirk lit her sensuous lips as her sweet pink tongue passed temptingly over them.

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He bent to nibble on her neck back down to her breasts, his mind on fire with curiosity about this new captive, as he again moved to suck those delicate breasts he would enjoy for a long time. She would be a good female on whom to sire an heir or possibly two. Her intelligence was higher than the woman with whom he had sired his number one heir. Already he was not happy with the boy's lack of attention to his battle skills, and his attraction to other boys his own age and younger disturbed Myng. He put those ill thoughts from his mind, moved lower to lick her navel.

"Here I believe I shall place a space diamond, perhaps even a golden one," Myng told her expecting to see fear enter her eyes. Only women he intended to take as mothers to his heirs did he bestow with jewels.

"A golden diamond, yes, please..." Solana growled. "Gold is my favorite, the color of wealth and intelligence, I shall prove worthy of it," she said, her voice deep and passionate as he tongued her clit to a more fevered excitement. "I will enjoy the pain you will give me when you pierce my navel to place it." She smiled wickedly. "Will you do it slowly my Lord, very slowly, that I may enjoy the pain?"

"You know the possible fate of a mother of an heir and yet you think only of the pleasure of the pain of the piercing?" he laughed making joke of her potential fate, shocked when she grinned evilly back then licked his purple headed cock. "You suck my cock without permission?" Myng attempted to sound angry, but his voice came out in breathless ecstasy, her pheromones, now aroused and unknown to either, had the same special hypnotic effects as his.

"Yes milord, but I would bring you only satisfaction." She pouted repentantly with a seductive leer and added, "but there are other areas I would wear jewelry as the mother of an heir. Perhaps, if my son proves more intelligent as the only heir, if I please you that long."

Solana's mind was working, plotting. Her realization that his purported abilities were not as affective on her as on others, and that she had some of those abilities herself came as a welcome and relieving shock. With some hope, that her own powers might save her

life, she drew his penis deep into her mouth allowing her body to respond as his tongue plunged deep into her rosebud core, building into a tremendous climax. She knew allowing her own body to be at his sexual mercy was part of her powers and she gave herself over to the ecstasy he sent to the center of her soul, a deep groan was the reward she gave him.

Myng was amazed, as he was earlier at the sweetness of her taste. Now her potential as the mother to his future heirs was staggering. He reconsidered giving this woman to his commanders after she gave him his progeny, the usual fate of such a woman. Instead of the Rooms of Pleasure, she would be *honored* by being given to only his commanders. This woman might prove worthy to rule at his side. A woman to conquer worlds with—she might be the one. She was a fine warrior, as bold as any of the women warriors he had on board. She had fought him when he took her world, and bravely, until he disarmed her. Holding her restrained in his arms, subdued, trembling not from fear but from defeat.

The memory of that battle was still sweet as was the feel of her body afterwards. Tonight he would take her for his own, this one he would not share again. Her training would be different from his other concubines—this one he might take as a wife. Her lineage was royal; fitting to be his Queen. Feeling the nearness of his body's eruption, a seething volcano brought on by the strong suckling of her mouth, all logical thoughts left his mind.

Myng moved to stare down into her deep amber eyes that seemed to have flickers of flame in them for him. Again, that hint of evil lurked behind those beautiful gems giving her mystery. Intelligence studded with desire and passion, he knew he had found his mate. No other would touch this one. As it had been part of his concubine's training—training he designed himself, other men would taste their womanhood before they lost their innocence. As was the custom of his women, she endured the embrace of the other eleven of his harem in public the first hours she had been on board his ship, suffered along with the embarrassment of the sister of Prince TyGer who he had given to his captain. That would be the only humiliation for this one.

“You think,” he groaned, close to climax, “I would bestow other jewels on your body?” Myng held his orgasm at bay with his mighty strength of will, his eyes fiercely looking down into the eyes of this woman who sucked his cock, her mouth demanding his climax. “Ah, yes...” he growled, “maybe I will bestow other jewels on you, but

if...” He faltered at the moment he was ready to release into her fabulous mouth. “...I do,” he swallowed hard, “you must wear them wherever I place them.”

Deep, throaty animal sounds issued from her throat as, with each thrust, she drank down his cock on the verge of eruption. Solana would have cried out her own peaks twice if she could have, but his cock blocked all sounds but his grunts. Feeling a trickle beginning to form in her mouth she swallowed, her throat contracting on his massive cock. Suddenly he pulled away.

“No milord, not again, please, let me have all of you!” she protested when he withdrew from her. “I swear I will wear what jewels you bestow where ever you put them.”

An evil gleam formed in his dark, cold eyes, “You want all of me?”

“Yes!” Solana begged, pouting with a gleam in her eyes, “One way or the other.”

“You give yourself to me?” he asked her. His women had said this before only to beg him to stop after he began taking them with his huge cock, widening their canal, pushing roughly into their tight core, opening their very wombs with his first thrust. He always looked forward to their begging him to stop, trying to pull away from the organ that would soon impale them. Myng was truly cruel and would tease them after they gave their consent by placing the mighty head at the entrance of their wet, hot, yet still tight virginal canals. He would accord her no mercy, but push her further toward the edge, where no other man would ever be capable of satisfying her but him. *Would Solana prove herself worthy of what he suspected, begging for more instead of pleading for mercy*, he wondered.

“I give myself to you,” she swore. “I want you inside me.”

“You no longer want your Prince?” he asked with evil glee.

“No, I want you, Myng the Conqueror,” Solana begged, her hands massaged her breasts and her nether lips suggestively, slipping a long, dainty finger into her own wet, burning sheath. “He would be like this,” indicating her finger, “compared to you.”

“Then you shall have what you want,” Myng said and positioned his enraged, purple headed cock at the entrance of her virginal, tight core. Roughly, he took her hands from her body and pinioned them above her head looking deep into her eyes. “You are ready?” he teased. “You are sure?”

“Why do you torture me? You are really cruel!” she exclaimed, the head of his cock at the entrance to her sex. “Would you deny your own pleasure?” Solana smiled seductively.

“Cruel, I am!” he grinned viciously and pushed into her, splitting her maidenhead instantly, lodging his cock in her tight canal. “But I deny myself nothing.”

Her scream rent the stillness of the ship, echoing, as Myng had left his communications devices on so the entire ship could view and hear Solana's rapture. He pulled from her, “Shall I stop Solana or do you want more?” he asked expecting her to plead for him to stop.

“Yes milord,” she gasped, reveling in the pain caused by his massive cock, her loving Prince forgotten forever, she was the evil and cruel Myng's woman now.

Myng's wicked laughter rang out as he plunged into her again followed by her cries of pain and passion. This time he lodged himself fully into her body and she screamed again.

“You rip me in two, my Lord Myng!” she exclaimed. “Please, can you do it again?” she begged him.

Her virgin's blood covered her thighs and he looked down into her enlarged pupils. Slowly he withdrew, and loosed her arms. Picking up her hips in his mighty hands, he drove her hips onto his cock, joining their bodies together as fully as possible. Her previous scream turned to a grunt of satisfaction. He held their bodies together, his cock throbbing inside her as he began to pound them together. Solana reveled in his rough sex, the harder he pumped into her body the more she begged him until she cried out in climax.

Myng looked down into the glassy eyes of the captive woman from Zantari. Her arms released he was surprised when she languidly stretched her arms around his neck and drew him closer, pumping her hips to meet his thrusts. None of his concubines ever begged for more! She flicked her delicate tongue over his full lips, invitingly, when at last he too found his climax. Hers came next as she held him close, unwilling to let him go. His cock throbbed inside her arousing her passion for him again and she locked her legs around his sinewy hips.

“More, milord?” she asked in a seductive manner. “I want you again. Is that, ah...” she smiled wantonly and the look in her eyes captivated him, “...permitted, for a lowly slave to ask?”

Myng reached over to the control panel and touched the “off” switch. “Yes Solana, it is.” His mouth covered her lips and his arms



encircled her. He was sure now he had found that one woman that matched his passions. *Oh yes, he thought, this would be the mother of his heir. The heir he longed to sire, on the right woman.* His kiss lengthened and his desire for her grew, his cock hardening under the caresses of her hand. Myng slipped his hand down to stroke her nether lips. She truly wanted him again. Her leg slipped over his waist, her hand guided his hard organ into her body, her hips bucked to meet their union. He would be in his chamber a little longer than he had planned.

Never had one of his women pumped into him, with the trick of a warrior she rolled them over, she was on top of him. With a hard squat she seated herself down on his cock, she pushed her body squarely on his enraged cock. Solana screamed again as she climaxed.

Myng felt her body give as the head of his cock jammed further inside her than it had any other woman before her. Slowly, languidly, she stretched her body over his, pressing every inch of her silken skin against his hard stomach and chest, stopping to lick his small male nipples, daring to nip his in return, allowing her own powerful pheromones to flow back into his system. Her mouth covered his, her tongue stroked his. Slowly, at first, she began to rock back and forth building a wave of pressure in his balls unlike he had ever known. Her amber eyes glistened with her own evil, taken back with her aggression, Myng flipped her back under him to control the little vamp he had unleashed.

“Now you will learn Solana, who is the master here,” he rasped dominantly.

“I never doubted who my master is, milord,” she said submissively, yet looking him calmly in the eyes her passion for him clear.

“We shall see my little Solana,” his voice rasped and he didn't speak for a while until they lay in each other's arms completed. A few hours later, his commanding captain woke him from his slumber; their ship had come under attack.

Myng dressed quickly without waking Solana. She would remain in his quarters. He ordered a servant put at her disposal to see to her needs. She would not be returning to his harem, but sleep with him until a time when her own quarters adjoining his could be constructed. With a last quick look back, amazed at the sleeping woman in his bed, he hurried to his command bridge to address the fool who dared attack his ship.

## CHAPTER THREE

TyGer made the jump last, as any good leader, waiting until the six other ships in his small squad safely escaped Myng, beginning their quest for the beams. By waiting he witnessed Myng's ship, Destructor, begin the jump. Followed by the delayed net of explosions he and SyVar laid, activate minutes into their jump. This left Myng temporarily stranded several light years from TyGer's home world of Zantari.

Grateful to the mysterious blue beams for the damage to Myng and his fleet, Myng unable to stop the damage to his ship or his fleet. It was some consolation. Yet, TyGer was unable to rescue his sister or Solana. They were lost to him and he grieved. His main mission now was to find who was responsible for the blue beams which had done so much damage to Myng's ship. The damage done by the beams alone would have delayed Myng's next conquest without the net charges set by he and SyVar. Directed and controlled correctly, those beams could destroy Myng.

TyGer needed to enlist those allies first, before Myng could repair his damage and gain that knowledge. Now it was possible to stop Myng, if he gained control of those beams. If Myng gained that power first, his first conquest after doing so would be Zantari, first after taking the world that controlled the beams. TyGer had to prevent that from happening to give his people another chance. He knew Myng's retribution on Zantari would be horrible the second time. With a last glance at the damaged Destructor under repairs TyGer passed by in light speed, destined for the world where those beams had originated.

\* \* \* \*

Myng was enraged. Three transports full of booty and slaves escaped back to their world he had just conquered because of damage of which he didn't know the cause. He was in no position to stop and

didn't know why. Half of his fleet was destroyed and his prize Destructor was badly damaged.

Prince TyGer was responsible for the series of net charges minutes after they went into light speed, he was sure of that. However, the damage done by those blue beams came from a world in the outer arm of the galaxy, a small world known as Earth. It was on his list to conquer, eventually, but his intelligence told him they didn't have technology so far advanced. Either his intelligence was wrong or there was a force at work he didn't understand. Somewhere, buried deep in his memory, the planet's name and existence stirred a forgotten, painful memory.

Myng was old, his life lengthened by the knowledge of time manipulation and dark science, he stopped aging at approximately forty, human years. In actual years he was over six hundred, or more. He'd lost track hundreds of years ago. His life was enjoyable, he was a conqueror of worlds, enjoyed women, and an occasional male if it struck his fancy, wielding such power it was almost unimaginable. Now he was extremely pleased at finding his soul mate, Solana. These beams were a mere annoyance, one he would add to his power base once he found the perpetrators that dared to attack him. Watching them suffer for attacking him would be enjoyable. Perhaps Solana would take part in their degradation. A sly smile lit his full lips. A smile that his crew knew meant he was planning a particularly nasty crusade. Most of the crew smiled along with him, enjoying his atrocities as he did.

When repairs were completed he would find out who was responsible and gain control of this force, either way he would return, reclaim Zantari and possibly settle here for a time. His thoughts turned to Solana, a more enjoyable pursuit. It was time to properly raise an heir, several in fact to rule the worlds he had conquered, after he was gone. A daughter or two from her might be affective as rulers on some worlds, if they had her tenacity and courage. First he would enjoy reigning as a ruler with her at his side, directing his Empire and enjoying the many facets of his space diamond, Solana.

"Mi lord?" His bridge Commander questioned when Myng rose from his throne.

"Advise me when repairs are complete and the ship is ready to make the jump," he growled and left the bridge. Most of the bridge personnel exchanged glances, wondering how brutal he would be with his new concubine. Perhaps he would leave the communications

channel on for their amusement, and her extra debasement, but they weren't so lucky with this girl.

Myng walked into his chambers to find Solana wrapped in a filmy robe of deep violet, her long honey-brown hair brushed to a silken sheen cascading down her back, she sat before a ship's computer terminal that monitored the command bridge. Solana turned to him a frown on her beautiful face when he walked in. She immediately slid gracefully from the chair to prostrate herself before him, her hair falling like a curtain around her.

"My Lord, I have taken the liberty of observing the events of the past few hours," she said humbly. Myng hid his delight at her interest in the safety of his prize ship and the defense of his empire, but assumed an angry pretense as a guise. "I am horrified at the attack the great Destructor has been subjected too. I might have anticipated the net charges but the beams, my lord, those did not come from Prince TyGer, and he does not have the technology."

"No Solana, I know this. Why would you be interested in the battle that has damaged my ship?" he asked her.

"My lord, this is the base of your Empire, at least until you can establish it on a chosen world. I have a theory if you would be interested in my humble idea," Solana said still on the floor."

"Look at me Solana," Myng told her. She looked up into his eyes and he said, "What is your theory?"

"This planet, Earth – ah, lord, your ancestors came from there," Solana told him.

"How do you know this?" Myng asked, amazed at this revelation, the memories beginning to return.

"I have used the ship's computers to research it, what else is there for me to do? I made myself ready for your pleasure, sitting and pairing my nails isn't what I consider a worthy consumption of time," she said, smiling seductively. "After the battle began I knew you would be away, fighting, so I looked for information to help you." She sat up, her breasts peaking through the thin wrap. "I am ready to relieve your needs my lord, at any time, but I can also help you find the origin of this blue beam. If you could gain control, the power of it would make you invincible. I am your servant, milord, to serve you in any way that is helpful or," she looked at him in a sultry pose, "pleasurable."

"Come to me, Solana," Myng commanded her. Solana rose from the floor and walked to him.

Myng fondled both her ripe breasts as his lips took hers. Releasing her breasts he wound his arms around her and pulled her closer. “Why do you attempt to gain my favor? You know my women are always dispensable.”

“What else is there for me, lord?” Solana asked, a sad smile on her pouting lips, “Only by proving my continuing worth will you keep me, in your bed and as a warrior at your side. My lord knows I am a warrior. Could any of your men have defeated me? No. Only you, my lord, could do that.”

“Perhaps you wished to be defeated Solana?” Myng suggested.

“No, I fought to the best of my abilities and would have killed you if I could have,” she answered honestly. “Now I am yours, I would be a fool to think otherwise. Besides, milord, I crave power as you do. Why else would I have married Prince TyGer? I bore him no love. I will give you the heirs you want, not that skinny, unintelligent boy who sits in the prince’s place on your bridge now. His mother was not an intelligent woman, was she?” Solana asked with a coy gleam in her eyes.

Myng looked at Solana a time before he answered, “No, she was foolish. After she gave birth she assumed that was all I would require of her and tried to rule through me. She expected me to give up my harem and take no other women to my bed. Are you so foolish Solana?”

Solana laughed, “Of course not. Bring one to join us this night if it so pleases you milord, or send me back to the harem and choose who you will. I am here to please only you. One thing I would ask,” she let it hang.

“That is?”

“If I have pleased you in the least, a computer terminal so that I may help you find where these beams came from,” Solana asked looking him clearly and straight in his dark and dangerous eyes. “I grow bored milord with the dull prattle of the harem women and...” She paused to look at her pricked fingers, “I can only sew so much, really milord,” she smiled sadly, “I am not very good at it. Why not let Prince TyGer’s sister complete your suit? Her sewing is impeccable.” She looked up at him from beneath long dark lashes. Her sad smile had just a little calculation to it.

“You may have your terminal, the one you currently use. I think the suggestion of your sewing has merit as well.” His eyes were fierce. “But attend both matters a bit later after I return to the bridge,

for now, I wish you in my bed. I desire no others from my harem – just yet.”

“As you will it milord,” Solana rose and went to his bed, not allowing Myng to see the supreme smile on her lips she let the violet wrap slip slowly, seductively from her shoulders leaving only her long honey-brown hair cascading down her back to her waist to cover her. Reaching the raised bed, the wrap fallen completely from her, Solana turned invitingly as she slipped onto the large, raised, silk covered bed. She passed her delicate pink tongue over her reddened lips. Raising one of her heavy breast with her hand, her eyes locked with Myng’s, she touched the tip of her tongue to her own hardened nipple. “Your mouth is much more satisfying, milord,” Solana voice was low and throaty.

“Woman you push me too far,” Myng growled threateningly, never had a woman of his harem acted in such a wonton manner. He began stripping off his clothing, watching this new, unconventional addition to his harem. Her eyes devoured him. Instead of shrinking away in fear, she watched with eager glee. Myng pushed her firmly down among the many pillows on the bed, he stroked her breast. Many women of his harem he was forced to restrain even after many visits to his bed and he found it tiresome, Solana reached for his cock to gently stoke the already aroused organ, ready to enter her.

“Oh milord let me kiss you,” she begged and put her mouth over his cock.

Myng groaned her mouth bringing him sensations his other women only gave lip serve to when forced. With a sudden motion he forced her away, penning her to the bed, “I want you now,” his eyes were intense, he cared not for her foreplay at the moment, only his needs, “are you ready?”

“I told you milord, I would always be ready for you,” Solana felt the head of his cock poised to enter her. He slid into her swiftly, filling her, expecting to hear her cry out in pain instead she grunted deeply, her body wet, on fire for him. “Oh, you fill me!” she choked out in a gasp.

Shock waves of electricity bolted through him when her long, strong legs locked around his hips, as he slammed into her body, Solana meeting his strokes, her arms encircled his neck to hold him closer. Solana’s mouth met his, fencing with his tongue nipping his neck to draw a fierce almost angry glare down into flaming amber eyes that met his with unleashed passion.

In return, he nipped her nipples. She screamed out her climax from the minor pain of his love bites seconds before Myng, only to meet his climax with another of her own. Her head thrown back in ecstasy, her voice a high pitched song of release as her body gripped his cock with contractions that drained him. She wouldn't release him until she found yet another peak. At last Myng, lay spent atop Solana, clasping her shapely form to his own hardened body. He pulled her long hair from her face grasping a handful of the thick mass and kissed her.

"Sleep Solana, while we travel to this mysterious world that will be my next conquest. We both will need the rest. I suspect I will depend on your knowledge more than I have other women of my harem." She caught the bit of humor in his voice.

Solana smiled, "Yes milord," she had him and she knew it, the slave became the master, but she knew too, she must tread carefully. Myng could never know she was leading him. Power was hers now, such power. TyGer had left her at this man's mercy, she and his poor sister who had not fared as well. Solana knew she couldn't save her either; to do so would jeopardize her own position.

As Myng slept, a tear slipped from beneath Solana's eyelids thinking again of the young girl who would have been her sister-in-law. Myng's commander seemed to value his prize, but he would use her and toss her aside when another was given him. Exhaustion took Solana, her last thought was to help the girl, when and if she could, but never would she allow her to weaken her position with Myng. Her suggestion of letting TyGer sister, Lapura, sew Myng's suite would give the girl some break from the commander's attentions and a little higher standing in the ship's common harem.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Troubled and frightened from the events she had witnessed, Sapphire spent the day at a Buddhist temple where she often went to think and meditate. Here she always felt safe. Today, to her disappointment, she found she felt safe nowhere. The senior monk, an old weather-worn man came and sat next to her on the garden bench in silence for a long time before asking, “Are you unwell, daughter?”

“No master, thank you for your concern,” Sapphire replied, her head bent, her voice low. Normally, Sapphire would sleep during the day after staying up at the observatory all night. She knew there would be no sleep for her until she found some solution for what she had seen.

“Daughter,” the monk said to her in a low, fatherly voice, “I was blessed.” He smiled ruefully. “And cursed as a child with the ability of foresight. My Karma?” he said with a bit of humor. “This night will be a turning point, for you and for Earth, embrace this event, you cannot run from it,” he warned. “A young lord will come for you, go with him. He is the key to the powers you were blessed with. You were not meant to be alone with this task. Together you must fight this terrible evil that even now approaches Earth.”

“You know such things from this gift?” she asked turning to look at the old lined face of the senior monk.

“I see the future, at times. I have seen your future and know of your past. You are the direct descendant of our ancient Emperor Ming. He had a brother named Myng, a slightly different spelling, pronunciation and being. Ming’s brother was evil, so evil and powerful he was exiled from Earth.” The old monk saw the questioning look in her eyes. “Yes, daughter, he had a way to leave our world back then. His powers with evil were strong and they still are.”

“You are telling me he still lives after these many years?” Sapphire asked incredulously.



“He does, and it has been so long since he was here, he has all but forgotten those early days. But he will soon remember with the help of the woman he has taken as his own, the woman who would have been the Queen of the young lord who comes for you. She is as evil as Myng, his female equal, beware of her my daughter,” the old monk warned.

“Thank you, Father, for your advice, I have been much troubled since – what I saw,” Sapphire paused, a slight smile on her lips. “No one would believe me if I had told them.”

“No daughter, I doubt they would, I have more to tell. Two men are coming for you, the first is good, a Prince on his world, a man of honor. However, the one who follows in a day or so is evil incarnate. Be warned, he is the one we speak of and the woman we speak of is with him. What you do will affect not only our world but our galaxy for a thousand years, as it did hundreds of years ago with your ancestor.” without another word he rose and bowed, “Peace and love be with you daughter.” he blessed her and left her alone to think.

Sapphire stared after him in amazement. *How so much responsibility could be placed upon her?* She wondered with some resentment toward her inheritance. Rising from the bench, she left. As evening approached she took her own telescope and returned to the observatory. *What did I observe the night before?* she asked herself.

Watching the sun sink into a cloudless winter sky she set-up her own telescope, much smaller than the University’s, and without links to the satellite, but powerful enough to see the area she was interested in. She prepared to do what she did most nights, watch the sky. Sapphire’s social life was nearly non-existent. Extraordinarily beautiful, or so she had been told, she had many first dates, but the moment a man began to arouse her and her eyes began to glow, a mark of her tremendous passion, the man became fearful, ending the date and any relationship that might have taken root. After the first several dates, Sapphire stopped accepting them, and after word got around her university, men didn’t ask.

Hours passed, overhead the stars moved slowly, the planets passed faster and there was no moon this night. Sapphire nervously scrutinized each falling star and passing satellite fearful it was a ship from the battle she had witnessed, the occupants coming for her. Knowing that time was coming, but not when, her imagination of what those occupants would look like elevated her anxiety level by the minute. She expected to see the aliens appear at night and with the approach of

dawn she drew a sigh of relief and began to pack up her equipment placing the delicate telescope in her car's trunk.

Uncertainty overwhelmed her. She drew a shaky breath as a feeling so cold and chilling her legs began to tremble. The blue glow in her eyes returned. She didn't need a mirror to know. Slowly she looked up and over the open trunk, her worst fears coming true. Two of the ships she watched battling the massive craft she knew to be evil, were settling silently to earth not far from her little car. The force of the wind, displaced from the ships' silent engines caused the car to rock unstably. Sapphire, already wobbly, held onto the trunk with shaking hands. Now she could make out details of the craft, other than a streamlined fighter.

Each craft was the size of a large corporate jet, without visible windows, including the front cockpit which resembled an airborne submarine. Sapphire wondered if they traveled through the beauty of space without seeing it. Assuming the occupants were humanoid, or of similar size, Sapphire speculated the crew could possibly be made up of several individuals. She stood, letting go of the trunk lid, observing the details of the closer ship. Weapon housings hung from the arrow shaped craft, made mainly for the performance in space. Wings would be a minor priority.

A low arch stretched from one side to the other and seemed to serve as a stabilizer. It was mobile, changing attitude when the craft landed. Because the interior wasn't visible, she couldn't see shapes. Stepping clear of her car she jumped, startled, when a large hatch opened in the forward section of the ship. Sapphire held her breath, terrified at who or what would step through the open portal. She remembered the monk saying a young *man* would come, she breathed a little easier. Sapphire waited in fearful anticipation for the – man that would come through the now open door.

TyGer's tactical group located where the beams had originated without difficulty. It hadn't taken them long to determine Earth's technological capabilities were not on a level to produce a high powered beam strong enough to damage Myng's Destructor and fleet. Furthermore, Earth had little reason to draw Myng's attention to the planet. TyGer doubted the peoples of Earth knew of Myng since their knowledge of space was not that extensive. TyGer's intelligence quickly narrowed the beams down to the location on the planet where they originated. After the beams energy signatures were analyzed his scientists assured him, one person was responsible for the beams,

probably a woman. Though they could not give him a reason why she would do such a thing, they assured him, she was powerful, possibly a mage.

Myng would decimate the woman's world to find her unless he found her first and together they could establish some form of defense. From the reports his agents had given him concerning Earth, their defenses were incapable of resistance. Earth's venture into space had mainly been peaceful exploration, unmanned robots to the planets of their solar system and some manned visits to their moon and closet neighbor, Mars. This mysterious woman's powers alone were the planet's only hope as defense. TyGer doubted Earth knew the danger approaching them.

TyGer knew if he didn't find her first, Myng would take her as his own, using her powers for his own gain, draining her of them, along with her life, in a most unpleasant way. By genetically engineering their offspring, while she was forced to use her abilities against his enemies. As their mother, a breeder, until she was of no further use, her powers depleted, and then she would be tossed aside. Not retired in honor, but given to his men as royal gift for entertainment. She might pray her children would save her, but Myng would never allow that to happen. She would die young—at least in years. TyGer felt fortunate his tacticians and trackers were among the best in the galaxy and located her first.

Sapphire stood away from her little car, her eyes fixed on the open door of the space craft. A dim shadow preceded the appearance of a tall, powerfully built figure, dressed in a padded form fitting deep teal tunic, over heavy knit trousers of a darker teal. What light was present glinted off golden metal bars on each shoulder, and a heavy golden chain draped from bar to bar across his broad shoulders. His face was in deep shadow, his features undistinguishable, except his golden eyes that unsurprisingly seemed to glow with a golden light of their own.

Sapphire moistened her full lips, unable to stop the rush of adrenaline heating her blood that suddenly flowed rapidly through her body at his appearance. He took two steps down the stairs from his craft and stopped, his eyes drinking her in, one hand casually braced against the craft's door. Dropping his hand he descended the last two steps to stand on the ground. Now she could see his hair, a thick, three shade mixture of dark brown, dark auburn, and an unusual red. He wore the thick, long mass bound back at the nape of his neck, the true length

undeterminable in the low light, the colors reminding her of a tiger's heavy coat, but longer.

From this man she detected no malevolence and again remembered the monk's warnings. This was the young man, the first one the monk spoke of, and he wasn't evil. Still he frightened her, his bearing was powerful, and she detected danger surrounding him as a mantle. She didn't know him, and therefore she had no reason to trust him. He slowly moved closer to her, approaching her as if he expected she were about to flee, causing her to wonder if he sensed her fear of him or perhaps he feared her as well. After all, she had sent the beams into deep space. Half way between his ship and her, he stopped.

"Earth woman," he addressed in a respectfully tone, "are you the one who sent the beams that attacked Myng the Cruel?" His question was direct, the name Myng the Cruel meant nothing to her but she guessed he referred to the Commander of the giant ship her beams had attacked.

Sapphire's mouth was so dry she shook. Her fear threatened to become an overpowering emotion, already accompanying the strong unexplained desire for this strange alien man that raced through her.

"Who are you?" she answered a question with a question in a bold tone, hoping she sounded commanding, and authoritative.

"My name is Prince TyGer. It was my forces that were attempting to stop Myng when the beams appeared. Without the beams we would not have been successful. My world would have totally succumbed to Myng. As it was," he paused and bowed his head, then straightened, "I lost my parents, my sister and my fiancée. Myng killed my parents. Only my sister and fiancée survived but now belong to Myng. My people were able to escape back to our world." TyGer answered her truthfully, hoping she would recognize the need for expediency in their meeting.

Her voice changed to become low and soft, compassion deep in her tone for his loss, "What do you mean, belong to this Myng?"

TyGer looked at her, now she could see his face and her heart raced at how handsome he was, his golden eyes glowed as her blue eyes did, "Once Myng takes a woman as his, she is no longer – ah, capable of returning—" he drew a deep breath, "to another man. She is gone, as if she were dead, perhaps possessed, would better explain..."

"Did you love her?" Sapphire asked unable to understand why any woman would wish to leave this handsome and powerful man. She was drawn to him, a rarity, but she found her breath shortened when he

captured her eyes and left her wet with desire. An emotion she knew only from the beams arousal in her innocent state.

“No, not yet, I didn’t know her. It was an arranged marriage, still she was to be my wife, and then my sister, who I do love, is also under his control and was given to his Commander as a – prize,” he spit out those words. Now we must consider your world, if you are the one who sent those beams Myng will soon come for you and take this. “He looked around. “...your world as his own. You, Earth woman, are not safe.” His eyes devoured her, seemingly stripping her clothes from her body. “What do you call yourself?”

“My name is Sapphire, because of the color of my eyes. Normally people of my race have brown eyes. I am different, and yes,” she sighed, “the beams came from me. Though I didn’t *send* them. It seemed the energy was just drawn from my body and escaped into space. I watched through the telescope,” she pointed toward the giant earth bound part of the instrument, “as they made it to the ship you spoke of. Somehow I knew it was evil. I cannot explain it.” She was shaking almost beyond control, TyGer approached closer now, to stand over her.

TyGer looked down, drawn to Sapphire’s delicate features, her blue eyes glowing. He could feel her trembling. *Did he dare touch this beautiful creature capable of such power, who seemed so vulnerable and in need of his protection?* he asked himself. Though dressed in drab, heavy, dark blue pants and a loose dark shirt, her long black hair braided in a long thick rope down her back she was exquisitely beautiful. Such power in a small body amazed him. Raising his hand he gently stroked a finger along her cheek.

“You are trembling, are you cold?” TyGer asked his voice filled with concern, low and passionate.

“No,” she answered confirming what he knew. Her trembling was from fear.

“You will come with me,” he stated, “you are not safe here, I think you know that.”

“I know it,” she agreed, she wasn’t safe.

He grew bolder and encircled her small frame in his arms, “You will come with me!” he commanded, his normal attitude of assuming authority showing.

“I do not like to be ordered, I make my own decisions.”

He smiled down into her serious face. “I understand Sapphire, but if I leave you here Myng will find you and neither of us wants that to

happen. Now come with me, for your own protection and that of your world.”

Sapphire looked deep into those glowing golden eyes, “I do not make it a habit to go with strange men in spaceships, however, I will go with you,” she agreed somewhat hesitantly, “but I must get my equipment.” She stepped away from his embrace, one of the hardest things she had ever done. The safety of his arms was like heaven compared to the world of fear she had been living in the last twenty-four hours. His embrace and his closeness was arousing making her want to melt into his strong body. Without thinking of the gesture, she laid her hands on his chest as she gazed into his eyes. It would be so simple to lay her head on his chest as well. In his safe arms she might be able to sleep, but exhaustion swept through her. She sensed another’s presence and startled. Looking up she found another man, dressed similar to TyGer.

“This is SyVar, he will take your equipment,” TyGer introduced him. “SyVar, the Lady Sapphire,” TyGer said noting the surprise at the prefix of *Lady* to her name. “Come Sapphire, you will join me in my ship.” He took her hand and led her towards his ship. Suddenly she stopped. Two steps from the craft, her eyes round and fearful. “Sapphire?” he questioned.

“I – ah, don’t know you,” she was apprehensive, “maybe you are the evil one.” She looked at him with skepticism.

TyGer smiled. “You don’t know me, true, but didn’t you say yourself, that you sensed the Destructor was evil? Did you direct the beams that came from you or did they attack on their own?”

“Yes, I said that and yes, the beams seemed to know what ship to attack,” Sapphire reluctantly agreed. A sudden movement from TyGer brought Sapphire’s still trembling body hard against his muscular chest. She found he held her close in his arms again. Again, she felt the safety there, smelled his masculine scent like no other, a petite hand lay upon the quilted teal fabric of his tunic. She looked up into his eyes.

“Little one,” TyGer said to her in a quiet, firm voice. “I am not the one to fear,” his lips touched her full warm lips as though he could no longer stop himself. His mouth covered hers persuasively; a hand cradled her head to move down her back and released the band that held her braid. Her heavy black hair, freed from restraint, spread out like silk, covering her back flowing down past her waist. TyGer laced his fingers in the mass, his consciousness lost in the sweetness of her. “I will never let Myng have you,” he said, heated passion in his voice,

his mouth still against hers, making her wonder even more about Myng and him.

“My Lord,” SyVar interrupted them politely. “Forgive me, but your eyes...”

“What do you mean SyVar?” TyGer asked.

“They are glowing. I didn’t know you had those powers, milord,” SyVar exclaimed.

TyGer expression registered his shock, silence reigning before he replied, “I don’t!”

“I thought that was normal for your type of humans,” Sapphire exclaimed and she looking closely at SyVar, whose eyes were a normal brown.

“No, my eyes are usually golden but have never glowed,” TyGer said with some confusion in his voice. “Perhaps, Sapphire, you have affected me, or your planet has,” his voice became soft and he took the liberty of tenderly touching her face.

“Either way, Lord,” SyVar interrupted, “we must go, the Earth’s military have detected our presence,” he explained.

“Thank you SyVar.” TyGer turned to her, “I will explain further when we are on board and in the safety of space. There is much history for you to learn, as well as learning to control your powers. Now, it would seem, I have a new ability to explore myself.”

“I will go with you Prince TyGer since I see no other choice.” She looked briefly at the rising sun, remembering the words of the monks from the temple, finding they gave her little solace nor quelled her fear, she was still afraid.

“You will be safe Sapphire, I give you my solemn oath,” TyGer told her. Looking deeply into her eyes he pulled her again into his arms and kissed her. Relaxing against him, she was amazed at the emotions he caused to flow through her. The words *passion and desire* were only the surface of what she felt and she found herself wondering if that ship had a bed in it. After all, she was twenty-two and still had not found out what it was to sleep with a man. Because of her strange eyes men had been frightened of her when she became aroused.

“TyGer, I’ll have to trust you. I don’t want to be found by this Myng either,” Sapphire sighed and entered the ship.

TyGer allowed her time to pause at the door and gaze about. Inside were four others were visible; his co-pilot, Ging’r. She was a little taller than Sapphire, short brown hair cut on an angle even with her defined jaw, her green eyes bright with a friendly smile. Then TyGer

introduced her to Totan, his navigator and tactician. Older than TyGer, the man's white hair and piercing blue eyes took Sapphire back a bit until he smiled, clicked his heels together, and bowed slightly.

"I was so relieved, milady," he said. "When I located your life readings and knew we had found you before Myng entered your solar system. I am sorry to say he is getting closer now." The later he directed toward TyGer, his eyes looking directly at the Prince.

Last, TyGer introduced his weapon's officer Crytu, "My pleasure milady. I have been theorizing ways to direct and enhance your astounding abilities with your unique beams. Hopefully we will be able to possibly do enough damage to Myng's Destructor that he will not be able to conquer your world. If that is the case," he smiled smugly, "he will not be able to return to harm ours."

"I don't know what to say to you Crytu, I'll help all I can of course," Sapphire's voice was serious. She looked to TyGer who now directed her to his private quarters.

"Here, Sapphire," he closed the door with a wave of his hand, "you may rest, and through that small hatch you'll find a bath." His hands rested on her shoulders, he could feel the tension in her muscles and though her eyes no longer glowed, they were large with stress. He looked deep into her eyes, "You did not rest last night nor the night before." His look was soothing. "No," he said, "I didn't read your mind, your exhaustion is easy to see. Rest for a time if you can, I will leave you to do so, you will feel the ship lift off, do not be alarmed, we will be in space in a short span of time."

"I would like to see that," her voice was soft and quick, his strong hands massaged her tense muscles making her blood run hot through her body. She glanced at his large bunk.

He saw her eyes go to the bed. "You are tired. I will leave you – for now." Before he did however, his mouth covered hers again, his arms drew her close, and he felt her arms slip around him. Perhaps she wasn't as tired as he thought, he would not be gone long, and he could use a few hours in that bunk as well and not all in sleep.

Sapphire didn't waste the time he allotted her and quickly showered feeling the ship leave earth while she was standing under the fine spray. She had no clothing other than what she had worn and TyGer's clothing was much too big for her small frame. She slipped into what was obviously a sleep shirt of TyGer's. A knock on the door startled her. It was after all TyGer's cabin, why would he knock.



“Come in,” she called. The door opened and TyGer stepped in. Glowing golden eyes met glowing blue ones, a gentle thumb stroked her jaw. His hands laced into her long black hair to pull her closer, his arms engulfed her, his lips met hers.

“You are beautiful Sapphire,” TyGer said in a low throaty voice. “I know now, I was meant to find you.”

“What about your fiancée, aren’t you concerned with freeing her?” Sapphire asked breathlessly, feeling guilty in the arms of another woman’s man.

“Sapphire, you don’t understand. Myng has her. By now she has shared his bed, with his pheromones in her.” He looked at her questioning. “You know what pheromones are?”

“Yes, we are not that primitive,” Sapphire answered a little affronted.

“I didn’t mean to imply that, little one. His pheromones will keep her under his control. Myng is more evil than anyone Earth has ever seen. He has powers, Sapphire; he can use his mind as well as his pheromones to control her. I hope your powers and now possibly mine are strong enough to overcome them,” TyGer explained.

“On my world, I have been forced to hide my powers, TyGer. I do not know how to use them,” she said with anxiety in her voice.” An impish look came over her face. “There have been times,” she came close to giggling but stifled it and it came out as a low sob, “that I was tempted.”

“What happened?” he asked.

Sapphire glanced around, then said, “A boy was mistreating a kitten. He would have killed the poor thing so I turned the tables on him, just a little. The kitten escaped unharmed, the boy...” She let the moment hang to smile. “He’ll not trouble another. He might be able to sire children.” She smiled. “It would be best if he named his first child after the tiger kitten in the animal’s honor.”

“You used your powers pretty well already,” he complemented her as they stood close to each other. “We will vanquish this villain together.” TyGer smiled confidently down into her face before taking her lips with his again, his tongue tasting hers this time. “For now,” he looked deep into her frightened eyes holding those glowing orbs with ease, “I want you, more than I have ever wanted any other woman. We were meant to be together I know this. It is our destiny.”

“TyGer, I...” Sapphire blushed, she wanted him as well, but how could she tell him that she was innocent of a man at her age. “I have never—uh,” she cleared her throat, his lips took hers again.

“I know Sapphire,” TyGer said. “Why, I could not begin to guess. You are the loveliest maid I’ve known.”

“Surely not, your fiancée...” Sapphire said and shrugged. “A princess of royal birth must be far more beautiful.”

“Why would you think that, because she can trace her parentage back many, many generations of royalty? Not so - lovely, yes, but not as much as you,” he told her, not letting her know Totan was also a genealogist. On their trip to Earth, after identifying her, he had traced her lineage back to her royal ancestor, the Earth’s Emperor Ming, Sapphire’s blood line was as royal as Solana’s. Fate had maneuvered her bloodline for a reason; to bring her abilities to a much stronger level. All her powers were equal to that of the Emperor Ming’s mother, a powerful sorceress, those powers brought back together in Sapphire to stand against the evil descendant Myng in battle. Myng’s uncle—actually a half brother of Earth’s Ming’s mother by an equally powerful sorceress, though evil, were linked in a strange manner.

TyGer guessed her thoughts, or read them, she didn’t know which. Before she could respond her feet left the floor. He swept her into his strong arms then tenderly laid her down on his roomy bunk. He joined her quickly, a mischievous smile on his lips, “Have you never been in space?”

“No. More people get that privilege now, but I’ve only looked through the telescope,” she answered. With a motion of his hand over the panel in the wall above the bed he triggered a sensor, the entire wall beside the bunk slid back to reveal an open window on space.

“Then let this forever remain in your mind as your first look,” he said over her surprised gasp.

Earth floated in the near distance, the moon closer, just over to the left and partially visible. “Later,” he said, passion in his voice. “You can see deep space through your telescope. Or,” he added, drawing her hair away from her neck to kiss her slender throat, “you can use our more powerful equipment.” Her pulse raced as his lips traced the throbbing vein down toward the breasts he caressed through the silken fabric of his night shirt.

Sapphire closed her eyes on the spectacular view, confident it would still be there in a little while. This mysterious man was taking her where she had longed to go so many times before.

The many men she dated in the past had been frightened away long before this point when her eyes took on the blue glow her passion produced. His warm, moist mouth found a hard nipple and closed around the peaked marble, Sapphire sucked in her breath and groaned, her fingers combed through his strangely striped hair, he looked up as his tongue curled around the nipple, his thumb rolled the nibble on her other breast. She arched her back, giving in to his caresses, allowing him to control her feelings as he wished. His hand moved lower, tenderly stroking her flat stomach and she knew flutters deep inside her body that had nothing to do with her stomach. Still, she was innocent and modest. His touch stroked the thick thatch of straight black hair covering her sensitized nether lips, she flinched a bit. Without a thought a delicate hand covered her exposed and swelled sex.

“I will know all of you my glowing blue gem, before I take you,” he said in a low and soothing tone, his mouth leaving her breast to kiss her tight stomach and tease her navel with his tongue. He moved her small hand, his fingers gently plucking one or two of her pubic hairs ever so slightly.

Sapphire was drenched between her legs. She wondered how she could be so wet and on fire at once. Little gentle tugs sent delicious tingles through her, and with a feeling like butterflies deep in her womb, her legs relaxed. She knew the delight of strong hands caressing her inner thighs that opened automatically, without her conscious consent. His hand slid between her legs, around between them to cup her butt then slip back, one finger sliding between her nether lips spreading the wetness further. Her world spun, as a delicious dizziness of warmth and sensations she had many times tried to imagine and had failed to seeped deep inside her body. She opened her eyes to see such passion in his eyes it brought tears to hers. He kissed her mound.

“Oh no – you mustn’t!” she exclaimed.

“And, why not?” he teased, passing the tip of his tongue between her labia lips, his tenderness sending waves of cravings so intense through her, she clutched the pillows between her hands, crying out from the sweetness of the feelings that raced through her body.

“There is no sweeter flavor than that of a woman, and the flavor of an innocent one even more so,” he said before he began massaging her nether lips with his tongue.

She cried out when she climaxed and TyGer chuckled.

“What if your crew should hear?” she gasped.

“What if they should?” he answered his voice deep with his own desire. Her hands explored his body but had not yet become brave enough to find his cock. Through half closed eyes he watched her, knowing the time was close when she would.

Sapphire became bold, her hands caressed his muscle shaped butt and around to the front feeling the pubic hairs. She had seen a man naked and never one aroused, the tremendous heat from his cock radiating heat, pulling her closer to his dry warmth. Her curiosity drove her as did her desire to touch the organ that would soon replace his mouth. Tentatively she touched him, her hand barely spanned around him. Her eyes flew open to lock with his, he held her eyes and would not release them. Her hand moved slowly to the end and the pre-cum that had bubbled at the tip.

*Oh, she thought, he is huge.* Then chided herself, *how would I know, never having enjoyed anyone else.* Timidly, Sapphire gently spread that thick, golden liquid around the head with her delicate thumb, TyGer’s moan of ecstasy stopped her.

“Have I hurt you?” she asked knowing men were sensitive in this area.

“No, but you make me desire you more.” TyGer moved back up to kiss her, “I would never hurt you either Sapphire” he told her, “but nature does put some obstacles...”

In his eyes she saw raw desire and passion, the heat from his need she still held carefully in her small hand, “I know,” her voice came in a raw whisper of her own need. “I want you!” she proclaimed, “I know of what you speak and do not care,” she whispered, knowing it was long past time to experience love.

His large hand covered her smaller one to guide his cock to the entrance of her virginal passageway to paradise. One arm went around her body, pulling her tight. To his surprise her leg went around his hips, their bodies touching intimately inch to inch. His mouth covered hers and she wound her arms around his neck pressing her breast into the bright colored hairs of his chest.

Slowly and calculating his cock lodged in her tight entrance. She gasped and he deepened his kiss placing one hand beneath her hips. In a swift movement he took her, pressing through the barrier of her virginity. Silence ruled. He feared she had swooned, his mouth parted from hers, to see only a slight blue glow from her half open eyes. Her body throbbed around their joining, coursing through the thickness of his staff lodged in her canal. They were tightly joined as one. Sapphire

only waited for his movements, her arms pulled him back suddenly, her strength surprising him.

“Love me, my Tiger!” she demanded, her voice a hushed gasp, “a small price for the ecstasy I already feel building.” Sapphire contracted her muscles around his cock, clamping down hard, feeling his response as he started to pull away. “No don’t leave me!” she cried out, fearful he was moving away from her.

“Shh, I am not leaving,” and he plunged back into her hungry body. “See, it is the way of it,” he explained and began to pump into her. A moan escaped TyGer as he held himself in check, fearing he would, in his passion, be too rough on her body the first time. She put that thought from him when she locked her other leg around his sinewy hips, drawing him closer, meeting his thrusts, muttering in Chinese instead of the English he had addressed her in from the beginning. Clapsed in each other’s arms they reached the depths of the deepest space together. Sapphire no longer cared if his crew heard her cries of passion and desire coming to a climax. Nothing mattered any longer, only the place of ecstasy he had driven her. When, after long minutes of strained orgasms they lay next to each other, TyGer took up a position behind Sapphire in a spoon position. He pulled a mid-night gray sheet over them for warmth as she lay staring out at the magnificence of space.

Exhaustion overtook her and she dozed to wake after a while, feeling TyGer’s eyes on her, his cock hard again in his desire for her, nestled between the cheeks of her butt. Sensing she was awake he placed light kisses on her face, neck and back. Sapphire began to turn over but he stopped her.

“No my love, lie still, enjoy,” was all he said.

His mouth placing massaging kisses over the muscles of her back, she knew a new measure of sensation, her body responding to his love making. Opening her legs to allow him access to her newly opened sex he entered her from behind, bringing her to almost immediate climax. He held her close to his hardened body, having not yet found his release; he would drive her to yet another pinnacle of sensation while she stared into the depths and beauty of space. Her muscles, from this position, had a greater command on his cock and gripped him until this time he cried out his release long after she achieved her first climax, when at last he released into her fevered body after she matched his orgasm, they drifted to sleep, joined, staring through drowsy eyes into infinity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Myng was furious. Solana couldn't blame him, she was angered herself, and never would she have guessed the damage could be so great. Myng's Chief Commander, brave enough to awaken them, reported of how badly damaged the ship was, more damage revealed during the light jump. While Myng dressed to inspect the ship, Solana, on her knees, begged to accompany him.

"Why would you wish to inspect the ship Solana?" Myng asked suddenly suspicious of her motives.

"My Lord knows that I have designed ships on my home world. I am not just another highbred, brainless, harem woman, my Lord," she had said in respectful tones, and then bowed her head, touching his toes.

Though doubtful of her gesture, she pleased him; he, however, didn't show it. "If you go with me Solana, you go dressed as you are," he warned, a callous edge to his voice, his eyes taking in the thin, skimpy rose hued covering she dressed in, "I will allow you no privileges.

"I expect none my Lord. I will accompany you dressed in what ever manner you wish to display me," Solana said her eyes down. She knew her position was precarious and to expect, or to ask for special privileges now would be foolhardy and destructive to her end plan.

"Very well, follow me, behind me at all times, unless ordered differently. Should you see something that requires my attention, you will let me know by dropping to your knees and touching your head to my foot," Myng informed her, he could have ordered her to perform a much more humiliating action to gain his attention.

"As my lord and master wishes," Solana agreed.

Their tour shocked her, not the leers from the crew, she expected those. She noticed Myng was not pleased by them, which surprised her. The women of the harem warned her Myng liked to display his women

by teasing his crew with their nudity. What shocked her was the damage done by the mysterious blue beams. Bowing as she had been instructed, she touched her forehead to the soft material of Myng's shipboard shoe.

"You have something you wish to bring to my attention, slave?" Myng asked in a caustic tone.

"Yes milord. This humble slave requests the privilege of touching the exact entrance point of one of the beams," Solana said in a humble voice. Known to be psychic on her world, Solana knew if she touched the first point of entry of a beam she could tell much of the beam's origin.

Myng's eyes narrowed. To allow her such a feat would endanger her life. He wasn't sure he was willing to do that, any one of his other concubines, yes, but not this one. He had plans for her and was not yet tired of her luscious body,

"Why would you want to endanger your life?" Myng asked her, jerking her to her feet with one mighty hand around her slender throat, "Are you attempting to end your life Solana?" He saw the sudden look of surprise and shock in her eyes and knew that wasn't the reason.

"No," she wheezed, "my lord!" Solana never considered he would think such a thing, "On Zantari," she felt his hold relax and she drew a grateful breath of air, "I am known as a psychic." He released his grasp, only to find it necessary to catch her, lest she fall at his feet, her legs unstable from lack of air and from fear. Any other woman he would have let fall.

"Thank you my lord," she said meaningfully and continued her explanation. "If I can but touch the first entry point of a beam, I may be able to tell much of where the beam came from and from whom," she said. She drew another gasp of air, painful though it was, and added, "or what sent it. Prince TyGer placed those charges to prevent us from making the jump to light speed. We knew that, but he was not responsible for those beams, Zantari did not have that technology."

Myng turned to his chief commander. "Get my slave a secure area around a point in the ship where a beam struck so she may *safely* touch the first strike area."

"Yes, milord!" The commander immediately ordered his men to prepare an area of the ship that would meet the requirements for Solana. This Commander was no one's fool and he knew soon, he would be calling her Lady again.

An area was secured where one of the stronger beams had struck. Myng's commander went one more measure of safety and provided an environmental suit for Solana. Before donning the suit, she knelt at Myng's feet and requested permission to dress in such a covering suit. Myng gave it. She left one glove off so her naked hand could touch the area of the initial contact. Slowly she ran her fingers over the jagged metal of the ship. She felt the ship's pain, and tears sprang into her eyes.

"Solana!" Myng addressed her with concern "are you well?"

"Yes milord, the ship is in pain and I can feel it," she responded truthfully, her voice somewhat hypnotic "these beams were produced by one, powerful woman. One who was born to do battle with you my Lord. She is on a planet called Earth. She does not know of her own strength and if we can find her before Prince TyGer, she can be used for your benefit. She is a distant descendant of Emperor Ming, my Lord." Solana drew a short breath and sank to the floor.

Myng sank to his knees and gathered her in his arms, "To medical, immediately!" he commanded.

People moved to do as he commanded and he rose to his feet with Solana in his arms. No one wanted to get in Myng's way. None had ever seen Myng carry a woman, much less a slave, a conquered concubine taken as a prize. This was Myng the Cruel, more likely to leave her lay where she had fallen for the crew to do with as they pleased. No, all knew by this act Solana held a special place within the heart of their cruel leader Myng.

Within minutes Solana had regained herself to find she was held high in Myng's arms. Languidly she slipped a perfumed slender arm around her master's neck, laying her head a little higher on his silk embroidered shoulder, taking a slow, deep breath of his special masculine scent.

"Are you better, little slave?" he whispered close to her so no one else could hear.

"Yes milord, I can walk," Solana said very quietly.

"No." Myng's reply was short and firm. "A doctor will look at you before your feet touch the floor."

"Yes my Lord," she conceded and left her head on his shoulder, watching the looks of respect she now drew from those who they passed, enjoying them, knowing word of her treatment had already reached the harem.



“Physician!” Myng called when they reached the infirmary. “She passed out,” he went on to explain her condition. “Be sure she is well, for if she isn’t and you do not find out why, it is your life that is forfeit.”

“Tell me how you feel, Lady,” the doctor asked, unable to hide his nervousness as he ran scanners over her.

“I am fine, really. It was the psychic strength of the ship’s damages that drained my strength.” She managed a weak smile. Please, doctor, send mechanics to care for our ship – it is the one in pain!” she almost begged and looked to Myng.

“She is as she says, and,” he drew Myng aside, “My Lord, she carries your child, very early possibly only hours, but our sensors are that sensitive. My Lord, if you value this woman and the mote of life she carries do not allow her such a risk again. She truly is gifted as a psychic and it could damage her and the pregnancy.”

Myng smiled. “Very good.” He turned to Solana. “You can walk?”

“Yes my Lord,” Solana said respectfully, “shall I return to the harem now?”

“No Solana, your, ah...” Myng looked at her for a long minute, making a decisive command, “arrangements will now change. You will await me here.” Myng left her sitting in the environmental suit on the examining table in their sick bay.

Solana was truly perplexed, whereas she was psychic, this did not give her sight into her own future and she was suddenly afraid. She had been so sure she had Myng under her own spell, now she was not sure. A mature woman entered, the head attendant woman of the harem.

“Our master commands me to dress you, Lady Solana.”

The older woman addressing her as Lady surprised her, followed by an easing of tension.

“As he wishes,” Solana answered humbly expecting the usual revealing garments. Instead she was dressed in rich fabrics, revealing but not as revealing as a slave would wear. The woman dressed her in fabrics that adorned a woman of high station and rank, the dresses of a Queen.

“You’re a sly one, milady,” the old woman commented, “I mean no disrespect,” she added quickly. “I have served our master well and long, since I was once a concubine and survived to become what I am, instead of in the Rooms of Pleasure. Never have I seen Myng so,” she paused and looked into Solana’s eyes, “enamored before. Walk

carefully and you may be the One,” she advised candidly and without rancor.

Solana knew the old one spoke the truth and she knew too, she saw what and who she was, “Thank you old one, I will not forget your words, or you.”

Solana preceded the head of the harem from the sick bay where she found Myng waiting for her. Immediately Solana knelt, putting her head on his shoe as was expected.

Strong hands drew her up, “Be it known, Solana, you are the only woman in my – collection,” he smiled evilly “that is absolved from doing this. From now on, you do not bow, others bow to you. I name you my mate; you are far too valuable to me for less. Return to our quarters to await my needs.”

“My Lord is too...” She smiled for she had almost said kind. Instead, she said, “magnanimous.”

A well armed, well trusted bodyguard was assigned to escort her, Myng would have liked too, but his responsibilities to his ship and command required his attention. His thoughts went with this strange, mysterious and equally evil woman he would keep as his own. What he saw in her mind just as she awakened from her faint, sealed what he was considering. With her at his side, and this woman who controlled the beams, he would rule the Galaxy. He found one thing lingering in his mind; he wondered what this woman who controlled such power looked like. Probably an old hag, he chuckled, then sighed, hoping he was wrong. He would probably have to mate with her to flood her system with his pheromones in order to control her. In any case, Solana was beyond compare, it would be but a few minutes of passing displeasure.

## CHAPTER SIX

“I can’t do it. It just will not go where I direct it,” Sapphire gritted her teeth after her tenth failed attempt to direct the beams, this after finally managing to generate them.

“Sapphire, you can do this, we both know you have done it before,” TyGer said with patience and encouragement. “Myng isn’t here so the full reason for your use of the beams is not strong enough to motivate you to direct them. However, you must learn to control your power. What if a beam should, by accident, hit one of our own ships, there are so few and I don’t wish to lose any of my people, I have so few warriors left,” he said with more emphasis. TyGer didn’t tell her of the beam that went around SyVar’s ship. He wanted to encourage her to learn control.

“No, for now, I think you should take a break, review the history of Myng and the things he has done, this may help you focus your mind on his evil,” TyGer explained.

“Perhaps,” she said distracted, “Tell me Ty,” she shortened his name when they were alone, “why did your eyes glow when we met?”

“I don’t know. It was the first time they have ever done that and before you ask, no, I have never generated a beam,” TyGer answered her.

She looked out over the open practice deck. It had amazed her when he brought her to this place, located in a wing type section of the ship. The top had opened, the atmosphere contained, but the area enlarged into an area the size of half a football field the stars above clear as any night sky without atmosphere. There was gravity, physical fighting and movement possible without uncontrolled floating. Truly ingenious, many parts of their ship served double functions. This area was one of them, giving the small crew a place to work out and exercise.

Sapphire stood silent, her hand on the old silk-paper book he brought her earlier in the practice area. Gently she opened the book that reminded her of the old scrolls from the Ming Dynasty, amazed at the ancient Chinese writing there, much of which she could read. It told of a great battle in the time of Emperor Ming, her distant ancestor. How his supposed half brother, Myng, attempted to steal his rule. Myng's mother, a royal concubine, was an evil sorceress and instead of fathering Myng by the same father as Ming, she was impregnated by an evil "god". Actually he was an alien. When Myng came of age he threatened Ming's rule and throne but was defeated. Some of the writing had been damaged and she looked at it for a long time. Two words seemed to stand out, blue of a gem stone and the gold of the tiger together. Somehow those two colors and symbols had joined forcing the Conqueror to leave.

"My Lord!" A messenger entered the deck and stood before TyGer.

"Yes," he answered almost knowing what the young crewman would tell him. TyGer glanced out into space looking at the other twenty ships in his small battle force.

"Myng's ship has been detected on our outer range sensors, he is still in hyper drive but he should be dropping out in about two hours and within range in four."

"Thank you. Please be sure the commanders of all other ships are notified and prepared, have them cloak immediately, I don't want Myng to detect us. Alert them we will move to a position behind Earth's moon before he drops out of hyper drive." TyGer instructed the messenger.

"Yes my Lord." He bowed and left to carry out his instructions.

"Ty," Sapphire said in a monotone voice, quiet and distracted, "Come here."

"What is it, have you found something?" TyGer asked.

"Yes, well maybe." Sapphire's brow knitted. "Can't you read this at all?" she asked.

"No, none of my people can read this dialect, I was surprised you could," TyGer told her.

"That is because you aren't Chinese," she let a little humor slip into her voice, "Here," she pointed, "and here," she moved her fingers to another arrangement of characters. "This one means blue, like a gem stone or a sapphire, this one means gold like a tiger, this one indicates they should be together to defeat the evil one."

“What is a tiger?” he asked, “Sounds like TyGer, we are together.” TyGer shrugged and added, “We should be victorious.”

“On Earth a sapphire is a blue gem stone. That was why my parents named me Sapphire. Most Chinese people have brown eyes. I am very unusual.” She explained.

“I know that.” TyGer laughed slyly, putting his arms around her.

Sapphire felt surrounded by a powerful animal, his strength flowed through his body and into hers.

“A tiger is a large, powerful, striped cat, very dangerous.” She smiled and turned to have his lips joined with hers in a long, heated kiss. “The description fits well enough,” she said drawing a breath when he released her, “I think it means we will have to, in some manner, join our powers,” Sapphire clarified.

TyGer smiled down into her eyes that had taken on a bit of a glow not realizing his eyes were glowing as well. “The only way I know to join fully is when we are in bed.”

“I knew you’d say that!” Sapphire said exasperated but deep down she suspected he was right. *But how*, she thought *would they do battle in such a way?* “Just how do you suggest we *join* in such a manner to do battle?”

“That I don’t know. We certainly can’t make love in the middle of a battle!” TyGer agreed.

“I think if we are in close physical contact it will concentrate our powers together. Perhaps the beam that we can fire together will be strong enough to take out the Destructor,” Sapphire suggested.

“You are possibly correct but I suggest we be as unified as possible,” TyGer said and smiled, a fervent gleam in his eyes.

Sapphire turned to TyGer and pressed herself against him, presenting him with her full lips for another kiss. Neither saw the messenger enter to tell them the Destructor was about to drop out of hyper drive, but the messenger saw the merging of their two glows, hers blue, his gold when their lips touched. The messenger’s shocked cry broke them apart.

“What is it?” TyGer demanded, incensed at the interruption of such a private moment.

“My Lord, you glow!” the young girl stuttered embarrassed.

“Explain!” TyGer commanded.

“When you ah, kissed, Lady Sapphire, my Lord, her body glowed the most beautiful luminescent blue, and you, my Lord, were shimmering in gold, when you joined to kiss, the two hues joined.”

“How lieutenant, how did they join?” Sapphire asked the overwhelmed girl.

“My Lord TyGer’s golden glow surrounded your blue glow,” she said firmly, and then whispered, “it was beautiful - sparks flew from you. I could feel them from here.”

“Why are you here Lieutenant?” TyGer asked.

“I am sorry to disturb you, my Lord, but Myng’s ship has dropped out of hyper speed, and you asked to be notified. We are moving as per your orders to seclude our forces behind the moon.” She stood at attention, “We have not been detected and should surprise them when you are ready to give the orders,”

“Thank you Lieutenant.” Sapphire smiled at the nervous girl. “We will arrive on the control deck in a few minutes, as soon as we – ah, sort this out, thank you,” she smiled.

“Our insight knows when the danger is near,” TyGer said as the Lieutenant left. “We must be in physical contact to be at our strongest, I suspect I will be able to help you direct the beams. Shall we try?”

Standing behind her he encased her in his arms, covering her arms with his, their hands together, sneaking a quick kiss on her neck. To their surprise a beam of glowing blue surrounded by a sizzling gold discharged from their joined hands to fly off into space and disappear into the dark depths.

“I hope that didn’t hit the Destructor and give us away,” Sapphire exclaimed.

“As do I!” TyGer agreed. “Let’s get to the control deck.”

Both rushed from the training deck, TyGer stopping to seal the deck, returning it to the normal form of the rest of the ship. Bursting onto the small deck where only four people staffed stations TyGer immediately asked his weapon’s officer, “Did a beam from our ship find its way to the Destructor?”

“No, my Lord, we monitored it as it impacted on the Moon’s surface,” the officer explained.

“Thank the Stars of Zantari,” TyGer exclaimed. “We aren’t ready yet to let Myng know of our presence. What is Myng’s status?”

TyGer’s diagnostic officer answered, “Destructor is in fighting condition, though they continue to repair their damage caused by the charges we placed and the beams Lady Sapphire sent. Many of her fighters were damaged and are not operational. Attacking soon would be advisable before further damage is repaired. It is apparent her destination is the planet Earth. I would apostolate, Myng has deduced

where the beams originated; possibly he believes one of the countries has that type of technology.” The man cleared his throat. “Not knowing the level of control he has obtained over the Lady Solana and her abilities of psychic deduction he may or may not know it was an individual who generated the beams and is looking for...” the man turned to look at Sapphire, “...our Lady Sapphire.”

“If he is, he will not find her on Earth,” TyGer said with some anger in his voice.

Sapphire wondered which angered him more, the fact that the Lady Solana was cooperating with Myng, or that he was looking for her. TyGer laid his hand on her shoulder gently. “Rest easy my love, Myng won’t get you.”

“I’m not afraid,” Sapphire said bravely, her bravado unwavering in the tone of her voice. In her heart, and her own intuition she had doubts; a dark cloud lurked in her heart. She knew a confrontation was coming and it wouldn’t be only between the ships. She would be forced to face this enigmatic Myng – who was a distant descendant of her own ancestor, Emperor Ming – if it was only a psychic meeting.

“My Lord,” his weapon’s officer said, “Myng’s ship is dropping into orbit around the planet. Earth’s governments are on alert and in near panic. I am monitoring their communications.”

“Notify all ships to be ready to come in behind Myng. Remain cloaked. Do not attack until we are all in position. I want to attempt to take out the Destructor first. The smaller ships will be easier to handle if their base ship is either destroyed or damaged to the point they cannot escape. Earth’s defenses then can handle what is left.”

“Yes Lord,” he said, following his superior’s instructions, passing them to the other ships by their communications instruments.

TyGer’s ship was directly behind the giant Destructor. Hitting it would be easy. TyGer knew that to destroy that ship would kill his fiancée, and his sister, but he also knew they were considered already dead. It saddened him, more for his sister. He had not really known Solana or what type of person she was since they had met only twice. A beauty she was, but Sapphire surpassed her and he didn’t plan on letting Myng near her. His sister was a delicate flower, with the strength of a mighty warrior. When they were children they could mentally communicate, now, he doubted it. Still, it would be worth trying.

“I shall be right back,” TyGer said to Sapphire and returned to his quarters to see if it was still possible. In the silence of his compartment

he cleared his mind and reached out to his sister. *Sister! Can you hear me?* No response, *Sister... Lapura!* He called her by her name. A sudden mental thought came to him.

*"Brother! I know you are close or our minds could not touch. Destroy this ship of evil, I am already lost. I have little strength left to touch you and I beg you not to leave me to live in this way. As the leader of our people do not allow them to..."* Her thoughts faded suddenly and he reached out in desperation.

*"Sister I cannot kill you!"* TyGer called out mentally to the only family he had remaining.

*"You must!, Solana is entirely Myng's, she is as evil as he. It is said she already carries his child—his heir. Brother, she IS as evil as he. You cannot save me..."*

The thought message stopped suddenly. TyGer could feel his sister's pain, as if she was being harmed for her lack of attention while she telepathically sent her message to him. His blood turned to fire. He knew she was right but anguished over her death that he must be the cause of. In despair he hurried back to the Control Deck.

"Where did you go?" Sapphire asked, her voice anxious.

"My sister is on that ship," TyGer explained. "I tried an old childhood mind link."

"Did it work?" she asked hopefully, seeing clearly the anxiety on his face, his answer clear.

"Yes but I almost wish it hadn't," TyGer said.

The sorrow in his voice brought tears to Sapphire's eyes.

"She is being made to suffer," he stated flatly.

"Is there no way we could save her?" Sapphire asked concern in her question.

"No, she will die with the ship and begged me to destroy it," TyGer explained. "She told me Solana, my fiancée, was truly Myng's now, and is as evil as he. She also said Solana carries Myng's heir."

"That's impossible, it has been but a few days," Sapphire exclaimed disbelieving.

"In space Sapphire, time and days are never the same thing, and Myng's medical technology is sensitive enough to tell if she were but hours pregnant," TyGer explained.

"I had never considered that in Myng's ship there were women and children, as well as the evil Myng." Surely there is a way to save the life of innocents," Sapphire said



TyGer took her by her upper arms and looked deeply into her eyes, “Sapphire, you must understand this; there are no innocents on that ship. If they belong to Myng—man, woman or child, they are evil. His mere presence taints them. His evil is that strong. Close your eyes, clear your mind.”

She stared at him disbelievingly.

“Do it!” He shook her a little.

Sapphire did what he asked. “Can you not feel it?”

The control deck fell silent.

Tears began to fall from beneath Sapphire’s long black lashes. She drew a jagged breath, her body shook and her stomach lurched. Swallowing hard, she said, “Yes, it is evil, so very evil.”

“Now you know why the beams came from you without you consciously controlling them when you saw the battle,” TyGer told her. “You know why it has to be destroyed. I wish I could rescue my sister, if there is an innocent aboard it would be she, and the other women like her, but there isn’t a way. She knows this, and would rather die than to live in the conditions they have kept her in. I saw them, in my mind, they are – deplorable.”

“Let’s do it then and be done with it, but I will tell you TyGer, I will have to confront this Myng, at some point I must face him,” she said.

TyGer looked into her eyes solemnly. “I don’t know how that will happen, but I know you have strong psychic abilities and will not challenge your foresight.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Prepare to begin firing on the Destructor,” TyGer ordered when a smaller ship, escorted by two others left the massive war ship and began to spiral down toward Earth.

“Who is on those ships?” TyGer asked.

“Myng is,” Sapphire answered to his surprise and then her statement was confirmed by the information officer.

“Can either of you tell me where they are going or what they are doing?” TyGer asked.

“I can,” Sapphire said. “They are attempting to find me. Lord TyGer, you must take me down to Earth, I cannot allow him to take someone he thinks is me.”

“He would know the difference,” TyGer argued, not wanting to put Sapphire in danger. “We should just destroy those ships now.”

“It will not work and only give away your advantage,” Sapphire pleaded with him. “My roommates both have some psychic abilities. He could mistake one or both for me, or take them just to bring me out into the open. I told you I would have to confront him,” she almost sobbed, a tear slipped from her eye. “TyGer you know what he will do to them. I cannot leave them to face him. They will not know what is happening or who he is.”

TyGer looked at the stress on her face. “Ready my smaller fighter I will take Sapphire myself.”

“My Lord, should we lose you...” his weapon’s officer protested.

“Do not argue,” TyGer ordered. “Have it ready by the time I get there.”

Taking Sapphire by the hand, he almost drug her to the back of the ship where once again to her amazement, TyGer produced another piece of technology seemingly out of nowhere.

“How do you manage to fit things into such a small ship?” she questioned.

“We pack in dimensional layers.” He smiled and assisted her through a small hatch into a fighter the size of a compact car. Telling her to buckle her safety harness he disconnected from their larger ship and followed Myng’s ships down toward Earth.

“Won’t he know we are coming in behind him?” Sapphire asked, alarm in her voice, her eyes beginning to glow.

“No, we have a device that dampens his detection of our ship, like your stealth aircraft,” TyGer answered.

Sapphire became strangely quiet. TyGer attributed it to her fear of detection, but looking over at her face he saw more concern in her eyes. “What is it Sapphire?” he asked noticing her entire body glowed now.

“If you get any closer, they will know,” she said in almost a trance.

“How?” he asked

“A woman will know. She is onboard Destructor and very close to Myng. A high born woman. I can almost see her face.” Sapphire groaned then and passed out. TyGer immediately backed off, slowing their forward speed to only enough to maintain steerage.

“Sapphire!” his voice was frantic. What had happened to her, he wondered.

She moaned, and began to wake, “My love, are you okay?”

“She knows, she knows,” Sapphire repeated.

“Who is she and what does she know?” TyGer asked gently.

Sapphire drew a hard gasp of air, “She knows—his woman. I thought you said this Myng had no wife. My God, TyGer, she is as evil as he, and she knows I am the one who sent the beams. Her powers are... strong.”

“What does this woman look like, do you know?” TyGer asked a sudden chill overtaking him as he cradled her trembling form in his arms. When he had hurriedly unbuckled his seat belts and then hers to revive her, a flash of Solana had passed in his mind. The two times he met with her had been at royal social functions, but he knew her face well. He had walked with her in his palace gardens the night before he left on his diplomatic mission before Myng’s attack. There he had tasted her lips for the only time. He remembered it had been unimpressive.

“She is a beautiful woman, about my age. Her eyes are amber-brown and her hair is like honey in color,” Sapphire described Solana. TyGer had not known she possessed any special powers, but then she would not let something like that be known.

“Can you place a name to that face?” he pressured her.

“Solan,” Sapphire said in a small voice. Her eyes grew round. “Oh, TyGer, it is your fiancée. Did you know she was so evil? Is that why you didn’t want to rescue her?”

“No, Sapphire, I didn’t know. As I told you, I had met her only twice. Our marriage was arranged when we were children. I didn’t know that much about her other than she was of royal birth, beautiful and would be my wife to unite the two major houses of my world,” TyGer explained. “Does this not happen on your world?”

“At one time, yes, political marriages were made, but not now. Our world is governed much differently now. Our systems are different.” Sapphire wondered what it would be like to marry for anything but love.

“TyGer, she has great mental powers, I have never been trained and do not know if I can block her mind from entering mine. If she does that we are lost,” Sapphire said nervously, truly fearful for the first time since she had left Earth with TyGer.

“Sapphire you were given these abilities for a reason. Agreed, it is a shame your parents were not wise enough to see that. We must use them and together fight Myng. To lose to him will mean Earth will become his as will my world. I have known it may cost my life to fight against him, but you Sapphire have no idea of what he will do with you.” TyGer paused and looked out at the massive ship, Destructor, then added, “and you don’t want to know.”

“Solana has joined herself to Myng. I am sure she believes with her own powers she will escape the fate all his women do, and she might, but...” He turned to look at the beautiful woman lying in his arms. “When he sees you and comes to realize the power you have and will soon control...” TyGer shook his head; he could not tell Sapphire what Myng could and would do to a woman such as her.

It was too horrible to attempt to explain and she didn’t need that distraction. He knew too, Solana would be extremely jealous of Sapphire, and the powers she controlled. Solana was telepathic, but her abilities could not be used as a weapon. Any position she managed to secure with Myng would not last with Sapphire in the picture; her beauty, intelligence and her powers were far greater than Solana’s. She would attempt to first control Sapphire, failing that Solana would try to destroy her. “We must...”

Their craft shook hard, a tractor hand from Destructor had attached to them. TyGer’s worst fear had just happened. “Sapphire, we must work together and quickly.”

He held her close. “We must produce beams and fire them at Destructor, if we do not cause them to release this craft it will pull us in.” A lighted portal large enough to land their ship and others had opened in Destructor and they were being pulled in.

Sapphire concentrated but nothing happened. She felt TyGer’s lips closed gently over hers. Between her fear of capture, and her passion for him, her glow became brilliant, filling their little craft. The air became electrified and a golden glow began to generate as well. Suddenly a strong surge, not unlike a sexual climax, discharged from them both and was projected directly at the ship attempting to capture them. The beam followed the tractor hand that held them, to culminate in the hanger bay where they were being drawn, causing a massive explosion.

Thrown backwards towards the Moon’s surface TyGer suddenly released Sapphire to get the ship under control, least they be thrown into the Earth’s only natural satellite. Sapphire stared, stunned at the damage their combined beam had done to the Destructor, that bay and the ships that were docked there were gone. An area of destruction had been blown out of the massive ship causing it to lisp to that side as the atmosphere discharged into space. Debris and bodies floated out with the rapid loss of continuity, and it was clear the ship was out of control if only for a few seconds.

TyGer working frantically slipped behind the Moon and joined his forces again to become safely hidden behind the airless chunk of rock and inside his larger ship. Together they disembarked from his small fighter into his command craft. His weapons officer waited on them.

“My Lord, are you and Lady Sapphire unharmed?” he asked first.

“Shaken up, mostly. Lady Sapphire will need to rest,” TyGer started to say when she stepped through the hatch.

“I’ll be okay, can we go forward to the command deck?” she asked TyGer, “I need to see what has happened to that ship.”

“Of course, you are sure?” he asked.

“Yes, that has given me an idea,” she said with a strange, lusty glint in her eyes.

Puzzled TyGer shrugged, looked to his weapon’s officer and both followed her forward. Destructor was, by now, completely under control.

Myng’s smaller ship had returned to the Destructor, they now knew Sapphire was not on Earth but somewhere in the space around the planet, somewhere they could not detect her.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Under control but damaged the Destructor and the few smaller ships accompanying it stopped moving forward. Myng had been on his Command deck when Solana requested, in respectful language to join him. She assured him that TyGer's ship and the woman who caused the damage to Destructor had come in behind them and were in a ship and masked. After some painstaking investigations Myng's people confirmed what Solana told him and locked onto the ship to bring it aboard Destructor. Myng wanted them both alive. Normally the tractor hand would neutralize all weapons. However, it couldn't neutralize Sapphire and TyGer's powers or their blossoming love. Their combined strength had dealt sever damage to Myng's ship.

Solana had touched Sapphire's mind, she explained, "She is weak milord, if I can get close enough I can influence her in a way we both will enjoy," she promised.

Myng understood, Solana would have sex with her as would he, what a delightful ménage that would be. A lusty grin slightly played at the twinges of Myng's lips from the thought of Prince TyGer forced to watch as he and Solana used the Prince's new love moments before his execution. The promise of such pleasure gave Myng an immediate erection making him wish he could take Solana without delay from the mere contemplation of such stimulation. With full faith in Solana, Myng called his advisors together to formulate a plan to gain control of Sapphire. Because TyGer's small band of ships were well hidden and masked their first task was to locate the Prince, not knowing how many ships the royal ruler of Zantari commanded, or where he might be, this was an almost impossible task. Solana, now dressed more like Myng's Queen than his concubine, gave them an important clue.

"My Lord, this woman of power, named after the Earth gem stone, the color of her eyes, a Sapphire, is much stronger when she is with

Prince TyGer. I have touched her mind, she is powerful but untrained. I know where they are.” Solana smiled smugly.

“Where is she, Lady Solana,” Myng addressed her with respect that surprised the others in his military.

“They are hidden behind the Earth’s moon, milord. Perhaps a small ship could get in and kidnap this woman. With her under our control we will be unstoppable, and then we can put an end to TyGer’s rebellion.” Solana suggested. A plan was quickly conceived and enacted.

Exhausted, Sapphire rested peacefully in TyGer’s arms, their window on space open as they slept without knowledge they were being physically observed. A small ship, barely big enough for five people eased up to their window and attached a soft seal. Before either person sleeping had a chance to react the space Plexiglas was shattered.

Sapphire screamed. TyGer, a sword always nearby, killed one kidnapper before he could pull her from the bunk, the second one of Myng’s hijacker and the pilot of the vehicle was in a precarious situation. Should he lose the seal of the hatch, they would all die in loss of atmosphere, if he didn’t jerk Sapphire back into his ship and bring her back, Myng would execute him.

“Make the choice,” TyGer growled at him, “give up or die, either way, you lose.” TyGer’s bloody sword was at his throat. “I will allow you to live, if you capitulate.”

“I give up, Lord TyGer, I didn’t want to do this anyway, I had no option,” the man said as TyGer’s men poured into the cabin ceasing the encroaching ship and securing the broken window that was beginning to fail.

“Take Lady Sapphire to another cabin,” TyGer ordered. He turned to her. “I will be there shortly when I find out what this man knows.”

Sapphire nodded and left to find a quiet place to think. Hoping to find some peace and calm she found a new battle to be fought; a battle of minds. Solana began to invade her mind the moment she was alone. She forced her out three times in a battle of wills that left Sapphire more exhausted each time. Hoping TyGer would come before Solana started the fourth attack. He didn’t, but found Sapphire in a light trance repeating his name as she would a mantra taught to her by the Buddhist monks. She was battling Solana managing to keep her from seeing into her deepest thoughts, unable to see past the love she had come to hold for TyGer in a short span of days. Sapphire sensed this made Solana angry, for some reason, possibly jealously or envy of her deep love

without debasing herself before TyGer the way she was expected to before Myng.

“Sapphire, my love,” TyGer said gently, kissing her face, hoping to bring her out of the trance. “Please, you must fight her. They know where we are now, we must go and fight them. If we do not they will take this ship and then your world as well as mine. What Solana is doing to your mind now is little to what will be done to you. Please, my love,” he pleaded.

She repeated his name. At last he kissed her lips softly then increased his passion in his embrace. Some response there, he held her tighter in his arms, cradling her precious body close to his muscular one. He felt her arms encircle his neck. Opening his eyes, she opened hers and the glow had returned. “Have you returned to me?”

“Barely,” she said weakly. “It was terrible--that woman is terrible. What I saw, what she wants to do to me and with me,” she shivered. “Hold me TyGer don’t let them get me please.”

“Only together can we stop them, Sapphire, we have little time. Even now the Destructor is being readied to do battle with us, it is coming.”

“How...how can they still fight after the damage we did?” Sapphire asked in amazement.

“That was but one hanger out of a dozen on Destructor, Sapphire. Regain your strength quickly. Let me get you something to eat.”

TyGer rose and ordered their meal which they shared. “Tell me what Solana said to you when she spoke to your mind,” he asked while they ate.

Sapphire’s face turned red, “She wants me.” Her eyes met his and her meaning was clear. “She wants to do what you do when we make love. I knew women did these things but never have I done it myself. Through her eyes I saw Myng, his desires for her and for me. How can he desire me when he hasn’t seen me?”

“He has, through her eyes,” TyGer explained.

“This last time, it was terrible. I could feel his mouth on me. You came in just as his mouth touched mine. I think I would die if he touched me. He is vile. I can feel his evil. I know now why I reacted the way I did.” She grew quiet. “Yes, I can fight him now, they thought to weaken me, and their plan did the reverse.”

Alarms sounded and TyGer looked at her. “Good because it is time.”



They rose together and went to the Control Deck, out of the front windows, still great distance, Destructor was quickly closing. Damage from the earlier attempt to capture their small ship evident on the starboard side of the great ship, yet it was a viable threat.

“My Lord, has the window in our quarters been repaired?” Sapphire asked.

“Yes, it was a simple repair, why?” TyGer asked.

“If the damaged generated from a single kiss did that much damage to the Destructor,” Sapphire said, smiling suggestively up into her Prince’s eyes and giggled, her voice soft for his ears only, “have our ship turned so we can see the Destructor and let’s us go to our quarters...”

TyGer looked around at his crew, all doing their jobs, “Keep me informed, I shall be in my quarters,” he ordered. “Lady Sapphire isn’t well after the kidnapping attempt.” He didn’t miss the sly smiles on his crew’s faces. He knew they were capable of their jobs and when the time came would call him.

Hands joined, they walked the short distance in silence to find their quarters in perfect condition. “Sapphire, what makes you think our making love – will work?”

“It is our powers and love joined in combination that is meant to fight against Destructor and Myng to destroy him.” She laughed, “How else? Why do you think he attempted to take me, to split us apart, to force me to use my powers against you?”

“I trust you will be correct, my sweet,” TyGer murmured into her ear, nuzzling her neck, to nibble on her ear lobe. “How is it,” his said, his voice growing husky, “you smell so sweet and I know you used the same body soap as I?”

“Lord TyGer,” she said in surprise, “do you think that Myng is the only person to possess pheromones? On Earth we have perfumes that act on a person’s singular pheromones and smell on that person differently than on another. You smell wonderful to me, and your communication’s officer uses the same body soap. I don’t find him at all attractive.” She giggled at the desire she saw in her Prince’s eyes.

“You are a lusty female,” TyGer whispered before his mouth took hers. The ship had turned when they stopped to stretch out on the bunk. Both saw a shadow on the moon, the shadow of the Destructor having turned away from Earth, it was now in search of Sapphire and TyGer.

Sapphire’s eyes were beginning to glow from her burning passion forgetting the imminent danger of Myng, her body reacting to only the

loving touch of TyGer. Upon seeing the shadow of the evil ship reflected against the moon, it reminded her of their mission and heightened her concentration.

Her eyes changed becoming more intense blue. TyGer, knowing they must concentrate on their union and joining not only their bodies but their powers for reason other than pleasure, drew her back into his arms. His hands caressed her body, so new to him. He had tasted her charms so little.

“I do love you, Sapphire,” TyGer told her in a raspy voice, his golden hands stoking her body, his eyes beginning to glow golden as their passions grew. TyGer’s lips rained down kisses over her breasts stopping to suck each one in turn until they were hard peaks in the warm air of his cabin. She gasped as the Destructor became no longer a shadow but the edges of the ship became visible. TyGer’s hand slipped between her wet thighs and she groaned. Her hands roamed over his body, one hand slipped into his thick multi-colored hair while the other cupped his rounded buttocks to massage those firm muscles. A gasp escaped her as his fingers slipped between her labia lips and spread the growing moisture through her thick black mound. He held her nether lips open to gently blow on the hot, sensitive flesh.

“She tries to touch my mind,” Sapphire gasped in a sudden panic. “NO!” she said firmly denying her entrance, feeling TyGer’s mouth close over her heated sex she pushed Solana’s intrusive thoughts from her mind. Knowing she was close to a climax, Sapphire arched her hips to meet TyGer’s mouth as he drove his tongue deep into her core. With her hand on his head, her eyes staring at the evil ship she felt the air crackle with the force generated by their love. “Look,” she gasped.

TyGer glanced up, his eyes glowing golden to see a blue beam surrounded by golden sheath just outside their view port. As Sapphire drew closer to her climax the beam grew stronger. No longer watching what their passion produced, the lovers lost themselves in a world of glowing lights and heightened sensations such as neither had known. Suddenly the ship rocked slightly from the explosion caused by the contact of their beam. They looked out their view port invisible to the outside of the ship, in time to see what the beam had done to the Destructor. Another gash, much like the one that had damaged the deck, graced the port side of the ship.

TyGer felt his ship move, his command crew was hard at work keeping their ship out of harms way. All of his ships were masked, Myng had no idea how many of his ships were waiting to open fire on

his ship. He mistakenly thought only TyGer and possibly one other ship stood against him. TyGer moved to kiss Sapphire's lips as his cloaked ships made sudden and unexpected passes on Destructor. He looked down into her glowing blue eyes, she up into his glowing golden ones. Slowly he merged with her body. Another beam formed outside their window as his lips covered hers and he began to set a slow, deep, penetrating rhythm to achieve a climax together.

"My Lord," Sapphire addressed him, her voice weak, the blue glow of her eyes slightly waning. "She tries to get into my head again."

"Deny her my love," his kiss covered her mouth. "Think only of our passion, our love," TyGer told her. "She is jealous of our love, something she will never have." He kissed her neck and clearing his mind allowed his thoughts to enter hers. *Yes*, he could feel the presence of Solana there, he never thought to *meet* her again and certainly not like this. Placing his more advanced trained mind into the ménage, he mentally stood before his love.

"You will leave, Solana. Go – be with your Myng for the little time you have left. You cannot stand against our love. I know now how evil you truly are, and though you present a formidable enemy, you will fail."

"Your little love toy," Solana laughed, "is weak my Prince. She even now is giving in to my, ah – temptations." Solana's thoughts turned to address Sapphire, "Are you enjoying the pleasures Prince TyGer has given your virgin's body? Oh what ecstasies I can give you, sensations that make your weak climaxes seem like feeble sunshine during a storm. Come to me little gem, let my gentle fingers tease your clit and my mouth taste your womanhood. My master Myng awaits you as well. Here, allow your mind to look into mine and see the sensations he has given me."

Solana opened her mind wide as if she were opening her legs to allow both access to her mind and body. It was distracting, as Myng intended. What they saw was the delicate, painful pleasures Myng had taught her body to enjoy. From the first excruciating moment that turned to pure blinding bliss until she knelt at his feet from the overwhelming, exuberance of release he at last afforded her as reward from her training.

"Stop!" Sapphire commanded in a mental voice so strong it threw Solana from her mind. "You show me sex, pain and pleasure, yes. However, you do not show me love. I am not as weak as you think, concubine of Myng. I have Prince TyGer's love. Can you show me you

have Myng's love? Possibly, lust in his own cruel way, but love? Keep to your own, stay out of my mind, I will not allow you to approach me again. You have attacked my world, you will not take it."

Her mental strength shocked TyGer, yet he stood with her, their bodies joined, forming another beam even as they sealed her words with a heated kiss and he increased the pace of thrusts. Solana's imagine faded from their minds, she could not withstand the sweetness or purity of their love. Their kisses joining, their souls sent the beam off toward the Destructor, two striking it before the increasingly damaged ship could take evasive maneuvers.

Since the battle had begun the ship took many hits by the space fighters themselves, as well as the beams. Fires spread rapidly throughout the ship and Myng turned her away at an odd angle toward the Moon. Because of the lack of gravity, only six percent, the ship settled onto the orb's surface and Myng ordered quick repairs.

Solana bowed at his feet on his command deck. Myng looked down at his defeated concubine. He had been privy to the entire encounter she had suffered between herself, Prince TyGer and his new Toy. He was aware of her humiliation and, for the first time in his life, he remembered he felt pity for another individual.

"Rise Solana," she did as he instructed to look sadly in his eyes.

"My Lord will execute me now?" Solana asked him bluntly.

"No, of course not!" he answered her, shocked, "Why would I do that?"

"I have failed you my Lord." Solana had bowed her head and not raised it since she stood.

"Look at me," he instructed, she did as he said. "You cannot control another, who have wills as strong as Sapphire's." He rose from his throne and drew her to stand. "Besides, I would not kill you, yet." He slid a ring on the third finger on her left hand, declaring to all in attendance she was his wife now. "Besides Solana, you carry my heir." He saw the surprise on her face. "I do love you in my way. Do not however, push me too far."

"No my Lord, what shall I do?" she asked.

"For now if we survive this encounter, I want you in my quarters. It is the safest place in the ship. Should something happen to this ship my second in command has been instructed to care for you and the child," Myng told her. "I will leave one with you to see to your needs."

"Oh, my Lord," she sniffed, tears in here eyes, "I will of course do as you say, but I cannot live without you."

“You will and your mission is to teach my son to finish what has happened here today,” Myng told her fatalistically. “You will teach our child who he is and what he is to do.”

“Yes my Lord.” Solana drew herself up proudly, yet the fear of losing Myng more than she could bear. Evil though both were, they loved each other in their own ways.

“Go now, rest if you can.” Dutifully she did as she was told.

Myng’s chambers formed a separate ship that only he and his second in command were privy to. Escorted there by Commander Myton, Myng’s second in command, he sealed Solana and TyGer’s sister, his prize Lapura, in after they entered the luxury of Myng’s quarters. Hearing the seals close caused Solana much panic at first until she felt the touch of Myng’s mind.

“Solana,” he said commandingly, “this is for you and the child’s well being. Do as I instructed you.”

Explosion after explosion rocked the ship, but her spacious, luxurious cabin remained untouched, she remained alone with TyGer’s sister, Lapura for a companion.

\* \* \* \*

Sapphire and TyGer, exhausted and spent, lay next to each other observing the destroyed Destructor that lay motionless on the Moon’s surface. Earth’s authorities would have an interesting piece of hardware to reverse engineer. No motion came from the Destructor now. TyGer had sent ships to fly over Myng’s once great ship and their sensors detected no life. It was over. Earth was safe and Zantari was again ruled by the now Emperor TyGer.

“Will you go with me to my world?” TyGer asked Sapphire.

She stretched in his bunk and looked at the handsome golden lord who had held her safe, changed her into a woman and taught her to love to the depths of her being. “What are you asking me to be on your world, Lord TyGer?”

He looked into her softly glowing blue eyes. “I am asking you to be my wife, my mate and my Queen. I do not take concubines as Myng did.”

“Will your people accept me?” Sapphire asked.

“The woman who saved their Emperor and their world? Yes I think they will,” he said in a low loving voice.

“Then I will go with you. I no longer have family on Earth. My parents are gone and I was an only child,” Sapphire said sadly. “Do you think we can have children, will our DNA match well enough?”

“I suspect so,” he said in a sure voice. Together they dressed and went to their command deck. TyGer ordered a course for home.

With one last pass over the Destructor they disappeared into the stars. Beneath them however, there was life. Safely hidden in the shielded section of the Destructor sat Solana, and TyGer’s sister, waiting. Waiting for TyGer to leave so they could safely do the same. Their escape ship, while luxurious, had minimal arms, and defenses. Myng was dead, as was his second in command and every other person aboard the Destructor. Only she, TyGer’s sister Lapura, and the mote of life Solana carried survived – and her hate. She carried Myng’s son, Myng the second, and he would grow to avenge his father, of that she would make sure.

Carefully scanning to make sure TyGer was gone and no other ships were in close proximity, she initiated the sequence that would transform Myng’s quarters into a viable and comfortable space ship. Earth would be a comfortable place to bring up Myng’s heir. There, she would hide the ship until he was old enough to take it to the stars and begin to reclaim his rightful heritage. Solana dried her tears and began to laugh. It would only be a few short years and they would all meet again. Then this old battle would begin again.

Already Solana knew the child she carried had his sire’s intelligence and her psychic powers. The secured part of Myng’s emergency ship, was well financed. This child would be educated and grow up as a King should. Just a few years and the proper training and Myng’s son would return to challenge Star TyGer and his Queen Sapphire.

Solana smiled. In the mean time, she would enjoy her young life as a powerful sorceress, training her son to be not cruel but – Myng the Merciless. Solana laughed as she depressed the buttons in sequence to disengage the rescue ship from the remains of the Destructor and set course for a secret base, where Myng had prepared a place of safety to regroup and plan for a victorious future for his son.

Prince TyGer approached his home world of Zantari with his new bride, Sapphire. His people heralded her as their savior from Myng and accepted her with a warm welcome. Her talented and intelligent children would secure the throne of their planet and peace for them for generations to come. Her brilliant blue eyes danced with merriment and intelligence and all could see the love their Prince held for her. It seemed a bright future lay ahead of them.

## Jaded Beasts II – Tiger & Rabbit

For now, peace ruled the galaxy, their world lay safe. Earth was now aware of how close it came to losing its independence and began to put aside their petty differences and work toward planetary defense. For now, all felt peaceful and Sapphire slept peacefully in her TyGer's arms.

The End

**The Hare of Chandor**  
**by**  
**Ann Morgan**

Shaylara Evanos must work with the notorious Valas Chandor, but couldn't allow him into her bed, for fear of losing her heart.

<http://HoosierAnnie.blogspot.com>



## **The Hare of Chandor**

**by  
Ann Morgan**

“He’s pushing you on purpose,” Shay whispered to Valas. “It’s a test. Call him on it.”

She watched as Valas stood from his seat at the bargaining table. He made an imposing figure. Standing two meters tall, with the long, lean muscles of a runner, His Royal Highness, Prince Valas, Duke of Chandor glared across the table at the Beltarran.

“Mister Ambassador, I may be my father’s second son, but do not mistake me for a boy just out of the school room.” He stepped away from the table and strode over to where the other man stood. “I am aware of Beltarra’s well earned reputation on the Jettaran Council. But let me assure you, neither Chandor, nor I, will tolerate being treated as the poor country cousin planet any longer.”

The beginnings of a smile curled Ambassador Dakkar’s lips. “Then, what is it you want from Beltarra?”

“A simple show of support,” Valas replied. “Place Chandor in nomination for the empty seat on the Council.”

Shaylara Evanos didn’t need her empathic abilities to know what Dakkar thought. However, that was the way of a diplomat; turn everything to your own advantage. The Beltarran had been playing this game for over two decades.

“And what does Chandor have to offer in return for our support?”

Valas’ blue gray eyes gleamed as he played the card saved just for Dakkar, “Most favored trading status.” He made that final step closer and gripped the other man on the shoulder. “Think of it, Beltarran horses getting first shot at Chandoran grain. The tables of Beltarra’s fine racing resorts, first choice of Chandor meat and produce.”

Shay felt Dakkar hesitate. *Come on*, she thought to herself, *take the bait.*

*He will, be patient.* Valas' voice as clear inside her head as if he'd spoken aloud.

*Stay out of my mind, Mage.*

\* \* \* \*

After Dakkar accepted the agreement and the Beltarran ambassador and his assistant left the room, Shay let her frustration loose on Valas. "How many times must I tell you? Stay out of my mind unless it's necessary to the negotiations."

His smile was instantaneous. "Ah, but Lady Evanos, it's the only intimacy you will allow me."

"And for good reason," she turned to face him. "I do not wish to be yet another conquest of The Hare of Chandor."

His blue silk shirt hung untucked over loose fitting trousers as he covered the space between them in two easy strides. Before she could protest, Valas captured her hand and placed a brief kiss across the knuckles.

"You wound me, Shay," his voice barely above a whisper. "I should have thought you smarter than to believe all the gossip."

When he looked up at her, she knew in an instant why women fell easy prey to this man. Something more glistened in the depths of his icy blue eyes, something that spoke of power.

"Save your flirtations for court, Your Grace." She tugged her hand out of his grasp. "For even if I could be tempted into your bed, it wouldn't be worth what I would loose in the bargain."

He cocked a blond brow in her direction. "Tell me you don't believe that old wives tale."

"That I'll loose my abilities if I give myself to a man with The Power? It's told for a reason, and I choose to heed the warning." She shrugged her shoulders. "So if that's belief, count me a believer."

Weeks ago, she knew working with Valas would be the most difficult part of the assignment. Advising the Prince on nuances her empathic abilities picked up was the easy part. It was what she did on a daily basis for his elder brother, Prince Dusan, back home on Chandor. But with each passing day, Shay was finding it harder and harder to resist the pull she felt toward Valas.

The heir apparent entrusted them to secure their world a place on the Council. Shay vowed she wouldn't give up her finest tool just because of her desire for a man.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, in the quiet of his quarters, Valas, still damp from his bath, slipped into the simple gray robe. He knew Shay had been given the suite next to his and he imagined he could hear her, moving about while she tended to her own bedtime ablutions.

The image he created of her in his mind had him hard and aching in moments. Her long, dark hair plastered against the soft skin of her back as she rose from the tub. Beads of water glistening, as they clung to her breasts. Were he standing before her, he would be fighting back the urge to lick one off as it slid over a taut nipple.

*Stop that, he chastised himself. Quit acting like the very schoolboy you denied being.*

In truth, Valas had been intrigued by the emerald-eyed empath for months. The first time he noticed her, she'd been standing beside his brother at court. Dusan had bent his head down so that she could whisper something. At the time, Valas wondered if his brother's interest in the raven-haired beauty was more than professional, but a few discrete inquiries had proven otherwise.

After awhile, he'd found himself making excuses to pass through the corridor outside his brother's study. He'd been on the verge of suggesting that she accompany him on this mission when Dusan surprised his brother with those very intentions.

Now, with each passing day that they worked together, Valas grew more certain that he had to have Shaylara. But this woman he wanted in his bed of her own volition, not because of his skillful seduction.

He chuckled to himself. He knew the rumors about his reputation as a bed-hopping womanizer. Valas would be the first to admit, he enjoyed women. No two were the same; he adored the challenge to find each one's special beauty. Besides, there were those lovely, feminine curves and each one's own soft scent.

However, now, only the determined Lady Shaylara Evanos occupied his thoughts. He had to find a way to convince her that the tale of loosing her power, should she surrender to him, was simply folklore. A tale told, he supposed, to discourage those with abilities from only marrying among themselves and combining the power in each successive generation.

He could prove the fallacy within his own family.

Valas jolted from his ponderings by the sound of female voices outside the glass doors leading to the balcony shared by his and

Shay's suites. Unable to resist, he crossed the room to stand in the shadow beside the door.

"Go on to bed, Ellia. I assure you, I am quite capable of locking up and getting in bed on my own."

Valas remembered the objections his lovely empath raised when Dusan insisted that she take a lady's maid. The only argument she hadn't been able to refute was preventing an appearance of impropriety to the conservative delegates on the Council.

He waited until he was sure the maid retired for the night before easing the latch open and slipping out into the night.

Dampness still clung to the air from this evening's rain. The scent from the gardens below blended rich, wet soil and heady, floral perfume. The power of the twin moons that hung in the night sky had drawn him out here every evening. Still, tonight, even that took second place to the woman who stood relaxed at the balcony railing.

The belt of Shay's robe dangled loose at her sides, framing the flare of her hips. He imagined how the soft fabric would hug the curve of her breasts. Below the hem, Valas could see bare feet as she stood at the railing.

He knew the second she realized his presence. Her shoulders straightened and graceful hands belted the robe closed.

"How long have you been standing there?" She spoke without even turning around.

He smiled to himself, he'd gotten in under her defensive shields. He'd take that small victory for the moment, choosing a place next to her at the rail, still looking out over the garden.

"Long enough to appreciate the beauty of the night," he paused, "and the woman. One is as lovely and mysterious as the other."

For several moments, neither of them spoke. Shay broke the silence.

"I hear you out here each evening."

"It's hard for me to resist their pull." He both pointed and cocked his head skyward. "Back home, with only one moon, I can feel the waxing and waning of its tug. But here, with two, their cycles just a bit out of sync, it's, it's..."

"Irresistible?" Shay's laughter sounded musical in the night air as she finished his thoughts.

"Completely." Unable to stop himself, Valas reached over and trailed a fingertip down her silk covered arm. He felt her quiver before she pulled away.

She shoved her hands onto the robe's pockets. "Then I shall leave you to enjoy."

Choosing not to stop her, he just nodded. Once he heard the door snap closed behind him, Valas turned around, and then leaned back against the railing. It would be hard to quiet his mind tonight, because of the desires Shay stirred inside him.

But he was Mage. Namesake and heir to his grandfather's power, Valas had been trained from childhood in the ways of magic.

He kicked off his slippers, feeling the cool slabs of stone beneath his feet. As he drew his concentration inward, he let the tensions of the day flow out into the stone.

Moments passed uncounted. When he could feel his thoughts and energies focused on the task at hand, Valas dropped the final barrier. Reaching out, he felt the surge of power flow through him. Tonight, he would harness it, sending it out to gather the necessary players.

Some things in life could be left to chance. Establishing Chandor's place on the Council wasn't one of them. He could rely on his skills, and Shay's, but they would be useless without the right combination of people and power through which he could act.

Valas felt the coil of energy building within him. It cycled, spinning faster and faster. Every cell of his body tingled with the growing force. Finally, his instincts told him he had enough for the job. With a rush of sensation, he severed the ties.

"Bring those who are needed," he whispered to the night.

\* \* \* \*

"More wine, Lady Evanos?"

Shay smiled at the server. "Yes, thank you," she replied, holding out her glass. "I've never tasted anything like it before. It's very delicious. Where is it from?"

Before the server could reply, the answer to Shay's question came in a rich, masculine baritone.

"It's an Adamano Red. From the north region if I'm not mistaken."

She turned toward the strange voice. The man to whom the voice belonged dipped his head slightly to her before continuing.

"Excuse me for butting in, Lady, but these wines are a favorite of mine."

He wore his long, dark hair pulled back and tied with a simple black ribbon. The fine woolen fabric and well-tailored cut of his jacket spoke of both his obvious wealth and a high social rank.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ra’lar, the Council Advisor from the Agricultural Guild.”

Shay smiled. She’d heard much about the powerful trade guilds in the briefings she and Valas had attended prior to their trip. Given Chandor’s reputation for its fine produce, both she and the Prince would be dealing with this man on a regular basis.

She offered her hand. “So nice to meet you, Advisor Ra’lar. I’m...”

He cut her words off. “Every man in the room knows of the lovely Lady Evanos.” Ra’lar took the offered hand, and brought it to his lips, stopping just short of contact. Under an arched brow, his eyes alive with amber fire, “Although few have the nerve to spar with one so beautiful and so intelligent.”

Shay eased her hand back as soon as manners allowed. Beneath his smooth manners, she could sense a calm and calculating center. Ra’lar was a man to watch.

“You’re too kind. I am here to advise the Prince on matters of protocol and to act as his hostess at functions such as this. Nothing more.”

He paused long enough to accept one of the savory tidbits offered by yet another server. “But you have his ear, Lady. And in circles like this, deals are made, and broken, by such as you.” He popped the snack into his mouth.

Shay scanned the room, finding Valas with a beautiful blond on his arm. While Shay watched, he whispered something that made the woman laugh.

“Seems His Grace has charmed Ambassador Dakkar’s wife.” Ra’lar scooped up Shay’s empty glass, and replaced it with a full one from a tray. “The Ambassador hasn’t let it leak who he will nominate for the empty Council seat, but gossip says Chandor is the front runner. The Lady’s opinion might be all that’s needed to tip the scales.”

Shay told herself that Valas’ flirtations were just what Ra’lar said, insurance for tomorrow’s meeting in the Council chambers. If Valas could advance their cause by charm, then why did her stomach clench watching how the woman seemed to hang on the Prince’s every word?

And what would prevent her from doing the same? Shay hooked her free arm around Ra’lar’s, “Tell me more about your Guild.”

\* \* \* \*

As the evening wore on, Valas found himself watching Shay closer. She'd had several glasses of the potent Adamano wine and now he could hear her laughter across the room. Back home, she rarely had more than a second glass over dinner, but the sweetness of this vintage hid its potency.

He excused himself from the conversation with Ambassador Dakkar and wended his way through the thinning crowd. He found her at the center of a small group.

"Lady Evanos, may I have a word with you?"

"Of course," she replied, and then scooted closer to the dark haired man standing next to her. "Come, join us."

"In private, please."

She giggled, and then winked at the man beside her. "Duty calls, Ra'lar." Shay excused herself, following Valas off to the side.

As he guided her out of earshot, Valas asked, "Who's Ra'lar?"

"A Council Advisor from the Agriculture Guild."

*Keep her talking, he thought to himself. It's the only way she'll leave the reception.*

"Sounds like someone we should arrange a meeting with," a gentle nudge, and he had her heading toward the ornate double doors.

"I thought the same thing. He's a very charming man, you know." Shay swayed a little, bumping against his shoulder.

"He is, is he?" Valas wrapped an arm around her waist, steadying her steps.

The two of them walked out into the corridor. She giggled, her nod exaggerated, "I charmed him. Just like you were doing with Ambassador Dakkar's wife."

So, she'd been watching him. Valas felt his lips curl in a satisfied smile.

"And did you learn anything useful?" He kept her moving as they talked, herding her toward the staircase that led to their suites.

"Ra'lar wishes to meet with you before tomorrow's Council session. He seemed very interested with how we achieve such high yields on our farmsteads."

Valas laughed to cover up his mental probe of her thoughts. "I'll just bet." Even with her over indulgence, she hadn't mentioned the deal between Chandor and Beltarra.

"Truly, he seemed quite fascinated." She looked up, her lids half lowered, "Though not half as fascinating as you, Valas."

That drew him up short. He hadn't expected her to admit the

growing attraction so soon. “I didn’t think you cared.”

They made the turn half way up the staircase as she replied. “I find I’m not as immune to you as I thought.”

For a moment, the only sounds were their soft footfalls on the steps and the fading music from the reception. Valas found himself hoping that he had enough reserve left to resist the offer he sensed coming, because he didn’t want her this way.

*Oh, she’ll go willing enough.* He need only ease open the door at the end of the hallway. *How simple it would be.*

As they neared her suite, he knew he had to let himself have at least a small taste of her. Once there, he pressed her against the doorframe.

“Don’t tease me, Shay.” He lowered his face, and tipped hers up with a finger under her chin. Bringing his progress to a halt just before claiming her lips, Valas managed to gasp out, “But give me a glimpse of what it could be.”

Her whispered, “Kiss me,” faded against his mouth as he devoured hers.

She opened her lips, letting him deepen the kiss, even as he felt her fingers rake through his hair. The scent of her perfume, all feminine spice and fire, filled each ragged breath he managed to pull into his chest.

Her breasts flattened against his chest as he pulled her closer. Even through the fabric of her gown and his own formal tunic, Valas could feel the warmth of her.

Shay arched against him. Gods, but she felt so good when he slid his hands down her sides and then reached back to cup the roundness of her bottom.

She pulled her lips away from his, and begged, “Please, Valas.”

The door handle, cool and smooth, slipped from his fingers as he pushed the door open.

\* \* \* \*

Every nerve ending in her skin tingled from the trail of kisses he’d rained up and down her body. Now he reclaimed her lips, her own salty taste on his mouth.

The feel of his knee, nudging her thighs apart had her once again moaning into his kiss. She spread wide, opening herself to him.

“I...I...I need,” she gasped, her finger nails raking up and down the muscled planes of his back.

“What, Shay?” Valas demanded, his breath warm against her



neck. “What do you need?”

She shuddered, feeling his thick, hard shaft against her opening. “You,” she confessed, “I need you, inside me.”

His hips ground hard against her. The slick folds parted at the pressure, her body taking half his length this first thrust.

When he pulled back, her body arched up. “All,” she begged. “Give it all to me.”

“Then take me.” He pushed deep. “Take all of me, Shaylara.”

Moving to the rhythm Valas set for them, Shay matched his passion with a desire of her own. She gripped his shoulders, letting her find the best angle to take him as deep as possible.

He filled her tighter than she’d ever been. The fit of his body to hers, the feel of his weight pinning her to the bed as perfect as she’d imagined.

“So close,” her voice ragged even to her own ears.

“Together,” came his breathless reply. He shuddered, and then drove deeper than she thought possible.

The spasms began at her core, spreading through her body. Hot and wet, she exploded, every muscle tense, until, with one last jerk...

Shay sat bolt upright in bed, the linens a tangle around her. From Valas’ suite next door, she could hear a woman’s voice crying out in the unmistakable throes of orgasm.

What had happened? She raked a shaky hand through her hair, only to find it tussled and damp. The last thing she remembered was Valas’ kiss at her door.

She reached tentative fingers down between her thighs. The slick evidence attested to her own climax but nothing more.

When a man’s voice proclaimed his own release, Shay bounded from bed in frustration. She jerked up her robe from where it lay across the foot of the bed and tossed it around her shoulders. How dare Valas leave her, only to seek another woman’s company?

\* \* \* \*

Where is she? Valas strode down the covered walkway. He’d just missed her, Shay’s maid had told him when he’d knocked on the door to her suite.

When he caught sight of her long, dark braid, bouncing against her scarlet tunic, the Prince ran across the courtyard in order to catch up. “Shaylara.”

Her pace never slowed. “Lady Evanos, may I have a word with you?”

“If you can keep up, Your Grace,” she replied without even looking over at him. “We’ve a breakfast meeting with Ambassador Dakkar.”

“I arranged the meeting myself.” He adjusted his stride to match hers. “But I thought we could use this walk to the Ambassador’s residence to discuss our strategy.”

“What is there to discuss? You negotiate the best deal for Chandor and I advise when asked.” She continued to walk, her eyes not leaving the path ahead.

“Since when,” he muttered under his breath, “do you wait to be asked?”

She stopped so abruptly that he was a full step ahead before he turned back to face her.

“I shall endeavor to remember my place in the future, Your Grace.”

He could almost hear the shards of ice shatter at her feet as she glared at him.

Blast it, what had happened since last evening? Valas thought things were progressing quite well between them after that soul-searing kiss outside Shay’s door. When they’d finally pulled apart, he’d opened the door and nudged her inside. It had taken all the restraint he could muster to close it, and head back to the reception.

*Could that be the problem?* Was she angry because he restrained himself? He thought Shay above those feminine pretenses, but she was, still, a woman. Maybe she’d wanted just that little bit more assurance that he desired her.

He reached out, catching the braid that now lay over one shoulder. As he traced his thumb over the strands of midnight silk, Valas leaned closer and whispered, “As lovely as this is, I still long to see this loose and spread out over my pillow.”

If she had been cold before, then the look Shay gave him now should have frozen him where he stood. The stare made him pull his hand back for fear of frostbite.

The mental distance between them grew with each frigid glance. As she stormed away without a word, Valas knew that somehow, he lost whatever ground he gained with her.

\* \* \* \*

Valas pushed the document back across the table. “Come now, Ambassador Dakkar, you can’t possibly expect me to accede to these terms.”

“Did you, or did you not, promise Beltarra most favored trade status in return for the nomination?” Dakkar picked up the agreement. “I merely took the liberty of spelling out the terms.”

“You spelled them out all right. These would bankrupt Chandor within five years.”

The Ambassador chuckled. “Then let the negotiations begin.”

Shay listened as the two men haggled back and forth, their banter a background in her head. Background for other voices, the ones she’d heard last night coming from the Prince’s suite. How dare Valas flirt after leaving her, only to seek pleasure between the thighs of another woman?

The barrage of emotions from his suite had slithered their way past her normal mental filters. She felt certain she knew how it had happened.

Her empathic abilities had caused her to create defensive mechanisms to protect her from the stray emotions that flooded day-to-day human existence. Under normal conditions, they kept out anything that she didn’t specifically seek out.

But the headache and queasy stomach she’d awakened with this morning had told Shay she’d over indulged in that Adamano Red. Her glass hadn’t been empty all evening.

*Shay?*

Valas’ voice in her head pulled her back to the task at hand. *What does he want now?* Refocusing her attention, Shay replied in the same manner.

*Yes, Your Grace.*

The expression on his face didn’t change. *I said, is this his final offer?*

Shay tamped down her inner turmoil. Duty took precedence. That’s the way it stayed for her, duty first.

She’d do her duty, her family and now the crown, but she’d be damned if she’d let Valas see her struggle to control her desires again. Last night’s kiss was a mistake she would not repeat.

*Let me check,* she told him.

The Ambassador had never come across an empath, of that Shay felt certain. She didn’t find a single mental shield to block her from his thoughts. She heard the men’s voices in the background as she probed gently into Dakkar’s mind.

*This is as far as you can push,* she informed Valas.

Valas picked up the document with all of the crossing outs and

additions written in by the Ambassador's assistant. "Very well, Dakkar. Chandor will agree to these new terms."

Dakkar offered his hand. "I shall have it tidied up into two fresh copies. We can sign them for our respective crowns in the morning."

"In plenty of time for the nomination session tomorrow afternoon," the Prince accepted the handshake.

"Of course, from what I hear, the gossip already had this as a done deal before our meeting today."

"I heard as much at last evening's reception," Shay spoke up.

Both men looked over. "From Ra'lar no doubt," disdain oozing from Dakkar's words.

"Yes, actually it was. He was quite charming."

Valas and Dakkar each arched a brow in her direction. "To your face," came the ambassador's comment.

Shay thought back to the conversation she'd had with the Guild Advisor. She could remember his quick wit, and how much his humor had made her laugh. What she couldn't remember were her own words. How much had she told the stranger about not only Chandor's objective, but her role in advising the Prince?

Oh, dear Gods, she didn't know.

\* \* \* \*

"You got very quiet back there," Valas remarked as the two of them stepped out into the midday sun.

She had to tell him, Shay thought to herself. He had to know about the potential indiscretion in order to prepare for the consequences.

She felt a flush of embarrassment color her face. "For good reason, I'm afraid, Your Grace."

"It was Valas last evening, Shay."

"That, too, was a mistake."

He gave her an exasperated look. "Enough." He looked around the plaza. Finding what he sought, he grabbed her by the hand. "We are going to clear this up right now," as he pulled her toward a stone bench on the edge of the open market place.

"Sit," he commanded.

The chill seeped through her skirt when she chose a spot on one end of the bench. Instead of taking the other end, Valas surprised her by sitting close enough that their thighs touched.

"You said there's a good reason for your silence. Tell me, Shay."

She swallowed hard, gathering her courage. "I, umm, I may have

had just a little too much to drink last evening.”

He nodded. “There may be hope for you yet as a diplomat, Shay. You’re learning how to understate the obvious.”

“You knew?” She turned away from him.

“Of course I knew. Turn back around.” He reached over, taking her shoulders to rotate her back to face him.

“Now the rest. What happened before I walked you back to your suite?”

She couldn’t turn back now. Besides, he needed to know. “I’m afraid I might have mentioned our negotiations with Beltarra. Chandor isn’t the only one in contention for the empty seat on the Council.”

His hand settled on her thigh, giving it a squeeze. “You didn’t give anything away.”

“How do you...” she answered herself mid-sentence. “You looked at my thoughts, didn’t you?”

“I had to, Shay. For the sake of our assignment, I had to be sure.”

She let out a relieved breath. “I suppose so.”

Valas raked his fingers through his hair, and then blew out a deep breath. “That’s one problem solved. Now, about this icy reception I’ve gotten this morning. If it’s about that kiss last night, I apologize.”

“Apologize? You’re sorry you kissed me?” Shay shot up from her seat. She ignored his shouts to stop, striding across the plaza. Then, just before she reached the villa where the Council had the diplomats housed, she felt his grip on her arm.

“Shay, Stop. Let me finish.”

She pulled her arm from his hand. “I think you’ve said enough.” Shay turned a deaf ear and continued into the villa.

\* \* \* \*

Valas watched, gaping, as the blur of scarlet disappeared through the door. Part of him wanted to charge in after her, to insist on hearing what had riled her so. His younger self would have done just that.

But as a man who’d seen thirty summers, he knew otherwise. Better to let her stew a bit, allow some of the bitterness to simmer out.

“I’ve never seen that look on a man’s face, when there wasn’t a woman involved somehow.”

The strange voice made Valas turn around.

“We met briefly last evening,” the man offered a hand. “I’m Ra’lar, Council Advisor from the Agricultural Guild.”

Valas accepted the firm handshake. “Valas, diplomatic

representative from Chandor.”

“You’re too modest, Your Grace. Second in line to a wealthy throne is a position most men would envy,” Ra’lar paused, glancing toward the door. “And one most women would pursue.”

“Then it’s a good thing that the Lady Evanos is not most women.”

Ra’lar’s chuckle rumbled deep in his chest, “Aye, in that we agree. She is a most remarkable combination.”

“Which leaves only one question, Advisor.” Valas looked the other man over. “Are you, or I for that matter, most men?”

“Touché.” Ra’lar tugged out non-existent wrinkles in his tunic. “Ambassador Dakkar must find you a worthy opponent.”

“Perhaps. He and I have spoken on a few occasions.” Valas chose each word with care. “I’ve made it a point to speak with most of the Council members.”

The plaza had begun to stir with midday activity. Food vendor carts filled the open area with their exotic and savory scents. The two men began to walk through the growing crowd.

“But here it is the morning before nominations, and you breakfast with Dakkar.”

Valas suspected his movements were being watched. Now he had proof. “And what a wonderful breakfast it was. The ambassador’s cook makes a fruit pastry that rivals any from my father’s kitchens.”

“Strange you should mention fruit,” Ra’lar handed over a coin to a vendor and chose a golden ripe peach from among the basket of produce. “The Agricultural Guild could give Chandor what it wants.”

“How is that? I don’t remember seeing the Guild listed among those that sit on the Council.”

The Advisor sliced the fruit in half, twisting to separate the flesh from the stone. “No, but many of those who do would be all too happy to do a favor for the Guild.” He took a bite from the peach.

At what cost, Valas thought to himself. “And what would the Guild want from Chandor?”

“Want? Nothing could be farther from the truth.” Ra’lar continued to enjoy the fruit. “It’s more of a matter of what can the Guild do for Chandor. We can help your farmers get the best possible price for their produce by brokering deals all over the quadrant.”

Valas felt a smile creep over his face. With a nod, he admitted, “That is one objective in getting Chandor a seat on the Council.”

“I thought as much. Every good ruler wants to see his subjects

prosper.”

“Mister Advisor, you forget, I am but the royal little brother.” Valas shrugged his shoulders, holding his palms up, “Once Dusan marries and sires an heir, I begin my slide down the line of succession.”

Ra’lar tossed the pit into a waste bin. “But until then, Your Grace, you are, as they say, a mere heartbeat away from the throne.”

\* \* \* \*

“Damn the man,” Shay threw the washcloth into the basin where it landed with a soggy splat.

She leaned over and peered critically at her reflection in the mirror. Ellia was right, cold water helped. The redness had disappeared from her eyes, and a few strokes with her comb fixed the stray hairs. Before Shay finished, she heard a gentle knock on the dressing room door.

“Lady Evanos? Shay, dear, is everything all right?”

Shay had completely forgotten about the plans made with Ambassador Dakkar’s wife. When she’d mentioned needing to find a few small gifts for family back on Chandor, Annara insisted on a shopping trip at the famous Bazaar here in Council City. Shay could not refuse.

“Oh yes, Annara, I’ll be right out.”

As Shay stepped back into her sitting room she saw the ambassador’s wife, dressed in crisp linen the color of rich mocha. The older woman stood looking out the glassed doors leading to the balcony.

“I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” Shay apologized.

“Nonsense. It was but...” Annara turned and stopped mid-sentence. Her smile dissolved in an instant, “What did the oaf do?”

“What? Who?”

Annara gave her an exasperated look. “The man responsible for your recent tears, that’s who. And I’d bet it’s Prince Valas.”

Shay reached up and touched her face. “Is it that obvious?”

“To a woman who’s shed her fair share, it is.” Annara stepped closer. “Was it Valas?” she asked.

When Shay nodded, her friend continued. “And what did he do?”

“He apologized for kissing me.”

Annara shook her head and drew in a deep sigh, “The fool.” She draped an arm around Shay’s shoulders in a hug. “And all the more reason, my dear, for you to go shopping.”

\* \* \* \*

Thankfully, the merchants all had arrangements to deliver packages to the diplomatic villas. With Annara's help, Shay had chosen presents for her parents, both sisters and her older brother. Now they sat in a street-side café, sipping sugar-rimmed glasses of iced *kifir*. Shay would miss the bubbly, cherry drink when she returned to Chandor.

"Good afternoon, Ladies."

Shay looked up to see Ra'lar standing beside their table.

"Advisor Ra'lar," Annara greeted him, her voice slipping into a frosty tone.

Hoping to soften her friend's formality, Shay offered her hand and smiled, "Good afternoon."

He held it a bit longer than necessary, letting his fingertips stroke her palm as he let go. "Doing a bit of shopping, perhaps? I do hope you left some baubles for me to choose from."

"Then you'd best hurry, Ra'lar, before Lady Evanos and I resume our hunt."

Ra'lar cast a subtle glare at the ambassador's wife. The animosity between the two hung so thick it turned Shay's stomach. She strengthened her mental shield, and the queasiness faded.

"Ah, but I fear the loveliest item in the Bazaar is not for sale." He turned back to Shay. "As much as I enjoy your company, Lady Evanos, I just stopped by to say hello. A matter at the Guild Hall demands my attention."

Once he'd left, Shay questioned Annara. "Now, you tell me what happened?"

Annara shuddered visibly. "That man is never, ever to be trusted, Shay."

"What has he done?"

With a shake of her head, the ambassador's wife continued. "Because of him, my father is dead."

"He killed your father?" Shay already had her doubts about the advisor, but she hadn't felt in him the capacity for murder.

"No, it wasn't his hand on the blade, but Ra'lar set it in motion." Annara fidgeted with her glass, "My father spoke out against the guild's growing power."

"He received warning after warning and finally, a visit from the Advisor himself. My father was killed within hours of his next public condemnation of the guild."



*Where is she this time?* Valas paced back and forth in front of the desk, the documents scattered over the top having received only moments of his attention. He hadn't a clue where she'd disappeared to all afternoon and evening.

This Ice Queen treatment had to cease. Tonight he'd find out once and for all what had put a burr under her saddle. *If I stay awake*, he thought to himself, stifling a yawn.

Almost a half an hour later muffled voices from her suite pulled his attention away from another Council briefing document. He frittered away several more minutes, and then decided he'd given her enough time.

From their shared balcony, he saw the lamp still lit in her sitting room. She hadn't closed the drapes on the glass doors yet. With a thought, he willed her to turn around.

Her fingers still undoing her long braid, she turned toward the door. The look on her face when she saw him was worth the berating he knew he would get. For the briefest of moments, she actually smiled.

*Shay, we need to talk*, he motioned her out into the night along with his mental request.

She hesitated, indecision covering her face, as she continued to loosen her hair. Finally, with a quick rake of her fingers through the onyx waves, she walked over to the balcony door.

When she'd closed it behind her, the Shaylara who'd smiled at him had disappeared. In her place stood Lady Evanos, formal and non-nonsense. Even for the charming Hare of Chandor, this wouldn't be easy.

"Yes, Your Grace, we do need to talk." Instead of taking a place near the railing, Shay walked over to a small table and two chairs. Choosing the one with its back toward the gardens below, she sat down.

Willing for the time being to give her space, Valas took the other chair. "Lady's first."

She hesitated, plucking off one, then two of the wilting blooms from the small plant decorating the table. "I went shopping with the ambassador's wife this afternoon."

Valas leaned back in the chair, resting his elbows on the arms. He tented his fingertips in front of his face, "Did you ladies enjoy yourselves?"

Shay responded with a tiny nod, “Yes, Annara knows all the best places to find a bargain.”

“I would imagine she does. She and Dakkar spend weeks at a time here.” He peered over his fingers at her, “I assume a report of your shopping isn’t what you want to talk to me about.”

“No, though it did happen while we were out.” She tossed one of the wilted blooms over the railing. “I learned something very disturbing about Advisor Ra’lar.”

“Go on.” After his own meeting, not much would surprise Valas about the other man.

She leaned closer across the table. “Annara says he arranged to have her father killed,” even in this private setting, Shay dropped her voice to barely above a whisper. She gave him Annara’s version of what had happened.

The advisor’s comment about Valas being just a heartbeat away from the throne now took on a more ominous meaning. He told Shay what Ra’lar had said. “I discounted it at the time, thinking it rooted in his power-hungry attitude.”

Valas pushed himself up out of the chair and began to pace. “This goes beyond knowing that we can’t trust the man’s words. He’s now slipped over into being a potential threat.”

Her eyes wide, Shay asked, “You don’t think he would harm Dusan or,” she pulled in a deep breath, “Or your father?”

“I think it best not to take any chances, given what we know.” Valas looked up at the twin silvery orbs in the night sky. “I’ll send a warning this evening. One I can be sure won’t be intercepted.”

“Does it increase your power? That there are two moons here?”

He nodded slowly. “I was surprised how much.” He stopped pacing to lean on the back of the empty chair, “It’s taking sometime to get used to, especially since their cycles are a bit out of sync.”

Valas’ mind whirled with possibilities of how he could use the doubled lunar power to get a warning back home. He pushed them to the back of his mind for the moment. He had another problem to deal with.

“Shay, what’s going on between us? We had a good friendship before we got here. And I thought things were moving beyond that.” He pulled the chair out and sat back down across from her. “I started that kiss, I admit. But you sure jumped right in with both feet.”

“I won’t deny that,” she looked down at where one fingertip drew invisible circles in the tabletop. “I might have been a little tipsy, but I

wanted you to kiss me.”

He raked a hand through his hair and blew out a deep breath. “Then why the Ice Queen treatment?”

Still without looking up, she continued, “You left. Then later, after I’d gone to bed, I heard you. You and some woman.”

“What woman?” he shook his head. “I went back downstairs to the reception. Dakkar and his aide pulled me into a game of cards. It was two, no almost three hours later that I came back up to my suite.”

“But, I heard you.” This time she did look up at him, her cheeks flushed. “And I,” she stammered, “I felt you. Felt it when the two of you...” her sentence trailing off unfinished.

Understanding began to dawn. “I swear to you, Shay. It wasn’t me.” Valas reached over and took her hand. “You think me such a cad that I could kiss you the way I did and then take pleasure with another woman that soon?”

“No. But I heard them, and felt their combined release. It came from your rooms, of that I’m sure.”

He thought back to last night. It seemed that everything had been conspiring against him, and he ran late dressing for the reception. He’d had to dash out without setting his usual magical wards, leaving the valet assigned to him to lock up.

That had to be it. “Shay, I think I know what happened.” He explained the rushed departure without his usual routine. “The valet must have brought some chamber maid in here.” He chuckled a little, “A man will do a lot to try and impress a lady. Borrowing my suite no doubt seemed harmless when he knew for certain I was otherwise occupied.”

The longer she sat there, the more he could see the disbelief fading from her face. It was no wonder she’d been angry. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Her lips curled up in a soft smile. “Yes, Your...,” she paused, before restarting, “Yes, Valas. I believe you. I have no choice.”

He looked at her, confused. “What do you mean, no choice?”

“The same ability that started this whole mess. I know empathically that you’re telling me the truth.” Her shoulders slumped, and she stifled a yawn. “It’s been a long day.”

He stood, and pushed his chair in. “Then let me walk you to your door, Shay,” Valas offered her his hand.

Once she stood, he draped her arm around his for the few steps to her door. There he cupped her face in one hand, tilting it up to his.

Waiting just a heartbeat for a protest, and getting none, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

“Let me hear it once more,” he said, his lips brushing hers even as he spoke. “I want my name to be the last thing on your lips tonight.”

“Goodnight, Valas.”

He waited for several moments after the lights in her suite winked out. All along this wing of the villa, windows darkened as sleep settled over the gathering of diplomats. Valas used the time to calm his thoughts and begin the gather of energy he would need.

There were a handful of mages on Chandor he could easily relay the warning for his father and older brother. But even though there were two or three who’s loyalties were above reproach, tonight Valas chose a different route.

As the energy swirled and circled in him, gaining power, the prince created an image in his mind of the corridor outside his brother’s rooms. He looked down, watching as his hand opened the door. At the desk over by a window, sat the heir to the Chandoran throne, Prince Dusan.

Counting on the power of their shared blood, Valas hoped his brother would be able to hear him. “Dusan, I need to tell you something.”

The other man stiffened where he sat, looking around the room. Then, just as quickly, his face relaxed, “This must be important, Little Brother. You haven’t spoken to me this way in years.” Dusan leaned back in his chair, eyes closed and massaging his temples.

“It is,” Valas knew his brother couldn’t see his astral self as he strode over to the desk. “I need for you to be even more vigilant about security. There’s been a veiled threat made.”

Dusan’s eyes snapped open. “A threat? Against who?”

“Father, you, even me. It’s impossible to be sure.” Valas shrugged his shoulders. “Given the source, and what I know about him, I’m taking no chances.”

Valas explained the information both he and Shay had gathered. He finished off with Shay’s empathic assessment of the Guild Advisor.

“I’ll notify security at once.” Dusan rose from his chair and crossed the room to the door. Easing it open, he spoke in hushed tones to the guard stationed outside.

Using his heightened astral senses, Valas listened to his older

brother instruct the guard to increase security on the king's suite. He didn't envy the job of explaining this to their father. Lycander, like his sons, was not a man to hide from a threat.

"I'm glad it's you, not me, who has to tell Father."

Dusan laughed as he walked back to the desk. "He won't be happy, that's for sure." Settling back into the leather armchair, he cautioned Valas, "You be careful too, Brother. And I know I can count on you to keep Shaylara safe."

Every protective instinct in the younger prince flashed to the surface of his mind. Valas had begun to realize how important the empath had become, not only to their mission, but to his own happiness.

"On that, you have my word," he answered, trying to keep his emotions from coloring his words.

A knowing smile lit Dusan's face. "I thought that might be the case." He reached into the desk's side drawer and removed an unadorned dagger sheathed in plain brown leather. Sliding the blade free, he tested the edge with his thumb. "Three days until the Council votes?"

"Aye. Three days." Valas and Shay, as members of the diplomatic corps, could not possess weapons in the villa. The administrators insisted that the Council guards were all the protection they would need.

"I'll not contact you again 'til then unless things turn very sour. I don't want to risk Ra'lar having someone who can sense the gifts Shay and I have. Right now, our wits and skills are the only protection we can count on."

"Then go. Let me know when Chandor's place on the Council is assured."

Valas gripped his brother's well-muscled shoulder. "I will. Until then, stay safe, Brother."

Dusan's nod faded as Valas let his hold on the energy spiral loosen. When the astral fog cleared, he once more looked out on his balcony above the villa's garden. The dark calm of the night engulfed him as he felt the remaining energy swirl within him. There was one last task to finish before he released it.

He held out his right hand. Creating in his mind an image, a glowing blue sphere appeared in his open palm. The ball began expanding, until it became big enough to release. It hovered and continued to grow.

Valas molded it with his will, letting it surround both his and Shay's suites. Once he had it in place, he muttered the incantation to charge it with protection. Inside it, they would be safe.

Pulling in a deep breath, he let go his hold on the energy flow. The sphere's boundary shimmered in place as Valas turned, and walked back into his suite.

Tomorrow promised to be a very interesting day.

\* \* \* \*

Valas squinted against the setting sun as he followed Shay down the walk. They'd been at Ambassador Dakkar's all afternoon and signed the agreement for most favored trade status. Now they were free until tomorrow's nomination session.

"I don't know about you, but I'm famished," Valas declared as they left the ambassador's fenced property.

Shay snickered. "Me, too. That fruit and cheese was delicious but it's long gone now."

A flash of inspiration hit him. "I've heard about this local dish, *burandi*. It's sausage cooked with onions and peppers and the like. What do you say we go out among the people in search of good *burandi*."

Her smile sliced right through to his heart. "That's a wonderful idea. But how do we know where to go?"

"Simple," he grabbed up her hand. "We ask."

They found a group of workmen packing up their tools for the day who directed them to a small, neighborhood eatery. It proved to be an easy walk, and once they found it, a bell jingled merrily above them as he pushed the door open.

The young woman who seated them brought a pitcher of icy cold water and two pottery mugs before taking their drink order and heading back to behind the counter. From the massive grill came a mix of scents both savory and spicy.

Shay leaned across the table and whispered, "I think we should have stopped to change clothes. She's already marked us as tourists."

He shrugged. "As long as the food is good, what does it matter?" He filled one of the mugs, setting in front of Shay, then filled his own. Lifting it, he added, "Here's to an evening of not having to be Your Grace and Lady Evanos. Tonight we are just Valas and Shay, out for a good meal."

She lifted her mug and clinked it against his. "Then Valas and Shay it is." She flipped over the single sheet menu the server had left,

“What shall we order?”

\* \* \* \*

Shay cut a bite from the roast on the platter before her, and then popped it into her mouth. The tender morsel, perfectly seasoned in the ale-based sauce, drew a satisfied moan of delight. “You’ve got to taste this,” she told Valas after swallowing.

Without thinking, she cut a piece and speared it on her fork. Reaching across the table, she offered it to him. As he took it, he looked up, capturing her eyes at the same time.

Those crystal blue eyes could see deeper into her than anyone else, as deep as she herself could see the emotions of others. How could she continue to resist the growing desire Valas stirred within her?

“As delightful as my dinner companion,” he declared, picking up his own utensils. “My turn,” he sliced a bite from his meal. “This is the best part of ordering different things.”

She let him feed her the bite. “This would be wonderful with my father’s homemade sausage and vegetables from Mother’s garden.”

At the mention of her family, she saw Valas’ smile soften. As a royal son, he wouldn’t have had the opportunity to enjoy some of the simple pleasures, like her mother’s gardening and cooking, that she had taken for granted.

“Did your mother teach you to cook?” he asked, as he scooped up some of the peppers and onions cooked with the spicy sausage.

“She taught all four of us, even my brother.” Shay took a drink of the chilled tea they’d been served with their meals. “Things must’ve been different for you though.”

Valas’ mother had died when the younger prince was in his twelfth summer. “My father takes his responsibilities very seriously. Thank goodness I had my grandparents. I got more than my name from my grandfather.”

“It’s true then,” she put down her fork. “Queen Keirrie’s father was a mage?”

He nodded. “One of the most powerful of his generation.” Valas took a bite of his dinner. When he’d swallowed it, he added, “What most don’t know is that my grandmother also had power.”

“She gave it up for him?”

He shook his head. “She didn’t have to. I told you, Shay, it’s an old wives’ tale. My own family is proof of that.”

Wondering to herself, did she dare believe him? “Then why is it

told? There's always some bit of truth in all the old tales."

"I don't know the whole answer to that, but I have my suspicions." He used a chunk of the brown bread to mop up the juices from his meal. "It's like our meals. Alone, each ingredient is good. But together, they become something bigger than all the pieces."

He savored the dripping piece of bread, and then continued. "I believe that somewhere back in Chandor's past, people noticed that when two power users produced children, those offspring had more abilities than the parents."

Now she could see where he ventured with his theory. "And out of fear of what could be, the tale began."

A broad grin lit his handsome face, "Exactly," gesturing with the fork he'd picked back up.

Part of her could see the wisdom in his words. Fear, one of the strongest of human emotions, was responsible for much of their behaviors. Still, she had no proof that his grandmother was what Valas claimed, no proof except for his word.

During the rest of their meal and the stroll back to the villa, they discussed mundane matters. When they arrived, Valas made a suggestion.

"It's such a lovely night, walk with me in the garden."

Whether influenced by the night, or the delicious dinner they'd shared, or just the man himself, Shay found herself agreeing. She felt his fingers lace with her own as they entered the sculpted metal gate.

She pulled in a deep breath, the air carrying the blended scents of the mid-summer blooms. "Reminds me of the gardens at your father's palace."

"The roses were my mother's addition, she loved them." For a moment, the only sounds were their footfalls on the sandy path. "You know the silvery one, in the eastern corner of the garden?"

"Oh yes, it has a subtle, spicy scent. It's my favorite." She trailed her fingertips over the green foliage.

"That's the one." His smile seemed to widen. "Its name is Lunar Magic. My grandfather gave it to her when I was born. He said then I'd be the one to inherit his talent."

"What about your grandmother? You said she had a gift too. What was hers?" Shay felt curious about the woman she'd known of only as the mother of Lycander's queen.

*Telepathy*, his answer inside her head.

Shay smacked him on the arm. "Think you're funny, do you?"



He rubbed his shoulder in mock pain. “No, witty. That’s what I am.”

“The women at court would, no doubt, agree with you.”

“It’s not them I’m trying to impress here, Shaylara.” He bent down, and snapped the stem of a blood red rose. Gently, he tucked it behind her ear. “For some reason, their opinions have ceased to matter to me.”

He bent his head, nibbling, and then planting a kiss just below her ear. “It’s only yours that matters.” Valas put the hand he still held around his neck. “And it your opinion, what am I about to do?”

She knew the answer as well as she knew her own name. “You’re going to kiss me.” Shay felt his lips inch across her cheek.

“Is that what you want?” He reached down, finding her other hand and brought it, too, around his neck.

He pulled her close, sending a shudder racing through her body. “Yes, I want you to kiss me.”

She could feel his smile as he held his cheek against hers before he pulled back, his eyes holding hers. With a feather light touch, he brought his mouth to hers, one after another, his kisses staying sweet and gentle.

Shay dragged her lips from his. “Please, Valas, kiss me like you did in my dream,” her words had no more than left her lips than she knew she’d made a mistake.

“Ah, but if I were to do that, I wouldn’t be satisfied leaving you at your door this time.”

“Then perhaps,” she suggested, “we should continue our walk.”

From inside the villa, strains of music floated on the night air. The windows of the grand ballroom glowed with light.

Valas slid from her embrace. “I never got the dance you promised me. Instead of the walk, waltz with me here in the garden, Shay.”

They melted together. His skills as a dancer didn’t surprise her. The king’s sons, no doubt, had started lessons at an early age.

With her head against his shoulder, it put his neck at just the right place for kissing. From the notch at the base of his throat to the spot where his pulse beat beneath her lips, Shay trailed playful kisses. When she hit a very sensitive spot, she felt the hand resting at the small of her back press her closer to him.

Through the garden they danced until, as if choreographed, the music stopped just as Valas pulled her down into his lap on a bench beside the path. As she wiggled to get comfortable against the lean

muscles of his thighs, he reached out and held her hips.

“Sit still,” his voice ragged.

Shay felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she realized why he’d made the request. She was not an innocent virgin and recognized the hard ridge of his erection pressed against her thigh. Immediately, she stilled.

“Thank you,” he acknowledged with a crooked grin, shifting underneath her.

“I’d say it’s my pleasure, but it appears we both enjoyed our waltz.”

His hands slid from her hips, up her back and over her shoulders. Cupping her face in one hand, he stopped just short of contact between his lips and hers.

“No, Shay, this is pleasure.”

The warmth of his breath barely had time to register in her mind before he began plundering her mouth. Demanding from the start, his tongue traced the line between her lips. She responded, opening to him, allowing him inside.

As he plundered her mouth, Shay felt his hand leave her face and slide down her arm, fingertips grazing her nipple. Lifting her arm, he placed it back around his neck. She couldn’t stop the shiver from racing through her when he stroked over the swell of her breast.

Shay raked her fingers from the nape of his neck, up through his blond hair. Despite his earlier request, she couldn’t help herself, squirming her hips in his lap.

“Gods, Shay,” he moaned into her open lips, “you’re driving me wild.”

Once more he kissed her, taking possession of her mouth. Shay responded, giving back as much as she took. Through her passion-fogged consciousness, she heard a rustle spread through the garden.

Then, in a second, they were...Soaked. To the skin, by the garden’s automatic watering system. Shay bounded out of his lap, laughing as she watched him sit dumbfounded for a moment before jumping to his feet. Taking the hand he offered, she ran with him back to the villa.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they got to the top of the stairs at the end of the second floor hall, their laughter had them staggering the last few step. Valas gripped the handrail and tugged Shay along. They dripped their way to her door.

They stood there for a moment, indecisive. Valas reached up, and stroked a fingertip along her cheek. When he felt her shudder, he knew it was as much from his touch as it was from the chill of wet clothing.

“Come with me, Shay. We can warm ourselves in a hot shower.” Imagining her naked in his bath brought back the ache their dousing had taken away.

When she looked up at him, her wistful smile gave him his answer. “You know I want to, but I can’t. I can’t take the risk the story is true, not now. My duty demands no less.”

“It won’t stop me from trying to change your mind.”

She shrugged, “I wouldn’t expect you to.”

Valas reached around her, easing the ornate door open. After placing a gentle kiss on her forehead, he told her, “Then get inside before I start trying again.”

She pulled away from him, the war between her logic and her emotions reflected on her lovely face. “Good night, Valas.”

“Good night, Shay,” he answered with a wink. “Dream of me. Again.”

A flush colored her cheeks as she slipped inside her suite.

Back in his own suite, Valas handed the soaked clothing to his valet and then dismissed the man for the night. He still needed that hot shower he’d tried to convince Shay to share.

\* \* \* \*

Bracing his hands against the tiled wall, Valas let the spray pound down on his shoulders. Its heat seeped into his muscles, and drew out the accumulated aches and tension. One ache, however, the shower couldn’t take away.

He stood up to let the water run down his chest. It sluiced down over his belly to the thickening length of his cock. Just being with Shay had kept him half hard all day. Tonight, with her in his arms, and then in his lap, he’d felt the strain of his rock hard erection against her body.

With one hand, he reached down, wrapping his long fingers around the shaft. She’d blushed when he’d asked her to sit still in his lap, but she didn’t shy away from the rigid proof of his desire.

In his mind now, she’d touch him, stroking lazily up and down while he kissed her breathless. Her breasts would flatten against him as he held her tight against his chest.

His own rhythm speeding up, Valas could feel her even now,

arching her hips against him. He'd reach down and probe the smooth folds of flesh between her thighs. Finding her hot and slick, he'd push a little deeper, stroking the hard nub inside.

He could only imagine how sweet she would taste when he brought his fingers to his lips. Valas braced one hand back against the tiled wall as the other hand stroked harder, the water adding to his own slipperiness.

Were she here, he'd stroke and tease her until she exploded with her first climax. Gods, how he longed to watch her take that wild tumble over the edge.

Once she calmed, he'd grip the firm roundness of her ass and lift her until she could wrap her legs around his hips. Then, he'd torture himself by slowly easing her down onto his cock. Inch by inch, Shay would open to him, letting him feel every ridge inside her.

His pulse pounding now, Valas felt his own hips arching against his hand. Buried to the hilt, he'd begin to thrust in and out of her, her rhythm matching his. Her grip tight around his shoulders, he'd ease her own against the shower-warmed tiles for support.

They'd buck and grind against one another harder and faster. His strokes mimicking their movements while the tension built deep in his groin. The ache he'd felt all day had now become the anticipated edge he drove himself toward.

He could hear her, the moans of delight mixed with her ragged gasps for breath. His grip tightened, just as he imagined her inner muscles would squeeze around him as her own climax neared.

His hips bucked one last time. Valas shuddered as the explosion began, the sound of her crying out his name the last vestige of the fantasy.

\* \* \* \*

"Lady, if you don't stop fidgeting and let me finish your hair, you'll be late for the Council session."

The maid's words pulled Shay back from where her thoughts had wandered. Valas' wish for her dreams last evening had been as potent as any spell. Once again, she'd awakened slick with desire after spending the night writhing beneath him in that nebulous world between sleep and wakefulness.

Maybe what he said about his grandparents was true. She had nothing but his word to go on. Or did she?

"Ellia, you've been with the crown for many years now, haven't you?"

Shay saw the other woman's reflection nodding in the mirror. "Since I was barely sixteen years old. I began as a nursery maid just after Prince Valas was born."

"What was he like as a boy?"

Ellia's hands stopped moving and even a non-empath could've felt the change in her. "Why do you ask?" the woman's tone turned clipped and formal.

The caring and protectiveness Shay hoped to see in the maid remained. Tell the truth, Shay cautioned herself, but only as much of it as necessary.

"It's just, well, I..." Shay stammered, somehow finding it difficult to choose the right words. "I think I'm falling for him."

The older woman laughed aloud. "I was beginning to believe it would never happen." A conspiratorial gleam lit her eyes, "Does he know?"

Shay shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not sure, Ellia." *Keep it simple*, she thought to herself. "He knows that I'm attracted to him."

"What woman wouldn't be? He's a very good-looking man. The very image of his grandfather." Ellia winked at Shay, "You do know that Valas got more than his name and looks from the older man, don't you?"

Shay nodded, and then placed a finger against her lips. The maid had been in the royal household long enough to understand the need to keep their prince's abilities a secret when outside their own palace walls.

"What about his grandmother? He hinted they filled the void after his mother's death."

Ellia picked up the first of the decorative combs for Shay's hair. As she secured it with a pin, she continued to talk. "Now there was a wonderful woman. The queen's mother stepped right in with the raising of those boys."

"After working for Dusan, and now Valas, I imagine they were a handful as they grew older." Shay held up the second comb so Ellia could reach it.

The maid smiled. "By then I had been promoted, assistant to the wardrobe mistress. I remember one incident, the autumn after their mother passed.

"The King was entertaining visitors from the southern province and expected both of his sons at the banquet table." Ellia pinned the comb in place, "I was helping their grandmother, Lady Alliana, chose

a necklace when she suddenly gripped my arm and told me the boys were in trouble.”

“What happened?”

“She stormed out of the dressing room in naught but her chemise and dressing gown. She commanded the guards to mount a search in the old orchard.” Her hands busy with a brush, Ellia fluffed Shay’s ebony curls.

“As it turned out, the boys were found, up one of the trees with a very angry Pretolan boar pacing and pawing at the base. They’d interrupted its search for fallow apples and had gotten chased for their efforts.”

What an image that created in Shay’s head. She couldn’t help laughing but realized that, at the time, everyone must have been worried about the princes’ well being. How had their grandmother known where to look for them?

“Did Lady Alliana ever tell you how she’d known about the boys’ trouble?”

Ellia shook her head. “No. We heard rumors and speculation, of course.” She stepped back to survey her work. “Someone even suggested that the Lady had powers of her own. We all knew how ridiculous *that* was.”

“Ridiculous, indeed,” Shay replied, but in the back of her mind, she couldn’t quite believe her own words.

\* \* \* \*

“Shay, would you stop pacing?”

Valas’ words pulled her back to the corridor outside the Council chambers. Uncertainty filled Shay’s mind with what ifs since the conversation with Ellia.

“Aren’t you nervous?” She’d stopped, choosing a spot next to him. Two formal guards stood outside the ornate doors, their weapons a gleaming testimony to the importance of the meeting going on inside.

He shook his head. “This is the easy part, Shay. All I have to do is confirm Chandor’s desire to sit on the Council. Besides, I’ll have you to keep me from making an irreversible mistake.”

Gods, but she wished she had his confidence, the ease with which Valas could talk to anyone and make him feel like a long lost friend. “What’s taking them so long?” She looked over at the closed doors, willing them to open.

When they did, the guards snapped to attention. The Council

Steward appeared, his jeweled collar of office winked with ruby fire.

“The Council calls the Chandoran representative.” He punctuated the request with a rap on the floor with his tall, blade-topped staff.

Shay gave her reflection a quick check, her hand tucking a wayward curl back in place. She watched Valas tug imaginary wrinkles from his tunic.

Squaring her shoulders and giving him a deferential nod, Shay added, “After you, Your Grace.”

The ripple of whispers quieted as they entered the room. It looked to Shay like a miniature version of Chandor’s High Court Chamber. Council representatives seated along both sides of a central open area, with an ornate desk on a raised dais at one end. Ambassador Dakkar nodded with a smile as the Steward led them past, finally stopping at two empty chairs placed behind a vacant table.

A rap on the floor from the Steward’s staff silenced all whispers. “Mister Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Council, Prince Valas, Duke of Chandor.”

At the desk, sat a distinguished looking man. Shay guessed him to be of an age with Valas’ father. He acknowledged the Steward’s announcement before speaking. “Be seated, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Mister Chairman.” Valas pulled out his chair and took his place at the table.

Acutely aware of the protocol, Shay waiting until he sat before taking her place. Even as they walked in, she’d been mentally feeling out the emotions within the chamber. She focused her concentration. There, off to her left, an intense pocket of negativity.

She’d best hurry and locate the source. In the background of her mind, she could hear Valas delivering his formal greetings from the Chandoran crown. Shay stretched her awareness, focusing on the cluster of representatives she knew were from the other agricultural planets.

Why would they be against Chandor? It should be that another vote favoring the issues important to them would be in their best interest. As she made discrete probes into each ones thoughts and emotions, Shay found the same things, disloyalty and deceit. And both directed right at Valas.

She skimmed through the collective thoughts until she found one representative whose mind was so unshielded it felt like looking through crystal clear water. There, swimming in those waters, was a fish she recognized.

*Ra'lar.*

The commanding voice of the council's chairman interrupted her thoughts. "A seat on the Council is not a free ride, Your Grace. Each member world must pull its own weight." He paused for a moment, before continuing, "Tell the Council, Prince Valas, what does Chandor bring to the empty seat?"

Valas pushed himself away from the table and stood before he began to speak. "Mister Chairman," he addressed the man, and then turned first to one side of the room and then the other. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Council."

He stepped away from the table. "Chandor isn't the wealthiest, nor is it the poorest of worlds. What makes Chandor special is her people." Valas stepped over to the bank of chairs on the right hand side of the room. "We're an independent sort, given to straight answers and strong opinions.

"We believe in giving our all, and then some, in tough situations. We don't abandon our friends." He crossed the room to the other group of representatives. "And we are very good at what we do.

"Chandor's grows what I dare say are the finest meats and produce in the entire Jettaran system." He strolled down to stand right in front of the group from where Shay had sensed the animosity. "We are willing to share the methods we have developed. Ideas and techniques that can be adapted to the various growing situations each of you may have back home."

"That, members of the Council, is what Chandor brings to the table." He strode back to his chair. Before he reclaimed his seat, he gave a nod of acknowledgement to the Chairman, "Thank you, Sir, for this opportunity to address the Council."

The Chairman straightened a stack of papers on his desk. "As you are, no doubt, aware, Your Grace, there are two others in nomination for the vacant seat. In order that each current council member have time to fully evaluate each nominee, the council will recess for a period of three days."

He looked around the room, "At that time, Ladies and Gentlemen, be prepared for final discussion as I intend to call for your vote." Picking up his gavel, the chairman gave the top of the desk a sharp rap. "This meeting is adjourned."

The room immediately buzzed with conversation punctuated by the rasp of chairs sliding on the polished stone floor. Out of the corner of her eye, Shay saw Dakkar heading their direction.



*We need to talk, Valas. Now.*

*Once I thank the Ambassador.*

It took almost an hour before she and Valas were able to leave the council chamber. The other agricultural representatives had cornered him and pressed for a meeting this evening. The Prince had no choice but to agree, though Shay could see that he, too, worried about something.

“Come with me.” He grabbed her hand as they headed down the corridor outside the chamber. When she tried to speak, he silenced her with a look followed by the command, “Not here.”

Valas pulled her along to the staircase leading to their suites. Once at his own door, Shay heard him mutter the same words he had when they’d left her room this morning. After a wave of his hand, she heard the lock click open.

Inside, he repeated the spell. Once the lock had snapped closed, he told her, “Now we can talk.”

“I suspect Ra’lar has turned the agricultural representatives against us.” She told him what she’d sensed in the council chamber.

“It doesn’t surprise me. Did your probe discover why?”

She shook her head. “Nothing definite. Just a general feeling of,” she searched for the right word to describe the emotions. “Of betrayal. As if you’d violated some family trust.”

His blue eyes darkened like a stormy summer sky. “Betrayal? I’ve known them barely a week, Shay. How can I have done anything that serious?”

Shay watched as he paced around the room, a mirror image of her own. “I haven’t a clue. All I know is what I felt. Ra’lar is the cause, though. That much I’m sure of.”

He walked over to the desk, its top littered with stacks of files. “Then, my dear empath, we have a mere five hours to formulate a plan by which to turn that betrayal into trust.”

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Valas leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms up over his head. “We’ve been over and over each profile of the representatives that are set against us and still nothing. What say you to taking a break?” He straightened. “Let’s go out and enjoy the afternoon sun for a bit. Maybe if we clear our minds, we will see something we overlooked when we come back.”

Shay stood from her own chair. “I think that’s a wonderful idea. My back could do with a good stretch.”

He watched her place both hands at the small of her back and arch against them, drawing the tunic tight across her breasts. Valas forced himself to turn away, rising from his seat, and then going over to open the balcony doors.

She followed him outside, bringing their glasses of iced *kifir*. Shay left them on the small table before walking over to choose a sunny spot.

Lacing her fingers together in front of her, she rolled her hands palm out as she lifted her arms over her head. Keeping them extended, Shay stretched left until her arms were parallel to the stone floor of the balcony. With the grace of a dancer, she righted herself, then stretched the same way to the other side.

It was torture to keep watching her, but Valas couldn't force himself to look away this time. The ache from his growing erection became almost unbearable when she stepped her feet a little wider apart and reached for the floor, planting her palms flat against the sun-warmed stone. All he could think of was stepping up behind her to sink his entire length into her wetness.

"Please, Shay," he said as he raked fingers through his hair. "Stop if you want me able to concentrate on the representatives instead of your delectable body."

She looked up, meeting his eyes as she straightened. At his words, she surprised him by letting her gaze drift down his body.

He also didn't expect the bold comment once she saw the effect watching her had on him.

"I'm glad you enjoy the view." She must have taken some pity on him. Shay came back over to the table, claiming one of the chairs. She slipped off her shoes and then tucked her bare feet under her.

Before Valas could reply, a very feminine giggle came from the garden below. "Please, Baylen, one more time. You said that the prince wouldn't be in his rooms for several hours this evening."

Hearing the name of his assigned valet, Valas put a finger to his lips, motioning for Shay to keep quiet. With silent steps, he eased closer to the railing.

"I'm sorry, my flower, but orders are orders. No one but me, or Lady Evanos gets into his suite without the prince being there." The reply coming in Baylen's smooth voice confirmed that the unseen woman spoke to the valet.

Valas had issued that order a few days ago when he'd discovered that some of the papers on his desk had been moved around. Nothing

had been taken and most men might not even have noticed the few items out of place.

“Oh but please,” the woman’s voice pleaded again. “I’ve seldom had a man with such stamina.” She paused, giving the last word more emphasis.

Baylen’s deep laugh drifted up from the garden below. “Then we shall find an alternative spot to play. My own quarters are not that far away.”

“It’s such a grand room though, Baylen. Can’t you at least let me see inside one more time?”

A plan began to take shape in Valas’ mind. This woman wanted to gather information for someone. He’d plant just what he wanted her to find and then let whoever was behind her take action. Valas would be ready with a trap.

Using a persuasion spell, he goaded his valet. The servant finally agreed to his companion’s terms.

“Just a quick look-see and nothing more. Right?”

“Of course, Handsome. All I want is to make believe I’m a grand lady for awhile.”

Valas listened as the valet told the woman a time. The servant was smart. At that time, the meeting with the other agricultural representatives would be well underway. There would be very little chance of the lovers getting caught.

The look of concentration on Shay’s face told Valas that she listened to the exchange taking place below them, too. At one point, he’d felt her mental probe reach out to the unseen couple. That initiative was just one more thing he loved about her.

Did he? *Love*? The thought drew him up short. Had he fallen in love with Shay? Valas knew himself too well to deny it.

After several moment of silence from the garden, Valas eased up from his crouch beside the railing. Peering over the edge, he confirmed that the couple had moved on. He’d barely settled back into the empty chair when Shay spoke.

“She’s nervous. She’s been told to gather information on the deal you and Dakkar made.”

He nodded. “I figured she was working for someone else. Could you confirm who?”

A self-satisfied smile curled Shay’s full lips. “I couldn’t read her thoughts enough to get a name, just emotion and motivation. But,” she gave him a conspiratorial wink, “I could see a face in her mind.”

“Ra’lar?”

Shay leaned closer to the table. “Yes. Valas, I think she’s being threatened if she doesn’t find something this time.”

“Then it’s up to us to make sure she discovers just what we want her to.”

Valas laid out his plan. They would leave information on a supposed meeting tomorrow with the Beltarran involving an under the table payment in addition to the trade agreement. A man like Ra’lar, used to such corruption, would be willing to believe others employed the same methods. Valas’ magic would protect him while he forced the Advisor to withdraw his influence against Chandor’s bid for the empty council seat.

Now for the hard part, he thought to himself. “One last thing, Shay. You have to remain here.”

“No.”

“This has to seem like a side agreement between Dakkar and myself.” He reached across the table and covered her hands with his own. “Besides, I don’t want you anywhere near that snake again.”

Her eyes flashed with emerald fire as she pulled her hands away from his grip. “You don’t have to watch over me as if I were some child.”

Valas knew she would only dig her heels in harder if he told her the complete truth behind his request. So he told her the one thing that might assure her compliance. “I promised Dusan I would keep you safe. Don’t make me break an oath to my brother.”

Shay’s protest died unspoken on her lips. She shook her head, “Damn you, Valas, that’s not fair.”

“No, it isn’t. Fair doesn’t matter when it concerns those I care about.” He reached over and took her hands back in his. “Give me your word, Shay. Tell me that you’ll stay here.”

“All right.” She drew in a deep breath. “Consider it given under protest, but I’ll stay.”

That was one less worry off his mind. “Now, how good of a forger are you?”

\* \* \* \*

Valas paced next to the fountain, waiting for the ambassador. Dakkar had instantly agreed to the faked meeting, saying he’d like nothing better than to be in on the advisor’s downfall. Now, five minutes past the arranged time, and Valas’ co-conspirator was late.

Footfalls on the crushed stone path jolted him from his thoughts.

The Beltarran approached from a different direction than Valas had expected.

The ambassador apologized for being late. “I took a round about way in case I was followed.” The ambassador played the role of conspirator to the hilt.

“Good idea.” Valas looked around the garden, hoping to appear nervous to the watcher he knew was out there. “You brought the agreement?”

Dakkar patted his tunic pocket. “Right here.” He then countered with his own question. “You brought the coin?”

Valas tugged the leather bag free from his belt. He bounced it in his hand a couple of times to let the jingle of the money inside act as proof of the contents. “As requested.” He tossed the bag to Dakkar.

The prince watched as his friend opened the pouch and spilled a few of the coins into the palm of his hand. Both men had agreed that Ra’lar wouldn’t make a move until the faked agreement and money had changed hands.

The ambassador poured the gold back into the bag and then tucked the bag into a separate pocket. From the one he’d originally indicated, he withdrew the agreement.

Valas took the offered document and made a show of looking it over. “Everything seems to be in order.” He refolded it and slid it into his own pocket. He offered his hand to Dakkar, “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, Mister Ambassador.”

Before the handshake was over, their watcher made himself known. Takash, one of the dissenting council representatives, stepped out from behind the nearest tree, “Ambassador Dakkar. And Prince Valas,” he nodded at each man in turn. “How convenient to find the two of you together.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Valas caught movement behind Dakkar. But the realization came too late. At the same time, he felt the unmistakable sensation of well-honed steel being pressed against the nape of his own neck.

“Gentlemen, your presence is required at the Guild Hall.”

\* \* \* \*

Shay tossed the small pillow back onto the chair. It hadn’t needed fluffing this time, nor the five other times she picked it up. She was worried.

Valas should have returned long ago. Something awful had happened, she felt sure of it. Yet here she sat, stuck in this damnable

suite, a prisoner of her own promise. She couldn't even send a message to Annara asking if Dakkar had come home. Ellia had the evening off to visit some of her new friends.

Why she ever let him manipulate her into that foolish agreement, Shay would never know. Now it was up to her to remedy the situation.

She strode into the bedroom and flung open the door to the wardrobe. With an efficiency learned from her years of service to the crown, she rejected selection after selection until she found what she needed. The dark gray trousers and midnight blue tunic were the plainest things she'd brought with her.

After sliding her feet into the low-heeled shoes she'd worn the day of her shopping trip, Shay surveyed her reflection in the mirror. It would have to do, she thought to herself, hoping it would be enough to divert unwanted attention.

She devised a simple plan. She'd begin at the site where the meeting was supposed to have taken place. Valas had at least shared that much with her. From there, she would follow the trail of his emotional energy wherever it led. She'd make adjustments once she found him.

Shay eased the door open. The corridor was empty and its lights already dimmed for the night. Drawing in a deep breath and gathering her courage, she left her suite and then closed the door behind her.

She never saw the two men who stayed in the shadows and followed her out of the villa.

\* \* \* \*

"Valas, sit down."

The Prince turned away from the window. Dakkar stirred his steamy cup of tea as if he had not a care in the world.

"Aren't you worried?" Valas drug a vacant chair over the wooden floor, its noise rasping on his nerves.

"Wary, yes. Concerned," he shrugged his shoulders, "perhaps. But worried? No." Dakkar set the unadorned spoon aside. "Lad, when you've been in this business as long as I have, you learn that things like this are usually all for show. For the moment at least, Ra'lar has no intention of harming either one of us."

Valas drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "How can you be certain? Shay told me what happened to Annara's father."

"A tragic accident to be sure."

The Prince looked up to see Ra'lar standing in the doorway. As

he entered the room, the Guild Advisor gave Dakkar a nod of acknowledgement. “All of Beltarra mourned his loss.”

Without giving the ambassador the opportunity to respond, Ra’lar turned his attention to Valas. “Let me assure you, Your Grace. Dakkar is correct. Both of you are, for the moment, quite safe.”

“Then what is it you want?” Valas tried to rein in the distrust coloring his words.

Ra’lar flared his open palms out to his sides. “To talk. Isn’t that what men like us do best?”

“I’ve never been brought at knife point just to talk, Ra’lar.” Valas rocked forward in his chair.

A hand clamped onto Valas’ shoulder, keeping him in his seat. “Please forgive the Duke’s impatience, Advisor. He is a man known for, shall we say,” Dakkar gave a sly nod, “his intense passion.”

“Ah yes, The Hare of Chandor.” Ra’lar’s deep chuckle fell short of honest laughter. “Even here in Council City your reputation precedes you.”

Valas felt Dakkar’s grip on his shoulder tighten. As they’d planned, the older man took the lead in the dealings with the advisor. “I’m certain that the men you asked to escort us here were only being cautious and that no harm or insult was meant.”

“You’re quite right, Ambassador.” Ra’lar pulled the table’s vacant chair out and sat down. “One can never be too cautious. The park was all but deserted when my men found you. It can be a dangerous place this late in the day.”

Once the Advisor had settled in the chair, Dakkar continued, “What’s on your mind, Ra’lar?”

“Not in the mood for small talk, I see. Pity.” Ra’lar looked over at Valas. “Then we shall come straight to the point. Hand over the agreement.”

Just as planned, the prince played dumb. “What agreement?”

“Stop the innocent act. The one between Chandor and Beltarra, currently resting in your pocket.”

Valas made a show of withdrawing the paper. “Oh, this agreement.” He placed the still folded document on the table.

Ra’lar reached out and took it. Scanning over the terms, he chuckled, “Ambassador Dakkar, it seems that nowhere in here does it mention an exchange of funds. And yet my men report seeing Prince Valas toss a purse of coins to you before you handed this over.”

“You’re no stranger to the world of negotiations, Advisor Ra’lar.

Sometimes the wheels need a bit of grease to turn smoothly.” Dakkar leaned back in his chair.

“That they do. Need I remind you, the Council has strict rules against such things. Bribery I believe they call it.” Ra’lar’s eyes gleamed with wicked delight.

Valas watched as Dakkar’s face clouded with worry. No wonder the man had made such a successful career as a diplomat.

“Only if they find out, Ra’lar. Right now, just the three of us know.” Dakkar pulled the pouch of coins out and placed it on the table. “There’s a tidy sum here, more than enough to share.”

“I’m sure there is.” The advisor’s hand shot out and scooped up the leather bag. “If, that is, I were the generous sort.” He tossed the bag in his hand. “No, my silence will cost more than that, though it’s a wonderful start.” Ra’lar hefted the bag in his hand testing its weight, and then dropped it into the pocket of his tunic.

“How dare you make such a deal without consulting the Guild?” Ra’lar shouted as his hand shot out, backhanding the Ambassador across the face, knocking him backward to the floor. Valas jumped to his feet, intending to rush to his friend’s side.

“Sit back down, Boy,” Ra’lar ordered, his words clipped.

Dakkar reached up to touch his swelling lip with the back of his hand. “I’m all right, Valas. Just shaken.” The ambassador regained his feet, and then returned to his chair.

“The Guild controls all deals made for agricultural products. You of all people should know that, Dakkar.”

Ambassador Dakkar squared his shoulders. “Not on Beltarra.”

As he eased back into his seat, Valas could feel the noose tightening around Ra’lar’s neck. Just a little more bait and the man would damn himself with his demands. “Nor on Chandor,” the prince declared.

Ra’lar turned around to face Valas. “Most especially on Chandor, Your Grace.” The advisor reached into his own pocket and removed a document. Slow and deliberate, he unfolded it and laid it on the table in front of Valas.

“Chandor will withdraw its acceptance of Beltarra’s nomination, accepting instead, the one from Takash of Lithum. Both Chandor and Beltarra will welcome the Guild, giving it authority to broker all agricultural deals with the other Council member worlds.”

“And if we refuse?” Valas forced his words past tense lips.

“Then the full Council will learn of this pact,” Ra’lar patted his



pocket. “Chandor’s chances of gaining a seat go up in flames and Beltarra is dismissed on charges of bribery.” The advisor stood and took a few steps toward the door. “You have one hour in which to decide. When you do, just let the guard outside this door know. Once I have your word, you will both be free to go.”

With his hand on the latch, Ra’lar paused, “How foolish of me, gentlemen, I forgot to tell you one last thing. I took the liberty of taking out an insurance policy against your actions.”

“Until the deal is completed as I have outlined, the Lady Evanos is and will remain a guest of mine. Act against me, Mage, and it’s she who will pay the price.”

\* \* \* \*

Shay found the fountain where Valas and Dakkar had met. Traces of the confidence from the two men still lingered in the air. As she walked around, she could begin to sense the ones who had hidden, watching the exchange. There’d been two, no, three watchers. She recognized one of them from the council chambers.

In order to find out which way they’d gone, she closed her eyes to decrease the outside distractions. With a mental sweep, she found the faint trail of emotional energy.

When she exited the park, it became more difficult to follow. Foot traffic increased as she entered the business district, forcing her to narrow her mental focus.

Shay wound her way through the maze of buildings, people, streets and alleyways. Once, in a panic, she thought she’d lost Valas’ emotional footprints. Passers by stared at her as she circled back over and over, unable to get a feel for the direction he’d taken.

In desperation, she reached out, and leaned against the rough bricks of the nearest building. Sensations of a knife blade being pressed against a throat flooded into her mind. Shay’s breath caught as she struggled to calm her own emotions.

She felt Valas, of that she was certain. He was close, very close.

But, which way had he gone from here? Shay scanned the bustling street, hoping to feel a tug.

Then, finally, she felt a glimmer of emotion from the prince. He’d stumbled after being shoved. The scrape of steel against his flesh that followed caused a flare of anger that she could grab.

She pushed herself away from the building, heading off in the direction of the pull. With each step, Shay felt certain she drew closer to her goal.

It could be any of the buildings. That second floor office? That vacant warehouse? She moved forward and knew the trail led her past all of them.

When she looked up and realized where she stood, Shay couldn't help but laugh. The building stood with a gleaming white stone edifice, its entrance flanked by columns carved to resemble giant shocks of grain. Surely Ra'lar wouldn't be so foolish as to hold an influential ambassador and a prince of Chandor someplace this obvious.

As she stood there, she felt someone bump into her. "Excuse..." Shay never finished her sentence. A thick, male hand clamped over her mouth and she felt her unseen assailant's other arm grab her around the waist.

She fought back, struggling against the man's strength. Feeling herself being pulled toward the alley, she tried to bite the hand that prevented her from screaming. As the shadows from the buildings engulfed her, Shay felt the man's breath against her ear.

"Don't fight me, Lady, and this will go much easier."

\* \* \* \*

Ra'lar eased the door closed behind him. "Let me know the minute they are ready to agree," he instructed the guards outside the room where Valas and Dakkar remained.

"Yes, Sir," the two men acknowledged in unison.

This was working out even better than he'd planned. Not only would Chandor be under Guild control, but that rebel Dakkar would be brought to heel..

It had been a stroke of luck when that trollop had found the prince's notes outlining the plan. But the icing on the cake had been receiving the information from his mole back on Chandor. Had Ra'lar not known about Valas' abilities, he might never have succeeded.

Taking the Lady Evanos as insurance was a stroke of sheer genius. The advisor had seen the way the prince looked at his assistant. A man like Valas would go to any length to protect a woman, and for a woman he cared for, even farther. Even so far as to forgo using his own powers to assure his freedom.

When he arrived back at his office, Ra'lar found Takash waiting as instructed. The other man stood until the advisor had settled into his chair behind the massive oak desk.

"You filed the counter nomination?"

Takash nodded, "Exactly as you requested, Advisor."

“Excellent.” Ra’lar pulled the pouch of coins from his pocket. Shaking a few into his palm, he laid them on the desk. “Something for your trouble, my friend.” The advisor smiled at the irony of using Valas’ own money to pay for Chandor’s downfall. He added a few more coins, “And something for your able assistants.”

The little man scooped up the gold. “A pleasure, Ra’lar.” Takash rose to leave. “Always happy to do a favor for the guild.”

Alone in his office, Ra’lar took a stack of papers from the locked desk drawer. If his man on Chandor was correct, then this would be a very profitable acquisition.

\* \* \* \*

Shay stumbled as the man pulled her farther back into the cool darkness of the alley. She kicked and squirmed, but still could not break his iron grip on her.

“Lady, please, stop fighting. I mean you no harm.”

His hand slid from her mouth. “No harm?” she spat his words back at him. “Them explain yourself. Now!”

“I, ah, we,” he nodded to his companion, “are from the council guard. We intercepted men sent by Advisor Ra’lar to kidnap you.”

“Why would he want to kidnap me?”

The grip on her arm loosened. “I can’t be sure. But I assume he wanted to use you as leverage against the prince.”

It began to make sense to her. “Ra’lar has Prince Valas and Ambassador Dakkar. I have reason to believe they are being held inside this building.”

The guard nodded. “We know. They took the precaution of informing the Chairman about their plan. He, in turn, notified us.”

Shay wanted to ask what the two men planned to do against a building full of guildsmen, when a whistle from her captor brought a half a dozen guards out of hiding places scattered along the alley’s length. His original companion trotted back from the entrance. “Building’s secure, Commander.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” he acknowledged. “Watch Commander Kershaw, at your service, Lady Evanos.”

“You’ve convinced me, Commander. Now let me loose.” When she was free of his grip, Shay demanded, “What are your plans for freeing Valas and the ambassador?”

He looked over at his sergeant who responded with a shrug. The commander turned back to Shay, “You’re certain they’re inside?”

“Yes. I can lead you to them.”

“You’d better be right.” The commander turned back to his men, “Sergeant, you and Handran take point. Lady Evanos and I will be right behind you.”

They found the building’s alley door easy enough. Once inside, the commander looked to Shay for direction.

“Up.”

The men moved in military precision, one man inching forward while his comrade covered him with drawn weapon. At the top of the first set of stairs, Kershaw again asked her which way.

This time before she replied, Shay reached out in attempt to let Valas know help was at hand. When she found him, it was difficult to cut through his anger and worry.

*Where are you?*

*Shay?* His startled reply.

*Yes, it’s me. And guards from the council. Where are you?*

*Third floor, north east corner.*

Shay relayed the information. “Please, Commander, don’t ask how I know.”

Kershaw nodded, then signaled his men.

*Shay, tell the guards I can give them Ra’lar.*

\* \* \* \*

Valas looked up as the door opened. He only hoped he could be as calm as Dakkar had earlier in dealing with the advisor.

“Ready to acquiesce, Your Grace?”

Valas smacked his hands on the table top. “Prove to me that Lady Evanos is safe.”

Ra’lar fumbled in his pocket a moment, and then tossed a glittery object out onto the table. The last time Valas had seen that comb in Shay’s hair was the night of the first reception. The advisor must have gotten it after she’d over indulged in the wine. “This doesn’t prove anything except that you were with her. How do I know you haven’t harmed her?”

“Agree to the terms, and I will let you speak to her.” Ra’lar walked over to stand by the room’s only window. “Through a door of course.”

Valas tightened and released his fist over and over under the table. He hoped he stalled enough for Shay to get the guards into position. “You have me at a disadvantage, Advisor Ra’lar. I am forced to concede to your terms.” He rose from his chair and then sauntered over behind Dakkar. “Mister Ambassador, I’m afraid I must

insist that you too abide by these terms.”

“With Lady Evanos’ safety at stake, I can do nothing else. But, Your Grace, indulge me a moment.” He glared over at the advisor. “Let us be sure we are in agreement as to what those terms are.”

Ra’lar nodded to the ambassador. “No wonder you are such a success, Dakkar. Very well, one last time.” He held up one finger, “Valas withdraws his acceptance of Beltarra’s nomination, only to accept the one proffered by Takash.

“You both agree to allow the Guild to broker all of your agricultural dealings. Once this is done, Lady Evanos is safely returned to you. And,” he reached into his pocket to jingle the gold coins resting there. “I forget about that contract and payment my men witnessed.”

*Now, Shay.*

Valas dove forward, pulling Dakkar to the floor with him. The door shattered as two broad shouldered Council guards forced their way into the room.

Ra’lar made a desperate dash for the opening, only to be stopped by the business end of Commander Kershaw’s weapon. Valas heard the gun’s mechanism being cocked to the ready, and then the guard’s damning words, “Advisor Ra’lar, you sir, are under arrest.”

\* \* \* \*

More than a full day later, Shay finally had a few moments to herself. She, along with Valas and Dakkar, had spent last evening called before an emergency session of the council and were questioned for hours.

She learned of the plan the two men had put into motion. They gave a copy of the false bribery-laced agreement to the Chairman and explained the control by extortion and violence they suspected Ra’lar of using. Chairman Wyrant agreed to the sting proposal only on the condition that council guards follow the two diplomats and be the ones to bring in the advisor.

When Shay found out that Valas had insisted on guards for her, she’d huffed and fumed, declaring she’d never been in any danger. Valas and the commander told her about two of Ra’lar’s thugs that had been sent to kidnap her, forcing her to admit she was glad that Commander Kershaw and his men had been right on her trail.

Tomorrow, the full council would vote on the nominations for the vacant seat. Tonight, however, was the Chairman’s Ball, and Shay had less than two hours before Valas would be knocking on the door

to escort her.

Sliding into the steamy water, she could still remember the feel of her stomach knotting up when she saw the prince and Dakkar trapped between the door and Ra'lar. Only Valas' quick thinking had taken the men from in front of the guards lowered weapons. The instant Ra'lar had been arrested, she'd slipped past the rest of the guards and had run straight to Valas, assuring herself that he was safe and unharmed.

She'd fallen in love with him. Sitting there on that meeting room floor, surrounded by guards with drawn weapons, she'd realized it. Shay would have willingly put herself between Valas and any danger, even at the cost of her own life.

The sponge gave up its load of fragrant water as she squeezed it against the base of her throat. She repeated the action over her shoulders and down each arm. Her maid had done a wonderful job of finding oil with just the right scent for this evening. Shay drew in a deep breath. Images of silvery blossoms in a moon lit garden filled her mind. Just the picture she hoped to paint in the mind of a certain Mage of Chandor.

\* \* \* \*

"I believe you promised me this dance, Lady Evanos"

Shay looked across the table to see Ambassador Dakkar rising from his seat. "You're quite right, Sir. I did." She stood, smoothing the deep green fabric of her gown.

He offered her his arm, and then added, "You know, for such a young pup, the prince does show extraordinary taste in women. There may be hope for him yet in diplomatic circles."

Unable to squelch a giggle, Shay almost missed hearing Valas' retort.

"Even a young pup can learn from such a fine teacher," he winked over at the Ambassador. Turning to Annara, Valas continued, "M'Lady, may I have this dance?"

Dakkar was easy to follow and soon Shay lost track of Valas and Annara. She reached up to touch her partner's cheek. Even his deep tan couldn't hide the purple bruise. "Valas told me about this. I hope it isn't too painful."

"If this was the only price I had to pay to see Ra'lar stopped, I consider myself lucky." He smiled, and then winced. "As far as pain, only when I smile. But please, don't tell Annara. She's been happily fussing over me since I got home last evening."

“Don’t worry, you’re secret’s safe with me.”

They finished the dance with a flourish. As they neared their table, Dakkar leaned down and whispered, “Be sure and invite Annara and I to the wedding.”

“There hasn’t been any talk of...”

The ambassador placed a finger over his lips. “I know, but there will be. Take my word on it.” At the sound of rustling silk he turned, “There you are, my dear.” He tucked his wife’s arm around his. “I hope His Grace didn’t tire you out as this next waltz is all mine.”

Shay watched the older couple walk out onto the dance floor, oblivious to anyone else. She couldn’t help but feel a bit of envy. Before Valas, it had never seemed to matter, not having a special man in her life. Now, she couldn’t imagine going back to the way things were back home. She only hoped that she hadn’t brushed him off one time too many.

She kept her request simple. “Dance with me, Valas.”

“It would be an honor.” Instead of offering his arm, Valas took her by the hand and led her onto the polished dance floor.

She was a perfect fit in his arms as he gathered her against him. Her lips curled in a tired smile as she settled her head against his shoulder. “Can we make our good-nights after this?”

He reached up, letting his hand slide down the cascade of dark curls, before returning to the small of her back. “Of course. It’s after midnight, we’ve done our diplomatic duty for this evening.”

Unable to resist, Valas dipped his head and placed a kiss on her forehead. When she rewarded him with a soft moan of pleasure, he tipped her face to his and once again captured her lips. They parted for him. She still tasted of the sweet cream that had topped their fruit-filled dessert.

The music faded into the background; Shay’s gasps the only thing he could hear. Without releasing her hand, Valas brushed his knuckles over her cheek. He felt her quiver as his touch trailed down her neck, their joined hands coming to rest between her breasts.

Her breath warm against his neck, “Valas, the music stopped.”

He looked up from where his face rested against her hair. “Yes, I do believe it has.” Giving her a gentle spin out of his embrace, Valas held onto her hand and led Shay from the floor.

When they arrived back at the table, they found Dakkar and Annara gathering their things. “If you two will excuse us, I believe we are going to call it a night.”

Valas picked up the lacy evening shawl from Shay's chair, and then draped it over her shoulders. He forced a yawn. "Shay and I had come to the same conclusion. The excitement of the past day has tired us out."

The four headed over to the chairman's table. When the older man greeted them, Valas extended his hand, "Chairman Wyrant, thank you for a wonderful evening."

Covering their clasped hands with his empty one, the chairman pumped the handshake. "Thank you, Your Grace. You and Ambassador Dakkar." The chairman shook the Beltarran's hand next. "I'd long suspected Ra'lar of underhanded dealings, but I confess, I had no idea his treachery had run so deep."

The chairman acknowledged the two ladies before continuing. "You have my promise that the council will conduct a full investigation into all of your allegations." He turned back to Valas. "Good luck at the vote tomorrow. If Chandor gains the seat, I would hope your father appoints you as the ambassador. You'd be a valuable asset to the council."

"Thank you, Sir."

Moments later, Valas and Shay said goodnight to their friends and headed back up the curving stairs to the suites. By the time they reached the top, their fingers were laced together. When they reached Shay's door, Valas gave a soft laugh.

"Seems we've been here before."

She let him take their joined hands to rest at the small of her back before she responded, "We have."

Shay looked up at him, her emerald gaze bright with desire. She'd hinted all evening and now he had to find out if she meant it.

"Last time, I left you alone." He trailed the fingers of his free hand down her cheek. "Should I leave you here tonight?"

He watched as she swallowed hard, as if gathering her resolve. She shook her head. "No, Valas. Not this time."

Reaching behind her, still not letting her hand go, he turned the handle on the door. "Are you certain, Shay?" Valas could feel his pulse pound in his chest; the ache in his groin stronger with each heartbeat. "Can you live with the consequences if your version of the old tale is correct?"

She nodded. "What I couldn't live with is never knowing how good we'd be together." Shay reached up and gripped a handful of his tunic. "Make love to me, Valas."



With that, Shay tugged him into the suite.

She only released his hand as she pushed the door to her bedroom closed. Letting the lace shawl slip from her bare shoulders, she felt him catch it.

He draped it over the back of a chair. She quivered under his gaze as he stepped back to her. “Turn around, Shay. Let me play lady’s maid and undo the hooks of your gown.”

Lifting up the stray strands of dark hair that had come unpinned, Shay offered him the line of closures. For each one he opened, Valas placed a kiss on the newly bared skin.

In the mirror that hung on the opposite wall, she watched herself respond to his ministrations. A flush colored her cheeks even as she felt the warmth.

When the last hook opened, the kiss that followed turned more demanding. His hands gripped her hips and spun her around. On instinct alone, her hands darted up to hold the gown over her breasts.

He looked up at her, an irresistible mix of desire and mischief blazed in his blue eyes. With just the silk of her gown between them, his kisses trailed up her belly as his hands slid up her sides.

As the touch of his lips went from silk to the bare flesh at the swell of her breasts, Shay raked her fingers into his blond hair. Dragging in a deep breath, she let it out in a moan laced with need, “Gods yes, Valas.”

His fingertips hooked over the edge of the gown’s bodice as his kisses inched higher, from the notch of her neck up to her jaw. Just as his mouth reclaimed hers, she felt him give the silk a tug.

Her nipples crinkled tighter, responding to his touch, when he pushed the bodice down. She’d never wanted a man as much as she wanted Valas. The sensations he stirred shot straight from the puckered flesh to the growing wetness between her thighs.

In one smooth move, she felt Valas’ hands push the gown off over the flare of her hips. The silk puddled around her feet, baring her completely to him.

“So beautiful,” he whispered against her ear. “And all mine.” He scooped her up into his arms for the few steps over to her bed.

Sinking down against the coverlet, Shay looked back up at him. “Seems to me that you’re overdressed, Your Grace.”

Valas’ laughter rumbled deep in his chest. He bent over her, placing a hand flat on the bed on each side of her head. “And what do you propose I do about that, my dear Lady.”

She reached up and began undoing the gold buttons that ran on a diagonal line from the neck of his tunic toward his left arm. “Give me a bit,” her fingers rounded the corner in the line as the buttons now ran straight down toward the hem. “There,” she said when the last one opened. She slipped her hands under the light-weight wool and pushed it off his shoulders.

He stood back up and shrugged out of the formal tunic. “I’ll take it from here.” Valas kicked off his shoes. Then nimble fingers made quick work of the belt and fly of his trousers. They joined the tunic on the floor.

The mattress dipped when he settled beside her. This time, as she felt his gaze rake over her skin, his fingertips followed. From the ridge of her collarbone, they ran down to caress first one breast then the other.

His hand kneaded, demanding, and then gentle. But when his lips captured one nipple and sucked it deep into his mouth, Shay could no longer keep still. She shuddered and squirmed under his skilled touch.

He kept up his rhythmic assault on her nipple while his hand slid from her breast and down past her belly. For a moment, he stroked and teased, brushing past the patch of trimmed, dark curls.

“Open for me, Shay.”

She parted her thighs at his request. Up and down, he traced the line between her feminine lips, already so slick with desire that they parted easily to his touch. Shay fought back the urge to arch upward.

Valas slid a finger between them, and then brought it to his lips. “So hot and sweet.” He used his knee to nudge her thighs wider, and then settled himself between them.

His breath was hot against her skin when she felt him replace his fingers with his tongue. He stroked and darted until he captured the hard nub of her clitoris between his lips, treating it as he had her nipples.

Just when Shay thought she’d explode from that pleasure, she felt him slide first one, then two fingers into her tight passage. Her control shattered. She bucked her hips up against his demanding mouth, taking his probing fingers as deep as possible.

When her heart stopped threatening to leap from her chest and she could draw breath again, she gasped, “Please, Valas, I need...”

“What, Shay, what do you need?” He began to lick and kiss his way up her belly, between her breasts to her neck.

She felt the hard length of his shaft against her wet center as he

positioned his hips to hers. “You. I need you,” she drew in another ragged breath. “Inside me. Please.”

He paused, the tip of his erection right against her opening. Shay could feel his heart pounding in his chest, his masculine scent filling her nostrils.

“Willing, my love. That’s how I want you.” He claimed her lips in a deep, wet kiss.

She arched hard against him. Her body stretched around him as he settled against her hips.

For a moment, neither moved. Shay expected the sensations of him inside her, but she was unprepared for the onslaught of emotion. She felt what he felt, the desire, the passion, and so much more.

They moved together, each driving the other closer to the edge. As she raked her fingernails up and down his back, she felt his hands cupping and kneading the roundness of her ass.

He filled her completely. Her body, her senses and, she realized, her heart. Over and over, she felt him hit the deepest part of her.

Just as she thought the tension building inside her was about to break free, Valas thrust deep, then stopped. He lifted his shoulders up off of her.

“Open your eyes, Shaylara. Look at me.”

She struggled, but her eyes finally fluttered open. “Don’t make me wait,” she begged as emerald fire locked onto sapphire.

She felt him circle his hips, moving himself deeper inside. “Go with me,” his words as much a command as a request as they fell into the abyss.

\* \* \* \*

Shay didn’t open her eyes right away as she felt herself break the surface of wakefulness. Sliding her arms out from under the covers, she stretched, arching her head back against the pillow.

When she finally did coax her eyes open, she found herself staring right onto a bare male chest. Valas sat, propped up on his elbow, looking down at her.

He bent to her face and kissed her. “I hope you slept as well as I,” punctuating his words with a wickedly handsome wink.

Damn but the man looked so self-satisfied, she thought to herself. “From the looks of you, I’d say yes, I did.” She ran a hand over his stubble-roughened cheek before she returned the kiss.

Before either could continue, they were interrupted by the sound of a door in the sitting room followed by footsteps, and then a timid knock on Shay's bedroom door. "Lady Shay?"

The maid's presence just outside the door set Shay's heart to racing. She motioned for Valas to keep quiet as she replied, "Yes, Ellia. What is it?"

"I didn't want to wake you. You were out so late at the Chairman's Ball. But I heard voices."

Shay watched Valas clamp a hand over his mouth as he tried to control a snicker. They'd been found out, like two youngsters sneaking off together into the night.

*I'll deal with you later. Just keep quiet.*

Leaving one hand over his mouth, he marked an X over his heart with a finger and then nodded.

"It's all right. It's just," she paused to figure out what to say.

They could hear a little giggle from the other side of the door. "You need not explain. Take your time getting dressed. I'll just go fetch breakfast." With only a brief pause, the maid continued, "For two."

Neither spoke until they heard the suite's main door close. "She knows." Shay threw off the covers and grabbed up her robe from where it had fallen onto the floor.

Valas grabbed the vacated pillow from her side of the bed and stuffed it behind his shoulders, sitting up in bed. "What does it matter? We're both adults, and unspoken for." He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. "Unless you're ashamed of what we did."

"No, but it embarrassed Ellia finding us together."

He sat straight up. "Did you hear what you just said, Shay?"

*What is he talking about?* She thought for a moment. "I said it, didn't I?"

Valas began laughing. "How do you know she felt embarrassed? You couldn't see her, she didn't say it."

"I felt..." Shay stopped herself. "I felt it." She sat back down on the edge of the bed. "You were right. It didn't go away."

He reached out and took her hand. "No, it didn't. It's part of what you are, you can't lose it." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "And what you are, Shaylara, is the woman I've fallen in love with."

Shay's stomach knotted under her heart. "The Hare of Chandor...*in love*? Who would believe it?"

“I hope you do.”

She leaned closer. “May the Gods help me, but yes, Valas, I love you.” She jerked the covers off him. “Now get up and get dressed. Ellia will be back with breakfast in just a few minutes.”

\* \* \* \*

*Five days later...*

Valas strode down the corridor toward his brother’s study. Best get this over with, he thought to himself.

*Don’t worry, Love.* Shay’s voice rang clear in his mind. *Dusan won’t be angry.*

He drew to a halt right outside his destination. “Just let me do the talking. He may take it better that way.”

She laced her fingers with his. “Then lets get it over with,” Shay repeated his own thought back to him.

Without so much as a knock, Valas opened the door.

Dusan looked up from the stack of papers on his desk. “Valas. Shay. They told me you landed.”

The Chandoran heir rose from his seat and rounded the desk. Valas let his brother pull him into a back thumping embrace. “Good to see you both home.”

“It’s good to be home. Shay and I are both exhausted.” Valas felt Shay give his hand a squeeze.

“Then I won’t keep you. We can go over everything in detail in the morning.” Dusan leaned back against the edge of his desk. “Just tell me about the vote.”

Valas swallowed hard to wet his dry throat. “They wouldn’t tell me the numbers.”

A confused look clouded Dusan’s face. “Are you telling me Chandor’s bid failed?”

As much as Valas would love to torment his older brother, he couldn’t withhold this detail. He let a smile spread over his face. “No, Dusan, the seat is Chandor’s.”

“You rotten...little...,” Dusan stopped, choking back whatever words he wanted to say. He reached over and smacked Valas on the shoulder.

Valas broke into laughter. “I couldn’t resist. I’ll give you the details after we’ve had some rest, but we barely averted disaster.”

“I’ll look forward to it. But before you go, just one more thing.”

Dusan reached down and grabbed their joined hands, pulling them up to eye level. “Were you going to tell me about this?”

“I suppose we must.” Valas looked over at Shay, her smile all the incentive he needed. “I asked. She said yes. Royal wedding to follow. And in this case, brother dear, I’m afraid you don’t get all the details.” He tugged Shay toward the door. “Now if you’ll excuse us. I’m taking my fiancée to bed.”

After they left, Dusan just stood there for a moment before he too, laughed aloud. He wasn’t going to say a word to his brother. Valas’ reputation as the Hare of Chandor was about to take on a whole new meaning. After all, Shay and Valas would find out soon enough.

**THE END**

**Forbidden Love**  
**by**

**K. Melton**

When Adrian meets his forbidden love, he goes against family and tradition. But will Sophie's love be enough for two races to co-exist as one?

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## **Forbidden Love**

**by**  
**K. Melton**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

“I don’t believe this!” Sophie Lacusta gasped, outraged that her father would suggest such a thing. Her hand came up, massaging aching temples. “I simply can’t believe you’d ask, no, demand, this of me.”

“It’s time you married. Sophie, you will be thirty-one in a few months, and it’s time to take a mate,” her father stated firmly.

Lowering her hand, Sophie looked from her mother to father in disbelief. She never thought her father would arrange a marriage. She’d been engaged before and walked in on her fiancé, making love to another woman. Instead of carrying on about it, she simply removed the engagement ring. Laying the sparkling diamond, encased in yellow gold, on the nightstand next to him, she walked out. To her family’s frustration, she called off the wedding. “No, I won’t do it,” she stated, looking her father in the eye. “I won’t be pushed into this.”

“You will do as I say!” He slammed his hand on the desk before him. “For one of our kind, you are very disrespectful.”

Sophie looked at her mother who sat quietly, wringing her hands in distress. Addressing her father, she continued, “Disrespectful? Why? For living my own life, choosing my own future and happiness? I am sorry, Father; I don’t mean to hurt you or Mother, but I can not marry this... this man you have chosen.” She waved her hand, agitated. “I will not be pressured or pushed into this again.”

Her heart raced. She disliked how the women, in her clan, let important decisions be made for them. They preferred, it seemed, to



look the other way and to avoid confrontations. Sophie just couldn't agree to such a marriage. Despite the ancient traditions of her people, some things had to change.

"Sophie, please?" her mother pleaded. "We are only looking out for your best interests."

Sophie knelt in front of her, grasping her hands. Her gaze roamed over her mother's face, searching for some sign of understanding. "I'm sorry that you are so distraught, Mother, but I can't do this. Ask me to do anything, except this." She gave the older woman a pleading glance, begging for help.

"See what you're doing to your mother?" Her father cut in, his voice rising. "Your disobedience is tearing her apart."

Releasing her mother's cold hands, Sophie stood. Her pulse quickened, but she remained steadfast. She didn't like seeing her parents this upset, but she repeated, "I will not do this."

Sophie looked sadly at both parents then sighed. Not wanting to fight further, she gathered her purse and keys. A need to escape enveloped her. She wanted to get out of there before she gave in to her father's bidding. "I love you both, but I will not marry someone I haven't even met. This is *not* the Middle Ages." With that, she walked out the door, ignoring the threats her father now promised to carry out.

Once outside, she hurried to her car. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she fled. The drive to town began to blur. Pulling over, her forehead rested against the steering wheel, and she cried.

"Oh, gods, why do they have to be like that?" She felt hurt and angered her father would even consider such a thing. Despite that, temptation urged her to turn the car around, apologize and accept the fate planned for her. However, an arranged marriage would never suit her. This time, Sophie knew, no matter what, she would stand her ground.

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"Corina, turn that blasted music down!" Adrian yelled to his younger sister, over the music, as they drove home.

"What's wrong with Jessica Simpson? Nothing, I say. One day I will have boots and will walk all over you," Corina teased her older brother.

Adrian glanced at her in amusement. Raising his hand, with a feigned swipe, he ruffled her hair. "You might like her singing, but I don't."

Corina laughed. Wagglng her finger at her brother, she poked him on the arm. “Admit it, Adrian, you like watching that video. I saw you. Your eyes were glued to the television.”

Ignoring his sister’s giggles, Adrian turned the radio down low. *What man wouldn’t like to look at a body like Jessica Simpson’s?*

“Adrian, look.” Corina pointed up ahead as a car pulled to the side of the road. A woman slumped inside, her head against the steering wheel. Adrian slowed his car, almost to a stop. “Oh, my,” Corina gasped, concern filling her voice. “What if she is hurt or something?”

Adrian pulled over in front of the parked car. Quickly, he pulled out his cell and flipped it open as he jumped out of the car, taking long strides to reach the woman.

“Wait, Adrian. She’s crying.” Corina hurriedly caught up, pulling the phone from his hand, receiving a frown.

“Good Lord, how in the world do you know?”

“Well, look at her shoulders and the side of her face.” Corina said, as if annoyed, raising her brow. “For someone your age, you aren’t very bright.” Turning, she pointed to the woman in the car. “Her shoulders are shaking, and there are tear streaks on her cheeks.”

Adrian looked, with interest, at his sister then at the small woman in the car. His stomach knotted; a powerful feeling filled him. Maybe he should get to know this woman. Shrugging off the feeling, he stepped up and tapped on the window.

“Yep, you just proved you’re not very bright around the fairer sex,” his sister muttered as the woman screamed.

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“Oh, my god!” Sophie’s head came up quickly, and she screamed once, loudly. She turned a wide-eyed stare at the two strangers, peering through her car window. Blinking and trying to gather her composure, she rolled down her window slowly. Clearing her throat, she addressed them, “Uh, yes?” A sniffle and a quick wipe of her eyes and cheeks. “May I help you?” Sophie could kick herself. She hadn’t even heard or seen the other car pull up.

Through wide hazel teary eyes, with heart racing, she matched the man’s intense gaze. Her body reacted but not with fear. A connection seemed to pass between them.

“Excuse my brother, Miss.” The pretty girl glared at the man. From their similar tone and features, she guessed they were siblings.

He received a sharp jab, from the younger girl's elbow, as she continued to speak, "For some reason, he is playing stupid today."

Sophie looked from one to the other. Her attention settled on the handsome man whose eyes remained fixed on her. His gaze shifted onto her mouth. Did she actually see his pupils dilate? Her heart fluttered.

No one had ever reacted this way toward her before. His eyes darkened into a smoldering heat. Sexuality filtered the obvious desire in his eyes. He looked as if he would like to devour her. Cocking her head, Sophie found that very interesting. Not to mention, exciting!

"Oh, gees, we pull over to see if you need help, and you two end up ogling each other like... like...I don't know what. But it's disturbing as all Hell!"

Breaking eye contact with Sophie, the man spoke with authority. "Quit cursing, Corina." Then he turned back to Sophie, none of the former intensity gone. "We're sorry to disturb you. Are you all right? Is there anything we can do?"

Shaking her head, Sophie gazed at him; his scent surrounded her. Inhaling deeply, her stomach muscles tightened. With her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, her nipples hardened in response to his unique male smell.

"Oh, this is just sick!" Corina complained. "I'll be in the car."

"I will be fine. I mean, I haven't crashed or anything. I'm just a bit emotional." Sophie felt herself blush. Her words sounded so lame.

"I'm Adrian Keese. Would you join me for a cup of coffee or tea?"

"Tea."

"I'm driving home," Corina yelled out the car window and drove off

Sophie started to laugh. "Oh my," she stuck her head out the window, staring at the car receding in the distance. "I can't believe she just left you here."

Adrian chuckled. "I can. Any chance of a ride? If it's not too much to ask."

"Get in." She nodded towards the passenger seat. Adrian settled into the car, and Sophie pulled out onto the road again. "I'm Sophie, by the way." Caution didn't seem warranted. Her kind could always sense danger.

## CHAPTER TWO

The drive into town remained quiet but arousing. Her scent overwhelmed him in the small confines of the car, causing his senses to overreact.

“I need to stop at my flat to freshen up, if you don’t mind. There is a small café across from there,” Sophie announced.

Looking in the direction she pointed, as the car pulled into the curb, he saw the café. The sign on the shop where Sophie parked read ‘Sophie’s Antiquities’. He climbed out and stretched. Noticing her gaze follow his movements as she got out, he held the stretch a little longer.

“This way,” she said, nodding toward the side of the building.

Adrian followed up the steps that led to her flat. He looked around and froze. The symbol of a rabbit sat on a shelf.

“I’ll be right out. Feel free to look around.” Sophie walked out of the room.

Adrian held her jade rabbit figurine, turning it over his hands. Similar to the small jade rat symbol his brothers’ wives, Ana and Maria, wore around their necks. Only someone from a clan would have such an object.

No wonder he could smell her scent clearly; like attracted like. It seemed Sophie had ancient rabbit blood. It didn’t matter, though. For some reason, Adrian wanted this woman, and he wanted her with every fiber of his being, despite coming from two different species—rat and rabbit.

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Shutting the door behind her, turning on the tap, Sophie looked at her complexion in the mirror, gasping in horror, seeing her red nose and puffy eyes. A trail of mascara snaked down both cheeks. Wetting a cloth, she scrubbed. Holding the cool cloth against her tear-swollen eyes, she muttered about ordering cheap makeup on-line.

While reapplying her makeup lightly, the sequence of events, with her parents, played back in her mind. “Good god,” she muttered

to herself. “How could they do this to me?” Closing her eyes, her hand covered her stomach; it felt knotted. If she developed an ulcer from all this worry, it wouldn’t be a surprise. She loved her family. Where the bravery came from to disobey them, she didn’t know. But, she would choose her mate, not her father. To top it off, a complete stranger waited in the other room, a stranger who made her body feel like wiggling jello.

Thinking of that man helped ease those knots. Desire surged through her. Something in her body awakened, and she knew that Adrian Keese caused feelings she thought long dead. Yes, she’d only just met him, but try telling her body that. She found him sexually attractive. Longing flooded her senses.

She closed her eyes, remembering his scent in the enclosed confines of her car. “Mmm,” she moaned as her nipples peaked, and her pussy throbbed. Opening her eyes, she gasped when she realized where her thoughts led. One hand rested on her breast, and the warm contact sent shivers through her body. Looking in the mirror, her face appeared flushed. Sexual need coursed in every cell. “Stop it, Sophie!” Chiding herself, she straightened her shoulders and opened the door.

She watched Adrian turn, upon hearing the door open. His nostrils seemed to flare wider when his gaze settled on her. Did she imagine his inner beast’s growl? His body stiffened. *Something is different about this man. Can it be possible?*

Stepping forward, he cupped her elbow. “Ready?” he asked in a husky voice.

Sophie jumped at his touch. The contact almost burned; tiny hairs stood on end. His one spoken word, laced with unspoken desire, made her body hum. She wanted to answer him with the same unspoken want. On shaky legs, she walked with him to the café across the street.

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“Would you like to talk about it?” Adrian couldn’t really remember tasting his latte. He couldn’t take his eyes off the forbidden beauty before him. Races intermingling—his actions might lead to heartache, but he didn’t care. He wanted Sophie as his lifetime mate. His family had already broken ground in inter-racial relationships, but the majority of the animal shifters still strongly opposed mixing breeds.

Her gaze lowered to his lips, her head tilted. “Talk about what?” she asked innocently. Her tone, low and resonant, caused Adrian’s manhood to jerk into awareness.

“Why were you so upset earlier?”

Her eyes slowly rose, searching his. “My father is trying to arrange a marriage for me. And I refused.”

The comment took Adrian by surprise. He had heard that women, born in the rabbit clan, were gentle-natured and tried to avoid conflict. They seldom used harsh or rude words. Seldom went against the wishes of the dominant male. Yet, Sophie defied her father. This woman showed strength of character. He liked that.

He could imagine why she’d been so upset—all animal clans remained fiercely loyal to family. By defying her father, she went against everything he believed in. Adrian stiffened at the thought of her being forced to marry another. “I’m sorry.” He reached across the table and lifted her hand, bringing it to his lips.

The movement of his lips, as they brushed across her hand, shot shivers of longing to her core. “No need to be sorry. I am just glad you stopped. I seriously considered turning the car around and agreeing,” she replied breathlessly.

“Why didn’t you accept?”

“I live a comfortable life. I have my own business and want more than my father is suggesting. Security is fine but not enough. I know it’s more about right and wrong for him and saving face. In our culture, things are done differently. I see a lot of uncovered ground between right and wrong,” she stated quietly. His warm breath fanned her arm as he kept her hand close to his mouth.

Adrian slowly released her. Pulling out his wallet, he threw some bills on the table. “I see. Do you have any plans for this evening?”

“No. Why?”

“Good. Neither do I.” He stood and reached for her hand again.

“Well, I thought, since I have no plans, and you have no plans, we could hang out.”

Raising her brow, Sophie chuckled and placed her hand in his. “Well, that clarifies the ‘why’.”

“That is, unless you want to be alone this evening.” He gave her a lopsided smile and shrugged his shoulder. Placing his hand at the small of her back, he walked with her toward the flat.

She felt so comfortable with Adrian. Tilting her head, she inhaled. Her inner muscles tightened at his heady aroma. Her answer came as naturally as the sunrise, “ I don’t feel like being alone.” She really didn’t. Adrian would be a welcome distraction from earlier events.

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Unlocking her door, Sophie turned, words suddenly unnecessary. She ran the tip of her finger over his firm, full lips. She looked up into his eyes, leaving her touch in place. Her nipples tightened with sexual need. The heated passion in his eyes fuelled her courage. Without hesitation, she stretched up and replaced her touch with her lips. Letting them lightly brush his, she moaned and deepened the kiss.

The tip of her tongue traced over his lips, coaxing them apart. Sucking gently on his lower lip, Sophie dipped the tip of her tongue into his mouth. Tasting him, touching his tongue lightly with her own, she communicated her approval to him.

Adrian growled low. His strong hands grasping her hips, he guided her into the room, kicking the door shut behind him. She felt his strength as he brought her around to lean against the door. The gravity of the situation hit her, and she tensed a little. It had been a while since she’d made love.

Not only that, Sophie knew once she made love with Adrian, she would be so emotionally hooked that she’d never want to let him go. Praying he would feel the same, she let her body take over her mind.

Adrian’s mind raced, and his cock responded to her softness. She seemed reserved at times yet so full of the desire communicated in her kiss. Pressing her against the door, never once breaking the kiss, his cock stiffened as her arms circled his neck. Her legs wrapped around his waist. He braced her between the door and his body, firmly enough to keep her in place. Reaching down, he fumbled with the button at his waist, finally releasing it while her tongue danced around his. A quick tug and his slacks ended up around his ankles. He pushed her skirt up and ripped off her flimsy panties, flinging them onto the floor. One hand reached around her thigh, underneath her buttocks and caressed her wet folds. She pulled out of the kiss, with a sharp intake of breath, as he explored her readiness. Adrian positioned his cock, teased her entrance.

Her mouth devoured his once more. Passionate kisses grew more fervid; her whimpers of need drew his passion to the surface. Cupping her firm bottom in both hands, he flexed his hips. With one swift

thrust, he drove his cock into her tightened sheath. He stilled. *So damned tight! Self control.* Breaking the kiss, he looked down at her and exhaled, letting her adjust to his size.

“Sophie,” the only word he managed to groan. She did not reply verbally, but the animal passion, evident in her eyes, said it all. How would he stop from taking her as his mate?

Sophie had never felt so full, so stretched, so completed. If only Adrian could be her mate. Her inner muscles gripped and released, accepting his thickness and length. She moaned as his hips flexed again. “Oh.” Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the door. His hands circled her waist, holding her up and allowing her some freedom of movement. Gyrating her hips, in response to his, gained her maximum penetration. The tip of his cock seemed to reach uncharted places. Desire slammed to her throbbing core. He continued to thrust while she matched his movements.

Kisses along her neck. Nibbles over her jugular vein. Sophie felt a light suction. One hand cupped her breast as his teeth applied a nip. That nip became a bite, and the pain, coupled with the pleasure, drove her desire insane. “Yes. Oh, yes,” she exclaimed. The bite of her perfect mate, she wished. Her hands either side of his head, holding his lips against her neck, she felt joy, as he obliged her request.

Suddenly she recognized his bite as one of claiming. Somewhere, deep inside, Sophie knew her mate had just claimed her. His lips and cock seemed to pulse in union within her. Her very being completely in tune with Adrian, the crest of her orgasm approached. Her inner muscles tightened around him, and he growled low as she screamed in release.

“I can feel you pulsing as I spilled myself.” He panted, struggled to control his ragged breathing. “Are you all right?” he asked between ragged breaths.

Sophie realized her eyes were still closed, and Adrian still pressed her to the door. The words seemed to come from afar. Opening her eyes, what she saw stunned her. He wasn’t of the rabbit people but of another species, all together. His face bore the faint traces of a rat’s features, his eyes sharp, his hair dark and his chin more pointed. Her father might accept her union with a human, but he would never accept her mating with another animal specie.

She gasped. Reality set in. Her legs slid down, stiffened, dislodging his semi-flaccid cock. She immediately hated the separation. Pulling down her skirt, she stared at his changed features.



“You’re not a rabbit,” she stuttered. “You are another species?”

Adrian sighed. He hadn’t wanted to shock her. At least, she understood his animal persona. He’d lost himself in her, and his natural self, understandably, spooked her. The taste of her blood had coursed through to his soul, bringing out his animal side, making it impossible to conceal his true form. “Yes, I am of the rat clan.”

Sophie stared at him.

From the scared look in her eyes, he knew exactly what she thought. Her family would not accept this. Her hand touched the side of her neck. Adrian had claimed her. Nothing could be done about that now.

Rubbing her fingers over the spot, her large eyes shimmered as she gave him a little smile. “It’s okay. I wanted it, needed it. But my family will never...” Adrian’s calm look triggered a sudden realization. “You knew?”

*Why sidestep the question?* He nodded. Reaching down, he righted his trousers. Stepping to the side, he nodded once again, this time toward the shelf where the jade rabbit figurine stood on display. “We have the jade beasts, too, though ours is the rat.”

Sophie covered her face with her hands and exhaled, “I can’t believe it. This day seems to get worse and worse.”

Adrian felt his heart sink. Her words cut through him. But, he would be damned if he let her go easily. Numerous women warmed his bed, but none had affected him the way she did. Before this, he never wanted anyone as his. Now he did.

Adrian wanted to take her in his arms. Instincts told him she needed space to get her mind straight.

Feeling a little defeated, a tear slid down her cheek. “I’m so sorry, Adrian. I didn’t mean that to sound cruel. This is just too much. So sudden. I need to think.” She reached down and grabbed her panties. At the bathroom door, she whispered, “Please, let yourself out.”

Adrian watched the door shut. As requested, he let himself out the front door, muttering under his breath. “This is far from over.”

### CHAPTER THREE

Sophie curled up on her sofa, sipping her noon tea, replaying the events of the day before. Earlier she had called her shop and told Tabitha she did not feel well. Lifting her hand, she touched where Adrian had left his mark, wishing it were him she touched. Loneliness seeped through her soul. “If only...” she sighed, thinking how her parents would react. Even so, she knew she could not give him up.

“Sophie?” The call came with a pounding on her door. “Sophieeee...”

Sophie watched as the door opened, saw Tabitha peek around and walk in, carrying a bag. “It’s time for lunch. I thought you would be too sick to make anything so I brought you some soup.” Tabitha held up a brown bag, waving it as she eyed Sophie closely.

Sophie smiled weakly. Friends since grammar school, Tabitha knew her well. No secret stood between them, even Sophie’s rabbit ancestry. “Thanks, Tabby.” Uncurling her legs to sit up straight, Sophie placed the teacup on the table in front of her then stood. Taking the bag from Tabitha, she walked toward the kitchen.

“Uh huh. I have never known you to get ill. Not even after you caught that bastard, you were engaged to, with that sleazy slut. He was a rat, a bastard rat, for hurting you like that.” Tabitha made a rude noise behind her. If only Tabby knew what the word ‘rat’ meant to Sophie, right now.

She turned on her heel and looked at Tabitha. “If you must know, my parents think it’s time for me to find a husband. Apparently, they have found one for me.” She turned back around.

Tabitha reached for the bag and removed the contents. “What? What the hell do you mean, they have *found* a mate for you? They aren’t trying to *make* you marry, are they? Hell, this isn’t the Middle Ages anymore.”

Sophie nodded. “That’s what I told them, and then I walked out.”

“Good.” Tabitha gave her a brief hug. “I know how hard it is for you to defy them, but, girl, you can’t let people run over you and make this kind of decision for you. After all, *it is your life.*” Tabitha stepped back, rested her hand on her hip and looked intently at Sophie. “So, are you going to tell me?”

Sophie pretended she had no idea what Tabitha meant. “What?”

“Oh, don’t play coy with me, Sophie. I saw you walking out of the café with a handsome man.”

Reaching into the cabinet, Sophie pulled out two bowls. “His name is Adrian Keese.”

Tabitha chuckled, raising her brow, “And?”

“And nothing.” Sophie shrugged, not looking at her friend. “We went for tea, and that’s it.”

“Sure, I will believe that when that hickey on your neck goes away.” Tabitha brushed Sophie’s hair aside and ran the tip of her finger over the mark that Adrian had left.

Heat flushed Sophie’s cheeks.

“Oh, so it’s like that, huh? I see how you are.” Tabitha laughed. “So, are you going to see him again?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” Sophie sighed, biting her lip before she continued. “It’s complicated; he’s not of my kind. He’s of the rat clan.”

“Oh,” Tabitha muttered under her breath. “You love him though, don’t you?”

“Wh... what?” Stuttering, she gazed at Tabitha with a stunned expression. “No! It’s too soon for love.”

“Yeah, sure. Don’t forget, I have known you since we were wee little girls in grammar school, wearing knickers and bloomers. You wouldn’t sleep with just anybody, and it’s been a while since you have been with a man.” Tabitha held up her hand, halting Sophie’s attempted reply. “I know you. Sometimes, better than you know yourself.”

True. Tabitha did know her, all too well. “It’s complicated, Tabby. My family will not accept this union.”

Tabitha blew out a loud sigh. “Screw your family. This is about you, damn it, not them. If you want him then don’t let him get away. Fight for him.”

“That’s precisely what I think.” A masculine voice sounded from behind them. “The door was ajar, and I heard voices so I let myself in.” His intense look held Sophie’s.

“Well, I can see I am not needed here. No, no. Don’t worry about me. I know when my cue to leave comes.” Tabitha stopped teasing and looked seriously at Sophie. “Don’t let others tell you how to live, grasp what’s in front of you.” With that, she walked out the door.

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“She’s correct, you know? You should grasp what’s in front of you.” Adrian paused; his eyes searched Sophie’s. “This won’t be easy for either of us. I couldn’t sleep last night for thinking about you.” Slowly reaching for her chin and raising it, he leaned down and brushed his lips over hers, breathing against them. “Our families will object at first, but all you have to do is reach out, and take what you want. I will never disappoint you.”

Sighing, Sophie looked up into his eyes, heartbeat pounding. She had never really paid much attention to other species, but she wanted to know about the rat clan and him. So, she did some reading.

His eyes showed her everything she’d always wanted. Filling her hands with his shirtfront, she pulled his head down and took his lips. One body seemed to melt into the other.

Adrian moaned and cupped her ass cheeks. Lifting her onto the counter, he stepped between her open thighs.

Sophie pulled back, breaking the kiss. “I want this, Adrian, but I am scared,” she whispered shakily, lowering her head onto his shoulder, absorbing his strength through his scent. Ran the tip of her tongue over his jugular. Her soul called out for his.

Adrian’s hands ran soothingly up and down her back. “I know, and this will not be easy. But, in time, our families will accept us.”

She nuzzled his shoulder, her nose twitching against his flesh. She felt at home, protected and safe with him. “I don’t know if I am strong enough. Is this love? I mean, real love? I have never been in love, but I do know that I want you, above all others. Within the last twenty-four hours, life has changed drastically for me. I’m an emotional wreck. Do I feel this way because of what happened with my parents yesterday?” She searched his eyes for answers. “I’ve asked myself those questions since last night. I can tell you this, though. I have never before reacted so strongly toward another.”

“I think you should come meet my family. You’ve already met one of my sisters. I have a human sister-in-law. If my family accepts you, that might make it easier for your family to accept me.”

“I don’t know.” His request overwhelmed her. Could she confront his family?

His hands slid down her back, cupping her buttocks, sliding her closer to the counter's edge. He ground himself against her heated center. His hardness interfered with her thinking even as her panties moistened.

"Would that be wise?" she asked, slightly out of breath.

Adrian's hand cupped one breast, his fingers teasing the budded nipple through her blouse. Bringing up his other hand, he quickly undid the buttons. "I think it's very wise." Bending his head, he placed his lips over the mark he gave her the night before.

"You do?" She breathed out, tilted her head to the side for better access. Her eyes closed, she released a long sigh, enjoying the feel of his hands against her aching breasts.

"Mmm. Oh, yes." His voice vibrated as he ran his lips up to her ear, capturing it between his teeth, nibbling, then whispered. "Say you'll come home with me."

"I... I can't think." She shivered. Goosebumps formed on her arms. Gasping, in desperate need, she quickly freed his hardened staff from his slacks, stroking firmly.

Adrian grasped Sophie's hair and gently pulled back, exposing her neck. His hips rocked in time to her stroking hand. Sharp teeth grazed her neck, moved down towards her breast. Flicking his tongue over her nipple, he quickly removed her clothes, tossing them haphazardly on the floor. First one foot then the other rested on the counter until Sophie sat fully exposed to his tender gaze.

When he reached for a wooden spoon, she gasped. "No!" Her fingers spread, covering herself.

"Shh, dearest, trust me. I won't hurt you. I only want to give you pleasure." He reached down and removed her hand. "Lean back against the cabinets, Sophie," he ordered. When she did so, he ran his fingers through her moist curls, caressing the mass of nerves hidden there. The sensation of his dipping finger heightened her desire. When her gasp turned into a moan, she saw his eyes darken.

"You like that, don't you?" He murmured. Leaning down, his hot breath warmed her wetness.

"Oh," she whimpered.

"Yes, you do. I can tell." He growled and flicked her several times with his tongue. "Mmm. So tasty. Like sweets." With that, his lips surrounded her nub, applied suction, while his finger caressed her insides.

Sophie grasped his head, her hips lifting, moving against his lips and finger. She cried out in pleasure, letting him know what he did suited her perfectly.

Adrian raised his head, loosening Sophie's grip. Raising the wooden spoon, he lightly slapped it on her aroused clit three times. Pleasurable pressure built within her, around his finger pressing her G-Spot. "You are unique Sophie." Twice more the wooden spoon struck her clit as he pushed up with a finger.

Sophie had never experienced anything like that before. The slight stinging pressure of the spoon pleased her. Her body hummed in pure abandoned pleasure. "Please, Adrian." She whimpered, her hips moving against his finger.

Adrian inserted a second finger, leaned in again, flicked her clit with his tongue. He teased her, using teeth, lips and tongue. When her body tightened around his fingers, he quickly replaced them with his cock. Pulling her bottom closer, her lips met his; she savored her own essence. His arms under her legs, he dug deeply into her tight sheath, using deep rotating thrusts.

When her release claimed her, Sophie moaned and cried out against Adrian's lips. Pulling her head back far enough to break the kiss, she bent down and sank her teeth into his jugular, claiming him as she came around his cock.

Adrian threw his head back and roared out as her tiny teeth sank into his flesh. Audibly gritting his teeth, he shot his seed into her. "Oh, Sophie, the pain. The pleasure," he gasped.

He held her quivering body close, long fingers running through curly hair. Lifting each foot, he kicked off his shoes and shimmied out of his slacks. Her legs wrapped around his waist, he carried her into the bedroom, his semi-softened member still nestled in her warmth. Not a word he said but laid her down on smooth sheets. He left the room but returned quickly with a bowl, cloth and water.

Sophie eyed him as he came near. "What are you doing?"

Placing the bowl on the nightstand, he dipped the cloth into the warm water and knelt on the bed in front of her. "I'm going to clean you. Lay back and enjoy." Gently he spread her legs then applied the warm cloth.

Though embarrassed by his ministrations, she enjoyed his attentions. Lying back, she laid her arm over her face and let him clean her. No way could she get him out of her system now. 'Forever

bound’ came to mind. *I’m such a fool.* “I can’t believe this.” She whispered aloud.

“Maybe, but I believe in love at first sight, Sophie, and, the moment I saw, you I knew.” Adrian lifted a passion-filled gaze to her.

“Knew what?” She leaned up on one elbow.

“That you would be mine.” He shrugged.

“Oh.” She sighed and gave in graciously. “All right, I’ll meet your family. We might as well get this over with.” She lay back, raising one knee and placed her hand on her chest, above a heart that beat just a little too fast, from fear and excitement. Her stomach knotted at the idea of meeting strangers, telling them she loved their son but came from a different clan. “I hope I can do this.”

Adrian slid next to Sophie and gathered her into his arms. “You can, Sophie. I will be at your side the whole time. Believe it or not, so will my family. I have a feeling you will be surprised when you meet my sister-in-law, Ana. She’s the human. Now hush, I want to explore my future bride.”

Sophie laughed when he pushed her back, growling playfully, as his breath puffed across her stomach.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“What in Hell is going on, Sophie?” An outraged roar came from the bedroom door.

*Father!*

Gasping, Sophie sat up with a jerk. The sheet fell to her waist. She hastened to pull it back up and over her breasts. Horrified, she looked down at a rumpled Adrian, who sat up slowly, then back at her father. Sunlight illuminated his scowl. A quick glance at the clock—four in the afternoon.

“I repeat, little girl, what the Hell is going on here?” Her father took two steps into the room.

“Father...” Words failed her. “I, umm... I...” she stuttered.

“Oh, never mind. I know a harlot when I see one.” He looked from Sophie to Adrian and sniffed. “You’re not even of our kind.” He turned back to Sophie and hissed, “Get your things. You’re coming home with me.”

“No, Father, I am already home!” Anger flared at the invasion of her privacy. “I’m not leaving.”

“No? How dare you defy me this way?” He came at Sophie, hand raised. She scrambled to her knees, bunched both fists and pulled back one arm, prepared to deliver her own blow.

“Don’t even think about it.” Adrian grabbed her father’s hand before he could bring it down. The older man pulled his arm away, as if burned by the touch.

“Sophie, get your things now, and come home with me. Your mother is worried sick.” He spoke in a quietly threatening tone.

Sophie cut in, straightening her shoulders. “This is Adrian, and I love him.”

“You love this man? How can you? How long have you known him? He is not even of our kind, not worthy of one, such as you.” Her father spoke gruffly, waving his hand toward Adrian.



Tears slid down her cheeks when Adrian gave her hand a light squeeze. A hostile look passed between the two men she loved most in the world. However, she refused to give in to her father's pressure.

Before she could say anything else, Adrian spoke up. "Sir, I happen to love your daughter, and I am more than worthy. I am Adrian Keese and can provide quite well for her when she becomes my wife."

"Wife?" Her father paused, disgust coloring his tone. "The same Keese who is in the banking industry? Of the *rat* clan? I think not! My daughter will not marry into that clan." He gave Sophie a scathing glance. "So you are whoring for the rich now, eh, Daughter?" He reached out to grab her arm.

"Do not touch her!" Adrian shouted, causing the man to halt. "Watch what you say to her!"

"Don't tell me how to treat my own daughter. I am her father. I know what's best for her."

"You are wrong, sir, Sophie is an adult. A father does not always know what is best." Adrian paused, never took his eyes off the other man. "We are in love. I can provide handsomely for your daughter. She would never have to work and neither would any of our offspring. Though, I would never deny her if she wanted to keep Sophie's Antiquities." Adrian finished.

Sophie pleaded quietly, "Can you, please, leave the room so I can get some clothes on?"

Her father mumbled beneath his breath, something inaudible, but left the room, slamming the door behind him. She wiped the tears from her cheeks as she slid out of bed. "I don't think I can do this."

Adrian jumped out of bed and caught her, made her look at him. "You did great. I am so proud of you. Look, Sophie, I know we just met. Not even twenty-four hours ago. You must know I love you and that you mean the world to me. I believe fate brought us together. Please, trust that I will protect you, provide for you and ours. I will hold you above all others."

With a snuffle and a nod, she stepped into his embrace and took a deep breath. "All right, Adrian. I won't change my mind. I trust you with my heart."

Adrian held her close. Gathering her composure, she stepped back. He brushed loose strands of hair from her face. *I must look a mess.*

“Let’s get dressed and get this over.” He looked around the floor as he spoke then grinned. “I do believe I left my slacks in the kitchen.”

Stunned by his unexpectedly calm revelation, Sophie started to laugh. “Oh, goodness.” She went to her closet, pulled out a pink robe and tossed it to him. “Here, put this on.”

Adrian caught the robe, raised his brows and stared at it. “Well, this will *really* impress your father.”

Her laughter resounded as Adrian pulled on her robe. His knees showed. The head of his cock peeked through the front fold. “Uh...” She pointed out his indiscretion. “Let me slip out and gather your clothing.” Donning her own slacks and sweater, she slipped from the room. Her father wasn’t in the living room. Exhaling in relief, she came to a halt at the sight of her father, in the kitchen, glaring at the clothing on the floor.

Still as a statue, Sophie silently endured the look of pure disgust on his face. “You are no daughter of mine.” He brushed past her. When the front door slammed, she cringed.

\* \* \* \*

“I’m sorry, Sophie.” Adrian drove them to his parent’s home. Sophie sat in silence. “I can’t blame you for being upset.”

She turned in her seat, her large eyes focusing on him. “Even though I wish this hadn’t happened this way, I want you to know I still choose you, Adrian.” She breathed out long and loud. Yearning came into her voice. “I just hope Father will eventually accept us being together. I am worried he will try to stop us.” She waved her hand. “The look he gave me, before he left, troubles me.”

Adrian pointed ahead, to the gates of his family’s estate. “I am sure he will accept us, in time.” He reached over and squeezed her hand, bringing it to his lips and placing a reassuring kiss upon it.

“I hope so.” She muttered under her breath, her eyes going wide, when the estate came into view. She could see several houses in the distance. She had heard about the Keese’s but never really paid much attention. To the right, a pond shimmered in the bright light. A white house graced a hill, not far away. A huge tutor-style mansion came into sight. She admired it as they passed. A sculptured garden wrapped around the back.

“That’s where my father and younger sister, Corina, live. It’s where we all grew up. My oldest brother, Marius, his wife, Ana, and their two children live by the pond.” He pointed to another house, not

to far from the mansion. “That is where my twin brother, Alex, and his wife, Maria, live.” He leaned over and whispered. “She just found out she is with child. It’s their first. So he is constantly by her side.” Adrian pointed out two more houses. “The pink one is my sister Julia’s house. She likes to be the odd ball. There is another house, behind the trees, that belongs to my youngest brother, Stephan. And that is my house,” he finished as he pulled up into his drive.

Opening the passenger door, she stepped out. “Oh, how pretty.”

Adrian stood next to her. He placed a kiss on her forehead. “I wanted to show you my home before I introduced you to the family. But it looks as if you will get to meet my twin first.” He nodded his head off to her left. Reaching for her hand, he placed it in the crook of his elbow and wrapped his fingers over hers.

Adrian’s twin walked toward them. “You look so alike, but you are not.” She whispered when the man drew closer.

Adrian chuckled. “Not many can tell us apart, and I’m glad you can. We used to fool many people.”

Sophie gave him a nervous smile. “You are so much more handsome.” She leaned into him when Adrian’s twin joined them.

“Well, isn’t this something?” He teased, in a good-natured manner, looking from one to the other. Taking her hand, he gallantly kissed it but addressed Adrian. “Corina came home in your car, saying you were ogling a hottie.” He laughed and shook his head. “She also mentioned that you probably didn’t even notice her leaving because your attention remained focused on said hottie.” He added, in a conspiratorial whisper, “Corina got in all kinds of trouble for driving off in your car. She’s only 14,” he added, for Sophie’s sake.

Adrian replaced her hand in the crook of his arm. “Sophie, this is my annoying twin brother, Alexander. Alex, this is Sophie Lacusta.”

Alex watched Adrian intently. “Welcome, Sophie.” He slipped between his brother and Sophie and easily guided her away from him.

“Alex?” Adrian grumped but walked on the other side of her toward Alex’s house.

“Oh, chill. I can tell something is wrong. Plus, I have never known you to bring home a woman after knowing her one day.” After one telling look at the mark on his brothers’ neck, he saluted Sophie. “Welcome to the family.”

\* \* \* \*

Sophie smiled nervously at Alex. She felt comfortable in his presence but didn’t know how he would react when he found out she

came from the rabbit clan. She walked quietly between the brothers. Maybe at first, she wanted to hide, but now she wanted Adrian more. Hiding wasn't an option.

Adrian must have sensed her anxiety. "This must be frightening for you, Sophie. Trust me. I will never let anyone hurt you, and neither will my brother."

"But..." Her words halted when Adrian placed his finger over her lips.

Alex broke in, placing his arm around Sophie comfortingly. "He's right, you know? No male in this family would allow our women to be hurt in any way. Come and meet Maria, and we will work this out. Don't worry, little one. Things sometime appear bad when, in reality, they are not."

She gave both men a nervous smile as they approached the house that Adrian had pointed out when they arrived. "All right. Maybe I am overreacting. I just don't know what to expect."

"Bring her here. I want to meet the woman who finally brought that brother of yours to his knees." Maria smiled as she met the three at the door. Her smile enlarged when she saw who walked between Adrian and Alex. "Sophie?" Then she burst out laughing, clapping her hands. "Good Lord, girl, it's been forever since I last saw you." She reached for Sophie and hugged her.

Sophie's fears eased. She looked over Maria's head at Adrian, giving him a reassuring smile. "It's nice to see you again, Maria." In a loud whisper to Maria, she asked, "So this is happened to you. I heard you got married a few months ago, but I didn't know to whom."

Maria looped her arm through Alexander's. "I am sure you have already met him. But this is my husband, Alex."

A small smile played across Adrian's face. Sophie shrugged. "Maria, Tabitha and I have known each other since we were children."

"So does Maria know about you, too?"

An awkward silence followed Adrian's question.

*Does Maria know of the Chinese Zodiac races?* Sophie had no clue. *Surely, she must. Her husband is of the rat clan.*

"Let's get comfortable before you begin." Maria led the way into the sitting room. After everyone got comfortable, Maria looked from Adrian to Sophie.

Sophie exhaled and started. "I am of the rabbit clan. Adrian and I met yesterday and claimed one another last night, uh...this afternoon.

My father is livid because he had arranged a marriage for me to another of the rabbit clan. I refused then he caught us together.”

“Oh.” Maria pointed to Sophie. “So you met yesterday and already claimed one another?” She tipped her head then grinned. “Sweeeet. Love at first sight. It happens!”

“Did you not hear me? I am of the *rabbit* clan.” Sophie sat wide-eyed, thinking Maria misunderstood.

“And I am of the rat clan, always have been, and my sister-in-law is human.” Maria shrugged. “It most definitely is a small world, huh?”

Sophie relaxed. “Is everyone in this family as accepting as you?”

“Not everyone. Andre will be upset, but the old fellow is a softie. Once he gets past the shock, he will love you for who you are, not for what clan you come from,” Maria assured her as she stood. “Let’s get this over. It’s about time the old man received a good shock.” Maria’s laughter cheered the group as they left the house.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The walk seemed endless though not far. Sophie's hands shook slightly. However, she kept a smile on her face as she listened to Maria explain the Keese family. All had partners, except Stephan. Apparently, none of them classed his girlfriend, Carmen, as a permanent arrangement. Maria described her as a money hungry bitch, only coming to the younger brother when she wanted something.

Maria laughed out. "You should see how Ana looks at Carmen when she comes over on Sunday for brunch."

Sophie smiled. Maria tried to ease her fears with endless chattering, and she appreciated it.

"Well, it seems the man we seek is here." Alexander muttered, nodding his head to an older man, walking their way.

Adrian placed his arm around Sophie's shoulder and drew her close when he saw the look of disapproval on his father's face.

"Adrian, I received a very disturbing phone call earlier in the day." His father said calmly. "It seems you have convinced this young lady to mate with you, and you two are foolishly claiming that you love one another."

Maria went over to Andre Keese and placed a kiss on his cheek. "Hello, Papa." She glanced back at Sophie. "Now go easy on these two. Sophie happens to be an old friend of mine."

Alexander grabbed hold of Maria's hand and pulled her away.

Andre looked at Maria with fondness. Sophie could tell he approved of her. Bracing her shoulders, she stepped forward, knowing that her father had called. He alone knew what happened. "Sir, I am sorry for the phone call. My father should not have contacted you." She turned to Adrian, giving him a nervous smile. "I know this seems far-fetched, and I agree, a bit unbelievable, but I do love your son. True, we just met yesterday, but, when I saw him, I felt like an

invisible force pulled me toward him.” She shrugged slightly. “Something unknown seemed to call me.”

Andre stood still, never taking his eyes off Sophie. “You are of the rabbit clan. How can we mix two species? Have you two thought about your unborn children?”

Sophie’s smile froze. “No, I haven’t thought of my unborn children. I do know that I will love my child, no matter what she looks like. I would do everything in my power to insure her happiness, even though she be cross-bred.”

“She. You used the word *she* twice. Are you with child?”

“Father,” Adrian growled low. “Don’t even insinuate what you are about to!”

“Adrian, please, don’t...” Sophie begged, placing her hand gently on his arm, stilling him. She maintained eye contact with Andre. Taking a deep breath, she continued. “I had a dream several months ago that my first born would be a female. My dreams normally come true. It’s a gift I have. So when I have a child, I know it will have a girl. I could not see her in my dream, but I could feel my love for her. An unconditional love. A love only a parent could know.” She looked intently at Andre. “I am sure you know that love. The feeling one gets when they hold their babe, for the first time.”

Andre nodded in understanding. “There is nothing I can do. You and Adrian have already taken it upon yourselves to claim one another.” He brought his hands up. “You say you love my son, and I have to believe what you say is true. I wish this would have been different, but it’s out of my hands. I have to accept this, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.” He eyed Sophie, his attention fixed intently on her. “So you think you will bring me a granddaughter? I mean, when the time comes?” His eyes softened, slightly, when he mentioned a baby girl.

Sophie’s body sagged in relief. The emotional roller coaster ride of the last twenty-four hours might be close to an end. She nodded. “I could smell her scent, so precious.”

Andre raised his eyes, looked at Adrian and spoke clearly. “Her father will not accept this. As a father, I understand his plight, but I don’t have to agree. I foresee trouble, son.”

\* \* \* \*

“Please Martin, she’s my only daughter.” Elena, Sophie’s mother, moaned and rubbed her temples. “I don’t want to push her away. I just want her to be happy.”

Martin repeated the words he told Sophie, “She is no daughter of mine. What am I to tell Felix when he arrives this afternoon? Oh, so sorry. My daughter has chosen another over you. Another species even—a rat.” He shook his head, in dismay, before asking, “How can she disgrace us like this?”

Elena stood and squared her shoulders. “Martin,” she spoke his name firmly. “I love you, but I will not sit here and listen to another word. This behavior towards my daughter is unacceptable. I will accept whoever she chooses, and if she chooses one from the rat clan then so be it!” She turned to leave then paused. “I believe it is barbaric the way you tried to set up your own daughter’s marriage. Until you accept her union, I want nothing to do with you. I’m leaving. You’ll know where to find me—when, and if, you stop and think what you are doing to this family.” With that, she left the room, leaving her husband staring after her.

Martin’s shoulders slumped. His daughter disobeyed his wishes, and now his wife sided with her and had left him too. Somewhere, something had gone terribly wrong. Instead of the love and respect of his wife and child, he found only sadness and hurt. Martin realized his pig-headedness caused this. Knowing he must fix the problem, he reflected on his control tactics.

When he’d met Felix, he thought him a fine gentleman. Having a staunch belief in the heritage of the rabbit clan, Felix seemed to be someone Sophie could relate to. She needed a mate and, somewhere along the line, Felix challenged Martin’s manhood, for not taking the decision into his own hands. *I only want what’s best for my daughter.*

Seated at his desk, he placed his face in his hands and exhaled. *Maybe Elena is right. Maybe I am being barbaric.* He should not have been so hostile toward Sophie. She’d always been a good daughter and used common sense when it came to her thinking. Times changed.

If she loved Adrian Keese then he would go along. Nothing could be worse than losing his family. He would learn to live with it and face anyone who would belittle his only daughter’s choice in mates, including Felix. *I owe Sophie an apology.* Before that though, he had to tell Felix that he made a mistake. He felt a little uneasy about that. The man put forward a very strong argument for taking Sophie’s hand in marriage. Martin couldn’t imagine him giving it back so easily.

\* \* \* \*



Felix's hands balled into fists as Martin tried to explain his mistake, regarding the marriage arrangement. As soon as he mentioned that Sophie chose another, Felix jumped on it.

"Who is he?" he cut in.

Martin shot an uneasy glance toward Felix; he'd hoped to gloss over that point. Eyes narrowed, his brows drawn together and mouth pulled in a tight straight line, Felix seemed devoid of any emotion but anger. Martin could not maintain eye contact. The intent look frightened him so he played dumb. "Who is what?" Martin asked.

"Come on, old man, Sophie met another. So, tell me who he is." Felix placed his fisted hands on the desk and leaned forward menacingly. "Don't play dumb with me. I happen to know all about your family. You are an intelligent fellow; at least, I thought you were."

Martin sat back. Something in Felix's eyes indicated danger. *Why didn't I notice how intimidating he is?* He could kick himself for not detecting that. His keen rabbit senses screamed *caution*. Sophie's life might be at risk.

Felix gave Martin an evil smile, raising one brow. Straightening up, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small nickel-plated 9 mm pistol. Martin's heartbeat jumped into high gear. The younger man's glance seemed to adore the weapon. Felix gestured with it toward Martin. "I do believe I will get what I want, one way or another. You promised me your daughter and money. I expect both." Pointing the gun at Martin, he hissed. "Now, who is he?"

Martin did not move. He stared at the gun Felix pointed at his head. He'd be damned if this crazed man would get any information, concerning the whereabouts of his daughter. One word, from him, would put Sophie in danger.

"Not talking, are we?" Felix laughed. "I know how to find her." He brought the gun up and tapped his own head. "I can burn her shop down or... " Felix smiled at Martin. "Better yet, I'll ask your lovely wife."

Martin stiffened. "Why do you care so much about getting my daughter?"

"I could care less about her. I just want the money, really. As far as I am concerned, she can meet with an unfortunate accident."

"Why are you telling me this? You'll never get away with it, now that I know."

“Enough! Tell me where she is, or I shall get the information from your fragile-looking wife.”

Martin’s heart sank. He had brought this upon his family. He couldn’t let this man hurt his wife or daughter, and he would call the Keese family as soon as this lunatic left. With a dejected sigh, “She mated with Adrian Keese...of the rat clan.”

“Thanks...” Felix laughed maniacally and raised the 9 mm. Martin felt the shots burn into his chest then darkness claimed him.

## CHAPTER SIX

Her eyes on Adrian, Sophie let the gown slide off her shoulders, felt the material whisper as it fell from her body to pool around her feet. She knelt on the bed then crawled up and over his nude body, straddling it. “Well, I think that went well.” She purred, bringing her lips down to his. Catching his lower lip between her teeth, she sucked it into her mouth.

Strong hands came up, capturing her around the waist, pulling her down, grinding his hardness against her wetness. “I agree. It went very well, indeed.” Rising up, he captured a rose-budded nipple between his teeth.

“Mmm, very well.” She lifted her hips and positioned his cock at her entrance, lowering herself down an inch on him. She teased him by rotating her hips before taking him completely in, adjusting her position and then sinking further down. As she leaned back, her hands gripped his thighs, and her body ground down.

Hands grasped her hips, holding her there, as he flexed up, pulling her hips back and forth with each thrust. “Ah, Sophie...”

Her hips matched his as she rode him. She reached down and thumbed her own tiny spot of nerves, set it to throbbing. “Oh, oh,” she murmured repeatedly.

“Mmm. Yes, that’s it. Ride me.” Adrian instructed.

Sophie clenched her inner muscles when she heard Adrian groan. Her peak neared.

Adrian leaned up and flipped Sophie over onto her back. Quickly, he placed a pillow under her hips and reached for her legs. Holding them straight up, he plowed deeply into her tight waiting sheath. Bringing her foot to his mouth, he ran his tongue along her ankle, up the arch of her foot and sucked on her big toe.

Sophie’s back arched up as she screamed out her orgasm. “Don’t stop!”

Adrian released her legs, letting them rest in the crook of his elbows as he leaned forward and started long deep thrusts. His teeth clinched tightly, he bore down, as her muscles seemed to milk his cock. The sounds of flesh smacking against flesh filled the room, the heady scent of their lovemaking all around them.

At the tight feel of her, Adrian's head went back, neck muscles corded as he thrust one last time. "Ah, Sophie," the only words as his release spilled over.

\* \* \* \*

Adrian slit an eye open and looked at the clock beside the bed, two in the morning. Reaching for the ringing phone, before he even got it to his ear, he heard, "Adrian. Adrian, something has happened. The police are at Father's. Are you listening to me, Adrian? Wake Sophie, and get to Father's." The phone went dead.

Sophie rose, rubbing her sleepy eyes. "Something wrong?"

"Corina just called. We need to get to father's house." Adrian muttered and slipped out of bed. "It seems the police are there."

Sophie left the bed, rummaged through her clothing and quickly got dressed. "I hope your father is alright." She replied gently and followed Adrian out the door.

"I do, too. The compound is well-guarded."

Neither spoke as they jogged to the elder's house. Lights blazed throughout the mansion. "I think something is seriously wrong, Adrian." She didn't know what, but any trouble probably involved her.

Adrian pushed through the doors. They followed the sound of hushed voices and walked into the family room. Adrian's brothers sat or stood around the room. She had met them earlier during dinner. The room went quiet when they came further into the room. Maria rushed to Sophie's side. A policeman came up to them.

"You must be Sophie Lacusta? I have some rather bad news, ma'am." He asked her to have a seat, after she confirmed her identity.

Maria sat next to Sophie, ignoring the officer. "Honey, it seems as if someone shot your father." She continued, "They found him earlier at his home. He's in intensive care."

Fear hit Sophie immediately, and she turned to Adrian. "Can you take me to him?"

Adrian nodded and reached for her, pulling her into him.

“Miss?” The officer called out, catching her attention. “There is more. Your father woke long enough to tell us to watch over you, that you are in danger. Both of you.” He indicated Adrian.

“I am going to see him now.” She said firmly then repeated her request to Adrian. “Please, I need to see my father.”

“We’ll come with you.” Andre said, standing. He nodded to Stephan then looked at Alexander and Marius. “You two stay here, in your old rooms, for the night.” He asked the officer. “Can you take us to her father?”

The officer nodded and led the four out to his squad car.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie waited until they settled in the car. “Can you tell us more? I mean, how did this happen? Do you know who shot my father?”

The officer shook his head. “We haven’t received much information from him yet. Your father woke and seemed extremely worried about you. Your mother is the one who found him. He had three bullets in him, all close range, all in his chest.”

Sophie gasped, placing her hand over her mouth. “I can’t believe this,” she whispered, leaning her head against Adrian’s chest, seeking the comfort that he offered. She sat in silence for the rest of the drive.

Sophie slid out of the squad car, with the three Keese men beside her. Walking quickly into the hospital, she found her brother and mother. She walked up to her brother and hugged him. “Hello, Cristofor,” then looked at her mother, over her brothers’ shoulder, “Mother?”

Elena broke down and started crying. “He would be all right if I hadn’t left.”

Sophie went to her mother. “What do you mean, left?”

“Your father and I had words about...” She nodded her head towards Adrian. “I don’t want to lose my only daughter, you understand.” She started to cry again. “I just wanted him to stop his venting and accept your choice. When he refused, I left.” Adrian came over, handing her a fresh handkerchief. She accepted it and dabbed her eyes. “I came back to talk to him some more and...” She cried harder. “I ... found... your father... behind his desk...” She gasped, “In a pool of blood.”

“Who is this, Sophie?” Her brother eyed Adrian, his father and Stephan.

Sophie covered the hand on her shoulder, stiffening her spine.

“This is Sophie’s fiancé.” Elena broke in, nodding to Adrian.

Sophie looked at her mother gratefully then finished the introductions. “This is Adrian’s father, Andre Keese, and his brother, Stephan.”

Cristofor stiffened and eyed the Keese men wearily. “Father woke and mentioned Sophie and her mate being in danger.” He glanced at her. “When did you meet him?”

“Two days ago.” Sophie boldly looked her brother in the eyes, ignoring his hostile gaze. Her father’s life was more important than an upset brother.

“Your father is in recovery, sweetie. Nothing vital was hit. They removed one bullet, but the other two went straight through. He lost a lot of blood and...” Elena interrupted what could turn into an ugly scene. Leaning forward, sniffing, she whispered. “I’m just glad there was enough blood to replace what he lost.” She meant his rabbit clan blood.

Andre broke in, offering to get coffee or tea for everyone. Elena gave him a tentative smile. “Tea would be lovely. Thank you.” She turned back to Sophie. “Would you like to see your father now? He can have visitors but, most likely, won’t respond. He is in a private room.”

Sophie nodded, letting Adrian know. “I’ll be right back.” She followed her mother into the room. Her heart sunk when she saw her father in his rabbit form, the rounded head, slightly larger ears, softer expression on his unconscious face. He lay there, hooked to monitors, with wires stretched hither and yon.

“I will leave; I think you need some time alone.”

Slipping to his side, she leaned over and placed a light kiss on his forehead. Her hand reached for his. “I am so sorry for displeasing you, Father,” she whispered. “But I can’t help the way I feel. I wish I could be the ideal daughter.” Sophie sat by her father’s side until the nurses came in to check his vitals. She slipped out of the room, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

\* \* \* \*

Felix stood sullenly, watching his promised fiancé leave her father’s room. He thought he killed the old man. Apparently, Lacusta was stronger than he thought. *I have to finish him off before he wakes.*

He followed Sophie at a distance. His cock hardened at the way her hips swayed. Licking his lips, he vowed he would enjoy her immensely, before he finished with her. She would forget the bastard who took her from him.

## Jaded Beasts II – Tiger & Rabbit

Sophie stopped at the waiting room door and looked behind her. She nodded to the lean man who walked past her before she entered.

\* \* \* \*

“Sophie, your mother has decided to come home with us for the rest of the night. None of you can do anything for your father at this point. I will have the car bring you back first thing in the morning, after you rest. My driver will pick us up,” Andre announced as soon as she walked in.

“Thank you.” She gave him a peck on his cheek. “You don’t know how much this means to me—your acceptance.” She turned and leaned against Adrian, letting him tuck her under his arm. Andre waved her away and led the group out.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Stephan, where have you been?” A pout came as soon as the small group walked into the mansion.

“Carmen, what are you doing here?” Stephan stiffened when he stepped into the hall and saw her waiting.

“I came to visit you, but you weren’t here.” A cloud of perfume floated through the foyer, wrapping itself around the group. “It’s seems you never have time for me, anymore.”

“Stephan, get that out of here. This isn’t the time or place for her to be here,” Andre ordered.

Carmen gasped. “That!” she turned to Stephan. “I can’t believe you allow your father to talk that way about me. I am not a ‘that’!” She stomped her foot.

Stephan grasped her by the elbow, sighing wearily. “Carmen, this has been a bad night. It is four o’clock in the morning, and you shouldn’t be here.”

“You are asking me to leave? Well, I see how it is.” She huffed, jerking her elbow away from him. “Don’t expect to see me again. I found another.”

Andre muttered, under his breath. “Good riddance.” He turned to the sleepy housekeeper. “Can you please show our guests to their rooms? Adrian will use the ones he had when he lived here.”

\* \* \* \*

Sophie followed the small group through the mansion. Her body seemed to drag once she entered Adrian’s room. Her shoes fell by the door; she went directly to the bed, quickly stripped and slid under the covers.

Adrian grinned. She seemed so at home with him, not caring about her own nudity. Her rounded bottom teased him, giving him a brief view, before she slipped beneath the sheet. Silently, he shed his clothing and joined her, pulling her back against him, cocooning her



in his embrace. Neither said anything; both lay awake in a comforting silence.

Adrian didn't know when he fell asleep, but the tiny hand rubbing circles over his chest made him stretch. Opening his eyes, he saw wide hazel eyes above him. "Morning." Raising his hand, he ran his fingers through her hair and cupped her cheek. "Did you get any sleep?" he asked roughly.

As she nodded, her hand trailed down his chest to his already-hardened cock. "About four hours; it's now a bit past eight. I have been awake for sometime and called Tabitha to let her know I won't be in for a few days." She leaned forward and bit his chin lightly. "Seems someone is wide awake... well, has been for some time."

Adrian flexed his hips. Her hand worked wonders with his cock. "Mmm, that feels good."

"Good," Sophie sighed as she pulled down the coverlet and ran kisses along his chest. She used one finger to trace the head of his cock then flicked her tongue teasingly over his shaft.

"Oh, no, you don't." Adrian jumped out of bed and reached for her. He tossed her over his shoulder and headed for the bathroom. "I think we can take care of three things at once while showering."

Sophie hung upside down and slapped Adrian's bare buttock. "Let me guess the three things: you and me plus a shower?"

Adrian caressed her soft round butt cheeks before delivering a slap, causing her to yelp. "But, of course, my dear." He adjusted the water temperature of the shower before he set her down and pushed her against the wall.

"Mmm..." Sophie purred, folding her arms around his neck. She raised one leg and wrapped it around his waist, rubbing her wet pussy against his throbbing cock, before she pulled her other leg up around him.

Adrian hooked his arms under Sophie's legs. Spreading her wide, he entered her with one thrust then sank deep, his lips capturing hers in a kiss almost as deep.

Whimpering in pleasure, Sophie's lips took Adrian's with hot passion. Her hips undulated as she met each thrust. He pushed up, causing his well-trimmed area to rub against her distended clit, her body shivering with each push.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie opened her eyes and saw Adrian in his rat form—that sharper image laid over his human form. She knew she would also be

in her true form—softer and rounder. Pulling her lips from his, she leaned back against the wall, capturing his eyes with hers as her peak neared. Her vision seemed to blur. She heard Adrian's whispered words in Romanian, saying how much he loved her.

"I dragoste tu, Adrian," she whispered back as pleasure overtook her.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie and Adrian slipped into the dining room at half past nine. They had showered and dressed, wanting to get down to the dining room to meet with everyone, before they went back to the hospital.

"Sophie. Cristofor and Marius are going to the house. They will see to the cleaning of your father's den," Elena commented when the two gathered their plates from the small breakfast buffet.

Sophie nodded, glad she didn't have to deal with that. She glanced at her mother and noticed something different about her. She appeared stronger, more confident, sitting straighter, her gaze calm and secure. Taking a bite of her toast, she chewed slowly until her sight blurred.

Visions passed before her eyes.

Eyes looked down at her, hands grabbing at her clothing. Tearing them away. Fear slithered through her as a slap stung her face. Crazy laughter erupted from above. She fought and fought but to no avail. Voices surrounded her; Adrian's features came into view. A shot fired! Someone screamed.

"Sophie, Sophie?" Adrian shook her, his expression one of worry.

Elena rushed to her side and slapped Sophie. "She's having a vision."

Sophie's eyes cleared. The memory of what she saw fresh on her mind, she reached for Adrian and held him close. Strong arms embraced her. Long fingers threaded through her hair. "It's all right, Sophie. Everything is going to be okay."

Inside, her body seemed to crumble. In her vision, she saw and heard someone shoot Adrian. The sense of loss hit her. Her fear transferred to him though the tension in her body.

"Shh." Adrian rocked her back and forth. "It will be fine."

Sophie pulled away. "You don't understand, Adrian. You got shot. I heard the gun go off."

"Listen, Sophie, you might have envisioned a gun going off, but didn't you also dream of having a little girl?" He continued when she

nodded. “Well, see? There you go. Since I plan on being the father of our little girl, I have no concerns about being killed.”

All eyes were upon her. “Can we go see my father?” she whispered, under her breath, blushing.

\* \* \* \*

No one spoke during the ride to the hospital. Sophie stared out the window the entire time. Her mind rolled in turmoil, the disturbing vision playing repeatedly in her mind’s eye. The sound of the shot filled her ears until she felt ill.

When they pulled in front of the hospital, the Keese chauffer quickly came around and opened the door. Stepping out of the car, she wrapped her arm through Adrian’s and ushered him into the hospital. Andre and Stephen followed close on their heels, Elena sandwiched between them. For some reason, Sophie didn’t feel safe outdoors yet something about the hospital disturbed her just as much.

As she walked toward the private ward, a sense of both familiarity and disruption confused her. Her stomach knotted because she couldn’t pinpoint anything amiss in the building.

“Sophie?” Adrian leaned down and asked in a hushed voice, “Do you want me in the room while you visit your father?”

Sophie scanned the hallway. Everything seemed fine, and she really wanted a chance to talk with her father alone. She turned to Stephan and Andre. “Will you please stay by his side? Don’t leave him.”

Adrian grumbled, but both nodded. “We won’t let him out of our sight.”

“Good, good. I don’t want anything happening to him.” With her mother beside her, she opened the door to her fathers’ room.

Elena rushed to her husband’s side, grasped his hand. Sophie approached him slower. She took his other hand in hers.

“Hello, daughter.” A raspy whisper greeted her. Though his eyes were still closed, his hand lightly squeezed hers.

“Father?” Sophie squeezed his hand in return.

“You’re safe.” He sighed.

“Yes, I am safe,” she reassured him.

“Good.” He sighed and opened his eyes. “Can you forgive an old fool?”

“Of course, I can. Papa.” She kissed his cool cheek. As a young girl, he had been her hero.

“I just wanted the best for you. I didn’t like seeing you alone.” He closed his eyes. “Be careful, daughter. The man who shot me, Felix, is not happy that you have found another,” he paused. “It’s my fault. I should have trusted your judgment and accepted. It’s just that I wanted so much better for you.”

“I know, Papa. But, Adrian is ‘the best’ for me. He loves me and will always be by my side. He will never hurt me.” Sophie looked towards the door then back at her father. Something felt wrong; she sensed it. “Papa, get some rest. I will be back in a bit.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Back out in the hall, Sophie glanced to the left then the right. A bad feeling washed over her, seemed to grow stronger. What did she sense? She headed toward the waiting room then stopped. The feeling seemed to ease the closer she got. Then, in an instant, her vision blurred. Someone screamed, a shot sounded and pain engulfed her.

“Noo...” she shrieked and took off in the opposite direction. The sense of danger seemed to magnify. Her heart raced as she came to the door of the stairwell.

Should she go by herself? Could Adrian be in danger? Sorrow seemed to seep through her being. She couldn't let someone hurt him. Opening the door, she flew up the steps, following that dangerous feeling.

\* \* \* \*

Adrian left the waiting area and headed toward Martin's room. A click echoed down the hall where the door to the stairwell slowly slid shut. His stomach muscles clinched with unreasonable fear. “Sophie?” Something told him she headed in that direction. He hastened to Martin's room, peeked in, seeing only him and Elena.

Martin waved Adrian in. “Come in, boy.” he said, his voice grating in a dry hush.

Adrian shifted his feet impatiently, but he went into the room. “Where is Sophie?”

Elena looked up in concern. “You should have passed her; she just walked out of the room a few seconds ago. I thought she went to the waiting room.”

Immediately, Adrian headed for the door. “Wait,” Martin wheezed. Adrian stopped with one hand on the door handle. “Felix is mad. He wants her even though, as far as I know, he has never met her.”

Adrian left the room on the run. He checked the waiting room first. “Where’s Sophie?” No one had seen her.

“Adrian?” His father and brother called out to him. Adrian heard their footsteps, not far behind. They’d follow; watch his back.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie gasped when a hand grabbed her and roughly covered her mouth, a strong arm pulling her against a firm body. Warm breath fanned her neck and a tongue flicked, tasting her.

“So sweet you are, my dear.”

She whimpered, looking around for help. Brick and cinder block insulated the stairwell. Would anyone hear her scream?

“I believe you will make an excellent obedient mate.”

Sophie raised one arm and brought her elbow down hard, into his guts. A pained whoosh of air passed her ear. Next, she stomped her heel on his foot then screamed as soon as his hand uncovered her mouth. As he released her, she reached for the door handle. Only, it wouldn’t budge. *Locked!* In a flash, she headed up the stairs. Laughter followed her, floating around her, as she fled up yet another flight.

“They’re all locked. Only one will open—the roof door,” an eerie voice called.

Her mind racing, she slammed against another door. It flew open, and she stopped, gasping for air. The danger she felt came for her, not Adrian. Breathing heavily, crying inwardly, she heard the man behind her, stepping out onto the roof. Her eyes searched desperately for safety. She ran behind a huge air conditioning unit, pressing her body against it.

“There is no way to escape, sweet one.” Felix laughed. “Come out. Come out, wherever you are,” he sang. “Don’t you just love that jingle? I’ve always wanted to say that.” He paused. “And, it seems, this is the time to say it. Don’t you agree?”

Sophie’s eyes went wide. His steps closer now, she found nowhere else to run. Frantically, she searched for something to fight with.

Felix laughed and jumped up behind her, catching her by the shoulders. “Look, it’s the big bad wolf; I’ve come to blow down your house.”

Sophie screamed. Everything happened as her vision predicted. She put herself and Adrian in danger. Kicking out, she caught him in the shin only to receive a sharp stinging slap across the face. Her head

jerked to one side, she gasped then started to fight again, screaming as she did.

“Fight all you want. It adds to the spice.” He reached for her shirt, tearing it away.

\* \* \* \*

Adrian snarled as he went up one flight then the next. All the doors were locked. The last door, however, flew open. “Sophie!” he yelled when he heard male laughter.

Sophie’s head came up when she heard her name. “No!” She screamed, tears flowing down her checks. “Stay away, Adrian.”

“Well, well. Your man found us.” Felix chuckled, slapping her again. “He will not get what Martin promised me.” Felix pulled a small 9 mm out and held it against Sophie’s temple. To scare her and infuriate Adrian, he ran his tongue over the side of her neck. Upon seeing Adrian’s mark on her neck, he roared, “He claimed you?” He turned his gun away from her head and aimed at Adrian as he ran around the unit where they stood. One horribly loud shot. Adrian flew back from the impact of the bullet, knocking him to the ground.

Sophie screamed when she saw him go down. Bringing both legs up, her weight going down released her from the tight grip. With a bound, she stood and quickly brought her knee up, connecting with Felix’s groin. As he bent double in excruciating pain, her elbow came down with all her strength on the back of his neck, knocking him to the ground.

She kicked the gun away then ran to Adrian’s side, held him against her chest. “Don’t you die on me,” she cried. She barely noticed Stephan and Andre passing her, holding down Felix.

“Mmm. I could get used to this.”

“Wha...what?” Stunned, Sophie pulled back and looked down at Adrian who smiled weakly.

He buried his head into her breasts and nuzzled then cut his glance back to hers. “For someone so small and fragile, you sure have a mean streak in you.”

Sophie’s hands searched his body. “I saw you get hit, go down.” Her hand came away sticky, and he moaned. In horror, eyes wide, she stared at the blood on her hand.

“It’s just a graze, dear. The bullet only hit my arm.”

Sophie blinked back tears then, wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him closer. “Oh, god, I put us in such danger,” she finally

sobbed. “You could have been killed, and all you do is ogle my breasts.”

Choking laughter came from a few feet away. “Both of you seem to be all right, but I do think, dear brother of mine, you should get that scratch looked at.”

Sophie blushed.

Adrian peeked from one eye, smiling up at his brother. “I am quite comfortable where I am.”

Stephan sought help from Andre who held the gun trained on Felix while stuffing a cell phone back into his jacket pocket. “Father, Adrian is nuzzling Sophie’s breasts in front of me. Make him stop.”

Sophie noticed her torn shirt for the first time, jumped up and tried to cover herself.

Adrian’s head fell and bounced off the concert roof. “Umph. Damn it.”

“Oh, good Lord.” Sophie looked from one brother to the other, her body shaking. “You are all insane.”

Stephan smiled then bowed. “It is better then being sane.” He placed a comforting arm around her shoulder. “So, dear lady, will you teach me some of those moves?”

“Stephan!” Andre interrupted. “Help your brother up and quit picking on Sophie. Can’t you tell she just went through one hell of a fright? Look at her cheek.”

Adrian struggled to stand and stumbled. “The son of a bitch hit you!” He went after Felix.

Wrapping her fingers around his arm, Sophie begged. “Please, stop!” She had had enough violence and wanted this over.

Adrian heaved a sigh and pulled her to him. The door to the roof flew open; police officers filed out, paramedics followed.

Sophie watched as the police cuffed then led Felix to the door. Before leaving though, he winked at her, smiling as if nothing had happened. She shook her head when the paramedic wanted to examine her bruised cheek. “I’m fine.” She said ‘fine’ but, as the door closed behind Felix, she shivered.

\* \* \* \*

“Sophie, can you come in here, please?” Andre called out as Sophie passed his den.

Stepping into the room, Sophie raised her brow. “Is something wrong, Andre?”



“No, no. Please, have a seat.” Andre waved his hand to the empty plush chair in front of her. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a long black box. He placed it on the desk and slid it across to her. “This goes to all of my sons’ wives. I would like you to have it.”

“But I am not Adrian’s wife, yet.” Sophie eyed the box.

“Don’t sass me, little girl. Take the box and open it.” Andre removed his hand and sat back in his chair.

Lifting the box, she ran her fingers over the smooth exterior then flicked open the latch. She took a deep breath. Nestled inside lay a rat made of jade, connected to a golden chain. “It’s beautiful, Andre!”

“Well, take it out and place it where it belongs.” He nodded to the jewelry.

She removed the necklace, undid the latch and clasped around her neck. Straightening the chain, she smiled at him.

“Welcome to the family, Sophie. Now, let’s see what that old fart of a man, you call father, has to say about that necklace.” He gave her a wicked smile and winked.

## CHAPTER NINE

Sophie slipped down to the kitchen and brewed a fresh pot of tea, thinking about the past few days. With little conscious thought, she ran her fingers along the necklace that Andre had given her. Warm arms slipped up from behind her, and firm lips kissed the nap of her neck.

“Morning,” she purred, turned and wrapped her arms around Adrian’s neck.

“Mmm.” He kissed her neck some more. “Do you really have to go in to work today?” Strong hands pulled her against him, letting her know what he wanted.

“As much as I would love to stay here, and enjoy your delectable delights, I have a business to run and an apartment to pack.”

Adrian lifted his head then shrugged. “Very well then, I guess I will tag along with you.”

Sophie poked him in the side. “Don’t you have to work?” She paused, cocking her head. “What is it that you do, anyway? I can’t believe I haven’t asked that before.”

Adrian grinned. “I dabble in organic chemicals. Father and I deal with acids, their anhydrides and acid halides. That kind of stuff. So, you see, I can take the day off, even a few days off.”

Sophie’s mouth opened in an ‘O’. She didn’t understand a word he just said. “So you’re a chemist?”

Bringing his lips down, he brushed them against hers. “Something like that.”

Sophie retrieved the kettle from the stove when it started to whistle, placing it on a cooler burner. “So, this means I can put you to work, boxing up my books?”

“Slave Adrian, at your service, madam.” He bowed to her.

Arching her brow, Sophie gave him a wicked smile. “I happen to like the sound of that.” She sighed dreamily. “Hmm. My own personal slave.”

“Oh, yes, your very own personal slave and I will happily oblige you in anyway.” He wiggled his brows at her, snuggling her closer.

“I just bet you will.” She giggled, standing on tiptoes, bringing her nose into the base of his neck and inhaling. “Have I ever told you that you have your very own come-hither scent?” She slid her hands around and cupped his ass. “It makes me want to run the tip of my tongue all over you.” She flicked her tongue along his chin then bit down lightly, before running it up to his ear. Captured the soft lob between her teeth, sucked then fanned her breath into it.

A deep rumble rattled Adrian’s chest; she felt his response. A heady sense of power fueled her passion. She had never affected any man like this before, and she quite enjoyed this newfound influence.

Sliding a hand around, she cupped his balls, stroked him through his slacks.

Without warning, Adrian lifted Sophie and headed for the stairs. “You little minx, the help will arrive soon. Let’s take this to a more private area, shall we?”

Sophie giggled in delight, running her lips along his neck and ear. “You are not very good at being a slave. That’s all right. I happen to like you as you are.”

Stepping into the room, he kicked the door shut. “Hmm... that’s good. Because right now, I feel like seeing how many times I can make you scream out my name.” He tossed her onto the bed and quickly shed his clothing.

\* \* \* \*

“Sophie, mail’s in,” Tabitha said as she came up the stairs to the flat.

“I’m over here.” Sophie answered, from her spot on the floor. “How’s the shop doing?”

“It’s been busy all day. Business seems to have picked up. I am glad you let me hire another girl.” Tabitha handed the mail to her.

She riffled through it then frowned. Lifting one particular envelope, she opened it.

*My dearest Sophie,  
I am so sorry about how our first meeting  
ended. I had not planned it that way. I just want*

## Jaded Beasts II – Tiger & Rabbit

*you to know that I love you with all my heart.  
Know that when I am released from this  
institution, things will go according to plan. We  
can finally be together, as promised.*

*Please forgive my behavior.*

*I will always love you, and I can't wait until the  
day comes that we will be together, once again.*

*Yours truly,  
Felix*

The color drained from Sophie's face.

"What's wrong?" Tabitha reached for the letter that she held out.

"That man is absolutely insane!"

"And I love you, too." Adrian's chuckle froze when he saw the look on Sophie's face and saw how Tabitha gripped a piece of paper. He snagged the paper out of her hand and read it.

"Well?" Tabitha muttered.

"This is interesting." With no humor in his voice, Adrian left the room.

"I wonder what he is up to," Tabitha questioned.

Sophie shrugged and hopped up to follow him into the kitchen. Leaning against the door, she listened as he talked on the phone. Her eyes ran up and down his lean frame. Intense feelings wrapped around her heart. Tender affection, romantic desire and love.

"Well, that's taken care of. Don't have to worry about it any more. I asked if they would monitor Felix's outgoing mail. Asked them to hold any letters he might write to Sophie Lacusta or Sophie Keese."

Sophie raised her eyes, gazed lovingly at him. "I like the sound of that. Sophie Keese."

"You do, huh?" Adrian slid against her, pressing her against the door.

"Yes, I do."

"Good then let's finalize our union and get married." Adrian whispered against her neck.

Shivering, she reached behind him and ran her hands up the back of his shirt. "Sounds like a dream," she murmured.

“Oh, gees. Can’t you two just stop?” Corina said, in disgust, from the living room, her nose scrunched up. “How would you like it, if you came into the room, and I was all over some guy?”

“I’d probably beat him to a pulp and then tell Father.” Adrian stepped back from Sophie and winked at Corina. “She said yes.”

Corina huffed. “Like she would have said anything different. Just look at the way she ogles you. It is quite sickening.”

“Why are you here, anyway?” Adrian asked his little sister.

Shrugging her shoulders, “I thought I’d see if you needed any help.” She looked at Sophie. “So, can I be the Maid of Honor? After all, I told Adrian to pull over that day. So I basically am the one who got you two together.” She smiled sweetly and batted her lashes.

Sophie placed her arm around Corina and hugged her. “And I thank you for that too. We’ll see.”

“‘We’ll see’ means no, but I will get to be something? Say... a bride’s maid?”

Sophie glanced at Adrian who shrugged his shoulders. “Sure. I don’t see why you can’t be a bride’s maid.”

“Wahoo!” Corina calmed then whispered. “This wedding will cause a stir, and I get to be part of it.” She hugged Sophie close. “Welcome to the family.”

Sophie frowned, worried. “I don’t want to bring too much attention to this. Two species coming together will cause a problem, within the zodiac clans. All races will hear of this, and some will not accept our union at all.”

Corina waved her hand as though she didn’t care. “Don’t let it worry you, Sophie. I think you’re setting a new trend.”

Adrian chuckled. “We can take a holiday and do this quietly. I’m sure our parents would rather we head off somewhere and have a private ceremony with just close family and friends.”

Corina clapped her hands, jumping up and down. “A tropical wedding. Yes, I like the sound of this. We can all wear bikinis and check out the local hotties.”

Sophie started to laugh, “I don’t know about ‘tropical’, but a private wedding sounds good.”

Adrian yelled at Corina when she headed to the door. “I thought you came to help.”

“Me? I’ve got family members to tell, and I need Papa’s charge card.” She wiggled her fingers and skipped out of the flat.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sophie stepped off the plane in Tenerife and looked around. This trip had been planned for over three months. Nervousness and excitement battled in her guts. She would marry Adrian in four days here, in the Canary Islands. Both fathers reserved a private beach on one of the smaller islands. Bungalows, scattered about, insured everyone's privacy. The wedding party would travel to Gomera by boat. Only a handful of servants joined them.

"This is absolutely beautiful!" Tabitha breathed as she slipped her arm through Sophie's.

"Oh, I agree." Maria came up next to her two long-time friends.

"Who would have thought we would be sisters?" She looked around Sophie and winked at Tabitha. "There is still one Keese left." She nodded toward Stephan who stepped off the plane at that exact moment.

"Oh, no, he's not for me. Now pass me Cristofor and wahoo." Tabitha elbowed Sophie. "What do you think of me and that sexy brother of yours?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I think it'd be great." She eyed Tabitha. "So, does he know this yet?"

"No, not at all." She giggled. "But by the time we leave here, he will." Tabitha wiggled her brows at both women.

Sophie waved her brother over to the small group and got an elbow in the ribs from Tabitha. "Cristofor, can you do me a favor? Since everyone seems to be busy, will you help Tabitha with her luggage? Stephan is helping Corina with hers so I thought you and, well, Tabitha could..."

Cristofor raised his hand, halting his little sister's babbling. "Dearest sister of mine, you are one of the worst matchmakers I have ever met so, please, don't try." He turned to Tabitha, his eyes raking her from head to toe, giving her a heated look. "But, I would gladly help her with anything, including unpacking her luggage."

“Oh? Really?” Tabitha stepped closer. “Would you even help me,” she licked her lips, her gaze locking with his. “With this small annoying throb I have right below my navel?”

Sophie’s mouth dropped open when Crisofo took Tabitha by the elbow, steering her away, saying, “Let’s discuss this throb, you seem to have, in private.”

“What an interesting byplay of a developing sexual affair,” Maria snickered.

Sophie caught Adrian’s eye as he and Alexander headed their way. She forgot about her brother and best friend.

Maria leaned into her. “I hope I can handle the boat trip. My stomach is in knots and, knowing Alex, he will hover over me like a mother hen if I turn green.”

Sophie gently touched Maria on the arm. “Oh dear, I didn’t even think about you getting ill. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry.” She patted her pregnant middle. “I had one grand time, getting in this shape.”

Adrian slipped next to Sophie; tucking her against him, he brushed his lips on the top of her head. “We have some time before our bags are loaded on the boat. We can enjoy the island or go on board.”

“Enjoy the island,” both Sophie and Maria replied, laughing at their identical answers.

Two hours later, during the calm trip to Gomera, Sophie closed her eyes and inhaled the salty sweetness. The sounds of the boat, sea gulls, the waves as they splashed against the hull, the chatter of family and friends gave her a certain peace that seemed surreal.

Adrian came up behind her, pulling her back against his fully-aroused body, pressing against her softer form. A strong calloused hand cupped her breast, kneading it between his fingertips. Lips brushed the back of her neck, sending chills down her spine.

“Hmm, that feels so good.”

“Yes,” he breathed, raining kisses up and along her ear as he ran his hand down her stomach to cup her mound. “You looked so beautiful, standing here all alone, with your eyes closed.”

She hissed in amusement, “Adrian, there are people all around us.”

He sighed and placed his chin on the top of her head. “I know, so I think I will stand here for a moment.” He ground against her backside, letting her feel his arousal.

Sophie turned in his arms, sliding hers around his waist. She murmured. “You know we have to wait. Right?”

“Four days of celibacy? How will I refrain from taking you into the nearest cove and having my way with you?” He muttered in a low voice, filled with doubt and humor.

Standing on her toes, she pulled his lips down to hers, cupping his head. “Just think of our wedding night, Adrian. It’ll be that much more special.”

“Okay, if I have to.” He tilted his head down to tease her lips while his hands cupped her waist. “But, that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

\* \* \* \*

Andre’s gaze settled on Adrian and then Stephan, his last-born son. He had been elated when he heard that Carmen ran off with that older man. Shivering at the thought of having her for a daughter-in-law, his gaze settled on Martin, Sophie’s father, still recovering from his wounds. Now, that man had the right idea, setting up his daughter, although he didn’t do a very good job on research.

Contemplating an idea forming in his fertile mind, André rubbed his chin, hiding a small smile. Yes, he would do a search, secretly, of course, for the perfect bride for his one remaining son. Then he’d have to think of a way to talk Stephan into an arranged marriage.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The days before the wedding stretched endlessly. Everyone worked on getting the church ready for the small ceremony that would unite the two clans.

Martin Lacusta grumbled occasionally about what the other rabbit clans would say when they heard that one of their kind united with one of the rat clan. Then he'd smile when he saw how Adrian made his only daughter happy.

He hobbled into the dining room, patting a present hidden in his pocket. The necklace his daughter wore infuriated him though his wife chided him for acting childish. "Two can play this game," he muttered, under his breath, before he took his seat next to Sophie.

Everyone enjoyed the rehearsal dinner. Laughter filled the room and the toasts, given to the bride and groom. After kissing his wife, Martin stood and raised his champagne glass, tapping it gently to get everyone's attention.

Clearing his throat, he looked out across the room. "I didn't agree to this, in the beginning, and it is still hard for me to accept, but accept I will, for my daughter's sake. When I see how happy Adrian makes her, it does my heart proud." He motioned Adrian over, pulled out a leather black case and handed it to him. "Proud to call you 'son' and I welcome you into the Lacusta family." With that, he sat down and let his eyes glitter in mischief.

Adrian opened the box and burst out in amusement. He pulled out a Rolex watch with a jaded rabbit, placed in the center. "I accept this gracefully and will wear it proudly." He grasped Martin's hand, shaking it, before he handed the Rolex to Sophie to strap around his wrist.

Martin's smile broadened when he saw Andre shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"You are so sweet, Papa." Sophie said as she hugged her father tightly. "You don't know how happy this makes me that you accept Adrian."

Martin's grin softened, and he thumped his daughter's back, in typical male fashion. "Seeing the way he is around you, and the way

his family accepts you as theirs, eases me. I am just happy to see you settled and not alone.

\* \* \* \*

“Rise ‘n shine, cupcake!” Tabitha yelled as she barged into Sophie’s room. “It’s time to get that booty up so we can go to the spa, get our hair done and play dress-up.”

Sophie turned over in bed and moaned. One eye opened, she stared at the array of females entering her room. All the women were to eat breakfast, go to the spa and as Tabitha just called it, ‘play dress-up’. The men would do pretty much the same, probably playing golf, though, instead of visiting a spa.

“I can’t believe I slept in.”

“Me either. When Alex and I got married, I think I woke up two hours before the alarm went off,” Maria murmured and sat back on Sophie’s bed, kicking her feet up and sighing. She patted the spot next to her. “Come on, Ana, get comfy. Your feet hurt, too.”

“I am just glad my dress isn’t bright orange with lace galore or puke-colored.” Corina chimed in as she lay at the end of the bed by Maria and Ana’s feet.

“Give me a second to get dressed then we can leave.” Sophie said, in amusement, rummaging through the clothing she had packed the night before. The maids would move everything to Adrian’s bungalow while they were out. The wedding dress and finery were already at the church.

The vintage-style dress dated back to the early 1900s—a sheer gown worn over a flesh-tone under-slip, sleeveless, featuring a wide, rounded neckline. Corset-style lacing at the back adjusted the semi-fitted bodice. A large flower accented the front of the gown, where sheer material gradually receded toward the sides. The side paneling and corset could be easily adjusted or removed for additional comfort, following the wedding. The brilliantly detailed work enhanced the beauty of the garment.

Sophie had fallen in love with the gown. It suited the kind of wedding she and Adrian had planned. She would wear it later at the reception, to dance the night away.

\* \* \* \*

At the church, minutes before the ceremony, her image in the mirror left her gasping. She looked unbelievable, in the beautiful gown, with her hair curled and laced with a sprig of baby’s breath.

Several loose strands of hair wrapped around her face, softening her looks, making her seem almost virginal.

“You are so beautiful, Sophie.” Her mother cried and covered her face, tears forming in her eyes.

“I never thought you’d clean up so well.” Corina grinned at her own darker features in the mirror, leaving Sophie to wonder if the youngster referred to the bride or herself. “You are absolutely breathtaking,” Corina finally whispered to Sophie.

“Oh, absolutely.” Tabitha applied a clear coat of gloss on to Sophie’s lips.

A knock sounded, and the door creaked open slowly. Martin and Andre walked into the room. “Is everyone ready?” Martin asked, looking around the room, before his eyes stopped on Sophie.

“So very stunning, my dear.” Andre came over, lightly brushing his cheek against Sophie’s. “I can’t wait until Adrian sees you walking toward him.”

Corina blew out her breath in a loud gust. “Eww, none of you have seen those two in action. It’s down-right disgusting.”

Andre frowned at his daughter. “It’s time to take your places. Adrian and Alex are at the alter already, and the other men are out side, waiting to walk you in.” He waved his hand, ushering everyone out, even Elena. That left Sophie with her father.

“Well, this is it.” Martin whispered huskily. He was about to hand his daughter over to another man.

Sophie smiled nervously at her father. “This is it. I want you to know I love you, Papa.”

“I love you, too, Poppet.” He exhaled and stood straight when the wedding march began. “Ready?” He held out his arm.

“Ready.”

\* \* \* \*

Adrian could barely breath for watching the vision slowly walking his way. His heart gladdened with happiness.

The ceremony passed in a blur. Tears formed in eyes, breaths caught when words were exchanged.

Sophie seemed dazed the whole time. Tears flowed steadily down her cheeks. Adrian brushed them away several times.

When the minister announced them ‘man and wife’, they turned in union and smiled out at their families. Adrian leaned down and whispered into her ear. “There are no words that can express how I feel at this moment, Mrs. Keese.”

Sophie beamed at him. “I like that. Mrs. Keese,” she repeated. Reaching up, she cupped his cheek, “You’re my dream, Mr. Keese.”

“Ready?” Adrian asked.

“For what?” She asked, giving him a puzzled look.

“For this” He bent down, flipped her over his shoulder and took long strides out the side door, bypassing his cheering family.

Sophie laughed and remembered the first time he had carried her over his shoulder like this. In a fit of merriment, she waved to everyone as he carried her away. He sat her in the Jeep, carefully pulling in the long train of her gown.

“Where are we going?” She asked, curiously, when they passed the hotel where they were to have their wedding dinner.

“We are having our own private dinner, of course.” Adrian gave Sophie a cheesy grin. “We are meeting everyone tomorrow evening. I wanted you to myself tonight.”

Sophie could only blink.

“You like the idea?” Adrian smiled wickedly, pulling into the empty parking space in front of their bungalow.

“But, of course, dear husband. What’s not to like about finally being alone with you?”

He carried her through the entryway and into their rooms. Sitting her down, he stood back to admire her.

Sophie swallowed hard. Her eyes locked with his as she reached behind her and loosened the corset and shimmied out of her gown, letting it pool around her feet. She stood before him, in a sheer slip, white thigh-high hose and heels.

Adrian ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek then knelt before her. Stripping the slip off, his lips brushed the skin of her abdomen. Sliding his hands down her legs, his head lowered, lips burning a path down and over her thigh. He raised one foot and removed the hose and high heel. Leisurely, he did the same on the other leg.

“Adrian...” Sophie writhed beneath his caresses and kisses. So tender. So gentle.

“Shh.” He grasped the tiny white wisp of cloth she wore as panties, lowering then tossing it aside. “So lovely,” he whispered. Lifting one of her legs, he drew it over his shoulder, knelt at her opening. His fingers parted the soft folds of her pussy.

Sophie blushed, closing her eyes. Her breath caught, and her hands tightened on his shoulders when his warm wet mouth closed

over her. One finger slid into her. Her hands left his shoulder to tangle in his hair, pulling him tighter against the throb. “Adrian...”

He paid loving attention to her body, left her shaking, rising ever higher with the magic that he worked with teeth, tongue and hands. Crying out, she felt herself going limp, only to be caught.

Adrian sat on the sofa, Sophie on his lap. He brushed her hair from her face; his eyes heated with need.

Her fingers traced his lips then trailed down to help remove his clothing. He sat her astride him, fastening his lips to hers in a kiss as hot and needy as his cock. She took him into her slowly, savoring every inch.

One hand cupped a breast, twirling a nipple, as the other mussed her hair. “You’re my love, Sophie, no matter how forbidden.”

Something shifted in her. Tears gathered. She didn’t need to respond; her eyes spoke for her. Giving him everything, she made love to her husband.

The End