



Dragon Lord

By

Kaitlyn O'Connor

© copyright by Kaitlyn O'Connor, April 2007

Cover Art by Jenny Dixon, April 2007

New Concepts Publishing

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

An ambiguous mixture of emotions ran along the periphery of Raina Willows' mind as she carefully polished a three foot segment of the dark mahogany

balustrade. Narrowing her eyes, she studied the section critically. The light powdering of dust she'd been stirring around, she saw, had collected in a groove on the bottom side of the railing. Settling her rump on one of the stairs, she speared the polishing cloth with the nail on her index finger and ran it back and forth along the decorative furrow until she'd removed the pale line and then focused on the intricate carving that supported the balustrade.

It was archaic, Raina decided, but she still wasn't altogether certain of how she felt about it. Vaguely resentful, she supposed, maybe a little threatened.

Threatened might be a little strong, she amended, lifting her head briefly to flick a gaze around the vast foyer of the mansion, but something like that.

From the moment she'd first seen the place, from the outside, the fanciful notion had swept over her that she was walking onto a movie set for a filming of a vampire flick or a ghost story. The gothic mansion and its setting had the sort of theatrical feel to it that gave her a mild case of the willies even before she'd set foot inside, and the interior of the place was *evenmore* gothic--heavy crushed velvet draperies on all of the tall windows, heavily carved furniture, dark mahogany moldings everywhere.

She wasn't sure why she'd worked so hard to get the job.

Aside from the fact that she desperately needed work, that is.

Cleaning lady wasn't exactly the sort of thing one could put on a resume to get a leg up in today's world. She'd gone after the job because she'd thought it would be a cinch to get it and she'd been beat out by the competition on every other job she'd tried for over the past couple of months. Immediate needs had finally overrode the desirability of career building.

She'd felt like a peon, though, from the first moment she'd been interviewed, and that, at least, was no exaggeration. The housekeeper had *looked* like a character out of an old horror/vampire flick, not quite medieval but damned close in her severe, mid-calf length black dress, her gray hair slicked back and knotted at the back of her head in a style that looked like something out of the eighteen hundreds.

Raina had known immediately that she'd fucked up when she'd shown up for the interview in jeans and a knit top, be they ever so neat. The housekeeper, Mrs. Higgenbottom, had looked her over as if she smelled something that stank--like shit.

It was menial work she was applying for, though. How the hell was she supposed to guess they'd expect her to dress up just to crawl around on her hands knees to clean? She'd figured she should wear work clothes. She'd worn her best jeans and a neat, almost new, conservative knit top.

It had been obvious immediately that she'd figured wrong. The housekeeper, she strongly suspected, would've pitched her out on her ass right then and there, without an interview, except for Mr.*Smith*. The woman's face had looked as if it was about to crack wide open with outraged contempt--that Raina had dared to show herself like she was--when she'd looked up and met Mr. Smith's gaze. Raina hadn't noticed a single emotion ripple across the man's face and yet after that exchange of gazes, the housekeeper had settled and started the interview.

What was *up* with that, anyway?

So far, she'd met--not been introduced to, but had them pointed out to her--Mr. Smith, Mr. Jones, Mr. Black, Mr. Green, and Mr. White.

No way in hell was she believing that was their real names.

They were like--a security detail of some kind,

reminded her of glimpses she'd had of the secret service men that surrounded the President--they were *that* fucking scary! Maybe a little more scary.

Except for the detail of slight variations in hair coloring, they almost looked like a matched set of bookends--all of them were at least six foot tall and built like bouncers on steroids. All of them wore suits and dark glasses. All of them had hard angular, strangely exotic faces and looked as if their faces might crack if they ever used any of their facial muscles for anything approaching a smile. They all had unfashionably long hair, which was smoothed back on their heads and tied at the base of their skulls into a 'ponytail' that should've made them look ridiculous but somehow didn't--probably because they practically dripped testosterone.

Like the housekeeper, they all wore black, except their suits weren't throwbacks in style like the housekeeper's dress--or dresses. Either the woman wore the same dress every day or she had a closet full of the identical style. It was Raina's third day on the job and she'd yet to see the woman wearing anything that looked the least bit different from the dress she'd worn the day Raina had come to interview a week earlier.

She had yet to see the mysterious Mr. Simon Draken, her actual employer, but, as curious as she was about

the man, she actually dreaded the possibility of running in to him.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Higgenbottom, had spent most of her first day on the job telling her what was expected of her and laying down the 'rules of the house'.

She was a servant, not to be seen or heard--at all--which was where the archaic attitude came in. Mr. Draken was a busy man and rarely left the west wing, where his 'suite' lay so she was assured an encounter wasn't likely, but if she happened to be in an area of the house when he did pass through, she was to try to make herself invisible and *never* to look directly at the man.

Archaic!

It made her uneasy, though. *Maybe* she wasn't supposed to look at the guy because she was a servant and dirt beneath his feet, and maybe there was some kind of dark and creepy reason she wasn't supposed to look at him.

It was a flaw in her personality, she supposed, that aside from engendering a good deal of resentment in her, the restrictions had also given rise to a wealth of curiosity she might not have felt at all if Mrs. Higgenbottom hadn't been so adamant that she was forbidden even to look at the man. Her active

imagination had instantly began to conjure speculative images.

The mansion almost looked like it could've been from the Dark Ages, in style anyway. Except for the style of the architecture, it didn't look old, but the house didn't look new either, mostly because she couldn't imagine the craftsmanship evident in the place having been mass produced or even handcrafted by modern day millworkers.

So she figured he must be old, especially with his archaic expectations of his household staff.

He was obviously filthy rich, too. Even if this estate had been handed down to him, she couldn't imagine a younger man wanting to live in a place like this--single, she thought. There'd been no mention of a Mrs. Draken.

The fact that she'd been forbidden to look at him made her think he was deformed or disfigured in some way.

Maybe not.

The security detail that guarded the place as if it was Fort Knox suggested he might be someone who'd, at least at one time, been famous, maybe a political dignitary or something.

Or maybe not. She supposed it could've just been his wealth.

Shaking the thoughts off, she focused both her mind and her gaze on her work for a moment, examining it carefully. She didn't want to get fired when she hadn't even collected her first paycheck and Mrs. Bitch, old as the crow was, had the eyes of a fucking eagle. If there was so much as a speck of dust or a smudged fingerprint, the old bat would make her start over from the beginning.

She'd been trying to convince herself this was just the 'new girl' shake down, typical of most jobs where the boss led you around by the short hairs and cracked the whip over your head until they were certain you'd been properly broken in and cowed. If she could just make it through the initiation phase, it would be smooth sailing after that.

The intricate carving of dragons and vines and strange, exotic flowers was beautiful, she supposed. She'd thought so before she was told to clean and polish the damned thing anyway. All the tiny crevices and grooves collected dust, though, and a cleaning rag and polish just didn't get it insofar as removing the dust in the minute fissures.

Unconsciously rolling the kinks out of her shoulders and back, she glanced surreptitiously around the foyer again. Seeing no sign of Ms. Hatchet-face, Raina lifted her head for a more thorough search. All the doors along the foyer within her view were firmly closed and after a moment, she slipped the toothbrush out of her jeans pocket.

The woman would probably shit a squealing worm a mile long if she caught her using a toothbrush, which was why Raina didn't intend to get caught. She *also* didn't intend to spend the entire day cleaning the fucking balustrade that wound up both sides of the foyer in a grand, horse shoe shaped curve.

Draping her cleaning rag over the handle of the toothbrush, she dipped the soft bristles in the cleaning solution and made short work of the balustrade support, darting an occasional guilty glance around to make certain she wasn't caught at it. When she'd finished, she used another rag to wipe off the excess cleaning solution and then stood up and leaned over the balustrade to clean the outside.

Somewhere in the rounds of balancing and cleaning and the need to finish the task quickly, she became so focused on what she was doing that she not only forgot to keep a look out for her nemesis, the housekeeper, but she also didn't pay any attention to the march of many

feet on the upstairs landing until they slowed and finally stopped.

It was the cessation of the sound that finally penetrated her absorption. Instinctively, she glanced up and froze as she met the gaze of the man standing at the top of the stairs.

His eyes were unlike any she'd ever seen--on any human, or animal for that matter. Even with the distance separating them the color--a strange gold flecked with orange-rust--seemed to jump out at her. The black pupils didn't look 'normal' either. Instead of round, as they should've been, they were elongated, almost diamond shaped.

It wasn't the eyes, though, that caused her such a jolt. It wasn't anything *her* eyes were registering, because she wasn't actually aware of noting and cataloguing his physical attributes at that suspended moment in time. She wasn't the sort of person who went around talking or thinking in terms of 'auras' and yet she'd felt his even before she looked up, an almost electrified charge in the air that had already been crawling over her and prickling her skin even before she looked up. Once she *did* look up and met his gaze, she was enveloped in something like a force-field that was ten times stronger than that first awareness, a powerful, unidentifiable 'something' that seemed to suspend her breath in her

chest and her heart and then jumpstart both with an electric current that made her heart take off like a runaway freight train.

He seemed almost as frozen as she was, though she was quite sure, later when she could think at all, that it wasn't for the same reason or anything approaching it.

For her, the closest she could come to describing her feelings later was that she was awestruck, as if she'd found herself in the presence of some deity, or a being with god-like powers--or a sex god of the silver screen.

After a long, long moment, while her heart hung suspended in her chest, and the air she'd sucked into her lungs and held slowly depleted of oxygen and began to bleed a dizzying current of carbon monoxide into her feeble brain, he lifted a pair of sunglasses and settled them over his eyes. The movement, or the sudden release of her captive gaze, allowed Raina a handful of seconds to gather an overall impression of the man before she became aware of the men surrounding him, standing slightly behind him.

A security detail, her mind clicked.

The mysterious Mr. Draken, her mind added.

The toothbrush in her hand.

Guiltily, Raina made a belated attempt to hide the contraband in her hand. She averted her gaze but not before she saw her guilty movement had drawn his attention directly to the toothbrush she'd tried to palm.

She was never to be seen, or heard, and under no circumstances to look directly at the man. The color left her face in a rush as those rules, drummed into her head over the past several days, belatedly filtered into her mind. Straightening abruptly, she grabbed her tray of cleaning supplies, galloped down the stairs, and around the curve, flattening herself against the wall. Her heart, jump started by her abrupt awareness, was galloping in her chest at around ninety miles an hour. Her lungs, laboring overtime now that she'd remembered to breathe, pumped like a bellows, over oxygenating her blood so rapidly she thought for several horrifying moments she was going to pass out.

Triple shit! she thought in dismay as she caught a glimpse of the housekeeper's shoes in the doorway off to her right.

She'd broken every single damned rule in the space of a heartbeat and topped that off by galloping down the stairs like an idiot, drawing even more attention to herself!

She flicked a look at her hand by her side and saw the bright blue handle of the toothbrush sticking up out of the cleaning cloth. As casually as she could, she rotated her arm so that the handle, she hoped, was hidden from the woman's view, but she had a bad feeling it was way too late to be worrying about the damned toothbrush. Even if Hatchet-face hadn't seen the toothbrush, she'd probably seen her gallop down the stairs,*and* seen her look directly at the man--Simon Draken--staring at him as if she'd heard a chorus of angels singing in the background.

She knew it had to be him. As stunned as she'd been, she'd been dimly aware that he wasn't alone even before she glanced up. The fact that four of the security men had flanked him was enough to assure her it was 'his lordship' himself.

She frowned at that thought. She'd been too mesmerized to take in any particular details about him, but she certainly hadn't gotten the impression that he was old. His bearing had been ramrod stiff--almost military, although 'regal' was what popped into her mind from out of nowhere--not bent with age. His bearing aside, the impression she'd gotten was one of exceptional height, and massive proportions,*not* a body shriveled with age.

Not fat.

He wore black like everyone else in this bizarre household, but it hadn't been a suit. The slacks had been tailored to fit narrow hips and long, lean legs. The shirt, almost 'blousy' and old world looking, had been open at the neck, but his shoulders were broad and straight and the silk-like fabric had draped what seemed, in retrospect, hard, bulging muscles a body-builder would envy.

The men were halfway down the stairs before her hearing picked out the sound of their footsteps over her drumming heartbeat. Inwardly, she cringed, wishing she hadn't stopped by the stairs. She'd been lucky to make it as far as she had, though, without her legs completely losing muscle tone and dumping her in the floor. She was fairly certain she wouldn't have made it down the hall to the service area without embarrassing herself.

Sweat beaded her brow when the contingent reached the foot of the stairs and paused. The housekeeper was still watching her. She wasn't going to look, even though it was eating her alive to glance in that direction just to see if *he* was looking at her.

She wasn't going to.

She slid her eyes in his direction. She couldn't see anything but black shoes and calves clad in dress

pants--and a pair of knee high black boots. The toes were pointed toward the door. For some reason, though, she had the impression that he'd glanced in her direction.

Paranoia?

After that brief hesitation, the entire party went out the front door.

Raina expelled a breath of relief when they disappeared.

She counted to ten, expecting to hear the crisp footsteps of the housekeeper. She knew the woman wasn't going to bellow at her from down the hall.

"Mr. Draken will be back in an hour," Mrs. Higgenbottom said finally, her voice sounding almost mild for her. "Be certain you've finished with the balustrade and moved into the dining room by then."

More than a little stunned, Raina nodded, but the soft click of the door told her the woman hadn't waited for any kind of response.

Her entire body slumped as the tension went out of her. Feeling dazed and more than a little confused, Raina moved away from the wall when the weakness

finally subsided and strength slowly began to return.

She hadn't been dismissed.

Yet.

The old bat was probably going to wait until she'd finished cleaning and *then* fire her, Riana thought morosely.

And how the hell did *she* know he'd be back in an hour? Where would he go on the island that would take him an hour to get there and back? He wouldn't be *leaving* the island. It was a fifteen minute ride around it to the dock and another ten to fifteen from there to the mainland, twenty or thirty to the city limits

Shaking that puzzle off, Riana hurried up the stairs and hustled to finish the seemingly endless task in the time allotted. It wasn't just that she was concerned about the housekeeper, either. The entire episode had left her feeling strangely disoriented and jumpy. The man *exuded* cold and dangerous. As scary as she'd thought his watch dogs were, the main man made them seem warm and cuddly in contrast.

That was the impression that had made her heart stop and her breath freeze in her lungs, she decided.

The image of his strange eyes hung in the back of her mind as she worked furiously to finish the cleaning and polishing so that she could play least in sight when the man came back.

Emotionless, she thought, not just cold in the sense that he might have been looking at a roach that had had the audacity to creep out from under the rug. His eyes, his expression, had been as cold and distant as if there was no soul in the body.

She'd seen a flicker of ...*something* , though, she realized after a while. Fleeting, so briefly she would've missed it if she hadn't been staring into his eyes, she'd seen something pass through them, an acknowledgement of her presence, she supposed. Surprise, maybe? As if it had been so unexpected for him to discover an actual living, breathing being cleaning his house that it had jolted him out of that faraway place where his mind ordinarily dwelt.

* * * *

Such turmoil churned through Simon as he left the house that it was only habit that guided him down the path he'd worn over the years from the house to the sea. He found he could not sort the confusion of thoughts and impressions, even though he felt a need to do so, and that disturbed him almost as much as the fact that

he was in a state of disorder at all.

He had not expected to encounter the woman--his people *knew* he did not like to deal with outsiders--but he was not unaware of the woman's presence in his house. As little interest as he had in such things, he was kept informed of everything that went on around him. That was a given. Whether he was interested or not, his rank placed as many obligations upon him as it did his people.

And that being the case, he should not have felt such a jolt of ... shock upon encountering her. Should not have felt even a great deal of surprise, let alone stunned to such a degree that it seemed to suspend him in time so that he'd found himself unable to move, or think, or even breathe for a seemingly endless time.

It *was* shock that he'd felt, though, he finally acknowledged, an unpleasant jolt of stunned ... what?

He still was not sure, but his mind obligingly recalled every image it had recorded in those moments, every impression, and tumbled them around again in an effort to find some explanation, some logical reason for the disturbance.

A small, pale face surrounded by untidy locks of dark, reddish brown hair emerged dominate, and most

strongly of that impression was the eyes--because they seemed larger than anything else about her face. More vaguely, he had had the impression of clothing that had seemed far more suitable for a man--at least the men of his culture--fitted, though there had been nothing at all mannish about the body the clothing so faithfully conformed to--large, soft breasts, a narrow waist, nicely rounded hips and shapely thighs.

He had noticed *everything* about her body, he realized with a mixture of surprise and irritation. Without any actual intention of doing so, without even a conscious awareness of it, he had catalogued every pleasing curve, could remember very clearly every detail of shape and size, even a calculation of firmness and softness.

Arousal, he realized as he felt his body stir again only at the memories. Part of it, at least, had been desire.

He examined that with suspicion, searching for a reason to dismiss it, and realized that he could not. The potent attraction, unwelcome as it was, unfathomable as it was, had been the greatest part of the jolt to him.

He had not been with a woman in He could not exactly remember the last time. He had a vague memory of expending himself on some nameless, faceless female, but nothing beyond that--no perception of time. In truth, he had ignored his physical needs so

long he rarely felt it to any great degree anymore and he could not even recall when he had managed to quash even the call of his manhood.

That explained it, though--need. It was not want. It was only nature demanding he remember that his body had needs besides the intake of nourishment and the need to rest.

That did not explain why, though, the eyes bothered him so much, why the expression on her face haunted him.

She had felt it, too, he realized after a few more minutes of thrashing the idea around in his head, feeling almost more stunned by that realization. *That* was why he had felt such a jolt. The look in her eyes, on her face--it had mirrored the same, inexplicably powerful force of attraction that he had felt.

Reflected back at him, he wondered? Overlain there by his mind's eye only because it was what he felt? Or had she actually felt it, too?

Frowning, he examined that more carefully.

He did remember it correctly, he finally decided, but the attraction wasn't all that he'd seen. It might not even have been the emotion that dominated that little

face that he'd found so appealing, so strangely fascinating.

She'd been focused on his eyes, paled as she stared him, froze like prey that has sensed the interest of a predator.

He hadn't been wearing his glasses, he realized abruptly, feeling anger and far more disappointment than he should have.

He had scared the hell out of her.

* * * *

The conflicting thoughts and impressions did nothing to settle Raina's nerves. As tired as she was by the time she'd managed to finish, she was still jumpy. The faintest sound made her stiffen and cock her ears to listen intently until she'd identified it.

She was frantically polishing the last segment of the balustrade when she heard the sound she'd been listening for--the faint scuff of soles on the walkway outside the front door. For a split second, she froze like a deer caught in a car's headlights. As she stared at the door, though, and saw the door knob begin to turn, she grabbed her cleaning tray and darted toward the formal dining room on tiptoe.

God only knew why she thought that would help anything. The cleaning supplies jiggled and rattled with each step, noisily marking her quick retreat. She almost spilled the thing in her haste to clear the doorway and close the door behind her.

Struggling not to pant for breath like an obscene phone breather, Raina, inspired by some insane impulse she couldn't resist, paused before closing the door completely. Holding it with no more than a thin sliver between the door's edge and the frame, she peered through the minute opening as the men entered the foyer.

He was in the forefront again. Despite the panic that threaded through her veins, she allowed her gaze to take a full sweep of him before she focused on the hard planes of his face, studying his profile as he came into full view.

He hesitated fractionally as he placed one boot clad foot on the first stair. For a split second, she thought he knew she was there, that he was going to turn and look straight at her.

He didn't. He mounted the stairs and disappeared from view, leaving her to wonder if she'd just imagined that slight hesitation.

When the last of his escort had disappeared up the stairs behind him, she very carefully closed the door, wincing as she heard the click as the door caught and wondering if it only seemed loud to her or if it actually had been loud enough to carry up the stairs.

After glancing around the vast dining room vaguely for a moment, she finally moved to one of the dining chairs that lined the wall nearest her and collapsed weakly on the seat.

Staring at nothing in particular as her mind focused inwardly, she tried to sort the unfamiliar riot of emotions inside of her. With a touch of surprise, she finally realized that uppermost was almost a sense of awe, giddiness--vague hysteria--as if she'd discovered herself in the presence of some rock star or god of the silver screen she'd lusted over and fantasized about for years--except this man was a complete stranger. She was absolutely certain she'd never seen that face before. She would *never* have forgotten it. So how, him being a nobody as far as she was concerned, could he have had that kind of effect on her?

Chapter Two

Audric studied the prince surreptitiously as he followed in his wake, ostensibly scanning their surroundings for any sign of an assassin. He knew the others were alert for the possibility, though, and only half his mind was focused on that constant vigil. The other half was focused on the prince himself, searching for some outward sign that his ruse had been detected.

Simon had seen the woman. There was no doubt in his mind that, for the first time since he could remember, *something* had finally penetrated the shield of ice Simon had erected around himself. Unfortunately, since he'd been behind his half-brother, as was his place, he hadn't seen what sort of effect it had had on him.

He was still heartened. Even a tiny fracture was welcome after all these years when he'd almost lost hope that he would ever again see the man he'd worshipped since he was child, guarded with his life since he was old enough to take his place in the royal guard.

When Simon stopped at last on the promontory where he always stopped, staring out at the sea, Audric motioned for the royal guard to take up stations and then moved to a position that would allow him to keep

watch and still catch an occasional glimpse of Simon's profile.

Uneasiness filtered through him when Simon turned his head and stared at him for a long moment before his gaze focused inward again and he turned to stare out to sea as he had ritualistically once a week since his exile from his homeland. *He* knew, if the others didn't, that this was Simon's penance for living when the woman he'd loved more than life had died, taking his heart and soul with her.

To everyone else, it might seem as if Simon was hardly aware of where his eyes focused. It was just *a* sea, not *the* sea that had swallowed Evangeline and taken away the light in Simon's eyes.

He knew, though. The very first time they'd come this spot and looked out at the sea the image that had been printed indelibly on his mind forever had surfaced instantly and he'd thought for several moments that he would throw up.

That was why Simon came here, not because this sea reminded him of home, but because every time he looked at it, he saw Evangeline's long black hair drifting in the tide, saw her lifeless eyes staring back him.

He came to torture himself. For living? Maybe. Probably. But Audric thought it was also because he was searching for his lost soul, trying to figure out why he was still alive--or still breathing. What Simon had been doing since he'd been exiled didn't actually constitute living. Existing more accurately described it.

Despite every effort he'd made himself to banish that nightmare, Audric felt it grip him again the moment he acknowledged it, felt the memories wash over him in a sickening tide.

He'd been afraid and struggling mightily with the effort to hide it and maintain his dignity when they'd been brought out, they thought, for execution after the months they'd spent in that stinking prison. He'd told himself he'd expected nothing less, that he was surprised they'd even waited as long as they had. He'd told himself it was better to get it over with than to die by degrees, slowly rotting in prison, becoming less of a man and more of an animal every day.

When they'd brought Evangeline out, he'd felt sick, certain they'd brought her to watch, fearful that he'd shame himself when he died. He'd been so focused on that that it had taken him a while to figure out what they were doing.

Disbelief, he thought, had gripped all of them as they

watched the executioners bury Evangeline in the sand up to her neck, and comprehension was slow in coming. For a long while, he had simply stared at her, the men around him, the men standing on the beach, watching the slow, inevitable approach of the tide. Even when it had finally clicked in his mind what they were about, he hadn't been able to believe it.

It was just Jaelen's sick way of tormenting them to the bitter end, he was certain.

And it was.

What it was not, was a show merely to torment them.

He should have known that when he saw how excited Jaelen was, but there was no reason to kill Evangeline. It served no purpose. Killing them served a purpose. Killing Simon would have served a purpose, because *he* was the rightful emperor. *He* should have ascended to the throne upon his father's death--not Jaelen, the treacherous, backstabbing little worm.

There were times when he was not certain which part of that nightmare sickened him the most, watching Evangeline die, or watching Simon slowly fall apart; remembering the terror in Evangeline's eyes, or remembering the terror in Simon's; watching her slowly swallowed up beneath the sea, or Simon, tearing and

clawing at the chains that bound him like a raving madman, sobbing and begging like a child for them to kill him instead.

Audric's stomach lurched sickeningly with the memory.

He'd loved her, too, fallen in love with her long before she had caught Simon's eye and captured *his* heart. No one could be around her for any length of time and *not* love her. He had understood that, understood that Simon could no more help loving her than he could and, moreover, that she had never been meant for him. She had been Simon's long before he had finally noticed, or acknowledged, the woman his father had chosen for his bride.

For the most part, the same could've been said of Simon, that it was impossible not to love the man himself completely aside from his title. His men and his subjects had loved him, worshipped him as a god, as flawed and imperfect as he was as a man. In fact, it had almost seemed as if his flaws were as integral a part of why he was so beloved as his perfections, as if everyone had been drawn closer, felt that they *could* love him and not merely hold him in the awe and respect his birth entitled him to.

It was their love that had destroyed him, just as it was

his love for Evangeline that had destroyed her. If he'd been hated, or if his people had even been indifferent, his enemies could've simply disposed of him, given him the death that was all he'd wanted when they were through with him. As it was, Jaelen had deduced fairly quickly that killing him would only make him a martyr for rebellion, would bring the entire realm into revolt. So instead, he'd broken Simon, crushed the life from him, and left the shell to appease the people, held him ransom for their behavior by sending him into exile.

As long as they knew he was alive, that he would pay in blood for any attempt at revolt, the people endured--ever hopeful, as he was, that one day Simon would return and destroy the usurper.

Which was why, as much as he loved Simon himself, he'd been willing to risk being accused of treachery by bringing the woman into the house.

It had seemed safe enough. He'd checked her out thoroughly before he'd allowed the interview. She had no one. If she had to go missing, no one would be looking for her.

It seemed unlikely, too, that Simon would realize what he was up to. Physically, she looked nothing at all like Evangeline, which was hardly surprising since she was human. Still, there was something about her that had

instantly arrested his attention, something in her wide green eyes and delicate features that had snared him once he'd managed to drag his attention from her body.

Clad in snug fitting jeans and a body hugging top, every lush mound and curve was blatantly evident. He hadn't needed to see what was beneath the clothes to know that body was a siren call to any lustful male, human or draconian, and his mind had already been churning with possibilities even before he'd examined the face that went with it.

Viewed dispassionately, he supposed she was more 'interesting' than beautiful, but he doubted very much that many men realized she wasn't. *He* wouldn't have if not for the fact that his lustful thoughts had abruptly shifted to possessiveness and from there, naturally enough, to what sort of opposition the others might present ... which had brought Simon to mind.

That had brought her into clearer perspective, impelled him to take a step back and try to view her with more objectivity.

She wasn't beautiful, but she had a way of looking at a man that blinded him to her slight imperfections--a strange mixture of boldness and shyness, of frankness and mysteriousness, of appreciation and wariness--that aroused every hunting instinct. From the moment he'd

first met her gaze he'd been drowning in conflict. He wasn't sure which instinct was most dominant--the primal and purely male need to conquer and dominate or the urge to protect, but neither could be ignored and he knew, if he felt it so powerfully, Simon would not be able to resist those urges either.

The last time he'd tried to divert Simon with a woman, though, the results had been disastrous. She'd been too blatantly sexual, too obvious a plant to tempt his appetite because he'd been stupid enough to choose a woman that bore too striking a physical resemblance to Evangeline--not that she'd really looked like Evangeline. Tall and elegant and shapely enough to tempt most any man, her hair had been long and black like Evangeline's, her complexion like fine porcelain.

But, unlike Evangeline, the woman had been all too aware of her appeal. She had been too focused on her appearance, too aware of her sexuality. Every move she made had seemed calculated. Every toss of her midnight hair, every faux shy glance and timid 'come hither' smile had been as blatant an enticement as if she'd stripped naked and waved her tits and ass in their faces.

She'd pierced Simon's self-absorption, all right. He'd taken one look at her and shut himself into his rooms for weeks, staring at the wall and refusing to eat more

than a morsel of food as he had in the first months after Evangeline's death until they'd thought he would starve himself to death.

He let out a disgruntled sigh as Simon turned at last and headed back to the house, disgusted that he'd succeeded in getting no more of a rise out of Simon than that brief flicker of surprise and interest.

If Simon didn't want the woman, he was going to have her himself, he decided--assuming he could grab her before the others managed to.

They had noticed. Simon might be dead to the world around him and everything in it, but the rest of them had blood in their veins, and a woman like Raina caused that blood to heat and centralize in the groin effortlessly. She didn't even have to *look* interested. The sway of that delectable ass of hers, the bounce and sway of her pert breasts was enough to make a man instantly forget where he'd been going and follow her off hopefully, sniffing for just the hint of her womanly scent.

Despite his abstraction, as the others fell into formation beside him, he noticed Haig was trying to catch his attention. Frowning, he glanced at the man questioningly. Haig lifted his right wrist and tapped the face of the watch he wore.

Perplexed and more than a little irritated, Audric sent him a dismissive look and returned his attention to Simon. He didn't know why Haig was so attached to the damned time piece. It wasn't as if time meant a hell of a lot to any of them.

It jelled in his mind after a moment, though, and his head snapped toward Haig again. Haig nodded significantly and nudged a chin in Simon's direction.

Maybe, Audric thought, the petite brunette had managed more than a little crack in the ice? He'd been too deep in thought himself to realize Simon had stayed far longer than he usually did, and he hadn't been wearing that white faced look of someone who'd been stabbed in the chest, now that he thought about it.

He'd looked ... thoroughly pissed off, but Audric could deal with Simon's temper.

He was still unconvinced that his ruse had had any notable effect until they stepped into the foyer again and Simon hesitated, briefly, before ascending the stairs, as if he was aware the woman was peering at him from the dining room.

* * * *

Having successfully, he thought, dismissed the turmoil that had chased him from the house, Simon braced himself as he trained his gaze on the restless swells of the sea and focused his mind inward, summoning Evie to him. Instead, *her* image filled his mind. Wide, startled eyes the color of the changing sea--green and gold and blue, and dark and mysterious--surrounded by a thick fringe of curling black lashes. The long bridge of a straight nose that ended above a short upper lip, lips that were too narrow, too thin, too determined--not soft and yielding and feminine--and beneath that a small, jutting knob of a chin that bordered on belligerent, high cheekbones that created faint hollows in her cheeks, an oval face.

It wasn't a beautiful face at all.

And worse, it belonged to a human.

He didn't know why it had stuck in his mind's eye so solidly that it had thwarted his attempt to recall Evie's face, but he felt something stir to life inside of him that he hadn't felt in a long time--anger--resentment--pain, real pain, not just the distant ache of it that never went away completely.

He turned to stare at his head guardsman, his bastard half-brother, Audric, speculatively. Audric returned the look unflinchingly, but he thought he saw a flicker of

something in his eyes. Guilt?

Returning his gaze to the sea, he struggled to banish the image that had supplanted his beautiful Evie, called her to him with a mental command that bordered on desperation. They weren't going to take that away from him, too!

As tortuous as all his memories were of her, as much as they aroused a deep, unquenchable hunger inside of him, he had to have them to keep from going completely insane. The memories were all that anchored him anymore to the world he had to live in. He endured the last of them because he had to. He couldn't summon the others without remembering those horrible, gut wrenching last moments of her life but it was a price he was willing to pay to remember the rest.

So he watched her die--every time he became so empty he couldn't stand the emptiness anymore and sought her out. Over and over again, he felt the helpless rage well up inside of him until he was choking on it, felt the bite of the chains he had fought against with every ounce of strength he could summon. He felt the suffocating terror that seemed to go on forever and ever as the water advanced in rolling waves, covering her and then washing out to sea again, leaving her choking and coughing and fighting for breath until *he* couldn't

breathe, until at last it consumed her completely and all he could see was her wide, terrified, beseeching gaze as her midnight hair floated and swirled around her and her eyes slowly dimmed as her soul left her.

The regret came next, regret that he'd failed her, that she'd died for loving him, but mostly for loving her. If he hadn't loved her quite so much, mayhap they would've allowed her to live and taken him instead.

If he hadn't loved her so much, mayhap he would have seen what was coming. Instead, he had been so wrapped up in her, *willfully* closing himself off from the world he'd never truly wanted, submerging himself in his joy of her and ignoring all the warnings of treachery until it had been too late to save either her or himself by the time he'd become aware of the danger hanging over them.

Arrogance. More even than his preoccupation with Evangeline, it had been his arrogance that had destroyed them.

Because it had not occurred to him, even once, that his younger brother coveted the crown, that he was gathering to strike the moment their father died and take the throne that should never have been his--that was to go to Simon and his heirs forever.

He was the crown prince, had been born to rule. He'd known from birth that he would one day, that it wasn't a matter of choice for him. Everything had been destined, his entire life laid out for him before he'd even had the chance to live it--even Evangeline had been chosen for him and that had rankled. Of all the things about his life that chafed him, that had angered him the most. Gods he had been furious when he had found out his father had arranged that binding without even consulting him!

He had been so spoiled, so accustomed to always having everything his way that he'd refused to have anything to do with her, ignored even his curiosity to see what she was like. The day he *had* to bind with her, he'd thought--the day he was shackled to the woman his *father* had chosen would be soon enough to deal with her.

He should have had more faith in his father. Whatever else he was, his father had loved him. He should have known his father would choose carefully for him, would've picked a woman he could care for, not just whatever female was most politically advantageous.

It had pricked at his manhood, though, made him feel more of a child than a man, and that had enraged him so much that he'd *behaved* more like a spoiled, willful child than a man.

Until he saw her.

He'd been caught instantly by her gracefulness, by her beauty of form, the body that had seemed designed expressly for the purpose of depriving a man of his wits, but from the moment he'd pushed back her veil and seen her face for the first time, looked deeply into her wide, beautiful eyes, he'd felt as if he was drowning and soaring into the heavens at the same time.

Love, as unfamiliar as he was with it, it had still claimed him the moment he met her gaze. He had not recognized it for what it was, at first. It had taken him a while to sort through the myriad of powerful emotions and identify it, but it had been there from the first, awaiting only a drop of encouragement to grow wildly out of control.

No thought had entered his mind when he had gazed into the eyes of the woman bound to him for life. Awareness of anything beyond her had faded to nothingness. They might have been completely alone instead of in the midst of a grand, royal binding ceremony with hundreds of onlookers.

Habit was all that had guided him through the rest of the formalities, the manners and stilted customs that had always annoyed him, but that had been drummed into him until it required no thought at all to perform as

was expected of him.

It was just as well, he'd thought wryly, later, when he could think at all. Because his instincts from that moment were purely primal, savage, urging him to slough off any semblance of civilized behavior. Urging him to grab her and carry her off to his lair at once, to stake his claim on her, and defend his sole right to her to the death if any other male so much as glanced in her direction.

He'd seen that look in many women's eyes in his life, for he was crown prince and not hard on the eyes, accounted handsome by most, though he'd always taken that with a grain of salt--not love, not even exactly desire, but--worshipfulness--as if he was a god. For the first time in his life, though, it had made him *feel* like a god--more powerful than an ordinary mortal, more desirable.

He'd succumbed in that very moment, so enraptured by her perception of him that all he could think of was *being* what she wanted and needed him to be, terrified that he would slip and fall and she would wake up and see he was just an ordinary dracon, not special in any way beyond the accident of his birth.

For two years out of an entire life, he had walked among gods, known passion unlike anything he had

ever experienced, love that was for him alone, as a dracon--not because he'd been born a prince--known true happiness, not just an absence of unhappiness or boredom or strife, known what it was like to look forward to every day with eager anticipation.

And then as instantly as the snuffing of a candle, it was all gone--all of it--his beloved father, his princess, the daughter he had adored--everything--snatched away from him so jarringly that he couldn't even take it all in in the months he'd spent in prison.

Until the very day he was marched from his cell to his execution, he had still believed he was the god-like being Evangeline had perceived, believed he would still overcome, that he would take back everything that had been taken--somehow.

It had come as a shock to realize he really was going to die, that he really was just an ordinary dracon after all, not even a prince anymore. He'd still had his pride, though, that inborn arrogance that had been so carefully cultivated in him because he'd been born to rule. He'd braced himself for death. As afraid as he'd been when they'd gathered them all, he thought, for execution, he'd told himself he was ready for it, that he could face it with dignity and strength--show them all that he *was* the prince, whether they wanted to acknowledge it or not. He could face it like a dracon, even though waiting for

the execution was nothing in the world like facing a foe on the battlefield where one knew one had a chance to live as long as strength and skill held out.

And then they'd ripped all that away from him by dragging his beautiful Evangeline out onto the beach in front him and killing her instead.

He'd been far more afraid when he saw what they meant to do than he had been when he had expected to be the one who watched death slowly overtake him. He'd been petrified, mindless with it, unable to summon any of the quick wit he'd always prided himself on.

He'd tried. The gods knew he had--reasoning, threats, bribery--and begging when nothing he'd said had had any effect at all other than bringing a glint of hard satisfaction to Jaelan's eyes.

Evangeline hadn't pleaded for her life. She'd only stared at him with her beautiful, wide golden eyes, hopefully at first, and then without hope, but with fear and resignation. "I love you, Simon," she'd called to him. "Don't watch. Don't let them use me to hurt you. Please don't watch."

He hadn't been able to tear his gaze from hers, though. Somewhere in the madness his mind had beguiled him with the hope that he could hold on to her. If he just

didn't let go, he wouldn't lose her.

This time as he remembered, instead of feeling the emptiness wash into him as he watched her soul fleeing from him, instead of the soothing, hurtful images of the happiness he'd known and lost, he saw Jaelan's smile of triumph--not Evangeline's smile of love. He heard the complacency in Jaelen's voice as he banished him forever, not Evangeline's teasing voice echoing to him through the forest as she raced him to the glade that was their special place.

Rage and hopelessness warred inside of him instead of a bittersweet taste of peace, a remembrance of the days before when all he had known was the joy of greeting each new day because he had anticipated that it would be as grand and glorious as the day before.

And when he struggled to thrust those memories from his mind, strained to reach for Evie and wrap his mind in the warmth of her, her scent, the soul deep beauty of her, a pair of wide, soulful green eyes peered back at him. An image of a rosebud of a mouth parted in surprise teased him instead of Evie's generous, full lips curling in a tempting smile. Instead of visualizing Evie's long, graceful arms and legs twined about him as they made love, the press of Evie's full, generous breasts against his chest, he remembered the compact little body of the human woman and saw himself striving

over her, felt a rippling heat-wave move over and through him as he imagined her body engulfing his flesh.

And for a just a moment, so fleetingly he could almost convince himself he'd imagined it, he saw the look in her eyes and knew what it was. He felt the impact on his soul just as he had the first time he'd looked at Evie. And stark terror hit him--the paralyzing fear one feels in anticipation of inescapable pain. The fear that threatens to swallow one up when the certainty fills one that what is about to happen, and can not be avoided, is going to cause excruciating pain, even before the nerves detect it and send the sensation flooding into the mind.

Sucking in a harsh breath, he thrust it from his mind, telling himself he didn't see *that* at all, *feel* what he'd thought he'd felt.

Anger and resentment flickered to life inside him, began to boil like acid through his veins. He wasn't going to feel *that* again. Even if he had wanted to feel those things, *no one* could make him feel that again. Evie had given it to him and she had taken it with her to her grave.

He was safe. He couldn't die again because he was already dead.

But *she* had cut up his peace. Just by being there, she'd punched a hole in the wall he'd so carefully erected to shield him from the pain he couldn't bear, ripped away his ability to summon the comforting memories that were all he had left.

Damn her!

Giving up finally in his quest to relive the past as he had every miserable day of his life since he'd lost Evie, he turned away from the sea and fled back to his prison, hoping that he could at least find the peace of nothingness again even if he couldn't feed his withering soul on his memories.

The gods help him. He didn't think he could live and bear it if he had to feel *everything* again. This time, he *would* go mad!

Chapter Three

Raina was so tired by the time the housekeeper let her go for the day, it took all she could do to climb the

stairs to the loft apartment she'd been given above the garage. "Who would've thought cleaning and polishing would be so damned hard?" she muttered to herself as she sprawled in the first easy chair she came to and stared tiredly into space.

Actually it wouldn't have been if the place hadn't been so fucking huge, and every damned thing in it hadn't been made out of wood. The whole bottom half of the *walls* had been paneled in wood in the damned dining room!

She was starting to hate wood.

If Ms. Hatchet-face hadn't told her this polishing business was just a once a month thing, she would've quit before lunch and headed back to the mainland--even if she'd had to *swim* the damned inner-coastal waterway to get there!

If she didn't get used to this, in a hurry, there was no way she was going to be able to take classes next quarter. She didn't have the energy to think!

The longer she sat, the more inclined she was to forget supper and head straight to bed. She didn't even feel up to taking a bath. Expelling a deep sigh, she pushed herself up and headed for the bathroom, dragging her clothes off and discarding them piece by piece as she

went. She was down to her sports bra and panties before she even reached the bathroom. Stopping by the four poster bed to push her sneakers off and wiggle out of her jeans, she held onto a post to balance herself as she pulled off her socks and dropped them and then padded barefoot into the bathroom. The cool tile felt like ice under the warmth of her soles, and she gritted her teeth as she hopped onto the bathmat to adjust the water.

She hopped off again as the twist of the knob produced a clanking, knocking noise and a sputtering of rusty water and then a long, agonized groan. Wincing at the sound, she grabbed the knob and twisted it to 'off'. The groaning stopped. After staring at the thing in consternation for several moments, she tried it again, just in case the first time had been a fluke. This time the pipes groaned first and coughed up a couple of frigid blasts of water, sputtered a few times, and then just dripped. Turning the faucet off again, Raina glared at the shower for a couple of moments and finally spun on her heel and stalked back into the bedroom/kitchenette/living area.

A scan of the main room produced the information that there was neither a phone nor an intercom. What a surprise!

She looked around in disgust even though, when she'd

dragged her belongings upstairs upon her arrival that morning, she'd been delighted with the place--actually *loved* it. She didn't love it without frigging water, though!

She didn't *feel* like putting her clothes back on, trudging down the stairs, across to the main house to find somebody to help, and then back again!

Abruptly remembering she'd glimpsed someone working in the garden when she'd followed the covered walkway to the garage, she moved to the window that faced the garden and looked down. There was a man on his knees pulling weeds from one of the beds. She looked down at herself, but then shrugged. She was wearing a sports bra not one of those lacy, seductive things that revealed almost as much as it covered. Pushing the window open, she leaned out.

“Hey!” she called out in a loud whisper. “Psst! Garden guy!”

The man stiffened and glanced around.

“Up here!” she called again, leaning out the window to wave at him.

He lifted his head and gaped at her.

The thought crossed her mind that he might not be entirely bright.

“My water isn’t working,” she said plaintively. “Do you know anything about plumbing?”

He stared at her a long moment and finally shook his head. “I’m the gardener.”

Raina huffed an irritated breath. “So? You’re a man. Don’t you know anything about plumbing?”

“I know about flowers.”

All righty then! The guy was a few cards shy of a full deck. “Who takes care of things like this then?”

He frowned, scratching his balls while he studied over the question. “Oooh! I didn’t need to see that,” Raina muttered, immediately averting her gaze. As she did, her eyes collided with the gaze of the man standing at an upstairs window of the main house. Startled, she jumped and then dove behind the edge of the window she’d been leaning out of only moments before. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks the moment she did. “For christsake, Raina! That was stupid!”

“I’ll get Mr. Smith. He’ll know!” the gardener called up to her.

“No! Wait!” Raina hissed. It was too late, though, she saw in dismay. The man had already galloped off toward the main house. “Shit!” She glanced around. It was one thing to let a halfwit see her in her sports bra, but she had a feeling Mr. Smith, if he came at all, would expect to be able to inspect the pipes.

Unwilling to waltz across the room and dress when she had no idea if the man was still standing at the window, Raina glanced up and saw a rolled shade above the window. Grabbing hold of the bottom edge, she snatched it down--*all* the way down. She stared blankly at the edge she still had in her hand, stared down at the crumpled, unrolled sheet lying on the floor, and then popped her head up to look across the garden again.

She didn't see the man she'd glimpsed, or thought she'd seen, before, but the drapes were open and moving slightly. Dropping the shade abruptly, she darted across the room, snatching up the clothes she'd discarded and bundling them in her arms as she headed for the bathroom to dress. Deciding not to bother with her shoes, she strode across the main room when she left the bathroom, grabbed the doorknob and snatched the door open.

There was *a wall* of man on the other side. Evidently, he'd been just on the point of knocking. Raina nearly

had heart failure. “God!” she exclaimed, pressing a palm to her pounding heart. “You scared the *piss* out of me!”

He tilted his head at her. She couldn’t see his eyes. He was wearing the sunglasses all of them seemed to wear all of the time, but she didn’t need to see his eyes. The movement of his head was enough to assure her he’d surveyed her from head to foot.

She wondered if he was the one that had been standing at the window and if he’d watched her strip tease on the way to the bathroom, but finally decided he probably couldn’t have seen that far into the room even if it had been him.

Especially not with the dark glasses.

What was *up* with that anyway?

Did they sleep in the damned things?

“Dere is no vater?”

Raina blinked at him several times before her brain translated his heavy accent. Smith? With an accent like that? Where were these guys from anyway?

He moved past her without waiting for an answer,

striding toward the bathroom. Her hand still on the doorknob, Raina turned to watch him. His head barely cleared the doorframe--brushed it, in point of fact--and he had to angle his shoulders slightly to fit through the narrow doorway.

Ok. So he was a little more than six feet tall.

Which meant the main man was *alot* more than six feet tall, because she distinctly remembered he'd been noticeably taller than the others. Releasing her grip on the doorknob when the weakness in her knees finally subsided, she trailed after him and peered into the bathroom.

He'd crouched beside the tub and was twisting the knobs. The pipes let out another squawk of protest, coughed, and produced a flood of ugly brown water through the tub spout. He studied the flow for several moments and switched the tub to shower.

The pipes rattled and quaked, but no more than a spattering of water emerged.

He came to his feet, studied it frowningly for a moment and finally balled his hand into a fist and hammered on the wall. Raina stared at him blankly a moment and finally bit her lip, trying to keep from smiling.

He glanced at her before she had the chance to straighten her face. After staring at her for a long moment, his lips curled faintly in response.

She gave up trying to hide her amusement. “You think that’ll do it?”

His dark brows twitched together and then the frown vanished. “No pain to try.”

“Hurt,” Raina corrected when she’d translated. “It doesn’t *thurt* to try. You don’t speak English very well, do you?”

He shrugged, returning his attention to the ‘problem’. After surveying the wall he’d been beating on, he stepped back to examine the wall than enclosed the pipes. “No need. Uders speak same.”

“Oh,” Riana said as he grasped the edge of the panel and ripped it loose. Reaching into the cavity, he pounded on the pipes again until Riana more than half expected them to break and spew water all over the bathroom. “I’m not sure that’s a good”

She didn’t get the rest of the sentence out. The pipe broke and water began to gush in every direction, spurting in Mr. Smith’s face and soaking the entire front of his suit. Riana clamped a hand over her mouth

as he dove for the handles and tried to shut the water off. Unfortunately, shutting the water off that was running into the tub only increased the volume of water shooting out of the pipes. Within seconds the entire bathroom and both her and her ‘plumber’ were soaked to the skin.

“Shut off valve!” Raina exclaimed suddenly remembering the plumbers in her previous experience had always found one to shut the water off when they needed to.

Clearly, he’d never heard of one, however. He merely glanced at her and looked around for something to try to plug the pipe with. Squeezing past him, she shielded her face from the shooting water the best she could and peered into the dark cavity. There was no sign of a knob of any description, though, and she abandoned the effort.

“Downstairs!” she said. “There has to be one to the apartment!”

She hoped. Abandoning him to try to dam the flood with towels, she hurried across the main room and galloped down the stairs. Water was already pouring through the ceiling of the garage and onto the floor. Skirting the cars, she headed toward the closet at the far end. There she found a washer and dryer and a water

heater. There was a blue 'wing' type valve closure on one of the pipes leading up from the water heater. Grabbing it with both hands, she twisted it as far as she could in one direction.

"Did that help?" she yelled at the ceiling.

"Hot!"

"Sorry!" Grabbing the valve again, she twisted it in the other direction until it wouldn't go any further. "How 'bout now?"

"No hot!"

"There's still water?"

"Yes! Much vater!"

After looking around a little desperately, she finally discovered there was another valve just above the water heater on a pipe leading up from the back side. She discovered she couldn't reach it, however. After scanning for something to help her reach it, she finally climbed on top of the washing machine. She still couldn't reach it without standing on top of the water heater and she had a bad feeling it wouldn't hold her weight. Finally, she compromised by putting one foot on the water heater and leaning to reach the other valve.

Listening to the rush of water in the pipe, she turned the valve in first one direction and then the other until she couldn't hear the rush anymore. "I think I've got it!" she yelled at the ceiling.

"Stop vater?" he asked, directly behind her, giving her a jolt.

His hands settled on her hips as she wobbled precariously. As politely as she could, she pushed his hands away and turned to face him. "I can get down."

"I help," he said implacably. He caught her waist and pulled her from her perch before she could object further. She grabbed for his shoulders to steady herself as he lowered her.

He seemed in no great hurry to let go of her once her feet had settled in the puddle on the floor. Trying *not* to feel alarmed or threatened by the fact that the guy was not only a monster, but as hard as granite all over, she removed her hands from his shoulders and pushed at him. Almost reluctantly, he dropped his hands from her waist and Riana drew a breath of relief.

"You've got water on your glasses," she pointed out, as much to distract herself from her uncomfortable awareness of him as to distract *him* from his sudden interest in her.

He pulled the sunglasses off, looking down at his soaked clothing for a dry spot to wipe them on.

Seeing his dilemma, Raina said, “I’d dry them for you, but I’ve got the same problem.” She was almost sorry she’d pointed that out. It drew his attention to her at just about the same moment she realized her blouse was plastered to her skin and transparent enough she could clearly see her bra through it. Worse, the chill of the water, or the excitement of having him whisk her from the top of the water heater as if she weighed no more than a feather, had her nipples sticking out like twin bumpers on a caddy. His gaze zeroed in on the hard little nubs until heat climbed into her cheeks. She forgot all about her embarrassment, however, as he flicked a glance up at her face.

As quickly as he looked down again, frowning as he rubbed the lenses of his glasses on his coat and then put the glasses on, she saw he had the same, really strange looking eyes as Simon Draken.

Were they related? Or was it just some trait of the people from where ever it was they were from?

“I should go check the damage,” she said, abruptly far too keenly aware of how close they were standing and the way the room, tiny already, seemed to have shrunk

around them. He was a big man. As accustomed as she was to being around people all the time who were taller than her, she rarely even noticed--unless they were *alot* taller than her, and he was. Not only that, but he was just plain big. His hands had very nearly spanned her waist, she recalled, abruptly feeling vaguely uneasy.

She had a small waist. She'd always thought it was her best asset and had worked to keep it that way, but even so, twenty inches was a hell of a hand span--or two handed span.

He followed her back across the garage and then up the stairs. She tried not to feel threatened. There was no reason why she should. He hadn't been the least bit pushy, hadn't crowded her space until he'd pulled her off the water heater, but even at that she couldn't say that he'd purposefully intruded within her personal space. The utility room wasn't big and he was.

She regarded him with wide-eyed uneasiness when she discovered he'd followed her to the bathroom and stood in the doorway. He met her gaze and then looked away, a faint frown between his brows. "This is mess."

Distracted, Raina surveyed the room glumly. "So much for a bath," she muttered. "Guess I won't be getting one."

“You come to big house. Stay there. This must fix.”

Her shoulders slumped dejectedly. She really, really preferred staying in the little apartment, mostly because she really, really didn't like the idea of staying in the 'big' house with Mr. Smith and his friends from giant world. It was unnerving enough to be around *one* of them. Being around all of them made her feel like a cat romping through a lumbering herd of buffalos, in imminent danger of getting squashed if she didn't watch her step. The alternative, though, was trotting to the big house every time she needed to use the bathroom and that didn't appeal to her a lot more.

Besides, she reminded herself, Mrs. Higgenbottom stayed in the main house. Shrugging, struggling to shake off her uneasiness, she followed him as he left the bathroom and went to get her suitcases. Fortunately, she hadn't had the chance to unpack. He took her suitcases from her, shoved one under his arm and caught the handle of the other.

He dwarfed them. If she'd had any doubt about his strength, or his size, being purely the product of an overactive imagination, she no longer did. It was all she could do to drag the things. He had both under one arm, and they practically looked like briefcases--ok, slight exaggeration, like overnight bags instead of full size suitcases. She preceded him from the apartment,

surreptitiously peeling her shirt loose from her skin and fanning it to try to dry it a little. He'd used all the towels to mop up the water.

She just hoped she didn't run into the 'gang' on the way to her room.

It made her uneasy when they looked at her. She couldn't see their eyes and she was pretty sure it was just paranoia, but she felt like they were sizing her up for dinner ... and she didn't want anything *that* big humping her leg.

Catching her arm as she headed to the main entrance, he guided her through the garden and in the back way, leading her up a narrow back stairway. When they reached the upper floor, she stepped aside to allow him room to exit the stairs and then followed him down the hallway. Opening the last door at the end, he pushed the door wide and indicated with his hand for her to enter. She went in cautiously, glancing around.

She shouldn't have been surprised that it was as elegant as the rest of the house, but she was. A huge king sized bed was the focal point, mostly, she supposed, because it was the biggest thing in the room. A tall armoire claimed much of the opposite wall. Beyond that, there was a long dresser with a large mirror, a small chest on either side of the bed, and a

desk.

Raina looked around the lavishly furnished room uncomfortably. “You sure it’s ok for me to stay here?” she asked doubtfully.

“Yes, you stay here. Shower dere.”

She followed the direction he’d indicated with a nod of his head and then went to the door and opened it. The bath was beautiful, the room huge. Pleasure welled inside her, and then more doubt. “Maybe we should ask Ms. Hatchet ... uh ... Higgenbottom? I mean, this looks like a guest room. Aren’t there other, smaller rooms?”

He shook his head. “Go. Bath. Is ok.”

She smiled at him tentatively. “Bathe--you should work on your English.”

He straightened from settling her suitcases, smiling faintly. “You teach, yes?”

Riana chuckled, but wryly. “I’m not sure I’d be a very good teacher.”

It was impossible to tell much about his expression with the glasses, but she could tell he was studying her.

“You teach you speak. I teach my speak.”

It was easier to translate that time. She was getting used to his broken English. She decided to ignore the suggestion, regardless. He was way too interested. She wasn't going to encourage him. “How long have y'all been here, anyway?”

He frowned faintly and finally nodded. “Five.”

Raina looked at him curiously. “Five what? Months?”

He looked puzzled. “Full cycle,” he responded finally, extending a finger and drawing a circle in the air.

Raina studied the motion for several moments in complete confusion. “*Years?*”

He thought it over and nodded.

A shiver went through her. She glanced down at her wet clothes and decided that was reason enough to be shivering. “Uh ... I guess I'll just go get that bath and get some dry clothes on.”

He didn't move. After chewing her lip for a moment, Raina finally decided he'd get the idea that it was time to leave when she went into the bathroom.

She *hoped* he got the idea.

When she'd locked the door, she moved to the shower to turn it on. A heavy blast of water shot forth instantly and relief flooded her. Stripping off her wet clothes while she waited for the water to warm up, she kicked the pile into a corner and finally climbed in. Pure bliss filled her as the heated water beat down on her, washing away the chill from her wet clothes and the tiredness and tension from her muscles. It felt so good, she almost hated to get out.

Finally, reflecting that there were bound to be some really pissed off people if she used up all the hot water, she shut the water off and climbed out. A small linen closet yielded a stack of fluffy towels--huge fluffy towels. Ordinarily, she wrapped her wet hair in one towel and used a second to dry herself, but the towels were way too big to form a turban. She settled for scrubbing the towel over her wet hair until she'd gotten most of the water out and then wrapped it around her like a sarong.

A jolt went through her when she stepped out of the bathroom intent on grabbing clothes from her suitcase.

Mr. Smith was standing directly across from the bathroom, stark naked.

Chapter Four

Raina let out a shriek of surprise and dropped her towel. His head swiveled in her direction the moment she yelped, but otherwise he didn't look the least bit disconcerted. He paused to watch her with keen interest while she fumbled frantically to get the damned towel around her again. Finally, she gave up and clutched it in front of her.

“Holy shit! Holy shit!” she exclaimed, holding one hand up in front of her to block her view of him. He'd looked huge with clothes on. Without them she was sure she'd *never* seen that much bare skin. “Oh my fucking god! This is *your* room?”

He nodded. “Is ok,” he said finally, dragging his gaze from her with an obvious effort and reaching into the closet for a shirt.

As if that was *at all* helpful when his genitals were just *hanging* there.

Actually, not just hanging. The lethal weapon that hung

nearly halfway down his thigh was stirring to life right before her eyes. She lowered her hand to block the view, but she didn't dare take her eyes off him. "No hell it isn't ok, damn it! I don't know where you got the idea that I'd sleep with you, but I'm damned sure not going to!"

He glanced at the bed. A smile slowly curled his lips and then his lips parted in a grin. His golden eyes, no longer hidden behind the 'shades' gleamed with a definite predatory glint. "No sleep."

"No fuck, either!" Riana snapped. She didn't mind a challenge, but Mr. Great Dane might as well get it through his head right off that he wasn't going to be shoving that thing up *this* toy poodle's ass!

He chuckled. Obviously that word was familiar to him even as limited as his vocabulary was. And *why* wasn't she surprised?

He looked vaguely disappointed for all that. "No fuck either," he repeated, nodding agreeably.

Glaring at him, Riana grabbed hold of the handle of one of her suitcases and dragged it off the bed. As angry as she was, it didn't lend her enough strength to hold the heavy thing. It hit the floor, nearly jerking her down with it.

He strode toward her. Raina's eyes widened. Releasing her grip on the suitcase, she put up a hand to hold him off. He stopped as her palm flattened against his belly, stared down at it a moment and then lifted his gaze to meet hers. His black brows snapped together. He settled one of his hands lightly over hers. "No 'fraid," he said in a soothing voice. "I go. You stay here."

Disconcerted, Raina looked at him doubtfully. "You're not ... you weren't planning on sleeping in here?"

He shook his head. "You here. I there," he said, pointing toward the hallway.

"Oh." Riana felt her face heat, mortified to discover *she* was the one that had her mind on sex, not him. No wonder he'd laughed! "I'm so sorry! God! I feel awful for putting you out of your room. Where are you going to sleep if there isn't another room?"

He shook his head, either because he hadn't grasped everything she'd said or because he didn't want her to worry about it. She wasn't sure which.

He lifted her suitcase and placed it on the bed again and then moved back to the closet. Making a pretense of searching for clothes for herself, Riana watched him out of the corner of her eye as he pulled a pair of dress

pants out and stepped into them, adjusting himself before he dragged the zipper up.

No underwear, now that was something that was going to haunt her dreams, she thought wryly, wondering if he never wore shorts or he was just in a hurry to cover himself. He didn't seem to be. He seemed supremely indifferent to his nudity.

As mesmerized by that truly impressive cock as she was, she couldn't help but wonder about his complete lack of discomfort at being naked in front of a total stranger.

She wasn't exactly 'world weary' but she'd been around a few guys, dated her fair share, and had sex with a good many of the boys/men she'd dated, though certainly not all. Most of them at least tried to act unconcerned about being naked, but most of them *were* uncomfortable, at least a little bit. They pretended they weren't because they thought it wasn't macho to be bashful.

But then, he had nothing at all to feel the least bit self-conscious about. She'd suspected the men were all built like body-builders, but she knew she hadn't really believed it or she wouldn't have been so stunned. *He* certainly was. There didn't seem to be a spare inch of fat on that body anywhere, back or front. As masculine

beauty went, he was a definite ten, and he had a really nice face and a gorgeous smile to go with it.

And he was hung like a stallion.

She threw him a fleeting smile as he strode toward the door. He inclined his head slightly and kept going.

Her shoulders sagged with relief when he'd shut the door behind him.

Frowning thoughtfully, she dug a change of clothes out of her suitcase and went into the bathroom to dress, wondering if it was just because they were foreigners that they seemed so very strange to her.

And where did those eyes come from? She supposed they could've been classified as hazel, like hers. Hazel was a color that was hard to pin down. Depending on what she wore, hers could look brown, blue-green, or deep green, but his and Simon's had looked golden, not brown, not yellow, not some shade of greenish brown, just golden--with rusty glints--strange, strange eyes and the odd shape of the pupils wasn't something she'd imagined either. As handsome as he was, as pleasant as he seemed, those eyes made uneasiness creep along her spine.

* * * *

Simon was pacing his sitting room restlessly when Audric arrived and slipped soundlessly into the room. Surprised, he slid a questioning glance at Haig. Haig shrugged infinitesimally, but Audric wasn't left to speculate long on what the cause of Simon's agitation was.

Simon whirled on him within moments of his arrival. Already taut, his face hardened even more with anger. "I want her gone from here!" he said in a low, threatening growl.

Surprise, confusion, and uneasiness flickered through Audric in quick succession. He had *wanted* to provoke some kind of reaction out of Simon, hoped to. He hadn't expected this simmering rage, however, in point of fact was thrown off completely by it since, as far as he knew, Simon hadn't caught so much of a glimpse of the woman since that first encounter nigh a week earlier. "Raina?" he asked, sparring for wind.

Something flickered in his eyes and then Simon's lips curled back in a snarl. "I do not *want* to know that little whore's name!"

Audric studied him. He hadn't given a great deal of thought to how he would handle Simon if he did manage to pierce his shield and *make* him acknowledge

that he was still among the living and could feel. Mostly, he supposed, because he hadn't expected an avalanche of emotion. Before he could decide how to proceed, Simon turned to pacing again. "That ...*squat, graceless* speck of humanity has no appeal to me whatsoever. Did you think she would?" He demanded with a growl. "She*gallops* down the stairs when I come upon her! I can not walk through the house without the certainty of stumbling over her, or feeling her peering at me from around some corner like she has spied an ogre and expects to be eaten. I do not believe she can walk and speak at the same time without tripping over her dainty little feet! She falls in and out of doors with great regularity or trips over something that does not exist.

"She is not even pretty, let alone beautiful! She speaks as if she is from the gutter--I hear her swearing and muttering to herself even if I do not see her--and she behaves as if she is! She is as bad or worse than the one you dragged here before. That one at least had beauty in form, and grace, even if she*was* human! She did not look as if she would be crushed by a man's passions! She did not look like a startled hare whenever a man looked at her and bound into hiding!"

Audric exchanged glances with the other men ranged about the room. Struggling to tamp his anger over Simon's less than flattering ranting over all of Raina's perceived flaws, he folded his arms over his chest and

leaned back against the wall.

Jorell frowned. “She can not be a whore and shy of men at the same time,” he said reasonably, if unwisely.

Simon whirled upon him with a fulminating glare.

“I thought she was pretty myself,” Haig put in. “I find her daintiness very appealing. She looks sturdy enough for a man to ride”

“She is only being coy!” Simon snarled. “No woman of her age with a body like hers would be ignorant of a man ... especially *nohuman* woman!”

Audric studied his nails. “I confess I am counting on that. I have never seen the appeal of virgins myself. I far prefer a woman who knows her way around a man.”

The startled look Simon sent him might have been amusing if Audric had been in any mood to be amused. As it happened, he wasn't. *He* had been keenly aware of Raina's presence, had been so intrigued by her, in point of fact, that he'd all but forgotten why he'd thought bringing her into the house was an excellent notion to start with. He felt a sense of possessiveness move through him at Simon's speech that was almost disconcerting, mostly because it was a clear indication that Simon was just as fascinated with her as he was or

he wouldn't have noticed so much about her.

Simon recovered himself with obvious effort. He moved to the window. "Suit yourself," he growled finally. "If it does not bother you to fuck the whore, far be it from me to try to dissuade you, but I would take care that you do not catch some disgusting disease."

Audric came away from the door, abruptly angry himself. "She is no whore, and as you pointed out, she is human. I could no more contract disease from her than give her one ... even if not for the fact that I have had no woman in ... Fuck! I can not even *recall* the last time I had a woman! When did you become so 'nice' in your requirements? I can recall many a time when we drank and whored together halfway across Schalome and back again!"

Rama frowned at him. "It is not as if you have not been invited to come with us when we go to look for women! I, myself, have tried to persuade you to come! I thought that you did not want to because of Willa or I would have tried harder."

Audric shook his head infinitesimally, but he saw it was too late. The mention of his lost companion had prompted Simon to think of Evangeline. To his surprise, the haunted look, instead of intensifying until Simon forced the mask of indifference over his face

again, seemed to plateau for several moments and then lessen.

Mayhap that was where they had gone wrong before, he thought? Mayhap, instead of allowing Simon to hold his grief inside they should have forced him to let it go? None of them, least of all him, had been able to bear watching Simon's agony, though. Beyond the fact that *he* had grieved for Evangeline and did not think he could endure having his raw emotions lacerated, he also had not been able to bear the thought of dealing with Simon's inconsolable grief.

"I grieved for Willa," he said finally, and with complete truth. He'd loved Willa, and yet, unlike Simon, Willa had not been his first love. Evangeline had. He had come to love Willa because she was worthy of being loved, worthy of more than he'd been able to give her, but *she* had loved him and he hadn't been able to help loving her back. "In the beginning I did not want to think of laying with another woman and certainly not replacing Willa with another. No woman *could* replace her. I am a man, though. What does it serve her for me to be alone and miserable? She can not come back. She can not suffer any longer. She does not need as I need. It does not feel wrong to seek what comfort I can find."

"With that ...*shadow* of a female?" Simon growled.

Audric gave Simon a level look. He had done his utmost to hide his love for Evangeline, but he knew very well Simon had known. And knowing that, he had to know also that Willa was a ‘shadow’ herself. It was not new that he would be willing to settle for a woman he *could* love instead of the one he was in love with.

He saw something then in Simon’s eyes that he had not expected to see.

Simon wanted Raina--so badly he could taste it--and it terrified him.

For a moment that fear made Audric feel vaguely nauseous. Simon would not have been afraid if he’d felt no more than lust for Raina. He was afraid to go near her because he was afraid he would feel more than lust.

And he wanted her removed from his temptation before it got the better of him.

The sense of possessiveness tightened in his gut again, making him feel more ill.

Maybe, he thought, it *had* been unwise to bring Raina here? He hadn’t intended or expected to do more than crack the shell of ice around Simon, to bring him back to the living. It had certainly been no part of his plan to

place Simon in harm's way again, which he would be if he fell in love with Raina.

She was totally unsuitable. She was human, unacceptable as a mate ... for any of them, really, but especially for Simon. Simon would have to produce an heir, for his heir had died with Evangeline.

Beyond that, his own heart was threatened or he would not have felt ill at the thought of stepping aside for Simon, again. Swallowing the sense of drowning with an effort, he struggled to think, and do, what would be best for Simon, and therefore their homeland. This would be far more tricky than he'd expected. "I do not see her as a shadow," he responded to Simon finally. "I know what is due my family name ... even in exile. I would not set out to love her, or consider binding, for one day I expect to return to Schalome. She will suit my needs of the moment, though."

Simon snorted. "One never sets out to fall in love," he said dryly.

Audric smiled wryly. No truer words were ever spoken. He had painful first hand experience with making an utter fool of himself, and bringing misery down upon himself for loving a woman he could never have. "Assuming that I can coax her into my bed," he continued as if he hadn't heard Simon's

muttered remark, “which might take a bit more work than I have been accustomed to in the past. She does not seem indifferent to me, and although she is certainly no whore, she is not ignorant of men either. I have the uneasy feeling, though, that she finds my size as unnerving as I do hers. I think *that* is why she is skittish, but, to my mind, I think she is not easily intimidated. Once she grows accustomed to my hulking size and realizes that I am not so clumsy that I will step on her and crush her like a little bug, I believe she will be receptive to the notion.

“I could be wrong, but she seemed to find my body appealing,” he added.

Haig looked him over with interest. “How did you manage that if you have not ‘coaxed’ her into your bed as of yet?”

Chagrined, Audric chuckled. “I am no hand at mechanical things. I broke the pipes trying to fix them and soaked us both. I had to remove her from the area of disaster. I have put her in my room for now. Unfortunately, she did not fall for the ruse. She has made it clear that she *is not* prepared to share my bed with me ... at least not yet.” He paused, reluctant to continue, but at the same time unable to resist prodding with another dig. “Her face might be merely pretty, but her body takes my breath away. I do not believe that I

have ever seen a woman whose body was more appealing.”

“I had thought so. Is her patch the same color as the hair on her head?” Jorell asked with keen interest.

Audric grinned, discarding his reluctance to discuss the intimate details with an effort. Mentally, he shrugged. It was in a good cause and it seemed obvious that, however tempted Simon was, he was determined to resist. It could not hurt to give him a little push. “Much lighter, more red and her nipples a shade of pink that begs tasting.”

Haig smacked his lips, chuckling lasciviously. “Then her little lips will be as pretty a pink and as enticing to taste.”

Elden, who had said nothing until that moment, looked Audric over speculatively. “I had thought the moment I set eyes upon her that I would welcome the opportunity to lick her all over. If you have no luck with her, will you take it badly if I try my hand?”

Audric stiffened, feeling the sense of possessiveness clench at his gut again, before he could think of a response, however, Simon turned from the window and released a hissing breath. “I will go down and work out,” he announced tightly, stalking from the room

angrily.

When he had stormed out, slamming the door behind him, Audric looked at his companions. Almost as one, they moved to settle in the chairs and sofas arranged into a comfortable conversational grouping. "I do not think any of us should count upon collecting the woman's favors. If you've need of a woman, you should look elsewhere. Whatever Simon has said to the contrary, he wants her and if he sets his mind to have her, she will fall into his hands like a ripe plum. I have not seen the woman yet who could resist his charm when he blinds her with it," he said wryly.

The men exchanged varying expressions of disappointment, resignation, and irritation. "That is because he is the prince," Rama agreed glumly, nodding.

"Comfort yourself with that thought if you like," Audric retorted dryly. "But *she* does not know who he is, and it would mean nothing to her if she did. These Americans are not nearly as impressed with royalty as they are with their film stars! In any case, I saw the look on her face when she first saw him, if you did not. She is his if he wants her, whether any of us like it or not--whether *she* likes it or not. Even if we *wished* to challenge his right to have whatever he wants, and I would not consider it, none of us would have a chance

with her.”

Haig grinned. “Aye, he was ever a silver tongued devil!”

Despite his mixed feelings over the situation, Audric chuckled. “His silver tongue is not likely to help him now--I doubt that he has much more facility with her tongue than I do, and I am nigh hopeless. I had not *thought* that I would come to regret not putting myself out to learn it. But *the* does not need it. The man has a ... presence. There is something about him that draws women to him even when he does not *want* to draw them.”

He grinned more easily as the comment caused memories of more pleasant times to surface. “I have ‘rescued’ Simon more than once, for he has no more idea how he does it than I do, or of how to dissuade those he has no desire to entice. You have never seen such panic in a man’s eyes as I have in Simon’s. Not a flicker of fear on the battlefield and abject terror when some completely undesirable female crawls upon his lap and tries to seduce him into her bed--and they have done that, amazingly enough--for whatever it is that draws them to him also makes them brazen as bedamned.

“But when he wants them, he only has to *look* at them

and they come to him as if they have been summoned. Even Evangeline, although she was wise enough to lead him a merry chase before she allowed him to ‘catch’ her, was his the moment she met his gaze.”

He shook his head. “There have been many times when I have wished that I had even half whatever it is about him that makes women go weak and hot all over the moment he looks at them ... and almost as many times that I have been very grateful that I do not.”

Jorell burst out laughing. “Do you recall that toothless whore in Babayon? I swear I nigh snorted my ale through my nose at the look on his face when she crawled upon his lap and offered to suck his cock, pointing out she had no teeth to cause him any discomfort. I believe the little fellow crawled up into his belly to hide! He had the devil of a time coaxing it out again when he found a woman that *did* appeal! We had tried two more whorehouses before he had steadied his nerves enough to bed one!”

Haig snorted. “Little fellow? Your eyes are bad, or your ego inflated. I am loath to drag mine out when he is anywhere around for fear my ‘little fellow’ will be too ashamed to poke his head out.”

“I remember that! He *sneaked* out the back!” Elden said, laughing heartily at the memory. “No small feat

for a fellow his size. I do not know how he managed it.”

Audric gave him a look. “He managed it because I offered myself on the altar of sacrifice,” he said dryly. “And coaxed her into my bed instead. The things I have done for my prince!”

Rama grinned. “Well? Did the lack of teeth improve the ride?”

“I did not ‘ride’. I offered to let her suck my cock instead. It was not half bad, actually. The woman could have sucked the etching off of a steel blade,” he admitted with an easy laugh. “I thought for several panicked moments that my head would cave in.”

Elden rubbed his cock uncomfortably. “I am thinking I might go to the mainland and look up my woman,” he muttered. “I have not had a good ride in a while.”

“Did she not toss you out on your ear the last time you went sniffing at her mons?” Haig asked with a grin.

Elden sent him a sullen look. “She did not! She was not happy to see me ... at first, but these Earth women have very interesting customs. I reminded her that she had offered to be my ‘fuck buddy’ and she allowed me to persuade her. Simon can say what he pleases, but I

like uncomplicated sex myself and *I like* Earth women! I do not mind paying for it when I must, mind you, but I have never particularly cared to be serviced by a whore when *I know* that they are only doing it for the money. These *humans* , which Simon is so set against, give passion if a man is willing and skilled enough to draw it. For myself, I will miss that when we go home and have only the choice of binding or paying for service and may or may not get passion either way.”

His comments dampened the good spirits of moments before. “We are dead men if we return to Schalome,” Haig said finally.

“Not if Simon is ready to lead us,” Audric said grimly. “He need only show himself and an army will spring up on every shore to crush that upstart Jaelen into dust!”

Rama frowned. “I do not doubt that for a moment, but he would not believe, before, that his brother was after the throne else we would not be here now. I love Simon as much as any of you, but I know him well, too. Regardless of what Jaelen has done, he is still Simon’s brother. Simon may *think* he wants to kill him for what he did to Evangeline, but I do not believe that Simon can bring himself to kill his brother and if he does not, then we will have it to do all over again. Given time, he would raise another army of mercenaries and enemies of Schalome, just as he did before, and the results

would likely be the same--except that Jaelen will not make the same mistake twice. If he has to fight Simon for the throne again, he will make certain it is the last time. He will suffer no qualms about killing Simon, you may be sure. He would not have allowed Simon to live the last time except that he feared the people would revolt.

“They were enraged enough when he tossed Simon in that stinking hole for nigh two years and then dragged him through the streets and had him whipped like a common felon. I believe he thought that doing so would show them that Simon was merely a dracon--no god to be worshipped--but he miscalculated the depth of love the people feel for Simon. He will not do that again. I will not say it is a weakness, but there have been times when I have felt that Simon has too much heart and not nearly enough ruthlessness to be a sovereign.”

“He can be ruthless when he needs to be,” Audric ground out. “Never doubt that. But I think you may be right about his brother. I do not like to think what it might do to Simon if he was forced to kill his brother anyway--he has too much conscience. If he could have gotten to Jaelen that day, I think he would have torn him limb from limb with his bare hands, but afterwards” He shook his head. “I will take care of it myself when and if the time comes ... and I will be sure that Simon has no inkling that it is an assassination. I do not

want to test his ruthlessness myself.”

Haig studied him thoughtfully. “You think this woman is what we need?”

“*I thought* this woman was what we needed,” Audric responded. “Now I am not completely easy in my mind. We will have a hell of a mess on our hands if he becomes too attached to her.”

Jorell frowned. “Do you think there is any real danger of that? I will admit she looks like a tasty morsel--but no more than a mouthful--and she *is* human. He will not forget that. He *cannot* forget that, or where his duty lies. For myself, I had begun to make plans for when he has lost interest in her and set her aside.”

Audric shook his head. “*He is* worried, and that makes me nervous.”

Rama shrugged. “Then we will set out to seduce her ourselves. He will be less vulnerable to her if he knows that she has shared herself with any or all of us.”

“Do not even *try* to make that sound like a sacrifice! You want her as much as I do or you would not have thought up that idiotic plan! That is not likely to make a straw’s worth of difference to Simon anyway,” Audric snapped. “Evangeline was no stranger to men when she

came to him.”

They all looked taken aback.

“How do you know?” Haig demanded.

“Because *I* was her lover before him--and he knew it--and she was no virgin when I took her to my bed. You should not believe everything that he says. He is too fair minded to hold that against a woman when he has been such a cocksman himself, and too arrogant--and with good reason--to worry himself that his woman will stray if he chooses her. He was only spouting all that nonsense about whores to convince himself that she is not worth his time. If he believed that he would not be in the basement pounding out his rage on the bags.

“I will seduce Raina,” he added after a moment.

“And we are to back off only because you say so?”
Rama ground out.

Audric narrowed his eyes at his long time friend. “You will back off because this is what is best for Simon--and what is best for Simon is best for Schalome. I only dangled Raina in front of him to remind him that he is a dracon, and he is alive. It will not serve us if he becomes so smitten that he loses all interest in

returning home and reclaiming what is rightfully his, and we will be exiled forever.”

“So you will ‘sacrifice’ yourself? I do not see the difference.”

“You do. You just do not want to because you are ‘ripe’ for herself yourself. But the difference, if you must have it explained, is that Simon loves me. He is well aware that I loved Evangeline and he took her from me because he could not help himself ... and he still hated himself for it. For a time I hated him for it, until I realized that no one can take what you did not have to start with. If she had truly loved me, she would not have looked at Simon. She could no more help falling in love with him than I could help falling in love with her.

“He will fight harder if he believes that I care for her. That will give him two very good reasons to keep his distance--self-preservation for the heart he has already had broken once, and a reluctance to hurt me again.

“Please the gods, that will be enough, because I must pretend to be smitten with her or he will not hesitate to strike when his blood reaches full boil--and I am not at all certain that I can pretend and protect my own heart at the same time. In fact, I am afraid I can not ... and it *will* be a sacrifice for me either way.

“If we succeed and Simon turns his sights upon Schalome again, even if for no other reason than his need for a suitable mate, I will have to leave her.

“And if Simon can not contain his desire for her, then I am fairly certain that I will not be able to hold her to me anymore than I could hold on to Evangeline.

“The gods must hate me as much as they love Simon, else they would either have given me the same ‘gift’ with women that they did my half-brother, or they would not have given me the same taste in women,” he said tiredly.

Elden draped an arm over his friend’s shoulder, planting a sloppy wet kiss on his cheek, and then laughing uproariously when Audric glared at him and shoved him away. “I love you, Audric! I will save you from yourself by seducing Raina away from you before you can loose your heart to her!”

Audric gave him a look. “Such a sacrifice will not be necessary on my account!”

All of the men chuckled at that.

“I love you, too, brother!” Jorell announced with a grin. “I will gladly throw myself into the breach!”

Chapter Five

Simon was appalled to realize, once he had beat the edge off his fury, that every muscle in his body was screaming in protest and he was breathing as heavily as if he had sprinted five miles. He had worked out diligently for most of the years he had been in exile, all except the first anyway when he had been so weak and ill from prison and Jaelen's attempts to break him, in the beginning because his companions would give him no peace if he didn't, later mostly because it had become a habit--never once because it mattered to him that he keep in good fighting shape.

He was either getting old, or he had simply not pushed himself as he once did.

He frowned over that thought--both doubts.

He had not given any thought to his appearance or the years in so long he couldn't remember the last time it had occurred to him to wonder if a woman might not

find him appealing.

Not that he was wondering--or cared. It had only occurred to him to think of it because of Audric's comment about the woman finding *him* appealing. He scrubbed a hand over the faint bristles along his jaw, wincing as the gesture reminded him, sharply, that he'd beat the bag barehanded until his knuckles were raw and bleeding.

That had been unwise, he thought, studying them wryly. It was going to be hell working out now, until they healed.

He frowned as his stomach growled and he realized he was starving.

He couldn't remember the last time *that* had happened either. Mostly he ate because he knew he needed to, not because he had any enthusiasm for it. His 'enthusiasm' was back with a vengeance, however. He discovered he couldn't ignore the grumbling as he generally did and finally yielded to the demands of his belly and left the basement gym.

He paused when he reached the first floor and heard the tone that announced that dinner was served. He'd broken a sweat and he hadn't changed since that morning. Ordinarily, he would never have considered

sitting down to eat as he was--unshaven, unwashed, completely disheveled. Resentment filled him, though, when he realized a part of his reluctance now--the biggest part of it--was a disinclination for 'that woman' to see him as he was.

"To hell with her," he muttered to himself. He was not likely to see her, or she him. She would eat with Mrs. Higgenbottom in the kitchen.

And, in any case, he didn't give a flying fuck what she thought about him.

He probably smelled like *anaybst* --the furry beasts they rode into battle on Schalome--that had been run into the ground, but if *he* didn't mind his stench he saw no reason why *she* should. Setting his jaw, he slipped his arms into the sleeves of his shirt and left it hanging open. He was too damned hot to fasten it up and tuck it in. He combed his fingers through his hair to bring some order to it and then abandoned his unconscious efforts at grooming abruptly, leaving his hair hanging about his shoulders.

The glasses were another matter. Removing them from his pocket, he put them on.

Just one more reason to resent the woman's presence! He could not go about without the damned things

because *she* was human and was liable to faint at the sight of his alien eyes ... and then run screaming to the authorities that aliens were in residence on Milton Island.

Audric looked him over disapprovingly when he had sprawled in his chair at the head of the table. Simon regarded his half-brother broodingly, almost hoping he would make some snide remark so that he could feel justified in knocking his teeth down his throat.

“I would not worry about the glasses,” Audric finally said mildly, refusing to take the bait he saw in Simon’s eyes. “She has seen my eyes ... and yours. If she has not fainted, screamed, or taken off running by now, she is not likely to.”

Simon snatched his glasses off and pitched them across the room.

It was unfortunate that that little fit of temper happened to coincide with Raina’s entrance into the dining room. She jumped as the glasses hit the wall next to her, rattling the dishes on the tray she was carrying.

Simon felt dull color creep into his cheeks as she flashed wide, startled eyes in his direction. Clearing his throat, he glared pointedly at Jorell, who was sitting

next to him. Jorell stared back at him blankly and then whirled his head abruptly to look at Riana guiltily.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

Simon dropped his elbow to the arm of his chair, cupping his chin in his hand and pressing his index finger along his lips to curb the urge to smile.

“It was not I!” Jorell snapped.

Simon chuckled. “She can not understand Draconian. And I do not think she would believe you if you could think of the words to say in her language. You looked far too guilty when you looked at her.”

Jorell sent him a resentful glare. “You did that on purpose!” he said accusingly.

Simon shrugged. “I did,” he responded coolly. “It was an *un* princely thing to do. You did not expect *me* to take the blame, surely?” he added provokingly.

Letting out a huff of irritation, Jorell focused on Raina as she carefully balanced the tray on one hip and tried to lift one bowl of soup from the tray without spilling everything else.

“Pardon, lady,” Jorell said in his best English, pointing

at Simon. “He did!”

Raina frowned in concentration until she’d managed to settle the bowl of soup and successfully redistribute the weight on the tray. She flicked a look at Mr. Black--she thought he was the one Mrs. Higgenbottom had told her was Mr. Black--and then looked at Simon Draken. His gaze was focused on the plate in front of him, but she thought she detected a faint smile hovering around his hard mouth.

She wished the man hadn’t directed her attention to Simon. She was already having heart palpitations just being this close and dreading having to serve him. She was going to pitch the tray and run like hell if she spilled soup in his lap.

It was just as well she hadn’t gotten the full impact of the man when she’d first met him or she would’ve passed out and rolled down the stairs. She’d had the impression, then, that he was gorgeous. Now, with all that long, black silky hair hanging around his head in disarray, the hint of a five o’clock shadow on his hard jaw and chin, and the opened shirt that displayed the most beautiful chest she’d ever gotten the chance to look at, she could feel her kegel muscles clenching frantically and she had the horrible suspicion that her panties were damp.

She could *feel* the man's pheromones bouncing off of her in waves.

Ignoring Mr. Black's juvenile excuse for throwing *something* at her, like an--undisciplined juvenile delinquent--she sucked in a sustaining breath and moved around to Simon. The dishes on the tray were rattling from the shakes running through her. Color climbed into her cheeks as he very casually shifted in his chair to put some distance between them as she leaned to set his bowl on the table. She didn't know if it was because he was afraid she was going to spill the soup in his lap, or if it was a conscious or unconscious dislike of her close proximity, but she felt snubbed anyway. Moving around to Mr. Black, she gave him a narrow eyed look and plunked his bowl down in front of him hard enough to slosh soup over the edge.

Someone at the table chuckled and then tried to make it sound like a cough. She wasn't sure which one of them it was, but she suspected Mr. Smith. He was grinning at her when she flicked a glance in his direction. Turning her nose up at him, she stalked down the table and settled the last bowl of soup and then marched out of the dining room.

Mrs. Higgenbottom was glaring at her when she returned to the kitchen, her lips pursed. "You are to serve Mr. Draken first," she said coldly. "The others in

order of their station.”

Raina gaped at her. “Station?”

Raina wouldn't have thought it possible, but Mrs. Higgenbottom's expression turned even more sour. “Mr. Draken first. And then Mr. Smith, Mr. Black, Mr. Jones, Mr. Green, and finally Mr. White.”

Raina stared at her in disbelief. She was already irritated that the woman had told her she was ‘off’ for the day and *then*, when she'd come down to eat, had informed her that she had to serve first. Then *someone*, one of them, had pitched something at her when she'd gone in to serve their soup, almost making her drop the damned tray. And on top of that, she didn't know the first thing about serving and, if the woman hadn't noticed, she was clumsy, especially when she was nervous, and she *knew* she was going to make a mess before the dinner was over.

Especially since she couldn't come within ten feet of Simon Draken without turning to jelly.

“Look, lady! I can't tell one of the *Quints* from the other!”

Mrs. Higgenbottom's eyes narrowed. “You know Mr. Draken, do you not?” she demanded testily.

Raina realized abruptly that she was thoroughly pissing the woman off and also that she didn't give a damn if she was. "Tall guy? Boobs bigger than mine?--*Wait!* They're *reall* tall and they *all* have boobs bigger than mine! Dark hair? No that isn't going to work either!"

"They do not look anything alike!"

"Well! You *told* me not to look at them at all! Especially Mr. Draken! I'd have to actually see their faces to tell them apart, damn it! Otherwise I can't tell the forest from the trees because all I can tell is that they're all really, really tall--really, really big, and they all have long dark hair, and they all wear those damned sunglasses, which cover half their face anyway! *Maybe* I should examine their damned belly buttons and see if I can tell them apart!"

"*Mayhap* you could try being a little more observant? They are not *wearing* their sunglasses now!"

"No, because one of them threw their damned glasses at me when I went in with the soup and I'm *not* taking anything else in there if they're going to be throwing things at me because I'm slow in bringing on the chow!"

"I did not throw my glasses at you."

Riana's knees turned to pure water as the deep, masculine voice rolled over her. Her head whipped around so quickly at the sound that she felt a bone in her neck pop.

'The god' was standing at the door between the kitchen and dining room, leaning negligently against the door frame, his arms folded over his broad chest, making all those lovely muscles bulge. Her mouth watered. He reddened faintly when she gaped at him.

"It was a churlish thing to do--and I beg pardon--but you were never an intended target."

Riana averted her gaze, struggling to regain her equilibrium, feeling so weak she thought for several moments that she was going to do something really embarrassing--like faint. "Oh," she mumbled, resisting the urge to fan herself.

Mrs. Higgenbottom stepped into the breach, and although Riana didn't delude herself that it was intended for her benefit, she could've kissed the woman for distracting him from his intent study of her. She thought he'd been looking at her. She felt like he had been.

"Are you ready for the next course, my lor...Mr.

Draken?”

Apparently he nodded and returned to the dining room. He didn't say anything else, thankfully. Riana might have embarrassed herself by coming at the sound of his voice.

She was *that* close.

It ought to be illegal, she thought resentfully, for a man like that to be allowed anywhere in the vicinity of a starving woman. She was surprised women weren't attached to the man all over like limpets.

On the other hand, that might be why he never went anywhere. He was afraid of being mobbed.

“*You* carry the tray and follow me,” Mrs. Higgenbottom announced when she'd arranged the plates with the next course. “And pay attention so that you'll know the proper order to serve.”

Raina made a face at the woman as she followed her through the dining room door. Unfortunately, she didn't discover until she'd done it that, although Ms. Hatchet-face couldn't see her, the men at the table could and they were looking right at her when she did it. Embarrassed and completely unable to keep her color from fluctuating, she compensated by turning her

nose up at them as she stalked behind Ms. Higgenbottom to the table.

Mrs. Higgenbottom gave her a stern look as she removed the soup bowl and carefully settled a plate in front of Mr. Draken.

“What?” Riana asked, all at sea.

The woman actually rolled her eyes. “Observe!” she hissed.

“Oh!”

She removed Mr. Smith’s soup bowl next and set his plate in front of him. “Mr.*Smith*,” she said in an undertone, “likes his meat rare.”

Raina looked at Mr. Smith doubtfully.

He smiled at her and winked. She bit her lip to keep from smiling back at him. Diverted by his flirtatious interest, she almost ran into Ms. Hatchet face as she moved around the table and stopped abruptly because she was still looking at him when the woman stopped. The housekeeper glared at her. “Mr. Black likes his meat medium.”

Raina frowned, abruptly uneasy about where all this

careful instruction seemed to be leading. “Does this mean I’m going to have to cook, too?” she demanded in a loud whisper when the woman turned her back on her and moved to other end of the table. “Because I have to tell you I’m not worth a shit at cooking. They’re*all* going to get it rare in the middle and black on both sides, because I really don’t have the patience for cooking. I did say that when I applied. I distinctly remember telling you I couldn’t cook”

The last word was muffled by Ms. Higgenbottom’s hand as she clapped it over Raina’s mouth. Raina glared at her over the hand and then stuck her tongue out before she thought better of it. Ms. Higgenbottom snatched her hand back and gritted her teeth at her. Raina wiped her tongue on the shoulder of her shirt, wrinkling her nose. “Don’t tell me where you’ve had that hand because I *do not* want to know!”

Mr. White snorted his wine and fell into a fit of coughing. Mr. Black spat a mouthful of wine into his plate and then stared down at it in disgust for a moment. Finally, he shrugged and picked up his knife and fork.

Raina sent him a commiserating look. “That’s nearly as bad as dropping it on the floor. It’s*your* germs, after all. And they*do* cook them in wine sometimes. It’s supposed to enhance the flavor,” she whispered.

Ms. Hatchet-face grabbed her arm and practically hauled her out of the dining room.

“Exactly what was that all about?” the woman had the nerve to demand.

Raina slammed the tray full of bowls down on the closest counter and glared at her. “That’s what I’d like to know! Lady! I’ve got a lot of patience, but if you manhandle me again you’re going to draw back a nub!”

It was at that point that Hatchet-face lost her contacts and breathed fire.

Smoke, anyway.

Raina observed the twin streams of smoke that emerged from her nostrils with more than a little surprise. “Hey! I didn’t know you smoked!”

Someone grabbed her from behind and swung her in a dizzying circle. She didn’t stop until she slammed into a chest that felt like a brick wall. A hand settled on each side of her head even as she began to tip her head back to see who’d grabbed her. She met Mr. Smith’s mouth in descent.

She was too disordered to react with more than a jolt of surprise. As his firm lips settled over hers, melding

flesh to flesh in gentle adhesion; as his breath filtered into her mouth, merged with her own and then descended into her lungs and spread throughout her body, borne away by the blood pumping frantically through her heart; as he thrust his tongue into her mouth in bold conquest and filled her senses with the taste of him, a dizzying thrill went through her. Warmth rose up to envelope her.

Doubt flooded her.

She lifted her hands and placed her palms against his chest, above his heart, intending to thrust him away. She liked his taste and touch, though, enjoyed his scent as it became a part of her, relished the floating, dizzying intoxication of her senses, and, without consciously making a decision, instead of pushing him away, her fingers curled into his shirt. The tension of doubt and surprise uncoiled from her muscles and she swayed closer, relaxed her jaw to give him better access.

She felt a shudder ripple through his body as she closed her mouth around his tongue and sucked at it. She felt her body quicken, warmth and moisture and a gentle rippling of the muscles within her sex.

He tensed. She thought for a moment that he would bring her more tightly against him. Instead, he withdrew his tongue from her mouth, sucked gently at her lips

and finally lifted his mouth from hers.

For the space of several heartbeats, she remained perfectly still, waiting, hoping he would kiss her again. Finally, languidly, she lifted her eyelids. He was staring down at her lips intently, hunger in his eyes. As if he caught the movement of her lids, however, he met her gaze.

She caught her breath at the heat in his eyes.

And then she caught a glimpse of something in her peripheral vision and her eyes automatically swiveled.

And a jolt went through her.

Simon Draken was staring down at her, his expression nearly as taut and filled with need as Mr. Smith's, except anger mixed generously with his passion, or maybe spawned it. Instinctively, Raina shrank from that look, molding herself more tightly to Mr. Smith since he was blocking her retreat.

And behind *him* stood the others.

Raina crashed to Earth and burned. Still more than a little confused with the heat surging through her, she glanced up at Mr. Smith, glanced at the others, and then abruptly released her grip on Mr. Smith's shirt and

pushed past him to put a little distance between herself and the men--because all of them were looking--hungry--and she couldn't think of anything more unsettling than being the focus of desire of that many men at one time.

Mrs. Higgenbottom, she saw when she glanced around, was standing at the far corner of the kitchen, speaking in a low voice with Mr. White. The woman's back was to her, so she had no idea what they were talking about, because Mr. White's face was carefully devoid of expression. Frowning, she glanced back at the tableau of men crowding the door between the kitchen and the dining room and then looked at Mr. Smith.

"That was well done," Simon growled ominously.

Audric dragged his gaze from Raina and stared at him in tight lipped silence for a moment. *"I had to distract her. It was all I could think of,"* he said defensively.

"I do not doubt it." Simon slid a narrowed gaze at Raina's reddened, swollen lips, quashed a fresh surge of desire and fury with an effort and looked at Audric again. *"It is a very good thing that you did not have time to think of something more distracting else we would have witnessed something far more interesting, I am certain."*

Audric flushed, but his face went taut with anger.

“What’s going on?” Raina demanded as her stunned surprise gave way to a rise in anger when she realized they were discussing her in their language. She knew they were. Both of them kept looking at her.

Simon gave Audric a look of malicious amusement. “*Explain it to her.*”

Audric sent Raina a harassed look. Frowning, he fumbled around in his mind for the words he needed for several moments and came up empty. “No ... uh”

“Speak,” Simon prompted.

“Speak,” Audric echoed.

“English.”

Audric glared at him. “*Asshole!*” he ground out.

Simon stared at him for a long moment. “He kissed you to stop the argument,” he said without glancing at Raina. He paused for a long moment. “Because he was concerned that you would be hurt.”

“*What did you tell her?*” Audric demanded suspiciously.

Simon repeated it in their language. After studying him doubtfully for a moment, Audric glanced at Raina cautiously. She was still frowning, he saw, but at least she wasn't looking at him--at them--as if she suspected she'd been the butt of a nasty prank.

Simon pushed away from the doorframe abruptly and strode across the kitchen. "*Thank you, Tedra, for that delightful exercise in indigestion. I believe I will skip desert,*" he said coldly as he passed the woman. He paused at the door and turned to look back her. "*See if you can not learn to hold your temper a little better.*"

Mrs. Higgenbottom turned to stare at the door for several moments after he'd left and abruptly burst into noisy tears.

Raina jumped at the sound, staring at the woman in wide-eyed dismay.

There was a stampede of men as they vacated the kitchen abruptly.

Raina stared at the woman guiltily for several moments, wrestled with the urge to leave, and finally expelled an irritated breath. Instead of leaving, she moved to Mrs. Higgenbottom, stood staring at her uncomfortably for a moment and finally lifted a hand

and patted her on the shoulder consolingly. “Hey! It wasn’t that bad, was it?”

Mrs. Higgenbottom sniffed. Her chin wobbled. “He is angry with me.”

Raina gnawed her lip for a moment. “He’s angry all the time, though, isn’t he?”

Mrs. Higgenbottom glared at her. “No! I have been with him since he was a ... baby and he has never said a cross word to me, not in his entire life! It is *your* fault!”

Most of Raina’s empathy dried up at that hateful comment. “*My* fault? Hey, I didn’t spill *one* damned thing! And I didn’t start the argument. Why is it my fault?”

A hand clamped over her shoulder, spinning her around. This time, though, Mr. Smith grabbed her up and tossed her over one broad shoulder. Raina was so stunned she didn’t find her voice until he’d strode from the kitchen with her. “Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“No, Raina! No, no, no!” he said tightly. “No fight Tedra. Bad ting! Very bad! *I turn my back on you for five seconds and you are at it again*,” he muttered in his own language. *Lady, you have no sense of*

self-preservation at all! That woman could eat you alive. She is damned near twice your size and she is draconian. She is a hell of a lot stronger than you seem to think she is.

Raina reared up and tried to break his grip and slide off his shoulder as he headed up the stairs. He popped her on the ass with his palm. Raina gasped in stunned surprise and outrage. Collapsing on his shoulder again, she pounded on him in the general vicinity of his ass--his lower back because she couldn't *reach* his ass. "Don't ... you ... ever ... hit ... me ... again!" she snarled, emphasizing each word with another slap.

He ignored her, which only made her madder.

She glared at him through narrowed eyes when he finally gained her--their--room and set her on her feet.

Chapter Six

Audric regarded Raina with a mixture of disbelief, lingering irritation ... and amusement. He held up his hands in the universal gesture of surrender when she

took exception to the faint smile curling his lips. “*You seem to have gotten over your uneasiness around draconians, half-pint,*” he murmured in his tongue.

Raina frowned at him uncertainly, feeling her anger begin to taper off at his expression. “I don’t understand a word you’re saying, but I have a feeling you’re counting on that,” she said irritably.

His dark brows drew together. “No understand.”

Raina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I’m going to have to teach you how to speak English, Mr. Smith! If for no other reason than the fact that I’m going to go nuts with only old Hatchet-face to talk to.”

“Audric.”

She stared at him blankly.

He gestured toward himself. “Audric.”

Surprise usurped her annoyance as it clicked in her mind what he was saying. Allowing her gaze to wander over his face, she found herself smiling back at him. “Audric. I’ve never heard that name before. Should I call you Audric? Or Mr. Smith?”

“Audric,” he responded firmly.

Progress. She didn't know what all that business had been about in the kitchen, or why he'd abruptly gone all Neanderthal on her, but he hadn't taken exception to her pounding on him--which was a tremendous relief considering she'd been mad enough she hadn't stopped to consider that it might not be the best idea in the world to provoke Goliath.

If he was willing to let bygones be bygones and extend the old olive branch, though, she wasn't going to ignore it. Unfortunately, she didn't see any way to make any real progress in making friends with him--not when he couldn't understand much of what she said or vice versa. She heaved a sigh. "Well, Audric, I'm starving. I didn't get to eat. Do you think, maybe, you could get out of my way so I can go back down to the kitchen and get some food?"

She thought for several moments that he hadn't understood any of that when he shook his head.

"You stay. I get."

Raina studied him in surprise and finally nodded. If that was what he wanted to do, she wasn't going to object. All she cared about at this point was being fed.

She just hoped he didn't show up with something like

a peanut butter sandwich because she was going to be seriously disappointed.

* * * *

Audric met up with Simon as he reached the upper landing with the tray of food.

Simon studied the tray for several moments and then met Audric's gaze. "You are smitten," he said dryly. "Serving the wench instead of the serving wench doing the serving."

Audric reddened with irritation. "She is not a wench."

"She is not a lady."

Audric's lips tightened. "You did not used to be such an arrogant snob. She is not draconian. Our class system has no bearing on her. And it would not matter to me if it did. I am a bastard."

Simon looked at him uncomfortably. "A royal bastard."

"But still a bastard."

Simon met his gaze for a long moment and finally turned away, descending the stairs.

Audric frowned. “Where are you going?”

“For a walk.”

Consternation filled Audric. He glanced around but he saw no sign of the others. After looking down at the tray he held in his hands, he turned to look toward the room where Raina waited. “Shit!”

Striding briskly down the hall, he set the tray by the door and rapped on it. He had reached the stairs again when Raina opened the door and peered around. She studied his retreating back until he disappeared. Shrugging, she picked the tray up and went back into the room.

* * * *

Simon scowled with irritation when he realized he’d picked up a tail, particularly when he *also* realized it was Audric ... and Audric was responsible for the restlessness that had prompted him to decide to take an evening stroll to start with.

Haig and Rama had decided to head to the mainland in search of a woman. He’d managed to give Elden and Jorell the slip by waiting until they’d gone down to the gym to work off some of their tension on the equipment, and he’d thought Audric was preoccupied

with *that woman* .

All he could figure was that she was not nearly as fascinating as Audric pretended or he would not be out following him. He would be with the woman.

He dismissed that, almost reluctantly, after a moment. Audric was loyal to a fault. He would always put duty before personal desires and he was as convinced as the others that an assassin waited behind every tree and the moment they relaxed their vigilance *he* was a dead man.

They were overzealous to his mind, but they weren't completely wrong. There'd been a number of attempts over the years--sporadic, just often enough to make certain that they knew they could never relax their guard as long as Jaelen lived. He'd more than half hoped, in the beginning, that one of them would succeed and put him out of his misery. He didn't know how he felt about it anymore, except that, regardless of what they appeared to believe, he wasn't *seeking* his death.

He needed a woman. That was the biggest part of his restlessness. Since he'd seen *that woman* , he hadn't been able to think about much else. It wasn't *her* , not really. She was attractive enough, he supposed--not at all to his taste--but she was a woman and it was enough having her twitching her little ass under their noses to

make it impossible for any of them to get fucking off the brain, especially when Audric seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

He frowned at that thought. He'd been studiously trying not to think about that display he'd come upon in the kitchen, primarily because he'd gotten hard watching and every time he'd thought about it since he'd gotten hard all over again until his balls were aching like an abscessed tooth. As much as it went against the grain to take care of his own needs himself, he was not going to get any sleep tonight, he knew, if he didn't.

Anger surged through him. Not that he'd had a decent night's sleep since he'd seen her.

It occurred to him after a moment, though, that *she* hadn't behaved as if she was used to Audric's kisses. Audric had gone blank faced with raging desire, looked as if he was considering throwing her down right there and then and fucking her on the kitchen floor. He'd been in pretty much the same state himself, though, and it hadn't occurred to him, then, that Audric had looked far too desperate for someone who'd been assuaging his needs with a woman.

That didn't necessarily mean he hadn't been. He might have fucked her just enough to want more and not enough to have had a surfeit yet.

The woman, though, that was another matter. She'd not only looked stunned when Audric had grabbed her and kissed her, she'd looked as confused as she was rattled and he didn't think that was because she'd discovered *they* were watching the entire byplay.

He studied over that for a while, wondering if he was only trying to convince himself the woman wasn't warming Audric's bed, or if there was actually a possibility that Audric hadn't managed to coax her in to it yet.

Not that it mattered. He wouldn't touch her himself even if she hadn't.

He just needed *a* woman, not that one.

It wouldn't be wise, at all, to consider her because such an arrangement could get very uncomfortable very fast. She might get the idea that there was more to it than just lust and then they'd be looking for someone else to help Tedra around the house.

Not that that was his problem, but he didn't actually want her. He didn't see what the attraction was, for Audric, or any of the others for that matter.

They were just as randy as he was for *any* woman, he

thought derisively, and for the same reason. The sad truth was, none of them had had much in the way of female companionship since they'd been exiled. It hadn't been something that mattered a great deal to him, but he was well aware that it had been a hardship for the others. They'd chosen this world because it was the most like their own that they could find that was *also* inhabited with beings much like them.

And they'd discovered they still didn't 'blend' with the natives. The Earth people were a smaller race, but not that much smaller. Except for the eyes, outwardly there was very little difference. He still wasn't entirely certain *why* they didn't seem to blend in, but he supposed it must be that the humans, whether they were aware of it or not, *sensed* they weren't the same.

And, that being the case, they'd had to be very cautious about going among them. None of them, including him, wanted to have to look for another place once they'd settled. It was bad enough not being able to go home, bad enough living among aliens on an alien world, but it at least had some similarities to their home. They might not have that much if they had to leave and look for another place.

He stopped walking when he abruptly realized he'd gone, by force of habit, to the place he'd always gone to feel close to Evangeline. Turning, he stared out at the

sea. He didn't try to summon his memories of her. He hadn't been able to since

The loneliness returned full force, though--not the pain of loss. That had dulled, become a distant ache. He'd felt so empty for so long he wasn't even sure anymore when it had stopped grinding at his guts.

She'd left him, he decided. She'd come to him for years, wanting, hoping that he'd avenge her death, and he'd failed her in that like he'd failed to protect her. He'd allowed himself to be so wrapped up in his loss he had lost sight of what still mattered.

Revenge. Justice. He'd abandoned his people without giving a thought for what they were suffering--also because of him. Because he'd been too selfish to consider anyone's welfare but his own.

He had to go home, he realized. What he'd lost was gone and he was never going to get it back, but Schalome was still there, suffering because he had abandoned the people to Jaelen. And Evangeline had never gotten justice, never would if he didn't see to it.

Conflicting emotions welled inside of him the moment he accepted that he'd denied his destiny as long as he could. Homesickness warred with a reluctance to return to the place where he'd known the heights of happiness

and the absolute depths of despair. The need for revenge warred with a need to know true peace.

I am weary of being alone, Evie. If I do this for you, if I avenge your death, will you give me peace, beloved? Will you let me go?

* * * *

By the following morning, Raina had had time to consider everything that had happened the night before--over and over while she was trying sleep.

It had occurred to her that she'd allowed her temper to gain the upper hand. It didn't matter that she was tired and hungry and aggravated, and she still didn't know why Mrs. Higgenbottom had gotten so bent out of shape, she should've handled it better. Mrs. Higgenbottom wasn't her boss. Simon Draken was since he owned everything, but the housekeeper was still her supervisor.

If she didn't figure out some way to get on the woman's good side, she was going to be out of a job. The day before, she'd almost been ready to let it go. The thought had occurred to her to just walk out. She wasn't cut out for this kind of work. She'd thought it would be easy. She *knew* how clean. What was complicated about that?

But it was obviously more complicated than she'd realized. Mrs. Higgenbottom had lost her temper and if there was anything Raina had learned in the short time she'd been at the place, the woman was inclined to be unflappable.

She supposed it didn't really matter *why* Mrs. Higgenbottom was so stuffy about who got served first--undoubtedly it was some custom from where ever the men were from--*she* was going to have to figure it out.

She just wished she'd known before she'd taken the job that she was going to be expected to serve the meals. She'd never lied when she applied for a job. She would've told Mrs. Higgenbottom that she didn't have any experience in waiting tables.

Actually, she *had* had some--all bad. Her first working years had been spent waiting tables. She'd bounced from one restaurant to another for several years before she'd realized waiting tables was not only never going to get her anywhere, she wasn't any damned good at it. She was too absentminded to remember everything she'd been expected to keep up with--who ordered what, what the daily special was, what sides came with this dish, etc., etc.--and then on top of that, she wasn't the most coordinated person in the world. The first day she'd waited tables, she'd poured four tall glasses of iced

tea all over two men and their dates because she couldn't balance four glasses on a tray in the palm of her hand, and then *remove* one.

Luckily for Mr. Draken and the Quints, Mrs. Higgenbottom hadn't expected her to try to balance the tray on the palm of her hand or they would've been wearing their soup.

Two meals a day, Mrs. Higgenbottom had said. They 'broke their fast' in the morning with a breakfast buffet--*strangeway* to refer to breakfast--so she didn't have to worry about bad memory, lack of coordination, *and* not being able to unglue her eyes to see because she'd never been a morning person. She didn't come fully awake until around nine or ten o'clock, and she doubted they ate breakfast that late.

A sharp rap on the door roused her enough to sit up in bed just as Mrs. Higgenbottom opened the door. Instead of looking at her, the woman stared down her nose at the tray Raina had set outside the night before when she'd finished eating. "You will start on the front parlor this morning. If you want to eat before you get started, you should be downstairs within the next twenty minutes. Bring the tray to the kitchen."

Raina lay back down when the woman left.

Twenty more minutes of sleep!

She'd already rolled over to go back to sleep when it dawned on her that if she skipped breakfast, she was going to be starving come lunch time, and she wouldn't get to eat until she'd served lunch.

"Damn it!" she muttered, rolling off the bed and staggering into the bathroom.

The shower roused her enough to open her eyes a sliver. She wasn't much more awake, though, when she headed out of the bathroom to get dressed.

Audric was standing at the closet, stark naked.

That opened her eyes. It jump started her heart, too.

She stared at him in disbelief for many moments, trying to crank her brain into gear, wondering, since it was virtually a replay of the scene the first day, if she was only dreaming it.

"Audric?"

He looked disconcerted. "*You were in the shower. I thought I could change before you got out,*" he said with a shrug.

“Don’t talk to me in ... whatever language that is this early in the morning. I can’t handle it,” Raina said tiredly.

Moving to her suitcase, she grabbed some clothes and went back into the bathroom to dress. Thankfully, he’d dressed and left before she got out again. She managed to wolf down a few bites of breakfast before Mrs. Higgenbottom shooed her out of the kitchen. It was mid-morning before she came awake enough to mentally review the morning visit with any objectivity.

She supposed, since she was sleeping in his room, he might have the idea that it was *still* his room. And she completely understood that he needed his clothes to change. And if he was sleeping on one of the couches he wouldn’t want to move his clothes, especially since this arrangement was supposed to be temporary.

But for some odd reason, she had a feeling there was something going on that she was missing--like maybe it wasn’t just because of the inconvenience of moving them that Audric had left his clothes in the room. Unless *they* knew where he was sleeping, it was bound to look as if he was occupying the room with her.

And then there was the kiss the night before. Simon had said he’d done it to distract her from the argument with Hatchet-face. She’d been too bemused by

everything to really question it at the time, mostly because she turned into a slobbering moron the moment she discovered she was anywhere around Simon, but also because Audric had really dazzled her.

He was a damned good kisser. She considered herself a connoisseur of kisses. She'd kissed a lot of guys, or been kissed, and most of them were pretty so-so. Some were down right nasty. Some irritating. Some boring. Some ok, and every once in a great while, some were pretty damned good. On scale of one to ten, though, Audric was a definite fifteen. She'd had guys kiss her pussy that didn't get her that hot, that fast.

And pretty much all she'd been able to think about since he'd kissed her was if he'd do it again and if it'd be that good the second time. And if he could kiss like that, just how good was he in the sack?

She'd thought about that when she wasn't wondering if Simon could kiss even half that good and what he'd be like in the sack.

Which was why she was only just now getting around to realizing just how bizarre that episode had been.

She could understand everything right up to the point Audric had grabbed her and kissed her. She'd been arguing with Hatchet-face, getting madder and madder,

and old Higgenbottom had been getting angrier and angrier, and she supposed both of them had been getting louder, which explained why the argument had drawn attention. It didn't explain why *all* of them had piled into the kitchen.

They'd expected a show--that was the only explanation that made any sense.

She'd suspected, at first, that the 'show' had to do with that kiss. She still wasn't sure it hadn't, because she couldn't really remember what sort of expressions any of their audience had had on their faces.

Except Simon.

Simon had looked like he wanted to kiss her himself, and at the same time as if he wanted to throttle her--and not with his tongue.

If he'd been surprised to find Audric kissing her, if any of them had been, she'd missed that part, and she didn't know when they'd arrived. They might have been standing there when Audric had *started* kissing her.

As much as she'd enjoyed that kiss, now that she'd had time to gain a little perspective, it seemed like a really lame excuse. Kissing her to distract her?

Besides seeming lame, it was really depressing.

On the other hand, if he'd kissed her because he knew they were there and had wanted to make it look like something was going on between them, then that wasn't depressing or lame, and it pissed her off.

Trying to shake the sense that had come over her the night before, that there'd been more to it than a man seizing the opportunity to do something he'd been looking for an excuse to do, she studied over it again.

And she still got the impression that all of them had sailed into the kitchen because they'd expected ... something, maybe not what had happened, but something.

And then all of them had left when Higgenbottom had started bawling, except Audric had dashed back into the kitchen, snatched her up like he was some sort of caveman and hauled her upstairs--and he hadn't wanted to let her go down again to eat.

They couldn't honestly have thought the old woman was in any danger, could they? She didn't like Higgenbottom, and she'd been pretty ticked off about the woman manhandling her, but she was an old woman. She wouldn't have clobbered the old bat.

Of course they didn't know that, and Higgenbottom had said she'd been with Simon since he was a baby. Obviously, they'd *all* known her for years and years, because Audric had said they'd been living here for five years.

She thought that was what he had meant, although that was another puzzle, because none of them looked to be older than their late twenties. That would mean they would have been in their early twenties, or maybe not even that old, when they'd moved into the house.

That was hard to swallow.

She dismissed it as a puzzle for another time, though, bringing her mind back to the kitchen escapade. Abruptly, she remembered Simon had said that Audric was worried *she* would get hurt, not the old woman.

That was when she remembered that, just before Audric had grabbed her, she'd noticed Mrs. Higgenbottom was wearing contacts, colored contacts, because her eyes, the *real* color, was the same as Audric's, Simon's--all of the men's.

* * * *

Raina had no more idea why it was that she felt so guilty watching Simon than she did as to why she was

drawn to watch him to start with. Since her curiosity had driven her to find out where Simon went when he left the house, though, and she'd discovered he always walked out to stand on the beach and stare out to sea she hadn't been able to resist watching him when he left the house if she was able to reach a window where she *could* watch him.

There was just something about the way he stood so still for so long that did something to her, that created a yearning inside of her that she couldn't completely understand. His back was as ramrod stiff as ever, his shoulders erect, not slumped with dejection, but she *still* felt that she could sense loneliness and pain in him. And that drew her almost as much, though in a vastly different way, as her absolute fascination with the aura of power that surrounded him, and the less exalted, but equally distracting, lust she felt every time he came within her vicinity.

She had never been around a man that had that kind of effect on her, that she had only to look at to feel the urge to hump something--preferably him--as if she'd just shot up with some potent aphrodisiac. And the strange thing about it was that she wasn't entirely sure of *what* it was about him that made her feel that way. He was handsome and had a body that had a serious pant factor, but the other men were handsome and built well, too--Audric was gorgeous and he really turned her on,

but she didn't feel like she was going to melt just from looking at him. Her brain didn't take a holiday every time she looked at his mouth--or his eyes--or his hands. She didn't feel weak kneed and faint and clumsy and stupid whenever he passed through the room.

It was almost as scary, the way he made her feel, as it was enthralling and she could never decide whether she most wanted to run *from* him, or *toward* him.

Mostly, though, if she could command her feet to move at all, she ran *from* him, afraid he'd see the really embarrassing effect he had on her.

She had a bad feeling, though, that he *knew* how he effected her and that was why he always scowled when he got a glimpse of her because he hadn't looked at her once as if he welcomed her mindless adoration. He hadn't even looked vaguely interested until he'd seen Audric kissing her and she didn't flatter herself that she'd actually figured that much into the lust factor--mostly because *all* of them had the glazed look men got on their faces when they watched a porn.

“Raina!”

Raina nearly jumped out of her skin at the sudden intrusion into her thoughts.

“Get your cleaning supplies and come. Now! Quickly!” Mrs. Higgenbottom said sharply, turning away before Raina had a chance to scowl at her for scaring the pee out of her. The urgency in the woman’s voice communicated, however, and she scrambled to her feet, tossed everything into her tray, and hurried after the woman.

The housekeeper was nearly at the top of the stairs before Raina reached the foyer.

The woman might look as old as time, but she moved fast, Raina thought with surprise. Grabbing the handrail with her free hand, she hurried to catch up, stumbling about halfway up and nearly sprawling out on the stairs. Fortunately, she had a firm grip on the balustrade because she almost never managed to negotiate the entire staircase without stumbling at least once.

Damned treads! There was something about the height of the steps, or the depth of the treads that didn’t go well with the height of her step or the length of her foot because she always stubbed a toe on at least one riser going up, and caught her heel on at least one step going down, sometimes more than one.

She didn’t know how the men, with their great big feet, managed to go up and down the stairs without rolling to the bottom.

The door to Simon's suite was standing open when Raina reached the upper landing. Raina's heart instantly stepped up its pace. Since it was already fluttering a bit frantically from her near fall, the racing pulse had her panting.

Or maybe it was the idea of entering Simon's private sanctum?

Mrs. Higgenbottom stepped into the doorway.
"Quickly now! We must get the rooms cleaned before he comes back!"

Raina frowned but hurried down the hallway. She'd been at the mansion for weeks and she still couldn't get used to the strange way everybody acted. She supposed it was because she'd never been a 'domestic' before, had never even met anyone who had been--cleaning ladies, yes--but not a 'domestic'. It seemed really weird, though, to be so frantic to dash into the man's rooms and clean the place up while he was out.

As if they were magical pixies or something!

It wasn't as if the man didn't*know* he had servants in the house.

And Ms. Higgenbottom, she knew, wasn't as

awestricken with the man as she was, couldn't be if she'd known him all his life--wasn't afraid of him--so why the almost panicked way she ran around serving him and trying to keep from being *seen* serving him?

She didn't know, but she found that it really *annoyed* her. Mostly, she supposed, because she hadn't gotten the knack of the 'never seen or heard' part of the job. If he wanted to pretend they were invisible and didn't exist unless he wanted something, though, she didn't see why he couldn't just *pretend* it without her having to play invisible.

She was breathless by the time she scrambled through the door, but she didn't delude herself into thinking it was from the rush--not the race upstairs, anyway. It gave her a rush even stepping across the threshold of his suite, as if his aura lingered over the rooms. She stopped dead in her tracks when she'd stepped inside, though, her gaze drawn automatically to the huge portrait hanging over the fireplace at one end of the sitting room.

The woman depicted in the portrait was movie star beautiful, breathtaking--intimidatingly so. It looked like some old world painting, something like one of those famous old painter's might've done, partly because of the colors, and partly because the woman was wearing a style of dress that looked like a historical costume. The

long, flowing gown reached all the way to her ankles, covering her feet. She was curled up on her side on some sort of sofa that had one arm, half sitting, half reclining against the arm of the sofa in a position that displayed a nicely rounded hip and deep waist indentation despite the flowing gown. The waist of the dress fit just beneath her breasts, and at least half of those bountiful mounds were protruding above the rounded neckline. There was a lacy looking, standing collar sort of thing around the back edge of the neckline that started near the woman's creamy shoulders and stood up behind her long, graceful neck. Around that beautiful neck was a jewel encrusted collar, not a necklace, but rather a piece that fitted around her throat, making it look even longer and more elegant.

The woman's inky black hair was swept up close to her perfectly shaped head into some kind of intricate knot that perched directly on her crown, except for a thick, wavy lock that sprouted from the center of the knot and flowed down her shoulder and across one bosom. Freed of the intricate knot, Raina calculated the hair probably reached almost to the woman's waist.

Which would make it about a yard long, because Raina could see she was a tall woman--unless she was reclining on a really short couch.

A little girl, still with the chubby baby cheeks of a

toddler, was perched on the sofa in front of her mother. She looked like a miniature copy of the woman.

Mrs. Higgenbottom had stopped to stare up at the portrait herself, as if she'd never seen it before. Shaking herself, she finally turned and spied Raina gaping at the picture. Her movement had caught Raina's attention, dragging her gaze from the smiling face of the woman. Higgenbottom, she saw, looked, pale, shaken.

Raina instantly realized this was no classical painting of an unknown subject. Mrs. Higgenbottom knew the woman and child. "Who is it?" she asked in an awed whisper, wondering if, maybe, it was Simon's mother, although even that seemed improbable because of the clothing the woman was wearing.

"The princ Evangeline and Tiera."

Raina lifted her gaze to the painting again, noticing the background of the portrait for the first time. The couch had been arranged in front of very tall windows, or maybe French doors. Long, semi-transparent drapes fluttered at the openings, as if lifted by a light breeze, and beyond the windows lay a city. Raina could see the shapes of a multitude of buildings and the peaks of dozens of strange roofs that looked sort of like upside down ice cream cones--except they weren't perfectly conical. The wide base was sort of bubbled outward and

the narrow tips twisted. The top of a bright orange, huge ball of a sun peeked from behind one of the strange looking spires, partially hidden by a purplish range of snow capped mountains in the distance.

It reminded her of pictures she'd seen of the ancient buildings in Russia--except not quite. Something about it wasn't the same and it wasn't just the fact that there were mountains and she couldn't remember seeing mountains in any of the pictures she'd looked at.

“Evangeline and Tiera?” she echoed.

“Mr. Draken's wife and daughter.”

A shockwave rolled over Raina like the concussion of an exploding bomb. For several moments she felt completely divorced of her body, lost awareness of any of her senses. The shock suspended even her thought processes. She stared blankly at Mrs. Higgenbottom as she moved away, creeping like an old woman. She seemed to have shrunk somehow, aged. She looked a little dazed, as if she was wondering where she was, wasn't certain what she was supposed to be doing.

It clicked in Raina's mind abruptly that she'd not only not seen the woman or child, she'd not seen any sign that they'd ever been in the mansion. There were no toys, not feminine articles laying around.

Not that she'd been in Mr. Draken's suite before, but she*had* been in places where children lived. There were always signs everywhere--grubby little handprints, toys scattered about, things they weren't supposed to play with hidden behind chairs and under seat cushions.

"They don't live with him?"

"They don't live," Higgenbottom said harshly. "They've been dead" She stopped, frowned. "Five years," she said, almost as if to herself. "Can it really have been that long? I haven't seen the portrait in at least five ... Six? It's so hard to remember the years he" She broke off her rambling monologue abruptly as she looked up at Riana. "Cleaning," she said more briskly, looking around again as if she'd lost something and finally striding briskly toward the double doors at the other end of the room that opened, Riana saw, into a large bedroom.

Riana had to force herself to move. Her mind had taken a vacation and was no longer with her as she set to work cleaning, gaining a little speed as her frozen muscles began to thaw a little. Mrs. Higgenbottom came out of the bedroom a few minutes later, a bundle of bed linens in her arms, and left the room, moving quickly down the hallway to the back stairs.

The room, like the rest of the house, was actually not messy at all. She hadn't given it a lot of thought before, but with six men in the house and only the housekeeper, she supposed, before she'd arrived, it was almost amazing to realize the place wasn't a wreck. Her last boyfriend's apartment had looked like a war zone and he'd only shared the place with one roommate.

Beyond cleaning the floors and polishing the endless furniture and woodwork, and helping Mrs. Higgenbottom with some of the kitchen cleanup, there was very little cleaning or straightening to do. This suite looked the most 'used' in the entire mansion.

She didn't look up when she heard approaching footsteps until they halted just inside the door. A fresh wave of shock went through her when she did. Simon had halted just inside the door, his gaze riveted to the portrait over the fireplace mantel.

She didn't mean to pry. She stared because he always had that effect on her. Any time he came within her view, she was paralyzed until something broke the spell--a fly trying to fly into her open mouth or up her nose, the house falling down

The look on his face as he stared at the portrait crushed the air from her lungs, though, made her heart squeeze painfully in her chest. It was raw, the pain so clear in

his eyes that she felt it all the way through her.

She wished, desperately, that she hadn't seen it.

She must have made some sound, some slight movement. As she stared at him, feeling like crying, wishing she could sink into the floor, trying to make her body work again and at least avert her gaze from the painful sight of his tortured eyes, she drew that gaze. Instantly, all the pain she'd seen there transformed to boiling rage, fury that she'd intruded on something that personal, that painful, she knew, and it sucked every ounce of strength from every muscle in her body until she felt like a jelly fish.

“Get out!” he ground out in a rumbling growl that sounded like the low, threatening growl of a wounded lion.

Chapter Seven

Raina shot to her feet as if an electric current had boosted her from her knees. Escape was the only thought running through her mind as she barreled

toward the door, which he was blocking. His hand snaked out and caught her arm as she shot around him. Her momentum carried her in a tight circle, but she wasn't really aware of anything but a dizzying sense of disorientation until she was slammed back against an unyielding surface. The collision wasn't painful, but she didn't know if it was shock that cushioned her or if she just hadn't hit it that hard. She didn't have time to inventory possible damage or even figure out what had happened. A wall of flesh, as unyielding as the wall behind her, closed in on her, sandwiching her between the two. The pressure eased after a moment. A hand tangled in her hair, dragging her head back until she was staring straight up at Simon's taut face.

She didn't think, even if she'd had any of her wits about her, that she could've deciphered that expression. She certainly couldn't at that moment. The only thing rattling around in her brain was total confusion as to just how she'd gotten where she was.

Every muscle in her body seized as the dim awareness filtered through her shocked brain that the body flattened against hers was Simon's. Abruptly, she couldn't breathe. Weakness filtered through her in a stinging path from her chest outward, as if her heart had stopped beating and her body was slowly dying of oxygen deprivation. As devastating an effect as he had on her from across the room, nothing could have

prepared her for the way he made her feel at that moment.

Involuntary brain function kicked in and her lungs expanded abruptly, sucking in a gust of breath that carried a mingling of scents--a woodsy scent, the ocean breezes, the faint smell of detergent from his clothing, of soap and shampoo and aftershave, perhaps, from his skin although the light stubble of black hair along his cheeks and jaw and chin belied that. But the smell that overpowered all else, that wasn't identifiable or even detectable as an actual scent, was Simon, and she knew it without ever having been near enough she should've been able to detect it. The airborne pheromones reached inside of her and completed annihilation.

He swallowed. Mesmerized, she watched the movement of his throat, watched his face as it moved closer, filled her vision, and then his lips as they parted and then she lost all awareness of anything else as she felt the pressure of his mouth over hers. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest. Something hot and burning shot through her veins. Like acid, it seemed to burn a path through her and leave ash in its wake.

His mouth was hot, demanding, savage, almost hurtful, his tongue a conqueror, not a petitioner, as he thrust it between her lips and raked it along hers with a ravaging hunger that took the last of the starch out of her knees.

As she slipped, the hands she hadn't even realized were holding her, tightened, one on her breast, one on her waist. The pull of fabric in her clutched fists told her she was gripping two fistfuls of his shirt even though she had no recollection of grabbing a hold.

Fire pored through her, awakening her to sensation all over her body. As if she'd been frozen and abruptly thawed, it was so intense it was almost more painful than pleasurable. His taste enthralled her, intoxicated her. Her world reeled on its axis drunkenly and she clung more tightly to his shirt as she lost equilibrium along with all else. Her belly quivered, the walls of her sex tightening and easing in a milking fashion, as if begging for the feel of his flesh inside of her.

She wanted it, more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life before. Images flooded her mind of his body striving above hers. The thrusting sweep of his tongue in her mouth became the thrust of his cock in her nether mouth. The walls of her sex tingled and clenched in a mournful, aching echo of the pleasure rocketing through her from the feel of his tongue along the sensitive flesh of her mouth.

She sucked in a shuddering breath. Want, need, desperation thrummed along her vocal chords, emerging as an animalistic sound of supplication. An answering shudder rippled through him at the sound. His hand

tightened on her breast, squeezing and releasing like the muscles along her channel.

She moved restlessly, entwined her tongue tentatively along his to savor the taste and touch of him even more. Almost as if he'd been waiting for that sign of complete and utter surrender, or perhaps as if it had somehow broken through his own focus of his needs, he withdrew his tongue from her mouth, withdrew his mouth from hers as abruptly as he'd captured it. She followed the retreat as far as she could before the tether of his fingers in her hair prevented further pursuit.

His ragged breath fanned her face. She opened her eyes with an effort, no more than a sliver. His face was taut, his golden eyes, narrowed, but wild with the same savagery that had been in his kiss. "Next time," he ground out, "the forfeit will be more than a kiss. I will take everything I want."

A shiver crawled over her with the withdrawal of his heat. She stared at him blankly as he released her completely and eased away from her until he no longer touched her anywhere, too focused on trying to keep her legs from dropping out from under her to think.

"Get out!" he snarled. "And do not ever come in here again."

She stumbled over his feet as the order galvanized her to move at last. Grabbing the edge of the door to steady herself briefly, she fled mindlessly down the hall, unaware of any destination until her gaze lit on the narrow, rear stairway. She blundered down them blindly. Her feet skidded out from under her the third or fourth stair down and her ass made painful contact with the step behind her. It broke her fall, jarred some of the shock out of her along with her breath. She didn't move, couldn't gather her wits enough to even figure out how to get up.

Mrs. Higgenbottom appeared at the bottom of the stairs, fresh folded linens in her hands. She stopped as abruptly as if she'd hit a wall, staring up the stairs--past Raina's head. Feeling the hairs on the back of her neck prickle, Raina wrenched her head around to follow the path of the woman's stare.

Simon, still breathing heavily, stood braced at the top behind her. Dimly, she realized the sound of her fall must have drawn him. Her lips parted in surprise but the sight of him was enough to send a rush of adrenaline through her. She pushed herself up and stumbled down the remainder of the stairs, sliding across half of them on ass. Her grip on the handrail was all that kept her from pitching forward when she neared Higgenbottom and slamming into the woman. She nearly knocked the woman down anyway as she shoved

her aside to get past her.

“Rainie!”

Instead of freezing her on the spot, the sound of Simon’s voice calling her name sent another burst of adrenaline through her. She flattened herself against the back door momentarily when she failed to disengage the latch fast enough, fought for several mindless moments and finally managed to disengage the latch. Realizing at last that she had to pull the door inward to get it open, she wrestled with it and finally got the door open far enough to squeeze through. Without a pause, she raced through the garden, through the covered walkway, and across the front lawn.

She found herself jogging down the beach with no idea at all of how she’d found her way there. Feeling a stitch in her side, she slowed, gasping for breath. She heard the pounding of running footsteps behind her then, though. Whirling, she saw Audric barreling toward her. Uttering a breathless cry as her heart lurched in her chest, she whirled away and started running again.

She couldn’t hear anything beyond the roar of the tide and wind in her ears and the internal pounding of her heart. Thoughts flickered disjointedly through her mind, had since she’d fled Simon’s rooms, but she was in no state to try to collect them or sort them into any sort of

order. She didn't even know why she was running or where she thought she was going.

She'd simply yielded to an instinct to flee and been caught up so tightly in the urge that it continued to drive her even when she'd begun to feel as if her heart and lungs were going to give out with the effort. Something hard slammed into her abruptly, pitching her forward toward the sand. He fell with her, caught the brunt of the collision with his shoulder and hip, and it still jarred her painfully. She was only stunned momentarily, though, began struggling to claw her way out of his grip, driving sand painfully deep beneath her nails.

His arms tightened around her. Briefly, they wrestled on the sand and then he heaved himself over her, pinning her hips beneath his, manacled her wrists with his hands and forcing her arms to the sand. "Raina!" he growled when she continued to heave against him in an effort to throw him off. "It is I, Audric!"

She stopped abruptly at that, staring up at him. She'd known it was Audric all the time. A sob of a breath escaped her. Her lungs were still heaving so desperately for air she felt nauseous. Numbness abruptly gave way to pain and she expelled another hard sob. Another chased it, and then another until she was gulping and sobbing uncontrollably, hard cries that wrenched painfully at her chest.

He eased his hold on her wrists, lifted a hand to stroke her hair from her cheek. It was enough of an invitation to pour out her grief. She grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt and burrowed her face against him, trying to find comfort in his warmth and his scent. He rolled, carrying her with him until they were lying side by side, his arms tightening around her and holding her close. After a few moments, he began to stroke her back soothingly, murmuring words she couldn't understand--in his own tongue, she realized dimly. It didn't matter. It was still soothing and she still cried until she couldn't any more, until she could only snuffle and hiccough for breath.

Exhausted finally, she relaxed against him, more because she didn't have the strength to continue to cling to him frantically than because she wanted to let go.

"Why cry, Raina?" he asked huskily when she'd quieted.

Why? she wondered dimly, uncertain of why she'd wept as if her heart was broken, or why she'd run.

"Simon hurt?" he asked after a lengthy pause, anger threading his voice now.

When she didn't respond, he eased away from her, trying to see her face. She burrowed deeper against him,

trying to hide her tear ravaged face, to avoid the probing of his gaze. He wouldn't allow it. He caught her jaw in one hand and urged her face upward until she could only close her eyes to shield herself from him.

“Simon hurt?” he demanded.

Simon hurt, she thought. Yes. Simon hurt. That was why she'd cried, not for herself, not for anything he'd done. Although it had hurt her to the quick when he'd snarled at her to leave, she'd understood that it was fury borne of pain that had inspired it, anger that she'd seen something meant to be private and not shared, certainly not with her.

It wasn't *her* pain that had dredged up the hurtful wails. It was *his* that was chewing her up, *his* suffering that made her hurt so badly she felt like she couldn't bear it.

Because she knew, *knew* , that he had loved that woman, *still* loved her and there was not even a tiny little corner of his heart that was open to anyone else. She hadn't even realized that she had coveted that as much as she'd yearned for his body until she'd seen just how truly hopeless such an idea was.

She sniffed, shook her head. “No,” she finally managed. “He didn't do anything.”

His face tightened. The smoldering of anger in his eyes blazed into rage. “Liar.”

Her chin wobbled. “No,” she said on the edge of tears again, but she couldn’t explain it. Even if not for the language barrier that stood between them like an impenetrable wall, she couldn’t have explained that she *’d felt* the agony of his tormented soul to the depth hers and it wasn’t anything she’d ever felt before or wanted to feel. She’d run to escape the weight of it, unable to handle emotions more powerful than anything she’d ever known. She’d run to escape the shattering of dreams she hadn’t even realized she had been nurturing.

“No cry,” he said huskily, nuzzling his face against hers as he dragged in several ragged breaths.

Finally, he eased her away and sat up. When he released her to stand, Riana mopped her eyes and nose with her hands, wiping the moisture on her jeans for lack of anything else. He caught her hand, hauling her to her feet and then brushing at the sand that clung to her clothes and skin while she wavered and tried to find her balance. Slipping an arm around her waist when he’d brushed the sand off, he dipped and hooked the other beneath her knees and hefted her against his chest. She looped her arms around his neck instinctively. “You don’t need to carry me. I can walk,” she said on a

shaky, snuffling breath.

“No argue,” he said tightly.

She was too tired to argue. If he wanted to risk a hernia carrying her as if she was child, she was in no mood to quibble. Sucking in a shaky breath, she dropped her head to his shoulder and enjoyed the nothingness that had settled over her as her tears swept her clean of emotion, left her feeling empty.

Dread began to filter through the emptiness as they reached the front lawn. She hadn't run far enough or fast enough to escape the pall of sorrow that hung over the mansion. It shamed to her to realize she'd been too insensitive to notice before.

But she had, she realized in the next moment. She'd just misinterpreted it. She'd thought they were all cold and unfeeling when the truth was they were hiding from the raw emotions they didn't want to feel or deal with any more than she did, probably didn't *know* how to deal with any more than she did. No wonder they all looked as if a smile would be enough to make their faces crack like fractured ice.

Simon was standing at the head of the stairs as Audric began to climb them. Raina caught no more than a glimpse of his boots before she knew who it was.

Tensing all over, she tightened her arms around Audric's shoulders and burrowed her face against the crook of his neck. When he stopped, she hunched even closer to him, wishing she could become invisible. Audric's arms tightened on her, but she didn't know if that was because she was strangling him or not. She relaxed fractionally when he started moving again and she could tell by the change in direction that he'd turned toward the room she'd been using. The temptation assailed her to peek over her arms to see if Simon was watching. She quelled it. If he was, she didn't want to know badly enough to risk meeting his gaze.

She didn't want to see *that* again, ever. It had been hard enough to deal with the other things he'd made her feel, desire so powerful it wasn't even recognizable as desire, need that threw her into so much turmoil all she could think about was escaping its grip on her. She felt, suddenly, as if she'd lived her entire life up until the moment she'd first seen Simon in an emotional desert. All the pain, happiness, sorrow, anger, desires she'd experienced had been nothing, mere bumps in the road, so insignificant she wondered that she'd even noticed them now.

She didn't want to let go of Audric when he shouldered his way into her room and settled her on her bed, partly because she wasn't ready to give up the comfort of his closeness, but mostly because she'd finally emerged

enough from her self-absorption to realize he was tense all over, to feel the rage boiling out of him and threatening to explode in violence. “Stay with me, please?”

He peeled her arms loose in spite of her efforts to hang on to him. Fear squeezed her heart when she saw his face. She’d never seen that look on anyone’s face before, but she knew what it was.

Killing rage.

“Audric don’t! Please don’t! Oh god! Don’t! Don’t!”

He peeled her hands away as quickly as she caught at him again. “Stay!” he growled at her from between clenched teeth, his hands tightening around her wrists for a moment before he released them and stepped away. “No move!”

She stumbled out of the bed as he pivoted on his heels and stalked to the door. The slamming door reverberated behind him. The bellow of rage that echoed down the hallway made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She froze, unable to move, struggling with the urge to run after him and try to stop him and the equal urge to run and hide. Immobilized by the conflicting urges, she remained frozen to the spot as she heard the thundering raging of titans colliding down

the hall. The grunts and snarls and roars, accompanied by meaty thuds and the cracking and splintering of wood, sounded like two wild beasts battling to the death.

It was that thought that drove her to the door and through it. There was no sign of either man when she reached the hall. The sounds, she realized, were coming from downstairs and she surged forward, halting again in stunned horror when she saw Audric and Simon pounding at each other with their fists. A swath of balustrade and banister support was missing, as if they'd rolled down the stairs and slammed against it.

“Go to your room, woman!”

Raina's head jerked toward the voice. She stared at Mr. Black blankly until he surged toward her. Uttering a gasp, she whirled then and raced to the room, slamming the door behind her and then ran into the bathroom, slamming and locking that door and backing away until she bumped into the wall. She held her breath, staring at the door, expecting it to cave in any moment. When it finally dawned on her that he wasn't coming after her, she wobbled and finally slipped down the wall until her rump connected with the floor. Dragging her knees up tightly against her chest, she covered her ears with her hands and tried to block out the sounds of breaking glass and furniture that seemed to escalate for a time

before the silence between began to lengthen and finally stopped altogether.

It was a while before she realized she was so cold her teeth were chattering. She grunted with pain from stiff, cramped muscles when she unwound herself slowly and tried to get to her feet. She needed to get warm, though, and the promise of hot, soothing water beckoned. It took an effort to pull her clothes off. When she climbed in, she stood under the hot, pelting spray for a few moments and finally settled on the floor of the tub, allowing the water to beat down on her until it was no longer scalding, and then barely warm.

Feeling completely drained when she got out, she dried off, stumbled into the bedroom and climbed into the bed, cuddling a pillow against her. Audric's scent clung to the pillow. It was comforting. Burrowing her face against it, she yielded up the effort to stay awake and dropped into a welcome, black nothingness.

* * * *

Jorell dropped an ice pack into Audric's hand and then moved away. Sprawling in the chair across from the bed where Audric sat, he studied his sibling with a mixture of amusement and empathy. "You look like hell."

Audric said nothing, but he squinted at his brother

through the one eye he could still open. In truth, he felt like hell now that the heat of battle had left him and dreaded the morrow with the certainty that he was going to feel worse still before he began to feel better. “He deserved it,” he growled finally.

Jorell’s amusement deepened. “I will not argue that. It has been too long in coming, but while I am certain that it made *him* feel a great deal better to beat the shit out of you, I can not see that it has helped your feelings a whit.”

Audric glared at him, but he was too weary to maintain his anger and after a moment his own sense of humor got the better of him. “It was a draw,” he admitted, albeit reluctantly.

Jorell chuckled. “Only because this life he has led here as not kept him as sharp as he once was, a fortunate circumstance for you.”

Shifting the ice pack more comfortably over his eye, Audric moved from the edge of the bed where he’d been sitting with great care and settled on his back with equal care, letting out a long sigh of relief when it was no longer necessary to move. “Aye, you are right. There was a time, not so long ago, when he would have beaten me down in half the time it took him today.”

“A few more rounds like today and I expect he will be at the top of his game again,” Jorell murmured. “If I were you, I would wait awhile before I challenged him again, though. It is not likely to be much of a contest otherwise.” He paused. “I assume this was about the woman.”

Audric made a rude sound. “He did something to her, the bastard,” he growled, angry all over again.

Jorell said nothing for a moment. “He kissed her, nothing more.”

“So he said!”

“He is your brother, not mine, but I will say this. I have never known him to lie.”

“Nay,” Audric agreed tightly. “But he has been known *toomit* from time to time.”

“It is called diplomacy,” Jorell said pensively. “But why would he feel the need of it? You are closer to him than anyone I know. He was never as close, even to his full brother, Jaelen.”

“That serpent!” Audric spat. “I almost think his dame lied to his sire about that one! He is darkness. He has always been, since he was no more than an infant.”

Jorell shrugged. “Simon was the beloved ... born to rule while he was born only to dwell in Simon’s shadow. It ate at him.”

“He would have been that way regardless. His mother doted on him, far more than she did Simon. That is what is wrong with him, if you ask me, what was always wrong with him, that he was the favorite of that shebeast. Emperor Devlyn did not coddle Simon and see how he turned out. If he had had a hand in Jaelen’s upbringing he would have been a better man for it.” He thought it over for several moments. “Likely the woman poisoned his mind because hers was eaten with jealousy and envy. She spoon fed him her poisons night and day until she turned him into an image of herself. Likely it was she who convinced Jaelen that the throne was rightfully his. I think she hated Simon for being the image of his father.”

“Mayhap ... probably,” Jorell agreed. “Women have a way of doing those things.”

Audric turned to look at his half-brother. “You are suggesting that Raina is trying to drive a wedge between us?” he demanded angrily.

Jorell shrugged. “It is a thought.”

“One you can put aside!” Audric snapped. “You are too accustomed to the ‘ladies’ of the court, who dabble in politics and see that they keep some excitement or other stirred up. Raina is not of that ilk. She knows nothing about politics, especially ours, and she has no facility for deceit.”

“If she told you Simon did something to her and convinced you to behave like such a fool, she has a fair grasp on it!” Jorell said brutally.

“She said he did not do anything!”

“But not convincingly enough?”

Audric sat up abruptly and winced at the pain that shot through him. “You did not see her!”

“I saw her clearly enough when she came to watch the results of her little drama!” Jorell snapped.

Audric sent him an arrested look. “She saw?”

“Very little. I sent her back to her room.”

Setting aside his reflection that he and Simon had probably frightened her half death with the realization that going to her looking as he did was unlikely to soothe her, Audric studied his half brother in silence.

“Do you truly see her as such a creature? Or is it only that you would prefer to blame her than him?”

Jorell met his gaze for a moment and finally looked away. “She is no good for you, regardless of what I believe or whether she is or not, big brother. If you need a woman, come with me into the city. Stay away from that one. That one will steal your soul.”

Audric grimaced. “I am afraid she has already gotten her tender hooks into it, little brother. I have little will to resist the siren call ... and less every day.”

Jorell shook his head at him, smiling faintly but grimly. “Save yourself while you can, Audric. I am as certain as I can be that she has her hooks in *him* , as well. It will not go well for you.”

Audric dropped the ice pack on the chest beside the bed and lay down again. “I knew how it would be from the beginning. I have accepted that.”

Jorell snorted. “So you say now! But it is I will have to look at your glum face all the way back to Schalome and listen to your tale of woe.”

Audric smiled faintly. “I did not say that I would take it manfully. I said that I had accepted.”

Jorell stood up abruptly and paced the room. “Send her away. You have done what you set out to do.” He speared his fingers into his hair, clutching it for a moment and leaving it in wild disarray when he withdrew his hands. “By the gods! This is a nightmare! The fate of the entire realm hanging in the hands of this ... half-pint woman-child who is so daft she thinks she can take Tedra on one moment and weeps buckets over a cross word the next! This is as bad as it was with Evangeline ... No worse! She is not suitable for either one of you fools!

“This is a dangerous game, Audric! I should have seen it, but *you* know him best. I was certain that you knew what you were doing and it was the right thing.”

“*It was* the right thing to do!” Audric retorted. “The fate of the realm has rested in the hands of a dead man for years, who did not care about his own fate, let alone the suffering of the people he left behind. I thought that he would come out it on his own after a while, but it has become such a habit with him I do not even think he remembers *how* to live anymore!”

“Well he remembers now!” Jorell ground out. “Much more of this and he will be a complete madman!”

Audric frowned and then winced at the pain the effort caused him. “He needs to purge the poisons he has kept

locked inside him all this time. He never did, you know. If he could have, he would never have sunk so deeply in melancholia.

“It was not just losing Evangeline. It was losing little Tiera before her, the betrayal of his brother, and the helplessness he felt when he could not save Evangeline. *That* most of all, I think. He had never known what it was to be helpless. He has been treated almost as a god since birth, known his place in the universe, felt his invincibility as a dracon in every battle he fought and won. It destroyed his belief in himself when he was forced to watch helplessly while they did ... that to Evangeline.

“It is good for him to rage. Let him work it out of his system. When he has done ranting at nothing, he will turn it to good purpose. He will remember that he has a duty to his people and his name and take back what is rightfully his.”

Jorell stopped abruptly and glared at his brother. “You say that because you did not see him while ago. It took the four of us to drag him into his room when you brought her in. *I thought* that he had calmed down or I would not have backed down when he commanded me to release him. *I thought* you would try to make him see reason, but you were spoiling for a fight yourself!”

“We worked it out.”

“Nay! He worked you over and now he is pacing his room like a caged *leon*, snarling and baring his teeth every time anyone tries to speak to him. He ripped the portrait of the princess from the wall and pitched it through the window and dared anyone to touch it. I have not seen him throw such a royal tantrum as this since he was a youth.”

Audric struggled to sit up again. “I will go and speak to him.”

“You will not. I am set to watch you to be sure that you do not. Elden and Haig and Rama are bent on helping him drink himself into a stupor.”

Audric snorted. “He could drink them under the table any day of the week, and it is certain if he is still as angry as you say that there is not enough liquor in the house to do the job. I expect there is enough to mellow him, though ... especially when he has not had spirits in so long and has decided to *drink* his dinner,” he said dryly. “I will leave him to it, then. You need not stay.”

Jorell gave him a look. “I am not as big a fool as you obviously think, big brother!”

Audric grimaced. “It did not hurt to try.”

Chapter Eight

Raina felt refreshed when she woke--as well she should've since she'd gone to bed at dusk and slept through the night--but she was subdued as she left the room and went down for breakfast. She'd woken once during the night, hungry because she'd skipped dinner, but she hadn't wanted food badly enough to sneak downstairs to get it and in spite of her rumbling stomach it hadn't taken a lot of effort to go back to sleep.

Mrs. Higgenbottom looked subdued, too, which was a surprise. Raina had more than half expected the woman to bite her head off after what had happened the day before. To her relief, though, the housekeeper made a point of behaving as if none of it had ever happened.

When she'd finished eating, the woman sent her to clean the library to dust the books and clean the shelves. She supposed she should've been prepared since the housekeeper had said 'library', but she wasn't. She was dismayed when she discovered the library,

rather than a sort of informal home office with shelves full of knickknacks and a sprinkling of books, was a real library, with floor to ceiling shelves crammed with books that lined three sides of the enormous room. The other wall was mostly taken up by the three sets of double French doors, otherwise it would probably have had shelves, as well, she thought glumly.

After surveying the daunting task for a few minutes, she decided to start at the top and work down instead of starting with the easiest shelves and working up to the hardest. There was a rolling library ladder attached to a lead rail at the top and she pushed it to one end. She had climbed to the top before she discovered she had no where to set the cleaning tray once she got there. Climbing down again, she took the cleaning cloth she meant to use, soaked it in the lemon scented polish and shoved it into her back pocket for the climb up again. She'd already set her foot on the first rung when she remembered she was supposed to dust the books, too. Grabbing the duster, she shoved the handle of it into the other pocket and mounted the ladder again.

Dragging small stacks off the first shelf, she emptied it to polish the shelf and then began dusting the books one by one and replacing them. After a brief mental debate when she'd finished, she decided to keep going and clean all the top shelves first, then move to the second row and so on. She'd made it all the way to the corner

behind the door to the library when the door abruptly opened, slamming into the ladder. Clutching the ladder with both hands, her heart hammering uncomfortably in her chest, Raina glanced down to find Simon glaring up at her. The color fled from her face only to return again with a vengeance. She looked away, trying to remember what she'd been doing before he'd come in, hoping he'd just do whatever it was he'd come in for and leave.

She heard the door close and then the click of his boot heels after a few moments but it didn't sound as if he'd left the room. It sounded like he'd moved to the other end. Feeling as if she was being viewed under a microscope, she went back to her work with an effort, deciding to try to ignore him.

It was impossible. She doubted he was looking at her at all, but she felt like he was and, in any case, despite what had happened the day before she hadn't been miraculously cured of her fascination with him.

Actually,*due* to what had happened the day before, she was in a worse state of jitters. Her heart would race for a few moments and then brake to a halt and then kick in again. She felt over warm and then cold, depending upon what image taunted her at the moment--the kiss, or the fight afterward.

His face bore some interesting bruises.

She wondered what Audric looked like. She hadn't seen him since he'd left her and stalked down the hall to kick Simon's ass.

It was too much to hope, she supposed, that Simon didn't know that was what the fight had been about.

It occurred to her abruptly to wonder if he'd fired poor Audric. She knew he was a bodyguard. She didn't know why she hadn't thought about the possibility before.

Except that she'd been trying very hard not to think about any of it at all.

As sweet as it was that Audric had felt compelled to hammer Simon into the dirt because he *thought* Simon had done something to her, she did wish he hadn't. She hated to think he might lose his job on her account. He could hardly speak English. He was liable to have a hell of a time finding another job.

She supposed she'd find out when she served lunch.

She sure as hell wasn't going to ask Simon.

As much as she dawdled over the task, Simon was still planted firmly at the other end of the room when she finished. Trying not to think about it, she descended the

ladder and moved it to the next unit, opening the door and pushing it all the way back when she'd situated the ladder.

“Close it!”

Raina jumped, sending him a startled look, but she closed the door again. She was still so unnerved she dropped a handful of books while she was trying to unload the shelf. She stared down at them in dismay. She was trying to decide whether to just leave them there until she finished with the shelf or hurry down and pick them up again when Simon strode to the foot of the ladder. Bending, he collected the books and, to her dismay, examined them for damage. She knew what was coming even before he looked up.

“I trust it is not your intention to throw all of my books on the floor. I would like them dusted, not battered,” he said coldly.

He had to know she hadn't dropped them on purpose ... unless he had gotten the idea that she'd done it to attract his attention, she thought in sudden horror.

“Sorry,” she said weakly, wondering just how expensive the books were. “I'll be more careful.”

He lifted the books to her. She stared at his hand a moment and finally descended a couple of rungs to take

them, almost dropping them again before she managed to secure them against her chest and climb up to set them on the shelf.

It would've been a lot easier if he'd just go away instead of lingering in the library and making her so nervous. She decided, though, that she'd just finish the shelf she was working on and go to find Mrs. Higgenbottom and ask to work in another room. That thought relieved her considerably and she managed to clean the shelf and return the books without dropping any more of them. She was in such a rush to get down the ladder and evacuate the library that her foot slipped off a rung on the way down. Fortunately, she had a firm grip on the sides. Her heart was beating unpleasantly fast when she reached the floor, though, and her knees felt wobbly as she hurried across the room to grab up her tray. She didn't look in his direction as she let herself out and rushed off to find the housekeeper.

* * * *

Simon wasn't certain *what* he felt when Raina fled the library, but satisfaction certainly wasn't it.

He'd felt almost lightheaded when he had discovered she was in the library and had to fight the insane urge to flee like an inexperienced youth with no notion of how to behave, or control himself, around a woman.

Fortunately, that reflection had so thoroughly annoyed him that it had killed the desire before he could retreat in disorder.

His annoyance bolstered him for all of five minutes, just long enough to stalk across the library and plant himself firmly within full view of her ... if she cared to look, which she made clear she didn't. He knew damned well she knew he was there.

Guilt and embarrassment over his behavior the day before reared their ugly heads as he sat staring fixedly at her wiggling ass while she worked the cloth she held back and forth across the shelf. He had not meant to frighten her, had not meant to kiss her, for that matter.

He didn't know why he had anymore than he understood why he felt such a compulsion to drive her away from him--why *he always* felt a compulsion to drive her way whenever she looked at him--even if she wouldn't look at him.

She had not tried to entice him, not consciously that he could see, had not flirted or pestered him. There was no need to shun her when she was not importuning him in any way.

He did not know *why* she had not. He was not hard on the eyes. He did not need to be conceited to know that.

Women had always seemed to like his looks, anyway, and they did *notall* know he was the prince.

He would not have thought much about the uneasy glances she always cast in his direction if she had seemed *equally* unnerved by all the others. He would have put it down to her human instincts telling her that he was not her species. But she did not behave that way toward Audric--at all--she never flirted with the other men, but she did not seem to pay them any mind at all.

It was *him* she always looked at as if she had a ... prowling *leon* in behind her. Every gods be damned time he even glanced her way she tensed up and looked ready to faint or run, and he was damned if he could figure out why. He could not see that there was anything different about his face--it looked like the same face that had appealed to women before, mayhap a bit thinner, a hair older--but still the same.

And he distinctly recalled, by the gods, that the last time he had gone into the city to look for a woman, he had had his gods be damned pick!

He should apologize for being so rough, he thought guiltily. That had been enough to scare the wits out of her--*Not* that he would have had a gods be damned chance in hell of kissing her at all if he had not grabbed her before she could flee!

He *would* have apologized if Audric had not taken it upon himself to act like such a complete fool! As if he had dishonored her! Gods!

He should not have bellowed at her afterward. Then again, if he had not, he almost certainly would have behaved even more disgracefully because he had had to fight the urge to drag her into his room and plow into her until he had rid himself of the urge.

Ignoring the book in his lap, he turned to stare out the window, struggling with the frustration that had been dogging him since he'd first set eyes on that twice damned female and seemed to be getting more out of hand. It was worse than useless to keep telling himself he did not want her. He had been in an almost constant state of arousal since the first moment he'd lain eyes on her. His cock 'smelled' her whenever he was in her vicinity and stood at attention even before *he* knew she was there himself.

He was becoming obsessed with her. He knew he was. He supposed that was why he was so gods be damned determined to drive her away. Or maybe it was only the contrariness of his nature that, because she behaved as if she thought he was a monster, he felt compelled to behave like one, instead of trying to convince her that he was not.

He did not know. All that he did know was that he could not think straight when ever she was any where near him. And he was not doing a much gods be damned better job of thinking straight when she *wasnot* anywhere around him.

He had reached a point where he spent half his time hoping that she would just leave and end his torment and the other half fearing that she *would* leave and he would be no better off--mayhap worse.

He despised having to go into the city to look for a woman willing to take him into her bed. He felt uneasy to begin with because he could not walk into one of their taverns without attracting far more attention than he liked. And although he had long since learned their native tongue--more from boredom than for any other reason--he still did not completely understand their speech--because they used words *never* used on the television, which was where he had learned, and dialects that he had difficulty translating--and more than that their customs disconcerted him. There were no clear lines to follow that he could see. The women would flirt outrageously, rub all over him, and then sometimes agree to go with him, and sometimes grow furious and call him names and stalk off.

His need for release had finally driven him to consider

going anyway, but he had no sooner decided to do so than he discovered he had no interest it.

Because when he thought ‘woman’, his cock thought ‘Raina’ and he had an uneasy feeling that it might refuse to cooperate with him if he pointed it in a direction it did not want to go.

* * * *

Mrs. Higgenbottom glared at Raina when she reached the kitchen. “You are not done with the library.”

“Mr. Draken’s in there. I thought, maybe, I should work someplace else ... and not bother him.”

The housekeeper looked away. “Go and wash up and find an apron. You can help me with these vegetables.”

Oh joy! She was going to get to peel vegetables!

She rushed to do as she was told, but only because she was afraid she might run into Simon again. She wasn’t sure where her ‘arena’ lay--she still hadn’t found the niche that seemed to fit her just right, though the lord knew she’d tried--but she was certain it wasn’t in the kitchen.

Maybe, she thought as she settled down to peeling and

chopping vegetables at the kitchen island, she should reconsider taking auto mechanics at the tech school this fall? It had seemed like a good idea at the time because it was a skill that paid well and there would be the added benefit of being able to fix her own car--when she managed to buy one again. But she'd be working around men all the time and she didn't seem to get along with them in a working environment as well as she'd thought she would--not the men in this household, anyway.

She was getting kind of tired of going back to school to pick up a new skill anyway. With the money she'd already spent on training, she probably could've bought herself a house somewhere in this time or at least a mobile home. She hadn't exactly excelled at anything she'd tried before, though, she thought as she mentally reviewed her work record.

She'd been a fairly good beautician, and she'd liked it well enough. The only trouble with that was she'd had a problem with some of the chemicals, and anyway, after that time she'd burned that woman's hair off trying to straighten it nobody had seemed too keen on hiring her. So that was out unless she moved to another town.

Driving the school bus had been pretty cushy, and she'd been good at taming the little hellions, mostly, she thought, because she could bellow like a drill sergeant

when she wanted to, which seemed to have disconcerted them enough to get their attention. The hours had truly sucked, but she hadn't seen why she couldn't handle a rig if she could drive a school bus. Truck driving would've been better, she thought, but, there again, nobody had wanted to hire her even with her license and freshly signed graduation certificate from the tech school. They'd taken one look at her and dismissed her on account of her size. She was *alot* stronger than she looked, whatever those assholes thought, but she couldn't convince them of that. She'd seriously considered taking body building at the gym but had finally dismissed the idea. Even if she built up until she looked like a small ape, it wasn't going to add inches to her height and *that* was the main reason nobody took her seriously, or simply walked around her and ignored her.

So maybe she *did* have a chip on her shoulder about her size, but it wasn't her fault--*people* made her have the chip by either ignoring her or treating her as if she was as cute and useless as a miniature dog.

She needed to find a job where height didn't matter--that she was *also* good at.

It was amazing how damned hard that was!

She was on her tenth potato when Higgenbottom

decided to check her progress and nearly shit a squealing worm. “No! No! No! You do not *chip* the peel off! You are wasting half of the potato!”

And it was *her* fault nobody had ever shown her the ‘proper’ way to peel a damned potato?

Simon opened the kitchen door just about the time Higgenbottom had worked herself up to a good lecture and the woman clamped her lips together abruptly, sending him that special, sour smile she reserved just for him. “My lor... Mr. Draken? Is there something you need?”

He frowned, his gaze slipping from her--thank god!--to the housekeeper. The man always looked like a thundercloud when he looked at her. *That* was why she’d been under the impression that he was always angry, because he always seemed to be when he looked at her. She’d begun to suspect it was the breathing thing that annoyed him--as in, if she’d just stop he’d be a happy camper.

If she was honest with herself, she supposed it was her ‘hero worship’ problem. She’d always found idiots annoying herself--she just couldn’t help it. *Stupid* bothered her--and it gave her such palpitations every time he looked at her, or walked by her, or she caught sight of him, that her brain stopped functioning and her

mouth watered--not the one on her face. Even if her brain had been working and made it possible,*that* one dried up until she couldn't talk for the fact that her tongue was sticking to the roof of her mouth because *the other* one was gathering all her juices--and that kiss had certainly not helped one little bit.

It made her shiver all over every time she remembered it.

Not that she could remember it all that clearly. She had been *insuch* a state the only thing about it that she could really remember was that she was *insuch* a state she hardly knew where she was.

Learning about his personal tragedy had made things much, much worse. She wished, for an infinite number of reasons, she'd never found out about that, mostly because she thought if she hadn't she could've just dismissed her 'god' as an arrogant asshole after a while, not worthy of the hero worship she'd bestowed upon him completely without his consent--and obviously without his desire. She hadn't just heard about it, though, and made up her own little fairytale about the tragic, handsome prince. She'd *seen* what it had done to him and as feverish as his kiss had made her, his pain had reached a lot deeper, stirred things up inside her that was ten times worse than lusting over her boss.

As far above her as the man was, a man's cock was never all that discriminating. She might have had a chance of appeasing the lust, even if it meant doing so *also* meant she'd be waving goodbye to the job fairly soon and hello to the unemployment line.

The other--well she didn't need Hatchet-face to tell her that, to men like Simon, she fell in the category of something one stepped in and scraped off the shoe as soon as possible in the hope of removing the stench. She didn't have an inferiority complex, but she knew she belonged firmly with the working class. Even if she'd tried as hard as she could--and for him she would've been willing to try--she just didn't know how to act like a high society lady. She'd never been close enough to one to find out, but she knew enough to know she would always stick out as 'not belonging' and that meant no chance in hell he'd ever consider any kind of relationship outside of the bedroom.

She wasn't even the kind of woman a man would consider as a 'trophy'--not beautiful enough, young enough, sexy enough, and certainly not glamorous enough.

No matter how much she suffered for him, no matter how desperately she yearned to be the one to try to soothe his hurt, she was never going to get the chance to get that close.

She'd never spent a lot of time worrying about what she wasn't, but she envied that dead woman more than she'd ever envied any living woman in her life. If she could've just been half that beautiful, elegant, and graceful The truly 'stunted' like her couldn't *attain* elegance and sophistication, though. The best they could hope for was 'cute' and she'd missed that, too. She didn't have the face for 'cute', or the figure--or the temperament, if it came to that.

And she didn't *want* to be cute, dammit to hell! She wanted to be taken seriously. She'd never wanted to be cute, and she damned sure didn't want Simon to think so. She wanted him to look at her like he'd looked at that beautiful woman in the portrait--like she was a goddess or something.

“.... The handyman has arrived to repair the ... uh ... damages. When he has finished inside the main house, he will repair the apartment above the garage.”

Raina blinked, dragged from her abstraction by the keyword 'handyman' so that she caught the tail end of the conversation. She perked up instantly. “Really?” she asked hopefully, feeling such a dizzying rush of relief she forgot the ‘neither seen nor heard and never, under any circumstances, look directly at Mr. Draken, or draw attention to herself, or address him directly

unless he has addressed you' rule.

She remembered all that when Mr. Draken and the housekeeper both looked at her. Clearing her throat uncomfortably, she frowned at the potato in her hand. She would've picked up the knife and focused on peeling except, one, the housekeeper still hadn't given it back to her and, two, she didn't want to cut her thumb off in front of the boss and spoil his lunch.

Apparently, Higgenbottom didn't trust her not to bleed all over the vegetables either. She put the knife away and searched the kitchen tool drawer until she'd unearthed a potato peeler when Simon Draken left. Raina tried for a while to mentally calculate how long it might take the handyman to get around to the bathroom in her apartment, but since she didn't know the full extent of the 'damages' Simon had mentioned, and she didn't know anything about handyman work and how long it took to do things, she finally dismissed that exercise in futility.

She hadn't wanted to mention anything that might give Hatchet-face the opportunity to raise hell at her for her part in the fight the day before, but since Simon had already introduced it, she decided to see if the housekeeper knew where Audric stood now.

She cleared her throat. "I haven't seen Audric today,"

she said tentatively.

Higgenbottom stiffened and turned to look at her. Raina wasn't looking at the woman, but she sensed the movement and then the burning laser effect of her gaze. "*Mr. Smith?*"

Raina frowned, trying to decide what the undertones were in that query. "His name isn't Audric?" she asked doubtfully. She still hadn't completely got the hang of those names. They were just too 'generic' to keep straight.

"He is *Mr. Smith* to you!"

She didn't really want to get into another argument with Hatchet-face, but that irked her. "He told me to call him Audric," she said, turning to look at the woman.

Higgenbottom's lip curled like she smelled shit. "Earth American women, bah!" she muttered to herself. "No respect for their betters! If he said to call him that when you are romping in his bed, then that is his decision! Otherwise, you will respect his station and refer to him as *Mr . Smith!*" she added, turning to fix Raina with a hard glare.

Raina reddened, her hand tightening on the potato

peeler. Maybe *it had* been a really good idea to take the knife and give her the potato peeler before she insulted her? Briefly, she indulged a little fantasy about shoving the peeler up the woman's flared nostril. She gritted her teeth, counting to ten, and then to twenty. "Right," she said sarcastically. "When we're *refucking*, I can call him Audric. Otherwise, Mr. Smith. I'll remember that."

She fumed while she attacked several more potatoes, but when she got her temper under control, she tried again. "I guess that means *Mr* . Smith didn't get canned?"

The woman stopped and turned to stare at her.

"Fired? Dismissed?"

"He is not a *servant*," the woman responded with obvious disgust. "He is Mr. Draken's half brother."

That startled Riana so much she forgot about being angry. "No shit?" she asked, turning to look at the woman.

Again, the woman looked at her as if she smelled shit.

Riana counted to ten, and then to twenty, and she was still pissed off. "Look, lady! I don't know what your damned problem is, and I don't particularly give a

flying fuck if my breathing offends your delicate sensibilities. *You* are a servant here the same as I am so you can just get off your high horse and stop acting like you're better than me! I am *trying* to get along with you, but I'm *not* going to take your lip every time I open my mouth!

“Whatever you think, I'm *not* screwing *Audric* ! He's been nice to me and I just wanted to know if he was alright.”

Higgenbottom stared at her for a long, long moment. Finally, some of the tension went out of her. “The boys can get rowdy at times--that is the way of men, especially men of war such as they are--but they are deeply attached to one another and extremely loyal. Nothing *you* could do is likely to change that after all that they have been through together.”

Intrigued as she was by the first part of that speech, it was completely overshadowed by the snide remark at the end. Raina glared at the back of the woman's head but finally decided to let it slide. Nothing she could say was likely to change the woman's low opinion of her, and she didn't care what the old battle ax thought about her anyway.

She shouldn't have even asked the old bitch, she thought irritably, but at least now she knew *Audric* hadn

't been fired, which was the main thing she was worried about. She'd get the chance to see him when she served lunch so she could reassure herself he wasn't the worse for the battle.

She *didn't* get to see him at lunch, however. His seat was vacant when she took the food in. That worried her. There wasn't anything she could do about it, though. She couldn't just stroll around the mansion looking for him. Higgenbottom made damned sure she kept her well occupied.

Apparently there was work for the handyman upstairs and not just on the handrail and lower floor. Raina got the chance to see him climbing the stairs later carrying an entire window, which explained why Simon had taken up residence in the library, and made her wonder when the handyman might get around to working on the garage apartment.

Since the library was currently off limits, Higgenbottom sent her to clean up the front parlor. Most of the breakage had already been removed, but there was a good bit of glass and pottery shards still on the floor, which required a broom and dust pan for removal, and she saw the handyman was probably going to be working on the room after he'd fixed whatever needed fixing upstairs, and the handrail. Aside from several pieces of furniture that had been overturned,

there were holes in the walls that were the size of heads and fists and broken chunks of molding lying around--which marked the room as the main battle ground.

She stared at the carnage of the once beautiful room in dismay, more because it brought home how much battering the men had taken than because of the lovely things that had been destroyed. 'Things', no matter how nice, could always be replaced--usually, anyway. People that sustained that kind of damage usually wound up in the hospital.

She wondered worriedly if that was why Audric hadn't been at lunch.

Surely the old bat would've said something, though, if one of the 'boys' had ended up at the hospital?

She comforted herself with that thought right up until she entered the dining room that evening and got her first look at Audric.

Chapter Nine

Raina really hated the soup that generally constituted the first course, not that she had anything against soup, but it was hell getting through the kitchen door with a tray loaded down with dishes of soup and even worse trying to get the plate and sliding bowl on the table without spilling anything--because Higgenbottom always set the bowls on top of a plate for some reason that defied logic in Raina's opinion since it *obviously* wasn't there to catch the soup she spilled.

She'd just breathed a sigh of relief that she'd managed to negotiate the door and looked up as she moved toward the table to gauge the distance between herself and anything that might trip her up or that she could bump in to, when Audric looked up and directly at her. Sucking in a sharp breath when she saw his handsome face was battered almost beyond recognition, Raina dropped the tray from suddenly nerveless fingers.

Naturally enough the clatter of breaking dishes drew every eye in the room. Raina had just looked down in dismay at the mess at her feet when Higgenbottom charged out of the kitchen to see what had happened, stepped in a puddle of soup on the floor and executed the most amazing slapstick pratfall Raina had ever been privileged to witness first hand. She gaped at the woman in dismay as her feet flew out from under her and up into the air, her long, black, demure skirt

flapping upward to display her granny panties and the hose rolled to her knees. The woman landed flat of her ass in the middle of the soup, mopping up a good half of it as she skidded across it.

Before she could stop herself, or even realized it was coming, a gale of laughter erupted from her. She clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to stifle it. “Oh my god! Are you hurt?” she gasped when she thought she had her untimely mirth under control.

Not surprisingly, since her voice was shaky with suppressed laughter instead of the least bit sympathetic, Higgenbottom’s shocked surprise gave way to indignation and she glared up at Raina.

For some reason, that struck Raina as even funnier, probably because the usually excruciatingly dignified woman was sitting in the middle of the puddle of soup with her dress in her lap and her carefully coifed hair all askew. She tried not laugh. She really did. Another string of giggles erupted, however, as she bent down and tried to grab the woman’s arm. “Here! Let me help you up.”

Someone at the table coughed, which drew her gaze automatically, although she’d been at pains to try to pretend they weren’t there. She registered a couple of grins before she discovered that Audric had gotten up to

help Mrs. Higgenbottom up. “Watch the soup!” she warned, just before she stepped incautiously into a glob herself as she tried to brace herself to help pull the woman up. She skidded. “Whoa! Shit!” she exclaimed as she fell against Audric.

It was touch and go for a moment, but he managed to steady both of them, grabbing Raina as she plastered herself against him and started to slide toward the floor. As he righted her, she looked up at him, wincing at the painful looking bruises on his face.

It embarrassed him. She could see it did. He moved away from her and made his way around the mess cautiously until he was behind Mrs. Higgenbottom. A fist crashed on the tabletop, rattling dishes and glasses, as he bent down and hooked his hands beneath her arms to help her to her feet.

Raina’s head swiveled toward the sound. Simon was glaring at her, obviously furious. “Woman! You are a walking disaster!”

Blood flooded her cheeks. Raina bit her lip and looked down at the mess, realizing that she’d just ruined their dinner--again. “Sorry, sir! I’ll get it cleaned up!”

She stepped into the soup in her rush to get to the kitchen. Her feet shot out from under her and she

landed, hard, on her ass, spreading the mess before her. Stunned, it took several moments for her to realize what had happened. She lifted her hands and studied them, realized she had soup soaking through her jeans and snickered. Audric, she saw, had gotten Mrs. Higgenbottom to her feet. When she looked up at him, he shook his head ever so slightly.

She knew it was a warning and she still couldn't help giggling at the look on his face, even knowing it was probably going to enrage Simon more. Trying to disguise it as a cough, she moved cautiously to her knees. Audric extended a hand to help her up. She'd already reached to take the offering when she realized her hand was covered in soup. She came up on her knees, looked down at herself in search of a clean spot to use to wipe it off and finally rubbed her hand on her shirt.

She'd managed to conquer her mirth by the time she got to her feet and leaned down to examine herself. Clearing her throat uncomfortably, she grabbed the frame of the door and managed to make it into the kitchen without falling again. Mrs. Higgenbottom had disappeared by the time she got back to the dining room with the dust pan and a broom to get up the broken dishes and as much of the soup as she could.

She hoped the dishes didn't cost much. She'd really

been looking forward to seeing a paycheck. It was nice that she got room and board as part of the package, and one of the main things that had made the job so appealing in the first place, because she'd been expecting to be evicted any time from her apartment, but she needed money to buy personal items and she had to save up for when she got fired--which probably wouldn't be long now.

She was already a mess. There didn't seem much point in worrying about her clothes getting in a worse mess and in any case, she could feel Simon's simmering gaze the whole time she worked frantically to scoop up the soup and broken dishes. Fortunately, she and Mrs. Higgenbottom between them had already mopped up most of the spilled soup. She had to fight another round with her untimely mirth as that thought flickered through her mind. "Almost there!" she called out to the waiting diners as she dropped to her knees with a wet kitchen towel and quickly mopped up the residue on the floor.

When she'd finished and inspected the floor to make sure she'd gotten everything up, she dashed back into the kitchen. Mrs. Higgenbottom still hadn't returned and she hurried into the pantry to see what she could give them to take the place of the soup she'd spilled. Spying a row of canned soups, she grabbed them up and dashed into the kitchen.

There was no microwave, she noted in dismay. Grabbing a large pot, she started opening cans and dumping the contents into the pot on top of the stove, then read the directions on the can and added water. While the mixture was heating, she grabbed another dishtowel, wet it and worked on cleaning herself up as much as she could. The soup came to a boil and overflowed the pot before she could get back to it, extinguishing the fire on the stove. Shrugging, she turned the gas off and scurried to the dish cabinet.

It didn't seem like a good idea to try the tray again. Instead, she took out a new stack of plates and bowls and ferried them in to the men one bowl and plate at the time. She'd just returned from delivering the last bowl when Mrs. Higgenbottom reappeared, once again immaculate. She stared at the pot on the stove, and then the cans. Moving to the now empty collection of cans, she picked them up one by one and examined them and then looked at Riana.

“I improvised,” Raina said uneasily.

The woman looked at the can again and then moved to stare down at the remainder of soup in the pot.

Raina bit her lip. “There didn't seem to be five of a kind ... it was sort of a vegetable/noodle soup medley.”

Hatchet face stared at her for many moments, apparently wrestling with the urge to explode. Finally, she merely grabbed the cans up and threw them into the trash receptacle. “Go and clean yourself up! You can not serve looking as you do!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Riana responded, thoroughly subdued by the realization that she probably hadn’t ‘recovered’ the situation as well as she’d thought she had.

She discovered she didn’t have much of an appetite by the time she got the chance to eat. Afterward, she escaped outside for a walk in the garden, feeling too restless and depressed to hide in her room. She’d been sitting on one of the garden benches for perhaps twenty minutes, staring glumly at her soup spattered shoes, when Audric joined her. Immediately, her spirits lifted but they sank just as quickly at the look he gave her.

“I’m going to get fired, aren’t I?”

He shook his head and settled next to her on the bench. She studied him, wondering if that meant he didn’t know, he hadn’t understood the question, or if it meant that he felt sorry for her and she was definitely going to get fired.

“You should no have laughed,” he said carefully. “Bad

ting.”

Pleased to see he'd obviously been practicing his English, Raina smiled at him until the comment sank in. Biting her lip, she stared down at her toes. “No, I shouldn't have, especially since Hatchet-face might have been hurt. I just couldn't help myself.” She studied it over for a moment, remembering the incident. She chuckled, glanced at him and let out another chuckle when he smiled faintly. “She looked so funny, though!”

He hesitated. Finally, he lifted his hand to mimic the skew of her hair when she'd landed. “Hair flop over.”

Raina burst out laughing. “I think that was what was sooo funny! She's always so prim and proper and dignified ... and the look of disbelief on her face!”

Audric's eyes gleamed. He chuckled, then winced.

Raina didn't miss the wince. Her amusement died. “I amso sorry, Audric. Your poor face! Does it hurt very much?”

He shrugged. “Only when ha, ha,” he said finally, his lips twisting in self-depreciating amusement.

Raina felt a smile tremble on her lips in response.

“You shouldn’t have done it, you know. It was ... really sweet that you wanted to protect me, but even if he’d done something--which he didn’t--I don’t want you fighting with your brother on my account. I can take care of myself.”

He gave her a doubtful look, but she thought it was probably because he couldn’t understand half of what she’d said.

“I’ve been taking care of myself since I was sixteen,” she added, just in case that doubtful look had anything to do with disbelief that she was capable of handling herself. “My granny died and I didn’t want to end up in foster care like my little brother and sister, especially since I was almost legal anyway, so I took off. I hated that I couldn’t take them with me, but I could barely manage taking care of myself then. If my father,” she added, making quotes in the air with her fingers, “hadn’t been such an asshole and taken off when mama got cancer and died, they wouldn’t have ended up in foster care, either.

“I keep meaning to look them up, but somehow I never seem to find the time. It’d probably take a while. I don’t know if they’re even around here anymore. Honestly, I don’t know if I’d even recognize them if I saw them. It’s been” She paused, frowning. “God! Almost ten years! My how the time flies when you’re working your

ass off!”

She looked at him, smiling faintly. “You didn’t understand any of that, did you?”

He frowned faintly and then smiled apologetically. “Some.” He touched his lips. “Accent.”

Raina chuckled. “What? You’ve got a problem with the southern accent? I hate to break it to you, but I have trouble with *your* accent, too!”

He grimaced. “I work on. No good yet.”

Raina sighed. “I wish you could. It would be so nice to have somebody to talk to. Not that it matters now, I suppose. It’s just as well I got something out of the accident--a good laugh--because I guess I’m going to get the boot.” She glanced over her shoulder at the garage apartment. “Which sucks. I was really looking forward to living in that apartment. It’s the nicest thing I’ve been in since I left granny’s house.”

He took her hand. Staring down it as he settled it in the palm of his, he stroked her fingers. Surprise flickered through Raina at the warm, tingling sensation that ran through her at that simple gesture. She watched a little breathlessly as he lifted her hand and brushed his lips along her knuckles, feeling another pleasant gush of

warmth.

She saw his bruised knuckles then, though, and it distracted her. “Oh! Your poor hands!” she gasped. Shifting to face him, she grasped his hands in both of hers and examined them and then, impulsively, leaned down to kiss the injuries. “Poor baby! Did you miss his face and hit the wall?”

He was studying her intently when she looked up at him. Disengaging his hands from hers, he settled them on her shoulders and drew her toward him. She smiled, lifting her face readily for his kiss. She’d thoroughly enjoyed it the first time he’d kissed her even though it had been way too brief in her opinion because she’d just begun to get really warmed up when he stopped. She liked him, a lot, and more than that she found him very desirable, and sweet, and she felt so guilty about him getting beat up. She wanted to do something to make him feel better as much as she wanted the kiss for herself.

Their lips met, brushed.

“Ow!” he muttered, leaning away and sucking at his bruised lip.

Undeterred now that she’d set her goal, Raina came up on her knees as he released her. Leaning toward him,

she steadied her hands on his shoulders and brushed feather light kisses over his cheeks and then, very carefully, pressed her lips to his. He let out a hissing breath. Sighing with disappointment, Raina sat back on her heels.

His eyes were glittering with desire, she saw when she looked at him. Her belly responded by tightening hopefully, but she could see he was stiff and sore besides the bruises.

On the other hand, shy of actual death, men didn't seem to have a problem with sex if they got the chance of it, no matter how injured they were. She waggled her brows at him. "Want to fool around?"

He smiled faintly at the expression, but his dark brows drew together. "Fool around?"

She was always forgetting his limited vocabulary. "Fuck," she clarified baldly.

He looked startled.

She couldn't help but blush. She looked down, studying the definite ridge in his pants with a good bit of disappointment. "Never mind. I was just thinking I might be leaving soon--like to tomorrow--and I haven't gotten laid in a while, and I have a feeling you haven't

either. And everybody's sure we already have anyway."

She heard him swallow.

"Make love?"

"Are you ask ...? Shit!" She caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure near the house as she looked up at him.

She'd thought they were alone.

She wondered just how clearly her voice had carried to the man standing near the house and how long he'd been there. Completely disordered by the possibility that it might be Simon, since it occurred to her forcefully that he might have come looking for her to speak to her about the 'disaster' at dinner, she scrambled off the bench. "I have to go in now."

Since the man was standing in the shadows near the back door, she headed toward the front, moving briskly in the hope that she could make it in the house and upstairs before he could head her off. It wasn't that she thought she could actually put off a termination speech by running to hide. If he had that in mind, he was going to corner her sooner or later, but she thought later might be better. That might give him time to forget she was in the garden trying to hump his brother directly after the disaster at dinner, because she was pretty sure that wasn

't going to improve his mood.

She almost skidded to halt when she came through the door and saw Simon advancing toward her from the rear of the house. "Uh oh," she gasped and headed up the stairs at a gallop.

Any hope she'd entertained that he wasn't actually following her died when she heard his swift ascent on the stairs behind her. Throwing a panicked glance backward when she reached the landing, she sprinted toward her bedroom, hoping he'd decide not to follow her there. He caught the door with his hand as she leapt inside and turned to close it. She stared at him warily and gulped.

Simon tried to steady himself, struggled to reclaim his reason, dimly aware that he was perilously near his limit and running more on instinct than reason. He hadn't wanted to go any where near Raina, hadn't trusted himself to do so and retain his wits, but the woman had Tedra quivering on the verge of a nervous breakdown and she'd wrangled a promise from him to speak to Raina.

He shouldn't have followed Audric. He'd suspected immediately that *he* knew where Raina had disappeared to and, moreover, that it was probably a prearranged assignation between them. In point of fact, it was that

suspicion that had goaded him to follow. Otherwise, he would gladly have dismissed his promise to Tedra and waited until he was in a better frame of mind to speak to Raina.

All of which was a moot point. He had gone and instead of turning around and leaving when he saw his suspicions had been confirmed, he'd been rooted to the spot. He hadn't heard much, or registered it in any event. He'd been far more focused on the sound of her voice, her husky chuckles, the way she looked at Audric--touched him, offered herself to him. And equal parts rage and lust had battled it out inside of him and grown hotter and hotter until, together, they'd deprived him of any ability to do anything but act on instinct.

And then she'd seen him.

And she'd run.

If she hadn't, his hunting instincts might not have kicked in, but that was a moot point, too. With rage and lust already goading him past the ability to reason, he'd had nothing to stem the instinctive urge to give chase.

As he stared down into her wide green eyes, he saw the uneasiness in them and a flicker of doubt went through him, but he saw the other, too. The look he could never completely fathom. The look that made him feel as if

he was the center of her universe, that made him want to be. The look that made him want to hold her and caress her with infinite tenderness. And at the same time made him want to tear her clothes off of her and ravish every tender inch of her flesh until she was screaming his name and begging him for more.

That look that had made him want to run, made his heart beat so hard he felt like it would choke him to death.

The look that had compelled him to try to drive her away because with every fiber of his being, worse than he'd ever wanted anything in his life, he'd wanted to grab what she offered with both hands and nothing had ever terrified him as much in his life.

He hesitated, wavering as he felt that gut wrenching tug again to go in two diametrically opposed directions at once, and then he took a step toward her.

And she took a step back.

He advanced on her, stalking her step for step until he had her cornered, knew he'd cut off her retreat as he slung the door to behind him. She jumped at the sound, her gaze flickering from his face to the door and back again. The look of uneasiness slid through her eyes again, this time more pronounced, impossible to ignore.

She hadn't looked at Audric like that.

But then Audric hadn't been making a complete ass out of himself, trying to scare her away because he didn't have the guts to take her *or* run.

And he didn't give a fuck. It still pissed him off. "You do not mean to offer me what you offered him?" he growled.

Confusion filled her eyes. He folded his arms over his chest and leaned back against the door instead of doing what he wanted to do, which was to grab her and shake her till her teeth rattled. How dare she look at him that way, the way she'd looked at him from that first day, *make* him want her when he didn't want to and then offer herself to Audric? "No, let us fuck, Simon?"

She blinked at him rapidly as she assimilated that and then turned bright red. Only part of it was embarrassment, though. The dreamy, worshipful, faraway look left her eyes to be replaced by anger.

Good, he thought with satisfaction. He wanted a fight. He realized he'd been spoiling for it ever since he'd kissed her--that and a good fuck. "If you had it in mind to use him to intervene on your behalf, why not go straight to the source?" he ground out, deliberately

goaded her. He knew very well that wasn't what she'd had in mind, but he would have preferred it to what she had done--offered comfort, affection--because he could have felt contempt then instead of raging jealousy.

The anger in her eyes gave way to hurt, and then resignation, and then more anger. She lifted her jaw at him. "That was none of your*fucking* business!" she growled at him. "It had*nothing* to do with you at all!" She clamped her lips together, staring at him in quivering rage for several moments and then whirled away from him and stalked to the bed. Dragging her suitcase out from under it, she opened it and stomped into the bathroom. When she came out again, she had an armload of cosmetics. She dropped them into the open suitcase and glared at him. "And I don't have to take this shit from anybody! I don't care if you are my boss! I quit! You can go to hell and everybody else in this damned house can go to hell, too! I'm sorry you lost your wife, but you might consider not being such a complete asshole to everybody!"

If she'd said anything but that he would've accepted defeat and left because he realized the moment she started packing that he'd pushed her too far, that he'd succeeded in driving her away when it was the last thing in the world he really wanted. That stab went right through him, though, like a knife. "I did not*lose* my wife!" he snarled.

She froze, staring at him in confusion, her anger effectively diffused, though he was too raw to fully register it.

“She was murdered, right in front of my eyes ... and not cleanly, not quickly. I had to watch her die by inches, had to because I could not help her, could not stop it, and because I could not, I had no right to look away and spare myself the pain of watching when I could not spare her the pain of dying.”

He came away from the door abruptly, intending to leave--he thought. Instead he surged toward her, grasped her upper arms. “Do not look at me like that! I do not want your pity! I do not need your pity, damn you to hell!”

“What do you want?” she asked quietly.

He stared down at her upturned face blankly. Everything inside of him stilled. He swallowed with an effort against the rawness of his throat and forced his fingers to ease the bruising grip on her arms and then release her.

He wanted her to make him whole again, to drive the nightmares from his mind and the emptiness from his soul, he realized, feeling a swell of panic.

Because he knew there was only one way she could do that.

And he could not handle that, not again.

He turned away from her, strode toward the door, feeling weak and cold and sick with the emotions churning in his belly. She followed him. He froze with his hand on the doorknob as her hand skated along his back, seductive, warming. He wavered again between retreat and attack. Turning on her abruptly, he caught her and shoved her away none too gently, but then, instead of running while he could, which every instinct inside of him was screaming for him to do, he followed her as she stumbled back against the wall. *A taste*, he thought mindlessly, *just a taste of her and I will stop*.

Chapter Ten

Those eyes of hers stopped Simon cold even as he dragged her head back, bent on *making* her stay away from him if he couldn't stay away from her. They were soft, filled with trust, warm with her own desires. He

stared into those green depths for several moments and knew defeat. He drew a shuddering breath and dropped his head to rest his forehead against hers. “Do not run from me anymore, Rainie,” he said raggedly. “I am sorry, so sorry ... for all the things I said to you.”

He heard her swallow. “Ok,” she said breathlessly.

He drew a ragged breath. “I am so tired of fighting this.”

“Then don’t.”

He eased away to study her face, staring at her while that slowly sank into his mind. Abruptly, he realized that she was right. Instead of fighting the temptation, he should have yielded to it, expunged it by indulging it to the fullest until he’d sated himself on her. A red haze of lust flooded him, released abruptly by his certainty that *he could* expend it. He felt a tremor begin deep inside of him and work its way outward until he was shaking with it. A deep hunger flowed with it.

Slipping one hand to her cheek, he lowered his mouth to hers. The hunger intensified as his lips met hers, clung, and he absorbed her warmth, her taste, her desire. Spearing his tongue past her lips, he raked it possessively along hers, branding her with his taste and touch, taking her essence for himself. As he swallowed

it, sucked it into his lungs, it fed the hunger like aged kindling fed fire. It made him drunk with need. The little sound she made, of want, of surrender, made it blaze higher.

For an endless time, all he could think about was absorbing her taste and scent forever, reveling in the hot, wet feel of her mouth as he explored it possessively.

And then that wasn't enough.

And he still didn't want to let go of what he had.

With great reluctance, he withdrew his tongue from her mouth, sucked gently at her lips and finally broke that point of contact, promising himself he'd taste it again, once he'd tasted and touched the rest of her. His hands were shaking when he grabbed her shirt and dragged it off over her head. He skimmed his hands down over the thing she wore beneath it that imprisoned her breasts, and then across the expanse of bare skin beneath that until he reached the waist of her pants.

He would never have believed a woman could wear pants and still look so womanly all he could think about was how quickly could he peel them off of her to find his prize. He met her gaze as he slipped his hands upward again, spearing his fingers beneath the thing that

covered her breasts and peeling it upward and off of her as he had her shirt, tossing it away blindly as he had her shirt. “Your breasts are beautiful,” he said hoarsely as he stared down at them, mesmerized by the pert little pink tips, feeling his mouth go dry with the need to taste.

He cupped a breast in either hand, squeezing the soft globes gently, relishing the weight of them in his palms, the silkiness of her skin, the yielding of her flesh to his touch, and then slipped his hands to the center and caught the tight little buds he wanted to taste so badly between his thumbs and forefingers, plucking at them, rolling them to examine the contrast between the taut little buds and the soft swell of her breasts.

She made a sound, released a shuddering exhalation of breath, and he flicked his rapt gaze from her breasts to her face. The pleasure he saw there captured his attention for a handful of seconds, and then he looked down at her breasts again.

Dilemma. He couldn’t reach them to suck them into his mouth and explore them like he wanted to. The top of her head barely reached his pecs. He stared down at her, abruptly disconcerted by how tiny she was next to him, but he was far more troubled by his dilemma.

Get down on his knees? Lift her up? Lay her down?

The glint of a tiny ring in her belly button caught his eye. He skimmed hands that shook with urgency down her body, stroked one finger over it and then abruptly began tugging at the fastener of her pants, anxious to see the rest of his prize. Shoving his hands inside the moment he had mastered the closure, he peeled her pants from her hips as he followed the curvature of her hips, then explored the shape and tautness of her buttocks and finally stroked her belly, threading his fingers through the bright curls on her mons.

He met her gaze again as he was swept up in a feverish need to possess her that moment. Spearing his hands beneath her arms, he lifted her straight up, shifting one arm beneath her buttocks to support her once he had and opening his mouth over the tip of one breast. The sound she made when he sucked the turgid peak, the taste of her that flooded his mouth, sent a dizzying rush through him, shredded the last of his reason.

Pushing and tugging at her pants as he suckled feverishly at first one breast and then the other, a sense of profound relief filled him as he felt them drop to the floor at last. Freed from the fetter, she lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist. The hot dampness of her cleft on his belly, the light, musky scent of her arousal drove him over the edge. He wedged her body between his and the wall behind her, groping for the fastening of

his own pants blindly, so mindless with need, so shaky, he was ready to rip the thing open before he finally managed to unearth his cock and guide it into her opening.

Her heat seared him as he wedged the head of his cock inside her opening, crushing the air from his lungs. Releasing his hold on her breast for a moment, he sucked in a harsh breath and curled his hips, straining to press himself more deeply inside her channel. His heart, thundering deafeningly in his ears, muted the little sounds she made, but they whispered over him, sending shudders through him. Tightening his arms around her and pressing down on her in counter, he glided deeper, feeling the squeeze of her body around his shaft in his chest until he began to think his heart and lungs would explode.

He sought her mouth, covered it, darting forays inside the heated cavern of her mouth with his tongue as he heaved and pushed desperately to claim all of her before he lost his seed, to feel her hot, wet flesh surrounding him when he came. She groaned into his mouth as he burrowed deeply and began to thrust and retreat in desperate lunges stiffening in his arms as the muscles along her channel rippled along the length of his cock. He broke from her mouth with a sobbing breath, groaned as her gasping cries and the tremors he could feel inside of her pushed him over the edge and

his body began to convulse in nearly painful spasms as it pumped his seed into her until it dragged pained, choked grunts from him.

Spent, he leaned weakly against her, gasping and shuddering as aftershocks trembled through him seemingly endlessly. When he'd caught his breath, he rubbed his face along hers in appreciation, relishing the softness of her, her warmth, the perfume of her skin, regretful that it had ended so quickly when he'd wanted it to go on forever.

He should withdraw, he knew, but he was reluctant to do so. Despite the weak tremors running through him from spent passion, he didn't want to move. He thought he could die happy right where he was, his flaccid cock still enveloped in her tight channel, her scent in his nostrils, the soft silkiness of her skin pressed tightly to his own.

Almost on the thought, he felt himself growing hard again.

He wanted her again.

Not here, though. Not against the wall. If he came again like he just had they were going to end up on the floor.

He lifted his head and was momentarily distracted by the fact that he had no fucking clue of where he was.

It wasn't his room, however. He knew that. A fierce possessiveness moved over him. The instinctive need to carry her into his lair, away from the possibility of intrusion, temporarily overrode all else in his mind.

Withdrawing from her abruptly, he allowed her to slide to the floor, bent down to grab her pants, and then scooped her into his arms and brought her closely to his chest. She gasped in surprise, but looped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her breasts against him, nuzzling her face against his neck.

She tensed and lifted her head, however, when he opened the door and moved down the hallway with her.

“Simon?”

He tightened his hold. “I am taking you to my room,” he said gruffly.

She subsided until he opened the door and discovered his sitting room was full.

“Out!” he growled, striding toward his bedroom without pausing.

Raina hid her face against his throat, cringing inwardly. She forgot all about her discomfort, however, when Simon leaned down to place her on his bed. He straightened, shedding his shirt with a complete disregard for the buttons, sending them ping-pong in every direction as he tore his shirt off. When he dropped to the side of the bed to pull off his boots, she scurried up the bed, slipping beneath the coverlet. By the time she'd settled, Simon had dragged his boots off and skimmed out of his trousers.

She managed to get a brief glimpse of his body before he bent over, dragged the coverlet off of her, and dove at her. A little unnerved by his single minded pursuit, to say nothing of the mountain of flesh falling over like an avalanche, Raina tensed. "Simon?"

His mouth crushed down over hers, silencing her, but he caught the bulk of his weight on his arms as he shoved them beneath her shoulders.

Heady pleasure filled her as the delightful heat of his mouth covered hers with a restless, searching hunger that sent her into mindless bliss again. She clutched at him, digging her fingers into his hard flesh and lifting against him as she opened her mouth wide for him, stroked his tongue with hers as he wound it possessively along hers. The faint abrasion of his hair roughened chest and belly against her bare breasts and

belly sent tingles of pleasure through her as she rubbed sinuously against him, trying to make contact with as much of his body as she could.

He lifted his mouth, dragged in a harsh breath and dove for her lips again, sucking at them before thrusting his tongue inside the moist, wet cavern of her mouth and exploring it thoroughly. When next he broke for air, he explored the rest of her face--her cheeks, her jaw, and chin. He kissed her eyelids, nuzzled his nose with hers and then he found her mouth again, supped at it for long moments before moving off on another exploratory foray--her ear and throat and upper chest and shoulders.

She sucked in a sharp breath, digging her fingers into his flesh and arching upward as he covered her ear with the heat of his mouth, sending intense sensations through her that raised a rash along her flesh and curled her toes. Briefly, he moved back to explore her mouth and then pushed himself upward to rest on his side and elbow and allowed his hand to explore her. Cupping one breast in his hand, he leaned down to cover the tip with his mouth.

Raina arched upward with a harsh gasp, digging her fingers into his hair at the intense pleasure that went through her as he tugged at the engorged tip with his mouth and tongue. He lifted his head, angled it to suckle the other tip briefly and then shoved himself

down the bed, pushing an arm beneath her shoulder blades to lift her breasts to his waiting mouth. Exploring her body with the same, single-minded possessiveness as he had her mouth, he moved restlessly from one breast to the other, suckling and tugging at her nipples until Raina lost her breath and then exploring the circumference of the swells, the dip between them and lower, along her ribcage and belly, and then up again until she was on fire with need. Every inch of her skin tingled and burned and quivered with each touch of his lips and tongue. Her sex quaked and clenched with the need to be filled, hot moisture flooding the throat of her sex, seeping along her nether lips.

“Simon!” she gasped breathlessly, lifting one leg and coiling it around him, curling her hips to press her mound against him in supplication. “I want you inside of me. Now! Please!” It seemed as if she’d wanted it forever. She couldn’t wait, didn’t want to wait. She was drugged on the feel and taste and touch of him, drunk with desire, feverish with need.

He was lost to his own explorations, however, unmindful, deaf to her pleas. She tugged at him more desperately, demanding, begging for appeasement as he moved down to explore her quivering belly with his mouth. After a moment, he shifted back up her body to suckle her breasts again and more fire poured through

her veins, and then hope surged into her as he left off teasing them and climbed higher, sucking at her throat and then her chin before he reclaimed her mouth.

He rolled as he caught her mouth beneath his, against the thigh she had wound around him, catching her other leg and thrusting it outward to accommodate his hips. She coiled that leg around him, as well, surged upwards, searching for what she needed, bumping her mound demandingly against his belly.

Supporting his weight on one elbow, he insinuated a hand between them, slid his palm over her belly and then parted her nether lips with his fingers, tracing the wet cleft. She moaned into his mouth as he pressed a thick finger inside of her, stroking the cream coated walls of her sex until she was near frantic. She tore her mouth from his, sucking in gulps of air, arching against him, groaning his name. "Please, Simon! Please!"

He withdrew his finger, traced her cleft until he found the nub of her clitoris and teased it with his fingertip until she was hovering on the edge of release, fighting it with every breath, nearly sobbing with need. Heaving upward abruptly, he thrust against her, pressing the head of his cock into the aching mouth of her sex. She struggled to counter the pressure as she felt herself sliding upward, away from him, frantic to engulf his engorged flesh.

Uttering a hoarse groan, he shifted again, slipping an arm around her hips to hold her steady for his next thrust. “Rainie! I can not hold it,” he groaned as he filled her at last, shuddering, struggling to hold still.

She was too mindless by then to know or care what he said, to care about anything but finding the fulfillment that quivered within her. She bit down on his pec, arching against him, fighting him. Sucking in a harsh breath, he began to pump his hips, stroking her sheathe from mouth to womb and back again as he moved in and out of her, a little faster with each thrust, a little deeper, until he was forcing little choppy breaths from her with each pounding thrust.

She released a long, low groan as she felt her body tip, seize for a heart stopping moment and then rupture with pleasurable spasms so intense it forced keen, sobbing cries from her. He uttered a choked breath and came even as her own seizures of ecstasy began to abate and finally leaned weakly against her, struggling to catch his breath. She nuzzled her face against his hard pecs appreciatively when she finally caught her breath.

Bending his head, he kissed the top of her head and then, wincing, lifted his hips to disengage their bodies and shifted lower to place a short, gusty kiss on her lips before he levered himself off of her and collapsed on

his side beside her.

Dragging in a deep breath, she let it out on a long, satisfied sigh. “That was nice.”

He chuckled. “Only ‘nice’?”

She opened one eye a crack and discovered he’d propped his head in the palm of one hand and was studying her face, a faint smile playing about his lips. Lifting her arms above her head, she stretched like a satisfied cat. “Very nice,” she amended.

He stroked the index finger of his free hand down the bridge of her nose, traced a path across her lips and continued, right down the center of her body until he reached her mound, curling his fingers into the bright thatch of hair that covered it. “I will have to work on better praise for my efforts,” he said pensively, slipping his hand from that contemplation after a moment to settle it at the curve of her waist.

She rolled to face him, stroking a hand over the light furring of dark hair on his chest, curling her fingers into it as he had the thatch of hair on her mound. “Wonderful! Fabulous! Mind-blowing!”

His smile widened into a grin. “Better.”

She smiled back at him. “You want more?”

His eyes narrowed. “You will have to give me a moment to catch my breath, wench.”

She uttered a gurgle of laughter. “I didn’t mean *that* !”

“I did.” He lifted his head and slipped the arm he’d been propping on beneath her shoulders, hooking it around her and dragging her closer. “You are mine now,” he murmured against her hair. “Lost to this world until I have had my fill of you, for I am of no mind to allow you to leave my bed again until I have.”

Raina smiled rapturously against his chest, nuzzling her face between his male breasts just to inhale his delightful scent. “Promises, promises,” she teased.

He skimmed the hand that had been resting along her waist upwards to nudge her chin up. “Ah, but will you say that tomorrow?” he murmured when she met his gaze.

She smiled faintly. “Yes.”

He dragged her upward until they were face to face, nuzzling his face against hers. “And the day after?”

Her smile broadened. “Yes.”

“And the day after that?”

She chuckled. “Yes.”

He stroked the tip of his finger along the smile line in her cheek, studying her mouth. “The is a fascinating little mouth, wench,” he murmured.

“Is it?”

“Mmm.”

She studied him for a moment. “What? You think you’ ll have your fill in only three days?”

He met her gaze. “Nay, but one can always hope ... and I can but try my poor best.”

She lifted her brows. “If that was your ‘poor best’, I can’t wait to see your very best.”

His lips curled up at one corner. He dipped his head and fitted his lips to hers. They clung briefly. “I believe I have a far better use for this delightful mouth than chatter,” he murmured, covering her mouth again and delving inside with his tongue for a taste.

“Mmm?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“What would you like for me to use my mouth for?” she asked huskily when he broke the kiss, because there was nothing she would like better than to lick the man all over and she was perfectly willing to start where ever he liked.

“Now that opens up a world of possibilities.”

He made love to her more slowly that time, or at least seemed to set out to. Once they reached the state of high fever neither of them were inclined to hold back to savor the moments. They fed off of each other’s passions, pushing one another to a higher and higher sense of frenzied need until they came and then lay tangled together in the aftermath while they struggled to catch their breath.

As Raina lay drowsing in the pleasurable afterglow, her stomach growled, the appetite that had deserted her when she’d had the chance to eat coming back with a vengeance. Embarrassed, she clapped a hand to it. Simon brushed her hand away and moved to put his ear to her belly.

“Stop it, ass!”

He chuckled. “I have suspected there was a little *leon* in here,” he murmured, lifting his head to look at her.

Raina lifted her eyebrows. “*Leon?*”

Something flickered in his eyes. “A beast of the feline variety,” he said smoothly. “Not a large beast, but very ferocious.”

Raina pushed herself up on her elbows. “What do they look like?”

“Felines.”

She gave him a look.

Her stomach growled again. She popped her belly. “Stop that!”

He chuckled. “I believe that was mine ... calling to yours, no doubt.”

He rolled off the bed and strode to the door, snatching it open before Raina even realized his intent. Raina scrambled for the covers.

“Now where the hell is everyone?” Simon demanded irritably.

“You told them to get out,” Raina reminded him.

He turned to look at her in surprise and then frowned thoughtfully. “I believe you may be right,” he said agreeably and strode from the room. She heard the outer door open and his footsteps as he went down the hall. “Tedra!” he bellowed.

“Yes, my lord?”

“A tray ... for two. Bring plenty.”

Feeling her face redden, Raina scrambled out of bed and headed into his bathroom, locking the door while she attended private matters. The doorknob jiggled as she finished.

“You locked me out, wench,” he said in mild outrage when she opened the door.

She couldn't help but chuckle at his expression. “Some people require a little privacy,” she said pointedly. Recalling that he'd strolled down the hall completely naked and summoned the housekeeper, she laughed again as she moved to the shower to adjust the water. “I can't believe old Hatch ... uh ... Higgenbottom didn't shriek and faint when she saw you standing in the hall naked,” she said, diving inside the shower and jerking the door closed when he moved to the toilet to relieve

himself.

He climbed into the shower behind her. “I have very few secrets that woman does not know,” he said wryly as he took the soap from her and lathered it over his chest. “She was more mother to me than my own.”

Raina cringed inwardly, glad she’d stopped herself before she’d called the woman hatchet face. “Oh?”

He disappointed her when he didn’t elaborate. She was hungry to know everything about him, but it occurred to her that that was one appetite likely to go unappeased. In all the time she’d been at the mansion none of them had actually let anything slip about who they were or where they came from. She wasn’t so stupid she didn’t realize that was careful reticence not merely a disinclination to talk about their past as it was with her. The secrecy was one of the things about them that unnerved her.

The other was the fact that Simon rarely left the mansion without all five of his bodyguards trailing him. For that matter, even when he was inside, they were generally within a few feet of him at all times. Occasionally, one or two of them would disappear for half a day, or a night, but never more than two and never more than long enough than it took, she suspected, to find a willing woman for a few hours.

That had stopped being a mere curiosity to her shortly after her arrival when it had finally dawned on her it wasn't merely for 'show' because Simon was someone of importance.

Simon's life was in danger.

It was *areal* threat, not movie glitz, and certainly not glamorous, not when Simon's life was at stake.

It had to be political. As woefully ignorant as she was of current affairs she had no idea what sort of politics, but nothing else fit. He was certainly no movie star, be he ever so drop dead gorgeous, and it wasn't just a hazard of extreme wealth. Their security was far too tight for someone who had only to concern themselves about the unlikelihood of a kidnapping attempt for money or a robbery.

The small island estate was accessible to the mainland only by boat.

Besides, Higgenbottom had addressed him as 'my lord', and it wasn't the first time she'd let that slip, or almost let it slip.

She didn't ask him about it. He wouldn't like it, she knew, if she tried to pry. He'd tell her what he wanted her to know and no more, which would be nothing.

She wasn't going to delude herself into thinking this was more than what it was. He needed her to try to ease the ache from his loss. She knew that and she was still willing to take what he had to offer.

Truthfully, she would have taken *anything* at all that he'd offered--one night, or one screw. She had desperately wanted the man from the moment she'd first seen him, and nothing had changed that.

He reached around her to tweak her nipples, drawing her mind away from unpleasant thoughts. He drew her back against him, dropping his cheek to rest it on the top of her head and watching the play of his hands. "These are pretty, dainty little things," he murmured.

She elbowed him in the ribs. "Gee! Thanks!"

"I meant the nipples," he said, his voice shaky with suppressed laughter. "These," he added smoothly, cupping her breasts, "are bountiful melons."

"Right! Comparatively speaking, they *are* big I'll have you to know!"

"Mmmm? Comparative?"

"To the rest of me."

He released her breasts and stroked both hands down her belly, measuring her hips with his hands and then her waist. Knowing what he was up to, she caught his fingers and tried to push them away. He rotated his hands and captured hers, lifting her arms above her head and twirling her around to face him. “You are right,” he said when he’d pressed her back against the wall of the shower. “Most definitely.”

“It bothers you, doesn’t it?” she asked, feeling a sinking sensation as she thought about the portrait of the woman in the other room. People, in general, had a preference for certain ‘types’, she knew--*shedid*. Everybody she knew did. It didn’t matter how many relationships they had, they were always drawn to the same things. For most people that was particular age groups, or body types, skin and hair coloring--and definitely particular personality types and no one caught their interest for long if they didn’t match any of those preferences.

It would’ve been depressing if she’d discovered she was a lot like his wife, but somehow it was worse to realize she was nothing like the woman that had meant so much to him.

Because she knew that meant she had a very limited ‘shelf’ life. People liked ‘novelties’, but those things

were only briefly entertaining. Mostly, they liked the comfort of familiarity--and they always went back to it. Always.

Maybe he was intrigued that she was small, and maybe not. She couldn't even count on that considering she knew his taste ran to tall, slender, and classically beautiful.

Very likely he was just interested because she wasn't Mrs. Higgenbottom and she was handy.

And she didn't care. Everything about him made her hungry.

Releasing her wrists, he caught her waist and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist and looped her arms around his shoulders as he pressed closer to suck at her throat. "Mmm," he murmured lazily. "I will admit it makes navigation somewhat tricky--there are definite setbacks--but I believe I am enjoying the challenge."

"You are?" she asked hopefully.

"I are."

She chuckled. "What are the setbacks?"

“Navigation,” he murmured, laughter threading his voice. “There was a moment of panic when you disappeared beneath me and I thought I might not find the ... uh ... hole.”

She gurgled with laughter. “I didn’t notice you having any trouble.”

“That, sweeting, is because my soldier has an unerring eye and a penchant for exploring damp little caves. I had forgotten he had a nose for these things and did not need my help to find his way.”

Chapter Eleven

There was a large tray filled with covered dishes waiting on the cabinet beside the bed when they emerged from the bathroom. Raina was mildly embarrassed, wondering if Higgenbottom had heard her ‘yodeling’ in the shower.

If the woman was as familiar with Simon as he claimed, though, it probably wasn’t anything she hadn’t

heard before.

Which still didn't make her a lot more comfortable.

Oh the woman would probably relish having her prejudice confirmed! She'd already all but called her a whore.

Not that Raina cared what she thought--what any of them thought!

Alright, she did, a little. She cared more than a little about what Audric might think about it, but she wasn't going to allow that to cut up her peace or ruin her enjoyment. Her 'god' had deigned to bestow his favors upon her and she meant to enjoy it to the fullest as long as she could.

He was gorgeous. He kept her far too occupied that first night to give her much of a chance for her own explorations, but as they lazed away the following day, she had the opportunity to examine him thoroughly with both her eyes and her hands ... and her mouth. He was hard and muscular all over. Even his legs, though somewhat leaner, were well developed.

She was almost surprised. Even though she'd seen that Audric was very well built, it still came as a surprise that Simon was so well built and so pleasingly

proportioned. Very tall men rarely seemed to be in her judgment. They tended to have a ‘stretched out’ look--arms and legs that were too long for the body, or a body that seemed too long for the arms and legs, usually the latter.

Not that she was terribly familiar with tall men. She had dated a couple that were nearly six feet tall, but both of them had been long and lanky, not muscular. Mostly, her comfort range was men who, like her, fell into the under average height range.

They had luncheon in bed. Still naked and oddly comfortable with it, Raina sat cross legged with her back against the headboard of the bed. Simon sprawled on his side, cross ways the foot of the bed, his long black hair loose and flowing about his shoulders like some pagan king. The tray lay between them. Trying not to be too obvious about her interest, Raina nibbled at her food and allowed her gaze to wander over him.

Simon didn’t bother trying not to be obvious as he studied her assets. “Tell me about your family,” he said finally, with the air of someone demanding to be entertained.

Raina met his gaze briefly. “That wouldn’t take long,” she said wryly, reluctant to dwell on her sordid little life. She supposed she would’ve been anyway, but

Simon's opinion of her mattered--a lot. She doubted it was any secret to him that she was a nobody. Her granny had always staunchly maintained that they were a good middle class family, but the unhappy truth was that everyone else considered them white trash because they were dirt poor. "Why do want to know?"

He studied her a long moment, frowning as he looked down at the tray, but she didn't think it was because he was trying to decide what he wanted off of it. He was accustomed to getting what he wanted. He didn't like it when anyone balked at any request he made. "Why do you not want to tell me?"

Raina shrugged. "It's just that there isn't anything to tell."

He fixed her with an intent look. "You told Audric."

She frowned, irritated that he'd overheard. "Because Audric can't understand half of what I say to him. And it wouldn't bother him anyway."

"But it would me?"

Raina released a heavy sigh, wishing abruptly that she hadn't made an issue of it. She reached for a handful of grapes. "My father split--no clue of where he is. My mother's dead ... and my granny. My little brother's in

prison for armed robbery and my little sister died of a drug overdose about three years ago. At least, that's the story the cops told. Her friends," she made the air quote with her fingers, "said her pimp gave her some bad shit because he was pissed off with her," she finished, relishing having made it sound as sordid as possible, though there actually wasn't any way to 'clean it up' without telling outright lies--like she had told Audric. She hadn't actually *wanted* to talk about her fucked up family, though. She didn't like to think about the possibility that things might have turned out differently for her brother and sister if she hadn't run off.

He said nothing for several moments. "I am sorry."

Raina shrugged. "That's life. It sucks and then you die," she said flippantly.

"You were sixteen when you left your home?" he prompted after a moment.

"Mmm," Raina said noncommittally, trying to ease the defensive tension from her shoulders. "Almost. The first few years were pretty rough, but it's practically been smooth sailing since." She popped the last grape into her mouth. "I think that's the only time in my life my size was actually an asset ... mostly, anyway, though, come to think of it I suppose it might have had something to do with me being so stunted. I mean,

granny wasn't tall, but she wasn't as short as me. I can't really remember mama, though. Maybe I got it from her--my height, I mean."

He lifted one dark brow questioningly.

She smiled wryly. "I could get into places nobody else could. It helped when I needed to hide. *And* I got very good at climbing. It's been a real pain in the ass since then, though. I'm too short for just about everything I really want to do--because, I suppose, I'm contrary and want to do everything I can't."

"Such as?"

She waved her hand airily. "Oh, the list goes on and on. You'd wouldn't believe the jobs that have minimum height requirements--safety issues mostly. I went all the way through the course on truck driving, got my CDL and everything, and then nobody wanted to hire me." She shrugged. "I could've gotten something local, I guess, but I wanted the long hauls ... more money, plus you get to see the country. I had my heart set on it, too. I'd already tried for stewardess with the airlines and that was a bust."

"You like to travel?"

"How would I know? I never have gotten much further

than the damned city limits of this town. I'd just like to see something else before I turn up my toes."

He sat up abruptly and slid the tray off the bed, settling it on the floor. When he settled again, he caught her ankles and dragged her toward him. She studied him curiously as he arranged her legs to suit him, shoving her knees up and splaying her thighs.

She promptly clamped her knees together when he released them.

He sent her a look. Pushing her legs apart again, he wedged his shoulders between her thighs.

"What *are* you doing?" she demanded with a mixture of amusement and discomfort as he settled to stroking the thatch of hair on her pussy as if he was grooming it.

"Looking."

"I see that."

"Then why did you ask?" he asked, his lips twitching as he flicked a look at her face.

Raina felt her face redden. Flopping back on the bed, she dragged a pillow over her face.

He chuckled. “What are *you* doing?”

“*Not* watching you look. Why do you *want* to look, anyway?”

“Because I do,” he murmured, lightly stroking the inner petals of her nether lips.

Raina’s belly tightened, her heart and lungs constricting in her chest. She had to fight the urge to try to clamp her legs together again.

She felt the bed move as he shifted and lifted the pillow to see if he’d finished his survey just in time to watch as he lowered his mouth to her. She swallowed convulsively, unable to drag her gaze from the sight. As his mouth closed over her, however, and searing heat went through her, her eyes slid closed of their own accord. She sucked in a difficult breath, her mind, every nerve in her body focused on the point of contact and the feel of his tongue. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that he was watching her face as he sucked the little nub of flesh at the juncture of her thighs.

A fresh wave of heat went through her. Her head felt too heavy for her neck and she allowed it to fall back, her eyes closed tightly as the heat built inside of her in fiery waves. She moaned, gasped, panted for breath as the delightful sensations grew more and more intense.

Abruptly, though, she needed--wanted to do more than just lay passively while he pleased her.

Pushing herself up onto her elbows, she shifted to reach his cock, grasping it with her hand. He paused, lifting his head to watch as she struggled closer and finally took the head into her mouth, sucking on it. He pulled her closer still and finally rolled onto his back, carrying her with him.

She'd never felt anything like, never done anything even close. It increased her own pleasure tremendously to take him into her mouth and pleasure him as he sucked and teased her clit with his mouth and tongue. She moaned around his cock as her body climbed toward climax, pulling and sucking on his cock more and more frantically which, in turn, seemed to make him finess her more hungrily until they were both shaking, rocking restlessly against one another.

And then, abruptly, she reached crisis, hovered for several heart stopping moments and then groaned and bucked as she came. He shuddered, his arms tightening around her almost painfully as he tensed, groaning against her cleft before he spilled his hot seed into her mouth in hard spasms that rocked both of them.

She was too weak to move when the shudders finally ceased.

He rolled her onto the mattress after a moment and she flopped onto her back spread eagle, gasping for breath. He seemed equally spent.

Finally, he levered himself upward and stared at her for several moments. “Come here, wench. You are much too far away.”

She chuckled. “Too weak.”

He crawled over her, headed in the direction of the headboard and then grabbed her, dragging her limp form next to his and aligning their bodies ... or rather arranging her body to suit him, she thought wryly.

“Comfy now?” she muttered against his chest.

“Aye.”

* * * *

As the veil of sleep parted and consciousness surfaced, so, too, did a sense of supreme well-being. A feeling of anticipation followed on the heels of it, a surge of energy waiting to be expended, and Simon lazily searched his mind for a few moments for the reason he felt the need to get up and go about his business. No particular task came readily to mind, but he was certain

there was something that needed to be done else he wouldn't have felt compelled to get up at once and get to it.

Sucking in a deep breath as his senses followed the awakening of his mind and rose to alertness, Simon savored the scent of the woman pressed against him, the firmness of the buttocks nestled against his belly, and the softness of the breast resting in his palm. A flicker of sexual interest followed in the wake of those perceptions. Briefly, he examined the temptation, but he realized he was so thoroughly sated his appetite was mild, nothing he couldn't ignore.

The question was, did he want to ignore it?

Opening his eyes, he tightened his hand around the breast resting in his palm, squeezing it experimentally to test his interest. She made a faint noise of complaint in her sleep, shifting away from him. Mildly annoyed by her disinterest in his overture, despite the fact that he hadn't been certain of his own interest, he pushed himself up on one elbow to look down at her.

Dark, bruised crescents had formed beneath her eyes. He studied her sleeping face for a long moment, felt ... something stir inside of him and finally lifted the arm he had draped over her and rolled away from her. She was obviously exhausted, he decided, staring up at the

ceiling as he allowed his mind to fill with the impressions of the hours he had spent expending himself on her--the sounds, the sights, the scents, the sensations that had raced through him.

Sexual interest stirred again, but the troubling sense that there was something he needed to do, something that needed his attention, eclipsed it. Whatever it was eluded him, but the restless energy that filled him made it impossible to seek sleep again and he rolled from the bed and went to shower and shave, deciding that whatever it was was bound to come to him when he was more alert.

It didn't, but he dressed and left the room in search of something to do to work off the excessive energy. He met up with Tedra on his way to the basement to work out, nodded a morning greeting and kept going. Seeing her heading toward the kitchen, however, put him in mind of Raina, still sleeping in his bed and he stopped, considering it.

The time he'd spent with her had been surprisingly satisfying, but the point was he *did* feel completely satisfied. She'd been right, and he'd been right. Giving in to temptation had been the way to go. He could not recall when the last time was that he had felt so thoroughly and completely satisfied.

Swiveling on his heels, he turned to look at Tedra, whom he discovered had stopped and turned to look at him questioningly, her hand poised on the doorknob. “You should go and tell Raina to give you a hand about the place. I am done with her. She might as well make herself useful.”

An hour and half later, when he’d worn off the brunt of his excess energy and broken a sweat, it dawned on him what had brought about the sense of something ‘undone’ that needed to be done. He had nothing to do--here--nothing of any importance whatsoever. Every day was like the day before because, in essence, he was a prisoner. There was a very great deal of things to do in Schalome, however, things shelved for a more appropriate time, things ignored because he had not had the heart to face them or been able to summon the will to care whether they were ever done or not.

Vengeance and justice--they were his to wield, his to seek, his duty to perform, and no one else’s.

Belated, he thought with self-disgust. His sense of ‘urgency’ was seriously, criminally belated. Like a mindless beast searching for a quiet place to die, he had crawled into a hole and buried himself deeply, telling himself he only needed time to grieve, time to heal, time to grow strong again and then he would find his lost manhood, his courage, his conviction, and he would

be a force to be reckoned with.

Those thoughts sustained him until he caught a glimpse of Raina as he headed back to his suite. At once a mixture of conflicting emotions swamped him; guilt, desire, a sense loss and disappointment when he tried to dismiss the first two with the reflection that he had no reason to feel either. They'd desired one another. It was simple lust, and he had been careful to give as much pleasure as he'd taken, but it was time to move on and focus on his duty.

Her scent and his memories lingered in his suite, though, taunting him with the urge to reverse his decision, undermining his certainty that he'd slaked his desire for her and when he'd bathed and changed the restlessness and uncomfortable sense of loss drove him from the house.

* * * *

And on the fourth day, they rested, Raina thought wryly when she woke to discover she was alone in the bed, trying *not* to feel deserted even though she knew she had been.

Mrs. Higgenbottom, who'd awakened her, stood in the doorway. "You will need to clean the parlor when you have broken your fast," she said crisply, as if she wasn't

standing in Simon's bedroom door with Raina sprawled naked in his bed.

Raina heaved a heavy sigh. "Yes, ma'am," she responded, trying to feel philosophical about it.

She'd expected nothing less. She'd just hoped it would last a little longer.

Rising when Mrs. Higgenbottom had departed, she headed into the bathroom for a shower. When she emerged, she realized she had a problem. She had her jeans and panties and nothing else. It took her a little while to remember that Simon had stripped her of her blouse and bra before he'd decided to haul her to his room. He'd grabbed her jeans and panties from the floor when he'd grabbed her, but he hadn't bothered to look for the blouse he'd flung across the room.

She had two choices. She could borrow something of Simon's or stroll topless down the hall to the room where her suitcases were--because nobody had brought them to her.

She wasn't going to stroll topless, not with six men in the house. Moving to Simon's closet, she took out one of his shirts and put it on, staring down at herself wryly. The shirt tails came to her knees. She would've been decently covered without the jeans.

Not that it mattered, except there was no way anybody meeting up with her would be in any doubt that she was wearing Simon's clothes and if she met up with Higgenbottom she'd probably shit a brick.

Thankfully, Simon's sitting room was empty. Obviously, he'd left the house while the house keeper roused her out of his room.

It was harder to be philosophical about that.

She jolted to halt, though, completely forgetting her feelings of misuse when she discovered the portrait was missing from above the fireplace mantel. Frowning, she glanced around, but she'd already realized it hadn't simply been moved. It had been removed completely.

Simon probably hadn't felt comfortable cavorting with her and then having to 'face' his wife, she decided.

Shaking off her depression, she hurried down the hall to Audric's room and went in. Audric had one foot in his pants when she sailed in the door. "Oh shit!" Raina exclaimed, coming to a screeching halt and throwing up her hands. "God, Audric! I am so sorry! I should've knocked."

He said nothing and after a moment she realized he'd

returned his attention to dressing. Discomfort moved through her. She'd been so disconcerted when she'd come in on him dressing she'd completely forgotten the first encounter after Simon was probably going to be an uncomfortable one.

She studied him a moment, but what could she say?

She was just sorry that she'd been trying to seduce him in the garden just before. He might have felt the rejection anyway, but that had to have made it worse, because *she* was the one who'd tried to cross the line between friends and lovers.

He must think she was a slut of the worse kind, she thought guiltily.

Trying to shrug that off as she had the depression that had settled over her because *she* had been rejected, she looked around for her suitcases and finally got down on her knees to see if they'd been shoved further under the bed.

“They were moved to the garage apartment.”

Raina would have been a lot more favorably impressed with his progress on his English if not for the content of the sentence he'd just uttered.

“Moved?” she echoed in disbelief. “You have got to be fucking kidding me! Well! I guess I should just be grateful he didn’t pitch me in the yard naked when he got done, the arrogant asshole!”

Whirling, she stalked from the room and headed down the backstairs, angry enough to blast anybody that happened to step unwarily in her path. Fortunately, she didn’t run in to anybody, because she was in no state of mind, at the moment, to consider the inadvisability of it. She’d been dumped by her boss. The next step was the boot, and she hadn’t saved up enough money yet to get her an apartment, even a crummy one, in town.

She remembered that when she got to the garage apartment and it cooled her temper right down. It didn’t make the sense of misuse disappear, but she could handle that--and smile. God knew she’d been dumped on enough in her life she ought to be able to handle it.

She threw Simon’s shirt in the laundry when she came down again. She’d intended to return it to his room, but then it occurred to her that she might run in to him and she wasn’t ready--lunch would be soon enough.

She didn’t get the chance to eat. Higgenbottom had cleaned everything up and put it away by the time she made it back to the main house. She wasn’t hungry anyway. Her stomach was coiled into a nauseating knot

of dread as she headed to the parlor to clean.

She couldn't act angry, she coached herself as she settled to work. That wouldn't do at all. In the first place, there was a good chance that she was on the way out and she had a better chance of sticking around a while longer if she behaved herself. In the second, she actually had *no right* to be mad. He hadn't made her any promises. She hadn't asked for any, and she certainly couldn't claim that she hadn't been a willing soul in the seduction.

Cold wouldn't do, either. That was just mad inside out.

She was going to have to try to figure out how to behave as if nothing at all had happened.

That was just going to be lovely, of course, because there wasn't a damned soul in the house that didn't know.

It didn't dawn on her until she was ready to serve lunch that, under the circumstances, the other men might decide to have a go at her. She wished it hadn't occurred to her then because she could've served their luncheon without feeling so tense. On the other hand, she was a domestic, she thought wryly, and they were supposed to ignore her existence.

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared it would be. She had to focus on what she was doing anyway and that made it a lot easier not to look at anyone, which meant if they were giving her knowing looks they were wasting their time.

She was still relieved when she'd finished and could retreat to the kitchen where she didn't have to be worried about anyone except Higgenbottom. Her own lunch was miserable. She hadn't gotten breakfast, so her stomach was trying to eat her alive, and she was so tense and upset she could hardly swallow her food without choking on it. She managed to swallow enough to appease the beast and not look as if she was moping, but it sat like lead in the bottom of her stomach when she went back to work.

She was so exhausted from romping with Simon for days and having little sleep, that she was barely dragging by the end of the day. With gratitude, she climbed the stairs to the loft apartment and sprawled on the bed for a nap before she had to serve dinner. It seemed to her that she'd barely dozed off when a loud, extremely annoying buzzer went off. She came off the bed as if she'd had a jolt of electricity up the ass, staggering as she whipped her head around in search of the source. It stopped before she found it. She stared at the bed again. Just as she put her knee on the mattress to climb back in, the buzzer sounded again. This time,

though, it dawned on her that it must be a summons.

Sighing, she went to the bathroom to wash her face, combed her hair and headed to the main house. It was hard even trying to look alert while she passed out the plates, which was a blessing in disguise. She didn't even think about being uncomfortable.

She was more than half asleep by the time she'd eaten.

Audric cornered her before she managed to make back to her apartment. She really, really didn't feel like a confrontation, but she stopped and looked at him questioningly.

“You are ok?”

She stared at him, feeling the sense of misuse from earlier descend upon her like a clap of thunder on a sunny day. She hadn't expected sympathy, especially not from Audric. Her chin wobbled threateningly. She bolstered it. “I'm just tired,” she said and then reddened when she realized he would immediately know why. She cleared her throat, studying her shoes. “But thank you for asking. That's really sweet of you. Especially after ... after”

“Hush,” he said, grabbing her hand and hauling her quickly across the garden and into the garage.

She thought she'd mastered the urge to cry but when Audric pulled her into the apartment and into his arms, she burst into noisy sobs. He stood holding her for a few minutes, rocking her slightly and finally scooped her up and carried her to the bed. Settling her on the mattress, he lay down beside her and pulled her close again.

"I can't," she said tearfully. "I'm so sorry, Audric, but I can't do this."

He ignored her efforts to push him away, holding her tighter until she gave up and wilted against him. But, contrary to her fears, he didn't attempt to do anything more than hold her. He was still holding her when she woke up.

That went badly, because she was too disoriented at first to realize she wasn't snuggling next to Simon and it gave her a jolt when she finally realized it wasn't him.

And he knew.

She looked up at him guiltily for a moment and finally averted her gaze and climbed out of the bed. By the time she emerged from the bathroom, he was gone.

The rest and the catharsis of tears had helped her tremendously, she discovered.

One more reason to be grateful for Audric.

One more reason to feel like shit for not treating him as he deserved.

The worse of it, she thought, was that it wasn't even as if she didn't find him attractive. She did, and she appreciated his other qualities, as well. If she'd never seen anyone but Audric, she would've thought he was the most wonderful man she'd ever met--strong, handsome, protective--but Simon eclipsed him. Simon was *more* in every way. She couldn't help it that she felt that way or that she had been drawn in as much by Simon's neediness as his powerful charisma.

If she hadn't felt that Simon needed her, she would still have followed him off at the crook of his finger.

She wasn't actually sorry that she had. She was just sorry if it had hurt Audric that she had.

She tried to tell herself that it probably hadn't. It was probably just his kind nature that had made him feel compelled to be so protective of her. She thought he'd probably been hopeful of getting laid, too, but he didn't seem to have taken it in bad part that she'd picked

Simon instead.

Maybe he still thought he had a chance of getting laid?

And maybe he did at that.

She was very fond of Audric, and there was really no reason at all not to give in to him.

If he was interested.

Even if he wasn't, the very fact that he was willing to spend time with her should discourage any of the others from deciding to have a go at hitting 'it'. Which was awful of her, of course, but she didn't see it as using Audric when she was willing to have sex with him if he wanted her to.

Chapter Twelve

"I consoled her, nothing more," Audric said, keeping his voice even with an effort.

"I have no doubt of that," Simon shot back at him, his

eyes blazing with his own barely contained rage.

Audric studied him angrily for several moments while he wrestled with his temper. “She is no tavern wench, Simon, no whore, who performs for coins for her efforts and no thought of anything more. She was wounded by your carelessness.”

Simon reddened and looked away. “I gave her no promises. I would not promise what I can not give! She had no reason to be wounded.”

“You are not that dense!” Audric snarled, losing his temper. “She would not have given herself to you at all if she had not cared, at least a little. It does not matter that you did *not say* what you would or would not give. You gave her reason to think that you wanted her.”

“I did ... and now I am done,” Simon snarled. “She has needs--clearly since she had already offered herself to you. I have needs. *We consoled* one another’s needs!”

“Well if you are done then you have no reason to rage at me! And it is *not your* concern how I console her, is it, brother?”

“*I knew* you had fucked her!” Simon bellowed, punching Audric in the jaw before he could duck.

Jorell and Rama launched themselves from their seats and grabbed Audric before he could retaliate. Elden and Haig were a little slower catching Simon. He pulled his punch, however, when he saw Jorell and Rama had grabbed Audric's arms. Shrugging Elden and Haig off, he stalked to the window, staring out at the night.

"If you are done with the woman," Jorell said, "I will take her back into the city."

Simon pivoted on his heel and fixed Jorell with a narrow eyed glare. "Did I give you leave to make decisions for me?"

Jorell reddened and then turned white. "Nay, my lord."

"If you have need of a woman," Elden offered, "we can all go into the city and find one. There has been no attempt on you in months."

Simon swung his glare to encompass Elden.

"Or not," Elden muttered, returning to his seat.

Simon turned to look at Audric again. "Stay away from Rainie," he said coldly. "She is mine." He waited. When Audric did not respond, he strode from the room and down the hall.

“Where do you think he is going?” Elden asked uneasily.

“Where do you think?” Audric growled. “Unless you want a taste of his temper I would not advise following him.”

“But what if that is not where he is headed? He has been so unpredictable of late I never know if I should follow or not,” Haig said.

Audric dropped his hand from his jaw, which he’d been massaging. “Go. See that he is headed to her. If not, summon the rest of us and we will catch up.”

* * * *

As angry as Simon was as he stalked across the walk, into the garage, and up the stairs to Raina’s apartment, he was well aware that he was making a mistake. At the very least, he should’ve turned away and walked off the brunt of his anger before even considering approaching Raina.

He shouldn’t be approaching her at all. He had fucked her already until his cock was raw and his balls felt like they were filled with dust. He was going to be spitting blood if he kept it up.

But as certain as he had been that he had had his fill, appeased the need, the hunger for her was still with him--had dogged him from the moment he had left the house like a coward after informing Tedra that she was to put Raina back to work.

He didn't know why he hadn't simply told Raina himself that he didn't need her anymore.

Actually, he did.

He'd been afraid she would look at him with those big green eyes of hers and he wouldn't have the balls to say it himself ... and he would *know* he was lying to himself. He had not worked her out of his system and he was very much afraid that the complete opposite was true, that the more he was with her the more he would want to stay.

And he couldn't.

There was only one way that he was ever going to be free of his past and that was by putting it to rest once and for all. He had to give Evangeline justice so that she could rest in peace. He had to go home and do what he'd been born to do--free his homeland from the tyrant who had butchered his way to power. His people needed justice. They needed someone to guide them

who cared about them, not someone to crush them into the dirt and bleed them dry into the bargain.

He should not be standing at her door now like a beggar hoping for a few more crumbs of food. It had been hard enough to separate himself from her before. If he was wrong and he could not work her out of her system at all

He was on the point of turning around and leaving again when he heard her approach the door, no doubt alerted to his presence when he'd stomped up the stairs.

“Audri... uh oh.”

He narrowed his eyes at her as the tide of rage shifted abruptly and rolled back in. “Faithless wench!” he snarled. “*I know* that he slept here last eve! Elden has never learned to guard his tongue. You could not wait a day or two to fuck him?”

Outrage displaced Raina's shock, making her throw caution to the wind. “*Howdare* you! *Asif* it's any of your damned business who I fuck or when I fuck them!” she growled at him instead of informing him that she hadn't done anything.

“You are mine ... until or unless I say otherwise, damn you!”

“The hell I am!”

“The hell you are not!”

He caught her then--completely by surprise, tossing her over his shoulder like he was ... some barbaric king of the universe and stalking down the stairs with her. Shock held her tongue at first, and then the fear of falling as he jogged down the stairs, and the struggle to catch her breath. “What are you doing? Where the hell do you think you’re taking me?” she demanded finally.

“To my room. Our room. And you will stay there until I say otherwise. I will not have Audric ... poaching on my preserves!”

“Who the hell died and made you god! I am*not* your preserves!”

“Aye, you are, and I mean to fuck you until you will not look twice at my brother!”

“Put me down!”

“No!”

“I’m warning you, Simon!”

“I am warned.”

She bit him on the back.

“Ow! Damn it to hell woman!” he ground out, popping her on the ass.

She let go of the patch of flesh she’d managed to latch on to, rearing upward.

“Watch your head!” he warned, throwing the front door open.

“Asshole!” she screamed at him.

* * * *

Jorell moved to the window, staring at the window of the garage apartment as he realized Simon had been before. “He is there,” he announced to no one in particular. “Will he stay, do you think, Audric?”

“I am to read his mind?” Audric demanded angrily, moving to a chair and settling in it.

Jorell turned to look at him. “I was only wondering if we should form a perimeter there, or wait to see if he returns to the house.”

“Haig is outside watching. If he does not come back in an hour, you will join him and you and he can take first watch. Rama, Elden, and I will take second.”

Jorell turned to stare out the window again. “You should have waited,” he said presently. “If you had not instantly gone to her, it would not have aroused his possessive streak.”

“Mayhap,” Audric responded.

Jorell frowned. “You believe I am wrong?”

“Yes.”

“It will take longer than we thought to work her out of his system,” Elden said, nodding.

“Or he will not work her out of his system at all!” Jorell responded tartly. “He fucked her for three days straight. It can not be need. His balls will have dried up by now. I am surprised either one could walk when they came out. If he can not hold out one day without running back to her, we are in trouble.”

“You are making something out of nothing!” Rama snapped irritably. “Three days are nothing when he has not been with a woman in a year. He was with that whore a full day and he did not even find her to his

taste.”

Audric came to his feet. “Take care, Rama!” he growled threateningly. “If you want to keep your teeth you will not discuss whores and Raina in the same breath!”

Rama stared at him blankly for a moment and then glared at him. “I did not mean that! Gods! You are as bad Simon! I am only saying ... Gods! I do not know *what* I meant to say now!”

“You were telling us that we are being concerned over nothing, that Simon will only take a while longer to work her out of his system,” Elden said helpfully, “which is exactly what I said. It has got nothing to do with how long it has been since he was with a woman, or even *that* woman. She is handy and he is a man and can have her when he pleases, and he was obviously very pleased with her or he would not have been three days fucking.” He thought that over. “I have not been with *any* woman that I would be willing to be cooped up with for that length of time. I expect he knew that he was not done. He only came up for a bit of air.”

“For myself, I am sick of hearing how many days he was with her,” Audric snarled. “Can we not agree that it was impressive and leave it at that?”

Elden frowned. “I will certainly agree that it was impressive, though Simon has always had far more stamina than any man I know ...or know of.”

“All of that is completely beside the point!” Jorell snapped. “He has not said a word about going home and *that* is the point! Because he is not*going* to think of going home as long as he is following that woman about!”

“*That*woman is named Raina,” Audric said tightly.

“*That*woman Gods be damned! He is coming this way with her! And she is” He stopped abruptly and whirled to look at Audric.

“She is ...?” Audric demanded with a low, menacing growl.

Jorell’s gaze snapped to Elden. “Grab him!”

Elden gaped at him blankly. “What?”

“By the gods! Grab him!”

They all heard the front door slam open at that moment. Raina’s voice carried up the stairs. “YOU ASSHOLE! Put me down! Put me down right now!”

Audric charged the door before any of the others could get out of their seats. Jorell leapt the chair blocking his path and reached the door at almost the same moment as Elden and Rama. Briefly, they formed a bottle neck but managed to break free in a moment and race after Audric, catching up to him just as he met Simon on the stairs.

“Put her down,” Audric said tightly.

“Get out of my way, Audric,” Simon growled.

“Don’t you *dare* hit him!” Raina snarled.

Audric looked at her sharply as she reared up from Simon’s shoulder, twisting around to look at him. The distraction cost him. Simon slammed his fist into his jaw, rocking him back on his heels. Jorell and Elden, who were directly behind Audric by that time, each caught one of his arms as he rocked back and began to haul him back up the stairs.

“Audric!” Raina exclaimed in dismay. “Why did you hit him?”

“Because I did not like the look on his face,” Simon growled, stalking up the stairs with her and into his apartment.

“You ... you ... bully! He wasn’t even looking when you hit him.”

“He deserved it,” Simon said grimly.

“He didn’t do anything!”

“You do not challenge a man over his woman and then allow yourself to be distracted. Next time, he will know better.”

“That’s barbar....” Raina broke off, sucking in a sharp gasp as Simon bent over and dropped her on the bed. She flung out her arms instinctively as she fell. Simon sprawled on top of her, grasping her wrists before she could recover enough to try to escape. She stared up at him. “I am *not* your woman! You kicked me out!”

Simon stared at her a long moment. “I did not.”

Confusion filled her eyes. Simon took full advantage of it, covering her mouth with his and kissing her with a savagery that took her breath and sent shockwaves of heat all the way to her core.

Raina struggled to gather her wits when he broke the kiss and wove a meandering path across her face to her ear. “You didn’t?” she managed, shivering as he sucked gently at her ear and then traced the swirls with his

tongue. His heated breath fanned her ear as he did so, making the muscles low in her belly clench and sending a rippling cascade of goose bumps from her neck downward.

Had she completely misunderstood what had happened, she wondered dizzily?

He moved down her neck after a moment, lifted his head briefly to shove her blouse and her sports bra up and leaned down to suckle one engorged nipple just about the time it clicked her mind that Higgenbottom wouldn't have taken it upon herself to order her out of Simon's room.

Not that she had ... exactly.

Fire blossomed inside of her as Simon caught her nipple in his mouth and sucked at it, though, and for several moments she completely lost her train of thought. Her breath hitched in her throat. She groaned.

“Simon! We need to talk,” she said, breathless, warmed by his touch, but determined.

“After,” he said firmly, silencing her with his mouth again as he reached down to tug at her jeans. He slipped his hand inside the opening as soon as he'd unfastened them and pushed the zipper to the bottom, threading his

fingers through the thatch of hair on her mound and then finding her clit with the tip of one finger. Another wave of pleasurable heat washed through her as he teased her.

He slid his hand lower after a moment, tracing her cleft and finding the moisture that told him no matter how much she struggled she wanted him, too. Breaking the kiss, he grabbed her jeans and hauled them down her legs to her ankles. Pushing her thighs apart, he covered her again, reaching between them to unfasten his own pants and pull his cock free. The moment he did, he guided it downward along her cleft, found her opening, and pushed inside.

“You don’t want me,” Raina said shakily, “not really.”

“Does this feel like I do not want you?” he ground out hoarsely as he clutched her tightly to him and cupped his hips to thrust more deeply.

The fight went out of Raina as she looked up at him. She hadn’t wanted to fight him at all, had wanted to go to him. If he hadn’t made her so angry

The need in his voice, the tumult in his eyes--of desire and anger ... and hurt and confusion--completely disarmed her. She swallowed with an effort, clutching him and lifting her hips to meet his thrusts. He needed

her, she realized. He just didn't want to.

She lifted her lips to his chest, nuzzling her face against him as he thrust into her with an edge of desperation, feeling a thrill go through her as he stiffened, groaned low in his throat and came, spilling his seed inside of her.

He leaned heavily against her when he'd ceased to shudder and quake with release, gasping for breath. Finally, he withdrew from her and rolled onto the bed beside her dropping a forearm across his eyes.

Raina lay as he'd left her, listening to her heart thunder in her ears. She hadn't come, but she'd felt something far better--and scarier.

She shouldn't have just caved in to his demands, she realized. She'd had every right to be mad when he'd stormed into her room and called her faithless--a faithless*wench* , to be precise. She'd been absolutely stunned, both by his wild arrival and the accusation.

She hadn't done anything wrong, hadn't done anything, period, and it had outraged her for him to accuse her.

She should've just told him nothing had happened between her and Audric.

Now, he was not only not going to believe it, he was angry with Audric.

She rolled onto her side after a few moments, wondering what was going through his mind, wondering if he was still angry.

“That was unforgivably stupid,” he muttered.

“Which part?” Raina asked hesitantly.

“Every gods be damned bit of it! I think I am going insane.”

Raina touched his chest tentatively. “Nothing happened between me and Audric.”

He said nothing for several moments. “Why did you not come for me then?”

The question caught her by surprise, partly because she wouldn't have thought he would've noticed, especially all things considered, partly because she had a hard time following the logic of it, but mostly because he sounded like a sullen little boy. It amused her.

She looked down at herself and straightened her bra and shirt. She didn't think he could see her face, but there was no point in riling him up again by letting him

see she thought it was funny. “That’s because I was thoroughly pissed off with you and couldn’t catch up,” she murmured finally--which was true--but then he’d been so--fevered--had come so quickly, she wasn’t certain she could’ve anyway.

She knew better than to tell him that. That *would* wound his ego. “I enjoyed it anyway.”

His lips flattened. “You are so gracious,” he responded tartly.

It took more of an effort to keep from smiling that time. “You’re welcome,” she said when she thought she could command her voice.

“You will not believe me, I suppose, if I say that I have never done anything like that before?” he asked tentatively.

“Which part?”

He was silent for several moments. “Any of it.” He hesitated. “I do not know why I said those things ... did what I did. In battle it would be understandable, but I do not recall that I was ever so completely out of control.”

Battle? Raina’s heart thumped uncomfortably in her

chest. It dawned on her after a moment that Simon had no idea that he'd said anything that might seem 'off’ to her. She pushed it aside for later, though. She was going to have to give that *alot* of thought.

"You're too stressed out," she said finally--which she thought was completely understandable. In the first place, he clearly wasn't the sort to 'release' things that were bothering him. If he had been, he wouldn't be having so much trouble dealing with the emotional turmoil he was going through now. In the second, *she* would've been a blubbering moron if she'd spent the past five years expecting somebody to jump out and shoot her in the head like he obviously had. *That* by itself, in her opinion, was enough to drive anybody over the edge, but he was carrying a lot of guilt about his wife's death, still mourned her, mourned his daughter, and there was no telling what else he was carrying, but she knew that wasn't all of it.

She'd *hoped* the sex would help him. It was certainly no cure all, but that was the way men usually found release from tension. She had a bad feeling it had probably added as much as it had helped, though, because she thought he was feeling guilty about his wife.

He was probably feeling guilty about living and enjoying anything about life. Having someone die that

you loved had a way of doing that to you.

She shifted to look at him. “I know you don’t want to tell me what’s bothering you, and that’s ok. I’m not going to bug you to tell me. I don’t like to think I’m adding to your problems, though. How about if I make you a promise?”

He dropped his arm and looked at her, a frown between his eyes and wariness in them. “What sort of promise?” he asked uneasily.

Amusement and irritation flickered through Raina. Commitment phobia, she diagnosed. “No strings, no obligations, no commitment between us--except for sex. I’ll just be your fuck buddy--I take care of your needs. You take care of mine--and otherwise we just go about our lives and do as we please--that way, no stress. And I’ll promise not to fuck anybody but you as long we’re fuck buddies.” She lifted one hand and laid the other over her heart. “I, Raina Marie Willows, do solemnly swear that I will not, under any circumstances, consider fucking anybody but you, Simon Draken, as long as we have this pact between us, so help me god. And if I lie, I hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

He pushed himself up on one elbow, regarding her with a mixture of amusement and doubt. “This is a strange oath of fealty,” he murmured.

Raina chuckled. "I guess so. It's the one me and my brother and sister used to make to each other when we'd promise not to let Granny know what we'd been up to."

He took her hand in the palm of his, rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand. "What do I promise you?"

"The same thing," she said promptly and then hesitated. "But I don't want you to get mad at Audric any time he talks to me. He's my friend and I don't have many--in fact none but him."

Anger flickered to life in his eyes again. "Audric wants to fuck you."

She sighed. "Maybe, but I just swore to you I wouldn't. If you don't trust me at all this isn't going to work."

"It is Audric I do not trust."

"No, it isn't. It's me."

He frowned. "It is *Audric* *with* you I do not trust."

She fought a round with her temper and finally quelled it. "I'm sure this will come as a complete shock to you, but I'm a sexual camel. I can get along a very long time

without any sex at all. I think I can contain myself enough with you fucking my brains out every night to resist temptation.”

He tugged on her arm, pulling her down to rest on his chest and staring up at her. A half smile played around his mouth. “You are a strange spe” He broke off and hesitated fractionally. “This is a strange but very interesting custom.”

Raina ignored the slip. She chuckled. “There’s nothing strange about it. Haven’t you watched the discovery channel? Lots of animals have sex just for fun--*and* trade sex for favors--in this case, you scratch my itch, I scratch yours.”

His smile widened. “What if I do not want to ‘scratch your itch’ *every* night?”

She shrugged, pretending to think it over. “Once a month?”

He gave her a look. “I was thinking more along the lines of three times a day.”

She chuckled. “I’ll be bow legged.”

He frowned faintly as he thought that over and then laughed. Rolling over, he switched places with her so

that she was on the bottom looking up at him. “I think I will take you up on this promise.”

She smiled up at him. “I had a feeling you might.”

“Did you?”

“Mmm. I feel it on my thigh right now.”

He reached down and grasped his hard cock in his hand, thumping her on the leg with it. “This feeling?”

She gurgled with laughter. “That feeling,” she confirmed.

He dipped his head to nibble at her throat.

“No more of that ‘I am lord and master of all I survey’, shit, ok?”

He tensed, jerking his head up to stare at her for a long moment, his gaze shuttered. “But I am lord and master of all I survey,” he said finally, almost apologetically.

She shook her head at him, but smiled. “Except not this ‘wench’. The pact makes us equal partners.”

“Does it?”

“It does.”

He shrugged. “I believe I can live with that ... for now. When I have dazzled you with my prowess as a lover, you will change your tune,” he said arrogantly.

“You think so?” she said, chuckling.

“I am convinced of it,” he said teasingly.

“Mmm. So when are you going to start convincing me?”

“Is that a challenge?”

“You bet your ass, Mister! Bring it on! I have this itch”

“Where?” he asked with interest, his eyes gleaming.

She took his hand and guided it over her belly and between her thighs. “Right around ...there.”

He settled beside her, propping his chin in one hand. “There?”

“Mmmhmm. That’s the spot alright.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jorell sent Audric a questioning glance as Simon stopped on the promontory and stared out to sea. Audric frowned and shook his head slightly. It had been weeks since Simon had taken up the vigil that had been a constant in his life before Riana, and he wasn't certain what to make of it himself.

Simon had seemed more relaxed, more like his old self every day, and he'd begun to believe, for the first time in years, that there really was a chance that Simon would recover from the crippling blow he'd been dealt. He was never going to be the same as before, Audric knew, but close would have satisfied him, vengeful would have been satisfactory--*anything* was better than the broken shell he'd been.

He didn't know what had happened between Simon and Raina that night. He'd been sure Simon had finally completely lost his mind, but *something* certainly had and not the something he'd feared.

He hadn't thought so at the time. Mostly he'd just been relieved that Raina had emerged from the ordeal

apparently unscathed, but, unlike the first time, they hadn't holed up in Simon's room for days on end, with Tedra bringing trays of food up to them at every meal. They'd left Simon's apartment the next morning, both of them seeming completely satisfied, and gone their separate ways.

He hadn't known what to make of that either, especially when Simon had dragged her into his room the very next evening.

He didn't seem to be as obsessive as he had been at first, which had been a great relief, but he'd discovered that was only a surface façade. The obsessive possessiveness was still there. He was just hiding it--from Raina. He obviously didn't give a damn whether they knew about it or not. In fact, he made damn sure Audric knew it. He hadn't threatened to pound him into the dirt for even looking at Raina, hadn't told him to stay away from her, but one of the others always shadowed them when they were together. Raina seemed to be oblivious, but then she wasn't used to looking over her shoulder.

It made him uneasy that Simon had enough of his wits about him to use cunning to guard his possession. That required premeditation. The other had just been gut reaction, unnerving, but not unexpected.

A little unexpected, actually. He'd thought when thaw finally set in Simon would have a hard time dealing with the emotions he'd locked away for so long, allowing them to build toward explosion. He just hadn't expected an explosion of that magnitude.

"What news of home?" Simon asked presently, sounding perfectly calm.

Audric exchanged a glance with Jorell.

"What sort of news do you mean?" Jorell asked.

"The state of the realm," Simon retorted dryly.

"Brooding violence," Audric said. "After the attempted revolt several years ago failed, Jaelen lost what little sense he had. He has cowed them with an iron fist, he believes. When the truth is he has taught them that nothing they can do can appease him--the poor die in droves because the merchant class is now as poor as *they* were. And the wealthy and powerful are no better off now than the poorest merchants. He bleeds them dry. All of the nobles he had imprisoned when he imprisoned us have been executed. Those he did not manage to lay hands upon have been living in exile since, but I have heard that Ravenwing, Montdragon, Goldsinger, and the Duke of Sardovf have all fallen to assassins."

Simon's jaw tightened. His most vocal supporters--and incidentally the most powerful. "What of their sons?"

"The young duke, Nimets, is loyal and eager, but he has not been tested in battle. Goldsinger's son died with him. Ravenwing's and Montdragon's heirs are both as cagey as their fathers and can be completely depended upon."

"We will need mercenaries," Simon said thoughtfully, turning from his contemplation of the distant horizon to something that had caught his attention on the beach.

A flash of red assured Audric of what, or rather whom, had caught his eye.

"Send all the coin we can spare and tell them to make ready--quietly. We will not have half the army we had before. If we can not take him by surprise, we will lose the only asset we have." He turned to look at Audric. "Tell them I am coming."

He left them then, striding down the beach toward Raina, who stood at the water's edge with her jeans rolled up to her knees, her long, auburn hair fluttering in the breeze and flashing brightly as the late afternoon's sun caught in it.

Audric felt his excitement wane more than a little as he watched Simon slip up behind her and wrap his arms around her, dropping his chin to rest on the top of her head. The sound of her voice reached him--not the words, for those were snatched away by the sea breeze--only the sound, and then Simon's laugh at something she had said.

Envy filled him, but pity, too. He was going to miss her. He could not imagine how much Simon would.

Almost as if Jorell had heard his thoughts, he murmured, "I would not be in his shoes."

"He will triumph," Elden said cheerfully. "He has not counted the army we will have when we reach Schalome's borders with the army his men will raise."

Jorell looked at him. "I have no doubt of that. I was only thinking that it will bring him no happiness--wealth, power, the adulation of the people--but he will still be alone."

Rama joined them. "The council will not allow that to stand for long. Simon should have had a son near manhood by now. They will expect him to chose a woman quickly and breed one upon her."

"He would have had a son near manhood by now if he

had not died with Evangeline,” Audric said grimly.

“Gods be damned!” Jorell swore irritably. “They are not going to fuck, now, on the beach and it yet full light!”

“I believe they are,” Audric said tightly. “Send Haig down the beach southward. You remain here--and make certain you keep close watch for any vessel of any size. Elden, Rama, and I will guard the rear.”

* * * *

“Simon!” Raina said with a mixture of amusement and embarrassment. “Someone will see us--at least five I know!”

“I will cover you with my body, wench. Believe me they will see nothing but the flash of my white ass bobbing on the beach ... and they will have no interest in that.”

Raina laughed huskily as he nuzzled his way down her throat and covered one breast with his mouth. The heat and moisture sent a river of warmth through her even through her shirt.

“I wish you would not wear this thing you have here. It makes it harder for me to get to my breasts.”

“Mybreasts, you mean.”

“That is what I said,” he murmured, laughter threading his voice.

“Five seconds more--that’s all it takes for you to whip it up.”

“Yes, but I am not a patient man--and the pants are enough for me to have to deal with in getting to my pussy.”

“Yourpussy?”

He grunted in satisfaction as he managed to open the jeans and slipped his hand inside to cup her. “At least you did not argue with me on that.”

“Simon,” she protested weakly as he began dragging her jeans down, “I’ll have sand in the crack of my ass!”

He chuckled. “The things you do for your prince! You do not expect me to plant my royal ass in the sand, surely? Because it *is* royal, which means it is a superior ass. I am risking a great deal on your behalf only to expose it to the sun and wind.”

“A royal pain in the ass, is what you are!” she said

dryly. Apparently, he'd liked the fact that she'd accused him of behaving as if he was lord and master, she thought with a mixture of amusement and irritation. He missed no opportunity of bringing it into the conversation.

Despite the self-deprecating way he always joked about it, though, and the wise-cracks she usually came back with, she was almost certain he *was* royalty even though she had tried to dismiss that idea as absurd at first. Because the fact was, she'd noticed the moment she set eyes on Simon that he had aura of mystery and power about him unlike anything inside her experience. He had 'great man/leader' written all over him. She was just surprised it had taken her so long to figure that out.

"We have not tried that," he said musingly, tugging at her jeans until he had them past her knees and then running a hand over one cheek of her ass.

"And we're not *going* to try that either!" Raina retorted. "You're hung like a horse. No way am I letting that thing near my ass!"

"It was no more than a passing thought," he said, sounding vaguely disappointed.

"Right."

He wedged his hips between her thighs once she'd dragged her feet from her panties and jeans, supporting himself on one elbow as he reached between them to unfasten his own pants. "I can not help that I am obsessed with claiming every inch of you," he murmured huskily, watching her face through slumberous eyes as he entered her.

Raina gasped, closing her eyes in delight as she felt his flesh melding with hers, felt her body yielding to the force of his. The familiar excitement filled her as he did, as he stroked her channel with his hard length, giving rise to heated desire and quickly after that to shaking anticipation. She hadn't expected to come with so little foreplay, exposed as they were, but there was something so wildly exciting about making love to him in the open that she felt herself nearing her peak within a few minutes.

She moaned low in her throat as she felt the first tremors of release, trying to muffle the sound against Simon's chest. He shuddered, at the sound, or the suction of her mouth as she bit down on his flesh lightly as her climax broke over her. Uttering a choked sound he came as her body milked his of his seed and leaned weakly against her.

"Woman, you are shameless," he murmured huskily when he'd caught his breath. "Do not spare my blushes.

Have your way with me where ever you like.”

Raina laughed. “You are *such* an ass! Blame it on me, why don’t you?”

“I had thought I just did.”

He bent down and kissed her before she could think of a retort. When he lifted his head, he glanced around them for the first time. “Ah ... Rainie, my precious, we have a dilemma.”

“We do?”

“I have just thought that it will not be nearly as easy putting your pants back on as it was removing them.”

Raina gave him an irritated look and studied it over. “Lay on your side behind me and I’ll put them on sitting down,” she said finally.

“Good plan.”

He got up and casually shoved his genitals back into his pants, zipping them before he bent to retrieve her jeans, shook the sand from them, and handed them to her.

“Where are my panties?”

He looked around. “Alas, the sea has claimed them,” he announced cheerfully, settling behind her.

She glared at him irritably but finally struggled into the jeans and fastened them.

He helped her to her feet, dropping an arm around her shoulders and herding her back toward the mansion.

“I hesitate to point this out, sweeting, but you are walking strangely.”

“Because I have sand in *everything* !” she said shortly, plucking at her jeans in discomfort.

“However did you manage that?” he asked in a shaking voice.

She elbowed him in the ribs.

Laughing, he scooped her into his arms. “This, at least, will reduce the discomfort until I can bathe you.”

“*You* can bathe me?” she echoed.

“Thank you, sweeting. I always enjoy that. I will tell Tedra to hold dinner. It may take me a while, but I am dedicated. I will make certain that there is not so much

a single, tiny grain of sand to cause you any more discomfort, my precious.”

* * * *

It wasn't until Raina had finished serving and finally settled in the kitchen to eat her own meal that it dawned on her that she'd noticed a tension among the men in the dining room that she hadn't noticed in a long time. After considering it for a few moments, she revised the thought. She had never noticed them behaving anything like they were tonight.

There'd been a tremendous amount of tension when she'd first arrived. She hadn't known them then so she hadn't realized that it *was* tension. She'd just thought they were all a bunch of up tight, cold, snobs. The tension had shifted to a different sort of uneasy restraint during the time when she and Simon had been battling it out, but it wasn't until they'd managed to get on a fairly even keel that she'd realized that that uneasiness was because they were expecting Simon to explode and concerned about fallout and which direction the shrapnel was going to fly.

When she'd made the pact with Simon, though, and it had relieved him of so much stress, the men had relaxed, as well.

They were like weather balloons, a very good gauge of conditions around the hurricane--which was Simon.

And now they were sending out signals that were a warning of storm weather. She just wasn't exactly certain of what sort of storm was coming their way.

* * * *

Raina wasn't certain what had woken her at first. Disoriented, she lay staring at the ceiling for several moments before she heard the sound she knew had awakened her.

Simon was moaning in his sleep.

Shifting onto her side, she studied him in the dim light filtering through the bedroom window and realized he was having one of his nightmares. He'd already begun to thrash, straining to move, his face contorting with the emotions attached to his nightmare.

Empathy squeezed tightly around her heart. He hadn't had a nightmare in a month, at least. She hated to wake him. He had to be exhausted--probably not as exhausted as she was, she wryly amended, but he'd fucked her six ways from Sunday before he'd finally given in to exhaustion--something he hadn't done in weeks.

Ordinarily, he was satisfied with once a night--He wanted sex *every* night, but he settled for once--and once in the morning if she spent the night with him, which she did fairly often--and once in the afternoon unless he was occupied with something else, which he usually was.

The marathon fucking was something they only did on fairly rare occasions. Sometimes he'd let a couple of weeks go by, sometimes no more than a week, and then he'd drag her in to his room before it was even good dark and make love to her with an almost frantic sort of desperation until they were both so exhausted they fell asleep.

Tonight he'd been more insatiable than usual, and that was one of the reasons she was reluctant to wake him. She knew if she did she was in for it.

The nightmare was escalating, though, not dissipating as she'd hoped. He'd begun to mutter unintelligibly--it was his language. She didn't know what he was saying, but she'd heard them speak to each other in their native tongue enough times to recognize it.

She'd already shifted closer to him to try to soothe him when he said something perfectly audible.

“Rainie ... Rainie!”

Her throat closed. There was so much distress in his voice she forgot about her reluctance to wake him. She settled her hand lightly on his chest, stroking him soothingly. “It’s alright, baby.”

He sucked in a choked breath and went completely rigid for several moments and then slowly began to relax. His arm came around her shoulders and pulled her closer. When she settled her cheek against his chest, listening to his frantic heartbeat, feeling faint tremors still running through his body, he stroked her back. “What is it, sweeting?” he asked, his voice sounding raw--not rough with sleep, hoarse with remembered fear or pain or both.

She shook her head. “I just wanted to snuggle. Sorry I woke you.”

She heard him swallow. He sucked in several deep, pained breaths and seemed to relax.

She’d just decided he was drifting back to sleep when he rolled to face her, dragging her tightly against his length and squeezing her so hard her breath left her in a little grunt. He didn’t seem to notice. He continued to hold her so tightly she’d begun to feel miserably uncomfortable long before he finally drifted off again and his tight hold relaxed.

She woke to the feel of a hot mouth tugging at her nipple and sending delicious currents through her. A faint smile curled her lips. “I’d know that mouth anywhere,” she murmured huskily without opening her eyes.

“Do you?” he murmured lazily.

“Mmmhmm. It’s attached to the most beautiful man in the world.”

He nipped at her nipple with the edge of his teeth just hard enough to send a tidal wave of sensation through her. “I never like to argue with my lady,” he said teasingly, “but it is, in point of fact, attached to the most beautiful woman in this world.”

“Uh oh! He’s gone blind! Granny always said if you did it too much you’d go blind!”

He lifted his head from her breast. She opened her eyes to look at him as he stroked his hand caressingly along her cheek. “There is nothing wrong with my eyes,” he said solemnly.

Raina reddened, partly with pleasure and partly with discomfort, searching for something to say.

He smiled after a moment. “I can not believe I have rendered you speechless, wench. No!” he added quickly when her lips parted, dipping his head to claim her mouth. “I can not allow you to snatch my victory from my grasp.”

He seemed in no great rush, building the heat between them languidly. She stared down at him through half closed eyes, stroking his long silky hair as he wove a meandering path of kisses along her belly. “I suppose you’d freak if I got pregnant?”

He tensed momentarily. “Happily that is not possible,” he said easily after a moment.

She couldn’t see his face for the wall of black hair hanging across his lean cheek, but it didn’t escape her that he hadn’t sounded too receptive of the idea. She drew a pained breath. “I don’t suppose that would fit into our little pact anyway,” she said as lightly as she could.

He lifted his head to study her for a long moment.

She smiled at him lazily. “I think you missed a spot.”

His dark brows rose. Amusement gleamed in his eyes. “Where?”

She chuckled. “I’m going to let you find it.”

“Unfair. Now I am convinced it was the tastiest spot and I must start all over again to make certain I have not missed it.”

Raina stretched languidly. “Sorry,” she murmured, “but I wouldn’t*think* of telling you how to do your job.”

His eyes narrowed. “Here?” he asked, digging the tip of a finger into one of her ribs.

She gasped and chortled with laughter, slapping at his hand. He grinned at her and found another ticklish spot, making it abundantly clear he’d mapped each and every one. He chuckled when she shrieked with laughter. “Simon stop!” she gasped when she could catch her breath.

“Woman, I am trying to find the spot I missed! What about this one?”

She was breathless with laughter, her stomach aching, and tears streaming down her cheeks by the time he settled face to face with her, scooping his arms beneath her shoulders. She wiped her eyes, trying to give him a censorious look as he grinned down at her.

“I have not found it. I will have to look again.”

Her smile slowly died as she stared up at his laughing face. Her heart seemed to turn over in her chest. As handsome as she had thought he was from the first, he was even more handsome when he smiled and laughed. It filled her with a deeply satisfying warmth to know she'd brought laughter into his eyes. She lifted a hand to trace a laugh line in his cheek.

He regarded her questioningly, his own smile dying. "What is it, sweeting?"

She swallowed with an effort and averted her gaze, stroking her hands down his shoulders.

"I did not hurt you?"

She shook her head. "I was just thinking."

"This is a bad sign," he said, striving for a light note. "Dare I ask?"

She stroked her hands from his back to his sides. "That I owe you," she said, digging her fingers into the spot she knew was ticklish on him.

He let out a choked grunt and burst out laughing, scrambling away from her. She followed him, straddling his waist and working her way up his ribs to his armpits.

“Stop that, demon spawn!” he growled, his voice shaking with the effort to suppress his laughter. Grabbing her wrists, he shoved her arms behind her back and dragged her down until she was plastered against him.

“Now that I have you at my mercy,” she murmured against his chest, “I believe I’ll have my way with you.”

Chapter Fourteen

He chuckled but then sucked in a sharp breath as she bit down lightly on a patch of flesh and then sucked at it, teasing it with her tongue before she released it.

Releasing his hold on her wrists, he skated his palms lightly up her arms. She caught his wrists, pushing his arms down until they were flat on the bed on either side of his head.

He gave her an arch look but he made no attempt to break her hold. She skimmed her hands lightly along his hard forearms and then the hard, bulging muscles of

his upper arms, and all the while she nibbled little bites along his upper chest. She slipped her hands back down his arms and matched her palms to his as she wove her way to one turgid male nipple and sucked at it. His fingers laced with hers, curling over the back of her hands. When she'd teased that nipple until his breath was hitching in his chest, she moved to the other, undulating her body and pressing her mound against his taut belly.

He was watching her from beneath half closed lids when she lifted her head, his eyes gleaming with desire. Disentangling her fingers from his, she stroked his arms while she explored his throat and neck, teased his ear until he was breathing raggedly and then moved to his hard mouth, plucking his lower lip into hers and sucking it and then nipping at his upper lip before she slowly traced both with her tongue.

He swallowed thickly when she opened her mouth to thrust her tongue into his mouth. A shudder when through him as he sucked on it. He followed her mouth as she retreated, lifting his arms to wrap one around her waist. He cupped the back of her head with the other, trapping her, kissing her deeply.

She kissed him back, stroking her tongue along his and then sucking at it while she explored his cheeks with her palms, his shoulders.

When he broke the kiss at last, she brushed her cheek along his, relishing the feel of his skin, the rough brush of morning whiskers. He had a faint cleft in his chin, which she explored with her tongue before she scooted back along his belly and worked her way down his broad chest with her hands and mouth until she felt the head of his cock delving into her cleft.

She pushed herself upright then, came up on her knees and grasped his cock. She watched his face as she stroked it back and forth along her cleft until she'd coated him with her body's moisture and then aligned his body with hers. He caught her hips to balance her as she began to lower herself, slowly engulfing his flesh within hers.

He closed his eyes, tipping his back as she settled fully against him, sheathed him fully. "Rainie," he breathed raggedly. "Gods! You feel so good, sweeting!"

He sat up abruptly as she began to move. Coiling his arms tightly around her, he nudged her chin up to cover her mouth with his, kissing her ravenously for several moments before he broke the kiss and urged her to move faster. Lifting and pressing her hips to guide her to the rhythm he needed, he watched their bodies merging, his chest expanding to brush hers with the depth of each harsh breath he drew.

Raina moaned as she felt her body quicken, shuddering as the first wave of release went through her and tensing at all over. Holding her tightly to him, he tipped her quickly onto her back and began to drive into her with rapid, pounding thrusts as she gasped and sobbed for breath with the hard quakes rushing through her.

He uttered a choked cry as his own body seized and the spasms of ecstasy overtook him, murmuring her name raggedly as he spilled his seed inside of her.

* * * *

Simon's face was grim as he stared at the hologram of the battlefield he had chosen. Inwardly, he raged as he listened to Audric recite the latest intel the couriers had gathered from their supporters.

"It is as if he knows every move before we make it," Audric growled with repressed fury.

Simon flicked a glance at the faces of his men around the table in the basement where they had gathered. "You have scanned the area for any devises?" he asked when his gaze settled on Jorell.

"Thoroughly," Jorell said grimly. "I have gone over every inch of the island myself. Unless they have

something with a far longer range than I have knowledge of, the leak is not here.”

Simon nodded, his expression a careful façade of calm. “He will have spies within the ranks of our supporters. He would not overlook anything so obvious.” He went back to studying the hologram, moving slowly around the large table to study it from every angle. When he had chosen the battlefield where he would meet his enemy, he had expected to have the Fortress at his back, to retreat his men, if necessary, up the single narrow access. He had not expected that he would have to fight his way up the mountain to reach his enemy.

But that could not be helped now, he thought furiously, for Jaelen had seized that position for himself.

He would find another way. Everything had been set in motion. There was no going back, not unless he meant to let Jaelen live out a long and happy life and die in his bed. And he had no intention of allowing that if he had to take the Fortress apart stone by stone. “We will assume, then, that he knows most, if not all, that we had planned for him and act accordingly.

“The fortress itself will be the hardest nut to crack. If he has knowledge, then he has had plenty of time to reinforce the weaknesses.”

Audric studied the fortress. Perched at the pinnacle of Mount Lania, it was bound on every side by nearly sheer cliffs, which was why it had never fallen in the five hundred years it had stood guard over Schalome's southern boundary. There was only one way in or out and it was a narrow, winding road that would allow no more than five mounted men abreast to pass. "I have never more deeply regretted that we no longer have the knowledge to morph," he muttered. "Our grandfathers did not foresee such as this or they would not have taken the knowledge with them when they went to their final rest."

"We have the strength of our fathers," Simon said grimly. "And those we do battle with will have no more. We do not need wings to take Draken Fortress. We will have the skimmers. We do not need dragon fire. We will have incendiary bombs. Our grandfathers knew the time had come to walk the land and claim it as land dwellers. We would have been extinct as a species before many more generations if we had not treated with the Macedons for their technology. It was a fair exchange, technology far advanced of any other race we have met, including the Earth people, to give up the skies and the territorial wars and become a united people, to be builders instead of destroyers."

"Despite the wars fought since, we have progressed far more in the past hundred years than in a thousand

before.”

Audric shrugged. “I did not say that the old ways were better--though I still recall with awe the magnificence of our grandfather on the day of the Signing. He was a glorious sight to behold, far more regal than the Macedons who had defeated him.

“Draken Fortress was built in the days of the great dragons. With all the technology we have developed ourselves, and all that given to us by the Macedons, one dragon could do what it will take an army to accomplish and still leave the Fortress for our sons and daughters. We will have to destroy it.”

Simon lifted his head to meet Audric’s gaze for a long moment. “I know the secret of Draken Fortress. Jaelen does not.”

Audric nodded fractionally.

“It is time to bring the ship in and prep it for our long journey home,” Simon said, turning from Audric to the others. “Tomorrow, Jorell and Rama will leave to retrieve it. Elden and Haig will have watch--leaving us thin. Do not tarry in the retrieval.”

Dismissing them with a nod, he turned and strode to the vid screen on the far wall, staring at the star charts

displayed there. Audric joined him after a few moments. Simon said nothing for so long that Audric had begun to think that he had misread the signal Simon had given him to speak alone.

“It will be good to be home again,” Simon said presently, his voice harsh.

Surprise flickered through Audric, but he followed Simon’s lead. “Aye. And in the thick of battle! This place is pleasant enough, but not as beautiful as Schalome.”

Simon drew a ragged breath. “We are getting too old for this,” he said, smiling faintly.

“Speak for yourself! I am in my prime.”

Simon said nothing, but every breath seemed to pain him. “It will take no more than five days to prep the ship for the long journey home.”

“More or less.”

“Five, Audric.”

“Aye. We can manage in five.”

Simon swallowed audibly. “Go to her, Audric,” he said

on a ragged, pained breath.

Audric frowned. “Now? She is surely abed by now and asleep.”

A muscle in Simon’s jaw worked as he clenched his teeth. “Do not be dense, Audric, and make this harder for me. At first light, go to her and say that I have sent you and the pact is broken. I can give you no more than five days, but I will grant you that for the love I bear you ... because I know you care for her and I think that she will need you.

“Take care of her for me. I must be here and ... and I am not at all sure that I could do what I know that I must if I saw that it hurt her. You must take her into the city and find a place for her to stay awhile.” He reached into his pocket and dragged out a folded paper and an envelope. “You will give her these. One is the deed to this estate. The other has the number of the account I have set up for her.”

Audric nodded, too stunned speak, taking the papers and pushing them into his pocket.

Simon swallowed with difficulty, dragged in a ragged breath. “I will speak to the others, make certain they know that I will not tolerate any attempt to harm her, but I will still feel better knowing that you are with

her--protect her for me in case one of these fools decide they know better than I what is best for all of us.”

Audric stared at his profile in horror. “She is no threat to us or our plans! She knows nothing. She would not say anything if she did. I know her.”

“Aye. You know, and I know, but we are going to war. They will be thinking like warriors and they will not like to leave loose ends, especially when we all know that there is a spy among us. I would far rather be safe than live with regret the remainder of my days because I had failed her.”

* * * *

Raina simply stared at Audric blankly when she had answered his summons on her door, trying to figure out why he was standing on her doorstep so early in the morning. “Good morning, Audric,” she said summoning a sleepy smile as she squinted at him through sleep blurred eyes. “Did I oversleep?”

“It is half past six.”

“In the morning?” Raina demanded, turning to look at the window and trying to figure out if the dimness was actually late evening. She couldn’t seem to get her sleep starved brain to function, however.

“Yes, morning,” Audric confirmed.

“Oh! Well, I don’t have to get up yet,” she responded, staggering back toward the bed and sprawling face down on the mattress.

Audric followed her, staring down at her limp form and finally leaned over and popped her ass with the palm of his hand. She bolted up, blinking at him in shock. He crouched beside the bed. “I am to take you into town, Raina. You can not go back to sleep. You must get up and pack your things and we must go.”

That finally penetrated her stupor and Raina glanced toward the window that looked towards the main house, the window of Simon’s sitting room.

When she looked at Audric again, she saw that his face was taut. “It is time go, Raina,” he said, his voice gruff.

Swallowing with an effort, Raina nodded and climbed out of bed. She stared numbly at her reflection in the bathroom mirror when she’d washed her face and brushed her teeth. She knew she’d been dismissed. She knew she was being sent away, she just couldn’t fully grasp it.

She realized after a moment, though, that the

numbness was a blessing.

She might actually have some hope of leaving with some of her pride intact.

She'd never actually unpacked. She'd known from the beginning that she wouldn't stay long and in any case, it had become a habit over the years to live out of her suitcases. She never knew when she might have to leave a place quickly and she'd worked hard for the little she had. When she'd dressed, she had only to drop her laundry and cosmetics into the suitcase and close it again.

Audric carried the suitcases downstairs for her and loaded them into the back of the car he'd chosen to drive her. She sat stiffly in the front seat beside him as he backed the car out of the garage, staring at her hands in her lap, fighting the urge to look to see if she could get one last glimpse of Simon.

She maintained her stiff posture until they were out of sight of the house and finally leaned her head on the seatback, closing her eyes.

"I am to find a place for you in town to stay."

Riana lifted her head to look at him blankly. "I can find my own place, thank you," she said finally, closing her

eyes again. “I’ve saved my pay.”

“We will look together,” he said firmly.

She didn’t try to argue with him. She didn’t especially want company, but it was a habit with Audric to rescue her from distress, and, truthfully, she didn’t think she was up to a search for shelter. If left to her own devices, she would simply sit down somewhere and stare at nothing, because she felt too empty to think.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the boat dock and Audric pulled the car under the shelter nearby, removed her suitcases from the car, and carried them down the dock to the boat. Raina followed him like a zombie, realizing after all that she was relieved she didn’t have to try to think.

The crossing was brief even though the channel between the island and the mainland was fairly wide. On the other side, they took the car that was always left in a shed there for trips into town.

Raina dozed, wakened sometime later by the sounds of traffic. Even with the windows up and the air conditioning going, despite the early hour, the racket seemed ungodly loud.

She’d grown too accustomed to the quiet of the island.

It seemed bizarre that she would have. She'd been on the island for months, true, but she'd lived in the city her entire life before that.

“Are you hungry?”

Raina glanced at him, thought it over and finally shook her head.

He frowned. “I am hungry.”

Raina managed a faint smile. “Then we should stop and eat.”

Audric stopped outside the diner he'd chosen and took a newspaper from the vending machine. “Good thought,” Raina said. “I'll need to start job hunting right away.”

He ordered breakfast for both of them. Raina gave him a look, but she didn't feel up to arguing. Instead, she helped herself to part of the paper, flipped to the help wanted section and began studying the possibilities. She felt vaguely nauseated when the waitress brought their plates, but she sipped at the coffee and had a few bites of bacon and toast. She couldn't look at the eggs without feeling ill.

Audric sent her a disapproving look but forbore

comment.

By the time they'd left the restaurant, Raina had circled a half dozen hopeful possibilities. She had very little interest in where she stayed beyond the price, but she quickly discovered that Audric's idea of where she should stay and hers didn't coincide at all.

"I can't afford a place like this!" she hissed angrily when he'd pulled up in the parking lot of an expensive apartment complex. "Don't stop. Just start the car again and give me the paper."

Audric shifted in the seat to study her. "Simon is paying," he said finally.

Raina's head jerked up. She stared at him blankly while her face changed color three times. "No, he isn't," she said after battling her emotions for several moments. "I can take care of myself."

Audric sighed impatiently. "I am ordered to take care of you."

Raina's jaw tightened. "And here I thought you'd come because you were my friend. Stupid of me."

"I am your friend, Raina."

She gave him a look.

“I am trying to be your friend.”

“I don’t work for Simon anymore. You might have to follow his orders, but I don’t. And I am not, nor was I ever, his mistress. I don’t give a shit how he usually disposes of his mistresses. He can take his money and shove it up his ass.”

Audric’s face tightened. “He has never had a mistress. He sent me to take care of you because he wanted to be sure you were alright. I came because I wanted to be sure, otherwise I would have told him to go to hell.”

Raina’s throat closed as she stared at him. The tears she’d been fearing would overcome her stung her eyes. She blinked them back with an effort, knowing if she started she wouldn’t be able to stop.

“I will arrange this for now,” he said gently. “When you are feeling better, if you do not want to stay, then go and find another place.”

Riana nodded. All she really wanted was a bed to lay down on, a room with dark shades she could lock herself into ... and maybe she’d never come out.

She dozed off again while she was waiting for Audric,

awakening when he opened the door on the driver's side and got in. Starting the car, he drove around the building, staring up at it until he found what he was looking for and then parked the car and took her bags out. Telling her the apartment number, he allowed her to precede him.

Raina stood uncertainly in the middle of the living room when Audric had opened the door for her. He passed her, heading down the hallway toward the bedroom.

The apartment was fully furnished.

She couldn't have afforded it without furnishings.

Audric returned from the bedroom after a few moments. Closing and locking the door, he took her hand and led her to the bedroom. Her shoulders slumped with weariness and the weight of her tamped emotions when she saw the king sized bed. Releasing Audric's hand, she crawled on the bed and lay down, staring at the wall. "Are you leaving now?" she asked when he didn't move.

"If you wish."

She flicked a look at him. "Would you stay if asked you to?"

He swallowed audibly. “If you wish.”

Raina’s chin wobbled. She nodded, unable to speak for the hard knot in her throat. He moved to the bed and settled behind her, curling an arm around her waist. She dragged in a difficult breath, trying to hold the tears at bay.

“Cry if you need to, Raina. I will not mind holding you.”

Turning in his arms, she pressed her face to his chest gratefully and accepted the invitation, crying until she’d exhausted herself and fell asleep.

He was gone when she woke. Distressed to find herself alone, she felt like crying all over again, but she’d cried already until her head felt as if it would explode. Instead of yielding to the impulse again, she got up and went to the bathroom, standing under the hot water until she felt like she might live.

There were no towels, of course, and she hadn’t thought to get one from her suitcase. Dripping water, shivering with the cold of the apartment after the heated water, she went back into the bedroom for a towel. As she stood quickly drying herself, she heard the front door open and the rattle of plastic bags. Her heart

executed a hopeful jounce in her chest. Wrapping the towel around her, she moved to the door and peered down the hallway.

Audric dropped an armload of bags on the floor and turned to leave again. As he did, he glanced toward the bedroom and did a double take as he saw her standing in the doorway. His gaze slid over her bare shoulders and down the towel that covered her from her breasts to the tops of her thighs, lingered for so long at that point that she'd begun to think she must be hanging out the bottom, and lifted one leg across the other. The movement seemed to break the spell. His gaze snapped up to meet hers again.

"I thought you'd left," she said.

He looked away after a moment. "You needed much. I have brought all that I could think of that you would need that is not here already and I have food if you are hungry."

Raina smiled tentatively, the first real smile she'd felt since he'd awakened her that morning. "Trying to fatten me up?"

His gaze flicked over her again, but briefly. He finally smiled back at her. "You have enough meat on your bones to please any man with eyes in his head."

Raina blushed. “I wasn’t fishing for a compliment,” she said uncomfortably. “I’ll get dressed.”

He’d brought fast-food, she saw when she went into the dining area--burgers and fries and cola. “Yum! All my favorites!”

He looked at her a little doubtfully and Raina’s burgeoning spirits plummeted. Simon had always thought of a clever comeback whatever she said. She missed that, missed him, so much she couldn’t breathe for several moments, felt as if a tight band had squeezed around her chest and would crush her. She wanted to run from the pain, thought wildly for several moments about running and never stopping until she couldn’t feel anything anymore. But she knew there was no running from pain, no escaping it. All she could do was endure and try to forget and know that after a while it wouldn’t hurt as much.

She’d lost before. She knew the drill. At first the pain was so intense it felt as if it would consume you and for a little while you hoped it would, hoped to just die and escape it. But you didn’t and then it would dull into a heavy ache that would allow you to function and stay alive even though it dogged your days and nights and you lost track of time and place, days, weeks, months--and after a while even that would dull a little

more and one day you would wake up and discover there was life after loss.

Sometime in the future she'd remember how to laugh, feel something besides pain.

She was no hungrier for lunch than she had been for breakfast, but she sat down with Audric and tried to eat enough to make him feel as if his efforts were appreciated.

“I guess you'll need to be getting back soon?” she asked tentatively when they finally finished their meal, dreading the loss of her last link to Simon as much as she dreaded being alone, wishing she could just cling to Audric for comfort until some of the hurt went away.

Audric hadn't seemed a lot hungrier than she was. At the question, he pushed his half eaten sandwich away.

Chapter Fifteen

Audric stared at Raina, feeling a cold sweat pop from his pores as the moment he realized he had been

dreading was upon him. He had faced men armed to the teeth with blood in their eyes and murder in their hearts with less fear than he felt at that moment.

He was suddenly sorry he had eaten anything at all, for it sat like a lead ball the size of his head at the bottom of his belly and, as his belly tightened around it with nerves, he felt vaguely ill.

He had never refused an order from Simon in his life, could not consider doing so in this instance at all even if he had wanted to, and he hadn't. Fool that he was, as hard as he knew it would be, he could no more resist the lure of spending these last days with Raina than he could have cut out his own heart. In any case, he had been too stunned when he realized what Simon was giving him to feel much beyond shock and then a tentative thrill of happiness--which had vanished the moment he came face to face with the task Simon had given him.

Simon was in his own hell and he knew that better than anyone else, knew that Simon was focused on the task at hand with the determined single-mindedness of a man drowning and clinging to the only piece of flotsam he could find. Simon had not reasoned it out, hadn't been able to, or he would've known that all he was doing was giving *him* a taste of hell, as well.

Mayhap, he thought, Simon was so steeped in his own pain he had no idea how Riana felt--would feel, but *she* did. She loved Simon, not him. It did not matter that he loved her, he knew, as much as Simon could possibly love her. Her heart was given. Even if he was willing, even eager, to take the scraps from Simon's table, she could not want him, couldn't possibly have anything to give him.

Anger flickered inside of him as he thought of what Simon had done to him--given him the hardest task. *He* had to see her pain because Simon could not bear to see it. He had to hold her while she cried for Simon. As much as he wanted to hold her, as grateful as he was for any excuse to hold her close to him, it tortured him that she was hurt.

He dwelt on the anger for many moments until it dawned on him that he *should* be the one to bear what must be borne. He deserved to suffer as much as they were. He had thrown the two of them together. He hadn't expected what had happened, but he had certainly expected something to happen, hoped that it would--not this, never this, but still he had played with their lives. It had not seemed callous or wrong at the time. He was doing what was best for Simon, he thought, and ultimately for the people of Schalome. He had not considered that Raina might be hurt. He had not considered that Simon would be hurt.

He had not considered that *he* would be hurt.

Getting to his feet abruptly when he saw that Raina was waiting for him to say something, he paced the floor, trying to compose a speech that would encompass all that must be said in the gentlest way possible. He had worn a path across the floor before he finally had to accept defeat. There was no way to say what he had to that would be gentle, that wouldn't hurt her more.

No way at all.

He discovered that Raina had moved to the couch. She was watching him with wide, wary eyes.

He strode to the couch purposefully, settling beside her. After staring at her speechlessly for several moments, he got up to pace again.

“You’re making me dizzy, Audric,” Raina said finally.

He stopped again and stared at her. He’d raked his hands through his hair until it was a wild tangle. The look in his eyes was one of pure misery.

Audric settled beside again, stiff, tense. He couldn’t tell her, he realized. He couldn’t. He was as big a coward as Simon when it came to Raina. When she

sighed unhappily and dropped her head to his shoulder he had to fight the urge to spring up and run out the door.

He couldn't protect her from the outside of the apartment, though. He couldn't watch both sides at once, couldn't be sure that someone was not slipping into the rear while he was watching the front, or vice versa.

"I will stay a while," he finally said gruffly, clearing his throat when he felt his voice crack.

She relaxed more fully against him and after a while, he shifted to get more comfortable and lifted his arm around her shoulders.

"I should be doing something," she said after a while, vaguely, as if she wasn't sure what she should be doing.

"There is nothing that needs to be done that can not wait a while--until you feel better."

"I'm not sure it can wait that long."

He thought it was an attempt at humor, but he could hear the quaver in her voice of tears. He tried to think of something to say that might stave them off. He was still a nervous wreck from the last bout, but he was no

good at diverting her mind and it seemed to help her to pour out her sorrow in tears. He couldn't begrudge her that, even if it did make him feel like squalling like a babe himself. Uttering a long suffering sigh, he shifted to pull her across his lap and tucked her more comfortably against his chest, trying to ignore the feel of her buttocks against his groin and the soft press of her breasts against his chest.

Her delicate scent wafted to him with each breath she took, warming him and pushing his mind in a direction it had no business going. Gritting his teeth, he firmly ignored the war inside him and stroked her silky hair along the back of her head and her shoulder and back in a manner he hoped was soothing.

It didn't soothe him. It made him regret, as it always did, that he had brought her to Simon's notice at all. It made him wish that he had listened to the voice inside his head that had prompted him to take her for himself and leave Simon to his own devises.

It wouldn't have turned out differently, though. He couldn't have hidden her from Simon if he'd tried. Sooner or later, with or without his interference, she would have come face to face with Simon and it had taken no more than that for either of them. He'd seen that endless look they had exchanged that first day, seen the way she looked at Simon. He hadn't *needed* to see

the look on Simon's face to know the attraction was mutual and had rocked Simon's world.

He shrugged that thought off. There was no point in dwelling on it, no point in regret. It had happened. It had to be dealt with. They all had to deal with it now.

Bit by bit she had relaxed against him until he'd thought she had drifted to sleep again when she spoke.

“How long can you stay?”

He tensed, instantly at war within himself, trying to think what he could say that would be the truth and not something he could*not* tell her, but it was no more fair to her to allow her to think that he could stay as long as he wanted, or as long as she needed him. “I have ... business that I must attend. I am going home in a few days, but I can stay until then ... if you wish.”

Raina sucked in a harsh breath and held it as fresh pain spiraled through her and made it impossible to push the air from her lungs again and drag in another breath. He was going home--and he always went where ever Simon went.

Simon was going home.

That was why he'd sent her away, because, as she'd

always known, there was no place for her in his life.

She couldn't do anything for several moments except wrestle with the magnitude of the pain in her chest. As much as it had hurt to think that Simon had ordered Audric to take her off and dump her like an unwanted pet, it hurt far, far worse to realize that he had done it because he was leaving. It was stupid, she knew, to derive comfort from Simon's nearness when she knew she'd never get to see him again no matter that he was just across the channel. But she *had* drawn comfort from it.

Even that solace was to be denied her, though.

He was leaving--going back to his world.

Because she knew 'home' wasn't on this one.

It had taken her a little while to piece it all together, mostly because it had seemed just too fantastic to be true, but there was no getting around the facts. No human being had eyes like theirs. That trait wasn't from *any* country, or any race on Earth, as hard as she'd tried to convince herself that was all it was, a unique racial trait, or maybe even just a unique family trait.

Beyond that, their native tongue wasn't spoken anywhere on Earth. She was dirt poor and she always

had been. She'd lived and worked among the struggling poor her entire life, and immigrants fell into that category for the most part. She'd met and worked with people from countries all over the world. She knew *they* weren't speaking an Earth language, had known it from the first moment she'd heard it, she thought, although she'd struggled for a long time to try to fit it into something familiar.

Even their speech patterns when they spoke English were different, very formal--sounded stilted because they didn't use slang, or understand a lot of it, and they didn't contract their words and run them together like everyone else on Earth did. They very carefully enunciated each word.

To say nothing of the terms they used so often.

As far as she knew, there wasn't a culture left on Earth that still believed in or worshipped more than one god--which they obviously did.

As painful as it was to think Simon had just gotten tired of her, it was far more painful to realize he wasn't going to be on the same world with her anymore. She knew, even if he had meant to stay, that she'd never see him again, but it had comforted her to think of him being close by. Now, she didn't even have that.

And Audric was leaving, too.

Lifting her head, she stared at him miserably, realizing how much she'd depended upon Audric to comfort her, to befriend her in times of need--realizing she needed him more desperately now than she ever had--and he was leaving.

“Do not look at me like that,” he said hoarsely. “The gods are my witness, I never meant for you to be hurt, Raina.”

She averted her gaze. Dropping her cheek to his hard shoulder, she fought a round with her tears and finally dragged in a long, shuddering breath, trying to sort through her chaotic emotions.

Simon had sent Audric to take care of her. It hadn't occurred to her before that there was significance in that fact, that there had to be one. Simon knew that Audric wanted her. They'd come to blows over it more than once, and almost come to blows about it more than that. After they'd made the pact between them, he'd allowed Audric around her, but she knew he hadn't liked it, hadn't completely trusted her or Audric.

Why, then, had he sent Audric? She thought Audric would've come anyway, or at least have wanted to, but he'd said that Simon had sent him to take care of her.

Was it just because he trusted Audric more than any of the others?

Maybe, but she didn't think so.

And she had seen 'that' look in Audric's eyes, the hunger he'd worked so hard to hide before.

As tumultuous as her thoughts and emotions were, it was hard to ignore the picture that emerged--that there'd been a reason besides Simon's trust in Audric, besides his sense of obligation or responsibility or maybe honor that had compelled him to be certain that she was taken care of.

That hurt, too, the thought that Simon had passed her on to Audric, because she wasn't so sunk in misery that she'd failed to notice Audric had arrived with his dick in his hand and a hopeful look in his eyes.

Maybe, she thought, he was just trying to make it up to Audric by giving him a chance to be with her before they left?

That didn't make it hurt any less, but *she* cared about Audric. She'd felt guilty that she'd led him to believe that she would welcome him and then had turned to Simon.

And Simon was gone, had released her from her promise and handed her off to Audric.

And Audric had his own needs and he was still trying to ignore them and comfort her.

Desire was the furthest thing from her mind, but she realized she needed comforting. She was clinging to Audric because she couldn't bear to be alone, taking advantage of his feelings for her, and it wasn't fair to him.

It was never right or fair when one person did all the taking and one all the giving.

Who would it hurt, after all, if they gave each other what they needed? Not Simon as much as it hurt her to accept that. He knew how Audric felt about her and he'd sent him away.

Lifting her head from his shoulder, she looked up at Audric again, studying the drawn lines of his handsome face, the faint frown between his eyes. She was never going to see him again. In a few days, he would be gone and she would have no one to run to when she needed a comforting shoulder to cry on, nobody to talk to who never seemed to judge her. Just like Simon, he would disappear forever from her life, and in his way, he was

as dear to her as Simon.

Without actually acknowledging that she'd made her decision, she lifted a hand and settled it on his hard cheek. He turned his head to look at her, a mixture of hope, doubt, and uneasiness in his eyes, as if he thought she would only tease him and then push him away again.

Like she had before.

Shame filled her for her uncharitable thought of before--He hadn't come with his dick in his hand. He'd offered comfort for nothing, just like before. He couldn't help that he was hopeful for more.

She hadn't wanted to hurt him either, hadn't meant to. She'd just been so wrapped up in Simon, she hadn't spared him a thought--not enough thought. Guilt hardly counted. She deserved the guilt, but it hadn't done anything for him, hadn't helped his feelings in any way for her to punish herself with little prickles of shame and remorse that bothered her only when she could spare a few moments from thinking about Simon.

Maybe he wouldn't even want what she had to offer, but she wanted to offer it. If nothing else, he deserved the chance to blow her off like she had him.

She drifted closer, planting a kiss at one corner of his mouth, and then brushed her lips lightly across his. He tensed, sucked in a shuddering breath and stilled as if he was afraid to move, uncertain if it was an offer or not.

She might as well go for broke, she thought wryly, unnerved by the idea, uncertain herself of whether she was facing rejection.

Slipping from his lap, she held his gaze as she unfastened her jeans and peeled the jeans and panties from her hips. Confusion flickered in his eyes briefly but disappeared quickly. A glazed look formed on his features as she wiggled out of the jeans. His gaze fastened on the patch of curling red hair on her mound as if he'd been transfixed.

When she'd stepped out of her jeans and panties, she climbed onto his lap again, this time astride his hips. He seemed to recoil for a moment. Disconcerted, Raina hesitated. When he did nothing more than stare at her, she grasped the bottom edge of her shirt and peeled it off over her head and then her sports bra.

He swallowed convulsively, his gaze dropping to her breasts.

He made no attempt to touch her, but she could feel

faint tremors running through him, could hear them in his ragged breaths. His chest, hard and mounded with muscle, huge, expanded even more as his breath sawed in and out of his lungs in quick, hard breaths.

The look on his face, the evidence of his need, aroused her when she hadn't thought anything could.

He swallowed audibly again. "You do not have to do this, Raina," he said hoarsely. "I do not expect it of you."

"I know."

"I will stay and protect you, comfort you if you have need."

"I know. You always have."

"Why then?"

She could see he suspected it was only to get back at Simon, but what would be the point of that even if she was that kind of person? If Simon had cared, he wouldn't have sent her away, and he wouldn't have sent her with Audric. She couldn't punish him even if that was her objective, and it wasn't. "I've always run to you for comfort, Audric. Do you think I would have if I hadn't care about you? Do you think I would've found comfort

in being with you if you didn't mean something to me?"

"We are friends," he said gruffly.

Relief flooded her when he said that. "Yes, we are," she agreed, "and I don't want you to go without knowing what it feels like to be with you. If memories are all we'll get, we should make some happy ones, don't you think?"

He swallowed with an effort. "I do not want you to hate me, Raina. I do not want you to feel regrets because of me."

"I won't regret doing this," she said firmly. "I will regret it if I don't."

He allowed his gaze to drop from her face to her breasts. "If you tell me to stop, I will stop," he murmured, but almost as if to himself. Lifting his hands slowly, almost like a sleepwalker, he cupped a breast in either hand, sucking in a shuddering breath as he gently explored the weight and fullness of them. After a moment, he released his hold on her breasts and slipped his hands along her ribs until he'd encircled her waist with them and then followed the curve of her hips. His gaze had riveted on her mound, though. He stared at it for long moments before he looked up at her again.

“You are so beautiful, Raina,” he said reverently.

She felt her face redden at the compliment, but her heart quickened at the way he said it, at the look in his eyes. “Thank you,” she murmured, lifting her hands to distract him, and herself from her discomfort and opening the buttons of his shirt with hands that shook.

He skimmed his hands over her thighs while she tugged his shirt from the waist of his breeches and pushed it wide to explore his chest. Dark hair covered it liberally, not beast man thick, but certainly more than Simon.

She promptly pushed that thought from her head. She wasn’t going to compare him to Simon.

He had a beautiful chest, but she’d known that already. She’d managed to catch him dressing regularly when she’d been using his room. She’d never deliberately looked, though. She’d glimpsed, and then tried to look away, and although she had the impression that he was built very pleasingly, she hadn’t studied him as she did now. She hadn’t felt the pleasing texture of his skin. She hadn’t felt the tautness of the bulging muscles of his pecs, the ripple of muscles that cascaded down his belly.

He didn’t just look beautiful. He felt wonderful to

touch. He made her feel beautiful as he studied her almost with wonder in his eyes, desire. The tremors of need rippling through his big body spawned echoes in hers.

He met her gaze when she skimmed her hands beneath the shoulders of his shirt to push his shirt and coat off of him. A shoulder harness thwarted her efforts and she looked at the butt of the gun beneath one arm pit with surprise she shouldn't have felt. He was a bodyguard. She knew that. She shouldn't have been surprised that he was wearing a weapon.

She certainly shouldn't have been surprised to see it didn't look like any weapon she'd ever seen, not when she knew Audric, none of them, were from her world. When she sat back, he slipped it off, unholstered the weapon and lay it within easy reach before he shrugged out of his coat and shirt.

His shoulders were broad and muscular, his arms like the arms of a weight lifter, huge and hard and bulging with muscle. She skated her hands along his shoulders, feeling the ripple of reaction that went through him with a dizzying sense of pleasure.

She thought abruptly that she was going to enjoy this far more than she'd expected to. She hadn't really thought beyond giving. She was still far more interested

in giving him pleasure than finding pleasurable release for herself. It would bring her just as much enjoyment, she thought, if she didn't come.

He speared his fingers through her hair and dragged her close, tilting his head to cover her mouth with his and reminded her instantly of how good his mouth had felt on hers when he'd kissed her before. His scent, that unique perfume that belonged to him alone, that nearly intangible essence of Audric that had come to represent protection and comfort was magnified tenfold as his mouth opened over hers and she sucked it into her lungs with his breath. He tasted heavenly, felt heavenly as he thrust his tongue into her mouth and rubbed it along hers.

A hard shudder went through him and he broke away to stare at her, breathing hoarsely, his eyes nearly black with desire. He was waiting to see if she was still willing, if he'd distressed her or unnerved her. She dropped her gaze to his hard mouth, drifting closer.

He dropped all pretence of restraint. This time when his mouth closed on hers, she felt the hurricane force of his need. The power of it shook her to her core, banished any thought of merely accepting, or giving only for the sake of charity and caring. The demanding, almost violent assault commanded her passions, seized control from her, and she welcomed the breach of her

defenses.

Dimly, she realized this man was a stranger to her, not the gentle suppliant that Audric had always shown her. He was a man who took what he wanted with the same untamed lust that she'd felt in Simon.

She knew it was Audric's mouth that held hers captive, though, Audric's tongue that made her feel faint and breathless, giddy with excitement, drunk with pleasure. Her head fell back weakly as he hooked an arm around her shoulders and dragged her upward on her knees to meet his mouth in descent. Dimly, she heard him fumbling with the opening of his pants as he moved his mouth hungrily over her breasts, first one and then the other, suckling and tugging at her nipples with his mouth and tongue and the edge of his teeth. And each love bite sent a fresh, harder wave of mass destruction by fire through her blood stream.

She gasped in sharply as he dragged the head of his cock along her cleft and seated himself in the mouth of her sex, thrusting her downward to impale her on his shaft. Shaking all over, his face contorted with rapturous anguish, he drove into her without restraint, without rhythm, hard, desperate lungs. His breath hissed through his clenched teeth. "Gods, Raina! I can not hold it. Come for me dearling. Come for me, Raina," he groaned as he heaved upward to drive into

her body in jerky, frantic thrusts.

As if he'd summoned it from the depths only with his voice, her body seized with blinding, mind-blowing abruptness and intensity. She uttered a choked cry, groaned, moaned long and low as her body erupted with pleasure. He crushed her against him, shaking and groaning as the clenching convulsions of her sex brought his own climax upon him.

Completely drained, Raina dropped her head weakly to his shoulder. His arms tightened around her, holding her upright, holding her tightly to him. "Sweet," he murmured gustily, nuzzling his face against hers. "My sweet, Raina."

She smiled hazily and dropped into oblivion.

Chapter Sixteen

Whether by design or accident, Raina thought with some wryness, Audric found the magical elixir to drive her pain from her mind. She roused when he stood up with her and strode into the bedroom, settling her on

the cool sheets, discarding his pants and then joining her in the bed.

And thereafter, he gave her little time for rest and less for thought. He didn't leave the apartment and rarely allowed her to leave the bed more than the time it took to take care of her personal needs. When they needed food, he called and had it delivered and as often as not they sat in the bed and ate it, brushing the crumbs off when they'd finished and making love again.

Anytime she became pensive or sad, he dragged her into his arms and kissed her, or made love to her, or both until she was amazed that he could still wring pleasure from her.

She didn't count the days. She didn't want to and Audric made it easy for her to lose track of the passing time.

He never mentioned it, and yet the morning she woke and saw his face was taut, she knew the time had come to say goodbye to him.

At least she got to say goodbye, she thought.

She hadn't gotten to tell Simon goodbye.

After studying her face for a long while, as if he was

trying to memorize it, he'd made love to her and then dragged her into the shower for a bath and made love to her in the shower. Clad in nothing but a towel, weak and shaky, she watched him as he dried himself and dressed, shoving his weapon last of all into the shoulder holster. He hadn't put on more than his pants in days and it was a clue that he was leaving even if not for the look in his eyes.

Raina cleared her throat. "I guess this means you're going?"

He looked at her, but this time his gaze skated away from hers. "I must," he said gruffly.

Her chin wobbled. "Then kiss me goodbye."

He crushed her against him instead, rocking her slightly. "I will miss you, dearling," he murmured hoarsely against her hair.

"I'm going to miss you, too."

He squeezed her so tightly she couldn't breathe, but she didn't complain.

"If ... this business does not keep me from it ... If I could come back," he said hesitantly. "Would you welcome me, dearling?"

Raina couldn't keep the tears back any longer. She knew he wouldn't come back, no matter what he said. He didn't belong here any more than she belonged on his world or there would've been no question. He would've asked her to go with him. "If you came back to stay," she said finally. "Don't ask me for a little while. I can't do that, Audric. I love the hellos, but I can't handle the goodbyes."

He nodded and finally released her. After staring at her for a moment, brushing at the tears on her cheeks, he pulled a handful of crumpled papers from the inside pocket of his jacket and placed them in Raina's hands. "Simon asked me to give you this."

She stared at them, trying to focus through the tears and finally just nodded at him. She didn't walk him to the door. She sat weakly on the edge of the bed and stared at the papers blindly while she listened to him stride across the living room and close the door behind him.

Alone again, she thought miserably.

Pulling the towel off, she mopped the tears from her cheeks and sniffed. When she felt like she'd regained some of her self-control, she opened the sealed envelope.

I have never more deeply regretted anything in my life than leaving you, but I think you know I have no choice. I hope you do, and that you will understand how grateful I am to have known you.

I have opened an account for you to see to your needs and to give you the one thing that I know that you wanted--travel. Go and see the world you want to see, and think of me from time to time, for I will always be thinking of you.

Simon

Tears streamed down her cheeks in rivers as she read the note, dripping off her chin, but despite her sorrow, she felt warmed and cheered immeasurably by the fact that he hadn't wanted to leave her. Mopping at her face again with the towel, she unfolded the other piece of paper and saw it was the deed to the island estate.

She stared at it for a long time, stunned by his generosity.

But she couldn't live there. She would wither and die being surrounded by memories of Simon day in and day out. The only way she was going to survive was if she

could somehow push him from her mind.

Taking a shaky breath, she set the papers aside and stared down at her belly. Lifting a hand to settle it over the slight swell, she felt just a flicker of hope. “I guess it’s just you and me, now, little guy.”

“Not quite.”

Riana shot up from the bed in fear and whirled toward the man who’d spoken.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped, knowing she wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

“Emperor Jaelen awaits you. He has always liked to keep a few steps ahead of his enemies,” he said, setting the large, black case he was carrying down. “I have come to take you to Schalome.”

Raina stared at him, feeling a flicker of hopefulness that cost her. The man reached her, grasping her by one arm. Her eyes widened with fright. Her mind went blank with fear. “What’s that for?”

He glanced down at the case. “It is a portable sleep pod--for one’s pets. Fortunately for you you should fit in it very well without the need to remove any parts you might be fond of.”

“You’re not putting me in that thing!” Raina gasped, realizing even as she tried to struggle that it was far too late.

She didn’t see the strange looking object he pulled from his pocket until a split second before he calmly stabbed it into her neck. Instantly, an icy cold wave flowed from the spot and through her and in its wake it left nothingness.

* * * *

There were a hundred things that should have been on his mind, details that, if they did not require his immediate attention, still needed to be considered, but none of the things that should have been running through his mind were.

It was the restlessness to be gone, Simon told himself, that had him in such turmoil, that had his belly tied in knots and his temper on edge. It was the irritations of preparing for the voyage that had seemed endless, his eagerness to see his homeland again, his impatience to deal with a situation that should have been dealt with long ago.

He had not simply accepted defeat and never intended to bring Jaelen to account. He had always known that he

would go back, that he had to--when the time was right, he would go back and do what both his conscience and his duty compelled him to do. Somehow, though, he had just lost track of time. Time had ceased to have any meaning to him at all, as if, when he had arrived on this alien world, time had simply stood still.

He was appalled that so much time had passed him by, that he had made no attempt to bring Jaelen to account, none to avenge Evie in all these years.

He had not wanted to rule. He had been young and wild, and he had chafed at all the restrictions imposed upon him by his birth, but even when he had rebelled against it, he had *known* that he would rule when his time came, known that when his father died he would ascend the throne as his father had before him, and his father before that, for generations.

He had known when he was exiled that it was his duty to return, to die if need be in an attempt to take back what was his by right--but not accept, never to simply accept.

He had done the right thing, the only thing that he could have done, he told himself as he paced the bridge restlessly, listening with a half a mind to the conversations flowing around him as they prepared for take off. He had made the only decision his conscience

would allow.

Why then, did it feel wrong, he wondered? Why did he feel a far stronger pull to stay than to go?

Why was it that he could not put Rainie out of his mind?

Guilt, he decided. Regardless of the pact she had made with him, he should not have simply sent her away as he had. He should have told her something. He could not have told her the truth, but he should have told her something.

Instead, he had made excuses for why he could not tell her anything, made excuses for why it would be best to simply send her away.

She would be angry, he knew, and it was better that way, better than hurting her if she did care for him.

The unpalatable truth was that it was just better for him, because he had felt himself wavering the moment he had made the decision to go, found himself trying to think of reasons why it would be better to wait a while longer--to stay, only because the thought of leaving Rainie was unacceptable.

He had known all along that he would not want to

leave her. It was for that reason that he had ordered everything set in motion--while he had still had some will to resist the pull of staying with her--because he had known if he could find an excuse, he would.

There was no choice now--none. An army had been raised, preparations made, promises made that he could not break and still look at himself in the mirror. He had failed in his duty by not returning before, failed his people, failed Evie, failed himself.

She would be all right. Even if she thought that she cared for him, it was only because she had no idea of whom or what he was.

The kindest thing he could have done, he supposed, was to have told her. Then there would be no question of hurting her. She would have been eager for him to go, eager to escape him--probably horrified to discover the man she had given such passion to was not a man at all, but dracon.

He could not have done that, though, even if he had wanted to, and he had not wanted to.

He paused in his pacing as Audric came aboard, searching his face for ... What? He had no idea. Some sign that Raina had rejected him? Some sign that she had sent him off a happy man?

That thought brought his temper from a simmer to a slow boil.

The look in Audric's eyes did nothing to tamp it.

Audric looked as miserable as he felt and he knew at once that he had spent his time 'consoling' her.

It was unreasonable, he knew, when he had sent Audric to her, but he did not care how gods be damned unreasonable it was. It still infuriated him.

He turned away when he felt his beast stir within him, that primal, territorial part of him that he had been at pains to keep hidden.

* * * *

He frowned when she went limp, studied the injector with a faint sense of uneasiness and finally pocketed it, lifting his fingers to check her pulse. If he had miscalculated the dose, Jaelen was not going to be pleased. Her pulse was slow and faint, but that was to be expected. He decided not to worry about the speed *themuzinaire* had taken effect. That was probably just the difference in the human metabolism, or maybe hers in particular.

Allowing her to slide to the floor, he opened the case and then scooped her limp form up and placed her inside. He paused for a moment as he studied her, appreciating her naked form, but finally dismissed it as undoable. He was already fifteen minutes behind Audric. He didn't have time to sample the wares.

Quickly, he inserted the tubes, set the cyber sleep, and adjusted the life monitoring unit. Satisfied, he tucked her arms and legs into a fetal position and closed and locked the case.

He checked his time piece. Twenty minutes in and out. Not bad, but maybe not good enough if he didn't hurry.

Audric glared at him as he strode up the ramp and into the ship. "Where have you been?"

He shrugged. "Collecting."

Audric's lips tightened. "You are bringing that stupid beast?"

"I am fond of the bitch and Simon gave me leave."

"Stow it then and get to your station. Simon's fit to be tied at all the delays."

Pressing the retractor, Audric waited until the gangway

had receded into its slot and locked into place and then closed the hatch and sealed it. Jorell sent him a warning look as he reached the bridge.

Audric glanced at Simon.

His face looked like a thunder cloud, but Audric didn't think it was only because of the delays in departure. Simon had met his gaze when he'd arrived and he'd known instantly that, regardless of what Simon had said, he was less than pleased that Audric had taken him up on the offer to make the best of the time he had been allowed.

Or maybe it was only that he'd been convinced that Raina would refuse?

Likely she would have if she'd believed Simon cared. It was his own damned fault if he'd left her feeling discarded and unwanted. He could have told her--something.

Simon had the men going through another systems check. He didn't look appeased, though, when everything had checked out. Instead, he turned to pacing the bridge while they waited for dusk to launch.

Nothing the earthlings had could catch them, but caution was ingrained by now. They'd launch after dark,

when it was less likely they would be seen by anything but mechanical eyes. They would break free of Earth's atmosphere long before the airbase could scramble jets to follow, launch a missile--do anything more than gape at the blip on their radars as it shot skyward and disappeared beyond their range.

When Simon at last took his seat and began to fasten his restraints, Audric moved to his own chair and settled, trying to focus his thoughts away from Raina as he fastened his own restraints and checked them.

He should not have asked her, he realized, but he could not resist. He had wanted so much to know if she cared enough for him to consider it and the thought had come into his mind and spilled from his tongue before he could stop it. As much as it had pleased him to know that she would consider having him, he realized he had given her hope that he might return that would only hurt her more if he could not.

He had made up his mind, though. If he lived through the war, he would petition Simon to release him from his vows and accept permanent exile to be with Raina. She loved Simon far more than she would ever love him, but she cared for him, and he loved her. He could give up his homeland, his friends, his family. He could accept that he would have no family of his own. He did not want to accept life without Raina if he had a chance

with her.

“Fire up!” Simon commanded abruptly, dragging Audric from his thoughts.

Haig dashed onto the bridge and scrambled into his harness on the heels of the command.

Simon gave him a look.

Haig shrugged. “I had to take a leak.”

“You could not have held it?” Jorell demanded in disgust.

“With the way this thing bucks like a wild *daybst* on take off?” he demanded indignantly. “I pissed my pants last time.”

Elden nodded. “He always pisses his pants.”

Jorell snorted.

“It is better than shitting his pants,” Rama put in. “Tedra would make him wash them himself.”

“If everyone has finished discussing Haig’s problem,” Simon said dryly. “Perhaps you would consider flying the fucking ship?”

“Power is at full,” Jorell announced.

Audric swiveled around to check his instruments. “All systems holding.”

“The sky is clear,” Elden said, “on my mark ... three ... two ... launch!”

Tedra let out a mewling cry as the ship shot skyward.

Simon flicked a quick glance at the old woman, but he could not see that she was under any particular distress aside from the fact that she had always hated flying. He glanced significantly at Haig. “Vitals check.”

Haig frowned and followed the direction of Simon’s nod. Nodding in return, he checked the vitals read outs. “We are all good,” he announced after frowning at the vid for several moments. “Tedra’s heart rate is a bit accelerated but she is not in the range of danger,” he added more quietly.

“She is a tough old bird,” Jorell teased. “Are you not, Tedra? She has not had a ride the likes of this in a while, I will warrant.”

Tedra pried one eye open and glared at him. “If you are suggesting what I think you are, Jorell Blackwing, then

I will have you know that it has not been nearly as long as you think!”

Elden laughed. “You have done it now. She will save the nastiest piece of meat for your dinner. Right, Tedra?”

“Now that you have given that away, no,” Tedra said primly, struggling to shake off her terror at their bantering. “I shall have to think of something else.”

“Gods be damned!” Jorell bellowed abruptly, jerking the ship so suddenly that it banked hard right and then righted itself almost as quickly, performing a hard zigzag that slammed everyone in first one direction and then another. “I thought you said the gods be damned skies were clear, Elden! I nigh took the tail off of that airline jet.”

“It was ... then. I can not help it that there is an airport nearby! It changed course.”

“Rama! You are supposed to be monitoring the chatter! Get your head out of your ass!”

“There are two more,” Elden said. “Three degrees port on my mark ... now!”

The craft cut sharply to the left and then righted itself

again.

“Clear,” Elden announced, “we are above their fly zone now.”

“Punching through the outer atmosphere,” Audric announced, completely unnecessarily as the ship began to shimmy with the last drags of gravity. “Artificial gravity in ten.”

Haig left his seat as soon as the artificial gravity kicked in. “I believe I will just go to my cabin and change my shorts now.”

Jorell emitted a snort of laughter. “You have no balls, Haig. That is your problem. It was not even that difficult a launch.”

Simon had thrown off his own restraints and moved to check on Tedra. “I do not believe Tedra would agree with you. She has fainted.” He glanced at Haig. “She has only fainted?”

Haig nodded. “I kept watch on her vitals. Blood pressure and heart rate remained well below critical.”

Crouching down in front of Tedra, Simon tapped her cheek lightly and finally unfastened her restraints. “Get the door for me, Audric,” he said as he scooped the old

woman into his arms. “She will be better if she rests awhile in her cabin.”

Audric preceded him, opening the door to Tedra’s cabin and turning down the blanket on the bunk. She roused as Simon settled her, looking around vaguely. “We are in space?” she asked.

Simon smiled at her. “The worst is over for now. Rest a while.”

“I really should be preparing dinner,” she said weakly.

“We will not starve. Rest.”

Audric glanced at Simon when they left Tedra’s cabin. Simon had not spoken to him since he’d returned and he was fairly certain he knew why. He thought that it would probably be best to wait until Simon was ready to speak to him, but he decided to test the waters anyway. “It would have been better to place her in a sleep pod for take off,” he said.

Simon slid a glittering glance in his direction. “She is afraid of them,” he retorted coldly.

Frozen waters, Audric mentally acknowledged, allowing Simon to brush past him as they returned to the bridge.

He was not needed any longer and was tempted to avoid further contact with Simon at the moment, but he could not resist the possibility of taking once last look at Earth before they left it behind. Simon had already ordered the aft view up on the main screen when he arrived. He was standing rigidly before the screen, his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze focused intently, though there was nothing of any interest to either one of them to see any longer. A swirl of white cloud covered the entire southern portion of the continent. The city itself would have been no more than a speck now even without the clouds to obscure it.

He wondered if she was thinking of him ... or Simon. She'd been tearful when he left but struggling to keep them inside. It warmed him that she'd cared enough to cry for him, and at the same made him feel ill at leaving her.

She would be alright, he told himself. She was far stronger than they had given her credit for. She had wept in her grief, but she had already begun trying to pick up the pieces and begin again.

She would be alright.

He was not at all certain that he would be.

Or Simon.

He discovered as he averted his gaze that Simon had turned away, as well. For several moments, their gazes locked and Audric wondered if he looked as miserable as Simon did.

He supposed must. He saw when he looked away that Jorell was watching him and the others studying Simon.

Simon cleared his throat. “Perform a thorough systems check for possible exit damage,” he said, his voice sounding rough. “If everything checks out, chart a course for Maiden Prime. We will go there first.”

“You think the Macedons will help us?”

“It can not hurt to ask,” Simon said grimly. “I will be in my cabin.”

* * * *

“The men are grumbling,” Audric said as he propped his shoulders against the wall of Simon’s cabin, folding his arms over his chest.

Simon didn’t move. He was staring at the ceiling as if mesmerized by the gleaming metal above him. “It is to be expected. They are chafing for the battle.”

“Exactly, and complaining that we have added another month to the trip for no good reason. They are concerned that you have no heart for this ... and so am I.”

Simon expelled an impatient breath and sat up, running a hand over the growth of beard on his face--at a guess, at least three days worth. There were dark circles beneath his eyes and hollows in his cheeks since he neither ate nor slept as he needed to. “I am here,” Simon growled.

“Are you?” Audric asked tightly. “You look like shit.”

Simon lifted his head to glare him. “You look worse.”

Audric felt a flicker of amusement. “You have not checked your mirror lately.”

“I do not like the man I see,” Simon said after a long pause.

Audric could think of nothing to say to that for several moments. “They are not wrong, are they? You do not have the heart for this.”

“I will do what I must. I know my duty.”

“But you do not have the heart for it.”

Simon made a derisive sound. “Because I am a heartless bastard,” he retorted. “That is what she believes, is it not? That I am a cold, heartless bastard?”

Audric said nothing for several moments, not because the root of Simon’s depression was any great surprise, but it was a surprise that Simon spoke of it to him. They had not exchanged more than a handful words in all the weeks since they had left, and at that Simon only spoke to him as his aide, never of anything personal. “She did not tell me and I did not ask,” he said finally.

Simon speared his hands through his hair, cupping his skull as if his head pained him, which would not have surprised Audric either considering Simon had celebrated the end of his talks with Macedons by tying on a four day drunk. “I had not thought that I would miss her so ... desperately,” he said raggedly.

“It does no good to dwell on it!” Audric said harshly.

“*Nothing* does any good!” Simon snarled at him.

“In time”

“Do not spout that tripe to me! I do not want time to take her from me! I would rather be miserable than

forget.”

“You can not go into battle with a divided mind, Simon. We are at a disadvantage already. We will have to focus on the prize or we will have no chance.”

Simon dropped his hands and lifted his head to glare Audric. “That is the problem, Audric. The *prize* is back there! I was just too ... arrogant to see it ... because I was born to rule and taught from birth that I must do this for the realm, and that for the people, and set myself above them, and yet marry to please them. And if I do not give my life for the greater good, I am a selfish bastard, unworthy of the regard and respect of my people.

“*Damn* the people! I do not want to be their gods be damned ruler! Not if it means I can not have Rainie.”

Audric felt fear well inside of him and twist at his gut. Some of it was anxiety for Simon, himself, for, despite their differences, he loved his brother. A good deal of it was concern for their enterprise because it was critical to their success that Simon put his whole heart into it or they would surely fail ... and in doing so, many would die.

They were dead men if they failed. Even if they managed to escape, Jaelen would never allow them to

live to threaten his control again. He would have them hunted down. They would never be able to rest for looking over their shoulders for assassins.

But a very great deal of it was because he had been certain that, regardless of how Simon felt about Raina, he would do what his duty required of him, take his birthright, bind himself with a suitable consort, produce his heir, and rule as he had been born to rule.

He had not once considered that Simon would be willing to give up everything to go back to Raina.

As he had planned to do.

“You are not thinking clearly,” he responded finally, feeling more than a little ill.

To his surprise, Simon smiled. “I have not been thinking clearly since I first saw Raina,” he said wryly. “There is nothing new in that.”

“What do you mean to do, then? Turn about? Leave our supporters to try it on their own? Order them to stand down? They will not do it, you know. They are gathered. They are ready to fight.”

Simon got up from his bunk. “Nay. I am not so sunk in my own concerns that I would fail them. You should

know me better than that. Even if it were not for that, regardless of what I said about the people, I can not leave them any longer to Jaelen's tender mercies. I set about to free them from his tyranny and I will. I set out to avenge Evangeline and I will.

“And then, when I have done all that my conscience requires of me, I will do what I want. I will go home to Rainie and see if I can convince her to take me back.”

“Schalome is home,” Audric said hoarsely.

Simon shook his head. “Rainie is home.”

Chapter Seventeen

Raina could hear the drone of voices. At first, she was certain they were part of a dream, or maybe a nightmare, but there were no images floating through her mind in association with the voices and somehow that didn't fit her understanding of a dream, despite the thick fog that clouded her mind. When she swallowed, pain drove the little thought she could manage from her mind. Her throat was as raw as if someone had shoved

sandpaper down her throat and scoured the flesh. As that pain subsided a little bit, she became aware that it wasn't the only pain. She was a mass of pain.

The pain in her throat didn't seem quite as bad after she'd swallowed a few more times--still bad, but more manageable and it made it easier to inventory the rest of the hurting. It was general overall ache, she decided.

Fever? Sore throat. She'd been sick?

She must still be sick, delirious, maybe, because even though she'd aroused and was certain she was actually hearing the voices, not in her mind, but with her ears, she still couldn't tell what they were saying.

Why would there be voices around her anyway?

She must be sick and in the hospital, she decided, not sick in bed at home.

The bright lights drilling holes in her eyelids seemed to support that.

Why did she ache and hurt all over? She wondered plaintively.

She couldn't remember getting sick.

She didn't feel hot. She felt as if she was freezing to death.

Almost on top of that thought, she felt the shivering begin from deep inside of her and work its way outward until it felt as if the shivers were going to shake her apart. It grew worse and worse until her jaw spasmed with it and her teeth began to click together.

The voices stopped abruptly. She didn't realize it at first. She was too focused on trying to control the tremors wracking her, but as the pain and shivering brought her more awareness and she tried to stretch her aching, cramped muscles, she also realized there was suddenly silence around her.

The silence and the discovery that she couldn't stretch, could barely move at all, cleared the heavy fog until she was able to expand her senses beyond her body. She struggled to lift her eyelids when she'd studied over what she could smell, feel, and hear and realized that nothing entering her mind through those senses identified her surroundings as anything even vaguely familiar.

She wasn't lying on a bed. The surface was hard and completely unyielding. In fact, she wasn't actually laying at all, not like she would've in sleep. She was curled on her side into a tight little ball and she couldn't

move more than a few inches without hitting something that kept her from moving more. The lights against her eyelids weren't like the bright fluorescents in a hospital, or the soft yellow/white glow of her bedroom light. The smells weren't like a hospital--or home.

She couldn't lift her eyelids at first. Her eyes felt as if they'd been glued shut. Finally, after several tries, she managed to get both open a tiny slit. Her eyes watered immediately, filling with burning tears that prevented any attempt to focus. She closed them again, squeezing her lids tightly to dispel the water and then tried again.

A wavering image filled her vision when she tried again. His lips moved. A voice emerged, but she didn't understand a word he said. The tone, she understood. It was commanding, a demand of some kind.

The face swam away and another entered her vision. Hands clamped around her arms, pulling and it felt like her joints were separating from the sockets as she felt herself lifted. She groaned involuntarily at the pain that enveloped her. The effort tore at her throat and sent her into a fit of coughing.

She was still coughing when she felt the soles of her bare feet touch what felt like a sheet of ice as she was lowered. She tensed, partly from the cold and partly from the instinctive urge to catch herself as she

descended. Pain shot through her muscles but they responded sluggishly and weakly. She slowed her descent, but she wilted into a heap anyway on the freezing surface.

She heard the voices again and thought they were discussing her. She wasn't sure why or how she arrived at that except that they surrounded her and she felt hands plucking and poking at her. When she managed to get her eyes open again, she saw a man crouched beside her and there was something about his expression and the gleam in his eyes that told her he was the one poking and prodding her--like a malicious, sadistic little boy examining an injured animal and poking at it to see what it would do.

She let out a hiss of pain as he grabbed her wrist and pulled it, straightening her arm, and he chuckled.

She couldn't see much besides the man, but she saw enough of the room she was in to realize her senses hadn't betrayed her. Neither the man nor the place was familiar to her and that discovery added a taste of fear to the confusion.

He rose after a few more minutes of tormenting her--when she refused to make another sound to amuse him, barking an order. Another man bent over her, pulling at her and jostling her and finally lifting her off

of the floor.

She was naked. She'd dimly registered that, but it had fallen so far down the list of discomforts that she hadn't done more than register awareness of it. Her discomfort over that fact climbed higher on her list as she was carried across the room and discovered there were people everywhere--men, all of them staring at her with taut faces and yellow/gold eyes.

A kaleidoscope of images and impressions pelted her, adding to the chaos of misery from her cold and pain, confusion, and her embarrassment to be naked and completely exposed to the people they passed. They looked her over with the avid interest of people viewing a side-show freak. She didn't know the man carrying her any more than the others. She'd refused to acknowledge him after one glance at his stony expression, but she curled a little more closely to him, trying to pull into herself to shield herself from those eyes that followed her, trying to hold onto some warmth.

The man descended stairs into a darker area. No natural light filtered here. Only dim artificial light that hurt her eyes. After striding down one long corridor after another lined with doors, he finally shouldered his way through one, dropped her unceremoniously on a hard, narrow cot and left her, bolting the door behind

him.

It was darker inside the tiny room than the corridor had been. Feeble light spilled through a tiny widow high up on the door, but there was no light inside the cubicle. It wasn't much *more* than a cubicle, maybe the size of a large elevator--just long enough for a cot, which went wall to wall in one direction. There was a hole in one corner, from which eye watering smells emerged that identified it as a crude latrine. A small pipe emerged a few inches from the wall above the hole, dripping fat drops of water that hit the edge of the hole and dripped into it.

She was in a prison cell and it was way worse than any jail cell she'd been a guest in on Earth.

Shivering, she looked down at the thin, stinking cover on the bed and finally drew it up and wrapped it around herself.

The shaking from cold never actually went away, but it eased after a long while, leaving a shuddery, shimmying feeling in the pit of her belly that was more fear than cold. She didn't make a conscious effort to analyze any of the thoughts drifting around her mind. She had no desire to assess her situation. She wanted to blank her mind and try to 'hide' from the fear, but eventually her brain sorted the puzzle pieces and began to fit them

together regardless of her wishes.

The moment real awareness finally penetrated her mind, she jerked the cover from around her and stared at her belly. The confusion of chaos instantly descended over her again as she stared at the basketball sized mound with total incomprehension and fear induced panic. Slowly, it penetrated her mind that her baby had to be alright and that a great deal of time had passed since she'd been aware of anything at all or the baby wouldn't have had time to grow so much.

Months. She'd been unconscious in a drug induced coma for months.

Instantly, fear assailed her again that whatever she'd been given had hurt her baby, but she tamped it. The baby was growing. Surely it wouldn't have been if they'd damaged it?

She didn't completely believe that, but she couldn't bear to allow herself to think otherwise and she shoved it from her mind determinedly. A flutter of movement inside her stomach gave the fear an additional shove in the right direction. She stared at her stomach, her breath suspended in her chest. The movement came again, a shifting sort of sensation. A small knot appeared on the rounded mound of her belly and moved across it. A choked laugh escaped her as it dawned on her what that

small knot was.

A hand ... or maybe a foot.

She burst into tears of relief then, looping her arms around her swollen belly and rocking herself. He was alive. He was moving. That had to mean he was alright, didn't it?

She calmed herself with an effort when she realized the baby was moving agitatedly, as if her distress had communicated itself to him. Rubbing a hand soothingly over her belly, she crooned the few words she could remember from the only lullaby she could recall and dried her eyes with her other hand, sniffing until a sense of peace stole over her and with it a flicker of happiness and hopefulness.

For a while, she basked in it, allowing herself to fantasize about the baby, trying to imagine what a baby sized replica of Simon would look like.

The thoughts of Simon led her mind away from the pleasurable fantasies about the baby and her mind took off like a runaway train, snatching at puzzle pieces and slamming them together.

She was on Simon's world, surrounded by his enemies. There was no doubt at all in her mind of that--and that

could mean only one thing. She'd been brought to his home world for one reason--to be used against him.

“Welcome to Schalome,” she muttered to herself.

* * * *

Excitement threaded Simon's veins as he drew back on the reins of his mount and brought the *aybst* he was riding from a canter to a sliding halt on the brow of the hill. The sun was just rising above the distant mountain range, bathing the landscape with its orange-red glow, and the morning dew that had collected on the foliage twinkled like gems as the prisms of water captured the light. The village below them, cloaked in a wispy morning mist, was as still as a painting.

He sucked in a deep, sustaining breath, drew in the smells of home and felt it flow through his veins like wine.

“I can see Schalome from here,” Jorell murmured low, but despite the quietness of his voice, or mayhap because of the near reverence of the pronouncement, his excitement was evident.

Simon glanced at him, and then at the faces of the others that he could see from where he sat on his own

mount, Audric and Elden. Rama and Haig had stayed behind to take the ship to a secure location after they'd landed and disembarked. To a man, and despite their efforts to contain it, they wore expressions of absolute joy, as if they were staring at the gates of *Hadan* , the home of the gods, instead of their homeland.

He didn't stop to analyze his own feelings. He knew what had sent a rush of excitement through him and it was not the same thing that had affected them. *He* saw Raina as he stared out over the countryside at the peaks that formed Schalome's southern border. *He* saw the task at hand finished and felt the narrowing of time and space that separated him from her. Soon now, he realized, he would face his enemy for the last time. Soon he would feel the thrill of battle that was like nothing else--fear, excitement, challenge, victory, all rolled into one--and more, because at the end of it he would be that much closer to *her* . And then he would be done and he would have nothing more to do but clean up the mess and he could go back to her.

He could not entirely dismiss the fear that she would forget him, or that she would be too angry with him for leaving her without any explanation to take him back, but he had hope. He had determination. Somehow, he would win her back.

Audric grinned at him. "I do not believe I have ever

seen a more beautiful sight!”

Simon smiled faintly, his gaze distant as he summoned the image of Raina’s face to his mind’s eye. “I have,” he murmured.

Audric’s smile flattened. Pain filled his eyes and he looked away.

Discomfort moved over Simon, but he shook it off. “I do not know about the rest of you, but I am looking forward to getting down off this beast,” he said easily. “My ass begins to feel sorely abused.”

The other men chuckled, shifting in their saddles uncomfortably as if they’d only just then recalled the stiff muscles and numbed regions from three days of hard riding.

“You are waiting for an invitation?” Simon asked, grinning at them as he kicked his *naybst* into motion. “Alright then. Welcome home!”

The village awakened and began to stir to life before they reached the first cottage. By the time they’d cantered into the market square, adults and children and beasts seemed to throng the narrow, cobbled streets.

They slowed their mounts, holding them to a walk as

they threaded their way through the emerging foot traffic. A hum of excitement began to build around them, almost imperceptible at first, like the electric charge that filled the air as a storm gathered.

“It is him! The Emperor!*Pater-Draken* --Father Dragon. Our dragon lord! He is the image of his father! I saw him once. I know it is him. It is him!”

Audric glanced at Simon as the whispers of awe drifted around them, became more pronounced--louder and louder as excitement as contagious as a virulent virus moved from person to person.

He seemed oblivious at first, distant, caught up in his own thoughts. Abruptly, though, his *maybst* took exception to a child that darted through the growing crowd of gawkers and let out a series of angry clicks and then a roar as it balked and tried to rear. Simon’s hand tightened automatically on the reins, drawing the beast’s head down to its chest, his knees digging into its shoulders. Then *maybst* sidled, but quieted almost instantly. When Simon’s attention moved from the beast to the people around him again, he smiled, no more than a faint curling of his lips, and nodded--that regal nod he seemed completely unconscious of, probably *was* unconscious of.

“Emperor Pater-Draken!” someone exclaimed.

Almost as one, every man, woman, and child within sight of them dropped to their knees in reverence, some sobbing or wailing loudly, others laughing with nervous excitement, still others calling out welcomes.

“Emperor! Emperor! The gods bless us! He has returned! He has returned! The gods are smiling upon us!”

Simon sent Audric a disconcerted look, color darkening his cheeks.

Audric shrugged. Almost reluctantly, he grinned.

A group of men emerged from a hostel near the center of the town. They stood rigid for some moments and finally dropped to one knee and bowed their heads, bringing one arm across their chests in salute.

Simon’s party came to a halt and dismounted.

As he approached the men, they rose. “Emperor Pater-Draken!” the eldest man exclaimed, grinning broadly as Simon caught his shoulders and embraced him briefly.

“Dill my old friend!” Simon said. “You are looking well!”

Dilligen Valedraken studied Simon's face searchingly. "Very well, Sire. Better than ever to see your ugly face among us again!"

Simon chuckled. "We came with all haste--and great secrecy," he murmured wryly.

There were chuckles from the men surrounding them. Dill Valedraken laughed uproariously. "They know their*true* emperor, Dragon Lord. You could have worn a mask and hood and they would*still* have known you. In any case, it matters not--not now," he added, sobering.

Simon nodded and they all turned and entered the building the men who'd greeted them had emerged from. Striding through the common room, the party gathered in a large, private chamber beyond.

Gathering around the large, round table that sat in the center of the room, they exchanged pleasantries and reminisced as the barmaids scurried back and forth bringing spirits and platters of food. When they'd withdrawn at last, everyone present fell silent.

Smiles vanished and faces grew taut.

"We have spies everywhere," Dill announced grimly.

Simon studied him in silence for several moments. “The gathering of such an army was bound to attract notice,” he said coolly.

“Aye!” Dill agreed, “But it should not have done so as quickly as it did. We used the greatest discretion, I assure you. We have staggered the recruiting and gathering with great care--no parties larger than a dozen in any one place at any time. And even if that had begun to attract notice, *it still* would not explain how Jaelen knew that we would gather here to attack. The southern border is the least accessible. If he had had no knowledge of our plans, he would have amassed his army along the other borders.

“Beyond that, Draken Fortress has stood empty since your exile. Jaelen prefers the pretty little confection that he had designed and built for himself at Reamestone.

“I tell you he was expecting us even before we’d begun gathering our forces.”

Pushing his plate away with disinterest, Simon settled an elbow on the table and supported his chin in his hand, staring thoughtfully at the men around the table. “And you have ferreted none out?”

“A round dozen in my own camp alone,” Dill said with disgust. “We got nothing out of them before they died.

Either they knew nothing or they were more terrified of Jaelen than my best torturers, and I am thinking they knew nothing.”

Simon transferred his gaze to Ravenwing, listened to his report, and then Montdragon’s, moving around the table clockwise until he reached Nimets, the young Duke of Sardovf.

When he’d heard them out, he rose. “I have a yearning for a bath and a bed. We will meet here again this eve and go over the final details of the attack and determine what, if any, alterations should be made.”

Dill rose, as well. “By your leave, Sire, I will show you the chambers we had prepared for you.”

Simon nodded, sent his own men a significant glance, which they correctly interpreted to mean that they were to stay put, and he and Dill left the room together.

“You are off your food,” Dill commented as they ascended the stairs, sending Simon a speculative glance. “I can assure you it did not reach the table without a taster.”

Simon shrugged. “I never doubted it. I have grown unaccustomed to the food here, however.”

Dill looked taken aback. “You did not leave with many, but you had servants, surely? Could they not be trained to prepare a decent draconian dish?”

Simon averted his gaze, ignoring the tightening in his belly at the inadvertent reminder of Raina. “They are not magicians and as impossible as it may seem to grasp, we did not think to load stores of ‘decent’ draconian herbs, spices, vegetation, or meat. I had Tedra, and there is no better cook on all of Drack, but she can not work miracles. There were a thousand subtle and not so subtle differences in taste, but I grew accustomed and now, I think, it will take time to reacquaint myself with my native foods.”

Dill studied him curiously. “I had not thought of that. They are much like us, though?”

Simon grimaced. “Aye, but like the food--subtle and not so subtle differences. Naturally, we chose a world as close to our own Drack as possible, peopled with beings much like us, but, by and large, they are smaller folk--less robust. The physical differences should not have been too notable, and yet we discovered quickly enough that we could not walk among them without drawing far more attention than we were comfortable with. They are ... very curious of strangers. Beyond the size, our eyes are not at all the same and seemed to distress them far more than their strange eyes disturbed

us.

He frowned as Dill paused before a door situated about halfway down the corridor and opened it, stepping back with a slight bow for him to enter. Simon scanned the room as he did so, relaxing slightly when he saw the room was empty and moving further inside to settle in a comfortable chair.

“It has been many years,” he murmured as Dill took the chair across from him at the wave of his hand, “and either my memory is faulty or I had miscalculated how ... enthusiastic my homecoming would be. I will say nothing about their prematurely hailing me as Emperor--perhaps *their* memories are faulty and they do not recall that I was never crowned. But the folk did not used to grovel on the ground. What was all that nonsense upon our arrival?”

Dill expelled a harsh breath of disgust. “Need you ask? Jaelen. He requires *proper* humility of his subjects. Anyone in his presence whose head is above the level of his knee--if they are common folk--or above the level of his waist--if they are nobles--will find themselves without one.”

Simon’s lips tightened.

“As for the weeping, and wailing, and shouts of

joy--that was purely for you. They do not let out a peep, you may be certain, when Jaelen passes, not only because they hate him as enthusiastically as they love you, but also because they are terrified of drawing his notice.”

Simon nodded. “It is no wonder our plans are no secret,” he said dryly. “I begin to think there is no one who did not know and anticipate our arrival.”

Dill shrugged. “The commoners have a nose for these things, but you may be absolutely certain that, whatever they may have culled from watchfulness, they would never betray you. Some slimy bastard of a spy has infiltrated us. I swear to you on my father’s soul that no one, with the exception of the courier, whom I trust completely, had full knowledge of the plan save Montdragon, Ravenwing, Sardovf, and I. And I can not believe that it was any one of them, and I know gods bedamned well that it was not I!”

Simon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “It is done now and not worth weeping over. We will simply have to do the best we can with what we have to work with.”

Dill frowned. “You do not think that it would be best to march ‘round Schalome and attack from another vantage?”

Simon shook his head. "I have considered that, but we will certainly have no better element of surprise and we can not dismiss the effects that it would have on the men. They would be weary from the forced march, and dispirited, very likely--neither situation, of which, would be to our benefit."

Dill was silent for several moments. "We heard word that you had diverted to Maiden Prime on your way home?"

"Aye. I spoke with their minister at length."

"And?"

"They have agreed to remain neutral."

"That is so very helpful of them," Dill retorted with disgust.

Simon smiled faintly. "I accomplished what I set out to do. It is all that I was interested in--making certain that they would not intervene on Jaelen's behalf."

Dill sent him a startled glance. "I had not thought about that. You did not detect any sign that they have chosen to side with him?"

"They are lovers of peace. They will never interfere

unless they feel that it is necessary to keep peace. In this instance, they are no happier with Jaelen's rule that we are. I have their blessing to--remove him from power, but they prefer to merely observe and allow us to make our own mistakes, and clean up our own mess."

Dill nodded, but he still seemed unhappy. "It would have evened the odds for us a bit if they had been willing to furnish us with some of their weapons," he growled irritably. "I will not complain overmuch--for I far prefer our own weapons, crude as *they* might consider them, but in this instance"

"In this instance, we will triumph with draconian might," Simon said coolly.

Again, Dill nodded. "The gods have always favored you, Simon Pater-Draken."

Simon smiled thinly. "Let us hope they do not favor me as they have in the past," he said dryly.

Chapter Eighteen

Raina stared at the two men who'd entered her cell, keeping her expression as carefully blank as possible. She recognized one of the two as the man who'd examined her with such malicious glee when she'd first woken, though, and it took an effort to stifle the shivers that kept trying to creep up her backbone.

His manner of dress was almost absurdly elaborate. Although he wore trousers and a shirt and boots, much like everyone else, his boots were not black, but bright red and topped with a cuff of fur. Bright gold tassels swung from the top, as well, and a colorful design had been stitched into the leather all over. His trousers were gold. Made of some glossy material, an elaborate design followed the outer seams from knee to waist--a sort of trailing vine with buds and blossoms. There was an obscene bulge in his crotch that she would've been willing to bet had been formed from some sort of hard cup-like device, maybe something like sports figures would wear to protect their genitals. But she doubted that was the purpose. The purpose seemed to be to make him *appear* to have monstrous genitals.

The shirt he wore was of a paler gold color, but seemed to be made of the same glossy material as the pants. It

was open to the waist, displaying pale skin completely devoid of any hair and an expanse of chest that, while still fairly impressive, seemed soft.

He had a definite paunch--not big, but a soft bulge instead of a flat belly, as if he was fond of foods that tended to collect around the waist--either that or he just didn't get much exercise. She guessed both. He just seemed like the sort of man to overindulge himself.

“You are Petra-Draken's whore?” the second man, obviously brought as an interpreter, demanded for the second time.

Raina merely stared at the man, trying to decide if they were just trying to get a rise out of her or if they expected her to answer that. They couldn't be in any doubt that she'd been Simon's bedmate for months--not considering who it was that had taken her. “Is that supposed to be a question?” she asked finally.

The other man flung a string of furious words at her.

“The emperor will not tolerate your insolence, wench!” the translator snarled. “Answer the question!”

Fear pricked at her, but Raina pursed her lips in irritation. “I didn't understand the fucking question.”

Prissy the emperor might be, but he moved like lightening and struck like a rattlesnake, backhanding her across the face so hard her head jerked sideways and she rolled off the cot and onto the floor. Raina spat out the blood that filled her mouth from her cut lip and struggled to stop her brain from reeling.

“You carry Petra-Draken’s bastard, yes?”

The shock receded, allowing pain to wash over her. Ignoring the throbbing, she pushed herself up to look at them, wondering if she would be better off to ignore her pride and rebelliousness and blubber and cringe instead. She could. She’d never had a problem using whatever worked. It went against the grain, though. “I don’t know who the fuck Petra-Draken is,” she muttered, “but I’ll have you to know I’m *not* pregnant! I can’t help if I’m fat, can I?”

The interpreter grabbed her by her hair and pulled her to her feet, using it to slam her against the wall behind her several times. “Then it will not kill the babe if I plant my fist in your belly, wench?”

Raina wrapped her arms around her stomach protectively, instantly losing every ounce of bravado. “I’m pregnant,” she admitted, swallowing against the urge to burst into tears. “He said his name was Rick.”

To her relief, the man let go of her and the two men settled into a discussion. Raina sidled back to the bunk and pulled her knees up as tightly to her chest as she could, locking her arms around her calves. It wasn't much protection for the baby, but it was all she could think of to do.

“Simon Petra-Draken,” the man said finally. “The deposed monarch of Schalome--you know nothing about this man?”

Raina flinched in spite of all she could do at his name. Her heart seemed to cringe in her chest at the discovery that he was, had been, the king--or the emperor, she supposed since the guy had referred to the prick as emperor--but she studied her toes studiously. “I worked for a guy named Simon Draken,” she said finally. They *knew* everything. They had to. Why the hell were they questioning her?

It dawned on her after a moment that they didn't trust Green. If they had, they wouldn't have seen any reason to question her.

“You fuck him, yes?”

She wanted to protect Simon. She knew once they were certain that she'd meant something to Simon that they were going to try to use her against him, but she

also realized they were cold blooded fuckers. She knew the type--malicious and sadistic. If they had no use for her, she and the baby were dead.

She had to protect the baby.

“Yes,” she said reluctantly. “I was his favorite fuck. He’s going to be really pissed off when he finds out y’all have been so hateful.”

“The bastard you carry is his?”

She sent the man a sullen look. “He seemed to think so,” she lied.

To her relief, they seemed satisfied and left the cell again. Her shoulders sagged. The terror she’d been holding at bay by sheer willpower flowed over her like a tidal wave. For an endless time she stared blankly at the door, shivering uncontrollably. After a while, her muscles began to relax because she just didn’t have the strength to hold them taut any longer and shortly after that weariness overtook her and allowed her to escape for a while.

* * * *

A scraping noise woke her. Raina stared at the glob of food in the bowl by the door without much interest and

finally got up to get it before the rodents that shared her cell with her tried to beat her to it. So far, the nasty looking things had seemed fairly timid, but the food drew them out. More importantly, she couldn't afford not to eat, however disgusting the food was. She couldn't afford to get weak--although eating a glob of mush once a day wasn't doing much to keep her strength up--and she couldn't afford to ignore her baby's needs.

It took all she could do to hold the mess down once she'd managed to swallow it. When she was sure it wasn't going to come right back up again, she got off the bunk and moved to stand over the latrine, trying to catch water in her mouth and swallow it without gagging on the stench emanating from below her and throwing up her food.

As jails went, this was the worst she'd ever been thrown in, and she'd seen the inside of more of them than she'd ever wanted to. When she'd first run away, it had seemed that she'd ended up in one every time she turned around, mostly for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being poor, and being homeless--and she was usually charged with prostitution even though she'd never been one--which was really ironic considering she'd spent most of her first years on the street running from pimps who wanted to add her to their stable. The cops didn't care. As far as they were concerned, if you looked guilty, you were guilty. And

guilty in their book was any female who loitered on the street. They didn't give a shit if you didn't have anywhere to go.

As familiar as she'd become with such places, though, she wasn't familiar with the concept of trying to escape. It had never occurred to her to try before. Once she'd gotten over her initial shock and terror, though, she'd thought of little else. She wasn't going to serve a little time and get turned out on the street. No one was going to bail her out--not that anybody ever had, but there'd been that option before anyway.

No one, except the bastard that had taken her, even knew she was here.

Thoughts of escape didn't make a route miraculously appear, unfortunately. The place had no venting ducts. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all stone. The cell had a door, not bars and she'd already tried reaching the latch from the outside. She could barely reach the fucking window, let alone get her arm out of it. There was no dragging the cot over for a lift up. It was bolted to the floor.

God, she fucking hated being so damned short!

The latrine was the only way out. It had still taken a while to get up her nerve to consider it, but she'd had to

dismiss the notion fairly quickly. Given the choice of life or death, she thought she might have been able to contain her disgust about crawling through shit, but it wasn't an option. If she hadn't been pregnant, it might have been. The hole wasn't big, but it was obvious they hadn't ever had a prisoner her size in here. If she hadn't been pregnant, a few days or weeks of their food would've reduced her enough to fit. She *was* pregnant, though, and she had only to take one look to know her belly wasn't going to make it, and it was getting bigger--she thought. It was hard to say. She was losing weight, she knew. Maybe it only *seemed* to be getting bigger really fast because the rest of her was getting small really fast from starvation.

She tried not to think about how that might effect her baby. She couldn't do anything about that anymore than she'd been able to prevent that bastard from drugging her and keeping her in that case god only knew how long in a drug induced coma. She knew it was probably going to be a miracle if the baby survived, let alone was born strong and healthy, but she could only do what she could do.

Which was pretty much nothing.

* * * *

If she considered that she was fed one meal per day,

and Raina was pretty sure that was as regularly as she got fed, if it was even that often, she'd spent four fun-filled weeks in Schalome's answer to criminal rehabilitation when the door of her cell opened and a guard strode into the room and grabbed her. She was too stunned to even attempt to struggle, which was just as well since it wouldn't have done her a bit of good. She might have gotten loose from him, but she had no idea how to get out of the place and she would almost certainly have run afoul of a dozen more soldiers before she'd gotten far.

It was actually very fortunate for her that he'd surprised her because once she'd gathered her scattered wits she realized her docile behavior coupled with her size, which probably wasn't half his in weight, had disarmed the man. It had led him to believe she wouldn't be any trouble to him and it was the only advantage she had that she could see. He led her by one arm, forcing her to keep pace with him, which was difficult for her given that she was at least a foot shorter and trying to keep herself decently covered with the ratty blanket. She tried to use the time to best advantage, staring at her surroundings, trying to remember every turn and stair, but all the while her mind was busy sorting possible reasons for removing her from the cell.

They'd only questioned her once since her arrival and except for the infrequent feedings, no one had come

near her since.

As miserable as her incarceration had been, she was fully aware that it could have much worse. More questionings and more beatings, or rape. Given those possibilities, being left freezing, and naked, and half starved weren't bad at all.

It made her wonder, though, what the sudden interest in her was, and it wasn't hard to figure out. The time had come when they were going to do whatever it was they'd brought her here for.

She arrived at that realization about the time the man dragging her carried her through a huge doorway and she found herself outside. A cold tide of terror washed over her as 'outside' and 'execution' collided in her mind. She was still trying to convince herself that she was allowing her imagination to run away with her when they stepped outside.

Instantly, she was blinded by the bright sunlight and bombarded by a rumble of mingled noises that sounded like the distant roar of a coliseum full of football fans--caught in the middle of a thunderstorm. Smoke filled the air, as well, as if they were in the midst of a fourth of July fireworks display. The explosions preceded the light, though, she realized as her eyes began to adjust to the bright light, and the crowd she

heard wasn't cheering and roaring with pleasure.

The roars she heard were all from the throats of men--of challenge, of excursion, and pain and death.

And then she saw the scaffold.

Her mind went blank, but she'd seen the sadistic glint in Jaelen's eyes the first time she'd met him, and the second meeting had reinforced that impression, not dispelled it. The setting was so like medieval movies she'd seen of public execution and torture that, as much as she wanted to disbelieve, she accepted that her wild thoughts weren't wild at all.

There was a battle going on some where nearby and Jaelen had decided the best way to use her.

Incongruously with the almost medieval setting, there was a huge video display screen erected in the distance, near what appeared to be a drop off. She hadn't had time until that moment to realize that they must be on top of a mountain. The view beyond that screen made her stomach go weightless.

As she dragged her gaze back, she saw herself on the screen. She stumbled. The guard's hand tightened, alerting her to the fact that he'd grown so certain she wouldn't present a problem to him than he'd relaxed

his grip. She focused on his hold when she righted herself. It was firm, but not tight.

If Simon was anywhere around, and she thought he must be--figured the screen made it pretty obvious he was too far away to fully appreciate what they were going to do to her--he couldn't help her. She was going to have to save herself and her baby because no white knight was going to come charging to her rescue.

Dragging her gaze from the horrible things set up on the scaffold with an effort, she scanned the area, looking for any possibilities. There were soldiers around, but most of them were focused on watching whatever was going on below them--a battle obviously. No doubt once the fun started with her, she'd have their full attention, but at the moment, except for the man dragging her out for her execution, she was almost unguarded.

Places to hide--places to climb--there would be no running. The cliff wasn't something she was willing to jump off of, although it did occur to her that it would probably be a lot quicker and less painful than what they had in mind.

It looked like the 'drawing and quartering' thing she'd seen in a movie--close enough at any rate, she didn't want to find out how close it was.

The scaffold was a raised platform, maybe eighteen inches above the leveled stone plateau where it had been built. She was fairly certain she could get under it, despite her belly, and they couldn't, but where to go then?

Could she take cover there until the 'calvary' arrived? Had the execution been scheduled because they thought Simon's side was about to win and they hoped to demoralize him? Or were they already in trouble and Jaelen figured this would finish things off nicely? Distract Simon at a crucial moment?

She didn't know, but she realized she didn't have any options. There was nothing else. The scaffold was built on the very edge of the cliff. If she scrambled under it and they came after her, she supposed she was going to have to find out how good she was at rock climbing.

The thought was terrifying enough to make her feel weak all over, but she resolutely put it from her mind. There was no point in thinking about it until or unless it became necessary--no point in thinking about it then, if it came to that, or she didn't have a prayer. She would have *todo* , not think.

She waited until they'd almost reached the scaffold. Dragging in a deep breath, she snatched her arm quickly

from the guard's grasp and whirled in almost the same motion. Letting out an ear splitting 'hi-yah' like she'd seen the marshal arts people do, she slammed her fist into the man's nuts with every ounce of power she could sling at him. The blow felt like it broke half the bones in her hand and dislocated her wrist, elbow, and shoulder, but the man let out a roar of pain and doubled over.

Raina was already halfway to the scaffold by the time he crumpled up, nursing his balls. A yell of alert went up from three or four men as she scrambled under it.

It was a tight fit and hell trying to crawl with her belly dragging the ground, but she ignored that, ignored the pain in her hand and arm, ignored the fact that she'd lost the blanket and was stark naked. She didn't pause until she'd covered a good bit ground, but she finally stopped to get her bearings, to gauge how far she was from the sides all around.

Faces appeared at the edges of the scaffolding.

They stared at her, trying to figure out how to get to her and get her out.

Obviously, a quick and relatively painless death wasn't an option for her or they would've just shot her where she was.

A couple of them got down on their bellies and began trying to wiggle toward her.

She heard feet tramping on the scaffolding above her and looked up quickly, trying to see if there was anything that looked like a trap door of the sort she'd seen used in hangings. Deciding the scaffold was probably too low for anything like that, she stayed where she was, trying to catch her breath and keep a watch on the men trying to crawl toward her.

They didn't have any weapons, but neither did she. The moment the thought occurred to her, however, she began to look around for a loose rock. She found pebbles, nothing big enough to bash a head in, but she scooped up handfuls and began slinging them at the men coming toward her, hoping it would at least slow them down.

It did. It also pissed them off more than they were already pissed. She grabbed more and slung them harder, inching a little closer to the edge of the cliff as they inched closer to her.

She ran out of running room a lot faster than she'd thought she would.

A man ran around to the narrow ledge near the cliff's

edge. As she saw his knees bend, Raina reversed directions and kicked him with both feet as hard as she could. He wobbled and let out a scream as he went over the cliff edge.

Raina thought for a moment she'd throw up, horrified that she'd shoved the man over the cliff. She realized fairly quickly, though, that it had made the others a lot more cautious about approaching her. Everyone else apparently decided to just wait and let the men crawling toward her get her and drag her out.

She turned to watch their progress, trying to even her breath. She'd been gasping with fear and exertion until she felt dizzy. She could still hear men walking around on the scaffold above her and realized they were watching and waiting for her to try to dart out.

The cliff was starting to look better and better, or more accurately, she supposed, less scary, more like a possibility when all other possibilities were quickly narrowing to none. There were probably men waiting to catch her if she popped out even on that side, but she'd run out of rock even to slow the men down and she saw they'd be on her in a matter of minutes.

She wasn't going to let them drag her out and do all kinds of horrible things to her. She'd be dead anyway, and the baby would be dead. She had two

choices--climb, or die.

Girding herself, she scanned the edge, trying to see which spot closest to her looked like the best place to go over. Even as she stared at her last, dwindling hope, though, she saw something that stilled the breath in chest--stopped her heart, and she wasn't certain whether it was more from terror, or sheer awe.

Chapter Nineteen

Gasping for breath, Simon transferred his sword from his right hand to his left, flexed his aching fingers a few times to relieve some of the ache, and grabbed his water skin, squeezing water over his hot face before he filled his mouth. After swishing it around a moment to relieve the sour taste, he spat and filled his mouth again, drinking sparingly since he knew too much would make him ill. He was too hot from fighting, and too empty of food.

They'd had four full scale battles and nearly twice that many minor clashes over the past weeks, paying in

blood and sweat for every inch of ground they'd taken and everyone, him included, was the next thing to total exhaustion--partly because they rarely managed to stop long enough to fill their bellies or catch more than a few hours of sleep.

At that, they had been lucky. The first clash might have been disastrous for them, might have been the only battle of the war, except for the fact that nearly a quarter of Jaelen's army had promptly switched sides. From that moment onward, they had been steadily pressing Jaelen's rapidly diminishing army back--diminishing almost as rapidly because of desertions and switched loyalties as from those who'd fallen in battle, while his own army had been growing steadily despite their losses.

Loyalists from the east and west had arrived within a week of the commencement of their campaign. Another group from the north had arrived a week later to fill their ranks--and still they had been at for weeks. Simon chafed at it, but they were virtually at the gates of Draken Fortress now, and Jaelen had been kind enough to come and greet them himself. He would not be forced to chase him down when he had defeated his army.

Because Jaelen had been unwise enough to trap himself in Draken Fortress.

“They are forming up for another run at us,” Audric gasped tiredly, dragging his own water skin from his saddle horn to take a few quick gulps.

Simon nodded, using his arm to wipe his face as he squinted at the army across the plain from them and the dead men that lay between both armies. “We have cut them down to size, though,” he said with satisfaction.

“But they have managed to keep the pass at their backs,” Jorell muttered in disgust.

“We will outflank them in the next engage” Simon’s voice trailed off as he lifted his head to stare up at Draken Fortress. A wave of cold washed over him as he stared in disbelief at the enormous vid screen Jaelen had had erected near the cliff’s edge.

They had thought he had done it to taunt them. They had thought it was Jaelen’s clever way of telling them that he was already preparing for their execution. They had thought the screen was his way of insuring that their executions could be clearly seen by the defeated army.

He saw that they were only partly right. Jaelen had had the scaffold and screen erected for their benefit, to taunt them--taunt him.

As he watched, feeling cold dread settle through him, disbelief, fear, he saw a guard dragging a half naked, very pregnant woman toward the scaffold--toward the sadistic torture and lingering death he had believed Jaelen intended for them.

And mayhap that was his plan, but he would see to it that Simon had to watch Raina die first. Just as he had Evangeline.

For many moments, he could not seem to bring his mind to function. He could only stare, feeling the cold slowly give way to the horror he'd felt while he watched them prepare Evangeline for death, the tortuous sense of helplessness, the sick rage. Not Rainie, he thought. Gods! Not his sweet Rainie! He could not live and bear it!

Seeing that Simon had gone as still and white as death, Audric lifted his head, as well, and froze, staring in disbelief at the vid, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he was watching Raina being dragged to her death. He thought for several moments that he would lose what little he had left in his stomach as his mind refused to give the lie to what he was watching. "Gods! Sweet, merciful gods! Do not do this!" he whispered.

"Gods be damned!" Jorell exclaimed, drawn by their rapt attention to look up, too. "That is not ... that can

not be ... Is that Raina?"

"By the gods *itis* her!" Elden exclaimed in angry disbelief. "How? How could she be here? How could he have gotten his foul hands on her?"

Simon abruptly let out a roar that echoed across the valley and bounced from the mountain back at them. Flinging his sword to ground, he leapt after it and began to tear at his clothes. Elden, Jorell, and Audric turned to gape at him.

"Gods! He has lost his mind!" Audric gasped, struggling to get down from his own *naybst* even as Jorell and Elden leapt from their mounts.

Racing around the *naybsts* to try to restrain him, the three men skidded to a halt abruptly, shocked into a frozen state as they saw that Simon was not Simon anymore.

"He is morphing," Audric said in disbelief and dawning awe, "shape changing! By the gods, Simon is morphing!"

* * * *

Pain submerged the rage for a time, surpassed it. Simon choked and gasped at the burning fire that

flowed over every inch of his skin and seared him all the way to the bone. Gritting his teeth, he fought to focus, calling the change as he had realized long since that he could if he but put his mind to it--his secret weapon, the secret of Draken that he alone knew now. He had planned to call upon it to defeat Jaelen if need be.

He had not known that he would need it to save his Rainie.

Fear trickled through the fire and pain and rage as her image filled his mind, and doubts, for he hadn't succeeded in calling it before--not a complete transformation.

He thrust the distraction from his mind, focusing every ounce of his will on changing. In much the same way a hypnotist would focus on relaxing each part of the body, he called to each part of his to change, expand, grow--and he felt the change tear through him. Unrestrained by the inhibitors fed to the dragon folk in everything they consumed, he felt his bones crack and reform, felt his skin harden, felt his muscles burn as they bulged outward in thick, ropy cords. He felt his shoulder blades burn like fire as they bulged against the skin of his back, elongating, forming finger-like spines that stretched the thinning skin like the taut sail of a ship. He felt his spine crack, felt the bones expand,

forming a hard, jutting ridge from his neck downward to form a long, spiny tail.

And as he felt the pain begin to flow away, allowing the rage to surge back into him in a hot, molten tide, he looked down at himself and a savage sense of satisfaction filled him as he saw that he'd called forth his dragon form.

Lifting his head again to Raina, he stared at the men racing around the scaffold in an effort to get to her and the rage threatened to consume him, eating at his mind until he had to struggle to hold on to the man part of himself. *Rainie* , he thought, *mine* !

Sucking in a deep breath, he expelled a death challenge to Jaelen, and with it a wall of fire that seared and charred everything in its path. Unfurling his wings, he stretched them wide, fanned them experimentally a few times and then raced forward, sprang upward, using his great wings to catch the air and lift him higher.

He glared down at Jaelen's army as he soared above their heads, feeling the urge to circle around and blast them with his dragon fire, to launch himself at them and tear them limb from limb with his talons, shred them with his teeth, and stomp them into dust. Snorting, he lifted his head again.

Raina. Raina first, he told himself, his woman, his mate--his young.

His heart and lungs expanded and labored as he fought the currents to climb the walls of the canyon, to climb higher, climb faster. Quickly, he thought, he must move quickly or they would have her.

And then he burst above the cliff's edge where the scaffolding was, where his Raina was. Angling his wings, he allowed the air to pass beneath and around them so that he hovered, studying the threat to Raina, assessing how to go about killing those who threatened her without harming her and his child.

The men atop the cliff froze as he came within their view, gaping at him as if they'd never seen a dragon--dragon men who gaped in terror at their own kind, he thought with grim amusement. He smiled a dragon smile, sucking in a deep breath to burn them to dust.

And then he saw his Raina--his brave, clever woman--peeking at him from beneath the scaffold, her beautiful green eyes as wide as saucers, and he struggled to tame his dragon mind with his man side.

Come to me, sweeting, he coaxed, flapping his wings to move closer, holding his arms out to her. *Come to*

me. Rainie.

She looked at him doubtfully, but he knew she'd heard him in her mind.

Trust me, Rainie. Come to me. Quickly, beloved.

“Simon?”

There was doubt in her voice, but even as he began to think he would have to think of another way to reach her, she scrambled out from under the scaffold and leapt toward him, dove right off the edge of the cliff. His heart seemed to stop in his chest as he swooped to catch her, folding her into his arms and against his horny hide. Sucking in a deep breath then, he expelled a wall of flame at the men who'd had time to recover from their shocked surprise and began to race toward the weaponry that would pose a threat to him.

He didn't linger. As soon he'd blasted a swath through them, he peeled away, gliding downward on the air currents he'd had to fight to use to reach her. He could feel her clinging to him, shaking, could feel their child nestled between them.

His child.

She had allowed him to send her away and she hadn't

told him.

Anger rolled through him. He tamped it with an effort, fighting another round with his beast side, reminding himself how fragile she was, how easily he could hurt her. There would be time--now--to tell her how displeased he was that she'd said nothing. Later. Not now.

“Simon?”

Yes, beloved. I have you safe.

The battlefield, he saw as he dropped toward the ground, had become a tangle of clashing bodies as both armies lost all semblance of order. Drawn by the fighting blood raging through him, he swooped low, but he could not attack without killing as many of his own men as he did Jaelen's.

“Haig,” Raina said suddenly. “It was Haig that took me! He's working for that asshole, Jaelen!”

An unsettling mixture of anger and amusement filled him, anger to learn of Haig's involvement, and amusement at his Raina. *I had begun to suspect it was him,* he answered her. *I will take care of him when I am done with Jaelen, but for now I must see to your safety.*

Circling the battlefield until he saw Audric, he called to him.

Audric dispatched the man he was fighting and looked up.

I need you to protect our lady. I do not dare leave her alone when Jaelen's men are everywhere. I trust no one but you to protect her.

Nodding, Audric wrestled his *naybst* around and fought his way to the rear of the battle. When he'd cleared the melee, he spurred the beast into a gallop.

Simon circled above him, lifting higher on the air currents until he could see where the men were fighting and finally alit when he'd found a place that seemed safe enough. Crouching low, he settled Raina on her feet with great care, dipping his head to study her carefully for any signs of hurt. *I did not hurt you, beloved?*

Cushioned from the roiling emotions at the back of her mind by shock, a sense of being caught up in a dream state, Raina gaped up at the dragon with Simon's eyes, that spoke inside her mind with Simon's voice, and shook her head.

He studied her a moment longer, as if to make certain she wasn't just telling him that. After a moment, he lifted a hand, as if he would touch her belly and then withdrew it again, curling his long talons inward toward his palm. *Mine?*

Raina swallowed with an effort. "You have to ask?"

He frowned. *I want to hear you say it.*

She looked worried and defensive at the same time. "I tried to tell you, but you didn't seem to want it."

He stared at her angrily, uncomfortably, trying to recall anything that she'd said that had seemed to indicate she was carrying his child, but he found his beast was at war with his man's mind. Thoughts were hard. Instincts struggled to take over and his instincts were demanding blood. Impatience moved through him now that he had his woman safe, impatience to deal with the man who'd tried to kill her.

He snarled at Audric when he finally saw him racing up on his *naybst*. *Stay here with her and keep her safe.*

Without waiting for a response, he lumbered away from the two of them, moving awkwardly on the ground. When he saw he'd put enough distance between himself and them, he launched himself

skyward again. He could do nothing for his men on the field without endangering their lives, but he could get to Jaelen.

* * * *

The blood lust began to sing in his veins again as Simon reached the battlefield. He circled above the plain, slow circles, peering down at the mass of struggling man forms below him through narrowed eyes, searching hungrily for an opening for vengeance. They had harmed his mate, threatened his child. They would have to pay in blood for that.

All of them, he thought--all--but Jaelen first.

Even as he looked up the fortress, however, his man's mind pricked at him, reminded him that he could not simply yield to the beast. He had to have victory. He had to defeat the army.

Cutting another slow sweep over the field, he spied the men waiting for the signal to attack the fortress itself.

Dill stared at him with his mouth at half mast as he settled, hovering just above the ground. "Simon?"

"Aye," Simon growled in his rumbling dragon voice. "It is time. Launch the skimmers. We will crush Jaelen"

s army between us.”

Nodding jerkily, Dill whirled to belay the order. The skimmers rose from the ground like a swarm of angry bees, lifting, riding the air currents upward as Simon banked, circling around to lead the way.

The defenders of the Fortress had had plenty of time to regroup and recover from their shock, Simon saw grimly as he burst above the rim of the plateau and then had to bank sharply to avoid an incendiary bomb launched at his breast. It slammed into the skimmer behind him, sending it spiraling toward the ground far below like a fire bomb itself. It exploded halfway down, but the men inside had long passed beyond feeling it.

Sucking in his breath, Simon expelled a fire wall at the men who'd launched the weapon. The flame licked at the wall they'd hid behind, the wall built by dragon men to withstand dragon fire. He flapped his great wings, boosting himself higher into the air until he was above them, and belched a ball of fire at them.

Two managed to scream before they died.

Looking around for more to satisfy his need to kill, Simon saw that the skimmers were swarming round the fortress. The disk-like vehicles were armed to the teeth,

gun barrels sticking out in every direction that fired shells as big as man's fist and powerful enough to penetrate the hardest material known to draconians--the crystal stone Draken Fortress had been built from.

From the top of the fortress, Jaelen's skimmers rose, firing as they lifted. Simon swerved and dipped, avoiding the bulk of the shells, then roared in agony and rage as one pierced his thigh. He spiraled downward for several moments before he gained control of the pain and lifted his wings to catch an air current to break his fall.

Through pain glazed eyes, he searched for a place to light and finally struggled upward again, moving off to the nearest peak to the fortress and settled to examine his thigh. The bone in his leg had stopped the shell. Gritting his teeth, he used his talon to slice the hole wider and dig the shell out. Blood flowed freely from his leg for a moment before his accelerated cell regeneration sealed it.

He paused to catch his breath, watching the battle while he waited for the weakness to pass and finally returned his attention to the fortress. Jaelen, he thought. He needed to find Jaelen before he managed to escape.

Now where, he thought, would my murderous little brother be hiding?

* * * *

Audric leapt from his *maybst* the moment it skidded to a halt and raced to Raina.

She lifted her arms to receive him, gasping as he caught her to his chest and lifted her clear of the ground.

“Raina! Gods! How did they find you? I thought you were safe,” he ground out hoarsely. “I never would have left you if I had thought otherwise. I thought my heart would fail me when I saw you up there.”

Raina clung tightly to him, her teeth chattering in reaction, tremors of cold washing through her. The warmth of Audric’s body chased the chill, though, the strength of his arms around her drove the terror away, the steady beat of his heart against her cheek comforted her. She sniffed, fighting the urge to let go of the emotions roiling inside of her.

He cupped a hand along the back of her head, pressing her more tightly against his chest. “My brave woman,” he murmured soothingly. “You were so brave. I was so proud of you.”

Raina sniffed again and burst into tears. “I was scared

to death! I was so scared, Audric! There was no place to go. No place to hide. I thought I was going to have to try to climb down the mountain.”

He rocked her gently until she'd calmed and finally pulled away to look at her. A frown drew his brows together as his gaze wandered downward from her face to her belly. “Why did you not tell us? I know you did not tell Simon. He would never have left you if he had known about the babe!”

Raina gave him a resentful look. “I tried to tell him.”

His eyes narrowed. “You are saying he would not listen?” he demanded in patent disbelief.

She sniffed. “I asked him if he'd be mad if I got pregnant and he said ‘happily that isn't possible’.” Her chin wobbled. “I thought he just didn't want to know. Obviously, he didn't want me to have his baby.”

He studied her for a long moment in tight lipped silence and finally slipped an arm around her waist and guided her over to his beast, dragging a shirt from his pack. He watched her uncomfortably as she slipped her arms into the sleeves and began to fasten the buttons. “Did they ...? What happened to your clothes?” he asked in a strangled voice.

Raina looked at him questioningly and then it dawned on her that he thought she'd been raped. She shook her head. "They didn't do anything--I don't think. I guess they figured it would make more of an impact if y'all could see I was pregnant--otherwise, god only knows what they would've done to me."

He frowned. "Do not think?"

She sighed, but glanced around uneasily, feeling a shiver skate along her spine as she listened to the noises of battle. "Are we really safe here?"

Diverted, Audric lifted his head to look around, as well. "Simon checked. He would not have left you here if he had not been certain it was safe. But you are right. We should find a place less exposed."

He stared down at her rounded belly, and then looked at the beast, and then looked at her belly uneasily, and then looked around. "Gods be damned! I do not think it is at all safe to put you on the beast, but you can not walk like that."

Raina plunked her hands on her hips. "Like what?"

Audric looked at her belly uncomfortably and finally down at her feet. "Your feet are bare," he pointed out meekly.

She knew damned well he hadn't been talking about her feet! She didn't like the looks of the thing he'd been riding, though. "What is that thing?"

He glanced at his beast. "*Anaybst* ."

"It's horrible looking. It looks like a ... big rat."

He looked affronted. "It is a noble beast ... but it is trained for war. It is no ride for a lady ... especially I will carry you," he added hurriedly at the look she gave him.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Raina said, thinking about the possibility of running into soldiers.

"I do not either, but I do not see an alternative. You can not walk--your feet are bare. You will cut them on the rock." As if that settled it, he moved to the beast and took the reins he'd left trailing down on the ground. "You hold the lead. I will hold you."

Studying the animal doubtfully, Raina took the leather strips he held out to her. The moment she took hold of them, however, the beast began nodding its head and making a strange clicking noise. Audric balled his hand into a fist and slugged it in the jaw. "Behave you ugly brute!" he snarled.

Raina's lips curled as he turned back to her and bent to lift her into his arms. "I thought you said he was a noble beast."

"He is. But he is not a beautiful, noble beast," he retorted, his eyes gleaming with humor. "He is a vicious, disrespectful brute, and he will run off if I leave him and we will be stranded."

After glancing around, he followed a fairly level path for a bit and then began to climb a slight incline toward a rocky overhang. When they'd reached the wall it formed, he set her on her feet and brushed the rubble from a fairly flat stone close by. "There. Sit. I do not want it to fall out."

"Excuse you!" Raina demanded angrily. "*Fallout*? Just how fucking big do you think I am?"

He looked disconcerted. "Wrong word?" he hazarded.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Yes, wrong word, asshole!" she snapped and flounced down on the rock, wincing as it bit into her next-thing-to-bare ass.

He misinterpreted the wince. "Gods be damned! Do not have it here!"

Raina gave him an irritated look and then stared down at her belly, placing her hands over the mound to study it. “It’s not *that* big.”

Audric obviously didn’t want to argue about it, but he studied it with a good deal of uneasiness. “It is not ready?” he asked hopefully.

“I honestly don’t know. How long does it take to get here from Earth?”

“We traveled three months Earth time--two and half our time.”

“I guess that means I’m over half way--six or seven months. It’s supposed to be like nine months, I think. I’ve never had a baby before.”

If possible, Audric looked more uneasy, but he apparently decided against voicing whatever doubts were running through his mind. Taking the beast’s reins, he led it a short distance away from them and settled a rock on the ends of its reins. After studying the beast thoughtfully for a moment, he reached into one of the packs and dragged out a handful of some sort of grain, holding it in his palm for the beast to eat. Wiping his hand absently on the leg of his pants when the beast had finished eating, he made a sweep of the area with his gaze and then returned to stand beside her with his

back to the rock wall.

Raina studied her stomach. “That ... dragon was Simon,” she said finally.

Audric sent her an uncomfortable glance. “Yes,” he said. “We are dragon folk, Raina--that is why Simon said to you that it was not possible, because we thought it was not possible.”

“Draconians.”

“From the name of our world, Drack, but, yes, that is why it is named that ... or perhaps why we are known as dragon folk.”

“I don’t understand. Everybody I’ve seen ... they look like people, not dragons.”

“This land has not seen dragons for generations--until Simon. I do not know how he learned the way. I thought--we all thought--that the knowledge had been lost to us long ago.” He was silent for a time. “That is what Simon meant when he said to me that he knew the secret of Draken Fortress. He was telling me he knew the old ways.”

He grinned suddenly. “He is magnificent! I was so afraid for you that I could scarcely take it in at the

time--I thought that his fear for you had unhinged his mind when he began to tear at his clothes. And then I saw him begin to transform and I could scarcely believe even seeing.”

Raina swallowed a little convulsively. “Will he change back?”

Chapter Twenty

Audric sent her a sharp glance. “You are not afraid of Simon?”

Raina thought it over. She had been afraid. She’d also been awed. Audric was right. He *was* magnificent--but she’d always thought that, always.

She still didn’t want to think about her baby and the ‘transformation’ at the same time. She’d known even before she’d climbed happily into Simon’s bed that he wasn’t human. But she’d still thought he was the same ... not as different from her as he was.

She looked up at Audric unhappily. “I just want my

baby to be alright.”

He looked away. She could see he wanted to reassure her and at the same time he had doubts, too. “We have not We have never mated outside our own kind,” he said finally. “If it is possible, then”

“It will be a miracle if he’s alright,” Raina said sadly. She didn’t want to think about the fact that the odds seemed stacked against him. She’d been through so much, though, since she’d gotten pregnant and now it had been brought home to her just how great a risk she’d taken when she’d had sex with Simon, knowing her birth control was no longer effective and hoping she would get pregnant.

She’d been thoughtless because of what she’d wanted. She hadn’t been able to resist the temptation to have Simon’s baby, though, knowing all along that she could never have Simon. She loved him so much! She’d wanted *some* part of him to love that would love her back.

It was Simon’s baby, she told herself. Simon was so strong. How could his baby not be? The baby *seemed* strong. He was very active, she thought. Though she had nothing to compare her pregnancy with, he seemed to move almost constantly, and he was certainly growing.

She struggled to put her anxieties from her mind. All she could do was do her best to take care of herself and her baby. She was six or seven months along, she was sure. In a few months, she would know and that would be soon enough to deal with problems if there were any. It couldn't be good for him if she spent all that time worrying about things she had no control over. *Heknew* when she was upset. Every time she was distressed, he was, too.

“Audric?” she said tentatively.

He looked at her questioningly.

“Do you have an extra weapon?”

His dark brows shot up. “Why?”

“Don't look at me like that! I'm pregnant, not crippled! There are soldiers everywhere. I'd just feel better if *both* of us had something.”

“Women do not fight--especially women who are breeding.”

She gaped at him in outrage. “Oh! Don't *even* start that macho man shit with me! It's ok for them to *die* if they get overrun, but not ok to fight? I've just spent weeks in

a fucking prison--by myself!--and chased all over hell and gone by soldiers bent on ... doing horrible things to me. I have absolute faith that you'll try your best to protect me, and I know you're very good at what you do, but what are the odds only one or two guys might show up? There's an *army* out there! Give me the damned pistol!"

He studied her with a mixture of anger, reluctance, amusement, and grudging respect. "Do you know how to use it?"

Raina frowned at him. "Point and shoot, right?"

"You would not be able to bring yourself to kill, Raina. You are a woman. Women do not do these things."

"I shoved a man off the damned cliff! Don't tell me what I can and can't do, damn it! If anybody threatens my baby, I'll blow his fucking head off and I can assure you I'll sleep just fine!"

A slow grin curled his lips. "You are so ferocious, dearling!"

He chuckled when she glared at him, but finally pulled the weapon from his shoulder holster and instructed her on how to use it. "Just do not shoot me in the back. I do not like to have holes in my hide."

Raina gave him an irritated look, but finally relented. “I’m fond of your hide, too.”

They were distracted by a sudden roar in the distance. Both of them stiffened and strained to hear what that roar of sound might mean.

“Pater-Draken!”

“The Emperor has fallen!”

“Long live Emperor Pater-Draken!”

Raina and Audric exchanged a look. “What are they saying?” Raina asked breathlessly.

Audric grinned suddenly. “We have defeated Emperor Jaelen! They are cheering Simon--our new Emperor!”

Raina smiled back at him, feeling her chest swell with pride, and at the same time a sickening sense of loss. He was Emperor. He’d won. And she’d lost. She swallowed against the nauseating pang. She’d never *had*. There had never been a chance of any other outcome. Even before she’d known exactly who and what Simon was, she’d known that he was a great man, not a man who could or would seriously consider having a woman like her as anything more than a mistress or temporary

plaything. “That’s good, then. That’s what he wanted. I’m ... so happy for him.”

Audric frowned, looked as if he meant to say something. Before he could, however, he heard a sound that diverted him. It was a moment more before it penetrated Raina’s misery and she realized it was the sound of pounding feet, heavy, as if it was many feet. Four men mounted on *naybsts* burst into view, bent low over their beasts’ heads and riding hell for leather.

Audric recognized the man in the lead before she did, calling out to him before she could gather her wits and stop him. In truth, he’d already called out before it dawned on her that he didn’t know, that she hadn’t told *him* .

“Haig! We are here!”

“No! Audric! Oh god! He’s the one that took me, that brought me here. He’s with that asshole, Jaelen.”

It was too much to hope they hadn’t heard, but then Haig might have spotted them anyway. He veered toward them without slowing the beast by much. Raina froze in abject terror, certain for several moments that the riders were bent on running them down. Before it had clicked in her mind that they couldn’t very well do that unless they were willing to flatten themselves on

the rock face behind them, all four men pulled their beasts to a rearing, skidding halt and leapt from their saddles, pulling long, lethal looking swords from the sheathes strapped to their backs. Audric pulled his own, taking up a fighter's stance.

Raina came out of her stupor, stared at Audric a moment, looked at the advancing men and then down at the weapon in her hand. Without giving it any actual thought, she pointed the thing at the first man that caught her eye and depressed the lever Audric had told her would make it fire. A beam of light shot from it, stunning Raina, who'd expected a deafening explosion of sound. It stunned the man it hit, too, knocking him into the air and backwards.

It stunned everyone, actually. Audric went rigid with shock. The three men still standing froze. Raina recovered first, firing at wild random as the men surged forward again at a hard, ground eating run.

“Raina!” Audric bellowed, grabbing blindly at her to either push her back, or stop her. “They have only swords!”

“Good thing, too!”

“It is dishonorable!”

“And I give a shit!”

Either her first shot was just blind luck, or her panic ruined her marksmanship, or the speed they were racing toward them combined with her poor hand/eye coordination made hitting any of them in a vital spot impossible. She managed to hit all three, but they kept coming--and the weapon stopped firing. Audric grabbed her blindly by the shoulder, and began dragging her toward his beast. She stumbled to follow him, wondering if he thought they could get on the thing and get away before the men reached them.

“Stay behind the *aybst* ,” he ordered grimly.

Raina looked at his back in dismay, realizing he was trying to form a shield around her with his body and the beast’s--which might be a good plan if the beast didn’t decide to stomp her to death.

She screamed as Haig, teeth gritted, his eyes wild with fury, leapt at Audric and swung his blade. Audric caught the blow with the edge of his own blade. The loud clang of metal against metal nearly deafened her. The high pitched screech of the blades sawing against each other as Haig’s blade continued its downward arc made the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

Clamping her hand over her mouth to keep from

distracting Audric by screaming again, Raina danced behind him, trying to stay out of his way as he and Haig hammered at each other with the deadly things as if they were swinging clubs, not four foot long blades. The men with Haig didn't seem to be worried about 'honor' or being dishonorable about ganging up on one man. They hobbled up behind Haig, watching for an opportunity to thrust at him. One of the men, spying her, tried to get between Audric and the beast. "*Hasar*!" Audric bellowed.

Clicking and snorting furiously, the beast promptly began to nod its head and bounce on its two hind legs, kicking out at the man with its two front legs and striking him on the knee with one cloven hoof. The man's leg buckled. He staggered, caught his balance and swung and jabbed at the beast with his sword. The beast screamed as the blade sank into his chest and began to flail more frantically, rearing high enough to catch the man on the forehead with one hoof. The blow split his scalp and blood flowed from the man's head, running like a river over his face. He staggered again, struck out blindly, missing the beast and nearly impaling Raina on the blade. Then he wobbled and both knees gave out.

In horror, Raina stared at the man as the beast stomped him over and over beneath his hooves until he was nothing but a ragged, bloody heap. Quivering all over, the beast finally stopped, wobbled unsteadily and went

down on its knees. It struggled for several moments to rise again and finally dropped to the ground on top of the man.

Raina slammed back against the stone wall behind her as she tried to leap out of harm's way when the beast collapsed. There was little room for maneuvering, though, with the two men pressing Audric back. She managed to avoid the bulk of the beast's weight, but its body pinned her legs against the stone.

Audric was breathing as if he'd run ten miles, his breath hoarse, grating. Raina could hear his laboring breaths even above the almost constant ringing of three blades as he beat back first one and then another. Realizing any minute Audric was going to be backed against her and the beast, with no room to maneuver at all, that they would have him pinned, Raina looked around frantically for something, anything. She had the pistol in her hand still, she saw. Even if it hadn't run out of 'juice', though, she was too close to all of the men to try to hit one without risking hitting Audric.

Anythingshe did was liable to distract him. They didn't have any options, though. Audric was going to trip over the beast. His legs were against it, she saw, and the two men were trying to press their advantage, trying to overbalance him.

She hurled the pistol at Haig's head as he jerked sideways to dodge a blow Audric swung at him. The pistol caught him across the bridge of his nose. It wasn't heavy, but he jerked instinctively and when he did, Audric's blade caught him across the neck. His head tipped drunkenly to one side. Blood spurted from his jugular vein like a fountain.

Audric jerked his blade back in a backhanded swing toward the other man. The man leapt back, but the blade still sliced a gash across his sword arm and all the way across his chest. He staggered back and whirled to run.

Audric lunged at him, shoving his sword straight through the man's back. The man screamed, flung an arm over his shoulder to claw at the sword between his shoulder blades and then dropped to his knees and fell forward.

Gasping hoarsely, Audric wrenched his blade free as the man fell, driving the tip of his sword against the stone and leaning on it. Shaking all over, hardly daring to believe they'd managed to fight off all of their attackers, Raina strained to free herself from the weight of the dead animal. "Audric?" she gasped shakily as she saw his knees wobble. She screamed as his knees gave way and he dropped to the ground, wavered a moment as the beast had and then pitched sideways.

Her fear for Audric gave her the strength to wrench free of the beast at last and she scrambled over to him, searching him frantically for wounds. Her hands came away from him sticky with blood, but she had no idea how much of it was his. “Audric?”

“Make ... certain ... they are ... dead,” he gasped out in a weak, pained voice.

Sobbing uncontrollably, Raina grabbed his sword, dragging it behind her as she stumbled toward the man he’d just defeated. She didn’t know if he was still breathing or not. She didn’t care. He’d hurt Audric. He wasn’t going to be breathing when she was done with him! Screaming every foul thing she could think of to call the man, she lifted the sword as high as she could and hacked at him over and over until someone grabbed her and grabbed the sword, wrenching it from her hands.

Her chest heaving as much with her emotional outburst as with the effort of moving the heavy sword that was almost as long as she was tall, Raina looked up into Simon’s face without recognition for several moments.

“I believe this one is dead,” Simon said wryly.

Raina’s chin wobbled. “I think he killed Audric.”

The faint glint of amusement in Simon's eyes died. Handing the sword blindly to the man who stood just beside and behind him, he released Raina and moved quickly toward Audric. Mopping at the tears streaming from her eyes, Raina followed him in a rush, dropping down and struggling to lift Audric's head into her lap as Simon examined him quickly and turned his head to bellow for a medic.

Sensing Simon's gaze, Raina lifted her head to look at him hopefully. "Is he ...?"

Simon shook his head. "I do not know. He is alive."

Raina uttered a choked sob and went back to stroking Audric's face lovingly. "Stay with us, Audric. Someone's coming. Just hold on for me, ok? Don't you dare die on me Audric! I'll never forgive you!"

In a daze of shock, Raina sat holding Audric's head while two men came and worked over him. Finally, they brought a stretcher to move him. Raina followed as they lifted him and carried him away, hardly aware of what was going on around her, her entire focus on Audric, as if she could keep him breathing by staring at the slight rise and fall of his chest.

No one tried to stop her as she followed the men onto

some kind of vehicle and settled beside the stretcher, taking Audric's limp hand in hers and stroking it soothingly although he didn't seem to be aware of her at all. The thing they were in moved. She felt the sense of floating, but only peripherally, and then it dropped and the door opened. A shiver skated down her spine when she saw they'd landed in the courtyard where she'd nearly died, but she shut her mind to that and followed the men as they went inside.

Someone took her arms and sat her firmly in a chair as Audric was carried into a room. When she looked up, she saw it was Simon. "You must rest," he said firmly.

Raina swallowed with an effort. "Later ... when I know Audric's alright."

His lips tightened. "You must think of the child. You are thin. You have not eaten. You have not rested."

Raina looked down at her belly, stroking her hand over it as if to soothe the baby. "Alright."

He stayed with her until she'd bathed and dressed in clothes someone had brought for her--a high-waisted gown sort of thing that buttoned up the front and was intended to be worn over loose, flowing trousers--made her eat some of the food that was brought, watched her until she had lain down on the bed

and closed her eyes. He was gone when she woke. She had no idea how long she'd slept, a few minutes, or hours, but she got up and found her way back to the room where they'd taken Audric. He was still unconscious, or maybe, she thought hopefully, sleeping. He didn't rouse when she dragged a chair close to the side of the bed and took his hand in hers, but his hand was warm in hers. His fingers squeezed hers ever so lightly. Comforted, Raina lay her cheek on the back of his hand and dozed off again.

A hand settling heavily on the back of her head roused her. Dopey with fatigue, Raina lifted her head with an effort and found Audric staring down her.

Relief so profound it made her tearful washed over her. "Hey, you," she murmured shakily. Gathering his hand in both of hers as he dropped it weakly to the bed, she brushed her cheek along the back and kissed it. "How are you feeling?"

He sucked in a pained breath. "Alright."

"Liar," she accused without heat.

He managed a faint smile. "Surprised."

"About what?" she asked curiously.

“That I am still alive.”

Raina’s chin trembled. She swallowed with an effort. “It was close. Don’t do that to me again!”

He smiled a little more easily that time. “You are a bossy wench,” he murmured.

“People keep telling me that.”

She hugged his hand and arm to her, studying him worriedly. He looked pale and weak. It was scary when he’d always been so strong and capable. She felt hopeful now that he’d wakened, but she knew he wasn’t out of the woods yet. “You remember what you asked me just before you left?” she said after a moment, feeling her heart thunder erratically in her chest as she heard movement behind her and glanced around to see that Simon was hovering in the doorway.

She felt the color drain from her face as she met his gaze. Resolutely, she turned her attention back to Audric. He hadn’t noticed Simon, she realized.

And he didn’t remember. He was frowning and she could see he was searching his mind for what she was referring to.

Trying not to feel slighted by the fact that he seemed to

have forgotten, she smiled faintly and got up. Leaning over him, she kissed him lightly on the lips. “Well, when you remember, if you still want to, the answer is, yes. You have to get well first, though.”

She didn’t look at Simon as she left. Her heart threatened to beat its way out of chest as she passed him, but thankfully he didn’t try to detain her. She felt so weak and breathless by the time she’d returned to her room, she had to drag herself onto the bed. Her chest felt tight, making it hard to breathe.

She hadn’t even gotten the chance to grieve for the loss of Simon, not really. It was hard facing him when she still hurt so much, but it had been brought home to her as nothing before that there was never going to be anything between her and Simon. It didn’t matter how much she wanted it. It didn’t matter how desperately she loved him.

If he had just been a wealthy businessman, it was still doubtful that he’d chose to ally himself to a woman like her, but it *was* possible if he cared enough. If he’d even just been some political figure, she might have a chance ... assuming he was willing to risk not getting re-elected, or being overthrown because she wasn’t suitable wife material for anybody like that, especially when she had a record for prostitution, however undeserved it was.

She didn't know all that much about royalty, but she had some education, enough to know kings married princesses. She'd heard about one or two that hadn't married another royal person, but that was on Earth, not here, and anyway they hadn't really married beneath them. They'd just married very high born aristocrats with money.

And he didn't care about her. He didn't love her. If he had, he wouldn't have sent her away to start with. He was all bossy and possessive about the baby--the baby he hadn't wanted and certainly hadn't wanted *her* to have, but that was because the baby was at least half-royal.

Well, he could just put all that out of his head! It was *her* baby! She was the one carrying it around. She was the one that was going have to do all the work of bringing it into the world. All he'd done was have fun fucking her.

Alright, so she'd had fun fucking him, too, but that was beside the point. She'd hoped to get pregnant, wanted his baby because she loved him so much. She was just going to have to remind him that it was hers and he hadn't wanted it. He could find him a damned princess and make *aspecial* , perfect little prince in he wanted one!

Audric loved her and she loved him. If she'd ever been in any doubt about that, and she hadn't been, realizing he might die was enough to convince her. It wasn't the same way that she loved Simon, but it was still love, and he wasn't Simon. Nobody ever loved two different people the same way, because they were different people, but that didn't mean it wasn't just as good, or just as real.

She was never going to get over loving Simon. She knew if she lived to be a hundred, she'd still love him and it would still hurt every time she thought about him--which was going to be every time she looked at their baby.

But life went on. A person had to live and there was only one ride on the merry-go-round per person. She could be happy with Audric and she thought she could make Audric happy. She was going to try, really hard, if he wanted to try.

Chapter Twenty One

Simon watched Raina hungrily as she hurried away from him, resisting the urge to go after her. She wouldn't look at him, though, and he was afraid he knew why.

Anger flickered through him even though he'd known she would be as horrified as all the other humans to discover he wasn't one of them. He had thought it wouldn't matter to her, and mayhap it wouldn't have if she had not seen his dragon form. She could not stick her head in the sand and ignore *that* as she'd ignored all the rest, though.

He did not regret it. Even if he had known that she would run screaming from him and he would have to chase her down to save her, he would have done it. Even if her knowing meant she would never look at him the same as she once had, he could bear that far easier than he could bear the thought of having her snatched away from him by death.

He supposed, in a way, she *was* running screaming from him. She was just hiding it inside.

Swallowing a little sickly, he turned away and studied Audric, feeling angry and resentful at the way Raina had fussed over him and at the same time deeply relieved to see that Audric was recovering. He moved into the room after a few moments, struggling with his jealousy. Dragging the chair to a more comfortable distance for

himself, he settled in it and dropped his hand to his brother's.

Audric opened his eyes, stared at him for a long moment and then his eyes lit, a smile curling his lips. "You did it, Simon! I heard the victory shouts!"

"We did it," Simon said, squeezing Audric's hand before he released it. He settled back in the chair tiredly, exhausted by the endeavor, weary beyond belief--and more miserable than he had ever been in his life because Raina would not even look at him and he ached to hold her--just to hold her to reassure himself that she was safe. It would be a long time, if ever, before he recovered from the fear that had gripped him when he thought he would not get to her in time. He was going to have nightmares over it--waking nightmares. He felt ill with fear and rage every time the images rose into his mind. "The healers tell me you are too mean to die and hell has spat you back," he said teasingly.

Audric made a sound that was half laugh half pained cough. "Do not make me laugh. It hurts."

Silence fell between them. "I owe you a debt of gratitude that I can never repay," Simon said finally, "for protecting Raina and my child."

Audric reddened. “You owe me nothing.”

Simon shrugged. “I know you did it as much for her sake, or perhaps more, than mine, but that does not alter the fact that you nigh gave your life for theirs, and it does not lessen my gratitude.”

“I am not at all certain that I could have managed it *without* Raina,” Audric said wryly. “There were four. If I had been fresh, I would have been more confident, but we had all been fighting for days as you well know. I will not lie. I was so tired and sore by then I do not think my chances were that good at taking them all. But I had called out before I discovered that Haig was the spy we were all hunting so determinedly and there was no hope for it then.

“Luckily for both of us, Raina had demanded that I give her my *catatrophe* and show her how to use it. Also luckily, she has no sense of honor and a great deal of determination,” he added, chuckling and then wincing at the pain. When he’d caught his breath, he continued, “she killed one right off. I scolded her, told her it was very dishonorable to shoot a man armed only with a sword, but she informed me that she did not care if it was honorable or not and she managed to wound all of them before the *catatrophe* ran out of ammunition. If they had not been wounded, the end might not have been so good.

“My beast took care of one, who was trying to get to her, which left me only two and I was still out of breath from fighting the two. I dispatched Haig when she hit him in the head with the empty *catatrope* and distracted him. The other--I was not sure that I had finished him, but I suppose I must have.”

Simon smiled grimly. “No doubt you did, but Raina was making certain of it when we arrived. I took your sword from her before she could injure herself.”

Audric looked at Simon apologetically. “I told her to be sure. I was afraid that he might get up and harm her and I was in no condition to do more. I did not think that she would try to lift my sword. It is nigh as long as she is tall.”

Simon studied him, a half smile playing about his lips. “We have not given proper credit to our little Raina,” he said, bemused. “She does amazingly well at taking care of herself.”

Audric held his stomach, groaning in pain and chuckling at the same time. “Did you see that guard’s face when she punched him in his balls?”

Simon stared at him blankly a moment, searching his memory and finally began to laugh. “I saw. I was just in

no state at that moment to really register what she did.”

He got up after a moment. “I will leave you to rest. Raina has ordered you to get well quickly. I will add my command to that. Keep that in mind.”

“Simon?”

Simon paused.

“How did you do it when no one has been able to in generations? How did you even discover how to do it?”

Simon studied him for a long moment and finally closed the door and moved back to the side of the bed. “I must swear you to secrecy.”

Audric frowned. “You know that you can trust me.”

“I do. It is only for that reason that I will tell you--we can all do it, Audric. We never lost the ability. It was taken from us--or rather bartered. As you know, we were a fairly barbaric race in those days--though mayhap you do not know that we had fought amongst ourselves until we were almost to the point of making ourselves extinct. I think that is why the Macedons stepped in--to keep us from self-destruction--this is what they have told me, at any rate. But they knew it was our beast side that needed to be tamed--because

when we are in dragon form, it is hard to think as a man at all, hard to reason. I had not realized myself until I morphed, but we are creatures of instinct then, and our instincts have always been to fight others of our kind for our territory, or mates.

“The offer was to allow us to live so long as we lived as land dwellers, and to wipe us out themselves if we did not because we were a threat, not only to ourselves, but to the others who share our world.

“They did not trust us, though, regardless of the treaty, and the technology they shared with us to compensate us for what we lost. It is in everything that we consume--inhibitors, drugs that keep us from morphing, keep us even from the urge to do so.

“I might never have discovered it except for Raina--likely would not have.”

Audric looked confused. “How did Raina help you discover it when she did not even know what we are?”

Simon chuckled. “By driving me insane with lust and jealousy, Audric. Rage is what gave me the ability to shape change, the complete loss of control of my emotions. Do you not recall the night she enraged poor Tedra until she nigh breathed fire? That was when I began to suspect. I almost transformed thrice in that

time when Raina came to us. The first time it was no more than an awareness of the beast side, a stirring that I realized, when I could think, was not *me*, not the me I knew, at any rate. The other two times, I *almost* morphed. I began to change, but then I was so stunned by it I just stopped partially through the change and resumed my man form.

“I did not know how to do it, how to call it. Even though none of us had had the drugs in years, none of us, including me, had ever been taught the way.

“When I saw what they meant to do with Raina, I lost control and began to change. If I had not been so focused on getting to her, I am not certain that I could have made a full change, though I had planned to try all along. *That* is why I have neither eaten nor drank anything of this world since we returned, why I carry the food and drink only from the ship ... from Earth. And that is also why I had to go to the Macedons. I had to be sure that they would not attack us if I broke the treaty.”

He patted Audric's cheek jarringly at the expression on his face. “Now, you know all and you can rest.”

He paused at the door again as he started to leave, struggling with the urge to ask Audric what Raina had meant when she'd been speaking to him. He knew that

it was private, and he had no right to ask. Her behavior had alarmed him, though, not just given rise to his jealousy and, although he had thought that he'd mastered the itch to know, his uneasiness and the sense of threat he had barely acknowledged increased the longer he thought about it. He *needed* to know. He turned to look at Audric.

“What did Raina mean when she said her answer was yes? What did you ask her before you left her?”

Guilt was in every line of Audric's face and in his eyes as he stared at Simon with a mixture of reluctance and resentment. “I asked her if she would take me back if I returned to her after we had done what needed to be done here.”

For several moments, Simon lost all the color in his face. When it returned, it returned with a vengeance. “And she said yes,” he muttered, but it wasn't a question. His hands fisted. For a moment, Audric saw a glimpse of his dragon, rippling menacingly behind his eyes. With obvious effort, he tamped the urge to release it and left the room.

Simon paused just beyond Audric's room, fighting the urge to go instantly to Raina and inform her that she would not be going anywhere with Audric. She was carrying *his* child! She was *his* , damn her to hell!

She was going to be the death of him, or she was going to drive him insane! He did not trust himself to speak to her at the moment, however. He could feel the stirring of his dragon beast. If she defied him

And he *knew* she would. He could trust that she would snap her fingers beneath his nose and tell him to go to hell.

If she had any sense of self-preservation

He dragged in a deep, calming breath, and then another, and a third.

She was fond of Audric--too fond--but he loved Audric himself. He could understand that she had been out of her mind with worry that he would die. He could understand how powerful her relief must be, the sense of gratefulness of knowing that she would not lose him.

That was what the root of this was, he told himself--fondness, relief, gratitude. She could not, truly, be considering leaving him to go to Audric carrying *his* child! The child had bound her to him--should have. Whatever anger she still carried against him, despite what he had done, she had to forgive him. She had to see that she belonged with him.

He would give her time to come to her senses.

He was still struggling with his raging beast, however, when he joined the men awaiting him to discuss affairs of state. He realized fairly quickly once he had joined them that he had not appreciated the full extent to which Jaelen had plunged the realm into disaster or the effects the war would have upon an already severely beleaguered nation. Once the nobles captured his attention, they dragged him so deeply into the quagmire of arguments over territorial disputes, taxes, the needs of the poor and homeless, etc., that he hardly had time to eat or sleep, let alone recall that he had a life of his own.

* * * *

As much as Raina wanted to simply lay down and wallow in her misery, as hard as it was to do anything else, the baby had no intention of allowing her to ignore his existence and think only of herself. She avoided the doctors, or healers, as they called them, because she was afraid of what they would tell her and at the same time distrustful of their skills and medicines. True, the medics that worked with the army had managed to bring Audric back from the brink of death, but she wasn't convinced that that was entirely from their skills and not a stroke of luck combined with Audric's natural strength and healing abilities.

And besides, she wasn't draconian. She hadn't considered before that there might be vast differences, but it wasn't something one could*not* think about when it came to medicine.

When she first thought about the fact that she should find a doctor, she figured she'd just wait until she got home and go to the clinic like she usually did. After a few weeks, however, it dawned on her that she might not make it home. Audric had said it had taken them three months. She still didn't know exactly how far along she was, or exactly how long it was supposed to take, but if she was close to right, and she knew she was, then she was liable to have the baby somewhere between Schalome and home.

Audric would have a heart attack and die if she went into labor and there was no one but him to help her. Just looking at her belly had been enough to send him into panic.

Moreover, even if Audric had decided he did want her and wanted to take her home, he wasn't in any shape to travel. He was up and trying to get around within a week, but stiff and sore ... and grouchy as hell.

The first time he'd tried to get up when she'd been in the room, she'd rushed to help him. He'd looked down

at her in bemusement for several moments and then told her he didn't need or want her help.

She'd looked up at his angry face and knew immediately that he was embarrassed about being so weak. "I'm just going to help steady you a little."

His lips tightened. "Go and sit down, woman!" he growled.

Her own temper flared. "Grouch! Now, I know you're getting better."

"What is grouch?" he asked suspiciously.

"Bad tempered."

He sat back down on the bed, but grabbed her before she could move away. "I do not know how to tell you this, Raina, because it is obvious you do not know, but you *cannot* hold me up. You are not much bigger than a *nuztin* and if I fall, which I am likely to do, I will crush you as flat as a ... pancake."

"What's a noozeen?" Raina asked suspiciously.

"A rodent ... much like the mouse."

"Oh, you are so funny."

His lips curled. “Why are you giving me that evil eye, then?”

“I’ll just help you balance. If you start to fall, I’ll let you.”

He shook his head at her. “No, you would not. You would try to catch me because you think that you are a giant.” He encircled her upper arm with his thumb and forefinger. “Do you see this? It is not as big as my wrist and not as strong either.”

“Well I wasn’t planning on trying to pick you up and carry you around!” she said irritably. “I’m just going to help you balance ... until you don’t need help.”

He pulled her closer, settling her between his thighs. “You are a very determined woman, Raina, but there are limits even to what you can do.”

“Can’t never could,” she quipped.

He chuckled. “I do not know what that means but I have a feeling it means exactly what I just said. I will wait until Simon can give me a hand.”

Raina sighed. “That’s probably going to be a while. He’s gone.”

Audric's brows lifted questioningly. "Where?"

Raina shrugged. "Don't know ... off to save the kingdom, I expect. He left a few days ago."

"He did not say when he would return?"

She gave him a look. "*Tomoi* ? Why would he tell me anything? And it's for sure I can't ask anybody even if I was interested--which I'm not--because nobody around here speaks English besides me and you."

He gave her a look of sympathy. "Poor Raina. It is no wonder you are always hovering around me."

"Oh! Don't *even* go there! If you don't want my company, just say so and I'll stop bothering you."

"Grouch," he said without heat.

Raina averted her gaze, trying to master the quiver in her chin. Audric caught her face, forcing her to look at him. "What is wrong, darling?" His face darkened. "You are wounded. Has someone said something to you?"

She sniffed. "*Asif* I'd know if they did! They all stare at me, like I'm ...," she broke off with a half sob half

laugh, “an alien! Or a balloon that’s about to explode.”

“You are imagining it.”

“Right! *You* look at me like you think I’m going to explode.”

He looked down at her belly, which he had been studiously ignoring. “It is a very impressive mound,” he said teasingly.

“It’s ugly,” she wailed. “I look horrible. That’s why they all stare at me!”

He tightened his arm around her, pressing her head against his shoulder. “You are beautiful,” he disputed. “And very desirable. If my cock were not as nigh dead as I am, it would be leaping up to greet you.”

Raina snorted, and then laughed. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Give me a few days more and I will be happy to show you instead.”

She lifted her head to look at him doubtfully, but the look in his eyes reassured her. She dropped her head to his shoulder again, looping an arm around his waist. “Promise?” she asked teasingly.

He settled one large hand on her belly, moving it over the hard roundness experimentally. The baby kicked and a jolt went all the way through him. The look on his face was priceless. Raina let out a peal of laughter. “You should see your face! It’s just a baby, Audric. It doesn’t bite.”

The scrape of booted feet on the threshold startled both of them. Simon was standing in the doorway, Raina saw, livid with rage. “It is no*this* baby, however!” he growled. “It is mine!”

“Uh oh,” Raina said as he strode across the room, grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet.

“I will speak with you later, Audric. I will speak with you*now* , Raina.”

Audric made an abortive attempt to rise and settled back with a groan.

“Stay put!” Simon snarled.

“Don’t you*dare* try to get up!” Raina admonished him as Simon hauled her toward the door. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“She will*not* be back in a few minutes,” Simon

countered.

“I can’t walk this fast!” Raina said breathlessly after they’d left Audric’s room. He slowed, stared down at her a moment and then jerked her into his arms, scooping an arm beneath her knees and lifting her against his chest. Looping her arms around his shoulders, Raina stared at his profile. “I don’t know why you’re mad,” she said tentatively.

“Do you not?” he asked, giving her a fulminating glare before he looked away again.

Raina thought it over and felt her own temper rise. “Actually, I don’t!” she snapped.

“Then I will explain it so that it is very clear to you,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

She waited, but he said nothing else. She did note, however, that he stalked right by her room. “When did you get back?”

He sent her a narrow eyed glare.

Raina chewed her lip. “It was that woman that’s been following me around,” she said accusingly. “*Sheran* and told you the minute you got back, didn’t she, the damned snitch?”

His lips tightened, but he didn't need to confirm it. She doubted he'd just *happened* to drop by to see Audric and just happened to catch her. Of course she did spend a lot of time in Audric's room, but she still didn't think it was a coincidence.

She knew even before he stalked through the double doors that he'd taken her to his room--or apartment. It was the two guards standing on either side of the door like matched bookends that alerted her. They snapped to attention before he even reached the door and stepped together, each grasping a lever and pushing the doors wide. As Simon carried her through, the guards closed the doors again.

Raina looked up at Simon with a mixture of wariness and irritation when he set her on her feet. After a moment, she decided to let him fire the first salvo just so she could get her bearings and find out *what* they were going to fight about. "*What* were you doing in his room, woman?" he demanded.

She gave him a look. "How much did you miss?"

He looked taken aback, but only for a moment. "You will *not* go to his rooms again. He is recovering. You have no need to hover over him."

“What’s wrong with me going to Audric’s room?” she demanded.

“He is not your man!”

“Says who?”

“I say!”

“Well, excuse me all to hell and gone!” Raina snarled at him. “But the last thing *I* remember *I was* his woman and that was because *you* not only dumped me, you sent him to me! If you changed the fucking schedule, you should’ve let me know!”

“The schedule is changed!” he growled ominously.

Raina gaped at him in outrage. “Why?”

The question threw him. Something flickered in his eyes. “Because, I say.”

“That’s not an answer!”

His lips tightened. “You are carrying my child.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “*I knew* that was it, you asshole! Well, you discarded your damned seed. It’s mine now. *You* didn’t want the baby. You can’t claim it

now!”

“You did not tell me you were with child,” he ground out, abruptly reminded of the jolt it had given him when he’d seen her racing around the top of the mountain. “I did not know until I saw you the day of the battle.”

“I asked you if you’d be mad if I got pregnant and you said ‘happily you could not’ get me pregnant. *Happily* ! I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell you then! So don’t get all pissy with me because I didn’t! You didn’t want to know!”

“You do not *know* what I want!” he roared furiously.

The fight went out of Raina instantly, mostly because she was abruptly afraid that she was pushing him into demanding his rights as a father and that was the last thing she wanted to do. It wasn’t as if she was on her own turf where she could leave and take the baby with her. If that had been the case, even if he’d wanted to look for her, she could’ve made certain he didn’t find her. She was on *his* world, and *here* he was master of all he surveyed, and if he didn’t let her go home, she couldn’t. “What do you want?” she asked uneasily.

He stared at her angrily for several moments, breathing raggedly. Slowly, the anger dissipated. A restless hunger took its place, pain and yearning that made

Raina's heart squeeze painfully in her chest. "I want what we had, Rainie," he said hoarsely, closing the distance that separated them and pulling her against him.

Raina stared up at him in confusion, feeling her heart trip over itself. He wanted her? Or was he just saying that to get what he wanted? He wanted things just*like* they were before, the pact? Or he wanted something more permanent?

There couldn't*be* anything more permanent, she reminded herself abruptly, and it just went to show how bad he was for her that, after everything, she still wanted it so desperately she was afraid even to consider it. A hard knot formed in her throat and refused to be dislodged. "It can't be like it was before. You threw that away."

He dragged her up more tightly to him, until she was standing on her tiptoes, cupping his hand along the back of her head as he dipped his head to nuzzle his face against hers. "It can, Rainie," he murmured huskily, brushing his lips over hers, melding his mouth to hers in gentle adhesion and then nipping lightly at her lips with his.

Chapter Twenty Two

Raina sucked in a sharp breath at the first contact of his lips on hers, inhaling his glorious essence, and felt herself falling instantly into a dizzying whirlpool of delightful sensations that beckoned to her seductively, promised heaven. “I don’t want it to,” she whispered dizzily, making no attempt to pull away from him, wanting him to convince her it would be alright, that she could trust him this time not to break her heart.

“Liar,” he whispered back to her, covering her mouth at last as she’d been dying for him to and plunging his tongue past the vulnerable barrier of her lips.

The moment he filled her senses with himself, she was lost--lost to thought, lost to the world, lost in him. Desire rose up inside her in a conflagration that chased everything from her except an awareness of him. She made a sound of surrender in her throat, straining to get closer to him, to feel more, taste more, to inundate her senses with him. She wanted to drown in him, *was* drowning in the liquid heat, the boundless excitement he stirred inside of her as no one else ever had or ever could.

She loved him so much she ached with it, could not

have closed herself off from him, refused to respond to him, if she'd wanted to. Everything she was, was his, always had been. She hadn't just grieved for the loss of him, she'd been diminished--less, as if she'd lost a critical part of herself and when she was with him, every sense seemed electrified, every reaction magnified until it was as close to glory, she knew, as any human being could ever feel.

“Simon,” she sighed in praise, in supplication, in acknowledgment that no one else could make her feel as he did, as he lifted his mouth from hers and anointed her face with the blessing of his touch, kissed her throat, and then returned to her lips to make her weak with want, hungry for more. He excited her as no one else, thrilled her, made her hunger for each new touch as if she would die with the waiting.

Her head swam dizzily as he reached down to slip an arm beneath her knees and lift her into his arms, turned with her, and strode quickly to his bed. She roused from her blissful stupor as she felt the cool softness against her back, the weight of his body as he settled against her and, briefly, doubts flickered through her mind. They were gone too swiftly for her to capture the fleeting warnings, though, banished by the heat and taste of his lips on hers, the feel of them on her throat and breasts as he unveiled her body to his touch with shaking hands, stripping her with an eagerness that left

her quaking and wet and needful.

She gasped as he captured a sensitive, aching nipple in his mouth, threading her fingers through his silken hair as he suckled her, teased her until she could scarcely catch her breath. The trace of his hands over her body as he explored her with his palms and fingers, disrobed her, left shivers of excruciating awareness in their passing, heightened the expectation until she was nearly sobbing for him to take her, to carry her to the heaven he promised with every touch. “Love me, Simon,” she gasped out on a shaky, sobbing breath. “Come inside of me. It’s been so long, baby. I thought you’d never touch me again.”

He kissed her deeply, almost savagely, silencing her and plunging her into a chasm of dark delight as he sucked and nipped at her lips, possessed her mouth with fierce, desperate thrusts of his tongue. He tore his mouth from hers almost as abruptly as he’d seized possession of it, rearing upward to rip his shirt off and then unfastened his pants, shoving them down his hips.

Through dreamy, half closed eyes, she peered at him, admiring his beautifully sculpted chest and belly--and felt a jolt go through her as her gaze dropped and the white mound of Olympus came into view. Embarrassment filled her cheeks, but he seemed oblivious to both the mountain that rose between them

and her dismay. Taking her hands in his, he pulled her upright. Dragging her onto his lap, he positioned her for entry and drew her down to envelope his turgid flesh. She caught her breath on a frisson of delight as she felt him entering her, stretching her, sinking deeply inside of her.

“Rainie,” he murmured hoarsely, praise and triumph and shaking need in voice as he began to move inside of her, lifting and settling her hips over him to guide her until she caught the rhythm he needed, until she felt the delicious thrusts of his cock wafting her upward to skim the crest of the tidal wave carrying her toward the rapture he’d promised her. She groaned, throwing her head back as she felt the tension building rapidly inside of her. He slipped an arm upward around her shoulders, bending toward her to trace opened mouthed kisses along her throat, cupping and massaging one of her breasts.

She lost her rhythm as she felt a tremor quake along her passage, moved halting until she felt the tremor explode into fiery sensation. And then her climax hit her, rocked her, rolled over her, tearing choked, gusty cries of ecstasy from her. He caught her tightly against him as she began to quake with release, moving inside of her in short, deep thrusts until he was shaking all over from his own release, uttering rasping groans as his cock jerked and spilled his hot seed inside of her.

They stilled as their delight in one another slowly dissipated into a warm glow of satisfaction, panting for breath as their heartbeats slowed, until they finally caught their breath. He shifted after a time, carrying her down onto the bed so that they lay side by side, face to face.

“You are mine, Rainie,” he murmured with lazy satisfaction. “You will always be mine.”

Raina opened her eyes with an effort and stared at him. *Oh god!* She thought in dawning dismay. *What have I done?*

She’d *just* gotten through assuring Audric that she’d be with him.

Guilt welled inside of her, threatening to swallow her whole until she remembered abruptly that he’d acted as if he didn’t even remember asking her. She frowned, trying to remember his expression, but he’d *seemed* as if he didn’t remember, not as if he was trying to backstroke, and she didn’t know what the hell to make of that. Had it meant that little to him? Had it ‘slipped’ his mind because he’d been so sick? Or was it just that he hadn’t really meant it any of the time?

Or maybe he’d changed his mind because she looked

like a cow now and was carrying Simon's baby?

Judiciously, she had to admit that was probably a big turn off all the way around.

Maybe he'd just pretended he didn't remember because he'd thought she would have better sense, or better taste, than to expect to hold him to a 'sort of' commitment he'd made when he didn't know she was pregnant?

The thought deflated her and she was already depressed.

She'd never thought she was especially gullible, but she must be. She'd thought Simon cared for her--at least something about her--and he'd discarded her like yesterday's newspaper. She'd thought Audric did, but obviously she'd mistaken good old fashioned lust for caring--with both of them.

She didn't know why Simon was suddenly interested in her again, except that he seemed damned possessive about *her* baby and she supposed he figured he had to keep her if he was going to keep the baby.

Over her dead body he was keeping her baby!

Almost as if he'd read her thoughts, he dropped a hand

to her belly and began to rub it gently. She was tempted to slap his hand away, but the baby kicked at that moment and he jerked his hand back as if he'd been scalded.

He sat up and pushed her hands away to study her belly when she tried to cover it.

Almost as if the baby realized he had an audience, he began to perform gymnastics--bend, stretch, turn, roll. Simon watched his antics with fascination and finally placed his hand on her belly again. "He is strong," he murmured, lifting his head to look at her.

The look on his face made her catch her breath.

She was *such* a fool! Even after he'd left her with no intention, she knew, of coming back, she still loved him, loved him so much she didn't have a bit of sense--no sense of self-preservation at all. Anxiety descended upon her, though, not for herself, for Simon. She'd been trying very hard to convince herself everything was fine, but no matter how hard she tried, worry ate at the back of her mind.

Simon wanted the baby, desperately. She could see that and even while she resented the fact that he hadn't wanted it before, and hadn't wanted her, she couldn't help but be gratified that he seemed to want it now--and

more worried. It was going to break her heart if the baby wasn't strong and healthy. What would it do to Simon when he'd already lost his wife and child?

Simon slipped out of the bed after a moment to remove the clothing he still wore--his boots! And pants.

She reddened, but she felt warmed, too, that he'd been in such a hurry that he hadn't spared the time to completely undress, even though she looked like a blimp.

When he settled on the bed again, he settled near 'the baby', stroking her stomach. It felt good. She didn't just look ready to pop. She felt like she was ready to explode like an overripe piece of fruit and the counter pressure of his massaging hand felt wonderful.

"If it is a male child, we will name him for my father."

Raina dragged a pillow beneath her head to watch him. "I was sort of thinking about naming him after *his* father."

He looked surprised but pleased. Then he frowned. "This would be confusing. I would not know if you were calling to me or to him."

Raina swallowed against an uncomfortable knot in her

throat, trying to ignore the surge of hopefulness that went through her at that comment. “I didn’t think his father would be around.”

He studied her for a long moment and then slipped up the bed, kissing her lightly on the lips before he settled on his side facing her. She could see from his expression that he was wrestling for words. It surprised her. Simon wasn’t the sort of man who usually had trouble speaking his mind or making a decision.

“Whatever you believe, Raina, it was not easy for me to make the decision to leave you,” he said finally. “And it was far more difficult to send Audric with you. I sent him because I knew that he would guard you with his life and I thought you might be in danger.

“Unfortunately, I did not realize that the spy everyone was searching for was one of my own men, but I did not trust them completely--which is why I sent Audric. My mistake was in believing the danger to you would be removed once we had left.”

His eyes filled with anger. “I am not usually so easily duped. It is still hard to accept that a man I had trusted for so many years would betray me, and worse, threaten your life. I still can not believe that not one of us ever suspected that he had had the audacity to take you captive and bring you here on *my* ship! But I am certain, now, that he did. There is no other way he could have

gotten you here so quickly.” He fell silent, reflecting over his carelessness that had almost cost him Raina and his child--that *had* cost Rama his life, he knew. He had not had the chance to discover if his suspicions were true, but, unless Rama was also involved, Haig would have had to have killed him when he altered the plans so that he could deliver Raina to Jaelen.

It occurred to Raina to ask him if he thought the drug, or the sleep, might have harmed the baby, but he might not know anyway, and she didn’t see any sense in making him worry, too, about something that couldn’t be changed.

The baby *seemed* to be none the worse for it. She was just going to have to trust that it was.

Which only left her with the anxiety of what the results of their cross breeding might be.

He slipped an arm beneath her shoulders, drawing her closer. “I have a suspicion that Devlyn would not approve if I were to sheathe my sword in your beautiful scabbard again, beloved, but I must confess I am vastly tempted to test his wrath. That was a very nice appetizer, but I am still hungry. I have fasted far too long.”

Raina stared at him a moment while that sank in and

finally chuckled. “He did seem a little disturbed that you’d decided to joust with him--but you do realize he may actually be a she?”

He gave her a mock haughty look. “I am Simon Pater-Draken, master of all I survey--even my seed. They would not dare to present me with a female--not for our first born.”

Raina might have taken exception if she hadn’t seen the gleam of amusement in his eyes. It helped that he’d said ‘our first born’ as if he had every intention of being around for a second. Pathetic fool that she was for him, that small encouragement sent a thrill of hopefulness through her. “Oh really?”

He shrugged. “Mayhap it would be wise to choose a female name, as well, just in case there is treachery afoot.”

“What’ve you decided to name *her* ?”

His brows rose. “I thought I would allow you to choose the female name.”

“You are so magnanimous!”

“So I am told,” he retorted, his eyes gleaming with suppressed laughter. “Simon the Magnanimous--that is

what I am called I am told.”

“Not Simon the Magnificent?” she asked teasingly.

“That, too,” he murmured, dipping down to nuzzle his face against her throat and suck a love bit on the tender flesh. Leaning away after a moment, he studied her face. Desire gleamed in his eyes, but teasing amusement, as well. “Ah! I sense doubt.” He slipped a hand down to capture one of hers and drew it to him, curling her fingers around his erection. “Behold! Is that not magnificent?”

Raina burst out laughing, but she made a sound of appreciation in her throat as she explored his length with her hand. “All this for little old me?”

The teasing light went out of his eyes. “Only for you, beloved,” he murmured, and set out to prove to her the sobriquet ‘magnificent’ was no exaggeration. Afterward, he spooned with her, dragging her back against his chest and stroking a hand over her swollen belly until she drifted to sleep.

She was surprised to discover he was still with her in the morning, but apparently he was bent on staking his claim as her lover and making it abundantly clear to everyone. Either that or he was just horny as hell because it had been months since they’d been together

because they spent the better part of a week reacquainting themselves in his apartments while servants ferried trays of food to them. When they talked, they confined themselves primarily to ‘light’ conversation, which suited Raina. She’d been more than half afraid he’d bring up the pact they’d had before, and when he didn’t, *that* worried her even more. Something, even so weak a commitment from him as that, was better than having nothing to hold on to.

He poked and prodded until he’d gotten her to tell him all she could remember about her ‘adventure’ and then about herself. She wasn’t comfortable talking about her life after she’d run away. She supposed it didn’t really matter. She was pretty sure he already had a fair grasp on it from what she’d told him already. He didn’t know about her run-ins with the cops, though, or the times she’d been locked up and charged with soliciting, and she didn’t want to have to try to convince him she hadn’t been guilty to start with. It was easier just to avoid talking about it at all.

Unfortunately, the things she didn’t want to tell about herself made it hard to piece together a whole picture for him.

He surprised her by telling her about his life, regaling her mostly with amusing anecdotes--many of which included Audric, although he seemed reluctant to talk

much about Audric--but he still told her enough to give her a grasp of what his life had been like when he was growing up, and what life in general was like on his world. Apart from the entertaining aspects, she enjoyed listening. She'd been hungry to know everything about him, and yet the vast differences between his life and hers seemed to her to make the chasm between them wider, more impossible to breach.

She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised that he seemed willing to talk to her about it when he hadn't before. She knew, now, why he'd been so reticent before, but she had always sensed that he was a very private man anyway--and cautious about revealing too much about himself.

She was sorry when it ended, but all good things came to an end--eventually, and she admitted, to herself, at least, that she was more surprised that he'd seemed to have no interest in the outside world for as long as he had. She was not only *not* sexy when she could barely sit up without help and wallowed around the bed like a walrus, but despite his efforts not to show it she was pretty sure he didn't think so either. He spent far more time cuddling with her and stroking her fat belly than he did trying to think up inventive ways to navigate his way around mount Olympus and even when he did have sex with her, he was either very careful to restrain his passion and use great care or the mountain had severely

dampened his passion.

It was still good. The pleasure she felt only from his touch was better than the pleasure she'd known before climaxing from sex--and when he made her come, it was the closest to heaven she ever expected to come.

He woke her tickling her nose with a lock of her hair. She thought it was a bug and slapped at it, whereupon he uttered a husky chuckle.

Cracking one eye a slit, she glared at his grinning face. "Very funny, you ass," she muttered, struggling to roll onto her side and put her back to him.

He promptly scooted up behind her and shoved his cock between her thighs, pushing slowly in and out while he nuzzled her neck and nibbled at her shoulder. "Are you referring to the long eared animal known as a jackass? Or this?" he queried with mock indignation as he squeezed one of her buttocks.

Raina smiled in spite of the fact that she was far more interested in going back to sleep than bantering with him. "Both," she said promptly. "And you can stop that. I'm not interested ... right now."

He nipped at her ear. "Just go back to sleep, sweeting. I will attend to this. You will not even know that I am

here.”

Raina uttered a snorting chuckle. “*Asif* I could sleep with that ... log of yours sawing back and forth along the crack of my ass!”

He cupped a breast, massaging it. “Does it not distress you at all to waste such a magnificent erection?”

She chuckled. “*It might* ... if I didn’t know there’s lots more where that came from!”

He lifted his head. “Do you hear that, soldier? I told you you might as well go back to sleep. The lady has spurned you!”

She grinned. “Simon! You are impossible!”

“Nay. I am magnificent,” he retorted with a chuckle.

Shifting her shoulders so that she could see him, she smiled up at him. “Yes, you are.”

He met her gaze for a long moment and finally dipped to kiss her on the tip of the nose. “Now that you are awake, you must get up and dress. Duty calls,” he ended wryly.

Raina frowned at him. “Duty?”

He grunted, popping her buttocks lightly before he rolled away. “Alas, yes. The council is convened and I must go and speak with them.”

Raina pushed herself up on her elbows. “You want me to go with you?” she asked in surprise and not a little dismay.

Correctly interpreting her alarm, he smiled at her reassuringly. “It will not take long to say what I have to say and then I will take you to show you the beautiful side of my homeland. I know that you have seen nothing but the ugliness.”

That sounded a lot more appealing, but she still wasn’t happy about having to go into public when she knew they’d all be staring at her. She had no interest in politics, even if she could’ve understood what they were talking about. She hated to disappoint him, though, so instead of whining and asking him to let her wait in his room until he came back, she got up and tried to pretend she wasn’t as uneasy about the prospect as she was.

She was*not* happy at all, though, when he summoned women to help her bathe and dress. She was uncomfortable being exposed to Simon’s view looking as she did. It was worse having strange women helping

her bathe and dress, especially since they chattered to one another in their native tongue the whole while. She didn't *know* that they were talking about her, but she didn't know they weren't either.

She felt a little better when she'd finished bathing and saw the gown and pants they had brought for her to wear. In style, it was pretty much like everything she'd worn since she'd been brought to the palace, a sort of loose robe/dress to be worn over the loose legged pants made to match it. As with the others, the dress fastened up the front. The 'waist' was just beneath her breasts and the skirt loose and flowing to mid-way her calves. The neck of this one, though, was lower than the others, showing a lot more cleavage than she was used to having on display.

It was made out of a material that reminded her of satin, though, shinny, and not clingy like the other gowns she'd worn. It was also lavishly embroidered with a beautiful design and sparkling stones had been sewn into the designs that reminded her of diamonds.

The only drawback was that it was a pale cream, almost white and she already felt like a blimp. This was bound to make her look even bigger, she thought glumly.

Simon seemed pleased, though.

He seemed a little less pleased with the way they'd arranged her hair--in a style similar to the woman in the portrait--which Raina hadn't especially liked either, but it seemed to be a fairly common style among the women.

"I far prefer your beautiful hair flowing about your shoulders," he murmured. He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head and then tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, matching his steps to hers as he guided her along the seemingly endless corridors of the huge place and finally through a set of double doors that opened into a huge room.

She almost had heart failure when they stepped inside and a contingent of trumpeters snapped to attention and let out a blast with the strange looking musical instruments they were holding--all six of them at one time. Jumping, she sidled closer to Simon, looking around with wide eyed uneasiness as everyone in the room--and it was packed to the gills--immediately bowed low and stayed that way as Simon dragged her down the center of the room to a dais at the other end.

He patted the hands she had looped frantically around his arm. When she looked up at him questioningly, he smiled at her. "Do not be alarmed, beloved. Old traditions are hard to break."

Easy for him to say, she thought with some dudgeon. *He* wasn't surrounded by a room packed with aliens. She'd known there was no way she could enter a room with Simon and not attract attention. She just hadn't expected to be the focal point of the entire room.

She supposed Simon was actually the focal point, but she could hardly go unnoticed under the circumstances and she'd hoped to.

She felt a little relieved when she saw that Audric was one of the people seated on the dais, which held several chairs, one very big, very fancy looking chair, and two less fancy chairs on either side of that. The relief didn't last, of course. Audric's nearness had been a tremendous comfort to her almost as long as she'd known him, but she'd no sooner drawn a sigh of relief from knowing he would be close by than it dawned on her that he was probably really pissed off with her right now.

She'd be lucky if he didn't give her the evil eye and snub her.

Which she richly deserved.

He didn't, though. Even as she sent him an uneasy, guilty glance, he smiled at her reassuringly and got to his feet with an effort and bowed as Simon helped her

up the steps to the dais, guided her to the chair beside Audric and helped her to sit--helped her because the damned thing was higher than it had looked. She managed to plant her butt on the seat easily enough, but by the time she'd scooted into it, her feet were dangling above the floor. Trying not to look as uncomfortable as she felt, she propped her hands on the mound in front of her and then moved them to the arms of the chair as Simon moved away from her and sprawled comfortably in the huge, fancy chair she finally realized was the throne of Schalome.

She felt the color drain from her face as that sank into her, felt her heart alternately skip and race with nerves as everyone finally rose from their bows and faced the dais.

Chapter Twenty Three

Simon reached almost casually for her hand and laced his fingers through hers in a gesture of reassurance. Raina smiled at him tentatively when she saw that he was looking at her, relaxing a little when he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. He lowered her hand to

the arm rest again, but he didn't let go of it as he turned to survey the crowded room, bringing them to an expectant silence with no more than that look.

As the silence became so profound it was nearly deafening, he began to speak.

Raina had no idea what he was saying, of course, but as she surreptitiously watched the crowd around them she saw shock in every face--just shocked disbelief. She couldn't decide, at first, if they were shocked speechless with joy or fear or anger, but she noticed after a few moments that everyone began to flick curious glances at her. The color that had left her face surged back and then began to pulse uncomfortably hot when the people began to divide less subtle glances between her and Simon as he continued. The dead silence that had gripped everyone when Simon began speaking gave way to a whisper of voices that gained in volume when he'd finally stopped speaking. Several men, dressed in clothing that seemed to indicate they were men of importance, detached themselves from the crowd and seemed to be arguing with Simon. They were certainly discussing something they weren't happy about.

After a few minutes, when the crowd seemed to be becoming more agitated instead of less, Simon rose and helped her from her seat. "Do not look so distressed,

beloved. I knew they would not be pleased. Go with Audric,” he added, glancing at Audric. “He will keep you company while I sooth their ruffled feathers.”

She didn’t like the taut look on his face and the tone of the voices, even though she couldn’t understand what they were saying, made her more anxious, especially when Simon seemed worried about her continued presence. “You’ll be alright?” she asked anxiously.

He smiled. “You do not need to stay and protect me, my little dracon,” he murmured. “Go with Audric. I will be along directly and redeem my promise to show you Schalome. They are more ... distressed than I had anticipated, and I do not want to leave until I have calmed them.”

She still didn’t like leaving him in the room filled with so many agitated people, but she thought, maybe, she was adding to the contention the way they kept looking at her. Finally, she nodded and turned to look at Audric a little doubtfully. He looked as grim as Simon, but he moved unhesitatingly to take her hand and settle it on the crook of his arm as Simon had before, guiding her to a door at the back of the dais.

Instead of leading her back to her room, or his, or even Simon’s apartments and leaving her, he walked her down a long corridor and outside into what looked like

a small formal garden. There were strange, stunted looking plants arranged along walkways and benches sprinkled here and there. She didn't have much interest in the landscaping, though. A shiver skated along her spine. It was cool outside, so high in the mountain, but that was only part of her discomfort. She didn't know what Simon had said to those people, and she knew there were guards stationed around him, but she still didn't like him being surrounded by so many people who seemed so unhappy with his announcement.

Audric noticed. Turning to one of the men trailing them, he barked what sounded like an order and the man saluted and disappeared. He returned bearing a long, fleecy woven something that looked like a very long, wide scarf as Audric guided her to a bench and helped her to sit down.

Audric settled the scarf-like thing around her shoulders, wrapping it around her. "Better?"

Raina nodded, struggling with her uneasiness about Simon and her discomfort around Audric considering their last meeting. "You're getting around much better," she commented finally. "I'm glad."

"Not nearly as glad as I am, I expect," he returned, smiling faintly. "I was heartily weary of being confined to my sick bed."

Raina managed a faint smile, but then frowned, feeling her discomfort rise as she struggled to think of an adequate apology for her behavior. “I’m tempted to beg off on account of hormonal insanity,” she said finally. “I know you probably hate me, and you won’t believe it, but I’m sorry ... about”

He lifted a hand and nudged her chin to force her to look up at him. “I do not hate you. I do not think that I could. I love you, Raina. I knew that he would come for you, even if you did not ... and I also knew that you would go to him--As it should be when you carry his child. I will not say that it did not cause me pain,” he finished wryly, “but it was no surprise to me.”

Raina studied him with a mixture of hopefulness, distress, and shame. “I love you, too. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just” She broke off and sighed. “I can’t help it.”

“You love Simon more,” he said simply. “Do not look so distressed, Raina. I am used to being in Simon’s shadow. I do not particularly like it, but I love him, too, so I understand.”

Raina frowned. “I love Simon differently,” she corrected him.

“Because he is Simon.”

“And I love you because you’re you,” she said, smiling faintly.

“In a brotherly way.”

Raina chuckled, but she hated to see that look in his eyes, especially when it wasn’t true. “I hope you don’t think that I’d do the nasty with so much enthusiasm with my brother--even if I still had one. Ew!” she said teasingly.

He smiled more easily then, desire rising to gleam in his eyes. “I am not at all certain that I believe that, but as it helps my feelings a great deal, I think I will try to believe it.”

“You should. It’s true.” She studied her hands for a moment. “What was all that ruckus going on back there?”

Audric’s entire attitude changed instantly. “Simon abdicated. He has relinquished all rights to the throne of Schalome, now and forever,” he said with a mixture of anger and incredulity.

Raina stared at him in shocked disbelief. “He did what?”

Audric stared at her for a long moment. “You did not understand any of that?”

As embarrassed as she was to admit she hadn’t managed to pick up even a handful of words in their language, she shook her head. “Sorry. I haven’t actually tried to learn. I figured when Simon got tired of me, again, he’d send me home. There just didn’t seem to be much point in learning the language.”

He looked taken aback. “He worships the ground you walk upon, little fool! I have never seen him behave so foolishly over *any* woman and I have been with him my entire life! Unless he tires of having a heart, I do not think that is anything you need concern yourself over.”

He shrugged, apparently oblivious to the fact that he’d sent her reeling with that information. Raina desperately wanted him to continue in that intriguing vein, wondering if he included Simon’s wife in that ‘any’, but she decided it was probably just a figure of speech. It was enough to thrill her no end that Audric considered that she held a special place in Simon’s heart. She couldn’t help being envious of that long dead woman who’d meant so much to him, but she was *not* going to let it ruin her enjoyment of being special to him now.

“I do not suppose there is any point in learning our language, unless you wish to please Simon. He told me when we were coming back that he would do this, but I did not truly believe he would. Even/ I thought that it was no more than lust and possessiveness that he felt for you, that he would realize that and forget you Or, at least, I suppose I only hoped that that was it. He would hardly eat or rest. I had begun to be seriously alarmed about his health, but once he had made the decision to go back to you it eased his mind.”

Raina stared at him speechlessly. “He said that?*Before* he discovered I was pregnant?”

The look he gave her was skeptical, but he smiled wryly. “Love has made us all blind and deaf to the rest of the universe. It is you he wants, dearling. I think that he did not know that himself until he left you and came to realize you were all that mattered to him. I told him that he could not go into battle with his heart and mind divided, that he must focus on the prize. And he told me the only prize of any value to him was the one he had left--you.

“He knew that he would have to give up all to have you--for there has never sat a consort upon the throne that was not draconian--and he knew that he could only have one or the other, not both.”

Raina felt faint with the thoughts churning through her mind, so thrilled she could hardly catch her breath, but hungry to hear more, and still doubtful. “He didn’t say he loved me,” she said after a moment.

“He calls you beloved. Is that not saying it?” he demanded with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

Raina blinked at him. “I thought that was only a term of affection. You both call me ‘sweeting’ and ‘dearling’ all the time. And he hasn’t acted any differently that I can tell.”

“Because *weboth* love you! And there is no reason to behave differently when we both did almost from the first moment.”

“Oh!” Raina cooed with a mixture of pleasure and shock. “That’s ... that’s ... Oh, that’s bad!” she finished. “He’s not going to be happy not being the king, is he?”

“Emperor,” Simon corrected as he reached them. “But he knows what he wants. Do not doubt that, beloved.”

Raina jumped, whirling to look at him in surprise, having dismissed the sound of approaching footsteps because she was so engrossed in her conversation with Audric and thought, besides, that it was just one of the

guards.

She looked up at him hopefully, feeling both shy and uneasy as she searched his gaze. “They’re still mad, huh?”

He shrugged. “They will recover,” he said dismissively, taking her hand and helping her from the bench. “They are arguing over who they will find to take my place when we leave. To appease them, and because we can not go anyway until you are able to travel, I told them I would do what I could to untangle the mess the realm is in before I left. For now, though, beloved, I am yours. I have arranged a traveling skimmer to show you about Schalome. I am anxious to see for myself how much has changed since last I was here.”

He grinned at her once he’d settled her in the thing he had called a skimmer, looking more relaxed and carefree than she’d ever seen him. “Ah! Alone at last,” he quipped.

Raina gave him a look. “Just you and me and the dozen heavily armed skimmers following us,” she said dryly.

He chuckled, but shrugged. “The realm is still in a bit of unrest. We can not be certain, yet, that we have ferreted out and eliminated all of Jaelen’s supporters.

We will ignore them.”

He ignored them. Raina found that a little more difficult, but the droves of people they met up with made that easier. Everywhere they went excitement rippled through the people that saw them, that bowed respectfully to Simon, looking at him, when they dared, as if they were in the presence of a god. Simon seemed to take it stride, smiling easily at anyone that made eye contact with them, although there weren’t many who seemed able to get up the nerve to do so.

“What does Pater-Draken mean? Your name isn’t Draken?”

Simon shrugged. “It is ... ah” He paused to consider it. “An honorary thing from ancient times.” He smiled wryly and dropped an arm around her shoulders. “Long ago, the people looked upon the emperor as the son of the gods,” he whispered conspiratorially. “That is why the heir to the throne is always referred to as Father Dragon. We are credited--or were--as the origin of the race.”

She looked at him askance, not because she doubted it for a moment, despite the teasing way he’d said it, but because even she could see, without any understanding of the language at all, that they *still* looked upon him as a god.

“This is why they call you Matra-Draken,” he added, his eyes gleaming with amusement and something else she found hard to decipher. “But also because they have heard of your feats in battle and respect you as a great warrioress.”

“My feats ...? You’re kidding, right?”

He chuckled. “Now you are credited with having slain a dozen draconian warriors. Before much longer it will be an entire battalion, but they are right about the gist of it. You are a remarkable woman, Rainie. You deserve their respect and honor. You were brave and strong and I would have swollen with pride in you myself if I had not been too terrified to appreciate it at the time.”

Raina reddened, both gratified by his praise and embarrassed. “I wasn’t brave. I was scared to death. I ran and hid.”

“You confounded the enemy, retreated to a more defensible position, and held them off with stones until I could rescue you--to say nothing of the man you dispatched to protect Audric. You kept your wits and fought them, for which I will be eternally grateful--because you protected the one thing most important to me--you. I am proud of you, and justifiably so. Few women in your position would have had the

courage or the wit to fight for their lives. They would have wept, or screamed, and waited for someone else to protect them.”

She still felt very undeserving of his praise when she'd only acted on her instincts for survival, but if he wanted to be proud of her for it, she was happy to bask in it. She smiled at him and slipped an arm around his waist as they walked together. As much as she enjoyed seeing the things he took her to see, and admired the beauty he'd spoken of--and the place *was* beautiful, the scenery as well as the fine architecture of the buildings he took her to see--she enjoyed being with him far more.

She was exhausted by the time they returned to Draken Fortress, but happily so. She didn't regret it even though her feet hurt from the soft soled slippers she'd been given to wear and her back hurt, and her belly felt as if it needed something more substantial to support its weight than her body, because she barely saw him for days on end afterward. Almost the only time they were together was at night, and she was usually exhausted and Simon seemed both exhausted and aggravated.

Audric entertained her. She didn't doubt that Simon was behind it. If he hadn't wanted Audric around her, he would've placed an army of guards between them, so she didn't know if Audric actually wanted to be with her or not, but she enjoyed his company anyway. He

took her for walks, which got shorter and shorter as time went on because it became an exercise in teeth gritted endurance for her to walk at all after many more weeks and she began to fear she was going to have to spend the last weeks of her pregnancy confined to bed. She was determined not to if she could help it. She had reached a point where she was just as miserable, physically, no matter whether she sat, or stood, walked, or reclined. At least as long as she could move around she wouldn't be bored to death, or worse, have nothing to occupy her mind but her fears.

Those alternated between the baby's health, having the baby, and the fear that Simon would dump her, whatever Audric had said, because he seemed to lose interest in having sex with her.

She quit worrying about any of it after a while, though. She'd grown too miserable to have any room left for anything except hoping the baby would come so she could get it over with. She 'ripened' well past her anxiety about not being able to get around, when even getting a decent breath of air was a struggle.

Audric stopped walking her to the garden and started carrying her out to get a breath of fresh air. As much as she appreciated his thoughtfulness, though, it was pure torture to sit for very long on the hard, backless bench. She couldn't sit up straight because of the mound in her

lap, and she couldn't lean back far without her muscles screaming in agony.

As she sat staring at nothing in particular, thinking about nothing beyond the fact that she had to pee again when she'd just gone before she came out, idly rubbing her stomach, Audric finally turned to straddle the bench. "Come here. I will rub it and try to make it better."

Raina looked at him doubtfully, but she was tempted. Finally, she dismissed her concern that Simon would find out and be mad and shifted closer. Audric dragged her between his thighs and pulled her back against his chest. Raina relaxed against him after a moment, closing her eyes in enjoyment as he began rubbing her belly soothingly. Just having him to lean against made her feel tremendously better because it was a strain to sit up without anything to lean on when she couldn't sit straight up anymore because of her belly. The pressure of his hands was heavenly. Within moments she was half asleep.

"Simon's going to be mad at both of us," she murmured, feeling compelled to point that out.

Audric glanced up at Simon as he appeared in the door and strode toward them with angry, purposeful strides. Their gazes locked as Simon came to a halt a few feet

away, his eyes blazing with anger. “I will deal with Simon’s temper,” he said grimly. “Does that make it feel any better, dearling?”

Raina expelled a deep, contented breath. “It feels wonderful! It almost doesn’t hurt now. I used to wonder what people meant when they’d say ‘it’ll feel good when it stops hurting’. I can almost get a really deep breath. Will you feel slighted if I fall asleep?”

“No.”

“Good,” she murmured. She drowsed, but she knew the moment Simon crouched beside her even before she felt the light touch of his lips. “Don’t be mad, Simon.”

He slipped an arm behind her back and one beneath her knees. “I am not, but I think you will be more comfortable sleeping in our bed.”

She doubted it, but she was relaxed enough she felt some hope of taking a nap so she didn’t argue. If the baby would just take a nap with her she thought she could manage it, but he was rarely still for very long at the time.

* * * *

Audric sent Simon a look that was a mixture of guilt and belligerence when Simon returned a short time later. He relaxed slightly when Simon, instead of blasting him with his temper, settled on the bench where Raina had been sitting and dropped his head into his hands.

“I am nigh sick with fear for her, Simon,” he said after a prolonged silence had settled between them that had grown from tension. “There is little more to her than belly now. It is your child, and I know that you will not like for me to say this, but is there not something that could be done?”

Simon lifted a haggard face to him. “Do you think I am not worried? I feel like weeping every time I look at her and it is all I can do to pretend that I am not anxious to keep from infecting her with my fear. I want the child, but not more than Rainie! Gods help me, but I would sacrifice it if I thought it would save her. I spoke to the court healer--asked him to take it from her, even though I know she would probably never forgive me for it--but he said it was too late, that it would be more dangerous to try, now, than to wait for nature to take its course.”

Audric’s shoulders slumped. “Mayhap it only seems huge because she is so small,” he said gruffly.

“It seems huge because it *is* --to her. The healer thought there might be more than one--which would have made me feel a great deal better, I do not mind telling you--but he could not find but one heartbeat.”

“Mayhap he is right and there are two,” Audric said more hopefully.

Simon nodded in agreement, but he didn’t look much heartened. He said nothing more and Audric had just decided to leave him with his thoughts when he finally spoke again.

“I have suggested to the council that they should consider you to take my place.”

Audric stared at Simon’s profile in disbelief for several moments before anger settled over him. “May I speak to you as your brother?”

Simon sent him a questioning look, but smiled faintly. “I thought that you always spoke to me as my brother.”

Audric glared him, unwilling to allow Simon to tease him out of his ill temper as he generally did. “Then I will tell you straight out that I want no part of it! I love you, Simon, both as my brother and my sovereign, but *this* I will not do for you! I have never refused to do anything you asked. I have always tried my best,

regardless of how I might feel--but not this!

“I was not born to it, and not trained to it. I could not do it if I wanted to, and I do not want to even try. I knew from the moment that I realized that I loved Raina, that she was already lost to me, that there was no hope ... at all. I can live with that because I must, but I will not be pushed into a position where I must marry for the sake of the realm! I will not *nottie* myself to a woman I do love, and could never love--very likely could not even tolerate. I have no doubt that I will be miserable, but I am not going to be made *more* miserable by struggling with affairs of state and listening to the whining of some *princess* who thinks she has married beneath her because I am only a royal bastard!

“And, like it or not, when you leave here to return to her world, I will go also. You may not think that you need me now, but I have always watched your back, and I will continue to do so! Because whatever you say now, whoever they finally decide upon will not like to think that you might decide to return just about the time he becomes comfortable. If you do not spend the rest of your days dodging assassins, I will be nothing short of amazed.”

He got to his feet then, barely remembered to bow, and stalked off.

Chapter Twenty Four

Audric was startled and not terribly pleased when he answered Simon's summons several days later and entered his chamber to discover that Simon was sitting with his back against the headboard of his bed, Raina between his splayed thighs and propped against his chest. He stared fixedly at Simon's hands as they moved over Raina's bared abdomen for several moments before he collected himself enough to beg pardon and make an about face.

"My apologies. I was told you wished to speak to me," he said stiffly.

"I summoned you. Sit down--the end of the bed will do," Simon responded coolly.

Audric stared at the bed for a moment and balked. "I will stand ... if you please," he growled irritably.

Simon ignored him, tipping his head to look down at

Raina. “Is that better, beloved?”

Raina sighed, but decided to lie. “Yes, much.”

“There was something I needed to discuss with you ... and it concerns Audric, as well.”

Raina shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position as she looked around for something to cover herself with. Seeing nothing close enough to grab, she gave up. She didn’t particularly care. If Audric was revolted, he could look at something else. “What is it?” she asked finally. “Nothing bad?”

“I hope you will not think so,” he said, and paused for a moment. “Would you be greatly distressed if we stayed here instead of returning to your world?”

Raina tipped her head back to look up at him. “I’d ... still be your woman, right?”

He smiled faintly and kissed the end of her nose. “Did I not say you would always be mine?”

Raina smiled back at him in relief. “Then I don’t care--as long as I’m with you I don’t care where we live.”

“You are absolutely certain?”

Her smile widened. "Of course I'm sure."

"Well, that is a relief, because I had told the council that I would not consider ruling without you by side and they have decided that they want us both."

Raina chuckled wryly. "They want you badly enough to put up with the upstart Earthling, you mean."

"They will do more than 'put up' with you, I assure you," he said grimly. "They are happy to have you, else I would not have considered it."

Raina sent Audric a wry look, but he was staring studiously at the far wall. She frowned. "I'd be ... like ... your consort?" she asked hesitantly.

"You will be my Empress--we are equals, you and I, remember?"

Raina wasn't certain of how she felt about the title, but she felt delirious with joy that Simon had said he would marry her--not asked, told her, but she wasn't about to quibble over it. "Empress Raina," she said thoughtfully.

"It does have a nice sound to it," Simon agreed cheerfully. "And Audric will be *your* consort," he added.

Raina's mind went blank. She stared at Simon a moment and then looked at Audric. Audric looked as if he'd been pole-axed, though, and she could tell he wasn't going to be any help clearing up her confusion. "But ... you mean he'll be my escort?"

"Audric knows what I mean, do you not?"

Audric stared at him blankly for several moments and finally sat down on the end of the bed as if his knees had give out. "I have not betrayed you, Simon. I swear it! I never would."

"But you love her, Audric, and she loves you--I love you. I would far rather accept that we are all dracons, and fallible, than demand something of you that you might or might not be able to do. As much as I want to be with Raina all the time, and as little as I care for the thought of sharing her, I can not do my duty without leaving her alone much of the time and I would never trust anyone to keep her safe but you.

"I need to be easy in my mind that Rainie is safe when I can not be with her, Audric, else I can not in good conscience accept the duties expected of me. Rainie's happiness and well being will always be far more important to me than anything else."

Audric turned to look at her for the first time, staring at her for a long, long moment before he looked at Simon again. “You do not mean this,” he said hoarsely. “You are ... concerned ... now and you are not thinking clearly.”

“I am thinking clearly. I have checked the laws. There is no impediment. Despite the fact that it has always, in the past, been males who have binded with multiple consorts, there is nothing to prevent such an arrangement between us. You may be sure that I am not completely delighted with the prospect, even though I feel that it was the best solution for all of us. You may *also* be certain that I mean always to be first with my Empress--*wewill* be first bound. She and I first mates, and *you* will be her consort--that does not make you and I equals. I do not expect this to go smoothly--perhaps in the years to come--but no time soon. I believe that we will muddle through, however. I have not slain you yet.”

“Uh ... Do I have a voice in this?”

“Only if you mean to agree with me, beloved.”

Raina gave him a strained smile. “I should’ve known that was your idea of us being equals,” she said teasingly. “There’ll be raised eyebrows.”

Simon shrugged. "I do not care, even a little. They can waggle them, if they like. I am the Emperor Simon Draken, and I always do as I please."

Raina sighed. "Well, if y'all are through deciding what you want to do, do you think, maybe, you could call the healer? I'm pretty sure something's happening here."

All traces of humor left Simon abruptly. He stiffened. "Gods be damned! Rainie! Why did you not say something before! Audric will have a heart attack if you have that child before the healer arrives and I am not at all certain that I will not! Audric! Go! Fetch the man now. And if you faint, I swear I will tie you to the whipping post myself and take the hide off of you!"

Simon looked so relieved when the healer arrived and sent him from the room, Raina might have been amused if she'd been in any condition to feel amusement. The pains had been growing steadily worse even before Audric had arrived for the discussion, though, until they'd reached the point where she couldn't sit still any longer.

She'd listened only with half a mind to the discussion, had a dim idea of what it was about, and a lot of reservations, but she could deal with that later, she thought, when she didn't hurt so much. It got worse than she would've believed possible, so that she passed

from the fear of dying to the fear that she wouldn't, and still it didn't let up. She hardly knew where she was or what was happening beyond the haze of pain, but she perked up when the healer stepped to the door and announced that the baby was coming and Simon should come in to witness the birth.

Almost over, she told herself. Just a little longer.

When she managed to open her eyes again, Simon and Audric were plastered against the wall at the foot of the bed, both of them looking as if they would pass out and slide down the wall at any minute. She lifted a hand hopefully to Simon. He stared at it as if it was a snake and finally wobbled to the side of the bed and dropped heavily to his knees, grasping her hand. She squeezed his hand tightly, uttering a growl of effort each time the healer told her to push.

“The babe has crowned,” the doctor announced.

Audric slid to the floor and fell over, distracting Raina in the middle of a contraction. She tried to sit up. Simon pushed her back down. “He is resting, beloved. He will be fine.”

Raina panted for breath. “He hit his head.”

“He has a very hard head. I am certain, if he broke

anything at all, that it was the fixture he turned over when he fell.”

“It is a male child!” the healer announced just as the baby announced his arrival by letting out a loud, indignant wail.

Riana let out a tearful breath of relief. “Is he alright? Does he look alright?” she demanded anxiously.

Simon turned his head to look at the infant. He frowned. “He is very small,” he said finally. “And very ugly.”

Raina glared at him, but ground her teeth as another contraction hit her. “What’s wrong?” she asked, panicked when the pain eased off.

“You are doing very well, lady,” the healer said soothingly. “The second infant has crowned.”

Simon stared at the man blankly. “You said there were not two,” he said accusingly. “I have been going insane with worry that it was one enormous babe and there are two?”

“I beg pardon, sire, but I said I did not *hear* but one. If you will only look, you will see that there are definitely two.”

Simon looked vaguely ill. “I will take your word for it,” he said uneasily, his hand tightening on Raina’s, more as if he needed to hold on to her than as if he was giving reassurance.

“If you will take this one, I will help the other.”

Simon looked at the man in horror, but finally reached to take the wiggling bundle. Raina held up her arms for the baby as he turned and he settled it beside her with a look of profound relief. She cuddled it as she strained with another contraction and finally went limp as a thin wail announced the arrival of the second baby. “It is a female.”

As excited as she was about the babies, and anxious to examine them, exhaustion threatened to swallow her up. She struggled against it until she’d carefully looked both of her babies over and satisfied herself that they were perfectly formed. One of the women that had arrived with the healer surged forward and reached for a baby. Raina tightened her arms around the baby protectively, glaring at her.

“It is alright, Rainie,” Simon said soothingly. “She only wants to bathe them. She will bring them back to you.”

She still didn't like it, but she was too exhausted to argue. She lay drifting in and out of sleep for a while, listening to what was going on around her, feeling awe and happiness slowly claim her. "Devlyn and Racquel," she murmured.

When she opened her eyes, she discovered Simon had disappeared and Audric was kneeling by the bed, holding her hand and grinning at her sheepishly. "They are beautiful," he murmured. "Just like their mother."

Raina blinked at him dizzily. "They are?"

"Yes."

She frowned. "Racquel has dark hair ... like Simon."

"I have not seen them," he confessed shakily. "But I know they are beautiful."

Closing her eyes, Raina smiled. "Go and look at them and come back and tell me."

She dropped into oblivion when the healer had finally stopped bothering her and went away. When she woke again the room was dim, as if darkness had fallen. Somewhere in the distance she heard the faint threads of music and many voices. For a while, she struggled with the realization that it had been midday the last she

recalled and finally pressed her hands to her belly. It felt so strangely soft and flat.

A light came on at her movement and she squinted at Simon, who'd been sleeping in a chair across from her. "Where are the babies?"

"Sleeping--as you should be."

Disappointment filled her. "I only got to hold them a minute."

He pushed himself from the chair and sat on the bed beside her. "You have had little rest in weeks. Rest. They are being well attended, you may be sure. Each of them have a nurse for their needs and Audric is standing guard over them--when he is not making absurd faces and strange noises at them. I told him to stop frightening them."

Raina frowned, searching her memory. "Did he faint?"

Simon chuckled, but quickly pretended to cough. "Nay, lady. He is a fearless draconian warrior! Why would you think that?"

She thought it over. "He had a knot on his forehead the size of my fist."

He grinned. "I will let you ask Audric." He hesitated. "Will it discomfort you for me to lie beside you?"

Raina smiled. "I could sleep better."

Dragging his boots off, he climbed into the bed with her and settled beside her. "They are beautiful and I could not be more pleased or proud--of them or you."

"You said Devlyn was ugly," she said accusingly.

"He had been through a great trial. I have seen him. He is handsome now that he is not such a bloody mess. In truth, I did not get a very good look at first. I was trying not to disgrace myself as Audric did."

Raina chuckled, but then frowned. "What is all that noise?"

Simon grinned at her. "They are celebrating the birth of the crown prince of Schalome--and our new princess. You need not concern yourself that you are welcome only because you will be my mate. They adore you as much as I do."

Raina sighed blissfully and snuggled next to him. "Do you adore me?"

Simon slipped his arms around her and sighed

contentedly. “With every fiber of being, beloved.”

Chapter Twenty Five

One year later ...

Raina propped her head on her hand and watched Audric appreciatively through half closed eyes as he removed his clothing. Catching her gaze as he finished removing his trousers, he paused, studied her a moment and, his eyes gleaming with amusement, posed, flexing his muscles for her. A smile tugged her lips upward. “Mmm,” she murmured, “very, very nice. I especially like that muscle right there,” she added, pointing to the erect cock jutting from his belly.

Grinning, he moved toward her. Placing a knee on the bed and one hand on her hip, he rolled her onto her back as he settled the bulk of his weight on his side on the bed and dragged her beneath him. “It likes you, also. Especially this little part of you right here,” he

murmured, holding her gaze with his as he glided a hand over her belly and cupped her mound in his hand.

Dragging one leg upward, she allowed it to drop to one side, giving him better access as he stroked a long digit along her dampness and found her sex, delving inside. “I like it when you let your fingers do the walking, too,” she murmured huskily as he stroked his finger slowly in and out along her passage.

Lifting her arm, she settled her palm over the bulging muscle he’d been displaying for her moments earlier and tracked the contour upward and across his shoulder until she’d hooked her hand behind his head, drawing him down to her. Their lips met, clung briefly and parted. Again and again, he teased her and finally settled his mouth fully over hers and teased her with the stroke of his tongue in imitation of the steady movements of his finger inside of her.

Heat blossomed, delightful tension building inside of her until she began to move restlessly against him, surging upward to meet his hand, sucking hungrily at his teasing tongue. He slipped between her thighs after a moment, replacing his finger with his cock, surging into her with maddeningly slow thrusts until he’d seated his engorged member fully inside of her. He went still then, curling his body over hers until he could capture her mouth beneath his in a kiss filled with far

more hunger than before, a kiss that sent a fresh surge of heated need through her.

She lifted her legs, wrapping them tightly around his waist and curling her hips into his, the muscles along her passage quaking with the delightful spread of fire through her veins. He wrenched his mouth from hers abruptly. Pushing himself upward on his arms, he watched her face as he began to move his hips rhythmically, stroking the walls of her sex in pleasurable, teasing caresses that made her breath hitch in her chest.

Breathless, feeling the channeling of sensations focus inside her, feeling the tingling, almost electric charges jolting through her as her body gathered itself toward its peak, she dropped her feet to the bed and curled her hips to meet his thrusts, moaning her pleasure in the feel of his body inside hers.

Audric began to move faster to accommodate her rising need and his own, shuddering as he struggled to pace himself with her, allowing his passion to take over as he felt her nearing her peak. The moment he felt her passage begin to quake around his member, felt her muscles clenching him, milking him, he yielded control to her, allowed her body to coax his seed from him. He curled around her as she came, covering her mouth to drink in her soft cries of pleasure, groaning his own into

her mouth.

He was gasping for breath when his body finally stopped convulsing in release. Weak and utterly content in the aftermath, he wanted nothing more than to stay just as he was, joined with her flesh to flesh. Instead, he gathered himself and rolled over, carrying her with him until she was draped bonelessly across his chest.

“I pleased you, beloved?” he asked after a bit, just to be sure, just because he liked hearing her tell him.

“Mmmm,” she murmured lazily against his chest, the hum of her voice tickling him.

“I may take that as a yes?”

She chuckled. “You know you did.”

“You are stingy with your compliments,” he complained without heat.

She lifted her head. Folding her arms over his chest, she propped her chin on her hands and stared up at him, a half smile on her lips. “All that moaning and groaning wasn’t enough for you?” she asked teasingly.

He folded his hands behind his head to stare down her. “I came with you. I thought my timing very nice.”

She chuckled. “You almost always come with me,” she pointed out.

“Because my timing is *always* very nice.”

Laughing, she removed her hands and placed a kiss in the center of his chest before shifting upwards to nestle her face against his neck. “And it *always* pleases me no end,” she murmured.

He stoked a hand along her back, caressingly, releasing a deep sigh of contentment. “I love you, Raina.”

“I love *you* , Audric,” she murmured.

He swallowed, the sound loud in her ears. She sensed tension in the prolonged silence. “If this does not happen as we had hoped, I will not be disappointed.”

Raina said nothing for a moment. “You wouldn’t?”

“Mayhap a little,” he conceded after a lengthy pause.

Raina smiled against his throat. “Then you wouldn’t be disappointed if it *did* happen?”

“I would be very happy if it did. I am only saying that I will still be happy, even if it does not.”

Raina slipped off of him, but propped on her arm to study his face. “But you would be happier if it did?”

He studied her face, frowning faintly. “I had thought Simon crazed when he suggested this, but I wanted it too badly to try very hard to dissuade him--even though I believed we would only end up with all of us miserable more often than happy. But I am more content than I had ever believed possible and I do not want you to think that I am not, or that anything would change that.”

She studied his face for a long moment and finally lifted a finger to draw little circles along his chest with it. “Then you’re saying you don’t actually need anything more to make you content with your life?”

He caught her finger. “No more than you.”

She released a deep sigh of feigned regret. “Then I suppose you won’t be nearly as excited about my news as I’d hoped.”

He stared at her blankly for a moment and then sat up abruptly. “You are saying ...?”

Raina chuckled. Grasping his hand, she guided it downward and settled his palm over her belly. “I am

saying, yes.”

He studied his hand on her belly and then her face. Slowly, a smile dawned and then widened to a grin. “You are certain?”

“Oh yeah! I’m sure.”

Chuckling, he pushed her onto her back and kissed her soundly on the mouth. “You are...?” he asked when he’d broken the kiss.

“I are,” she responded with a grin.

He sighed shakily and stroked her belly. “I wonder if it will be a male child or a female?”

“One or the other, for sure--if its both, I may murder you,” she added jokingly.

“Gods! I hope not!” he said in sudden horror. “That would be” He stopped, grinning as he thought that over. “Simon would be very outdone. He has preened himself over producing two at once ... very modestly, of course.”

Raina eyed him with a mixture of amusement and annoyance--at both him and Simon. “Well, you’re just going to have to preen over one!” She considered that a

moment and finally shrugged. “At a time.”

He caught her face between his palms and kissed her again. “You may be certain that I will be so puffed up with pride that I will be insufferable.”

* * * *

Raina lay on her belly on a blanket beneath the shade of the open sided tent that had been erected on the beach for her use, dreamily studying Audric, Racquel, and Devlyn. Racquel and Devlyn were naked, and Audric the next thing to it--wearing a sort of breechcloth that was going to figure in her fantasies for a while. He was focused on trying to build a sandcastle for the babies, and they were focused on trying, by turns, to eat it, staggering around in drunken glee--delighted they'd gotten the knack of walking-- and racing on their stubby little legs for the waves crashing on the shore some distance away.

For the most part, he kept their attention, but every now and then either Racquel or Devlyn would make a dash for the water and he'd spring up and chase them down.

He was good with them and they adored him.

They seemed a little confused about which man was

daddy, but they adored both Simon and Audric, and Simon didn't seem to have a problem with it.

He had suggested, though, that he would be pleased when Audric had his own.

A delicious shiver rippled through her.

Audric had certainly been working very diligently on fathering one.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he lifted his head just then and met her gaze. A slow smile curled her lips. He gave her one in return, his eyes taking on a speculative gleam.

Simon had had a summer palace built for her on the shores of the sea to remind her of home and she and Audric and the babies had been here lazing in the sun for nearly two months while Simon was off working on a peace treaty with a neighboring kingdom that had thought a bit too hard about annexing a little corner of Simon's realm.

She sighed. She missed him. As much as she loved Audric, as much as she enjoyed the times they spent together, she always hungered for Simon.

She supposed that was one of the reasons Simon had

decided that she should take Audric as her consort. He'd known she would be lonely a lot of the time, away from her homeland and people, and he loved her enough to worry about it and to want to make certain she was happy and protected.

And she was and she loved the palace he'd had built for her to remind her of home, and she still missed Simon.

Sighing again, she got up and joined Audric and the babies. They'd been a little small at birth, but they were beginning to make up for it. Simon and Audric had both been a little outdone that she'd been determined to breast feed them herself. Women of high birth in Schalome did not feed their babies themselves. They had wet nurses for that purpose, to which she'd responded that she wasn't native born, or high born, and she meant to feed her babies herself.

She was glad she had, because it seemed to have given them a tremendous growth boost. Racquel had inherited her father's hair and her eyes, and Devlyn her hair and his father's eyes, but both of them looked just like Simon.

It was no wonder he thought they were so beautiful, she thought with amusement.

Her throat closed as the thought prompted the memory of the night Simon had told her how much Racquel reminded him of Tiera. His voice had cracked. He had never mentioned his lost daughter before, and not once since, but she understood. He couldn't bear to speak of her.

She was so glad she'd been able to fill some of the emptiness and ease some of his heartache.

Maybe, she thought, that was the main reason he had decided to form the unconventional family they had. He'd had so much taken from him. He was so fearful of losing again. And he couldn't be in two places at once. As jealous as he was of Audric, still, he needed constant reassurance that he wouldn't lose her and the babies, and he knew that Audric protected her and his children when he couldn't be with them.

"This little one is the image of her mother," Audric said, noticing Raina was watching with a half smile curling her lips as the baby dug her toes in the loose sand.

She didn't say anything. He was determined her daughter was going to be just like her no matter what she said. Instead, she smiled at him lovingly. "I wonder if little Audric will be the image of his father?" she asked musingly.

He grinned at her, excitement gleaming in his eyes. “Do you think it will be a son?”

Raina felt her throat tighten with love. “I hope so. Will you be disappointed if it’s a girl?”

He shook his. “Not even a little--especially if she is the image of the woman I love.”

He looked down at the twins, who were quite happily crawling all over him. “Did you hear this, little ones? Mommy will have you a ... uh ... hmm.”

Raina laughed. “Another brother or sister? You’re not going to faint on me this time, are you? Because I expect you to be the cheering section.”

He reddened. “I did not faint. It was only that I felt a little dizzy and decided to sit down to rest.”

“Whatever you say, teddy bear!” Her eyes narrowed on his mouth. “What do you say we take the babies to the nanny and go back to my place to fool around? I’ve been having fantasies about this gorgeous draconian with tight little buns running around in a loincloth.”

His eyes turned slumberous with desire. “This is someone I know?”

She stood up, taking Devlyn and settling him on her hip. She gave Audric a look over her shoulder as she started down the beach. He got to his feet abruptly, brushed the sand off and snatched Racquel up, tossing her into the air. “Nap time, sweeting!” he said, smiling up at her as she laughed and tried to pull his nose off.

He caught up to her in a moment, dropping an arm across her shoulders as they walked companionably along the beach that reminded Raina so much of the beach where she’d made love to Simon so long ago. She wondered if that was why he’d chosen this particular spot.

She liked to think so.

A man appeared on a dune ahead of them, staring toward the sea, his long, silky black hair fluttering in the breeze and Raina’s heart stilled in her chest. She felt Audric stiffen. He stopped. Raina looked up at him worriedly. He lifted his free hand and caressed her cheek. “Go to him. I can not begrudge him the company of his beloved Rainie. He has allowed me more than I ever dared hope for.”

Raina smiled up at him and rose up on her tiptoes. Placing a hand on either cheek, she kissed him briefly on the lips. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. Give me Dev before you dash off.”

She kissed the babies and turned to look for Simon. He had walked down the dune and was coming toward them. Hiking the skirts of the long gown she wore up to her knees, she raced toward him, flinging herself into his open arms when she reached him hard enough he had to take a step back to catch his balance. “Simon! I’ve missed you so much!” she gasped, kissing him all over the face.

He chuckled, lifting her up for a more satisfying kiss. When he set her on her feet again, he glanced down the beach at Audric, who’d turned away to climb the dunes.

Returning his attention to Raina, he studied her face questioningly. “I hope that this trip has been as fruitful for you as mine was, beloved, for I must tell you these past months have been pure hell for me and I do not think that I can leave you for so long again.”

Raina nuzzled her face against his chest, inhaling his scent with pure delight. “I think it was. I don’t want you to leave me for so again, either.”

Some of the tension left him. “Think?”

“I told Audric.”

His eyes narrowed speculatively. “Seven months?”

She shrugged. “More or less.”

He tugged her down on to the sand, kissing her hungrily as he drew her into his arms. Raina was breathless by the time he dragged his lips from hers and began to refamiliarize himself with her throat and the upper slope of her breasts. Unfastening the first few buttons of her gown and freeing her breasts, he kept going. The heat of his mouth on her breasts and the rough caress of tongue completed her descent into mind drugging euphoria. “We aren’t going to do this here?” she gasped dizzily as he switched breasts. “Someone will see us. The guards are everywhere.”

“Umm,” he murmured, suckling one turgid tip. “We have only seven months, more or less, and I must yield up my breasts to another. I will cover you with my body. No one will see anything more than my white ass bobbing in the sun, and they will have no interest in that.”

He was already covering her with his body and it felt wonderful. “Deja`vu,” she murmured as he came upright, slipping his hands beneath her gown and pulling off her trousers.

He smiled the slow, intimate smile that always made her breathless as he leaned over her again. Reaching between them, he unfastened his pants and entered her with slow deliberation, propping himself on his arms so that he could watch her face as he worked his cock deeply inside of her and then began a lazy, tortuous rhythm that built the heat slowly but fiery hot until she began to moan with need, to gasp his name beseechingly. Lowering himself finally when she was almost sobbing with need, he increased the tempo until she climaxed so hard she cried out, burrowing her face against his chest to try to stifle the harsh cries of ecstasy.

Shuddering, he came with her and finally leaned against her weakly. “You can not say *that* was the same,” he murmured with satisfaction when he’d caught his breath. “I held out far longer this time.”

Raina chuckled huskily. “No, but I still have sand in the crack of my ass.”

The End

About this Title

This eBook was created using
ReaderWorks™Publisher, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information on ReaderWorks, visit us on the
Web at "www.readerworks.com"