



# Midnight Showcase

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## Mae Powers

### Aldairian Ecstasy

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### Forbidden Hearts

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# **MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**

## ***SPECIAL EDITION***

**Aldairian Ecstasy**

**-Forbidden Hearts-**

**By**

**Mae Powers**

**MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**  
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# Aldairian Ecstasy — Forbidden Hearts

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**ALDAIRIAN ECSTASY**

**Forbidden Hearts**

**By**

**Mae Powers**

For years, Rieka faced down the warrior races of Gehenn and Vaukeen. Yet, Dalharan's dark, roguish good looks and explosive sensual capacity attacked her much different from what she'd felt on the battlefield. While on Aldairia, though she is happy to be reunited with her estranged family, she has a hard time keeping her hands off Prince Dalharan.

When he sees her again on Aldairia, Dalharan is aggrieved both of them must act as if they have met for the first time, and cannot publicly show his attentions for her. If the Gehennans found out he and Rieka had an affair, neither Aldairia nor Gehenn would know peace again.

With enemies and duty tearing their lives apart, will the forbidden emotions of their hearts ever become a reality; and will they ever be able again to experience the bliss of the Aldairian Ecstasy?

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## Chapter One

“Kaderick, you're about to marry my sister, how can you sit there looking so disheartened?”

Kaderick Ahmaad Demmonarris glanced up at the short Earthman that he knew for a long time. He spoke in the standard intergalactic language, though he knew his friend understood the Aldairian language. “It is not my upcoming nuptials that have me disturbed, my friend.” He let out a sigh, motioning for the alien male to join him on the couch in the royal drawing room, which was empty except for the two of them.

The Earthman sat his lanky, six-foot-six-inch frame down near the Aldairian prince. “Then what are you sulking over?”

Kaderick squared his broad shoulders, straightening his foot taller frame. “I do not sulk, Lieutenant Hahl.” When Kaderick saw his friend's grinning eyes, he sucked in his lower lip. “I guess I do tend to worry too much over things.” He leaned forward, placing his arms on his knees, and clasped his hands together. “It is thoughts of my eldest brother that is causing me such turmoil.”

Carter Hahl's eyes saddened as he looked at his friend. “His own upcoming marriage is not in the same vein as yours and Raeschel's, Ked. But he chooses to do this for his world and peace.”

Kaderick stood up suddenly and began pacing furiously. “That is the problem! Dalharan always does everything for the good of Aldairia, regardless of how he feels personally. He has no feelings for that damn Gehennan princess. But he will marry her just to bring lasting peace between our worlds!”

“Is that what you feel guilty about? Of being happy yourself, while you know he will be miserable, that's got you so riled up?”

Kaderick threw his hands up in the air and sat back down. “You know me well, Carter. There is nothing I can do to stop Dalharan's

marriage. What hurts worst of all, is that he is even dis-Charjing himself for the Gehennan's benefit."

Carter nipped at his bottom lip, then asked "Ked, I've known you seven years, long enough to have learned something about an Aldairian's heritage. When your people choose mates, male or female, that partnership is intolerable unless there is a Charj."

"It is very integral to us. It is how we choose our soul mates. As I experienced with your sister."

"But you also love Raeschel, Kaderick. She's said you've told her so. Raeschel would not have agreed to marry you otherwise."

"True. I still do not fully understand this chemical emotion you humans feel for each other, but Raeschel has been adept at teaching me. I just wish my brother could experience what it is like to have even a Sparc before he commits himself to a life of hell."

"A Sparc is a very minor version of the Charj, like when a human might decide on an affair before settling down to marriage?"

"Yes. Dalharan is considered one of the most eligible males on my world, but he never takes the time to look any woman's way."

Carter leaned back a bit, his face showing some surprise. "Are you telling me your brother never did it?"

Kaderick tightened his hands together, trying to keep his temper in check. "There is no need to be amused, Carter. Many men of my world keep their honor in tact until they find their soul-mate and many choose not to even Sparc."

Carter tried not to grin. "Your brother is thirty-eight years old. It's hard to believe that, especially considering how I've seen women flock around him, vying for his attention."

Ked leaned back, trying to ignore his friend's infectious grin. "I know, but it is true. I hate to think it, but I believe Dalh finds Aldairian women too quiet for his tastes."

"Aldairian women are graceful and quite beautiful. But perhaps what he needs is someone more exotic."

Kaderick's thick brows knitted together. "Are you suggesting we 'hook him up', I believe that is how you put it when you tried to get me involved several years ago, during our precarious friendship."

"I'm not suggesting fixing him up with a ditz, Ked. But maybe someone who's more experienced and who would not hang on him once the affair is over. We've six weeks before the Gehennans arrive."

"I do not think I like where this is leading, Carter. Dalharan would be furious to know I have meddled in his affairs. His temper makes all of Aldairia stand at attention."

"Your brother is a level-headed man. I see nothing to fear."

"You do not live around the man, Lieutenant. You only take your shore leaves here occasionally. He's pleasant most of the time."

"I know. He was pleased when I brought Raeschel here, during my last shore leave. I think he almost took an interest in her."

"Do not even say that! Raeschel has always belonged to me!" Kaderick rolled his eyes when he realized his friend was deliberately teasing him.

"You tempt me to throttle you, Carter. Sometimes I wonder how we became friends."

"Ten years ago I rescued you from a drunken Gehennan woman on Vetas Prime. That's in the Nonpartisan Tract, remember?"

"I was seventeen at the time and listening too much to my middle brother Vultar's advice. He left me there at the mercy of that beast. Gehennan women like their men experienced. I still do not understand what she saw in me."

"Perhaps she was a wolfer."

"A what? What kind of Earth slang is that?"

Carter stretched out his lanky form, his full lips curving into a mischievous grin that made Kaderick nervous. "It sort of means a woman on the prowl for a man to bed."

"You are suggesting we find this kind of woman for Dalharan? You scare me with your antics sometimes, Carter. Vultar had no luck setting Dalh up, what makes you think we could do any better?"

"It all depends on the woman we choose."

Kaderick fidgeted. "I am afraid to ask who you have in mind."

"I'm almost afraid to suggest the woman, but I can think of none other who could catch your brother's interest and still allow him to carry out his duty."

"Dammit, Carter, who are you suggesting?"

"My eldest sister, Rieka. She's a confirmed bachelorette, Ked. I think once she sets eyes on..."

Kaderick jumped up and began pacing again. "Of all the lame-brain ideas I have heard—even from my brother Vultar—yours is the worst, most stupid, and outrageous. Your eldest sister would eat Dalh alive! She's a military woman."

Carter jumped up then, stretching upwards to get up in Kaderick's way. "My sister is the most brilliant officer in Earth Enforcement! And she's a wonderful, intelligent woman. She had enough sense to turn Vultar down."

Kaderick looked down at Carter in irritation. "She also left him with a broken jaw, two fractured ribs and numerous other injuries. I want Dalharan to experience ecstasy, not pain."

"I've little doubt that any man who's left my sister's presence didn't have that expression written all over their faces, even if they were a little bruised!"

"How can you disrespect your own sister, Carter? She is not the person I would want around...."

"Everyone in the palace can hear your shouting. Might I know what you two are arguing over? Right now."

Both men were startled by the rich, calm voice breaking in on their dispute. The two were at once embarrassed to find out that the very person they were plotting about just walked in on them, without them noticing.

"You two look like a couple of children caught doing something mischievous. Tell me the reason for your quarrel, Kaderick."

Kaderick gulped and looked away from the taller, stalwart Aldairian to his friend. "We were just having a discussion concerning his sister."

"Raeschel?"

"No, Prince Dalharan." Carter bowed slightly to the elder prince. "My eldest sister, Admiral Hahl. Kaderick does not wish to have her at the wedding."

"Damn you, Carter," Kaderick muttered beneath his breath, hoping that his brother did not hear. "That is not true, Dalh. I merely assumed Admiral Hahl would not be able to make it and suggested that she probably could not get shore leave. She has not attended many functions held for Raeschel."

"Raeschel told you that?" Carter glanced at him speculatively. "It's never been because Rieka never wanted to come, Ked. Raeschel should know that. What with the war our two worlds have fought with Gehenn and her other pressing duties, Rieka's never had the time. She is more attached to Raeschel than you could possibly imagine."

"Now that we will finally be at peace with Gehenn, perhaps I can meet her."



Startled at the elder prince's words, both men turned in his direction, but Ked is the one that put their mutual concern into words. "You have never given any indication of that before, Dalh."

"I have wanted to meet her for years, but the Legion of Allied Worlds always kept Admiral Hahl quite busy. I understand from Raeschel she has only taken one shore leave in ten years. Quite unusual. As President Elect of the Legion of Allied Worlds, your own father could have pulled enough strings to get Admiral Hahl stationed here for the duration of the wedding."

Kaderick noticed Carter's face turning pale.

"My sister and our father, President Hahl, are not on the best of terms, sir. He is coming here day after tomorrow. Rieka is one of Earth's and L.A.W.'s best defense leaders. They feel more secure when she is out there."

"The matter is taken care of, Lieutenant. I persuaded your father it is in Aldairia's and L.A.W.'s best interests to have the Admiral here."

"Then my elder sister could arrive anytime?" Carter asked, astonished.

Prince Dalharan nodded, his eyes sparkling with humor. "Now, I believe we are all due to dine with some of the family soon. Let us not disappoint them. There is something I must take care of. Tell them I shall be along shortly."

"Of course, Prince Dalharan."

"We shall go there promptly, Dalh."

Quietly, side by side, Kaderick and Carter exited the room. They walked silently and swiftly for some moments before either one spoke again.

"I hope you are satisfied, Carter. Now he will meet her."

"I hope you're satisfied, Ked. I was beginning to believe I'd erred. But now you've really made it worse."

"Me? You suggested she come here to have an affair with my brother!"

"I know it was a stupid idea. I was funning you at first, until you started making nasty comments about Rieka. She may not be perfect, but she is my sister and the best damn officer in any of L.A.W.'s fleets. I don't see how your brother got L.A.W. and my father to let Rieka come!"

“You do not know my brother's gift of persuasion. He has all of Aldairia at his beck and call and there are very few who deny him anything or do not fear his temper!”

“Damn! I shouldn't have been such an idiot. Rieka's temperament is like a nova going off when she's been pushed too far. And even a second in my father's presence sends her off the deep end.”

“I have wondered why the two never got along. The few times I met him, your father has been very proud of all three of his children's accomplishments.”

“Ked, the problems between my eldest sister and my father go back a long way. I am not at liberty to divulge that information. Please don't ask it of me.”

“Forgive me, my friend. I just hope your sister is all you claimed.”

Carter turned his head in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps an affair with Admiral Hahl is just what my temperamental brother needs. It is about time someone showed him he can not rule everyone.”

Carter laughed. “Just a few minutes ago you were aghast at the thought and worried about him. I see you don't like being chastised any more than I do.”

“Never mind, Carter. Let us just hope there will not be sky-rockets on Aldairia when the two meet.”

“You mean explosive novas, I'm sure.”

Even as Ked and his friend joined the family for dinner, the younger Demmonarris prince was not any easier about the present situations than when Carter first talked with him. He only hoped Admiral Hahl's coming would be a pleasure for them all.

## Chapter Two

Glad to be back home these last few days, Dalharan walked quickly and purposefully towards the royal family's private drawing rooms. His father usually reserved early morning for his family members alone. He'd had much time to think things through since coming back home. After going on that mission with Rieka, his life as heir to a galactic throne seemed odd somehow, as if he were not meant to be here any more. Yet automatically he did what he had been raised for.

Still, after that mission, and having her in his arms, life seemed dull afterwards. He loved his world and his family, but excitement in the form of a luscious, headstrong woman like Rieka Hahl only came once in a life-time! How was it they had not met before? If only...but ifs were hindsight and destiny played with their lives as if it had been only a fleeting thing between them.

Yet Dalh knew differently. Had they met before, they might have fallen in love sooner, or...not. She was a strong and independent woman, would she be the same had she not become the person he knew her to be. Vibrantly passionate and stubborn as himself. If only...but duty called and affairs were brief.

He tried not to let his step drag as he went about his morning ritual. At the entrance to the royal family's private area, he waved away the doorman and entered the spacious rooms.

Dalharan always liked the elegant blue and gold furnishings in this suite. He walked towards the three high-backed couches, trimmed in walnut carvings, which were arranged openly in the center of the room, yet cozy enough for conversation. He paused at the smallest of the three couches upon which his father and Raeschel sat. He nodded to Lt. Jon-Carter Hahl and Dalharan's two younger brothers – Kaderick and Vultar, who sat on one of the larger ones.

“Prince Dalharan, I’m glad you joined us.” Raeschel rose from her seat, and held out a hand in greeting. “I don’t know how you

accomplished the feat, but Jon and Kaderick tell me I have you to thank for my sister Rieka coming to Aldairia for my wedding.”

“You are welcome, Raeschel.” Dalharan shook her hand then glanced at her elder sibling. Jon-Carter Hahl might have been tall by Earth standards, but Dalharan found him short by Aldairian ones. The Earthman, everyone usually just called Carter, was even shorter than his youngest brother Kaderick by several inches. Dalh liked the younger man's arresting face and quiet manners, which Carter had shown over the years since befriending Kaderick.

“I don't know what you did, but I thank you,” Carter said. “Most impressive. You've done what no one else could do – move my father to station Rieka here during Raeschel's and Ked's wedding.”

Raeschel's blue-violet eyes showed her puzzlement when she turned to her future brother-in-law. “I heard from her early this morning, Prince Dalharan. She should be landing anytime now. What did you do to get Rieka posted here indefinitely?”

Dalharan grinned wickedly. “Just a little persuasion. And as we are practically family, please start calling me Dalharan or Dalh.”

All his relatives chuckled, perplexing the two Earth persons.

Carter looked from Dalharan to Kaderick. “You mentioned he's very convincing. Might I know the humor behind the situation?”

Kaderick looked at his eldest brother with whimsy before speaking to Carter. “My brother pulled your father's strings.”

“During the last two visits he and I had, we shared a mutual liking for Sec-star level chess,” King Zahr put in. “My son merely mentioned that having your sister stationed here would assure President Hahl that we could continue those friendly visits.”

Carter chuckled and turned to Dalharan. “If I didn't know better, I would assume that was a threat that Aldairia would leave the Alliance if my sister did not come here.”

Dalharan looked intently at the two Earth persons. “It was.” Then he suddenly grinned at Carter. “I find it hard to take no for an answer.”

“I did warn you about that, Carter.” Kaderick moved around to sit with his father, and Raeschel sat back down, too.

Dalharan and Kaderick were only four inches apart in height, but Kaderick was darker in looks and younger than Dalharan by 11 years. Dalharan turned to glance at Kaderick after taking a seat near him and noticed Raeschel giving him and his kin speculative stares.

Her ambassador abilities, he noted, took over after her perusal of them. “Come now, you three, don’t make our family time so dreary. Carter, he was only kidding.”

“Though our security forces have had dealings with hers, I have yet to formally meet her in person.” Dalharan’s middle brother, Vultar, moved forward on the lounge, finally joining the conversation. “Her strategies during the Vaukeen invasion, years ago, were brilliant.”

Dalharan glared at his second brother who commanded Aldairia’s own armada. Vultar stood the tallest of the three brothers and the fairest, his hair a darker golden brown rather than the sable brown he and Ked were born with. He and Vultar had not spoken yet to the rest of their family about all that happened on Tigon. He could not tell any member of his family that he was already closely acquainted with Admiral Hahl. Especially not about the physical closeness he shared with Rieka. Vultar’s teasing was not making it easier. Like his father Zahr and brother Kaderick, Dalharan felt glad to have Vultar back in one piece and the middle prince’s health improved.

“Quite so, Prince Vultar,” Raeschel said. “Though I was but eleven at the time, I loved keeping up with her adventures. However, later on in ambassador school, I often wished I did not have such a famous sister.”

“You just recently graduated from there, did you not?” Vultar asked.

“Yes. In fact, Carter’s graduation present to me was this trip to Aldairia,” Raeschel added.

“For which I am thankful,” Kaderick said softly.

Dalharan was happy to see the ease with which his family and the Hahls were getting along. The evidence of Kaderick’s happiness lay well written on the younger man’s face. Dalharan exchanged a satisfied glance with Vultar, before Vultar turned his attention back to Raeschel Hahl.

“We all are thankful for you, Ked.” Vultar commented. “Just call me Vultar, Raeschel. I understand from Uni-News sources, Chieftess Cassia was in your class this last year of your Ambassador training school.”

“Yes, she was. We were, um, amenable towards each other.” Raeschel answered.

All heads turned to Dalharan as everyone realized the awkwardness of the situation. He smiled and shrugged. “The more I

know about my future bride, the better our relationship will be. Tell me, Raeschel, do L.A.W. officers of Admiral Hahl's rank even get a chance to enjoy themselves at any festivity?"

Raeschel chuckled lightly. "Of course, they do. Rieka and JC taught me to dance."

Vultar turned to glance at Carter. "You'll have to give me lessons then, Carter. Last time I danced, I stepped on my partner's toes."

The others grinned at him, and the Earthman commented, "I think we would make lousy partners, Prince Vultar. Raeschel would be the better choice."

Vultar turned to Raeschel and stated. "I promise not to step on your toes if you consent to teach me some graceful moves."

Raeschel grinned. "Maybe Rieka can do so instead. She's an excellent teacher. Despite her military sobriety, Rieka has always charmed everyone."

Dalharan noticed Carter Hahl giving Kaderick a lopsided grin and an *I-told-you-so-look*. He had the feeling the two friends were plotting something. Earlier, when he walked in on their conversation, he saw guilty looks on their faces.

"Carter has let me know her glowing attributes in no uncertain terms." Kaderick said, and Dalharan was duly convinced then the two men had been discussing him.

No one commented further for the doors to the drawing room opened up. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. When he rose and turned, a being of his own height and build, strode into the room. Dalharan immediately recognized the person dressed in long, flowing, dark gray robes from head to toe. The face of the man seemed always hidden in shadows. His distant cousin, the universally known scientist, Deurke Sol, the Master Watcher, was both his friend and mentor.

"Cousin, I am glad you could get to Aldairia!" Kaderick exclaimed then turned to his fiancée. "I do not know if you have met our cousin...."

Carter surprised everyone with his sudden curtness towards the Watcher. "Raeschel and I have had the opportunity to meet the Watcher. Everyone knows the icon he is."

"Yes," Raeschel said quickly. "I've had the pleasure many times. Deurke is a friend of mine and Rieka's."

The Aldairian scientist nodded his cowed head in her direction. "Will Rieka be here for your wedding to my fortunate cousin?"

After giving her brother a quick warning look she smiled at the Watcher. "I am the fortunate one, sir. Rieka will be here. It has been a long time since you two have seen each other."

"Quite a long time," the Watcher said wistfully.

Dalharan, though a bit perturbed by his cousin's and Carter's attitudes toward each other, asked, "When did you meet her before?"

"I've been friends with Admiral Hahl since Raeschel was an infant."

"Much has passed in those intervening years, sir," Raeschel commented.

"Quite a bit, sis," Carter said sullenly.

Dalharan had the oddest feeling that Carter Hahl did not like the Watcher. "I shall order refreshments."

He pressed a button of a built-in unit on a small table and ordered wine and appetizers to be brought into the room. Within minutes, the doors opened, and a servant brought in a laden tray. He motioned for the servant to put the tray on a round table in the middle of the conversation area. After the servant left, he poured drinks for everyone.

"I look forward to seeing your parents again, Raeschel. Your father plays a mean game of Sec-star level chess," the Watcher commented.

The king chuckled. "That he does. He is the only one beside yourself and Dalharan who has ever beaten me, Deurke."

"Then you have yet to play my sister, King Zahr," Carter said, grinning. "She's better than anyone I've played against. Even my father."

"I shall have to second that, Jon-Carter," the Watcher stated. "I have enjoyed many a game with her."

Carter stood up. "If you will all excuse me, I should get ready to greet my sister when she lands."

Dalharan was surprised at the younger man's curt display, but as Raeschel rose with her brother nothing was said. "I shall join you, Carter. If you will excuse us, Sire."

The king rose, nodding his permission. He did not settle back down, but glanced at his younger sons. "Vultar, join me and Kaderick in my study. There are things about the wedding I would like your opinion on. I will talk with you two later, Deurke, Dalharan."

The other two men nodded in the king's direction and seated themselves again after the others left. "What was that all about

between you and Carter Hahl? He is usually an amiable man. I am assuming he is protective towards both of his sisters and you got on the bad side of Admiral Hahl.”

The Watcher turned his head in surprise. “You know me better than I thought you did, cousin.”

Dalharan chose his words carefully. “You and I have been friends a long time. I am surprised you kept your feelings for Admiral Hahl from me.”

“I never mentioned because.... You read that just now in my conscious thoughts. You never were able to read my mind before, Dalharan.”

“I have improved my powers over the years. I know I am being presumptuous, but were you two ever closer than friends?”

The Watcher slumped his shoulders. “Yes, but Rieka made me realize we could never be more than friends. It was a long time ago.”

Dalharan could sense psychically and emotionally the sadness in his friend’s demeanor. “You still care for her more than you want to admit, even to yourself.”

“Though we cannot be together, I will never stop...” The Watcher tilted his head up in surprise. “How is it you are able to sense me out and read my aura so easily? I know you have adept psychic powers, but I am one you could never intuit before.”

“As I said, I have been training my powers more.”

The Watcher tilted his head thoughtfully. “Though I feel you are more confident in yourself, you seem saddened also.”

Dalharan looked dejectedly at his friend. “I’m to wed the Gehennan wretch and must dis-Charj myself for their benefit. At one time, I thought it a small price to pay for peace between Gehenn and Aldairia.”

“How could you have gone through this a second time, Dalharan? Why not your middle brother Vultar, or a cousin or...”

“No, I am heir to the throne. The Gehennans broke off the contract last time when High Chief Vahn Viaad’s elder daughter KreaH died. The younger one Cassia and I may not like each other much, but she and I have an understanding that our marriage will benefit both worlds. The feud between Gehenn and Aldairia must finally end.”

“You have always put others before yourself, Dalharan. I wish you could find a chance for happiness.”



Dalharan shuffled his feet and folded his hands in his lap. “I will find a way to be content.” Dalharan rose then and the Watcher did likewise. “I should join my father and brothers now.”

The Watcher nodded in understanding. “We will visit later.”

After the Watcher left, Dalharan plopped back down in the big chair, leaning his head back. With eyes closed, he let out sigh of frustration.

Dalharan strummed both hands on the arms rests of the chair and muttered out loud, “Universal Hell!”

What was he to do? The only happiness he would ever find had been with Rieka and in his dreams. No, he corrected, it had taken Rieka to make him realize his imaginings were but suppressed longings. At least, he had had a dream come true. He lost his virginity to Rieka. He smiled with remembrance at her embarrassment at the blood. She uttered out loud that it was not time for her feminine cycle. When he told her about Aldairian males loosing their virgin foreskin the first time they physically partnered with a female, she was shocked.

Dalharan had been perplexed himself when she started cursing in her native tongue and almost left him afterwards. Their actual parting had not been easy. He tried to convince her they needed more time together, but she refused and threw him off her ship. That was the last time he saw her. Frustration and anger built up inside him now. For what could have been, and for what could not be. Anguish tore his insides up. Anguish at finding out that Rieka and the Watcher, his best friend, had a history together, and anger at her for her deceptions towards him. When Rieka Hahl arrived here, he wanted to act as if they just met and never made such devastating love together.

He let out a loud groan as he remembered that Carter and his brother were plotting to set him up in an affair with someone. How could his personal life be thought so sad that people close to him figured they needed to do something to liven it up? Who was the unsuspecting person they had in mind?

Remembering back to their earlier words he let out a loud oath. “Damn those two.”

Their glances toward each other earlier gave away their plan. Carter and Kaderick intended to set him up with Admiral Hahl. How could they have even thought such an idiotic thing? Even though the affair already happened, they should have known better than to interfere in his life, especially with him about to marry a Gehennan.

Rieka Hahl had been a thorn in the Gehennans' side for a long time. If it were found out that he had an affair with her, neither Aldairia nor Gehenn would know peace again.

Before Rieka Hahl arrived, he must make sure Carter and Kaderick did not meddle in and mess up both his and the unsuspecting Admiral's lives. Dalharan felt he already did enough of that himself. It would be hard, but he would keep his hands off her body and her throat, while she was stationed here. She had to leave Aldairia after his brother's wedding, though. He did not know how long he could keep ravishing her sexy body. Groaning with the injustice of the situation, he went to join his kin.

## Chapter Three

Landing on Aldairia came too soon for Rieka. At the royal palace coordinator's desk in the planetary capital city of Kiir, Rieka was given directions to quarters prepared for her own use and where Raeschel's suites were located. Though not happy about being on Aldairia, she would be glad to see her brother and sister again. Going on twenty-eight, Carter was a very independent young man and matured wisely, Rieka thought. Raeschel, at twenty grew into an intelligent woman, who would soon be married and start a life away from the family elsewhere or perhaps even here on Aldairia. The thought both saddened and pleased Rieka. It also made her realize that neither she nor her parents or brother would always be around to protect Raeschel.

Her brother Jon-Carter was there with Raeschel when Rieka arrived. Both of them embraced her in turn the moment Rieka entered the younger woman's rooms. After not seeing the two for several long months, they were a sight for her tired eyes. Rieka's family meant a lot to her. Though always at odds with her father or both parents sometimes, she always got along well with her brother and sister.

"Oh, sis, it's been so long. I wish Alliance Intelligence Medium didn't keep you away for such long periods." Raeschel flung her arms around Rieka a second time.

Rieka chuckled at her sister's rush of words. "Slow down, sis. And loosen the arms a bit. I'd like to live to enjoy our visit. However, I have to agree, I wish L.A.W.'s secret service branch would give me more time off."

"At least when you were a captain, we heard from you often." Carter said and sat down on a dark green chair in Raeschel's private drawing room.

"Carter's right about that, sis."

Rieka chuckled as she loosened the younger woman's arms and went to sit on a green and pink decorated sofa. "Pet, I couldn't agree

with you two more. And sometimes I feel it was a less dangerous time.”

Rieka realized she said the wrong words when Raeschel’s brows knitted in worry. “Has father and the L.A.W. council stationed you here only for security reasons then?”

“Raeschel,” Rieka patted her sister’s hands reassuringly, “We will have lots of time together while I am here. R&R is long overdue to me. And if the Alliance Governments don’t like it, well they can just....”

Raeschel chuckled. “I get the picture. Good, then tomorrow we can go shopping for a gown for you. I’ll not have you wear your uniform at my wedding.”

Rieka rolled her eyes, and her sister laughed even more. “Ouch, Raech. I have an aversion for shopping and don’t wear dresses. You know that.”

“She knows, sis. Raeschel’s been wondering how she could punish you for being gone so long.”

“Watch it, Carter. You are the one responsible for Raeschel being taken from the family bosom. I should make her take you shopping instead.”

“Rieka,” Raeschel placed a hand on her sister’s wrist, “Carter didn’t know Kaderick would Charj me. He’d been promising for years to bring me here to meet his friend.”

“Did you two fall in love right away, before he Charjed you? I mean how the hell did all this happen so soon...”

“Be happy for Raeschel.” Carter stopped Rieka’s sudden rush of questions. “Heck, she didn’t even like him when we first arrived here.”

“And now, sis?” Rieka asked in concern.

Raeschel took Rieka’s hands in hers. “Rieka, I love him very much. I was attracted to Ked in the beginning, but thought him a little bit pompous. Once I realized that all Aldairians are naturally that way, I started liking Ked more.”

“Kaderick became smitten with her since she first arrived.” Carter put in. “After a few days, when Raeschel felt more comfortable with him, the two got along great.”

“It was a bit scary at first, Rieka. When the first emotional shock wave of the Charj wore off, I felt it was the most natural and wonderful experience I’d ever known. I think I knew even before the

Charj, that Kaderick was the one for me. Please be happy for me, Rieka. I couldn't contemplate marrying him without your blessing.”

Rieka felt like a heel. “Raech, your happiness means everything to me. If being with Prince Kaderick does that, then marry him.”

“Good.” Carter chuckled, relieving the stress in the room. “Now you can go shopping with her instead.”

Rieka threw up her hands in mock surrender. “Ok. Just let me know what time I’m to be led to the guillotine.”

Raeschel reached over to hug Rieka. “It really is good to have you back. I owe Dalharan for that.”

Startled, Rieka pulled back from her sister. “What does Prince Dalharan have to do with my coming here?”

Raeschel bit her bottom lip and looked over to Carter for help. “Uhhh...well...”

Carter moved over to sit next to Raeschel. “Rieka, Dalharan informed us he spoke with father about having you assigned here. I understand from Kaderick that Dalharan has wanted to meet you for years. You never accepted any of their invitations here before and after you saved his life years ago.”

Before Rieka could reply, her sister’s incombell sounded, and Raeschel moved to go answer the door. Rieka glanced at the doorway and saw a man no taller than her enter. He looked familiar. Hand in hand, Raeschel and the man moved back over to her. Rieka stood up with her brother to greet the newcomer. She realized this had to be Prince Kaderick, Dalharan’s youngest brother and the man who had Charjed Raeschel.

“Sis, this is Kaderick my fiancé. Kaderick, you finally meet the rogue of our family, Rieka.” Raeschel made the introductions.

Rieka politely held out a hand in greeting. “I must warn you now, Prince Kaderick, to keep that happy look on my sister’s face, or you’ll answer to me.”

“Your brother Carter said much the same, Admiral Hahl. It is a pleasure to finally meet the woman your kin have been praising for some time now.” Kaderick returned the handshake, which Rieka knew a similar version was also customary with his people.

Rieka glanced at her sister and brother and then back at the prince. “I’m sure between Raech and Carter, the two have given you the most fearful of impressions concerning me. I may be military, but I am not an ogre.”

“Except when your rare temper is displayed, sis,” Carter said.

“And when she starts ordering people around,” Raeschel teased.

“You both can be easily turned over my knee right now, just like when you two were younger, dear siblings,” Rieka threatened playfully.

Rieka was pleased with Kaderick when he laughed at their antics. “Carter mentioned something about exploding novas and you in the same breath.”

Rieka quirked an eyebrow. “I bet he did. I do truly hope you and Raech shall have a long and blissful life together.”

“Thank you, Admiral Hahl. I will do my utmost to make Raeschel happy. She means everything to me.”

“I think I did pretty good as a matchmaker. Don’t you, Rieka?” Carter said, looking pleased with his handy work.

“You and I will speak later, wretch.” Rieka turned from her brother to glance at the Aldairian again. “Prince Kaderick, call me Rieka when you feel comfortable enough to do so.”

“I shall. Father has asked me to inform you that he expects you at dinner tonight.”

“I think he intends to challenge you to Sec-star chess, Rieka,” Carter warned.

Rieka grinned. “I know the king has played the game with the President.”

“Their last game ended in stalemate, sis,” Raeschel chuckled.

“I am given to understand you also excel at Sec-star, Admiral. Both my father and eldest brother Dalharan are likely to challenge you to a game or two. So be prepared,” Kaderick stated.

“I shall remember your warning. Carter, I think we should leave them alone for awhile. At least that’s the message I am getting.”

“Then we had better excuse ourselves,” Carter agreed.

“Do not leave on my account, Admiral. I shall have a lifetime with your sister. You have but arrived,” Kaderick offered.

“I suspect I need to get my next assignment from Rieka, you two. Neither Father or Admiral Coyton have called me yet,” Carter put in.

Rieka was thankful for his intervention. She did need to speak to him privately and was glad he picked up on that. “Unfortunately, Carter is correct. I will spend lots of time with you while I am here, Raech.”

After hugging Raeschel once more, Rieka and Carter left their sister’s rooms. Rieka remembered the directions given to her quarters and bid Carter to follow her there. The two remained quiet until after

entering the Aldairian suite. Rieka glanced over the large living room, noting that other than its different color scheme, it was decorated in old-fashioned settings much like her sister's.

"Though antique is mixed with modern, they do have excellent taste in furnishings, Rieka."

"Yes, brother, they do." Rieka sat in a big chair and crossed her legs. "Want to tell me what's on your mind now that we are alone?"

He sat down in the chair across from hers. "Rieka, I know you must have been angry with me when you found out about Raeschel being Charjed and my having brought her here. I really didn't know that would happen."

"Are they truly happy together, Carter?" Rieka needed to make sure.

"Yes." Carter had always been honest with her and she trusted his judgments.

"That's all that matters then," Rieka said, stifling a sudden desire to yawn.

"You don't look like you've had much rest lately, sis."

She sighed and the yawn won over. "Besides these long assignments of late, I've always been a light sleeper, Carter."

Carter glanced at her and Rieka saw he did not believe her simple explanation. "Rieka, even as tired as you look, I know something else is bothering you."

"Admiral Coyton ordered me personally to keep tabs on the events taking place here besides Raeschel's wedding."

"You refer to the contract between Gehenn and Aldairia?"

"Yes. Both L.A.W. and Aldairia have requested me to be stationed here." She explained some of her conversation with Joeseph, being careful to keep what she had to even from her brother. "You see, your father only cares to make the most of my military service, even at a time of joy to the family."

"Rieka, you should give him more credit than that. I wish you two could settle your differences."

She harrumphed. "I doubt that will ever happen, Carter."

"Perhaps if you let him understand you better, he would loosen up."

Rieka shifted wearily in the chair. "I know what you're getting at, but it's out of the question."

He leaned towards her and took her hands in his. "You've been hiding things too long concerning what happened to you on Gehenn

years ago. I know that yours and father's grievances date back to then, when Jon-tu died. Can't you tell me what happened to my elder brother?"

Carter was becoming too astute of late. "You were a child back then. I could not explain it to you at that time, and father was not rational."

"He lost a son. And we lost a brother. And I am no longer a child, though I still remember how Jon-tu played with me. You called me your little soldier because I use to imitate you when you were in military school. I know father always blamed you for your twin's death, but you owe it to us to tell us the truth soon. Do not let your secrets tear this family apart any longer." He squeezed her hands.

Pulling one of her hands free, she reached over and stroked his cheek fondly. "We will talk about it soon. But not today."

"Are you worried that your being here will not help Aldairia's matter with the Gehennans?"

Rieka tightened her resolve and pulled her inner thoughts together. "Trust me in this matter, Carter."

Carter got up and paced before her. "Rieka, do you really believe the Gehennans hate you so much that they would cause even our family harm?"

"You can bet they'll find someway to slight me," Rieka insisted.

"What is this damn personal vendetta you have with the Gehennans?" He stopped pacing and stood before her.

She jumped up and grasped him by the shoulders. "It's the other way around, Carter. They started the war back then, not I. I don't know what you heard over the years, but that's the truth!"

He did not become angry when she released her grip on him, and Rieka felt relieved. "Sis, I have never doubted you before, nor will I now. I'll do all that you ask of me. Just remember that you can trust me. I expect us to talk more about this soon. All right?"

"Yes." And then softly she said, "I'm sorry I jumped on you, little soldier."

Though he had outgrown it, Rieka could see he was warmed by the pet name. "We'll get through this episode, somehow. I shall leave now, but you must promise me something."

"What?" Rieka grinned at him.

"Get some damn rest. The drawn look doesn't become you."

She chuckled. "Thanks, brother. You are right though, I need some rest."



After her brother left, she sat back in the plush chair. She closed her eyes, leaning her head against the high backing. Even though she spent a few days on the resort world of Leos I, Rieka failed to get any worthwhile sleep. She came from there directly to Aldairia. The two planets, at the *Oddessy's* top speed, were only several days apart. Today marked a week since she last saw Dalharan. Tonight she would have to face him again.

Many episodes from her past came back to haunt her of late. Especially that dangerous, soul shattering experienced with Dalharan. Even the ordeal Almeagar once put her through, never prepared her for a Charj. She didn't want something like that to happen again. Even though a week passed since he first Charjed her, it still unsettled her and he easily attuned himself to her mental and emotional wave patterns. No one, not even the Watcher or Almeagar with their great telepathic and psychic powers ever accomplished anything so personal. Dalharan made her want to give in to something that frightened her.

Even when they went on that assignment together, she had a hard time admitting this powerful attraction she felt for the Aldairian prince. Not even her long ago fascination with the Master Watcher hit Rieka so explosively. She needed to get hold of her warring emotions. Love was something she could give to no man, because she closed her heart long ago. It could never be opened again. Reaffirming this now to herself, she made a hardened decision. No matter how long she was ordered to stay on Aldairia, she would watch her actions carefully. She could not allow anything to spoil her sister's happiness or cause her family or anyone else more sorrow.

But damn, it would be hard as hell to keep her hands off his hot, sexy body. She wanted him to fill her moist depths again and again. When she saw his large, fine-looking body again, she'd have to keep her cool. Yet, with the Gehennans coming to Aldairia, she had to be circumspect and not promiscuous. That would not be easy, at all.

## Chapter Four

“Checkmate, Your Majesty.”

Rieka found the king of Aldairia to be a pleasant man to talk with during their game of Sec-star chess. He enjoyed the competition, but hated to lose. Rieka arrived in the royal family’s private drawing room an hour ago. Except for a servant or two, the king had been alone. He greeted her with warmth and aplomb. Glad she decided to rest and refresh herself after her visit with Raeschel and Carter, she felt more relaxed now and able to enjoy the king’s genial camaraderie.

“Your kin mentioned you were much better than your father. Alas, now I see that to be true.” King Zahr Demmonarris conceded his second defeat with some amusement. “I see why you won the last few battles that forced the Gehennans to a stalemate and then peace years ago. You are a ruthless strategist.”

She tilted her head in acknowledgement of his compliment. “My father first taught me strategy games when I was four years old. I’ve been beating him since I was six.”

He chuckled. “Amazing. He and my cousin the Watcher are some of the best players I have ever met. I understand you and Deurke have been friends for years.”

“Yes. He and I have often played together,” she replied.

“My eldest son, Dalharan will find your moves fascinating. He’s almost as good as you with strategic maneuvers. Vultar may head our armada, but his brother taught him strategy. He has been anticipating your arrival,” the king admitted.

She smiled warmly at him. “Thank you. I met Prince Kaderick earlier, King Zahr. I doubt any of your sons can be half as charming as you have been this evening.”

Rieka felt pleased he laughed at her bold compliment. “And you, my young Admiral, are lucky I am not looking about for a second wife.”

She started to retort when a doorman stepped in and announced Prince Kaderick, Raeschel, Carter, and Prince Vultar. Rieka recognized Vul immediately. She kept her composure as she rose with the king to greet them and was introduced to the king's second son Vultar.

Though Vultar stood taller than Kaderick, the two younger men favored little in the face other than their amber-tinted brown eyes. Vultar glanced at her speculatively, and Rieka felt for certain that Prince Vultar remembered her from the mission. That meant Dalharan would know her identity. It was not going to be an easy evening. Prince Vultar, howe remained silent on the subject.

"Where is your brother Dalharan and the Watcher, Vultar?" At the king's mention of the Watcher, Rieka riveted her attention on Prince Vultar.

As they all sat, Vultar answered. "He will be here momentarily, father. Deurke had a medical emergency and will be back in a few days."

"I am glad most of our family members are here anyway, sire." Raeschel, sitting on the arm of Rieka's chair, patted her sister's hand.

Rieka glanced affectionately at the younger woman. "Nothing could have kept me away. I like the glow Prince Kaderick has put on your face...and in your heart."

Raeschel blushed, glanced at Kaderick, and then back again at Rieka. "Thank you, Rieka. It means a lot you and Carter are here." She moved away to sit next to her intended.

"Has my father beaten you, Admiral?" Rieka saw Vultar nod towards the stacked game that set on a table between her and the king.

"Admiral Hahl is more wily than her father and has already beaten me at two games. I've never played a craftier opponent."

"Other than myself, father?"

All heads turned towards the open doorway. One man entered. Rieka tried to keep the slight smile frozen on her face. It took all the fierce command she could muster to keep her emotions from giving herself away. The Aldairian heir was still devastating to her senses.

"Never mind chess, Dalharan," the king admonished his eldest son, still speaking in Interlak. "Come meet Admiral Hahl."

Rieka rose with the king, but she kept her hands behind her back as the king made the introductions. "Prince Dalharan."

"I have been awaiting the pleasure of personally meeting you for a long, long time, Admiral Hahl." She was glad to see him act as if they just met for the first time. "It should have happened sooner."

"One's duties, war, or destiny, will not always allow some things to happen, Prince Dalharan," Rieka commented.

"Raeschel and Kaderick were not wrong about your charms. Your beauty is as deadly as your battle methods." He emphasized his words, and Rieka did not miss his underlying meaning.

"Canvean Moorve, a fifth century Gehennan philosopher from your planet's history. Seventh line of the ode to the Battle Queen Vekahs Viaad." She saw by his raised brows that she had surprised him.

"You know much about our history then," he stated.

"Bits and pieces," Rieka admitted, wishing he would not continue standing in front of her. "One must know one's adversaries as well as one's allies."

"Dariat Vendahl, a Krithnaran poetess." Dalharan's words showed that he was well versed in alien history.

She nodded. "And a deadly warrior, Prince Dalharan. From my father's ancestry."

"If it were not commonplace for the Krithnaran males to take their wives surnames then yours would have been Vendahl. Your current name suits you best. There is much passion and power in the sound of it," Dalharan professed.

"Admiral Hahl's name and actions always make the Gehennans and Vaukeen quake with dread," the king remarked and Rieka was glad the interruption made Dalharan remember to act more prudent. "Even before you became famous, you saved Dalharan and his crew's lives many years back, Admiral. All my sons mean a lot to me. Thank you for all you have done for Aldairia and my family."

"You are welcome, Your Majesty," Rieka said.

As if he realized she felt awkward at the compliment, Prince Dalharan spoke up. "Perhaps, you would like to engage in a game of Sec-star with me, Admiral? That is, if you are through, Father."

The king offered Prince Dalharan his seat before motioning towards the others, saying, "We less fortunate players shall adjourn to the dining room. I have a feeling these two may miss the evening meal. Come now."

Once all the others were out of the room, Rieka sat down again in a chair. Dalharan did likewise, never taking his eyes off her face. The

longing she saw in his dark, warm eyes unsettled her. Rieka averted hers from his and busied herself with putting the pieces in position for playing.

The bastard was making it hard on her to deal with being in the same room with him. Since he'd entered the room, she hadn't been able to keep her eyes off his arresting, handsome face. His thickly muscled body still make her libido jump out of whack.

Like before, the extreme nearness of his satiny, dark honey-brown body infused ripples of sexual heat in every nuance of her being. She wanted to feel his cock plunging deep inside her moist folds. Tall and devastatingly disturbing to her feminine senses, his dark hair played seductively around his wide shoulders and the natural copper streaks of hair along the sides framed his darkly noble face.

There wasn't anything about him that didn't disturb her sexually, when she sat, laid or was near his tall self. She so wanted him back in her bed. Suddenly, Rieka's empathic senses told her he scrutinized her at the same time she studied him. She snapped out of her reverie quickly as his luscious mouth formed a self-satisfied smirk. Damn him, he knew she'd been thinking about their heated times together.

"How long have you known who I was?" he asked, finally breaking the silence. "Was it since I first walked aboard the *Oddessy*?"

"Yes," she answered. "Shall we play?"

Dalharan crossed his arms in frustration. "Do you fully realize what has happened? What we could very well cause?"

"Yes, Prince Dalharan, I do. Any of the others could come back to check on us. I suggest we talk quietly while we play Sec-star," she pointed out.

"Shall I go first or would you like the pleasure of the first move, Admiral?" he teased.

"I think you have already done that, Prince Dalharan." She glanced at the board and moved a piece.

He toyed with a game token, making her wonder just what he was up to. "A most unusual move. I do not believe your mind is on the game. You beat me so easily aboard the *Oddessy*."

At his play her lips tilted into a small quirk. "D-4 takes and holds 1<sup>st</sup> Knight."

His laughter made her skin prickle with excitement. "Demon fourth class is not able to take a 1<sup>st</sup> Knight."

“Your Knight is in a Yellow Zone Square, which are neutral voids on the space battle-board. Demons, no matter the class, can hold Knights for ransom. You have to trade or forgo a lesser piece to get your Knight back.”

“I have already traded you a piece of my heart, Rieka Hahl. Do not take more from me.”

Rieka slammed her next move down on the second level of the board, so hard it toppled a few pieces. She saw him quickly put the tokens back in their regular positions. He turned his face to view her and again she became flustered by his checked need.

“What happened between us was not planned. I never meant it to be for more than the short period we were together,” his voice was laced with reserved passion. “Nor did you, even though your heart ached for more.”

“How could you know that?” Rieka felt surprised he knew what her inner feelings were at the time of their heated parting on the *Odyssey*. “No one’s ever been able to...to...”

“Read your emotional aura?” he asked, making his next play. “Not even the Watcher?”

At his last words, her hand tightened around her selected piece to play. “I don’t know how you knew about that, but it’s none of your damn business,” she said heatedly.

“Deurke and I are cousins and close friends. But evidently he kept us both in the dark for some odd reason. Do you still care so much for him?” Rieka did not miss the anguish in his voice.

She strived to keep her voice as calm as possible as she made another move. “It is none of your business. Stay out of my affairs.”

“No. Our brief time together has escalated into a more serious matter than this game.” Dalharan studied the game board, she noted, even as he spoke to her. “Kaderick and Carter are making matters even worse.”

She voiced her confusion. “I do not understand. What have our brothers done?”

He exhaled and spoke bluntly. “I have reason to believe the two are plotting to interfere in our lives. I overheard bits of a conversation the two had earlier this morning. They were discussing us getting to know each other better.”

Rieka shook her head and let out a gruff laugh. “Carter has come up with some wild schemes over the years, but this tops everything.”

"I quite agree. I would have expected this from my brother Vultar. He's as wicked as young Carter, but not Kaderick."

"I cannot imagine what got into their heads. Such an idea would be...um..."

"Catastrophic," he supplied the word for her. "Especially since we have already had an affair, my dear Admiral."

"One that will stay dead and buried, I trust." She hoped his mellowing a bit meant that he would continue to act as if nothing prior happened between them.

"Before I respond to that statement, I must first warn you that I am very much like my father."

Perplexed at his change in behavior, she raised a questioning eyebrow. "In what way?"

"I do not like to be beaten." He made another play. "Royal Guard takes Star Queen. Stalemate."

She was now surprised. In a mere few moves, he had ended the game. "That's uncanny! No one's ever neutralized me in two moves. Even aboard the *Oddessy*, you were not this good."

He let out a triumphant laugh. "I remember your excellent moves quite well. You do not like to be beaten either."

"And it seems I'm not the only one who doesn't play by the rules." Rieka narrowed her eyes at him. "I have a feeling you are still upset with me for capturing your 1<sup>st</sup> Knight, and other things." She eyed him warily. "I think you are enjoying this little revenge a bit too much, Prince Dalharan."

"Your company gives me all kinds of pleasures, Admiral." His teasing grew bolder. "I have you at a double hold. If you move your Star-Queen I can capture your High-Duke. That would be a most crucial piece to lose."

"You are good at this game, I grant you. I could demand you fork over a compensation piece due me as high up as a Mage-Prince, but I doubt you will comply. That would deprive you of a highly movable piece."

He folded his arms within each other. "You are correct about that. According to the rules, I have at least six moves left before I am forced to give up a piece. As you said though, I hardly play by the rules. Instead, since I have you at stalemate, I don't have to fork over a game-bit to you. This gives me the satisfactory choice of challenging you to double-battle and a chance to win back my piece and an opportunity for an extra play-point."

“And if I refuse the battle option I could forfeit a piece myself or you could win that extra move and then take my High-Duke anyway. That strategy puts me in a double-hold. Very clever, Prince Dalharan.” She had to admit his ploy was very well thought out.

“Coming from you, I consider that high praise. Thank you.” A gleam of satisfaction twinkled in his eyes and his mouth tilted upwards in a small smug. “I finally came close to beating you, Admiral. I will not give up until I have thoroughly thrashed you.”

“Then I guess the game is postponed. The Watcher often did that to me also. He’s another one who hates to lose at anything,” Rieka admitted then realized too late she opened herself up for any barb he might make.

“I know. He hated losing you.” He said those words, she felt, to provoke her.

She tried to stifle her sudden annoyance with him. “As far as I’m concerned, Prince Dalharan, the conversation and this game are ended.”

She rose, as did he. “I apologize for the last statement, Admiral Hahl. However, this game and explanations are far from being over. We shall postpone them for the rest of the evening.”

Before she could retort, Raeschel entered the room. “Ah, you are stalemated. I’m impressed, Dalharan. Your father thought something like this might happen and sent me to see how engrossed you two were. Now you both can join all of us.”

“Yes, Pet, we can,” Rieka commented. “Unless you are up to a game, Raeschel.”

“Nope, sis. Like Carter and Mother, I learned not to play with you over the years.” Raeschel laughed. “Your moves are too good for me.”

“I have, on the other hand, enjoyed her moves quite well. I asked your sister to continue the game with me at another opportunity, Raeschel, but I think she is afraid I will win.” Dalharan's provocation irritated Rieka even more.

Her sister playfully scoffed at the Aldairian. “Nonsense. Nothing frightens Rieka. Stalemating my sister is a feat. I don’t think you can beat her.”

“If you were not marrying my brother, I would be offended by that, Raeschel. Perhaps my own strategies are more than your sister bargained for.”



Rieka knew the Aldairian deliberately toyed with her and enjoyed his repartee with her sister.

“I think you’re in over your head gaming with Rieka,” Raeschel chuckled.

“Heed my sister, Prince Dalharan. You’ll never win any game played against me,” Rieka said with deadly intent.

“On the contrary, Admiral, I will,” Dalharan said with just as much lethal emphasis.

She was glad Raeschel did not seem aware of her frustration. Dalharan held out an arm to each of them, to escort them into dinner. She could do no more than be polite and accept it as Raeschel did. However, she intended to ignore Dalharan as much as possible during the remainder of the evening.

\* \* \* \*

Dalharan pondered his actions of last night. He realized why he provoked Admiral Hahl towards the end of their game and later that evening. He wanted her to feel the frustration that gripped him. He knew he should apologize and not bring up what happened between them during the mission. His chance came later that morning when Raeschel and Kaderick invited him to accompany them in showing the Admiral around the Aldairian capital, Kiir.

Rieka looked startled when he joined their group, but she immediately covered up her surprise and busied herself looking at aspects of the city Raeschel pointed out. He fell in step beside his brother, but studied her carefully.

She was somber but attentive in her manner while around him during the outing. Still like the first time he saw her, when she smiled, it still caught at his heart, and made him quiver with desire for her. Even deeper waves of sensual erotic pleasures soared through his mind and body, than when he'd first met her aboard her ship. Just knowing she stood nearby gave him a painful erection that he did his damnest to conceal.

Her blatant sexuality hit him forcefully, yet she acted as if he did not affect her in any fashion. Surely she had not forgotten the fiery passions they shared hardly more than a week ago?

Even in her near-form fitting uniform of black and silver, her finely sculpted muscles did not in any way take away from her definite curves of femininity. In fact, the uniform only emphasized the ample curves of her graceful, athletic body, broad shoulders, and her long, shapely legs. Though her dark auburn hair lay pulled tightly

back in a twisted braid behind her head, it only accentuated the loveliness of her oval-shaped face with its high cheekbones, firm chin, and steady gaze.

He wanted to once more feel her tanned, satiny skin within his hands, and trail long heated caresses over her jutting breasts with his mouth and tongue. Dalharan groaned. He needed to cool off quickly before the sexual aches and his growing hard-on became more noticeable.

Damn woman! And damn her for what she did to him.

He quickly turned his attention on his brother and future sister-in-law, calming down some as he took in the sites of Aldairia's largest city and its capital.

Kiir, like the huge palace, lay built upon a circular grid. It was an extensive, but spacious capital, despite its towering conglomerates of sparkling crystal and gold-metal. Overhead they saw much traffic of aerial taxis and individual air-cars. There were a few moving walkways here in the city, mostly to benefit aging aliens or Aldairians that traversed its interiors. Along some of the outer streets and airways, domestic buildings and landscaped gardens gave the surrounding edge of the city a look of tranquility. Nothing built on Aldairia from this inspection could be labeled ostentatious. Everything had been planned on simple, elegant lines.

"We must take Admiral Hahl to the Thendaas Observatory, Kaderick," Dalharan said. "The view from there is spectacular."

"You will love it, Rieka," Raeschel joined in agreement. "I fell in love with the sights of Kiir from there. Come on."

Dalharan laughed with his brother as Raeschel grabbed her sister and pushed through the throng of people. "You are going to have a very lively wife to deal with, brother."

Kaderick's shoulders shook. "I know. She is such an opposite from her sister."

Dalharan agreed with his brother. "But just as lovely."

"Though no woman's beauty can ever compare to Raeschel's for me, I have to agree with you. Admiral Hahl can take a man's breath away. Carter and I thought you might be fascinated by the Admiral."

"I just bet you did. Do not push it, Kaderick. Did you two conspirators not realize what your plot could cause?"

Kaderick glanced at him in some confusion, and then his reddened face betrayed the younger prince. "I did not mean to

interfere, Dalharan. I was just wishing you could find some happiness like I have with Raeschel.”

“I appreciate the concern, Ked, but the Gehennans would stop the contract and start a war if Admiral Hahl and I were discovered having an affair.”

He looked aghast and gulped out his next words. “I should not have let Jon-Carter edge me on. I am sorry, Dalharan. I will speak to him about this.”

Dalharan grinned, glad to get this reprimand over with. “See that you do. Now, let us put it behind us and enjoy the ladies’ company.”

The two men walked fast to catch up with the sisters. Dalharan kept noticing how Rieka very carefully made sure she was not in close proximity with him. She deliberately ignored him and took interest in the sights Raeschel pointed out along the way. They passed the Aldairian Archives and several museums before they traversed the halls of the observatory.

As he watched the trio, Dalharan reflected on several things. Such as how he had been more affected by Rieka Hahl’s beauty than he would have thought. Dangerous thinking, he realized that Rieka...Admiral Hahl, with her commanding manner, dark auburn hair, and reserved nature was such a contrast to other women he had met. But none would, or ever could touch his heart as she had. It had been a shock learning who she was and her deception still angered him a bit. She was right though, their game of desire must end. He did not know if he could allow such a thing to happen right now.

When he saw her viewing the city through a long-range telescope atop the observatory, he moved to the one next to her. Glancing through the powerful viewer, he looked over the outer-lying regions of the city. To the west of Kiir, situated a few miles away, were enormous docking bays for smaller spacecraft. He figured one of them held the *Odyssey*.

“If you look to the eastern sky line, you will see some great sights.” Dalharan heard Raeschel speak.

He surveyed the world he loved so well. Through a telescope, one could see outer regions that were fertile and beautiful, with natural temperate and uniform weather. To one side of the city's edge, was a large lake, surrounded by deep meadows threaded with orchard lawns and luscious forests. A dancing streamlet ran from the lake and into the city, alongside a mossy glen, which looked like it provided an agreeable walkway into the capital.

“From a distance, Kiir looks like an ethereal development of glittering gold and rainbow hues,” Rieka remarked breathlessly. “This city shines with its lively richness and wondrous splendor.”

Dalharan glanced away from the telescope to view her. Her raspy words not only moved his heart, but tugged elsewhere also. “I’ve always thought the same. Look below us.”

When he saw her turn her own telescope downwards, he did the same. Below, the main streets, several off-ramps of the aerial shuttles, and entrances from the underground shuttle stations, all led to the enormous trade center of the capital. To one side of the central marketplace, there were numerous recreation areas with amusements of all kinds and art centers in which were many types of theaters, concert halls, and museums of alien and Aldairian cultural activities. To the near east of it was the Aldairian Intergalactic Exchange, where much commerce was dealt with in credits, the major monetary unit of L.A.W. and Aldairian planets.

“Thank you all for showing me this.” Rieka stepped down from the telescope podium. “What is next on the tour?”

He saw Raeschel pull Rieka to one side for a moment. Dalharan gave his brother a questioning glance.

Kaderick chuckled. “The imp wants to shop for a gown for Admiral Hahl to wear to our wedding when we set the date at the engagement party. Raeschel told me the Admiral does not like wearing dresses.”

“Admiral Hahl does not like shopping?” Dalharan found the fact amusing.

“No. So I am stuck since Raeschel decided to spare her sister that agony.”

“Serves you right, Ked. I shall keep the Admiral company. We will await you two at the small café I frequent.”

“I recall it. Perhaps you would rather escort my intended,” Kaderick pleaded when the sisters came their way.

Dalharan grinned, but shook his head. “Have fun, you two.”

He turned to Rieka and offered his arm out to her. “Shall we make the best of this then? We can await them nearby.”

She nodded and lightly slipped her hand in the crook of his arm. Dalharan guided her farther into the busy area. He noticed she glanced everywhere except directly at him. Yet he felt she was actually interested in everything she observed.

“On Earth, several of the large cities have just as many different types of cultures and off-worlders as Kiir does.” She spoke matter-of-factly. “I’ve seen those willowy, four-eyed Buderanx and even more strangely exotic creatures visit Earth.”

“I know your home-world is as much a stronghold of trades as Aldairia.” He placed a hand gently on her wrist making her glance up at him. “Stop here for a moment, Admiral Hall. Turn and look back at the palace.”

She did as he bid, and he felt pleased when he heard her catch her breath. Dalharan always felt breathless with pleasure and awe when he viewed the palace from a distance. The enormous, temple-like, four-story building was surrounded by the mid-afternoon glow of the bright Aldairian sun, giving it a pearlized, ethereal, golden sheen.

“It is a wondrous sight. Heaven could not be more beautiful,” she said breathlessly.

“I agree. I have lived here all my life and traveled to other worlds. But nothing takes my breath away more than that sight.”

“You love this world a lot.” She cast him a sideways glance.

“With my all my heart. There is nothing I would not do for Aldairia and her people.” This woman standing beside him made that thought even clearer. Aldairia would always come first, no matter how much he wanted her. He suddenly realized that she too must feel the same way about her family and duty. He let out a soft sigh. “Come, the café is nearby.”

They walked in silence until they reached the establishment. He guided her in and procured a table for them in a quiet corner. Dalharan did not ask her what she wanted when the waiter came to ask their preference. He spoke to the person in Aldairian and then turned to her.

“I took the liberty of ordering you a warm teasa. Your sister mentioned once that you like hot tea. Our teasa is much like your Earth teas, but with a sweeter berry flavor.”

“Thank you.” She avoided talking to him further by glancing around the sparsely attended café.

A few moments later, the waiter set an odd-shaped silver pot and two cups down between them on the center of the table. Dalharan poured the teasa.

“It is indeed delightful,” she announced after sipping the hot, sweet brew.

“I am glad you approve.” He sipped from his own cup. “My late mother always brought some to my bedside at night when I had problems sleeping.”

She smiled wistfully. “My father once did the same for me. Until I started winning at chess and he told me I was too old for tea in bed.”

Dalharan chuckled. “Sounds like something my father would say.”

“I found the king to be very delightful, Prince Dalharan.”

“He was indeed charmed by you. Not once did he growl all evening after you beat him.”

Dalharan was surprised at how easy-going he found her and how much he was truly enjoying her company. “Rieka...er Admiral, I do hope you will accept my apology for edging you on last night. I rarely lost at Sec-star before we played.”

“We were both edgy at seeing each other again,” Rieka said calmly. “I never meant to harm you in any way...Prince Dalharan. You are right, I don’t like losing at anything either.”

Though he still desired her, he knew she was trying extremely hard to keep her own ardor in check. The two of them had to make the best of an awkward situation. “Admiral, you must play me once more.”

Rieka’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “I will not let you draw the game again.”

“Do not tempt me with a challenge,” he responded to her liveliness. “I could not resist it from such a lovely and devious opponent.”

“Are you eager for defeat again, Prince Dalharan?”

He took another sip of the teasa before answering. “It has been a long time since anything challenged me, Admiral. Our small mission together did. No, do not scowl at me. I am doing my best to curb my desires. Our liaison could cause too much trouble should anyone find out what happened.” When he saw her relax her shoulders, he asked, “Might I ask you something a bit personal though?”

“Depends on the question.”

He admired her frankness. “Earlier I noticed how you watched your sister and Kaderick together. I have been doing the same since she came to Aldairia.” He paused before continuing, trying to find the right words to explain his view to her. “I have always believed some souls were meant to find each other.”

“Are you trying to ask me if Raeschel and your brother were fated for each other?”

He felt she was trying to remain indifferent. “Yes. She did not have a very hard time accepting him, according to what Ked told me. Yet she loves him even without the Charj. Theirs is a strong, steadfast relationship, even though they have known each other personally a short time.”

Dalharan liked the myriad colors of her lovely aquamarine eyes displayed when she was in contemplative thought. Right now, they turned cloudy green, veiling her emotions. “She is fortunate. Not everyone in my race finds what Raeschel has. Nor are we like you Aldairians. Your people seem to have no problem obtaining spontaneous and lasting unity between the sexes.”

“That is a correct assumption, Admiral.” He lowered his empty cup and laced his hands together upon the tabletop, before boldly asking his next question. “Why are you hiding your emotions from me?”

He realized he first startled her and then angered her as she clanked her cup down on the saucer in front of her. “I prefer it when people do not pry into my private thoughts, Prince Dalharan.”

Her lovely face then became a mask of indifference. He let the matter rest and stated something else that was on his mind. “Admiral, I have not had the opportunity to thank you in person for saving my life. For years, either duty or war has kept us from meeting face to face. Please except my thanks now.”

She indifferently nodded an acknowledgement of his words. “Prince Dalharan, I just did what was necessary at the time. Let us not speak further of these matters.”

“Very well.” He said, and let the matter drop as he saw Ked and Raeschel entering the café, coming back from their shopping expedition earlier than he hoped they would. For the rest of the afternoon, he and Rieka said little to each other and she did her best to stay as far from him as possible.

## Chapter Five

After their trek into the city, Rieka tried hard to keep from meeting up with Dalharan the rest of the day. It became impossible in the early evening when she was expected to dine with the royal family and her kin once more. Later, after dinner, everyone went to relax and socialize in the royal drawing room. Rieka managed to pull Raeschel away from the others, and they stepped out on the veranda into the night air. Linking her arm through her sister's, Rieka walked with Raeschel down a path in the royal gardens. Rieka had a lot to talk to Raeschel about. She wanted the younger woman happy, but her sister needed to know the truth. So did Prince Kaderick.

"Pet, you are aglow tonight. I am happy for you."

Raeschel's eyes sparkled with the inner glow she radiated. "Rieka, you have made it even more special by being here. I'm glad we have a few minutes alone. I hope you'll one day find the happiness that I have."

She fondly smiled at her sister. "Raesch, not everyone is meant for wedded bliss. I thank you though. Just be happy, kid. And remember, no matter what, that I love you and have only wanted the best for you."

"I know, sis." Raeschel patted Rieka's arm affectionately. "I have a feeling you brought me out here to talk about more though. Perhaps Deurke?"

"Raeschel, the Watcher and I are only friends and nothing else. Please finally accept that," Rieka told her sister.

The younger woman let out a sigh. "He's always been like a big brother to me, but I will respect your wishes and Deurke's."

Rieka felt something was really troubling her sister. "How did you know Deurke has finally come to terms about us?"

"You being such a gifted empath, Deurke and I both were surprised you did not pick up on things. He seemed to think it was your preoccupation with your assignments that caused this. Even



when we are thousands of miles apart you usually know when something is upsetting me,” Raeschel explained, her voice cracking a bit.

“Then please tell me what’s wrong?”

“These last several months, I’ve been feeling strong vibrations from people around me, especially the Watcher. I don’t control these sensations well. And I don’t know what to do about having empathic powers.”

“I knew the day would come.” Rieka realized her odd statement startled Raeschel. “I should have seen them coming, Pet. We have time to instruct you better on how to use and control them before you go on your honeymoon. Do not let them overpower you.”

“Deurke said the same,” her sister admitted.

Rieka’s brows knitted into a frown. “Deurke has already been helping you, Raeschel?”

“When you are off on your missions, he’s the only one I have to turn to for questions of that nature. Our parents and Carter are not empathic.” Raeschel nibbled at her bottom lip. “Deurke has been there for me since I was a small child. Please do not be angry with us.”

“I am angrier with myself,” Rieka said. “It concerns something I should have told you a long time ago.”

“Oh?” Raeschel asked, worry evident in her voice and demeanor. “Deurke has spoken with you then?”

Regardless of where they were, Rieka jerked to a halt. With Raeschel’s arm being linked through her own she nearly toppled the younger woman. She reached out quickly to steady her sister. “What exactly did the Watcher disclose to you?”

Raeschel pulled her arm from Rieka’s, and Rieka scoped out the gardens until Raeschel spoke again. “My grandparents raised me well, but I think Deurke would have made an excellent father. I expect you to tell me more about Jon-tu, since Deurke could not.”

Anger, shock, and betrayal warred within Rieka towards the Master Watcher. “Deurke told you everything?”

Raeschel nodded her head. “Everything that he could or knew would be okay to tell me. I was angry at first until I learned why you kept things from me. Deurke made me promise not to tell you I knew, until you came to me with the secret. The Gehennans will no doubt bring it out this time. Especially since I am marrying into the royal family.”

Rieka was still shook up that Raeschel knew the whole truth. “How long have you known?”

“For almost eight months. I overheard Cassia Viaad speaking to her brother Almeagar Viaad about me while we were in school together. You were on a mission so I contacted the Watcher. There is so much I’ve wanted to ask you, Rieka. Things Deurke could not answer.”

“Pet, there is so much I’ve been dying to tell you.” Rieka wrapped her arms around the younger woman fiercely. “Please forgive me for not telling you. I just wanted to keep you safe from harm.”

“I know that now.” Raeschel pulled back. “The resentment I first had is gone. You may be mad at Deurke, but he made me understand why you kept my true birth a secret.”

“I will deal with Deurke, do not fret.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Raeschel said in mock worry. “You will not stay angry at him. I’m assuming the Gehennans know since Cassia was talking about me. I just wonder why they didn’t bring it forth before now?”

“I do not know why they have kept their knowledge quiet, Raeschel. Don’t worry over that now. Instead I will tell you about Jon-tu. He was a wonderful brother and human being.” Rieka went into detail about her late brother. “You would have loved him.”

“I already do, Rieka. What about KreaH Viaad?” Raeschel asked. “What was my real mother like? Did you resent her because she was Gehennan?”

“No.” Rieka took hold of Raeschel’s hand and guided her over to a nearby alcove of bushes, where a wrought iron bench stood. The two sat down. “I got to know a very warm-hearted woman. She would have been proud of you.”

“Even knowing I wasn’t raised as a Gehennan?” Raeschel’s innocent violet-blue eyes bore into Rieka’s with a desire to understand. “And does it make you my foster mother then, since you blood-bonded with me?”

“Pet, KreaH asked me to become your blood-mother just before she died at your birthing. I will always love you as my own child, my sister, and my niece. I was just too wild at the time to raise you. And my relationship with the Watcher was unstable. Our parents, Jon and Judeth were the only ones I trusted to raise you. Please know I do not regret my choices.”

"I've always had faith in your judgment, even when I didn't understand the reasons behind your decisions. I worry now even more what the Gehennans will do. Are you really married to Chieftain Viaad? Will he deliberately bring all this out in the open?" Raeschel barraged her with questions again. "Did you care for him, Rieka? What..."

Rieka put a finger to Raeschel's lips, stopping the younger woman's words. "Slow down, Raeschel. No, I did not care for Almeagar, but we are blood-mated. One day it will become public knowledge we married. I will handle that when the time comes. I just wanted you to know about your background. You have every right to be angry with me for not telling you sooner."

"At first I was, sis." Raeschel admitted. "Yet, knowing the truth and knowing why you and our parents kept it from me makes sense now. I have learned to deal with that over the last few months. I want to know more about Jon-tu, your brother and my father, one day. And about Almeagar's sister Kreh, my real mother. Does Carter know the truth?"

"No, Raesch. I will inform him and tell our parents you know."

"I still think of them as my parents too. I do not think that will change."

Rieka let out a sigh. "We have always wanted your happiness. I just hope I haven't ruined it for you and Kaderick."

"I could say it is a bit late for considering that," Raeschel admonished, "but I won't. Ked knows already. He has promised me not to tell his family though until I have talked to you."

"He seems like a wonderful and honorable young man. I am sure he will make you happy."

"Thanks, Rieka." Raeschel let out a prolonged sigh and threw her arms around Rieka. "That means more to me than you know. I can truly be happy now."

Amused, she pulled back from her sister. "Raeschel, you didn't need my approval of him to be happy. That choice is yours regardless of anything."

"You don't understand, Rieka. Knowing how you have been enemies with the Gehennans has kept me from giving Kaderick an answer. I would not want him or his family to be harmed, especially if I did not have your word you were ready to face things."

“Raeschel, I have seen it coming that one day Chieftain Almeagar would bring our mating in the public eye.” Rieka said. “Take care of your own happiness no matter what.”

“I know Gehennans do not like having it known children are born out of wedlock. Even though we know I am Jon-tu’s daughter, will Chieftain Almeagar not make it public knowledge that I am his sibling, since my Charj to Ked was made public news?” Raeschel was still concerned. “What happens then?”

“I acknowledge he is your father, it saves face for him and Kream, and we let it be known that you already know. However, because of the wars I let my parents raise you as their own.” Rieka told Raeschel her plan.

“But what if he wants you to become his wife again and live with him?” Raeschel’s lovely face was riddled with stress. “I think too he may guess that I’m his niece and not his daughter.”

Rieka stroked the worry frowns away from her sister’s face and soothed her with an explanation. “Dear sister, I never cared for Almeagar. There is nothing he can do to make me stay his wife, except in a legal binding only. He won’t blurt it out, you’re not really our daughter, if he has guessed that Jon-tu and Kream were your real parents. I believe he wants the Aldairian connection for his people. Whatever his reasons are. Now enough of this morbid stuff. Tomorrow, if you like, I will work on teaching you how to expand your empathic abilities.”

“Was it scary at first for you, Rieka? Was Jon-tu or Kream an empath?” Raeschel bounced back easily enough to Rieka’s amusement. “I hope things will be as easy as you state.”

“I was wary of being an empath when it first happened to me, but with training, I was fine. Jon-tu took to it so naturally. Kream was a telepath also. With more guidance you’ll do well. You can explain on the morrow what empathic training Deurke has taught you.” Rieka stood up, as did Raeschel. “We have been out here a while. I don’t want the others to worry and come searching for us. Now push aside your concerns and go find your intended.”

Raeschel stood up on tiptoe to kiss Rieka’s cheek. “Thanks, sis. I will be by in the morning to talk more with you about everything and start those empath lessons. Are you coming in with me?”

“I’ll be along shortly. Go enjoy yourself.” When her sister left, Rieka sat down on the alcove bench, closed her eyes, and let out a

long sigh. “Raeschel, empathic powers are not all you will inherit soon. It is what else that is coming that I fear.”

“I did not think you feared anything, my Admiral.”

Rieka let out a startled oath to find Dalharan standing before her. Hoping like hell he didn’t hear everything she uttered moments before, Rieka quickly composed herself.

He sat beside her on the bench. “Ked never mentioned Raeschel was an empath like you. Why is it a secret?”

“I do not appreciate you eavesdropping on me and my kin,” Rieka admonished him. “You will tell me all you heard.”

He bristled and narrowed his eyes. “My listening was not intentional. I merely took a stroll, and when I heard you two talking in the distance, I followed your voices.

“I just bet.” She knew she was deliberately taunting him, but didn’t care.

“It is true.” He became even angrier. “Ked told me Raeschel got lost in the gardens the second day she was here. I did not want that to happen again. I saw her get up and head in the correct direction towards the drawing room. Your words to yourself are all I heard clearly enough. So tone down your damn aggravations towards me.”

Rieka felt her own frustrations rise. “I’ll be irritated with you as much as I like. If you had kept your blasted libido under control, we wouldn’t be sitting here sexually hot and bothered with each other right now.”

“But then I would have missed tasting your delectable lips again,” he chided, then reached out and pulled her onto his lap.

Rieka cursed him just before his lips came down on hers. Not allowing herself to succumb to his devilish charms, she aimed a swift, soft jab into his solar plexus. The hit was just hard enough to make him release her. She jumped up before he could detain her again and ran off in the same direction her sister went, without bothering to look back and see if he followed. She made her excuses early to leave the company and went to her rooms.

Furiously, Rieka paced the bedroom of the quarters that were assigned to her during the duration of her visit. She began uttering expletives that would even embarrass the most hardened soul. When she finally calmed herself, Rieka sat on the edge of the nine-foot bed and let out a aggravated sigh.

*Damn the man! He comes exploding into my life like a wild comet and doesn’t realize just what his presence is causing me right now.*

Why the hell did he warn her one moment about their brothers trying to set them up and, in the next, ask those dang personal questions? Being in his company today took all the self-control she ever had cause to use. And tonight at the second dinner she'd shared with her siblings and the royal family, she tried hard to compose herself. His coming across her in the gardens almost pushed her over the edge. She'd faced down the warrior races of Gehenn and Vaukeen, but he hit her with more than just metal or psychic weaponry.

Dalharan's explosive sensual capacity attacked her much different from what she'd felt on the battlefield. Or from another male. She let out a string of curses again before jumping up from the bed. Rieka stripped, heading for the showers. She needed a cool one right now. Afterwards, she found herself calmer. Her torso wrapped in a soft body towel, she dried her hair with a smaller towel. Sitting down at the vanity she began combing her hair. A movement reflected in the mirror caught her attention.

Almeagar Viaad's image visualized before her in the glassy object. Rieka froze with uncertainty. Was the Gehennan Chieftain somehow making himself known to her? Could his intensive mental powers project his thoughts at such a great distance? Or was it the empathic legacy left to her by her late brother warning her to be careful what she did while on Aldairia.

Whatever the case, Rieka knew she wouldn't get any sleep that night. She needed do something to ease the restlessness within her.

Putting on some clothes, she left her quarters and headed outside the palace towards the Aldairian National Archives. From an Archive clerk, she initiated the use of a private viewing room where she could gather information she needed without being disturbed. Rieka sat down wearily in the old swivel chair. It creaked under her weight, making her wish she were slighter of build like Raeschel. Reaching out, she flipped on the ancient computer ensemble. It blinked for a second and then whirled to life.

Rieka tapped a command button making it crackle to life. After it hummed efficiently for a few seconds, she typed in the data she wished to view. Moments later, words lighted the screen, and she read the information she had needed to know since first encountering Dalharan.

"...eons before the Dispersement of the Original Seven Tribes of Aldairia, the Charj was primarily used for purposes of war. Tired of the tribes' warring ways, ancient chemist-healers found a means to

keep the Charj from being used for purposes of war. With the aid of the Ancient Majeeks and the use of their powerful Sage Stone, the chemist-healers were able to change and enhance the Charj strictly for the purpose of life-mating. That was the beginning of the Great Change. The tribe of the Jahennans, the forbearers of modern Gehennans, had an adverse reaction to the magic in the Sage Stone. Their ability to Charj was taken from them. The Gehennans still use the blood mating ritual...”

Becoming engrossed, she read more of the history. “...The Blood Ritual is basically a chemical reaction for finding a compatible life-partner and brings heated, primitive passion between two Gehennans. The Charj brings a chemical/genetic harmony, ensuring fine offspring, but does more. It unites the male’s and female’s emotional level on a higher plane, joining the couple empathetically and spiritually. Physical pleasure is also enhanced on an escalated scale...”

Rieka continued her reading on the Charj and the Sage Stone. “...The Sage Stone is one of the most ancient mystical artifacts in Aldairian history. When the Chemist Healers used it in conjunction with passion-powder, it changed the Charj’s original properties in most Aldairians. Test results found these trace properties in the Sage Stone, a chemical which is also in an Aldairian’s bloodstream and little is known about even today...”

Engrossed in her findings she searched for more answers...“There are legends about a prophecy connected with the Sage Stone and the Great Change. The most popular tells of a wise warrior-woman who is of the two oldest tribes (the Jahennans and Majeeks) but not of them. Her coming will restore the balance between the two and bring light unto the darkness when the original Eye of the Sage Stone is found. The Eye is said to be lost in the womb of the world...”

She kept reading, finding other pertinent information she needed to know “... Like the Gehennan Blood Ritual, the Charj should not be stopped once it has started because death or madness could occur...Recorded symptoms of knowing how the Charj was not completed are bouts of sporadic sexual frustration, heightened emotional awareness, cold sweats, mercurial mood swings...These symptoms are the beginning of the madness for the couple...the Charj should be allowed its completion within a few weeks to a few months of the first joining or the symptoms could escalate and

madness could occur...When and if the symptoms pass the maddening stage, intensive nerve damage results, followed by a painful death....”

“Damnation! I’m suffering the same symptoms. If all this is true, then I haven’t much time to find a cure for Dalharan or myself...If such a thing can be found. But what about why Raeschel and I were effected by the Charj?” Rieka exclaimed her stress and worries out loud.

She requested further data and then sped read through the text until she found more of what she sought. “...In known instances of the Charj, the couples are full blooded Aldairians... Though none have been recorded, it is believed that a rare instance of the Charj can happen between an Aldairian and individuals who have faint traces of the passion-powder in their genetic makeup. Examples of these individuals are off-spring of Krithnaran-Gehennan matings, or Krithnaran and a few other select humanoid types....”

“By the stars!” Rieka exclaimed out loud and her hand shook as she shut off the old computer. “Now I fully understand why Raeschel and Kaderick were able to unite.”

She leaned back in her chair and pondered what she'd just read. Not only had she and Raeschel been affected, but also so could Carter if he became involved with an Aldairian. Because their father, President Jon Hahl, was half Krithnaran the three of them were susceptible to Aldairian or Gehennan genetics. Krithnarans, a female dominated society, were descendants of a derelict group of Gehennans and Aldairians. The Hahl children all could possibly have that damn passion-powder chemical in their systems. She would have to speak with her cousin Doctor Eilea Sairius as soon as possible. The Earth scientist knew a lot about exobiology.

Rieka slammed her palm against the computer desk at the probability of Raeschel’s true heritage being brought out. “Damnation! Raeschel, I am happy for you, but why did the fates make you fall in love with an Aldairian? It is good you know the truth now. Even if the Gehennans and others find out, I swear though, no one will harm you. I will do everything in my power to ensure your happiness...even if it means my own downfall!”

Frustrated, she left the Archives. She would find something else in this bustling city to do. Even this late at night the capital did not stay still. Though she did not like shopping like her sister did, she occasionally found visiting unusual curio shops relaxing. Rieka



headed toward the part of the trades-mart Raeschel mentioned would stay open for late night shoppers.

\* \* \* \*

Restless. So very restless.

Dalharan sat up in bed. He would get no sleep tonight. He could not stop thinking about Rieka and her luscious body. He so wanted to slide his cock into her heated depths, making devastating love to her for hours. Admiral Rieka Hahl, he corrected himself, trying to think of her in more proper terms. It did no good. How could he contemplate such bold desires where the Admiral was concerned? Perhaps because Admiral Hahl stirred something within him he had never known before. Only in that damn dream on Krithnar had he come close. The fates would not let him know the true ecstasy of the Charj.

But he did come to know love. The revelation startled him beyond coherent thinking. Even though only knowing her such a short time, Dalharan realized without a doubt Rieka held the key to his heart. He wished he could unlock the darkness around hers and let his love encompass her forever. With him about to marry Cassia Viaad, that was impossible.

Months back, when he suggested to the Aldairian council, who ruled under and with his father, that they should negotiate another marriage contract with the Gehennans, they thought he had lost his mind. It had taken him great effort to convince them it was in Aldairia's best interest to unite with Gehenn. Even with the Aldairian Realm's aid from the Legion of Allied Worlds, the long war with the Gehennan Territory and their adversaries caused too much grief and devastation for all concerned.

For a long time his race did not want the amalgamation with the Gehennans. Perhaps they had been afraid of it. Dalharan was not sure why, but he felt destiny taking its retribution on Aldairia. The fates found a way of making one see what must be done. He believed this very much. He also believed that his dream on Krithnar was somehow related to the Sage Stone.

Dalharan dreamt a similar dream before and had not told anyone else. In it, he saw himself giving a dark-haired woman the Sage Stone and a new dawning for Aldairia and Gehenn had shone from within her hands. He did not see the woman's face nor that of the person near her who had been waiting to receive the ancient jewel. The Gehennans always wanted the Sage Stone, and Cassia Viaad, he knew

from his meeting with her and Almeagar on Krithnar, had black hair. Even now, he was not sure the meaning behind the whole dream. But he did realize that this was a lot of his reasoning for the idea of the contract. The marriage had to take place whether he wished it or not.

No matter his current interest in Rieka Hahl, he would do his duty. He did greatly wonder, though, why the fates caused them to meet up now. What part in all this galactic drama, did Admiral Hahl play? He still could not get her out of his mind. He got out of bed, dressed, and headed out of his quarters.

Dalharan found that walking the capital's streets always relieved his stress and restlessness. He liked the life the city produced even at nighttime. After strolling around, he finally entered the stalls of the trades-center. Perhaps, he thought, this would be a good time to get a wedding present for his brother and Raeschel Hahl. The two had yet to set the date, but it would be announced soon after the two families gave the couple an engagement party, which was set for a few days from now. Dalharan walked into a curio shop he had not been inside of in years. He was looking at several shelves of knick-knacks when something caught his attention.

At the end of the long row he saw jewelry and other items he recognized as being Krithnaran in design. He wondered if there might be something there that the couple would like. Just as he headed in that direction, someone came from around another isle and collided into him. Quickly, Dalharan reached out to steady himself and the other person.

He was surprised to find himself holding Rieka Hahl. Her eyes widened and she muttered an apology, but she still seemed startled at finding him there.

"I could not sleep either, Admiral." He released her arms. "I came out to shop for Ked and Raeschel's wedding gift. I have yet to find them the right one."

"I have had no time to search either. Kiir being a twenty-four hour city gives one the opportunity for last minute shopping," she said nervously.

Dalharan had the feeling Rieka wandered around for the same reason he did. She too was sexually and emotionally frustrated. The thought of knowing that should have pleased him more, but somehow it didn't make it any easier for both of them to be around each other. They must do something about their growing desires, and soon. Hopefully very, very soon.

“I saw something at the end of this row. Kaderick likes simple, symbolic things. I am not completely sure what your sister might find joy from. Will you help me?”

She nodded and followed him to the end of the row. “Raeschel has never been to Krithnar, but likes bright things, as our father does.”

He saw her eyes dart from him to the jewelry before he said, “I spoke with Vultar not long after our meeting yesterday. He will not say anything to our kin about you being the operative I worked with. My father, however, did have to know about the mission’s outcome.”

She went quiet for a second before replying. “I met with Admiral Coyton after leaving the Krithnar area. He sent some crews to make sure the pirates were dispersed. We should have no more problems with the Vaukeen or the pirates.”

“Vultar sent some operatives out also. I wish that you had....”

“Don’t, Dalharan. I do not think it wise that we continue to dwell on that parting. I am sorry, please let it die down.”

“Very well.” Dalharan knew she was right. Though the affair’s ending still bothered him, now was not the time to bring it up. Perhaps never. Still though, he wanted her. “We will speak no more of the matter. Have you found something?”

She fingered some of the sparkling pieces before picking up an open box containing two bracelets. “Perhaps these. They are Krithnaran wedding bands. Though my father detested most of his Krithnaran heritage, he loved that world’s pomp and ceremony. He presented my mother with a set of bracelets when they married. They still wear them to this day. The bracelets are sold on several planets because of their unique abilities.”

“I remember being told during my visit there that the couple could always find each other no matter how far apart the wedded pair was. Is that a true fact?”

“Yes.” She grinned. “My Krithnaran grandfather regaled me with many stories of promiscuous wives found by their frustrated husbands.”

Dalharan took the case she held out to him. He thought it odd how careful she was that their hands did not touch. “Then this will make the perfect gift from us.”

“I did not mean for...”

He reached out with his free hand to put a finger against her lips. At the slight touch he felt her soft shiver of pleasure. “I saw them, but

you picked them out. They will be from both of us. I think our kin would like that.”

Dalharan felt bereft when she moved back from him. “Very well. I think I had better return to my quarters.”

“Admiral?” He saw her stop hesitantly. “Join me in a late cup of teasa.”

“I do not think that would be wise.”

He sensed that Rieka’s attraction to him was deeper than she wanted to admit. Against his better judgment, Dalharan pressed the issue. “Please, there is something we need to talk about that cannot wait.”

“Very well.” She said with some hesitancy. “Let us purchase those and find a café that is open.”

They found a very quiet espresso bar not far from the curio shop. Seconds after they were served the teasa, he spoke to her. “When I was eighteen, you saved my life. How is it that you and your young comrades came to be in Gehennan territory?”

He watched her toy with her cup before she looked up at him and answered his question. “The ships we flew were experimental. My twin brother, Jon-tu, and I built them. I wanted to be an engineer since I was ten. When we joined the L.A.W. academy at thirteen, Jon-tu and I had hoped to have my designs used by them. After two years, they kept refusing me.”

“That angered you?”

“Yes.” She took a sip before talking again. “You must understand that I was pretty hot-headed during my teens. My father was an ambassador then and my mother was ready to leave the military. Our parents did not want me or my brother to join up. Jon-tu was not nearly as stubborn as I, but we were inseparable.”

He set his empty cup down and was fascinated by the different emotions she let show in her misty eyes. “I read somewhere that Krithnaran twins are empathic.”

“That is true. Only it is usually male twins. Krithnaran females have never had empathic abilities before. I believe it was because of my human side that it happened. There are a few Earth relatives from my mother’s family who were psychic. However, Jon-tu was the stronger empath. I never cared to use what little ability I possessed.”

He saw a soft smile play upon her delectable lips. “I take it he teased you often with them.”

She glanced up at him in amazement. “How could you know that?”

“My brother Vultar is a strong empath. He doesn’t have psychic powers like myself, but he learned how to use his empathic senses in our childhood games that often drove my parents crazy with worry.”

He liked her soft laughter. “Jon-tu was excellent at having our parents climb the walls. He was the more practical of us two, but came up with ways to frustrate them when he or I couldn’t get our way.”

“And I am sure, like me, you got blamed for your brother’s antics.” He joined in laughing with her.

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “I definitely did. When we were around seventeen, Jon-tu enabled us to be able to finally get a chance to use the experimental ships. He empathically assured our parents that we were going to change our careers.”

“What happened next?” She and her tale fascinated him.

She glanced down at her cup before looking back up at him. Her expression turned serious now. “Jon-tu, our friend Mikel Coyton, and I took a leave of absence from the academy and left out in the ships. The three of us wanted to prove what the vessels could do. We were just at the edges of the Non-partisan Tract away from Krithnaran boundaries, when we picked up your distress call.”

“I see how you came to my crew’s aid so quickly. That is near the borders of Gehennan Territory. Your ships were the fastest I had ever seen back then.”

“They were the swiftest ever designed.” He knew her words were not meant to sound boastful. “The three of us worked hard to get them ready. That incident proved just how powerful the ships could move.”

“Between your ships and excellent strategy, you saved the hide of my crew. We can never thank you enough for that. What happened after the Gehennans detained you and your brother and friend?”

He saw a sadness creep into her eyes before she once more looked away from him. “Jon-tu died trying to help me and Mikel Coyton escape. Mikel and I stole back two of the ships and escaped off Gehenn. He tried to keep them off my tail so I could escape. Mikel veered off-path. I saw them blow up his ship. He could not fight back because they found a way to disarm the weaponry. The only thing that kept them from catching me was the speed of my vessel.”

“Where did you disappear to for nearly a year?” He had to ask, had to know what happened to her after her escape.

For a few minutes, he was afraid she was not going to answer him. She glanced into his eyes, and he had the feeling she really wanted him to know. “The Watcher’s planetoid was drifting in the Non-Partisan Tract. He heard my distress call. Deurke’s planetoid is maneuverable, so he came to my aid. He used a highly advanced tractor beam on my ship to keep the Gehennans from capturing me. I stayed on with him for some time before I resurfaced to go to my family and rejoin the academy.”

“That is why you and Deurke know each other so well?”

“Deurke was then and always will be only a dear friend.”

He did not press her for any more details concerning her past with the Watcher. Part of Dalharan was glad no lasting intimate relationship existed between them. “As fast as you escalated up the ranks in the L.A.W. armada, with your cunning, I can see why the Gehennans feared you in battle. I am sorry for the loss that past skirmish cost you and your family. Thank you for sharing those memories with me, Admiral.”

“Thanks for listening.” She pushed back her chair. “I do not usually speak my thoughts to anyone. You are easy to talk to at times, Prince Dalharan. I think it best, though, that we call it a night.”

He rose with her. “It shall be daylight soon. Let me walk you to your quarters.”

She took the arm he proffered, but stayed quiet beside him as they made their way back to the palace. Dalharan remained as reflective as he felt her to be. They had shared much over the teasa, though little was drunk of the sweet brew. At the entrance to her quarters, she removed her arm from his.

“Would you mind if I left this parcel with you, Admiral?” he asked.

She shook her head. “If you have a quick moment, I would like to talk with you briefly about Raeschel and Kaderick.”

Though surprised by her invitation, he followed her into her rooms. She bade him sit down, but he refused when she offered to get him some refreshment. Tentatively, she sat on the edge of the couch, keeping space between them. He gave her a few moments to compose herself.

When those lovely eyes of hers looked at him again, he had to restrain his desire to pull her up into his arms. “What is it you needed to ask me?”

“How else has the Charj affected my sister, besides making her Prince Kaderick’s mate? I mean, she is only a quarter Krithnaran.”

“Deurke explained to us it was that trace of mixed genetics heightened by a rare chemical element in her that allowed the million in one chance which caused Kaderick to Charj her. She has displayed no side effects, but has been healthy and radiant since their full joining.”

Her look of relief, he felt, hid some underlying concern. “I am glad of that.”

“Our mutual friend the Watcher made sure of that. Raeschel and all of us trust his diagnosis completely. Do you not?” Dalharan hoped his prompting would make her tell him more about her feelings for the Watcher.

“Deurke has always proven himself with his scientific and medical analysis.” Her voice had a tinge of anger in it, which, Dalharan was sure, was directed at the Watcher for some reason. She immediately changed the subject. “The other subject I wished to speak of was the Sage Stone. I meant to ask Prince Vultar, but he has been busy. What’s the Sage Stone’s actual importance to the Gehennans?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “How did you surmise that?”

“The Gehennan I took it off of treated the Sage Stone as if the gemstone was more valuable than its monetary worth,” Rieka explained. “Why was it stolen?”

“The Sage Stone used to be a symbol of great power for my ancestors when both a Gehennan and an Aldairian once ruled together. I suppose that the Gehennans or Vaukeen thought the wedding would not take place if the Sage Stone was not present,” Dalharan told her.

“There is more, though,” she stated. “I read in the archives earlier that the Sage Stone is suppose to have mystical properties. Perhaps the Vaukeen hoped to use it to turn it into a weapon against our alliances as you and I figured days ago. Kathea mentioned she overheard them speaking in riddles of such an event.”

Dalharan ran a hand through his tousled locks. “You really do investigations well, Admiral. However, I do not believe the Sage Stone has magical powers. It has been dormant too long.”

“I read that the jewel in the Sage Stone is missing some kind of eye which is lost in the 'womb of the world'. Do you know what that means?”

Her curiosity pleased him. “I remember reading something about that myself. It could refer to a group of caverns. There are plenty of them in the old subterranean tunnels I told you about before. The prophecy itself is pretty cryptic also about this Eye. Do you suppose the Gehennans thought there was more to the legend?”

“It is possible.” She considered the idea. “Have they shown signs of believing more?”

“No. They have said they just wish the symbolic gesture again displayed at my up-coming wedding. I will give it to Princess Cassia as a token of our good intentions.”

“I am sorry you have to go through that.” Her voice was soft and low.

He studied her face and believed she meant her words. “That means a lot coming from you. I wish I had not instigated the damn contract again. Perhaps things could have been different between us.”

“I doubt it, Prince Dalharan. We had a short and sweet affair. Nothing else could have come of it. Try to let go of it, I have been managing to.” She spoke with emphasis to discourage him.

He also felt that she was hiding something vital from him. “I don’t believe you, Admiral. I sense your nervousness now.”

She clenched her fists, showing her sudden annoyance with him. No, not annoyance, but sexual frustration. “I think we should end this conversation now. Good night, Prince Dalharan.”

Dalharan stood up when she did, but he did not turn to leave. Instead he glared down at her. Her defiance and anger only inflamed his attraction to her. When he did not leave, he saw her put her hands on her shapely hips with an aggrieved flair.

“I asked you to leave,” she insisted again. “Now do so.”

“No. Admiral, these may be your visitor quarters, but Aldairia is my home. No one orders me around, anywhere,” he told her, narrowing his eyes.

“Fine, then I will go.” She moved to step around him.

Dalharan reached out and grabbed her by her upper arms. “Not yet, Rieka Hahl. You and I have unfinished business.”

“Don’t force me to thrash you again, Prince Dalharan,” Rieka threatened.

“You have had ample time to give me your worst, Admiral, but have only toyed with me.” He shifted his arms to hold her closer. He knew his grin and actions irritated her. He needed to find out if what he suspected was true. “Your heart is beating just as rapidly now as



when we first encountered each other aboard the *Oddessy*. I think you want more of the closeness we shared then.”

Her eyes narrowed, showing her displeasure. “You deceive yourself, Prince Dalharan.”

“Your eyes protest, Rieka Hahl, but I can feel the heat of your body telling me how intimate you wish to be with me right now.” He could not resist the temptation of teasing her. “You would have otherwise found a way out of my arms by now.”

When she opened her mouth to protest he lowered his head to hers, taking immediate possession of her mouth. He stifled her oath and was determined to melt away her cool resistance. Dalharan quickly stilled any retaliation she might have made when he used his heavier weight and made their bodies tumble down onto the couch.

He felt as if he had been drugged when he tasted the hot sweetness of her lips. She tried pulling away, but he used his free hand to hold her chin in place while he ravished her lips. His tongue delved deep into her luscious mouth, and he used all his male wiles to coax a response from her.

He felt her emit a low groan. When she arched against him, he knew she wanted this as much as he did. She missed him, and he hoped her body ached as agonizingly as his did. Upon feeling her response, Dalharan release a soft growl of exultation. She moved her arms to entangle her hands in his thick hair.

“Do not fight this attraction between us anymore, Rieka.”

Her only answer was to bring his mouth back down over hers. He responded greedily to her tempting kisses and fiery magnetism. He enfolded her closer into his arms so that their bodies were intimately closer. Dalharan leisurely caressed her backside, investigating every inch of her wondrous body. He felt Rieka quiver against him as she pressed herself as close to him as possible.

“Damn you, I need you inside me again.”

“And I need to feel you wrapped around me, Rieka. Let me fill you, pleasure you.” Her nod and her lips on his was all the answer he needed to make her his once more.

He unleashed kisses on her neck, her face, and her shoulders. His hands cupped her breasts. Rieka arched against him. Dalharan groaned as her hands slid up and down his body, inflaming him with her touch and her hot responses. His hands explored her more boldly and he could feel her perspiration mingling with his own as they both hurried and stripped out of their clothing between steamy kisses and

caresses. His left hand gently but firmly caressed her right breast as his other hand made its way down her sleek body. When his hand rested on her soft, feminine flesh, he heard her utter heated words of encouragement.

He kissed her deeply again, then trailed kisses over her bare neck and shoulders, trailing down to the hollow between her breasts. Aroused even further by her movements beneath him, he slid down her length, kissing every part of her upturned desirable body. Both his hands and mouth began to ignite uncontrollable fires within her.

He licked her wet slit deeply, suckling on her sensitive nub. Dalh pressed two fingers deeply into her slick pussy, sliding them into her deep passage. He loved the taste of her feminine desires and greedily sucked and lathed her folds as her hands knotted into his hair. He was glad she didn't refuse him, but wanted him as desperately as he wanted her. Soon he would fill her with his large cock, but first he would taste more of her delicious cunt.

Her hips arched against him, and she cried out his name, begging for his nearness.

Dalharan slowly trailed upwards, touching her with his hands, his lips, and his tongue. For a moment he pulled back to look deeply into her misty, lust-filled eyes. Within them he saw her intense desire for him, and a need so fierce, it equaled what he felt. He shivered intensely, then groaned at the invitation he felt her sending out to him empathically.

His body came back down to hers. His mouth bore more heavily over hers. His hands once more explored every inch of her, and he shivered as he felt her open up completely to him. Rieka's supple legs moved up around his hips. She arched against him, readying for his entrance. Her nails dug deeply into his buttocks as he pressed down over her.

Rieka cried out his name as he delved his manhood fully into her. She moved her legs higher up, allowing him further ease into her. His hips pressed firmly against her, and he shook uncontrollably above her. She brought his head down over hers, probing her tongue deeply into his mouth, enticing him further with her wanton response.

Dalharan's senses were now almost beyond coherency. His lips bruised hers with burning hunger, as his movements above her increased rapidly. He called out his need to be complete with her. Though his movements were now quite powerful within her, she felt no hurt, only extremely wild and wonderful pleasure. Their bodies

shuddered in unison as they felt the waves of flaming rapture wash over them. The waves became higher and higher, until they were washed away to the stars and beyond.

Rieka screamed out her burning desires, begging him to fuck her harder. Dalharan moved more fiercely over her, pumping as deep into her as he could without hurting her with his largeness. His head came up and then back down, and he felt as if the world around him were about to explode! A feeling of unity began surging forth from the two of them. It was as if the whole universe and beyond ceased to exist, save their explosive, raw sexual passions! Then they both shuddered violently against each other, with a final, bursting bout of pleasure they hit their zenith, universally shattering sensations. Dalharan grasped her to him as the final waves of pleasure washed over them. His mouth covered hers deeply and thoroughly once more.

Gently, he brought her back down to the world about them, and softly enfolded her within his arms. His legs stretched around hers, keeping her tightly embraced within the circle of his arms. He pressed her tired head against his wide chest as he turned to cuddle her close. Tenderly he stroked her hair, until she eased against him. He smiled to himself as he heard a deep sigh of contentment escape her, followed moments later by her deep breathing. Her head drooped further against his chest, until she lay slumbering next to him. The contentment of her dozing brought within him a deep peace. Dalharan mentally made a light blanket cover them, and then minutes later, he also dozed lightly.

The sleep didn't last long as he hardened, pushing into her again. She groaned beneath him as he shoved into her pussy once more. She bucked hard up against him, holding hard to his buttocks and pulling him down fiercely to her. Their mouths clamped together in a fierce kiss. He fucked her furiously, savoring every slide in and out of her wet cunt.

It was just as they were near completion, that a shrill from out of nowhere exploded in on the intensity of their heated movements and concentrated pleasure.

## Chapter Six

The sudden chime of the vid-com sent a cold shiver of reality over Dalharan. He jerked hard and fast into her as she pushed up to meet him in their finality. After their completion, he wondered that she possessed the strength to push him away and off of her. She jumped up and then quickly went over to the communications console in the room. He sat up, trying hard to compose himself.

She answered the call, but noted she didn't turn on the video part of the communication device, only the voice part. "Yes, Admiral Coyton?"

"Your father wished me to inform you he will arrive within a few days. Are security matters being taken care of for when the Gehennans will be on Aldairia next month?" First Admiral Coyton queried.

"They are being handled. Tell the President I will be there to greet him when he lands," Rieka answered.

"I shall be arriving in two days with your cousins. We'll discuss certain things later. Treat matters carefully, Rieka. Coyton Out."

"Your message is clear, Admiral Coyton. Signing off."

After ending the call, she turned her back on Dalharan. She grabbed her clothing, and just as hurriedly as him, got dressed. Rieka then walked stiffly towards the entrance. "I think you had better leave now, Prince Dalharan. It is best we forget this episode tonight and our indiscretions aboard my ship ever happened."

Dalharan clenched his fists wanting to knock that cool, authoritative chip off her shoulder. Instead he stood up and walked out of her quarters without once glancing back at her. Deep down, he knew that call from her fellow officer probably saved both of them from putting themselves at even more risk. Otherwise he might have

spent more time in her rooms; and both might have been caught somehow in each others arms, or seen going out of her rooms. Dejectedly, he sought the cool haven of his own private quarters.

\* \* \* \*

Almost two weeks had passed since Dalharan Charjed her. She had to find a solution to the dilemma soon. The two of them were getting more and more edgy with each passing day. It had been fucking hard to keep her hands off him after that quick bout of fantastic heated pleasure they'd shared. Neither of them could take the chance of being seen closely together or it could leak out to the Gehennans and others that she and Dalh were having an affair.

She need to spend time with her family and others to avoid him. The Watcher was still off-planet on an emergency. Her cousins Kathea and Eilea were due to arrive tomorrow with Admiral Coyton. All she had to do was get through the next twenty-four hours without bumping into Dalharan. She spent time with her sister and Prince Kaderick and Carter. Seeing the happiness that radiated from Raeschel and Kaderick made her glad she'd told Raeschel everything.

In a moment alone with her, Kaderick mentioned that Raeschel and he discussed things and that he informed his father. The king had not told Dalharan or Vultar yet, for both had been busy of late with royal duties. Neither one had been able to get away to join them today. Rieka was at least thankful Dalharan couldn't. Though happy to spend time with her siblings, Rieka needed something else to occupy herself. Later that day after she was away from her kin, she found a way.

She'd been dwelling on the Sage Stone since she and Dalharan discussed it. Her gut instinct told her that there had been another reason for Almeagar and General Kraahk wanting the gem. When she briefly examined it on Tigon, she fleetingly noted that there was an indentation in the otherwise unremarkable blue stone. Maybe the center of it was cut out for some reason. Perhaps that's why the jewel did not have magical properties or whatever the Gehennans and Vaukeen were looking for.

Rieka opted for doing further research on the magic gem's Eye and the Womb of the World in the National Archives. After assessing the insufficient data she came across, Rieka ventured down in the lower regions of the Archives, to the ancient map section. Carefully, she was assisted by one of the maps clerks. Finding the map she wanted on the old subterranean tunnels Dalharan once told her about,

she studied them carefully. An idea formed in her mind, and after she left the Archives, she acted upon the thought.

Though it was early evening, there were still traces of daylight left. She felt she could at least do some preliminary explorations. Retrieving some equipment from the *Oddessy*, she headed for an older part of Kiir. None of the buildings were dilapidated even though they were old. The government of Aldairia made sure their people did not suffer in any way possible. She admired that about the Aldairians.

There was not much activity in the district she walked through. Dressed in a dull-green jumpsuit, she blended in better as a civilian. Rieka found the building she was looking for. The old edifice stood about three stories high and not in use. Rieka figured since the Aldairians had more improved tunnel systems for public use, this old station house became a relic of a former era. It would make a marvelous museum some day. She made sure no one was around and entered from a side entrance. The building was huge inside. With several sets of stairs leading down into the more ancient subway system, she could see evidence of when the place once had lots of activity. When she looked at the old maps, she had been delighted to find this old way-station. The biggest one was not far from the palace, but it was part of the Aldairian Archives and had also been turned into a museum.

Turning on a porta-light, Rieka made her way down one of the stairwells. She briefly glanced at the walls, seeing posters and pictures of times long passed. Whimsically, she thought that this place was something like Grand Central Station back on Earth, now a national historical treasure and museum. Yet this building was only about a third that size. The sublevels here were blocked off from the newer ones. Rieka figured she wouldn't have any problems searching the subterranean caverns below. She found out in her research that the tunnels were built upon, and twisted through, some ancient caverns that were around long before Kiir achieved its greatness.

Rieka saw old rail tracks and followed them until they ended at a blocked-off wall. She knew that the older systems would have several such stopping points. However, from studying the map, she had seen old mechanical rooms near the closed-off points. These had stairs leading even further down into the depths of the tunnels. She found one and went down several flights of moldy stairs until she came to another blocked wall. There was a small hole in the wall that had not

been covered up. Rieka figured some ancient explorer used this very entrance to search the caverns below.

She pointed the light through the large hole, peering into the darkness. On the other side she saw another small cavern with a tunnel that sloped downwards. Gingerly, she stepped through the opening. Rieka walked carefully upon loose gravel. Turning up the brightness of the porta-light, she tentatively went farther down the rock-hewn tunnel. Rieka walked in silence for about an hour before her empathic senses told her she was being followed. She turned off her porta-light.

Hiding behind a bend in the tunnel, Rieka didn't have long to wait. Soft footsteps echoed faintly off the walls, but she still heard the hard crunching of feet tromping on the graveled floor. The being was big even if he tried being quiet. Rieka jumped out from her hiding place and attacked her stalker. He cried out something to her just as he landed on his back.

"I should have known." Rieka stared down at Dalharan. "Why did you follow me? I'm doing my damndest to stay away from you."

He grinned up at her. "I know."

"You are insufferable, Dalharan." Rieka kept her distance from him and turned her porta-light back on.

Dalharan put a hand against his eyes and adjusted them to the sudden brightness. "Get that out of my face, please."

Letting out a groan of displeasure, she swung the lamp off Dalharan's face and backed away as he got up. "Well?"

"Ked said you were preoccupied earlier and asked him questions about the old tunnels. Then I went to the archives and saw you leaving from there. I just had a feeling you were curious about the mystery surrounding the Sage Stone." He dusted off his brown cover-all. "I think you should have asked for mine or Vultar's help. We know these ancient tunnel systems pretty well. It would have been much safer."

"I told you before—I work better alone." Rieka emphasized the last words.

"You are not doing well trying to stay away from me." His knowing grin irritated her. "These old caves are dangerous. You could have at least brought your brother with you, in case something happened."

Rieka hated to admit he was right, but did not want to tell him so. “Fine, you can join me. Just promise honestly, you’ll keep your hands to yourself.”

For a moment he studied her seriously. “I am usually good at keeping my promises when I make them. I will keep my amorous hands off you while we are exploring.”

“See that you do, Dalharan,” Rieka threatened, “especially if you want me to know I can trust you to keep a promise.”

Rieka could see her words hurt him, but he quickly covered up the fact. “Very well. How about telling me what you have come up with?”

She explained her theories to him. “Perhaps this Eye is the power source that was told about in the myths. All the pieces of the prophecy and mystery surrounding the Sage Stone point to this. I started thinking about what the Womb of the World was and came across references to a cavern that has several tunnels leading out of it. The maps I studied showed a set of gaps below this building.”

“I think you are looking in the wrong area. Before you contradict me, hear me out.” Dalharan said.

“Go on.” Since he knew more about Aldairian history, Rieka felt he had a point.

“I, too, went back over the data. The Womb of the World was the old name given for the main central station. Had you asked, I could have told you that. The chasm you seek is below the palace.”

“And I suppose you know exactly where it is?” she asked.

“Yep. Told you my brother and I explored the tunnels excessively as children. Our mother loved to regale us with stories about its uses and myths. Shall we return to the palace now?” Dalharan’s smirk widened.

Letting out a huff of air, Rieka went with him back to the surface. She did not talk to him all the way to the palace, but had the feeling he was pleased with finding a way to be in her company. Why the hell was her luck going downhill recently? If she were more than a few hours in his provocative company, she’d turn into a damn neurotic, sex-starved, clinging-vine woman.

Once inside the palace, Dalharan led Rieka to the king’s private den. She was curious at his choice, but kept quiet, feeling he knew what he was doing. He grinned at her, as if he had a deep secret. He moved over to one of the tall bookcases and pushed in a book. To her surprise, the cabinet swung open to reveal a hidden entrance.



“Come on, I want to show you a family secret.” He disappeared through the doorway and she followed.

The door closed behind them and Rieka found herself in a dimly lit room. Dalharan moved over to one wall and touched a small panel there. The room instantly was flooded with light. Rieka stared around the small room, seeing a large table in the center with maps upon it, several chairs, another doorway, and the entrance that they had just used.

“What is this place?”

“Many centuries ago, this was the King of Aldairia’s war preparations room. It also served as a way for the royal family to come and go as they pleased. Look at the maps on the table. They are not as old as the ones in the archives.”

Rieka tentatively touched the maps spread out on the table and perused them. “These are no older than twenty-five years. The yellowing is not that deep.”

He smiled at her. “Vultar and I made those as kids. Come.”

He went to the other door and opened it for them. Rieka followed him out of the map room and down a landing that led beneath the palace. At the bottom of the stairs, she found a cavern entrance. Rieka turned on her porta-light again and surveyed the area. The cavernous room led off in three different directions.

“This is where Vul, mother, and I use to start our treks. The first one leads to the subterranean room I told you about, that is nicknamed the Womb of the World. Shall we explore there and see if we can find this Eye of the Sage Stone?” Dalharan explained to her.

“Lead the way, Dalharan.” Rieka was just as exited as he to delve into the mystery surrounding the Sage Stone.

Rieka followed him through several tunnels and caverns that were just as beautiful and deadly looking as the ones on Tigon. He finally led her to a subterranean room that had tunnels leading out of it from all directions. Dalh motioned her to carefully follow him. Rieka fell in awe over the deep hole in the center of the enormous chasm he carefully pointed out.

“Vultar, our mother, and I explored the pit here years ago. This is the Womb of the World. The many tunnels here lead in all directions.” His gold-flecked eyes lit up with humor. “Would you rather climb down or let me transport us below.”

“Thanks, but climbing will do. Not outta shape, are you?” She teased back.

“You know differently, Rieka,” he countered. “Come, it will be safer to transport. I will do no more than hold you close.”

“See that that’s all you do.” Rieka went into his arms and he curled one slightly around her waist. Seconds later they disappeared.

To her frustrated regret, he let her go once they stabilized below. Rieka turned up the portable lamp’s brightness more. She carefully searched around the rock-hewn room, seeing no exits or entrances to it. Reflective metal and crystal shown in some places on the cavern’s walls. Rieka pulled out a small device from her pack and fiddled with its operating buttons.

“What is that?” Dalharan asked, curious.

“This is a gem-recorder. Gems have frequencies that can be picked up and recorded and analyzed with this little device. Right now I’m picking up several traces of what is known on Earth as crystals, gold particles and topaz.”

He moved closer to her, watching her toy with the machine. “The Sage Stone’s jewel was made of a rare blue, psyfire-stone that is found in only a few places on Aldairia. Most pockets of it were mined out or destroyed somehow. Picking up anything else?”

Rieka looked up at him and smiled. “I think we have hit payload. Over there in that small formation of rocks, with the several gleaming crystals poking out of it. Come on.”

There were two large stones and several larger ones in the formation she pointed out. Rieka gave Dalharan a small silver object and instructed him in its use. She used a similar one herself and started examining the rocks. He did likewise.

“These jewel diggers make it easy to burrow them out. I think the crystals would make a beautiful present for Raeschel.”

“Leave them. Raeschel has enough jewels. We are looking for something else.” Rieka gently reprimanded him, though she smiled when she did.

“Okay. Find anything yet? What about with that gem-recorder?” He asked.

“No, a trace awhile ago, but it seems to have died out. Let’s look a bit longer. The Eye has to be here somewhere,” she insisted.

Rieka was glad she didn’t give up when she heard the jewel sensitizer bleep again. She looked into a small rock near her and saw an indentation on the side, big enough for someone to stick their hand in. Tentatively she flashed her light into the hole. Something gleamed for a moment. Rieka reached her hand into the hole and felt around,

bumping against an object. Feeling a little bit more, she clamped her fingers around it and brought the object out of the hole.

It was a small brown case, quite dusty and old. A small, gold eye-shaped symbol adorned the top of the case. Dalharan's eyes brightened with interest. The two of them sat on the ground and looked at the case with awe. Rieka held the gem-recorder next to it, and the device bleeped and shimmered. Rieka instinctively knew that the Eye of the Sage Stone must be inside. Her instincts heightened in agreed with the science instrument.

"Looks like we have it, Dalharan. Would you like the honor of opening this?" Rieka handed the case out to him.

Dalharan pushed the case back at her. "You found the Eye, you open the box."

"Thanks." Rieka flipped up the top and stared down into it with Dalharan.

A tiny, oval-shaped blue-green stone stared back up at them. Its center held a small bit of inlaid gold in the shape of an eye. Rieka wondered if the small gemstone contained paranormal powers. Tentatively she reached out a finger and caressed the smooth surface of the ancient stone. The jewel lit up at her touch. Rieka and Dalharan both jerked back with an instinctive, wary reaction.

"I felt a psychic vibration emanate from the Stone, though it was you who touched it. I can only conclude it does have some psychic properties."

"I guess so, Dalharan," Rieka stated automatically, immersed in confusion she could not identify. "Maybe if we put it back in the Sage Stone we will find out more of its abilities. Is the Sage Stone back in the Archives or in the Museum?"

"No." He answered her. "We have it in safekeeping within the palace. We can go there now."

"I do not think so." An eerie voice echoed in the cavern.

Startled, both of them glanced up, seeing a humanoid alien with dark green hair and eyes. Rieka remembered the alien from the Tigon mission. Fikk. stared menacingly down at them, holding a ray gun in his hand. He was dressed in a similar belted, dark cover-all like the one he wore when they first met him. Rieka instinctively closed her hand over the jewel and Dalharan put an arm around her protectively.

"How the hell did you get here? You disappeared on Tigon." Dalharan exclaimed.

Rieka inwardly identified what it was about the alien man's aura that felt familiar. "I know who you are now, Fikk. Or should I say Morkruul."

"I do not care what you call me, Admiral. Hand over the jewel. I need it to carry out my own plans." Morkruul did not bother to change his disguise.

"So you were in league with General Kraahk, Morkruul. Is Almeagar also in on this?" Rieka slowly stood up.

"He does not have the intelligence and Kraahk was getting in my way. We wanted two different things." Morkruul gloated. "Since I am going to kill you two I do not care if you know. Kraahk did not want the reunion of Aldairia and Gehenn. I was not too keen on it either, but I had other things in mind. You see I should have been the true ruler of Gehenn. It would have been easier had you stayed off Tigon and let the Vaukeen invade. However, I came up with an alternate plan."

"Do not keep us in suspense, Morkruul," Rieka edged him on. "At least finish this sordid tale. What plan?"

"I never knew what my cousin saw in you, Admiral. It does not matter. After I kill you two and when they find your bodies, Almeagar will call off the contract. I will kill him, marry Cassia, and rule Gehenn. Simple, a brilliant plan."

"Why do you want the Sage Stone?" Dalharan asked the disguised Gehennan.

"It truly does have psi-properties. The old Mysteeks and my ancestors the Jahennans joined forces before the Change and put power into the Sage Stone. It was the first peace that our two races had, and the last. But that does not matter. Your gutted bodies shall soon be found. And with my knowing of the jewel's true worth, I will have the power of the Sage Stone to do as I wish."

"Not likely, Morkruul," another voice echoed into the cavern.

Morkruul jerked around ready to fire. Rieka was relieved when Prince Vultar and her cousin Eilea both fired on the Gehennan before he could use his own weapon. Morkruul groaned loudly and at the same time his hand hit a button on the belt of his cover-all. Afterwards, the alien disappeared into nothingness. Vultar and Eilea rushed over to Rieka and Dalharan.

"It is a good thing Doctor Sairius and I saw you two go into the old map room, Dalharan." Vultar glanced at the two. "I was wondering what happened to that jerk."

“Too bad we had our pistols set on mild stun. The bastard deserved to die,” Eilea said vehemently and moved closer to Rieka.

Rieka knew her cousin had had harsh dealings with Morkruul, but kept that to herself. “You arrived early, Eilea. I’m glad. I agree, it is too bad we did not kill Morkruul.”

“I saw teleportation particles around his body. He transported out of here just as you shot him, brother,” Dalharan said.

“I sensed something about him,” Rieka put in. “This time I remembered where I felt his aura from. We will have to search the planet for Morkruul.”

“More than likely he has a ship and a partner waiting to pull him out of here,” Vultar suggested. “I do not think Morkruul will bother us any more now that we have thwarted his plans.”

“Hopefully so, Prince Vultar,” Eilea said then looked at Rieka. “Admiral Coyton got us here a few hours ago. Prince Vultar was kind enough to help me look for you. We eventually tried the drawing room. He bid me to come with him. I am glad I did. Are you okay?”

“Yes. You handled that well, Eilea,” Rieka said, looking speculatively at her cousin. Although covered from head to toe in a dark, cowled robe-gown that hid Eilea’s features, Rieka had the feeling there was something Eilea was hiding.

“How did you get down here so fast, Vultar?” Dalharan asked.

Vultar grinned. “I can not believe you forgot the short cut to this chasm that mother found.” He pointed to the opposite wall from where they were. “Behind that boulder over there is the only way into this room except from above or teleportation.”

Dalharan shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Somehow it slipped my mind. I told you, Admiral, that our mother use to join us in exploring these caves. It is a good thing you remembered that opening, Vultar.”

“I came through just seconds before he was preparing to fire on you. Glad I was in time,” Vultar added.

“Thank you, Prince Vultar and Eilea, for saving our hides. How about we all get out of here and see if this shard fits into the Sage Stone,” Rieka suggested.

“I second that. I do not like dark, cold places,” Eilea added.

The four took the way out that Vultar and Eilea entered through. Less than an hour later, they were back in the hidden map room. Vultar went over to a wall unit and took down a box that had been sitting on the shelf. He pulled out a key from his robe’s pocket and

inserted it into the small case. Opening the lid, he pulled out the Sage Stone pendant and brought it over to Rieka and Dalharan. Vultar pushed the gemstone towards her.

“Go ahead, Rieka, you found it.” Dalharan emphasized with words, as his brother had with a gesture.

“Seems you're destined to get to the mystery of this Sage Stone, Rieka.” Eilea peered closer at the pendant. “Interesting properties. I'd like to examine it sometime, if I may?”

“Perhaps you should do so before I connect the two pieces, Eilea,” Rieka said. “There's something about the stone that doesn't settle well with my empathic senses.”

“The Master Watcher mentioned to me, Doctor Sairius, that you are an expert on ancient gemstones,” Dalharan said. “If Rieka's instincts are sending her a warning, it might be best if you did examine it first.”

Rieka took the pendant and laid it on the table. She pulled the Eye out of the tiny old case, setting the container to one side. Glancing first from one prince to the other, she gave the eye-shaped stone to the Earth scientist. Something strong and warm passed quickly between Rieka and her cousin. Rieka jerked her hand as if she'd been stung, but noticed Eilea felt nothing.

Perhaps she had been imagining things. She shrugged the feeling off as Eilea closely examined the jewel. Rieka was only slightly startled as her methodical cousin studied the stone for a few moments before reaching to insert the gem into the Sage Stone. Another feeling of dread encompassed Rieka just before the ancient medallion glow fiercely in her cousin's hands. A small surge of power burst into Eilea before the jewel quieted down again. Eilea dropped the jewel on the table. She swayed, and Dalharan caught her in his arms.

“Eilea, look at me. Are you okay?” Rieka reached out to examine her cousin.

“Is she all right, brother?” Vultar exclaimed.

Eilea pulled out of Dalharan's hold and pushed Rieka's hand away. “I'm fine. There is something uncanny about that damn stone. Lock the damn thing up before it does any damage.”

“I would like to know what just happened, Doctor Sairius,” Dalharan said. “It may have adverse results on you.”

“I have to agree with Dalharan,” Vultar added.

Rieka picked up the chain, careful not to touch the stone. “I agree with Eilea. The Sage Stone is unlike anything I've felt before.”

"So that's how you knew I was psychic when we first met," Dalharan exclaimed. "You have an inherent ability to feel psychic power from a person or object."

"Yes, I do, but that doesn't matter right now. This thing is dangerous in the wrong hands. Perhaps for anyone that handles this jewel," Rieka stated heatedly. "Now lock it up."

"Do it, Vultar," Dalharan said, glancing at Rieka curiously. "We will discuss this later."

"Very well, brother." Vultar cautiously picked up the stone by the chain, and quickly put it in the bigger case.

After it was locked up, Rieka took one quick glance at the two men before escorting her cousin out of the hidden room. She knew by Eilea's nervousness that the scientist did not want to stay around and discuss the situation with the Aldairians. Rieka inwardly felt that the damn jolt of energy that shot through Eilea had scared the daylights out of her cousin, just like the Charj had Rieka. There was something decidedly odd about the jewel, and Rieka personally did not want anything to do with it again. Rieka headed for her own quarters with Eilea, hoping to find a way to settle her kin's frazzled nerves.

\* \* \* \*

Dalharan made good on his promise and kept his distance, even after the two's trek beneath the city and the incident in the map room. Admiral Hahl's parents and his distant cousin Deurke Sol arrived the next morning. With her obligations to her family and First Admiral Coyton, and his own duties, there were many times during the next few days, he did not see Rieka. When they did appear in the same vicinity he saw she was inclined to keep herself from being in close proximity with him. Tonight, though, there was little the two of them could do from spending time in each other's company.

Both families and some close friends of the engaged couple were gathered in the Demmonarris' large drawing room to present their wedding gifts to the young couple. The wedding was in two days. Right now, all concerned were sitting or standing amiably around the cozy conversation area, watching with pleasure as Raeschel and Kaderick lovingly helped each other open the gifts. The last gift they opened was the one Rieka and he had picked out for the couple.

"Your turn, love." Raeschel handed Kaderick the small package.

Dalharan's youngest brother tried to hide a blush. Kaderick first glanced at him then at Admiral Hahl, and then back at Raeschel before he spoke. "This is from Dalharan and your sister."

"This should be interesting," Carter commented.

Kaderick opened the case and showed Raeschel first. After her exclamation of joy, he showed the contents to all. Dalharan, not far from the two, glanced at the bracelets more closely. One was a bit larger than the other. They were of a rare hue of psi-fire blue, trimmed with the brightest star-gold Dalharan had ever seen.

"Those are similar to our own, Jon," Lydea Hahl, Admiral Hahl's mother, exclaimed as she held out her left wrist to show everyone the bracelet she wore.

"Yes, they are." The President Elect extended his own left wrist. Dalharan had not missed the strange glance the L.A.W. high-official bestowed upon his eldest daughter. "It is one of the few things I remember liking about living in a female dominated society on Krithnar. I believe you and Raeschel will be happy with them, as Lydea and I are, Prince Kaderick."

"Just like our parents have experienced, Raeschel," Rieka spoke up, "the bracelets should bring you both luck. The bands are a lasting representation of a couple's undivided love and the sharing of their hearts and souls. With them, your mate will always feel your love, no matter what anguish may come between you, or how far you may be apart. If you look long enough into the largest psi-fire gem on the bracelets, you will always be able to see an image of your life-mate. Legends of Krithnar say that if you proclaim divine love for your mate as you exchange them, there will never be any sorrow or grief in your lives together."

"You listened well to the tales I told you when you were younger, Rieka," Jon Hahl said.

Dalharan saw the Admiral look upon the President Elect speculatively before answering. "I have always listened to you, father."

Dalharan jerked his head around to view Lydea Hahl when she did a sharp intake. The older woman's blue-gray eyes became misty. For a few seconds, he noted all the other Hahls and their relatives and friends were astounded by the Admiral's simple statement.

It was Raeschel who broke the awkward silence. "I am glad someone got my sister interested in shopping, Dalharan. Rieka, the two of you could not have chosen a better gift. Thank you both."



All eyes then turned to Kaderick as he knelt before Raeschel. "I would be honored, my princess, if we exchanged these upon our wrists."

Raeschel looked upon him with glorious affection. "I love you with all my heart and soul, Kaderick." Tears slowly fell onto her cheeks as she took the larger bracelet, placing it upon his wrist.

Kaderick took the smaller one, putting it on Raeschel's slender arm. "I give my heart and soul into your keeping, my Raeschel. I love you far more than there are stars in the heavens."

After Kaderick's pledge, Raeschel moved a hand to caress his cheek. The couple's faces reddened a bit when everyone applauded their warm moment. His brother rose and pulled Raeschel to her feet. The two thanked everyone again for their gifts and moved to sit on a lounge.

Dalharan held up the glass of wine he had in his hand and made a toast to the couple. "May all your days be filled with the happiness I see in both your faces and feel in your hearts."

"I second that," Rieka commented.

Others in the room joined in on the toast and then broke apart to mingle with each other. He noticed Admiral Hahl moving over to the small game table set up on the opposite side of the room. Briefly, he saw her commanding officer First Admiral Coyton talking to her. After the Earth Officer left her, Dalharan slowly made his way over to Rieka and sat down. She did not look up at him but reached out and moved a Sec-star chess game piece.

Dalharan let out a soft chuckle of selfish pleasure when she still did not glance up at him. She was deliberately keeping her mind entirely on the strategy of the sport. He vigilantly watched her moves. She intended to keep him from stalemating the game. Nor was she going to let him win, just like on the *Odyssey*.

She had taken half his pieces when he saw someone near the table. "My daughter is better at Sec-star chess than you are, Prince Dalharan."

Dalharan glanced up at the President Elect of L.A.W. "She is quite ruthless, sir."

Jon Hahl laughed. "That is another aspect she learned from me."

Admiral Hahl glanced up then. Again Dalharan saw mixed emotions flicker in their eyes. Other than their tallness and large-boned structure the two favored very little. Had she the President's

bright purple eyes, yellow-gold hair and golden skin tone, she might have passed as a Krithnaran.

He did not dwell on the unusual thought as Rieka spoke up. “Obstinacy also runs in the family.”

For the first time that evening he actually saw Jon Hahl smile at his eldest daughter with warmth. “Yes, I learned it from you, Rieka. Excuse me, Prince Dalharan, I see your father beckoning to me.”

Dalharan turned his attention back to Rieka. “Was your brother’s death what caused the rift between the two of you?”

“Yes.” She turned her face from him and looked back down at the game. “Your move.”

Dalharan took the hint that she did not want to talk about the incident. He moved a piece and became once more engrossed in the game. It was some time later that he finally leaned back and finally admitted to defeat. He would insist on a rematch with her soon.

“Admiral, this is one of our most enjoyable games.”

Her eyes were misty when she looked at him, and her lips turned up in a warm smile. “I agree. Only this time you actually kept playing Sec-star longer.”

She was such a mercurial woman. One moment she could show a mask of indifference, the next deadly anger or intense passion. A man would never tire of living his life loving Rieka Hahl. His heart started beating erratically as he realized just how intense his love for her was.

“Are you ill, Dalharan? Your face is pale.”

Startled, Dalharan glanced up to see Deurke there.

“I am fine, cousin. Just a bit tired.” He moved his chair back and stood up.

The Watcher motioned towards the game. “I should like a game with Rieka if you are through.”

He stepped aside and let Deurke Sol have the chair. “Thank you, Admiral. Maybe we can have a rematch another time.”

“Perhaps.” She simply said then turned away from him to begin a game with Deurke.

Dalharan moved across the room to speak with his brother Vultar. Dalharan had been postponing the inevitable, about speaking with Vultar concerning security preparations for his forthcoming marriage. With Raeschel and Kaderick being married soon, he could delay it no longer.

Vultar stood next to Carter Hahl when Dalharan approached. Carter moved away after a few seconds of polite small talk. The two

brothers stood companionably quiet for some moments, watching the gestures and movements of the others in the room. Vultar was like Dalharan in that respect. The two always studied people.

“First Kaderick, soon myself. Careful, or you will be next, Vultar.”

Vultar laughed. “It is not marriage that is on my mind right now.”

Dalharan quickly picked up his brother’s feelings. “Do not tell me you are looking for another conquest?”

He saw Vultar roll his eyes upwards. “I should learn to keep my thoughts and emotions in check around you, Dalharan.”

“You have never been able to, Vul. One day someone is going to break your heart. I thought you might be interested in Kathea.”

“She’s nice enough, but not my type. Besides I think someone else is interested in her. Like Admiral Coyton.” Vultar nodded in another direction.

Dalharan looked across the large room, seeing the amiable First Admiral in deep conversation with Kathea Sairius. “I think they suit. She did not seem to be peeved with our antics.”

“True. Every woman I have been around or with physically has stayed friends with me. Like you believe, I do not think the fates intend me to find what Kaderick has found. So I find my bliss in sampling around.” Vultar chuckled.

“Who is the poor unsuspecting soul this time?” Dalharan shook his head at his brother’s flair for womanizing.

At the direction Vultar nodded towards, he glanced over at the game table where the Watcher and Admiral Hahl were still engrossed in their game. Standing near them was a woman dressed in a sparkling blue robe-style gown that covered her completely from head to toe, much like the Watcher’s somber robes did him. It was Doctor Eilea Sairius.

“You just met Doctor Sairius yesterday.” Dalharan stated.

“I have found her fascinating since we first met. She seems nervous around me, though,” Vultar said.

“I wonder why?” Dalharan chuckled. “Must be something in the male Demmonarris genes to have both my brothers interested in women from the same family.”

“You do not get off that lightly, brother. I know Admiral Hahl still makes your eyes light up whenever you are around her,” Vultar teased.

“Nonsense, we realized we are not affected by each other anymore,” Dalharan said more brusquely than intended. “I came to talk to you about the Gehennans arrival. They are due here by the end of the month. What security measures have you and the Admirals planned?”

Vultar’s knowing grin irked him. “I did not think you were in this much of a hurry to get married. You can not lie to me, Dalh.”

Dalharan felt like punching his brother. “Quit being impertinent.”

“You may be fooling yourself and others, but not me. I can always marry the Gehennan wretch and take over the throne if you find Admiral Hahl’s the one for you. Think about it before the Gehennans arrive.”

Vultar walked away from him. Damn meddlesome kin, he thought. Dalharan could not allow anyone else to realize he had such an intimate interest in the admiral. He had to be more careful how he acted around Rieka. The rest of the evening, he deliberately avoided her.

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“Your game is slipping, Rieka.”

She looked up at the Watcher and frowned. Most of the time, Deurke could tell when something bothered her. “You’re just better than last time we played.”

“Others may not see through you, Rieka, but I do. Why are you edgy about being around me again? You have been avoiding me since my return to Aldairia.” His indistinct, shadowy face could show none of the emotions she was picking up from him.

“I did not feel we had much to say to each other, so quit sensing me, Deurke.” Rieka made a play and psychically closed off her emotions to him.

“Where you are concerned it is an instinct with me, Rieka. I can not turn off the subconscious use of speculation, no more than I can stop caring for you.”

She fretted as he deftly took a Sub-Pawn from her. Rieka retaliated with a brusque move in taking his Royal Guard Knight. “Why can you not give up on us, Deurke?”

“I told you several times, over the years, that only you can cure my curse. I do not know how or why, just that you are my salvation, Rieka. I had hoped there would come a day when you fully realized we were meant to be together.”

“As I told you when we broke up, Deurke, it will not happen. I can no longer care for you other than as a dear friend.”

He let out a sigh, she felt, of resignation. “I know, Rieka. But a man cannot help but wanting. Do not worry, I will not press anything upon you while I am here. Your turn.”

She too let out a sigh, but did not make a play. “Deurke, I can not give my heart to anyone. I think you know better than any other soul the reason for that.”

“I know that when you realize the truth of what is in your heart, it will not be what you expected. Just be careful and be happy, Rieka.”

Before she could reply to his odd words, Eilea strolled up to the game table. “Rieka, your gift to Raeschel was lovely. She and Prince Kaderick are still in awe over the bracelets.”

“You and Dalharan did well with the bracelets, Rieka,” Deurke said softly. “But then he has always had good taste in...things.”

Rieka ignored the Watcher’s inspired taunt and kept her eyes on her cousin. “How are you feeling, Eilea?”

“Deurke examined the Sage Stone further for me, but his own powers did not pick up any disturbance in it or within me.”

“I would have told you that had you asked, Rieka,” Deurke said then glanced up at Eilea. “If you feel anything untoward, my mental sequence will be open to you.”

“I appreciate that, Deurke. Rieka, we must talk later. Perhaps on the morrow?”

Rieka nodded and Eilea moved away. Rieka turned back to the game. She made a move, placing a piece on the highest level of the six tiers. Deurke’s cowl swished with the slow movements he made when he looked over the board.

“Check,” he said, moving a bit next to one of hers.

“Space Queen topples Star Prince. Checkmate.” Rieka snapped a game piece next to his. “You lose, Deurke.”

“I know, Rieka,” he said and rose. “You have made me very well aware of that fact all too often. Good night.”

She blew out a frustrated breath of air after he walked away. Why didn’t he understand she could not care for him? Or for anyone, she added silently. The fates and her own fears would not allow her heart to unleash the secrets she held within her soul. Rieka arose, politely made her excuses to others and trudged back to her rooms, knowing she was in store for another sleepless night here on Aldairia.

\* \* \* \*

Rieka sat with her mother and the Sairius cousins as Raeschel did the last fitting for her wedding gown. Raeschel was a beautiful sight to see, and Rieka knew the younger woman would shine at the wedding. The five women were on an outing today since it had been so long since they were all together at one time. After Raeschel changed out of the gown, they left the dressmaker's shop to browse elsewhere.

As usual, Rieka noticed a few Aldairian security personnel following in their wake. With all the events going on, Rieka knew the action became necessary. She was just glad she didn't use personal guards and had always been more than able to defend herself or others. The other women were use to it also and just ignored the guards. Rieka's mother and Kathea, who enjoyed shopping as much as Raeschel, tugged on Eilea's arm to make the staid scientist join them in browsing a shop that housed textiles with unusual properties. Rieka and Lydea Hahl stood in a quiet part of the shop, keeping out of the way.

"Poor Eilea," Lydea Hahl laughed, "she's never liked appearing in public despite her being such a famous scientist. However, she looks fascinated by those glowing fabrics your cousin and sister are fawning over."

"More likely she is groaning inside about having to shop." Rieka chuckled and then said, "Mother, you are looking well. I haven't had much time with you since your arrival. Is the...Is father's health fine?"

"Yes, daughter, he is well. You are a different matter, though." Her mother's knowing eyes missed nothing. "Have we drifted so far apart that you can not come to me anymore, Rieka?"

"These last few weeks have just been rough, mother. I just tire of constant duty." Rieka answered.

"Have you considered resigning then?" Lydea asked.

Rieka looked from her kin to her mother. "Has Joseph been talking to you about me?"

"It is Coyton's duty to speak to me about security matters since I am Security Advisor and personal Counselor to the President. Rieka, you are one of the foremost officers in the Legion of Allied Worlds. What you do affects a lot of people." The older woman said. "Still, he only briefly mentioned that you thought about it. I have not told your father or anyone else."

“I have considered resigning. Though I still bear the title, I no longer command a fleet of vessels since a year after we stopped the Vaukeen.” Rieka reached out and linked her arm through her mother’s. “Let’s stroll around by the shelves at the end of the shop. Too many customers are coming in.”

“Everyone is shopping at the last minute for all the festivities coming up.” Lydea moved slowly around the aisles with Rieka. “I understand from Prince Kaderick that all over Aldairia people will celebrate, whether they come to the capital or not. I am happy to be here for Raeschel, but to tell you the truth, I hate these drawn-out affairs. Kathea and Eilea’s parents did, too. You and Eilea are a lot like my late sister and your father’s elder brother. They were very serious people.”

Rieka had to laugh. “Mother, all of you use to tell me Jon-tu and I were incorrigible cut-ups.”

Lydea grinned. “That was when you two were younger. He would have agreed you are much too serious these days.”

She squeezed her mother’s arm affectionately. “I miss him, too, mother. You and Raeschel are so like him. I take more after father.”

The shorter woman swung her head to look up at Rieka. “Rieka, that is the nicest thing I’ve heard you say about Jon-Senior in a long time.”

“There were so many heated arguments after I resurfaced from being captured by the Gehennans. While you and Father are here, we need to make time to talk, Mother.” Rieka removed her arm from Lydea’s. “The others are looking for us.”

“I should like that, child. Come let us get back to the palace. I do not wish to be late for luncheon with the royal family.”

Rieka nodded and followed her mother. They joined up with the others and left the shop. Lydea was very adept at getting Raeschel out of her shopping mode and steering her back towards the palace. This time, Rieka dropped back to talk with Eilea, whom Rieka could emotionally sense was a bit frazzled.

“Raeschel and Kathea are a whirlwind together,” Rieka teased.

“Who do you think got Raeschel interested in the first place. Kathea always hated being the younger sister and attached herself to Raeschel as an older one, Eilea said, flustered. “Rieka, I’m glad we have a few moments to talk.”

“Are you feeling something other than what you told me or Deurke last night? The Aldairians have not bothered you about the Sage Stone episode that I’ve noted.”

“Stop trying to be a bodyguard to me, Rieka.” Eilea admonished. “Other than my senses being heightened, nothing adverse has occurred.”

“You know you should have let me examine you right away.” Rieka said. “I have a med-background, even if I’m not on par with you in the scientific field.

“I don’t like being scoped any more than you do, Rieka.”

Rieka slowed her pace to match her cousin’s. “Being examined for health reasons is different from being interrogated with mind probes.”

“I know. I suffered through Morkruul’s sadistic invasions just as you endured Almeagar’s unwanted attentions.”

“I’m sorry, Eilea.” Rieka felt contrite as Eilea reminded her of her cousin’s morbid experience that happened many years ago.

“Ok. Really, though, Rieka, other than being uncomfortable for about an hour or so, I have felt no adverse effects since touching the Sage Stone. And like I said last night, Deurke found nothing wrong either.”

“Promise you’ll come by if you do feel anything untoward?”

“Okay, cuz,” Eilea agreed.

Rieka and her cousin sped up their pace a bit as the other women had gotten well ahead of them. “Tell me, if it won’t bother you now, have you come across anything about the Sage Stone that isn’t recorded in the Aldairian archives? What I read there only stated some of the legends behind it and that the jewel was purported to have magical properties.”

“Like I said, before it zapped me, I did notice the jewels had very unusual light properties. Though it shook me, I have been thinking about the Sage Stone,” Eilea said, not huffing though she had been walking faster. “I perused some books that Deurke collected years back. One of them mentioned a bit about the Sage Stone. It was originally shaped by the Majeeks and a half-breed Majeek-Jahannan sorceress who wanted the two warring tribes to become allies.”

“Uh-oh, looks like Kath and Raeschel dragged mother into another shop. Shall we stay outside and continue our talk.” Rieka pointed in front of them at the other women who disappeared into another building, flanked by the guards.



“Yes. And I’m glad those darn bodyguards went in there. Don’t scowl at me, Rieka. I know it’s necessary now,” Eilea stated.

Rieka knew Eilea referred to her cousin’s past experience when the woman had taken off on her own and was captured by Morkruul. “I am not scowling at you or referring to that. Now what else did you find out?”

As they waited outside the shop, Eilea answered. “The two tribes stayed at peace for awhile, and split the holding of the Sage Stone so that each had it for six months out of the year. This was all before the era of the Great Change. After a century, one of the tribes kept it too long and the leaders of each argued during the next bi-yearly exchange. It seems that the Sage Stone’s inner jewel was cut out of the larger one at the time. The book did not state exactly how. Just that war ensued afterwards. The Majeeks, which the royal family derives from, and the Jahennans, which Chieftain Almeagar’s line derives from, have not known true peace since.”

“So, do you think it is just the symbolic use of it they want back. Or maybe they wanted the Sage Stone for the same reasons the Vaukeen did, to tap into its powers?” Rieka still felt puzzled as to why Almeagar wanted it so badly, but was getting a better idea of the Sage Stone’s meaning to the Gehennans.

“The history of the Sage Stone reported that none, but the sorceress, could make use of the jewel’s powers.” Eilea told Rieka. “Legend states that only she can bring peace back to the two tribes again and restore the natural balance that was taken from the Gehennans.”

“Like any ancient gemstone, I’m sure the Sage Stone has connections with several myths and prophecies.” Rieka professed.

“You felt something about it, Rieka, but the gem didn’t come alive in your hands.”

“Your powers are much more adept than the small ones I have. I should have realized you would feel my own stress from the zap the jewel gave me.”

“We were born on the same day and time, Rieka. You, Jon-tu, and I have always been psychically tuned towards each other.”

“I know.” Rieka agreed. “And right now I feel there is more to the history of the sorceress and the Sage Stone that you wish to impart, so that we can solve the mystery of the Sage Stone.”

“That is true,” The scientist said. “The sorceress was kind of an outcast, yet feared and respected by both leading tribes. The most

prominent myth about her and the Sage Stone coincides with the other legend I mentioned. It states that a descendant of hers will make the prophecies of old come true.”

“There’s more that you are just dying to tell me, Eilea. I feel your mixture of amusement and hesitancy. What makes you so wary?”

“The history made a brief mention of the sorceress’s surname only.” Eilea finally told her after a few seconds of silence. “Her name was Vendahl.”

“That was our late Krithnaran grandfather’s surname before he married our grandmother, Captain Maren Hahl,” Rieka exclaimed.

“It’s the norm for Krithnaran males to take their wives’ last name,” Eilea added. “My own father, Zabon, chose to keep my mother Treya’s surname of Sairius. Aunt Lydea used Uncle Jon’s last name, as it is still somewhat common on Earth.”

“Exactly.” Rieka stated. “Maybe there is something to the legend after all since the Sage Stone responded to you.”

“Rieka, you must not tell anyone else about this right now,” Eilea pleaded. “I need time to figure things out.”

“I agree with you, cousin. I will do what I can on my part. We’ll talk later, after Raeschel’s wedding. Okay?”

“Sure, Rieka.” Eilea nodded towards the shop door. “Looks like Aunt Lydea finally got those rascals out of there. I for one am ready to return to the palace. My feet hurt.”

Though troubled by Eilea’s tales of the Sage Stone, Rieka smiled whimsically at the scientist. “Let’s go rescue mother, then. She is starting to look bedraggled too.”

## Chapter Seven

Dressed in glittering finery, people from many worlds mingled with each other in the enormous ceremonial hall. A small Uni-News crew taped the wedding of the millennium. Rieka stood near the wedding dais, watching her sister walk down the red-carpeted aisle on their father's arm. Dashing in his robes of sliver and gray, President-Elect Jon Hahl looked pleased to escort Raeschel.

Rieka glanced at her mother, standing next to her near the dais. The shorter woman was teary-eyed with pride and happiness for her youngest daughter. Rieka's own heart swelled with love and relief to see Raeschel looking so radiant. There were many oohs and aahs as the bride was escorted down the aisle.

Raeschel looked like a fairy-tale princess in her pearl-colored gown. Delicate rows of lace trimmed the off-the-shoulder neckline. The dress's three-quarter-length sleeves were made of the same lace as that on the neckline. The tight-fitting bodice tapered down to Raeschel's slim waist; and from the waist the long skirt billowed about her like a satiny cloud. A lace over-skirt, threaded with glistening pearls, completed the gown. On her cascade of curls, Raeschel wore a glistening tiara, which had been worn by the king's late wife on their wedding day. A long trailing, white-flowered veil covered most of her neck and flowed down Raeschel's back. Other than the earrings dangling from her ears and the mixed bouquet of white flowers from Earth, Raeschel wore or carried no other adornments.

Even through her soft veil, one could feel the rapture in her demeanor; and she seemed to spread a shining aura of contentment around the room. Rieka felt a tear trail down her cheek as she saw the President give Raeschel over in keeping to Kaderick. She wished that her brother, Jon-tu, could have been here to see his child married, but was proud Jon Sr. performed the traditional deed. Rieka glanced at Kaderick as he took Raeschel's right hand in his. He was handsomely

attired in a dress-tunic suit of white, trimmed with silver. The outfit enhanced his well-muscled body, inviting sighs from quite a few women in the room. Yet his eyes stayed wholly on Raeschel. Kaderick linked Raeschel's arm through his, and both turned to step up to the wedding dais.

President Hahl stood on the lower step once he gave his daughter away in keeping to the prince. Carter Hahl too looked resplendent as one of Kaderick's best men. Rieka and her cousins served as bridesmaids, and Lydea was matron of honor. The king was just behind the priests as master of ceremonies, and Kaderick's two brothers were his other best men.

Rieka could easily see Dalharan, who stood on Kaderick's other side, one step below the dais. The eldest prince, impeccably outfitted, in a dark beige, shimmery copper trimmed suit, caught the eye of many women. His hard muscled body looked as though it had been poured into the outfit. Rieka had to keep her composure when she saw the suggestive smile tilting at the left corner of his lips. Dalharan's eyes held hers briefly and she could see the longing in them. Then his expression changed as he glanced to Raeschel and Kaderick then back to her.

She quickly turned her head, letting the ceremony take precedence over other conflicting thoughts. Kaderick and Raeschel knelt before two priests: one Aldairian, one from Earth. The Aldairian priest began at the same time as the Earth priest. Their voices blended harmoniously, enabling all in the vast ceremonial hall to hear their echoing tones. Raeschel and Kaderick repeated their vows, both in Aldairian and Old Earth English. They exchanged rings after their pledges, and upon rising, Kaderick tossed back Raeschel's veil, pulled her gently against him, and kissed her with tenderness.

After the kiss, they turned back to the guests and stepped off the dais, arm in arm, to the sounds of cheer and well wishes. Those who stood up with the bride and groom followed behind the pair as they made their way down the carpeted aisle. Raeschel and Kaderick, alone, walked up the stairs to the royal balcony. The couple waved their thanks to the guests. Then, as Aldairian custom dictated, the groom took the bride's bouquet to throw into the throng. And whether it was male or female, it was considered excessive good luck and possible marriage to whoever caught the bridal flowers. For both genders of the Aldairian population, it was an expectant time. For Earth humans, it was usually the females.

The eager crowd, all of whom hoped to be the one to catch the bouquet, pressed Rieka and Dalharan forward. Cries of delight went up as Kaderick threw the flowers out with gusto. The draft from the heavy air-conditioning caused the flowers to swirl around several times before they unexpectedly landed in Dalharan's upturned hands. Whoops of laughter and congratulations were hailed upon the elder prince. Rieka glanced up at him, seeing a mischievous smile upon his face.

Her eyes narrowed at what she saw there. Why that big lummoX had deliberately made those flowers come to him with his psychic powers. At a movement above – for which Rieka was thankful – all heads turned back up to the wedded pair. Raeschel and Kaderick waved down to the people once again then turned to leave the balcony by a different route. More cheers of congratulations were given to the couple before they disappeared from view. Every one in the room turned back around towards the dais. King Zahr had remained standing up there, but now gave a short speech. He invited all the guests to partake of the feast being set along one side of the great room by the palace helpers.

Cheers went out to him, and then most of the guests began to further enjoy themselves. Servants began dishing out aromatic dishes of food and handing the guests glasses of brightly colored beverages. Soft, melodious music filtered through the enormous room to add more pleasure to the guests' gaiety. The king, as was custom of the groom's father, drank a toast with his guests to the happiness and well being of his household. Then the king gave ending thanks for the guests being there before leaving to go to a more quiet celebration of his son's wedding.

Those that were invited to the private wedding feast with the king and his family followed the monarch through another doorway. The large group of people continued on, until the guests were led into the royal family's formal banquet room. Nearly one hundred people filled the room. Among them were close friends, councilmen and women, their spouses, associates of the king and president-elect's, cousins, and other kin to the royal family and the Hahl family. Raeschel and Kaderick, already there, greeted them all.

Caterers set up an elaborate meal, and guests made toasts to the wedded couple. For over an hour, all enjoyed the mouth-watering delicacies, and lively conversation filled the chamber. After the meal, the wedding party adjoined to a ballroom, which was large enough to

hold all the guests and allow for dancing. A small orchestra, at one end of the room, provided music, and guests sat in fancy chairs near sideboards laden with tempting appetizers.

The company all lined up to watch Kaderick and Raeschel unite together for the opening dance, and then others joined in. Rieka grinned as Admiral Coyton surprised Kathea when he claimed her as his partner. Carter amused Rieka even more as he persuaded their reluctant cousin Eilea to join him. Rieka's own first dance was with the king. She found him to be an excellent partner. When the second set was underway, her brother claimed her next. They were silent for a few seconds as they whirled around the huge room.

"Rieka," Carter said, "look's like one of us could be next some year."

She chuckled. "Not me. I have no desire to give our parents grandchildren. Raeschel will give them plenty."

"You mean great grandchildren." He stated softly.

Startled, Rieka nearly missed a step. "Carter...I..."

He cut off her words. "Rieka, I've given this a lot of thought, especially since I overheard Ked and Raech talking. We've always been honest with each other. Can we talk about this soon?"

Rieka nodded, parting from her brother when the dance ended. They did not have time for further conversation as the Watcher came up to them. He held out his arm to her after nodding a greeting to Carter. Rieka accepted his arm, allowing the Aldairian scientist to lead her out a veranda door. For a few moments they were quiet until he stopped them in a sparsely used area.

"You have been busy since the engagement party. I had hoped we might have more time to...talk."

She removed her arm from his hold. "Deurke, I felt something troubling you, else I would not have come out here with you."

"I know, Rieka." He turned away from her momentarily. "I saw you in deep conversation with young Carter. He knows by now about Raeschel. I am concerned. I delivered her into this world and want her to be happy."

She wanted to reach out and touch him, but knew it was best she didn't. "Deurke, I know you wished to raise her with me. Fate, nor I, allowed that. I am not sorry for my decisions."

He turned back around. "I know. We were not meant to be, Rieka. I talked more with Eilea. She made me realize that. I just

wanted you to know that I will still be there should Raeschel...or you need anything. I will be leaving Aldairia soon. Good-bye Rieka.”

He stepped away from her and walked into the darkness of the night. She tried hard to keep her eyes from misting, and her heart from cracking. This parting with Deurke, for some reason, felt worse than ten years ago, when she broke off their long-time affair. She wasn't sure if the cause was her own fears or her growing need for Dalharan. A distant part of her wished she could have loved Deurke, and a present part of her knew with Dalharan in her life she couldn't. Life, she thought, was never simple. Rieka sighed and turned to go back to the festivities. She stopped when she saw her father standing before her. She hoped he had not seen the scene between her and the Watcher.

He moved closer to her, his hands laced lightly together. “I wish to speak with you, Rieka. Have you a spare moment?”

It had been a long time since he used her first name. She would not be the one to instigate an argument between them now. Not on Raeschel's wedding day, or any day ever again. “I have whatever time you need, sir.”

“Walk with me for a few moments.” He did not hold out an arm to her, but she stepped in beside him anyway. “Raeschel is happy.”

“Yes. And safe.”

“You have done your part to see to that,” he said. “We can no longer worry over her as much. Prince Kaderick will see to her safe keeping now. I just hope that....”

Without thinking, she picked up the words he let trail off. “The Gehennans do not cause us turmoil...Or find out about Raeschel?” Rieka stopped walking.

“Yes.” Jon Hahl did the same, turning to face her. She watched his expressions as he studied her face. “I have missed being beaten by you in Sec-star.”

She folded her arms, but remained at ease. “I, too, have missed our games, sir. There is much that has been left unsaid between us.”

“We shall rectify that soon. For now, I think it best we go back to the festivities.” He offered her his arm this time. “The past will not be easy to overcome.”

“I realize that, sir.” She slipped her arm through his. “But it is long overdue correcting the sorrows that my actions have wrought.”

They walked back to the palace. “There has been much animosity between us, Rieka, but your mother has made me see, over the years,

that your choices were your own to make. I can no longer fault you for them. You are not alone in having to repair past misdeeds. We shall speak on the morrow."

She only nodded an affirmative as they re-entered the palace. Once there, several people came up to them, and she was separated from her father. Rieka made a few pleasantries to others around her before excusing herself. She moved only a few feet into the crowd, when the orchestra started playing an old Earth waltz. A few seconds later, Dalharan came beside Rieka, claiming her instantly. He twirled her around the room before she had time to decline.

Rieka looked up at him, seeing his eyes glitter with an abundance of desire for her. It took all the self-control she could muster up not to grab his face and press a kiss upon him. She had to tame this uncontrollable need for him. It would not be easy, and for the moment, she did not want to.

"Ah, my admiral," he whispered into her ear. "These last few days have been an agony trying to avoid you. Today, though, I have wanted to get this close to you. You look quite alluring in that gold gown Raeschel acquired for you."

Rieka wondered if it was the wine, the music, or her flawed heart that put him in such a romantic mood. She smiled up at him, forgetting momentarily that both of them should be more cautious. The soft material of her gown swirled around her provocatively as she matched him step for lively step. Sometimes she felt she danced on air, and practically did when he turned her in time with the music. For a minute, it was though only the two of them danced. When the music died out, she realized that they had been. Others had made a circle around them, watching them waltz.

When they stopped, applause came from everyone. Rieka and Dalharan nodded their thanks before he moved off the floor with her. She was relieved when Dalharan led her over to the married couple. Dalharan released Rieka's arm and moved over to Raeschel.

"Let me finally welcome you into the family, Raeschel. You are a lucky man, Kaderick." Dalharan bent to lightly kiss Raeschel's cheek.

"I've never doubted that for a moment, brother," Kaderick chortled then blushed as Rieka moved over to him and brushed her cheek against his.

"And I welcome you into our family, Ked." She moved back then, going over to her sister. "I hope you won't mind if I steal Raeschel away for a few minutes."



Kaderick shook his head. "Just do not keep her too long."

Rieka was glad of the opportunity to get away from Dalharan. His closeness only disturbed her senses more and made the situation worse for them. Quickly she looped arms with her sister, moving through the throng of people, until the two found a private alcove in which to talk. The sisters sat down, and Raeschel gave Rieka a warm, hard hug. Rieka affectionately returned the gesture.

"Ked and I talked, sis," Raeschel said. "He mentioned he briefly spoke to you. I do not believe, however, that King Zahr has told Dalharan or Vultar."

"King Zahr seems proud of the two of you together. He is still the main ruling head on Aldairia, and as long as you have his blessing, why worry?" Rieka pointed out. "Just be happy, Pet."

Raeschel hugged Rieka again. "You are correct. Have you told Carter and our parents that I know? And what about Eilea and Kathea?"

"None of us have had time to speak privately, what with all the obligations and extensive festivities pushed upon us since our arrivals here. Aldairians do not believe in small celebrations. As Eilea is a close friend, I told her some years ago. Kathea probably doesn't know. However, I've spoken with Carter and father briefly tonight. We should be able to make time for getting together in the morning after you leave on your honeymoon,," Rieka said. "Now I've kept you too long from your husband. Go back inside and enjoy yourself. I'll be along shortly."

"Ok, Rieka. Don't stay out here long." Raeschel kissed her sister's cheek and then hurried off into the palace.

Rieka chuckled and wished she had half her sister's euphoria. If only life could be as simple as Raeschel viewed it, things would be better for all. She was startled out of her reverie when she saw someone move in front of her. Glancing up, she saw Dalharan before her.

"I am glad we have a few moments to ourselves, Rieka." He sat down beside her. "We need to talk."

"No, we need to keep out of each other's way. You pushed it with that damn dance tonight." Rieka did not hesitate to show her displeasure with him. "I am leaving, Prince Dalharan. Good night."

She started to rise, but he reached out quickly, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her back down. "It is more than your attraction to me that makes you wary to be with me, Admiral Hahl. I think it's time you

explained why you are always so evasive with me. You will not leave this alcove until you do.”

She did not hesitate about letting him feel her anger. “Let go of my wrist. We have nothing further to discuss.”

“We will speak, Admiral,” he said forcefully.

“No.” She quit trying to twist her wrist out of his hold.

“Quit denying what your body aches for, Rieka, or your heart.”

“It is nothing more than sexual pleasure we had for awhile. Nothing else can come from our brief affair. Things must end now. Oh no, there are others coming this way.”

She saw that her ploy worked, for he jerked around at her words and his hold loosened. Rieka quickly pulled away from him and left the alcove before he could stop her from returning to the room full of festivities.

She was thankful Dalharan did not bother her the rest of the night. Several exhausting hours later, Rieka was glad to ease down on the soft comfort of her bed. These Aldairians certainly knew how to entertain in style. Yet they also had the stamina to stay up for hours on end enjoying such elaborate celebrations. She moved over to sit before the vanity and began combing out her hair.

“I could get use to that sight.”

Rieka jumped up. Dalharan stood leaning in the doorway of the bedroom. His delectable lips turned slightly upwards, making her shiver with wicked temptation.

“Get out.” She did her best to remain calm.

“No. We need to talk.”

Watching him with a wary eye, she kept her distance. “There can be nothing more between us, Prince Dalharan. I made that clear earlier this evening.”

“Your body told me differently several times before. And that heated romp we had several days ago was more than casual sex.”

“That was but a momentary lapse of sanity on my part. I will discuss nothing with you. This is the last time I am warning you to stay out of my life.”

“I think you were sane each time we were close.” He advanced towards her.

Rieka tightened her fists, backing away from him. “Don’t come any closer, Prince Dalharan. I will hurt you.”

She was relieved when he stopped. “Like you harmed Deurke?”

“That was uncalled for. I did not scar his life.”

“But you have scarred mine, Admiral. And my heart. My life will never be the same now. Do you think you are the only one going through personal torment and anguish? You must see that...”

“I only see what can not be,” Rieka interrupted him. “There is nothing more to be accomplished here. Your continued behavior will not set well in the Gehennans’ eyes.”

He stopped and clenched his fists at his sides. “I doubt they would appreciate it either if they knew about your actions and responses towards me of late, Rieka Hahl.”

She felt it took much from him to leave her then. Rieka sat down on the bed once more, contemplating their situation. She did not want to admit it, but he was right. She was afraid to define what was currently happening between them.

Something more than the Charj had brought about. Yet, she could not tell him that. She was hesitant about complying with the desire, the want, and longing she saw in his lion-like eyes. The two would never be able to find happiness together. Just as she never allow anything permanent between her and the Watcher.

Anguish filled her. Regret snaked close behind. She could not allow the repercussions of her nights with Prince Dalharan to change what must be. When she met Almeagar again, retribution would follow. Knowing she faced another night of turmoil, she dressed again and left her room. This time, however, she did not wander around the capital, but headed for the *Oddessy*.

Rieka went to her favorite area of the personal space vessel she had designed. She loved the bedchamber with its clear domed ceiling directly above her circular pedestal bed. Just a few feet to the left of the bed, and beneath a clear flooring, was an enormous bathing pool. All around the room were plants in various sizes and colors, from several different planets. On the right side of the room were her storage compartments and a wardrobe concealed by floor-length mirrors. Also to the left of the bed, there was a small divan and an end table.

Rieka picked up a miniature remote from the little table. She scanned several tiny buttons on it then pressed the one which would remove the clear flooring, enabling her to use the bath-pool. As she removed her clothing, it began sliding back. After setting the temperature controls for the water, she slowly eased down into the pool. Closing her eye and resting her head on a cushiony indent for that purpose, her body and mind became totally relaxed.

It was long minutes later before Rieka realized how cool the water turned. Opening her eyes, she wondered if perhaps something was mechanically wrong with the automated thermostat. Rieka previously set it to remain at a certain temperature. Hell, even the air in the room was starting to get chilly. She stood up in the four-foot end of the pool, reaching out to get a towel that lay on the edge of the bathing unit.

“I think I prefer you without clothing.”

The towel draped before her, Rieka spun around at the sound of the male voice. She let out an oath and knotted the towel around herself when she saw Dalharan reclining on the divan, toying with the remote.

“You bloody imbecile. I’ve had enough of you for one night. Get off my ship,” she demanded, making her way to the steps of the pool.

His honey-brown eyes raked over her leisurely. Dalharan seemed to be enjoying her discomfort of having the wet towel barely hiding her body. “I finally get to see your personal quarters here on the *Odyssey*. Very enticing. Like you, Rieka. I have every intention of staying until we straighten out a few things between us.” Dalharan sat up as she neared him.

“We have nothing to discuss. Now give me that remote.”

The Aldairian prince tilted his head up to view her, but did not hand her the remote he fiddled within his honey-brown hand. “Take it from me if you want it so badly.”

Rieka did not like the darkening expression in his eyes when she put her hands on her hips in a gesture of indignation. “You are the most insufferable man I’ve met.”

His full lips widened appreciatively and the mischievous glint in his eyes made Rieka quiver with worry. “You, my dear Admiral, are an exasperating woman, especially when it comes to trying to keep you in my bed.”

Rieka swore at him then struck his jaw. “Damn you, Dalharan. No one’s ever pushed my patience like you have!”

Though she winced at having hurt him, it gave her some gratification as the smile was wiped off Dalharan’s face when he and the remote were knocked off the divan. Rieka kept her distance from him while he tried to compose himself.

He glanced up at her from the floor, rubbing his sore jaw. “Hell, you throw a mean punch. You will have to teach me that fast back

swing of yours, I did not see it coming. Just like last time you toppled me aboard the *Oddessy*.”

“Does nothing faze you?”

Dalharan gazed seriously into her eyes before he slowly stood up. “You do, Rieka Hahl.”

Rieka ignored what his words meant and asked, “Just how the hell did you get through my securities?”

“I am psychic, remember?” He placed one knee on the divan, half-kneeling upon the comfortable lounge.

She did not miss his look of surprise when she did not back away from his nearness. “Did you also use your abilities to enter my quarters earlier?”

His impish grin was more than enough answer for her. “There is just something about you that makes me act irrational.”

“That gives you no right to pry into my life or invade my privacy, Prince Dalharan. What’s it going to take to get through to you that I am not interested in you?” She was furious at how easily he could infuriate her.

“I cannot believe you are unaffected by me. Can you not see what is happening to us? Neither of us can control our irrational acts when we are alone together.”

“I’ve never used my combat training to hurt someone before except in self-defense or to protect others. Must you deliberately continue provoking me?” Rieka paled and clenched her fists at her sides.

She knew they both were acting irrational for more than one reason. The factors and the fates were not making this easy for her. She still could not bring herself to tell him they had Charjed. She knew she would not let him die or go mad, but still couldn’t tell him right now about their Charj. No matter how much his amorous attacks effected what rational senses she had left.

His eyes narrowed. “Must you deny your attraction to me?”

“Just disappear out of my life, Dalharan.”

“As you wish.” Dalharan’s tempting lips turned upwards into a mischievous leer, then he disappeared from her ship.

\* \* \* \*

After he vanished from her vessel, Dalharan made himself reappear seconds later right behind her. In the flash of a heartbeat he scooped her up into his arms as she cried out in astonishment. His mouth covered hers as he carried her the short distance to the circular

bed. He imprisoned her body against his just as she started to resist him. Dalharan deepened his kiss, countering her every move of resistance. His empathic senses felt her pulses quicken and melt against him.

“Damnation!” she cursed softly against his lips. “What spell have you cast on me?”

“Only that of my heart,” he answered.

He pressed as close as possible to her when her arms came around his neck. Dalharan held her with one hand while his other moved slowly up and down her lithe body. He groaned with intense satisfaction when Rieka responded wildly to his kisses.

For a moment he pulled back from her, rising above her on his arms. He knew, before the two of them went any further they had to talk. “I do not think either of us was satisfied with the little time we had on your ship earlier. And we sure proved that days ago. Do we take this fleeting chance for happiness while we are both able to? Answer me with your heart, Rieka Hahl.”

He saw the frankness in her eyes as she glanced up at him. “I can’t fight you emotionally or physically anymore, Dalharan. I want you as I’ve never desired another man, but tonight is all I can offer of myself. We cannot allow others to find out. Your continued temptations are draining me.”

He pulled her back into the circle of his arms. “I go into a loveless marriage. I will accept and ask for no more than the bliss you offer now. Sense what’s in my body, Rieka and in my heart.”

Dalharan’s powerful arms tightened around her and his lips descended upon hers again. Rieka’s mouth tasted like the hot teasa they had shared on two occasions. Warm, sweet and tangy all at once. And like the strong brew, she made him want to savor more of the temptations she offered. One sip of her would not be enough. He would make the most of this night.

\* \* \* \*

Dalharan growled out his sexual desires for her, whispering the things he wanted to do to her. Then he lowered his head down over hers, this time kissing her softly, tenderly exploring her mouth with slight brushes of his full lips. Rieka groaned in response against his lips. He removed his mouth from hers long enough to trail heated kisses down her neck; suckling on the rapid pulse he felt at the base of her neck.

Dalharan’s fingers snaked up around her breast, pressing,

pushing, and kneading. His other hand slid around her stomach, splaying over her abdomen, exploring her midriff before going even lower. He laid his hand over her clothed mound, feeling the heat rise within her.

Rieka turned in his arms then, making him lose his soft grip on her body. She stretched to wind her arms around his thick neck. She opened her mouth wider to his exploration of her mouth. Her tongue thrust against his, starting a teasing dance that drove him wild. He laced his tongue around hers, twisting into and exploring and tasting hers. Their kiss deepened.

A soft mewl of pleasure escaped his lips. His groan pounded against her chest.

He felt her nipples tighten into hard peaks. He shuddered as her nails slowly raked gently up and down his long back. Then her nails grazed his high wide buttocks. His nostrils flared at the seductive scent of her. He smelled the heat of desire rising from her skin. He wanted to fill her, to mesh his desires with hers.

Her body started racking with tremors of desire as she looked upon him. Trickle of sweat mingled with the rivulets of heat perspiring in tiny teasing flames down her upper thighs. She had no attention of denying either one of them.

Rieka smiled wickedly up at him. "I want to feel your heaviness in my hands, Dalharan."

Her arms came back around his neck, pulling him closer to her. His mouth came down harder upon hers this time. She arched into him until her large breasts were nearly meshed against his chest. His tongue darted deeply between her wet, swollen lips. She once more raked her nails down his back, along with caressing him with her fingertips and massaging his buttocks once more.

She urged him out of his clothing and he quickly helped her to remove hers. He glared down at her, admiring the beautiful woman lying before him. Her lips widened with the same pleasure she saw in his eyes when she looked over his hot body.

She started for him but he grasped both her hands. "Rieka, I want to feel you as much. But I also want to feel what I see in your eyes and sense in your clouded heart."

She leaned up on her elbows. "I don't know if love will fully come between us. Yet, you've crept into my heart in some way, and I desire you beyond all reason."

"That is more than enough, Rieka, and it is as honest as the desire

I feel for you.”

“Good, then shut up and let me touch you.”

He released her hands and she reached to grasp his huge shaft in her hands. He groaned as she worked her hands up and down over the length of his heated flesh. Then she used one hand to fondle his cock as her other went to her wet folds. She let her fingers glide into her self. Her desire poured over her fingers. Then she removed her hand and placed her fingertips over his shaft head. She rubbed her wet fingers over his large head, and caressed him with her heat slickened palm. Dalharan let out a guttural moan.

His big hand shot out to cup her hot mound, squeezing her softly. Her labia shuddered with pleasurable greetings as he slowly slipped a few of his big fingers, gingerly, deeply down into her heated channel. Her folds were nearly drenched from the desire he knew *he* aroused within her. He wanted to taste what his fingers were now fondling. He wanted to savor every heated morsel of her pussy, and to feel his tongue buried inside her cunt as deep as he could possibly plunge into her wet depths. He pulled her hands off his shaft before he burst too soon.

She did not seem too distraught as he moved between her legs, for she spread her thighs further apart and leaned back against the pillows. Dalharan opened her labia further with his two thumbs. He moved his face with little more than a crack of breathing room between it and her sex. He opened his mouth and his long tongue thrust into her center of desire. She cried out and nearly spasmed against his mouth. Dalharan tongued her deeply, with strong fierce strokes. She tasted hot and good to him. Her desires spilled slowly over his tongue and lips. He hardened with need as she jerked beneath him.

She writhed wildly with a small orgasm he felt against his tongue and lips, but still he suckled her folds and thrust both his tongue and two fingers alternately within her pussy. She bucked frantically in rhythm with the fingers and tongue he fucked her with repeatedly.

“I need you, Dalharan. Now.”

Dalharan slowly crept back up her length, licking her with his tongue and nibbling softly on her flesh with his teeth. He teased her belly button, making her squirmed even more heatedly beneath him. “Soon, Rieka. Soon.”

He took his time and lathed his mouth around her breasts, enjoying their sweaty fleshiness in his mouth and hands. Soon,



though, he rose above her, shifting himself for entry. Dalh first rubbed the stem of his thick rod, hard against her sensitive point of pleasure. He moved his cock-head up and down her mound of pleasure. Her body jerked with heated wildness. She opened her thighs as wide as she could when he once more positioned his tip at her opening.

Agonizingly, she felt him slowly enter her, burying himself as deep as possible into her wet depths. He filled her, owned her body and made her his. He needed to be within her as much as she had desired it too. His hips moved back up and then down again and again, until he moved a little faster and harder within her. Her sex quivered around his massive shaft. She tightened her slick inner muscles around him each time he pumped into her. Her hips lifted to feel his powerful thrusts as hard as she could stand them.

Long repressed fires ignited their bodies. Flames of desire mounted to fevered peaks. Dalharan let out a loud guttural sound and thrust his heaviness swifter into her hot depths. Rieka cried out his name as she met him push for push. Their bodies wracked with pent up needs, which soon reached an inferno between and within them. Each shook like a volcano near eruption. Violent shakes of release encompassed them both, spilling over into the realms of reality. With several hard firm thrusts, he brought them both to a climatic, wild high they stayed upon for several long minutes.

His breathing was as ragged and gasping as hers. Dalharan lay to one side of her, giving her room to breathe. Rieka reached over to stroke his sweaty cheek. He did the same. His smile widened and her lips curled upwards ruefully as they dropped together on the bed in total satisfaction.

\* \* \* \*

With the warmth of Dalharan's body next to hers, Rieka was lured into a deep, peaceful slumber. It did not last for long. Nightmares and unpleasant memories from years ago slithered like a snake into her mind. Haunting, vivid images poisoned the contentment she felt in Dalharan's arms. It was as if the snake bit into her psyche with its sharp, deadly teeth. She could not stop the venomous dreams from spreading into her consciousness.

The deadly creature began to change its shape into the form of a man. She recognized the face as that of Almeagar Viaad. A shiver of fear spiraled down her body as she saw he held a jagged-edged knife in one of his hands. Blood trickled from the blade and Almeagar's

hand. Rieka glanced down at her own hands and realized the blood from the weapon was her own.

“We will be complete now,” his eerie voice threatened.

She looked up to see him cut the palm of his hand that did not have blood on it. Two more people stepped into her nightmare. They each grabbed one of her arms, forcing her hands out to him. Almeagar moved forward and imprisoned her fingers within his. The others stepped out of Rieka’s line of vision as Almeagar forced their palms together.

A jolt of dark red energy slashed its way rampantly through every part of her being. For herself, it was a horrifying ordeal, but for him, Rieka felt instinctively, it was a savage awakening, a welcome embracement of his fiercest longings.

From somewhere behind him she heard her twin brother Jon-tu and her former lover Mikel both scream out in denial and protest. Several of Almeagar’s cohorts stopped the two Earthmen from interfering in the blood-mating ritual. Amid the chaos, she and Almeagar vanished, only to reappear seconds later in a bedchamber. There, he brutally forced her to accept their union and the realization that it was a permanent binding in the eyes and laws of his people.

Her arms flailed in retaliation of Almeagar’s assault. Rieka tried to stop him, to kill him in her blinding terror. His face becoming foggy, his shadowy image loomed over her. His hard, rough body imprisoned her beneath him, stopping her attacks. Panicking in fear, she tried again to break free of this living nightmare. She cried out for Deurke. He had stopped the nightmares before. But this time the horrors were stronger, and the Watcher wasn’t there to prevent them.

Someone was shaking Rieka then, crying out for her to awaken. Dripping with sweat, she bolted awake to find Dalharan grasping her upper arms. She gulped in deep breaths of air to control the remaining shivers of her nightmare. Finally, coming to some semblance of reality, she sat up. The moment she felt the first remnant of calm, she started to pull away from him.

“No, Rieka.” She did not struggle when he pulled her into the safe haven of his arms. Dalharan’s gentle stroking of her damp hair soothed Rieka’s frazzled nerves. “Stay, my love. I will not let your ghosts harm you again.”

She let him cradle her against his broad chest and was glad he did not ask her right away what had caused the nightmare. No man had ever made her feel this safe except...A name and a face became

bogged down in her subconscious as Rieka trembled with sudden realization.

At some befuddled period in her life, she feared the vulnerability of allowing anyone this close to her heart. Now, she welcomed the needed comfort of being held in Dalharan's arms. Sighing, she nuzzled closer into the warmth of his body and love.

The fears of the past seemed surmountable at this moment. Rieka wondered if this was what Raeschel felt in Kaderick's arms even without the Charj. She let out another soft sigh. She wished the universe would stop so she could enjoy this moment forever.

Rieka could handle what came tomorrow. For now, she intended to make the most of tonight. The last night, she corrected, the two of them would ever share intimate contentment again. Rieka knew that circumstances would not allow her to finally give her heart completely to Dalharan. However, for this short time, she was determined to return the caring he currently bestowed upon her.

Turning in his arms, she glanced up at Dalharan's soulful amber-brown eyes, so filled with concern for her. "Thank you."

His gentle smile tore at her heart. "You are welcome."

She didn't offer any explanation for her nightmare, and he asked for none. Rieka wanted nothing to destroy the little time they had remaining to them. She reached up to tenderly caress Dalharan's cheek. The satiny feel of his vibrantly warm brown skin sent tremors of renewed desire coursing through her.

"Make love to me again."

His eyes glittered with amusement and growing desire. "That is one wish I shall be more than happy to fulfill."

Rieka became thrilled at how adept Dalharan was at carrying out her requests. The night turned out more blissful than any she had ever experienced. At the moment, not knowing if such would ever happen again, she knew they would always have this time to look back upon without any regrets.

## Chapter Eight

Rieka was bereft when she found Dalharan gone the next morning. He had kept his word once again. She knew she should be thankful. Sighing with regret she rose from the bed and prepared for the day. Having spent the night aboard her ship made it easy for her in one respect. Many people had come to the docking port to wish the newly married couple well before they left for their honeymoon.

Minutes after Rieka left her ship, she saw the large wedding entourage walking along the dockway. Raeschel spotted Rieka and waved to her. Rieka realized she had almost been too late to see her sister and Kaderick off on their honeymoon. She briefly glanced around for Dalharan, but did not notice him or the rest of the royal clan around. Evidently, they had already said their farewells earlier.

After the couple departed Aldairia, Rieka and her other kin bid farewell to Admiral Coyton and Kathea, who were purportedly going off on a mission together. Eilea opted to stay a few more days on Aldairia. Rieka suspected Eilea's decision was to finalize the mystery of the Sage Stone. The Earth scientist, however, did not join Rieka later that morning when Rieka's parents and brother joined her aboard the *Odyssey*.

"....Jon-tu died trying to save Kreah Viaad's life and mine," Rieka informed them then stopped her pacing and sat down to join her kin at a table in the galley of her ship. "Kreah is Raeschel's biological mother, not me. The Watcher was near the vicinity where I escaped. He brought Kreah and myself to the safety of his planetoid. Kreah's dying words were to save her child. The Watcher enabled that to be so. I left him when Raeschel was eight months old. You know the rest after that."

For a few seconds, her family members were quiet. Rieka studied each one of their faces as they digested her words. Her father leaned back in his chair, quietly stroking his well-trimmed beard, while her mother folded her hands on the gleaming tabletop.

It was Carter who broke the silence. “Where does Chieftain Viaad fit into this scheme of things, Rieka?”

Rieka explained in the simplest words she could. “Almeagar Viaad forced me to become his blood-mate. If knowledge about Raeschel being half-Gehennan gets out, then for all intents and purposes, I will acknowledge being her mother instead of her aunt. The Gehennans do not like having bastard children scattered about. Since I blood-bonded with Raeschel during her infancy, as is a natural requirement during a Gehennan child’s first few days of life, I am her mother.”

She caught the look of anguish in her mother’s blue-gray eyes. “Then Almeagar will claim to be the father if he indeed has learned about Raeschel’s true heritage.”

Rieka nodded then glanced at her father. “I don’t ask the three of you for any forgiveness at the grief I have caused. I would not change the way I did things where Raeschel is concerned. Yet, it was my fault Jon-tu died.”

Her father startled her as he leaned forward then, reaching across the table to take her hand. “I was wrong to blame you for his death, Rieka. Jon-tu and Mikel were both strong-willed. It is not your fault that either joined you in testing those ships. Your mother, and brother, and Joeseph Coyton have all made me see sense. I should have known you suffered a lot of anguish yourself, child.”

“You do not have to explain, sir.”

Flipping back her dark auburn hair, Rieka’s mother held up a hand. “Yes, he does. Go ahead, Jon.”

“I should like to know myself, Father.” Carter stopped Rieka when she started to pull her hand out of her father’s. “No, sis. You need to hear this.”

“They are right, Rieka.” The president softly pulled his hand away from Rieka’s and leaned back once more in his chair. “I grew up in a female-dominated society. I wanted Jon-tu to be born first. You were instead and I have never let you live that down. Jon-tu hated war, but followed in yours and your mother’s former military career anyway. There were arguments he and I had that you never knew about. I suppose I took those things out on you.”

“That no longer matters, Father.”

“Thank you, Rieka.”

“It is passed time you and your father had these words, my daughter,” Lydea said. “The problem, now, is what we must do should Chieftain Viaad find out about Raeschel.”

“I agree with mother,” Carter emphasized. “But it is you, Rieka, I worry for. If he does find out, will you acknowledge publicly your marriage to Almeagar Viaad?”

Rieka folded her arms in resolve and looked at her family with determination. “I would have little choice. L.A.W. would have to endure the embarrassment.”

The president rubbed his chin. “Should it happen, Rieka, L.A.W. will acknowledge that we knew all along. Being that you chose to be with your people, there is little the Gehennans could do about the situation.”

Carter leaned back, grinning. “Father is right. All sides would just have to ‘grin and bear it’, so to speak.”

“You three should know, then, that I have discussed the situation already with Raeschel.” Rieka glanced at all of them. “She came to me the second night I was here and told me she knew her real parentage. She’s also discussed her background with Kaderick.”

“I’m glad they are both aware of everything,” Lydea stated, then rose from her chair. “Since nothing more can be done now, I for one would like to retire to my bed. It is getting late, Jon, and we have some worlds to visit before we return here for Prince Dalharan’s wedding. Duty will not allow the President-Elect or his personal counselor another moment’s rest.”

Jon Hahl rose, and moved over to Rieka. He tentatively placed a hand on her arm. “Take care. Do not let the Gehennans upset the peace we have fought hard to win.”

Rieka leaned over and surprised him with a kiss on the cheek. “Do not worry, Father. I still have them squirming in their pants wondering what I’ll do next.”

The president chuckled, and then pulled her into a fatherly embrace. “See that you keep that up, Rieka.”

After her family left her alone, Rieka let out a long sigh, and went to the control area of her ship. She sat down at the command console and contacted First Admiral Joeseeph Coyton on his private line. Within a few seconds she saw his face appear on the computer screen.

Rieka reported the necessary updates to him, and then he said, “I think the wedding went well, even with Uni-News reporters all over.

Raeschel looked happy. Those Aldairians certainly give stylish affairs.”

She chuckled. “I think they celebrate any reason they can. My family and I just left Raeschel’s honeymoon farewell party a few hours ago.”

Joeseeph’s voice was laced with laughter. “Other than Krithnarans and Pleasurians, I’ve never known such a race that liked to make merry so much.”

“Don’t forget the Dwabayans,” Rieka mused. “They have a month of festivities just to say welcome to a visitor. The plans for Prince Dalharan’s wedding, I’m sure, will be just as extensive.”

“Are preparations still going smoothly, Rieka?” His voice belied the smile upon his lips.

“Yes, Joeseeph, they are. But that is not the reason I called you. I wanted to say thank you.” Rieka moved her arms forward, laying them on the edge of the console.

“For what, my friend?” he asked.

“For instigating the talk I just had with my family. My father and I are on speaking terms again.” Rieka told him about the meeting with her parents and brother.

“You both are stubborn cusses, Rieka. It took Lydea and me years to finally get that event to happen,” Joeseeph professed.

“Though the process has started, old wounds are hard to heal. You are my best friend, Joeseeph, not just my commanding officer. Thank you again.”

She knew, by the way his eyes darted to and from the viewer, that he felt a bit awkward. “There is no need. As you say, we are friends. But as your commanding officer I order you to stop thanking me.”

“Ok, Joeseeph.” She grinned. “I am about to take off from Aldairia for a few days and scout around. My parents are visiting several worlds in the Aldairian sector. I wish to make sure that all is fine out there.”

“I would have recommended that had you not suggested it. Kathea is with me on my personal ship. I actually have a mission I need her help with. Prince Vultar told me about the incident with the Sage Stone. I’m going to make sure that Chieftain Morkruul and his associates are not anywhere in the vicinity to disturb the next wedding,” Coyton stated.

“Be careful, Joeseeph, and keep me posted. Kathea is good at undercover work and has a knack for sensing trouble. Trust her instincts.”

“I will do that and thanks for everything. Be careful yourself. I expect you to leave Aldairia once the merger is over. Coyton out.”

“I shall. Good bye, Joeseeph.” Rieka watched his image fade from view.

Rieka turned off the viewer and leaned back in her chair. She chuckled and stretched out her arms, resting her hands on top of her head. Rieka closed her eyes, expelling a deep breath of air. Some of her stress concerning the family, at least, had eased off. She wished her other problems would go away.

Suddenly Rieka tensed when she empathetically felt a presence behind her. She kept still for a few seconds until the dark robed figure moved to sit beside her in the co-pilot seat.

She surveyed him for a moment. “I thought you were quitting Aldairia this morning, Deurke.”

“I need to talk further with you, Rieka.” The Watcher’s demeanor showed the importance of his visit, otherwise he would not be bothering her now.

She also sensed the trouble in his mind. “I am still your friend, Deurke. You can talk to me about anything.”

“I know, Rieka. This visit is about Raeschel and something else, but first her.”

Rieka laced her fingers together and asked, “Has this anything to do with your training her empathic abilities or you telling her about being Kreh’s and Jon-tu’s child?”

He tilted his head in surprise. “I see she did tell you we talked. Raeschel and I have always found it easy to confide in one another.” He turned his shadowy face toward her.

Though Rieka tried not to show it, she was upset with him. “You should have told me, Deurke. It was my place to tell her about her true parentage.”

“You should have told her a long time ago, Rieka.” The Watcher’s deep voice held censure within it. “Just as you should also tell Dalharan the truth.”

Rieka gripped her hands tightly together. “I don’t care how good of friends we are, Deurke, you are treading on thin ice.”

“Then you are having an affair with him.” His words were a bold statement, not a question. “Stop it now, Rieka.”



Balling her hands into fists, she tried hard to control her anger at how he'd made her divulge that. "Stay out of my personal business, Deurke."

He flinched. "I cannot do that, Rieka. No matter how much it hurts, my heart will not allow that."

Frustrated, she turned away from him. "You lied to me, Deurke. I don't think you really have accepted that nothing can ever be between us. You should leave now."

"No." Deurke's voice was cold and hard. "Do you love him, Rieka?"

Rieka gripped the sides of her chair till her knuckles turned white. "Leave, Deurke."

Her grip stayed tight upon the chair's arms when he spun her around to face him.

"I do deserve to know the truth, Rieka. Do you love him?"

"War hardened my heart a long time ago, disabling me of that emotion."

"After you lost Mikel, you were afraid to allow any man near your heart. Now you just use his memory and old war aches as a convenient excuse to keep from making a commitment. You are so use to taking care of others, you are afraid to allow another to love and take care of you."

"I think you've said enough, Deurke. Now leave!" Rieka bolted out of her seat.

The Watcher jerked upwards just as quickly. His hands shot out immediately grasping her hands. A sudden force of energy thrust the two apart. Their bodies shot upwards and they landed with a thud on the floor near the console. Composing themselves as best they could, the two sat staring at each other.

"Why did you attack me?" Rieka asked, still dazed by the unexpected blow.

Deurke stood up slowly. "I did not attack you."

"Then what happened just then?"

Rieka was startled to see the mists shrouding his face darken, as if in anger. "That force is a protection field of sorts, usually between Aldairian couples. No one else could Charj you because of it. I know now Dalharan has Charjed you. Do not lie to me, Rieka. That is why I took your hands, to see if my suspicions were true."

"You should not have been spying on us," Rieka spat at him angrily.

“Both of your damn emotional auras were sparking like crazy whenever you two were in each other’s company.” Deurke moved to sit down on the co-pilot’s seat again. “Your attraction for each other is intense. I only hope no one else noticed.”

“We were careful enough, Deurke.” Rieka got off the floor. “Why did you come to me now with this?”

“I have had a clairvoyant sensing concerning you, Rieka. All my empathic abilities have been in overload lately. Be honest, did Dalharan Charj you?”

Rieka plopped down on the captain’s seat. “Yes, but he does not know.”

His tone of voice incredulous, the Aldairian scientist asked, “How can he not know you Charjed him?”

Rieka explained about her experience on Krithnar as best she could concerning her Charj with Dalh. “He still thinks it’s only a dream. The hypnotic-empathic suggestion I used on him has not worn off. Nor have I seen any signs of it doing so.”

The Watcher drummed his fingers on the chair’s arm. “Let us hope the subliminal obedience stays in effect then. I shall keep an eye on Dalharan. Rieka, I still care about your welfare, and my cousin’s. If Almeagar found out, I wanted to be around to prevent any trouble.”

Rieka let out a sigh. “Do not concern yourself, Deurke. You are a better friend than I deserve, but I can handle the outcomes of my own misdeeds. I would prefer that you do not tell Dalharan about the Charj we shared. He has promised to bother me no more and I intend to keep myself away from him.”

“This dilemma will blow over and keep you two safer if no one knows. I will say nothing about it, Rieka.” He reached out to stroke her cheek. “Raeschel’s predicament was another matter that just came out between us. You know I would never betray you, no matter how hard my heart aches for you. If you say the affair is ended, I trust your word nothing more will come of it.”

Rieka rubbed her cheek against his hand. “Thank you, Deurke. I wish that I could have given you my heart, but you deserve better.”

“I do not think the fates will ever allow me that...” He reluctantly removed his hand. “I will stay out of your affairs unless you request my help from now on, Rieka.”

“Thank you, Deurke.” Rieka picked up on his need to change the subject. “Eilea mentioned to me the other night what place is on your

agenda for today. I am going on a scouting duty not far from there for a few days. If you two wish, I can take you to Drackna III.”

“Although my powers could get us there, I think Eilea would prefer traveling the old-fashioned way—with something solid beneath her feet. I have some equipment to pick up on my planetoid, but shall join you two there tomorrow. I will stop by her quarters to let her know of the change in plans. We will talk more later.” The Watcher then disappeared from her ship.

Rieka turned on the communications device and contacted Carter, ordering him to assist Prince Vultar with security while she was away. While awaiting Eilea’s arrival, Rieka pondered her words with the Watcher. Deurke had yet to mention what exactly his premonition was about. Perhaps he told Eilea. Eilea was a close friend to both herself and the Watcher. She would find out if Eilea knew. Alone, the two might have a chance to talk as they did not before during Rieka’s stay on Aldairia. Rieka wished she didn’t have to go back to Aldairia for quite a long time. She dreaded the return.

\* \* \* \*

Rieka was glad, when they left Drackna III a day ago, that the Watcher did not return with her and Eilea. Deurke had been cool towards her when they last parted. Rieka confided in Eilea what once happened between Dalharan and herself. When she asked her cousin, Rieka learned that Eilea did not know anything about the Watcher’s prophetic dread concerning Rieka. Rieka let the matter drop out of her mind as thoughts of Dalharan popped into her head. It had been three weeks now and Dalharan showed no signs of going mad or dying. Their actions towards each other, she persuaded herself to believe, were just sexual frustrations.

A warning bell chimed suddenly, bringing Rieka out of her reverie. She was already in the *Oddessy*’s control room when it rang. On the view screen she saw a ship in the distance. She programmed the viewer for an enlargement and saw that it was a Gehennan special forces lead ship. Almeagar then was only a few hours ahead of her own arrival on Aldairia.

Rieka was sure that Aldairia was already aware of the Gehennan ship in the area. She called ahead to the Aldairian spaceport in Kiir to let them know when she would be landing. Seated in the command chair, she contemplated what was about to happen. For years, Rieka wondered how she would react to meeting up with Almeagar again. This time things truly would be different.

Secrets she had tried to keep hidden for so long would now come out. Almeagar would make sure of that. Though she and her kin were prepared for the outcome, Aldairia and the rest of the Legion of Allied Worlds were not. Her father hadn't mentioned yet whether or not he had informed the governing L.A.W. council. Rieka's past could cause her superiors to ask for her resignation. Or would she be pushed to volunteer one?

Either way, she thought, it was time she stopped letting her past haunt her. She would stand by the decisions she made. The one true regret she did have, though, was the damage she had done to Dalharan's heart. And her own. From the onset she had been attracted to him. Now she could not let him know the truth. She cared too much for him to allow others to harm him. Confirming her resolve, she double-checked the coordinates that would take her to Aldairia and a destiny she must accept.

\* \* \* \*

Though it had been but a few days, Dalharan felt like a part of him was missing while she was gone. He threw himself into his royal duties with more intensity than he had shown in months. Dalharan received word, a few hours ago, that the Gehennans would be landing soon. Admiral Hahl was only another few hours behind them. He wanted to greet her with all the pomp and ceremony his world had to offer, but could not. That would be reserved for his future bride and her entourage.

Dalharan knew it would take all his royal resolve to see him through the next few days until his marriage later this week. Kaderick and Raeschel were due back from their honeymoon in the morning. He could not cause them or his people any grief. It was best he forgot his feelings for Rieka Hahl. Aldairia did not need any more war ache. And his heart could stand no more pain either.

The incombell to his private quarters sounded, jolting him out of his reverie. He left his desk to answer the call. Vultar stood at his door. The middle prince looked as desolate as Dalharan felt. Vultar entered and immediately headed over to the hover-bar in Dalharan's waiting room.

"I sensed your frustrations as I was heading this way, Dalharan. It is still not too late to accept my offer."

Dalharan took the glass of wine Vultar poured for them both and sat down at the hover bar on a stool next to the younger prince. "I cannot allow you to be miserable as well, Vul."

Vultar searched his brother's face and asked, "You have not talked with the Admiral about your feelings, have you?"

Dalharan toyed with the wine. "No. I do not intend to either. Admiral Hahl has made it clear that she has no deep emotions for me. It would be useless to burden her with my sentiments. And I would not have you bear the weight of being heir."

"I thought that is how you viewed the situation." Vultar filled their glasses again. "I would not make that bad a monarch, brother."

Dalharan shook his head and grinned. "Yes, you would. The Aldairian council respects your security experience, but Kaderick or I are the favorites for ruling. And he is married already."

"Still you would not ask it of him either." Vultar immediately downed his drink, but did not pour another. "Dalharan, if you could, though, how would you tell her?"

Dalharan pushed his drink to one side. "The admiral's a strong cuss and would have to be hit full-force with my emotions. Give it up, Vultar. The event will not take place. Other than this friendly visit, what is on your mind?"

Vultar's infectious grin bothered Dalharan. "Father has commented that you are extremely moody of late. I told him I would speak with you. Your family is here whenever you need someone, Dalharan."

Dalharan reached over and clasped the younger man's shoulder. "Vultar, do not make me tell you again to let it be. I appreciate your concern, but I will be fine. You may tell Father I said so. Now, we had both best get prepared for the Gehennans' arrival."

After Vultar left his quarters, Dalharan refreshed and changed himself into more formal attire in which to greet the Gehennans. Two hours later, he and other members of the royal family and Aldairian High Council greeted the Gehennans and their entourage. It was both an awkward and stiff meeting for all concerned and Dalharan was glad to have it over with. The Viaads and the Demmonarrises were all scheduled to meet later for a preliminary dinner. The Hahls and Doctor Sairius, however, would also be at the gathering. Though his diplomatic training prepared him for the inevitable, he did not relish the meeting tonight.

Dalharan noted throughout the entire evening that Almeagar Viaad's dark eyes stayed primarily on Admiral Hahl. He knew the two were bitter war enemies, but some inner instinct told him there were other reasons for the enmity between the two. If the force of

their personalities did not clash soon, he would be surprised. The two, however, kept their distance from each other, no more than merely nodding in greeting when they first met.

He had to admit of all the people in the room, Chieftess Cassia Viaad was the most prudent. She went out of her way to be amiable towards him and his family. He made plans with her to show her more of Kiir and Aldairia on the morrow. Vultar also offered to show her more of the planet. Dalharan knew the middle prince was going too far out of his way to be pleasant to the Gehennan princess. Dalharan felt his brother was up to something and watched him more carefully. It was Admiral Hahl and her kin who were the first to retire for the evening. The Gehennans were next. When their father left, Dalharan deliberately kept Vultar back.

"I would like to know what that was all about, brother," Dalharan demanded.

Vultar shrugged his shoulders. "I was merely being polite."

"Do not give me your nonsense. One would think it was you marrying Princess Cassia instead, as much attention as you paid her tonight. Stop interfering right now."

"She is a beauty even for a Gehennan."

Dalharan rolled his eyes upwards. "I know what you are up to. Stop it."

"I think she liked the extra attention, Dalharan. She is much more amenable than Doctor Sairius. That woman flat told me no. Anyway, I merely wanted your bride to enjoy her stay here. Are you jealous?"

"Now you are being impertinent and annoying. I am heir, and it is my responsibility to marry her, not yours. Do I finally make myself clear?"

Vultar grinned and nodded. "Of course. Shall we call it a night now? I am actually looking forward to entertaining the princess tomorrow."

Dalharan let out an oath as Vultar turned and left him standing there. He would not let his brother stop the marriage. Vultar just did not seem to understand that Dalharan had no future with Admiral Hahl and he must marry Cassia Viaad. Dalharan strode out of the family drawing room and took a walk in the crisp night air to walk off his frustration. He strode among the well-tended gardens for several long minutes before he calmed himself down.

\* \* \* \*

Rieka walked into the palace gardens, breathing in the night air. Sleep evaded her as usual when she thought about Dalharan. Tonight at dinner, she used up all the self-reserve she possessed. She kept to herself, barely talking to anyone, least of all Dalharan and the Gehennans. However, she felt both Almeagar's and Dalharan's eyes upon her most of the evening.

She let out a frustrated sigh, moving farther down the dimly lit path, which led into the intricate alleyways of the royal gardens that surrounded half the palace. The walkways were smoother and not chipped like the ones on Krithnar. How she wished she could accept the ecstasy that he inadvertently brought into her life, instead of lying about it all. But such an event would never happen for either of them.

Rieka let her mind drift into nothingness and tried to enjoy the serenity of the gardens around her. She stopped to sit on a curved bench near a tiny stone pool, and a faint breeze caressed her face. Rieka closed her eyes, letting out a soft sigh of resignation. She would accept what had to be, what must be.

Rieka clasped her thin sleep robe tighter against herself as a soft shiver coursed through her body. She was no longer alone. Feeling movement near her, she slowly turned her head and noticed a figure standing near the bench. Quite tall and well built even in his early forties, Almeagar Viaad was still a dangerously handsome man. Strands of his silver-grey, long hair blew around his gaunt face like deadly fingers caressing his dark skin. He remained silent for some moments as he stared down at her.

"You no longer fear me, Rieka." His voice was eerie and deep as he spoke the simple statement in the Gehennan language. Like several others, Rieka knew Gehenn fluently. Like the Aldairians, the Gehennans did not use contractions "I did not think you would."

Until that moment, she didn't realize the truth of his words. She no longer feared what he could do to her. Only to her loved ones. It was them she must still continue to protect whether they wished it or not. For them, she would do what needed to be done and forgo any happiness she could have found.

"Your anger, also, is not as strong as it once was. Have we then seasoned so much over the years and become mellow in our antipathy towards each other?" Rieka mused.

He sat down beside her, but stared out at the faintly lit bushes surrounding the pond, just as she did. "I have waited and planned for

this since we last met. The hatred that drove us both onward is still buried deep within us. Just our manner of handling it has changed.”

“I admit to being surprised that you insisted my government send me here to oversee the security of your sister’s wedding to the Aldairian prince,” Rieka stated.

“With you here,” Almeagar turned his head to view her at the same time she finally glanced at him, “my people do not have to worry about the contract being interrupted a second time. We also have forces near the Aldairian territory borders, as L.A.W. and the Krithnar-ruled worlds do—to ensure the Vaukeen will not disturb the event. They would not dare tempt our combined forces a second time.”

A small, rueful smile curved her lips as she thought about his words. “The Vaukeen have been warned already to watch chancing another reprisal. But I’m sure your security operatives have informed you about the incident on Tigon, Almeagar.”

“I have no doubts your own agents are just as aware of what happened there,” Almeagar countered.

Oh, yes, she thought, Almeagar was conscious of what occurred on Tigon. He was not about to let it go, whether General Kraahk had been a traitor or not. She wondered if he had any idea of Morkruul’s plans. He did not seem to know about his cousin’s deception, but was sure he knew about General Kraahk. She empathetically sensed he was not ready just yet to do something about either Gehennan or her right now. Almeagar was too articulate in how he carried out revenge. He would try to make her sweat first and then surprise her with something. This time, though, she would be prepared for him.

“Your empathic senses are receptive towards me, Rieka. What are you up to?” Almeagar had never before been this good at sensing her out.

She bit her bottom lip to stifle her surprise. “Your tactics have indeed changed.”

“As you said, we are more seasoned now, Rieka. My anticipation of seeing you again has been rewarded. We shall talk further on the morrow.” He stood up.

Keeping an eye on him, she arose. “The Aldairians have an excellent gymnastics center. I am there sometimes in the mornings, Almeagar. Good night.”

She left him there, but did not head back to her rooms. She was still too restless to sleep. And the unusual aspect of their meeting



weighed heavy upon her mind. His manner of getting what he wanted had indeed changed. Rieka was more wary of Almeagar now. This gentle side of him, she was sure, was but a preliminary test of the rages she still felt in the inner recesses of his soul. She would not give in easily to him, and he still knew this. She knew this time, though, there would be no delaying the inevitable outcome of their private war. Almeagar would win.

She strolled deeper into the gardens, not particularly caring where she went. Rieka needed to walk off her frustrations and this sensation of helplessness she suddenly felt. Would anything ever be right for her again? Reflections of her past blurred her thinking. Never in her whole life had she ever felt this incomplete and empty inside. Before, seeing to the welfare of her kin, L.A.W., and others always seemed to fill her days. None of that seemed to matter as much anymore, leaving Rieka with a sense of empty meaning in her life.

She ached inside for something permanent to fill the void. What she wanted scared her. It was an emotion that frightened her since she first met Dalharan. Rieka shivered with sudden awareness and longing. The sensations and helplessness of this feeling were a totally new experience for her. Everything inside of her just now felt the shock wave of her realization.

She was in love with Dalharan.

“Why now?” she asked softly to the small wind blowing long silvery leaves in her path. “Why did I realize it just now?”

“Realize what, Rieka?”

Rieka let out a cry of alarm and whirled around to find Dalharan standing in the shadows of a tall willow bush. “You shouldn’t do that to a person.”

His green caftan shifted with his movements as he stepped out of the shadows. “You have been in deep thought for sometime now. As I have stated before, one can get lost in the palace gardens.”

Rieka rubbed her upper arms as if to ward off a sudden chill. “I could not sleep.”

“Nor I.” His voice was as enticing as the deep warmth she’d felt before in his arms. “It seems since you came to Aldairia I have not been able to get a decent night’s sleep. Why do you think it is happening to both of us, Rieka? Are we both troubled by thoughts of each other?”

Rieka did not answer, but quickly turned away from him. She started down a shadowy, cobblestone path. She made no comment as

he fell in step beside her. They walked quietly for a few minutes, taking in the moonlit beauty and serenity of the king's gardens. Many sizes, shapes, and hues of exotic flowers, shrubs, and trees were intricately formed to make a beautifully uniform landscape.

Rieka was familiar with some of the plants thanks to her sister's horticultural hobbies. She loved how their array of colors and sizes made a plush, dreamy setting. There were harajahu, a magenta, slivery leafed flower; cuhdroniums whose petals soaked up the moonlight, making them even sweeter and softer looking than they already were; and one of her favorites, the sharateem bush which was adorned with richly colored petals in shades of purple, blue, and red.

They passed by other plants, some which were ten feet tall or more, such as the kanamera, a deciduous shrub with flowers that were deep yellow with tints of sparkling gold, silver, and ruby. It made billows of colors as it moved in the gentle breeze that blew about them. The plant enticed a weary walker with welcome tendrils to hide and find comfort beneath its long, willowy leaves.

They stopped in front of the kanamera, and Rieka longed to let its sweet, seductive aroma tempt her into hiding beneath the exotic bush and never coming out again. She felt that Dalharan waited for her to start up the conversation again between them. Rieka traced a finger gently along one of the soft leaves of the plant. Its emerald leaves twinkled with mischievous delight. She let out a long sigh.

"Why are you afraid to be in my presence, my admiral?"

Rieka could not look up at him, lest he see the desire in her eyes. "You tempt me beyond control, Dalharan. Even with the small endearment you just uttered. I think you should leave."

"You could make the effort yourself, Rieka."

Rieka glanced anywhere but at him. "Just go."

"You radiate intense confusion right now. Does loving me frighten you that much?"

Rieka jerked her head upward at his statement. She gasped in surprise to find him mere inches away from her. She wrung her hands together, hoping he did not see her nervous movement. Dalharan's hand shot out, and he cupped her chin tightly within it. For long awkward seconds, he studied her face. Then ever so agonizingly slow, he covered the short distance between them.

Dalharan barely allowed any breathing room between them. "You are the most confident woman I have ever known. Yet my

simple question has made you a nervous wreck. Do you love me, Rieka?"

"Damn you. I wish you hadn't asked that." Rieka bit her bottom lip and made to move away from him.

His arms quickly came out, imprisoning her against him. "No, Rieka. I want an answer. Do you love me?"

Rieka trembled, took a deep breath, and strengthened her resolve. "I cannot allow myself that luxury, Dalharan. I would rather be miserable the rest of my life than to see your life endangered by loving me. Or to see the hate in your eyes such an admission would bring."

He pulled back in confusion. "Why would I hate you? Is there some soul-shattering secret you have kept from me that would make me abhor you?"

"Yes." She was glad when he released her. Rieka moved a few steps away from him. "Because I do care, I cannot let myself become further involved with you."

"Other than the contract I signed, what is there to keep us apart?" he asked.

Rieka knew now was her one chance to tell him. She bit her lip in frustration, knowing she should not keep the truth from him any longer. He had to see that she could not allow herself to love him. Perhaps the truth would make him realize that. Nothing else had kept him from wanting her. She glanced nervously around the area, not seeing or sensing any prying eyes in the vicinity.

"Your dream experience on Krithnar was real, Dalharan. It was I in disguise, that you Charjed. I have also experienced the Blood Ritual. Both occurrences terrified the living hell out of me." Rieka rushed the words out and backed away, putting more distance between them. "I'm sorry. I put an empathic-hypnotic command in your mind so you would not remember."

For a few seconds, she watched a mixture of emotions cross his handsome face: surprise, disbelief, anxiety, wonderment, and finally realization. He had a lot to digest, and with her nerves already distorted, Rieka knew it best she leave him be. Turning quickly, she ran back down the garden path as fast as she could, hoping he did not follow in anger.

## Chapter Nine

Dalharan slowly felt the numbness leave him and reality hit him with an onslaught of emotions, the foremost of which was betrayal, anger, and disgust. Rieka Hahl caused the intensity of all of them at once. No wonder he no more night visions concerning his dream on Krithnar. She claimed she used some empathic or psi-hypnosis on him to make him forget. It had worked. Even now he barely recalled the sensations of the dream.

No, not a dream any longer. He had actually Charjed Rieka Hahl while she posed as a Krithnaran. It would have been easy for her to carry out the lie. But why tell him now? Why had she deceived him? Rieka knew even on their mission together what she had done, what she hid from him. He shivered with dread and enlightenment at the same time. Suddenly something snapped inside his subconscious. It was as if he were coming out of a deep trance. Images rushed to his conscious mind, and that night flooded his memory, no longer hidden by her subliminal command.

Now he recalled how after he Charjed her, that it had confused and frightened Rieka. She did not feel as ecstatic about the experience as he did. Rieka associated it with the horror of another occurrence. The Gehennan Blood Ritual had similar aspects of the Aldairian Charj. However, the Gehennan mating method was not as highly effective or as intensely pleasing emotionally, physically, and spiritually as the Charj. Yet to one with mostly alien blood, being Charjed could very well be an internal horror and an incident the person might never wish to go through again.

Especially if they had also felt the savagery of the Blood Ritual, as he had heard it purported to be and as Rieka stated she did. Angrily, Dalharan tightened his fists into balls and walked back towards the palace with great strides. Why had the fates been so cruel to him? Why make him meet his destined mate when matters in his

life were so complicated now? Rieka had to be thinking the same thing.

If Rieka went through with the Gehennan mating rite then she was instantly married to that person. With an Aldairian, the Charj mated them for life, but there was still the wedding ceremony that Aldairians went through to publicly acknowledge the union.

It would explain her statement of never desiring the matrimonial state. It also made him realize without a doubt that Rieka loved him whether she acknowledged the fact or not. That did not ease his anger that she deliberately kept him from knowing. He understood now why she tried to protect his heart and welfare. If the Gehennan she was mated to knew about Rieka's and Dalharan's involvement, there would indeed be hell to pay. A Gehennan would not think twice about starting a war if his mate was taken from him.

Dalharan halted in his tracks at this last thought. A suspicious dread encompassed him. He remembered the words Morkruul said to Rieka. The shock of the only sensible answer lessened the anger he felt about her having lied to him concerning the Charj. Rieka was indeed trying to protect him and Aldairia itself. If what he suspected were true then his anger towards her Krithnaran deception was irrelevant and pathetic. Rieka could not and would not publicly acknowledge her love for him.

Their involvement would only start another intergalactic war if the Gehennan Rieka was bonded with was none other than High Chieftain Almeagar Viaad. At least, he now knew why Rieka deceived him. Dalharan felt she still should have trusted him enough to come to him. There had to be a way the two of them could work this disastrous dilemma out.

If her love for him was as deep as his for her then there had to be a way for them to be together. That was the first thing he needed to find out. With or without the Charj, just how much did Rieka Hahl care for him? He used his inner senses to try and locate her. They would end this tonight. Dalharan's psychic powers picked up on her whereabouts. He dematerialized and reappeared minutes later aboard the *Odyssey* in her private chambers.

She sat upon the divan, deep in thought. At his materialization, she looked up at him, though not in alarm. Dalharan had the feeling she expected him. He studied her reflectively for a moment then moved near her and sat down upon the divan.

"I know why you were afraid to admit how much you cared for me, Rieka," he said softly. "I do wish that you had told me the truth about the Charj and Chieftain Viaad."

Anguish clouded her lovely eyes, and he could *sense* how horrid she felt about her deceptions towards him. Her bottom lip trembled with worry, and Dalharan wanted to reach out and comfort her. He could not until they cleared up any other untruths between them.

"I know an apology is not enough, Dalharan, but it is all I can offer right now," she said.

"No, Rieka, you can offer more," he suggested. "Tell me the truth. Is Almeagar here to seek retribution from you? I need to know the whole of your history with him."

"Yes," she agreed, "you do need to know."

He did not get up when she did. Rieka paced nervously before him. He gave her the time she needed to come to grips with her emotions and to form her thoughts coherently. He did not have long to wait. She stopped and looked down at him, expelling a deep breath.

"Is it a lot?" he asked.

She nodded and started telling him what he wished to hear. "I told you already about my brother Jon-tu, Mikel Coyton, and me being captured by the Gehennans. We were on Gehenn for several months before we escaped."

"Something unpleasant happened during those few months?" Dalharan prompted.

"Yes. Almeagar Viaad became enamored of me. When he learned that Mikel and I were not married, Almeagar forced me into the Blood Ritual. By Gehennan law, I am his wife. Mikel and Jon-tu tried to prevent it, but were beaten for their efforts by Almeagar's comrades, among who were Almeagar's cousins Kraahk and Morkruul. Almeagar would not let me near my brother or Mikel. Kreahe visited me frequently and told me how my brother and Mikel fared. She healed the two and got to know them. Especially my brother. She fell in love with Jon-tu though they did not Blood-Mate. We became friends and she agreed to help us all escape."

"The first contract was nulled because of her death," Dalharan observed. "How did she die?"

"Kreahe escaped with us," Rieka told him. "I lead Almeagar into believing I had accepted the mating between us. They agreed to let my brother and Mikel go. Kreahe and I were together as Mikel took off first. Jon-tu made a diversion so we could board one of the ships."

Kraahk wounded him during the event. Telepathically, he sent me a message, telling me that Kreah was pregnant and to get her off-planet immediately. I could feel his anguish, feel him dying. I left him, but not to save myself. Jon-tu had set the third ship for self-destruction. I promised him to save his child and Kreah. Kreah was wounded when we made it to the second ship, but we were able to escape. Mikel was in space waiting for us. He fired on the Gehennans when they followed us. He veered off in a different direction hoping to distract them. They destroyed his ship, and Kreah and I made good our escape.”

“You have known Deurke for over twenty years.” Dalharan could not help but want to know more. “Was it he that kept the Gehennans from capturing you again?”

Rieka nodded and sat back down on the divan. “He picked up on our distress signal and used a tractor beam from his planetoid to rescue us. Kreah was near death’s door when we were pulled down to his planetoid. After we were well out of the Gehennans’ path, Deurke tended to her. She did not live much longer, but before she died, she made me promise I would save her child. Deurke helped me do this.”

“That child was Raeschel?”

“Yes. Deurke kept Kreah’s body functioning long enough for the child to grow within her womb. When it was big enough, he delivered a healthy girl, whom I named Raeschel.”

“Did Deurke wish to raise Raeschel with you?” Dalharan queried.

“Yes, but I could not let him. My need for revenge and my own self-loathing kept that from happening. I could not make him miserable. I took Raesch home to my parents so they could raise her as their own.”

His brows rose at this. “Gehennan children must be blood-bonded at birth with their mothers or they could die. Did you do this with Raeschel?”

“Before she died, Kreah told me what I had to do.”

“Then the Gehennans would view you as her mother.” Dalharan now understood why she still could not have become involved with him. “Do you believe Almeagar will believe he is Raeschel’s father then?”

Nodding, she said, “I have a feeling that is one of the main reasons they are here. At least, Almeagar must be. Cassia Viaad was in the same diplomatic school as Raeschel. I believe that Cassia might have found out then.”

“Does Raeschel know?”

“Yes. We talked before the engagement party. Raeschel said she told Kaderick. The two of them must have told your father.”

“My father did mention something he needed to tell me and Vultar. With all the festivities going on, he has not been able to make time to get all of us alone. It will be imperative that we talk now. The Gehennans have wanted amalgamation for a long time. With Kaderick and Raeschel’s marriage it has happened. I am sure they intend to make Raeschel’s true birth public knowledge then.” Dalharan watched her expressions closely at his next words. “There is no longer any need for this wedding between Cassia Viaad and myself.”

Her eyes widened in alarm and she shifted uneasily on the divan. “What are you planning, Dalharan? Your alliance nor mine can afford a scandal.”

“I know that, Rieka. Yet would you have me be miserable in an unwanted marriage? Or do you wish to see me suffer madness or perhaps even die because our Charj was not completed?” he countered.

She shivered uncontrollably and jumped up. Rieka rubbed her upper arms as she paced again. Dalharan knew she was tormented inside, but he had to know one last thing. He had to make sure of her love for him. Her nervous actions showed him and made his inner senses aware that she was certain that their Charj had not been completed.

“No, I don’t want you to go mad or die, Dalharan.” Her quick decision and stopping suddenly in front of him startled Dalharan. “And I sure as hell don’t want another woman in your bed. If the Charj was not finished then complete the joining now.”

When she held her hands, palms upward, out to him, he stood up. “What is it you are offering me, Rieka?”

“All of me always. I can’t handle this madness any longer. Charj me. Love me. Just end this blasted agony between us. I don’t know how to live without you in my life. Please show me what it is you want from me,” Rieka cried out her distress.

Dalharan held back the joyous tears her words brought to him. He closed the distance between them and took her trembling body into his arms. “This is what I want, my love.”

Tenderly he lowered his mouth over her quivering lips and kissed her. An agonized groan escaped her. Rieka threw her arms around his



neck and responded to his embrace. Dalharan's kiss then deepened, intense joy and desire washing over him. Rieka loved him without any restrictions. He would do the same for her. His hands clasped around her wrists then he pulled back from her.

"Are you sure, Rieka? I would not want to frighten you again." His eyes searched her face, hoping she still wanted this.

"Yes, damn you." Rieka startled him even further as she took hold of his hands and joined their palms together. "Let us feel complete in all ways, my love."

Joyously, Dalharan let the Charj flow between them. It was strong and spectacular in its intensity. It traveled from their hands, coruscated through their bodies and bonded their mental and sensual selves together. The two felt and enjoyed its concentrated mental and physical pleasures together. The flashing energy twirled brightly around their bodies. Together they knew this was the most natural and wondrous experience the two had ever felt. It was right and made them whole in all possible ways. After the Charj ran its full course between them, Dalharan pulled away from her, and then picked her up in his arms. He carried her over to the rounded bed.

"Never have I known such bliss, Dalharan," she said breathlessly.

Lying on the bed with her still in his arms, he glanced upon her with all the emotion he had in his heart. "Ah love, that was only the beginning of what I have in store for you this night. Let me show you what else the Charj can accomplish in conjunction with regular physical pleasures."

"If it's anything like the Sparc you showed me aboard my ship, when we went on that mission, I'm damn well eager for it, love!"

"That and more," he promised with devilish glee.

\* \* \* \*

Her hand splayed tentatively, eagerly over the warm imprint next to her. She sighed with pleasure knowing Deurke was there to caress and care for her. After last night's erotic and loving episode, she wondered how she could have thought to deny him her love all these years.

He'd taken her hands in his and Charjed her while kneeling between her legs and sucking deeply on her hot, wanting pussy. He'd also Charjed her while fucking her fast and furiously, having her orgasm repeatedly during the night and never tiring until the wee hours of the morning.

She hoped the fates allowed them more such days and nights of erotic wonderments that he'd shown her last night. She turned into the warmth of where his large body once lay, hoping he would come back to bed soon. While she waited, her foggy mind drifted back to that short period on his planetoid, when their souls and hearts had been in harmony with each other. No other man ever protected her before with his caring and loving. *No other man but Dalharan*, her clearing mind countered.

Rieka bolted upright in bed. A sweat of confusion and then sudden awareness of where she was jolted through her. She had not been with Deurke Sol last night, but Prince Dalharan of Aldairia. How could she have confused the two men? Sure, both were gentle, sensitive giants who could make her melt with one touch. However, it had been many years since she felt the intimacy of Deurke's arms. Last night Dalharan laid in her bed.

Rieka shook the strange thoughts she'd had of Deurke out of her mind, chalking it up to stress. Dalharan was the one she gave her love to last night. She was consciously disappointed to find Dalharan gone upon fully awakening. Why hadn't he stayed? Surely the two of them could have come up with a plan to be together always. Perhaps he'd gone to discuss things with his family first. He would have to call off the wedding, and she would have to publicly announce her marriage to Almeagar. Somehow, she knew the two of them would find a way to overcome the problems that threatened their love.

She needed to speak with her parents and brother and let them know what occurred. She could not keep them in the dark about her and Dalharan. She and Dalharan had to do something before Almeagar found out. Their love had to stay a secret from the world, if not from their immediate families. She had to think more clearly about what she would say to all of them. Suddenly, she knew what to do. Like she'd told Dalharan during the mission, working out always made her think more clearly.

Throwing back the covers, she shuffled out of bed. Rieka quickly went through her morning ablutions then headed out of her ship. She made it to the busy dockway and was about to take the shuttle into the city when she saw Raeschel and Kaderick coming down the dockway. She waited for the couple and their small entourage to reach her. Raeschel hugged her and Ked greeted her warmly.

Rieka spoke with the two for a few minutes then left them at their quarters. She headed for the main gym facilities of the palace. Hi-tech

exercise machines were situated around one area of the bi-level health center. It was not as heavily in use today. Rieka saw several people on some of the equipment or using mats to do limbering exercises or resting at a cooling-bar or watching small events from the bleachers on one side of the room. She went to the health controller's booth on the second floor and spoke to the operator on duty. She watched him type in the combat layout she wanted set up on the electronic arena situated at the far end of the gym's main floor.

What few people were there backed away from the combat-ring when the heavy round floor started to move and shift. It finally formed a round, fence-zoned fighting practice center. From a tall doorway, two large and fierce looking battle droids tromped into the combat-ring. Rieka threw her towel over one of the rink posts. She limbered up and then looked up to see the operator in the control tower signaling to her that the monstrous robots were ready for her to begin the combat exercise. A whirring light flickered around the arena, warning others to stay away and zoning it off for the protection of those too near the walled-off arena.

The bleachers, she saw, started to fill up quickly with people in the gym. She shrugged, feeling many people did not use this part of the gym operations much. The first time she ever used the Aldairian gym, the operator couldn't believe she wanted to fight even one battle droid by herself. When she destroyed it, he didn't bother to ask her a second time if she was sure. That was during her first few days of arriving on Aldairia. It had been a while since she had worked out with two droids, she thought. These were more modern combat practice robots, the room operator told her. These robotic exercise creatures were quicker in their moves than the first time she'd worked out with exercise-droids in this Aldairian gym.

Grinning, she watched the robots move and spin and par with each other for the first few minutes she was in the rink. It was customary, the operator said, to let any practitioner know how they fought and operated in all mannerisms. The gym was not responsible for accidents, just hoping to prevent them. Rieka preferred not knowing the Bots computed moves when she exercised. She'd reprogrammed the war-bots for erratic war exercises when he wasn't looking.

Rieka turned to signal the operator she was ready to begin. At just about the same time, she noticed the Gehennan entourage above her in the upper semi-circle bleachers. Almeagar nodded in her

direction when she looked up at him. She acknowledged his glance just as his group sat down on the front row of the highest bleachers. Looking upwards, she waved her hand for the operator to let loose the droids and turn up the war-zone frequency around the tall fence. One of the robots was blue and the other red, but both had glowing fire-orange eyes of destruction. The battle-bots stomped towards her.

Lately, Rieka had a lot of pent up frustrations. Exercise sometimes lessened those aggravations. With her extensive physical and slight psychic abilities, she knew the best exercise route would be to let her instincts battle the bots as if she'd just tried battling them for the first time, with no psychic aid in her maneuvers. Awareness of her own recently heightened mental abilities made her think about both Dalharan and Almeagar.

Almeagar's powers were much more extensive than Dalharan's, but not the Watcher's. She'd beaten both a few times when they used them, but not recently. She needed to be on her guard with Almeagar. And the droids. She suddenly stopped woolgathering when one powerful arm swung at her. Rieka rolled to avoid it. She rolled a second time to steer clear of being tramped on by the second robot.

She made a stance when the droids turned back to attack her again. This time she was ready for them. There was no noise in the room as everyone stopped to watch her. Jumping in the air, she jabbed twice at the metal jaw of the blue droid. It cracked on the second foot jab. Rieka whirled her body in the air before she landed and brought her foot against the back of the blue droid's head. Just as she landed on the floor on both feet, two powerful red arms came up from behind her and clamped around her. It's deadly arms tightened around Rieka, trying to squeeze the life out of her. The blue droid whirled around slowly and started coming towards her. Rieka swung her gloved fists upwards and rammed her hands with all her strength up against the ear-sensors of the red droid. Like a human would do when someone hit his ears, it was knocked slightly off balance. Rieka then brought her arms up under the red droid's arms, shoved with all her physical and mental might, and broke them off of her.

The blue droid was upon her about that time. She jumped in the air, somersaulted over the blue droid, and kicked it from behind forcefully. The huge metal beast went flying forward and toppled right into the red droid. The forceful impact sent metal and circuitry clanging against metal and circuitry. There was a bright flash of lights, crackling of components, a few whirring, moaning sounds, and

then the droids collapsed in a heap on the rink's floor. Rieka heard someone calling her name from a speaker.

She glanced up to see the frustrated face of the operator and shrugged her shoulders and gestured she was sorry about the mess. Chuckling, she left the rink. It immediately slid back into the wall, turned and shifted to a new, clean rink again, waiting for others to use. Cheers greeted her after she stepped off the battle arena. Rieka bowed her head briefly in acknowledgement of the well-wishers congratulating her on winning over the droids. She left the gym before anyone could detain her. Rieka was ready for a cool shower right now. She realized she would have to hurry back to her quarters. Since she overslept, she was close to being late for a meeting with Joeseph Coyton. After entering her Aldairian quarters, Rieka hurried with her shower. Dressed in a short brown wrap, she sat down at the vanity in the bedroom and brushed out her wet hair. She had just finished securing the braid when she heard movement in the outer room.

Cautiously, she entered the living room. Almeagar stood waiting there alone. Rieka tightened the robe around her. He had come quickly. When she had told him she would be in the gym, she had hoped the two of them would fight it out finally. She guessed wrong. Perhaps he wished to finally talk, as they'd never done before. However, she was sure, Almeagar used his powers to enter her room. He could easily have taken her unawares while she was in the shower or dressing. It was so unlike him not to take an advantage wherever he could find it.

"You were magnificent in the gym." His dark eyes scrutinized her methodically. "Those lovely legs of yours are still deadly, and your movements even now amaze me. Your form has improved, Rieka. Have you trained during the last ten years with the psi-warriors of Bhanath?"

"Thank you." She bid him to sit down. "I have trained with them."

"A bout between us then would be more interesting." He slowly moved to one of the chairs and sat down.

"Should I expect one then, like last time we met?" Rieka kept her voice calm and sat in a chair opposite him.

"That barb was deserved." He rubbed his well-trimmed goatee. "No, I am not going to attack you again. We both have become too mature to settle our differences with needless and senseless fury."

“You wish to talk calmly for a change?” Warily, she kept her eyes on him.

“I have fought with you from bedrooms to battle-zones. I do not wish to fight with such fury any longer. It tires me out now,” Almeagar admitted.

Rieka laced her hands together and leaned forward. “I too grow weary of these battles between our people and ourselves. It has to stop, Almeagar. Just tell me what it will take.”

Empathically, she sensed a change in him, but her nature was still distrustful of Almeagar. “Be careful what you offer, Rieka, you may not like what I am asking.”

Rieka stiffened. “What is it you are asking, Almeagar?”

He folded his hands in his lap, leaning forward as she had done. “At the offering ceremony Prince Dalharan will present the Sage Stone to me as a binding token of the contract he made with my people. I want you to be the mediator who passes it from him and gives it to me.”

“Just what is your true reason behind this request?” She thought about her recent talk with Eilea. “Has it to do with the pressure you put on the president to have me here?”

Almeagar leaned back, his dark eyes studying her closely. “Despite our enmity over the years, I know you have only fought for peace, fairness, and equanimity for both our races. However, I did not expect the mistrust between our alliances and the Aldairians to vanish completely. Nor do I believe this present situation will cause that to change overnight. Your presence here is but a reminder to the Aldairians that the truce is still in force. My people will see your presence there as an affirmation that the Aldairians and L.A.W. wish the continued peace with my people. It will be a much-televised event.”

If she refused his plea then it would look as if she and L.A.W. did not trust the Gehennans or want the continued peace with them. Almeagar had her at a stalemate and he knew it. At least, he had not changed in that respect. He used whatever means he could to achieve his desires. He was just subtler now. She wondered what ulterior motives he had behind the request.

“Why did you wait until now to ask this of me? Have you presented this demand to my father or the royal family?” Rieka crossed her legs and placed her hands on her knee. “I was told Prince

Dalharan will give the Sage Stone to your sister Cassia. Why not keep with the original plan?"

He again rubbed his dark beard. "Because the gesture will mean more if you present it to me than if Prince Dalharan gave it directly to Cassia. Prince Dalharan's councilors and my own did not finalize the exchanging of the Sage Stone. The details are to be completed at the final contract negotiations this afternoon in a private meeting between my group and the Aldairians'. Are you saying it is an unreasonable request?"

"No, Almeagar, it is not." She wanted to hit that smirk off his face, but instead said her next words in hopes of jostling him out of his smugness. "Then be straightforward and tell me what the real importance of the Sage Stone is to you. And why Morkruul and Kraahk were willing to put a rift between your own people and even kill for it."

Almeagar narrowed his eyes, bristling at her words. "Morkruul and Kraahk, as you have known or guessed by now, were recently found to be traitors to Gehenn. Their misdeeds were not under my authorization. Had your operatives not stopped them on Tigon, we would have annihilated them and their Vaukeen cohorts. You just beat us there, Rieka. As it is, some of my operatives are still looking for Morkruul's whereabouts. I was given word he was last seen escaping from Tigon. We will find and destroy him."

Though she still did not completely trust Almeagar personally, she was glad to see and empathically sense that he was aware of the traitors and had not been part of Kraahk's and Morkruul's devious plans to join with the Vaukeen. Still, he was evading the issue about the Sage Stone. Rieka had to know what he truly desired with the mystical gem. She intended to find out.

"I have no doubts you will punish Morkruul when he is found," Rieka said. "You've wanted this amalgamation too much, Almeagar. Even back when we first met, you talked about the union between Gehenn and Aldairia. However, I never before heard you mention why the Sage Stone is of such value to your people."

"How did Krea really die, Rieka?" Almeagar's sudden question startled her and his calming demeanor disturbed her.

Rieka stayed composed despite his words. "Now that you know Morkruul is the blackguard, I once accused him of being, perhaps you'll believe me when I tell you that it was his bore-gun that pierced her mind and caused her death. I did not kill her. Krea was a

wonderful person. A part of my life was made better by knowing her.”

He let out a long sigh. “I cared for my sister very much. Morkruul did not want her marrying Dalharan back then. I do believe you, Rieka. We both went through a lot of heartache and personal anguish in our earlier acquaintance. It is time the past was buried and forgiven, despite what you have kept from me all these years.”

Rieka did not pretend to misunderstand him. She was sure he meant Raeschel. However, she had a few questions of her own to ask him. “Why have you waited until now to bring this out, Almeagar? Cassia went to the same ambassador school during Raeschel’s final year.”

“I waited until we came to Aldairia because I wanted to make sure you would be here for me to talk to in person. Even after our alliance defeated the Vaukeen, you have evaded any personal confrontation with me. The right opportunity never came up until Prince Dalharan made his offer to Gehenn. I think those are enough reasons. Why did you keep knowledge of her birth from me? Does she know I am her father?” Almeagar’s voice was edged with razor-sharp infuriation.

Standing up, she moved to the small hover bar nearby and poured them both a drink. It gave Rieka the time she needed to form an answer. He hadn’t guessed then that his sister Kreah was Raeschel’s real mother. For some inner reason, she thought it best not to correct his assumption right now. She moved back over to him. Almeagar took the proffered drink, and then she resumed her seating.

Rieka twirled her drink and took a sip before finally answering him. “Raeschel knows. She overheard you and Cassia talking about her and figured it out from there. We talked before her wedding and Prince Kaderick was made aware of the situation. I believe by now the royal family knows also, Almeagar.”

“Good.” He leaned forward, putting his glass down on a small comfort-table between the chair and settee. “That will make the proceedings of the contract and the renewal of our marriage easier.”

Rieka drew in her breath and set her own glass down. “I have no desire to renew any vows with you, Almeagar. Why will you not give up on the idea of us staying married.”?

“My laws forbid me taking another wife, Rieka. Wars have kept us apart, but that is no longer a reason. I desire you to come back to



Gehenn as my mate.” Almeagar’s face was flushed with deep emotion.

With Almeagar starting to become emotionally unsteady, she knew it best to end their meeting. “I will consider your requests, Almeagar.”

The two rose at the same time and Almeagar gave a slight nod of his head. “A wise choice, Rieka. Think carefully before answering me. I will return after the meeting for your decision.”

Briefly, his gaze raked over her body. She could not stop the shiver that ran down her spine at his insidious smirk. After he finally left, Rieka let out a sigh of relief. She knew Almeagar wanted to push her further. Yet again, she received the feeling he was waiting for something. There was no chance in avoiding a final confrontation with Almeagar. Now she must make a choice that would keep Dalharan safe, especially after they shared such love. One way to ensure this was to be as guarded as possible when they were in the same vicinity in public. She needed to find a way to talk to him, though, and soon. He had to know what Almeagar wanted and the two of them needed to find a way to make their love possible.

With a lot on her mind, she went back to the bedroom to finish changing. She knew she had a lot to tell her parents. Long minutes later, she made her way to her parents’ visitor quarters. Only her mother was there. Lydea told her Prince Vultar had come by minutes earlier to escort the president to an unscheduled meeting with the king. Rieka groaned and proceeded to tell her mother what had happened between her and Dalharan.

\* \* \* \*

Dalharan let out a sigh and rubbed the back of his head. The tension was heavy in the room with his father and brothers. Early this morning, he’d left Rieka’s bed and went to his own quarters. After doing some heavy soul-searching and changing his attire, he headed out to meet his father. Kaderick returned early and was with the king and Vultar when Dalharan arrived. It was the first time in weeks the four of them had been alone. The other three evidently, started a deep conversation without him.

Ked briefly filled him in on Raeschel’s heritage when Dalharan mentioned he had something to discuss with them. Vultar was the only one in the room who had not known beforehand that Raeschel was Gehennan. Yet that was not the shocking news that had put tension among the four Demmonarris men. Dalharan had yet to tell

them about his affair with Rieka Hahl. It was telling them of his choice to step down as heir to the throne that caused the turmoil.

“You have a reason behind this sudden decision, Dalharan?” The king asked looking directly at his eldest son.

Dalharan glanced briefly from Vultar to his father. “Yes.”

“I think you had better tell them, Dalh.” Vultar moved from his chair to sit next to Dalharan on the largest couch in the royal drawing room. “I was not wrong after all, then.”

“No, Vul, you were not.”

“If Raeschel’s heritage comes out, Ked must become your heir instead of me, Dalh.” Vultar said. “You had better tell Father everything.”

“Yes, Dalharan.” His father had been watching the reactions between himself and Vultar too intently. “I believe you had better tell me all that is going on.”

Dalharan glanced over to his father who was seated near Kaderick. “I must step down. Let Kaderick become heir. Ked, your marriage will fulfill the requirements of the contract. Will you take my place?”

“Like Father, I am astounded by your choice. What indeed has caused this?” Ked asked. “Vultar seems to already know.”

“Your reluctance tells me it is a dire reason,” the king said.

Dalharan inclined his head. “It is, Father. I have to abdicate being heir. Otherwise I will cause all of Aldairia turmoil and embarrassment.”

“You speak like you have committed some damnable crime, my son.” King Zahr raised his voice due to stress. “What unspeakable deed have you done? Quit stalling.”

“Do not prolong this any more, Dalharan,” Vultar added.

He looked at Ked first. “Kaderick, Vultar knows what I am about to tell you because he guessed such.”

“I have seen it coming since your mission together, Dalh.” Vultar put in.

Dalharan let out a heavy sigh and finally told his youngest brother and the king. “Father, Ked, I have fallen in love with Admiral Hahl.”

“Damnation. To think that Carter and I were trying to set you up in the first place,” Kaderick declared.

King Zahr shot a look of consternation at Kaderick. “You instigated...never mind. Dalharan, please tell me this is a morbid jest.”

Dalharan let out a long sigh and said, “No, father it is not. I can not marry Princess Cassia under such circumstances.”

“You also cannot publicly acknowledge being involved with the Admiral.” The king drummed his fingers on his knee. “Does she reciprocate your feelings?”

“Yes. She did not want to admit it and tried not to let me know. I am sorry, Father, it just happened.”

Kaderick stood up and moved over to Dalharan. “I can at least testify to that. I fell in love with Raeschel, I believe, even before I Charjed her. I only wish you could know such happiness, Dalharan. I feel...”

“I can sense all your feelings right now,” Dalharan told him. “My empathic abilities are overloaded with all the friction and mixed emotions in the room. Father, I do not blame you for being angry and thinking of Aldairia first. That is the reason behind my giving up the throne. I do not wish to cause a scandal or war. Please abide by my decision.”

“Later today, it was planned for us to meet with the Gehennans and go over the ceremonies and finalization of the contract. I must talk with the president to ascertain if they are ready for the knowledge of Raeschel’s background to be made public.” Dalharan realized where he got his quick decision making from when the king gave his list of orders. “Kaderick, talk with your bride and make sure she is ready to accept the throne, and the publicity, then contact me before this afternoon. Vultar go immediately to the president and inform him that I wish speak with him now.”

Kaderick and Vultar bowed to the king and left the room. Dalharan knew his father had not finished with him yet. His father’s temper could sometimes be as bad as his own when provoked enough. Tightening his resolve, he waited for the king’s deserved wrath to come down upon him.

Zahr Demmonarris laced his fingers together and let out a deep breath of air. “I wish that I could congratulate you, Dalharan, but I cannot. Neither can I be angry with you though you have put Aldairia itself in a bind. If what I suspect is true, you make it also hard on me as both your father and king. Will I have to banish you from Aldairia?”

Dalharan's shoulders slumped. His father guessed that he Charjed Rieka, and King Zahr had to know by now Rieka's involvement with Almeagar if Ked informed their father about Raeschel's birth history. Banishment from Aldairia was the punishment for Charjing a married person. If the Gehennans found out, Dalharan knew his father would have no course but to publicly denounce him.

He let out a groan of despair, but faced his father. "I have Charjed Admiral Hahl in private, Father. You must do what is necessary."

"Have you told either of your brothers or the other Hahls?" the king asked.

"No. Just Rieka, you, and I know, for now." Dalharan said.

"Then keep your hands to yourself, Dalharan. I have no wish to bar you permanently from your home. Is that understood?" the king commanded.

Dalharan rose. "I will keep away from her even when I leave Aldairia."

The king quickly stood up and moved over to Dalharan. "Do you realize what you are saying, Dalharan? Is your love for the Admiral so great that you would leave your own people?"

"My choice to leave Aldairia is not solely based on my love for Admiral Hahl. Whether she goes away with me or not, I will not cause my world more grief," Dalharan said.

Zahr placed a hand on his son's shoulders. "Then you are not sure just how far the Admiral will go to prove her love for you?"

"That is what worries me even more than my own sacrifice, Father. I know that she loves me, but part of me believes Rieka has her own agenda to keep." Dalharan could not prevent his voice cracking.

The king reached out and squeezed his arm. "As my son, I wish you were not in such misery. Do you believe then that Admiral Hahl will acknowledge her marriage to Chieftain Almeagar?"

"Even worse, Father." Dalharan laid a hand over his father's. "I think she will in actuality become his wife if he pressures her into it. There is nothing Rieka would not do for her family or her people. She told me once that love was but a fleeting luxury she could not afford. She was correct about that. Telling you this now reminds me of a duty I dread to face."

"Sometimes, my son, it can be a pain in the ass being a monarch."

Dalharan blinked in surprise then his lips turned upwards. “Thank you, Father.”

“I am no less proud of you, Dalharan, whether you are my son or heir.”

He acknowledge his father’s statement, sighed, and then drew his somber thoughts together. “I think it best now that we let the Gehennans know this afternoon that Kaderick will be the new heir. Will that be satisfactory to you, my king?”

The king nodded and moved away. “I am sorry this must happen, my son. I would give my own life to find a way for you to be happy with the admiral.”

“I know such cannot be, my king. Do you wish me to be here when you speak with the president?”

“I do not think that will be wise, Dalharan, especially if Admiral Hahl has not told her family yet about your affair,” King Zahr said.

“I agree with you. Send for me when you require my presence. I shall contrive to keep to my rooms until then. Good day, sire.” Dalharan quickly left the royal family’s private drawing room before he totally broke down in front of his father.

His heart was desolate with what must be done, and his mind cried out for Rieka. He needed her, wanted to be with her. He had felt guilty when he told his father of his small fear about Rieka. She had given her all to him last night. He had to let go of his fear and believe she would be willing to leave her alliance and her old life for him. Only their immediate family could ever know of their love. The two would have to disappear from the public.

*Rieka, he thought to himself, please be true to your heart.*

*My heart will always be true to you, Dalharan,* he heard the reply in his mind.

Stopping suddenly, he looked around the corridor, glad no one was walking his way. Was it true? Had she heard his troubled words? He must have projected them to her. He had spoken with other people close up, mind to mind, and with his brother from a distance. This was different somehow. Since his Charj, he realized that all his senses and powers were heightened. He had not known this until now because of the temporary mind hypnosis she had used on him and his stress of late. However, his father and mother had been able to mentally communicate when they Charjed, even though his father was not a natural telepath.

*Rieka. He tried again to telepathically contact her. If you are nearby, meet me in the family drawing room quickly. We must talk. My father will soon be speaking to yours. Can you come?*

He did not have to wait long. *I am not far away. This is incredible, talking with you like this. Not since Jon-tu died have I talked so with someone mentally.... except Eilea or another L.A.W. agent occasionally. I will be there shortly, Dalh.*

Dalharan made his way to the royal family's screening room. He was relieved when no one was there waiting to see the king. He did not remember anyone being on the scheduled list until this afternoon with the Gehennans. He checked the room out carefully and was rewarded with no lurking reporters or councilpersons. The door opened and Rieka entered. She closed it behind her and quickly moved over to him.

"Dalharan we must be careful. I have a feeling Almeagar is somehow watching my every move." She spoke in hurried tones. "I think our fathers are meeting to discuss the two of us. Just before I left my mother minutes ago, she told me she suspected as much."

Rieka stood close to him, but did not touch him.

"The king sent Vultar to get your father a short while ago. I have told my family about us. Have you had time to tell yours?" he asked.

"Only my mother. After I left her, I was on my way to find Carter and Raeschel when I got your mental summons. My father will be furious when he finds out."

"Father was not overly thrilled when I told him and my brothers. I informed them I am going to step down as heir."

"Because of Raeschel's heritage? Will Prince Kaderick be the new heir?" she asked, turning her side to him.

"Yes." He felt she was contemplating what must be done about their situation. "Have you talked to Raeschel then about the possibility of the Gehennans bringing that up in public?"

"I have." She moved slightly closer to him.

"This afternoon, Chieftain Almeagar will be told that Ked is to be the new heir. That will settle the requirements of the contract with the Gehennans." He so wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms.

"He will take the opportunity to bring out the fact of my union with him, Dalh."

"I know, but that is a technicality we must get around. I intend to leave Aldairia," Dalharan said and then asked, "Will you go with me, Rieka?"

“It does not matter to you then, we can never legally marry?” she queried.

“Not as long as I can be with you.” Dalharan moved a few steps nearer to her, but did not touch her. Her answer still mattered too much.

“Then I will do no less. My ship can take us wherever your heart desires.” She smiled up at him, her love evident in her eyes.

“We have the universe at our beck and call. It does not matter as long as we are together, Rieka.” Dalharan took her in his arms and quickly kissed her.

Rieka touched his cheek fondly and then moved away from him. “It will be hard keeping my hands off you until we are finally together again.”

He was about to reach out for her when the large door was suddenly swung open. Cassia Viaad entered the room. In her rush to get here, Dalharan realized Rieka had not completely shut the door to the room and there was no doorman on duty when he had arrived. Cassia stepped tentatively into the room, glancing curiously at them. Dalharan and Rieka moved farther apart.

“I will check on those security measures, Prince Dalharan.” Rieka nodded in Cassia’s direction. “Good day, Princess Cassia.”

Cassia looked back toward Dalharan after Rieka left. “I was suppose to meet Prince Vultar here. He offered to show me more of Aldairia.”

“My brother should be along shortly.” Dalharan remained composed.

Dalharan was relieved when just a few agonizing seconds later Vultar showed up. This time he was glad of his middle brother’s intervention. He was sure Vultar felt the slight tension in the room because the younger prince glanced speculatively from Cassia’s solemn face to Dalharan.

“Ah, good, I am not late. Do you wish to join us, brother?” Vultar asked.

“I have preparations for tomorrow’s ceremony and today’s contract meetings. I trust you to see to the princess’ comforts. Princess Cassia, until later, good day.” Dalharan swiftly left the room, and then retreated to his own quarters and much needed time alone.

## Chapter Ten

Rieka dreaded the outcome of the meeting between the Aldairians and Gehennans though she would not be there. Would Almeagar try to bring out his connection to Raeschel then? She hoped not. Knowing the staidness of the Aldairians, she doubted they would be the first to speak about it. Rieka also hoped Cassia did not pick up on the tension in the room. If she remembered correctly, the younger woman had shown signs of having mental powers even at the age of four. That was how old Cassia had been when Rieka left Gehenn years ago.

Other than Raeschel's birth, she wished that event had never taken place. There was nothing she could do about that now except face the consequences. Remembering she had to meet with Eilea she went to her cousin's quarters. Rieka pressed in the incombell and was bid to enter. She found the scientist seated at a desk, perusing a book.

Eilea glanced up when the door slid behind Rieka. "I am glad you were able to come by. I've found out more about the Sage Stone. Has anything else occurred with you?"

Rieka nodded. "Eilea, I am in a fix. Almeagar wants me to be mediator at the bestowing ceremony."

"That's not good, Rieka. Even though the Sage Stone shot that eerie light into me, you might suffer adverse effects since it warmed your hand," Eilea said, pointing to the book she had been perusing. "The jewel acts as a conduit of sorts."

Rieka sat down near the woman in another chair. "In what way, cousin?"

Eilea pulled back the hood of her robe. Rieka did not flinch when she saw the marred skin on the scientist's face. Though Eilea did not think so, Rieka knew her cousin's loveliness showed through. Rieka hoped Morkruul was found and killed soon, if nothing else, than for what he did to this compassionate woman. Eilea only took her hood off in private, and usually only around Rieka.



The other woman's blue eyes were filled with disturbing emotions. "Rieka, the gem is a transmitter and receiver. Has Prince Dalharan Charjed you since you touched the stone?"

"What has that to do with...Oh, damnation. Tell me I'm wrong, Eilea." Rieka felt she was coming to the conclusion of the mystery that the scientist was about to convey.

Eilea shook her head sadly. "You must not let Almeagar touch your palms, cousin. If he does, the abilities of Charj could be transmitted from you into him through the Sage Stone."

"Then the Sage Stone passed on power from one race to another through the sorceress?"

"Yes, Rieka. Our ancestor was there every time the Sage Stone changed hands. Once the leader partook of the power she received from the stone, his people shared in the uses of it."

"No wonder he wanted me to be the one to hand him the Sage Stone," Rieka surmised. "He believes I am the one in the prophecy. How can I be the channel through which a whole race can be genetically changed, Eilea?"

"Remember the psychic race of the planet Zythr?"

"Yes, I do." Rieka quickly caught on to what the scientist meant. "When one individual got sick the whole race did. It was like a virus being passed through a central nervous system of minds. So if Almeagar received the power of the Charj back, then he could mentally trigger it off in all Gehennans?"

"Exactly," Eilea affirmed. "Have you not watched the Aldairians themselves closely? When I went out into Kiir, I noticed each one of them have this extrasensory preparedness, even though all of them do not have psychic powers."

"Then you think most Gehennans also have this paranormal singularity. At least, the ones who believe in the Sage Stone's prophesy as Almeagar does?" Rieka asked.

"Yes." Eilea shifted in her seat. "Cousin, I know that doesn't help make things easier. However, if Almeagar believes it is so, he will stop at nothing to have you and the Sage Stone."

"And what if destiny is telling me that I'm suppose to bring back this reunion of the past?" Rieka slumped her shoulders in defeat. "Do I follow this morbid pattern and allow it to happen or what?"

"You must follow the instincts of your heart and mind and soul. Your intuition has never led you wrong," Eilea said. "Not even when Jon-tu and Mikel followed you to test those ships."

“You make it easier to finally let go, Eilea. Thanks.” Rieka reached over and placed a hand over her cousin’s. “Do you believe that everything happens for a reason?”

“Sometimes, we have to make a reason so things will happen the way we want them to.” Eilea laid a hand over Rieka’s. “Which brings me to an idea that I’ve been contemplating while we talked. It may help you with Almeagar’s request.”

“I’ve racked my brain for an answer to this problem, but you’ve helped enough already,” she said. “I wish that I could do the same for you.”

“The answer was in here and within us all along.” Eilea pulled her hand from Rieka’s and tapped the book. “Rieka, you saved my hide from totally being torn apart by Morkruul and you helped me find the will to live again. Mostly though, you have always been my friend. I’m willing to show you my suggestion and do it if you approve.”

“I would not have you put yourself in danger over my own problems.” Rieka’s brows furrowed. “However, you can be stubborn like myself and might do something to help me whether I wish it or not, so tell me your solution.”

“I have never been able to completely get rid of the marring of my face Morkruul caused with his powers. Not even the Watcher or surgery could. However, I think that there is more power in Sage Stone than even the Watcher or Almeagar might hold. The sorceress of old had been able to wield it for short periods of time and was reportedly able to heal and correct things with its magic,” Eilea explained. “Though you have been trained in the telepathic abilities Jon-tu passed on to you, you have repressed them or selected not used them. You would have to overcome your aversion to having more psychic powers.”

“I think I have overcome that problem.” Rieka explained about her speaking telepathically with Dalharan. “I’ve become more aware of things around me also since I touched the Sage Stone. Do you suppose it heightened my own psychic awareness?”

“I do indeed,” Eilea answered. “I’ll tell you the idea shortly, but first, let me see your hands.”

Rieka did as the scientist suggested and held her hands out to the doctor. Rieka trusted Eilea implicitly and knew the woman had a reason behind her request. She gently turned each of them over within her own, softly examining Rieka’s hands. Eilea then reached over by

the book she'd been studying and picked up a med-scanner off the table. The small device's buttons glowed for a few moments as Eilea moved the medical unit back and forth over first one and then the other of Rieka's palms. When she was through, Eilea let go of Rieka's hands and put the med-scanner back up on the tabletop.

"Rieka, let's do a quick test." Eilea held up one hand. She closed and then opened her hand and a small glow of energy stayed stationary within her palm. "Try making a small ball of energy as I just did."

Rieka barely thought and the ball of energy appeared within her own hand. She held her palm out to Eilea and grinned. "Amazing. I guess since I've let myself get over my grief and self-pity, it is easier to do than I thought."

"Exactly. You've always had fine-tuned empathic abilities. Yet there was always more just waiting to come out. You knew you possessed them, but since they didn't help you when Jon-tu died, I think you suppressed those powers and your inherent ability to manage them. When the Sage Stone stung your hands, I believe it was telling you something."

Rieka toyed with the glowing ball, willing it to move up and down over her palm and then she made it dance on her fingertips. She passed it from one hand to the other as if she were tossing a child's toy ball. She chuckled and then smiled with simple pleasure. Eilea was right about the reason Rieka had never wanted to be able to use the psychic powers she possessed.

Glancing over to Eilea, she saw Eilea still held the similar ball stationary in her own hand. "This feels so natural. I've been denying myself so much all these years. What next?"

"Rieka, I feel you've used your powers more than you realize over the years. Though you have great strategic abilities, you've always had this awareness when and where the enemy would attack during battles. You know when an opponent will strike in physical combat, and you've always known how things should be without voicing an opinion. That's more than using your regular intuition or empathic abilities. Now that your mind is truly accepting your powers, you can do more. Even transfer yours likeness onto my body and you use my identity." Eilea stopped her own flow of energy.

Puzzled, Rieka did likewise and asked, "You want me to make you look like me, or become you? Not once during our conversation

have you mentioned the fact that the Sage Stone glowed more in your hands. Why?”

“Hear me out,” Eilea said. “Before Morkruul scarred my face, our features were almost similar enough in looks to be twins. I am your height and though I’m not as muscular, I am a bit fleshier than you and that makes our shapes comparable. I could masquerade as you long enough for Almeagar to get the Sage Stone and then you could leave Aldairia posing as me. Once you are away, I could depart from here with your parents. That way Almeagar would dare not follow. Please agree to this.”

Rieka shook her head. “I don’t like the thought of putting you in such danger. What if Almeagar found out? I would not want him to take this all out on you. You have suffered enough already at the hands of a Viaad. And what if it were meant I was to pass the Charj back onto the Gehennans.”

“Rieka, haven’t you understood anything about the Charj yet?” Eilea stood up and began to pace. Rieka couldn’t help but smile at the family trait. “Listen, it will not happen anyway between you two. The Charj comes about only when two people are compatible.”

Rieka sighed in understanding. “You’re right. I’m stubborn, I guess. It was so different from the Blood Ritual.”

“Almeagar forced that on you,” Eilea emphasized the fact as she still paced. “Do not let him win by forcing an unnatural Charj from you. There has to be another way to enable the Gehennans to Charj again. I’m sure with a bit more studying, I can find a way. I just need you to give me some more time.”

Rieka jumped up and jerked Eilea around. “Now I know why you have not been telling me what you’ve been psychically feeling. The Sage Stone has chosen you, Eilea, not me. Though we were born at the same time, Uncle Zabon was my father’s older brother. Therefore you are the one in our genetic line that was meant to control the Sage Stone. Am I not right?”

Eilea bit her bottom lip. “Yes. Our families are the only descendants of the sorceress left alive. A few years back, I spent some time on the Watcher’s planetoid and got interested in the Sage Stone and the Gehennans’ past. Sometimes the Stone didn’t always pick the eldest female sibling of the sorceress’ descendants, so I really never dreamed I would ever come in contact with, or be chosen by the Sage Stone.. You always had the most obstinate personality traits.”

“Yes, I know.” Rieka grinned at her cousin’s choice of words. “But if the Sage Stone heightened my powers then yours must be growing stronger even now.”

Eilea let out a sigh. “They have been, and that scares me. I was hoping that the two of us together might be able to make the transfer happen. Are you going to go along with my suggestions or not?”

Rieka started pacing for a few seconds. “That’s a tough choice to make.”

Eilea sat back down. “I know. But it’s the best solution I can come up with. I’ve tried using magic to heal myself, but it hasn’t worked. But if you could use your power to transfer an image of yourself onto me, it might work long enough to get through it all.”

“I can’t come up with anything either except to be careful and make sure Almeagar’s palms do not touch mine.” Rieka sighed and sat back down herself. “I don’t trust him enough not to try something. I don’t think Dalharan will do anything foolish if Almeagar did, but I cannot take the chance of Dalharan Charging me in public when I am legally married to Almeagar. That would cause banishment from Aldairia for Dalharan.”

“That statement tells me you have been studying up on the Charj. I’m glad, Rieka. I want you to be happy,” Eilea said.

“Thank you, but I want the same for you. If the Sage Stone’s powers are older than those of the Viaad’s, then transferring my likeness to you could possibly keep the marring from coming back all the time.”

“Then do your instincts tell you to go along with my idea?”

“Yes. I want to go over everything and further test these heightened powers we seem to have. If you agree to that then I will consider your plan. Fair enough?” Rieka asked.

Eilea nodded, and Rieka let out a sigh of relief. If what they were possibly planning worked, then Almeagar would not find out about her and Dalharan. And Eilea might be able to escape Morkruul’s disfigurement spell, if the transferring of her likeness over onto Eilea held up. Rieka still had many concerns about this plan, but would help Eilea test the theory for the present. If she was convinced the plan could be successful, then she would contact Dalharan and let him know what she and Eilea had come up with. She hoped he wasn’t around anyone when she got in touch with him. Rieka felt they did not have much time, so she listened closely to Eilea’s teachings and suggestions.

## Chapter Eleven

“I do not believe Princess Cassia and Prince Dalharan need to wed to make a permanent peace treaty. There is a Gehennan already married into the Aldairian royal family.”

Dalharan could not believe his ears or eyes when Raeschel broke the unsteady silence in the room by her blatant statement, and thereby admitting she was Almeagar’s daughter. His sister-in-law moved from Kaderick’s side over to where the Gehennan High Chief sat with his small entourage and his sister, Princess Cassia. When she stopped in front of him, the Chieftain and his councilors rose.

“The contract states Princess Cassia, your heir, is to marry the ruling heir to the Aldairian throne. I am married already to Prince Kaderick, sir, and I am your daughter. I have spoken with King Zahr and his siblings. They have all agreed my husband will be the new Aldairian heir. Does that not fulfill all the agreements, Chieftain Almeagar?”

Almeagar towered over Raeschel, and his lips curved upwards. He held out a hand to her and Dalharan saw that the Gehennan ruler admired the young woman’s spunk. Raeschel, to all’s surprise again, laid her hand in his.

“You are so like your mother, child.” Almeagar said. “I wish the wars had enabled me to know you sooner.”

“I would have liked that also, Chieftain Almeagar.” Raeschel was every bit the perfect delegate. “I hope no other wars will keep us from getting to know one another better.”

“That pleases me, Princess Raeschel. I will make certain of that now.” Almeagar brought her hand to his lips and then released Raeschel’s. “Then the contract is settled as far as I am concerned and will be publicly acknowledged at the bestowing ceremony when Admiral Hahl presents me with the Sage Stone.”

“That is an honor I would like, sir. As I am part of your house and my husband’s, and also represent L.A.W.’s interests, I think that would be most appropriate,” Raeschel said.

Dalharan smiled inwardly at Raeschel’s handling of the Gehennan War Chieftain. She would make an excellent queen one day. He wished that Rieka could have been present at this meeting, but all concerned thought it best she was not. Just as well, he thought, the Gehennans’ were showing their inner turmoil about the proceedings, even though outwardly they were calm.

Almeagar looked from her to his entourage to the Aldairian king, to the president of LAW and back to Raeschel before he voiced another word. Everyone present in the room knew that Raeschel left Almeagar at a standstill. Dalharan realized the woman’s ploy and wished that he could have applauded her. If Almeagar denied his own child the honor of bestowing him the Sage Stone, then it would make the War Chieftain look foolish.

“It would give me great pleasure to receive the Sage Stone from your hands, Princess.” Almeagar bowed towards her, accepting his defeat gracefully.

Dalharan paid close attention as Almeagar moved away from Raeschel and moved to the table that had been set up for going over the contract between the planets. Amidst the Gehennan and Aldairian council members in the room, he bent over, took a pen, and made the new notations to the contract, and then wrote his signature in the necessary places. Dalharan saw his father do the same. The two shook hands and Almeagar motioned for his entourage to rise.

“We leave tomorrow after the ceremony. Princess Raeschel, I expect you to visit with me before I depart,” the Gehennan High Chieftain said. “Good afternoon all.”

Almeagar gave a stiff bow and left the room with his entourage and sister. King Zahr motioned for his councilors to depart from the royal drawing room. All that was left then were Raeschel, his brother Kaderick, himself, the king and President Hahl. The president rose and moved over to the king, whispering something in the elder Aldairian’s ear.

“Ked, you and Raeschel please inform First Councilor Hahl what has happened here. I will see you two at dinner later,” the king said after the president moved away from him.

The couple nodded, but Raeschel moved over and tipped-toed up to kiss Jon Hahl on the cheek. The two hugged and then his brother

and Raeschel left. He knew his father and the president wished a private word with him. He had been expecting it since he came in the room earlier this afternoon, just moments before everyone had gathered for the contract settlement. His father and President Hahl were just parting from a Sec-star chess game. The president had sent Dalharan a hard speculative glance before acknowledging his presence. Dalharan could see where Raeschel got her composure from—the president was behaving quite calmly even now.

“The Gehennans were more amenable than we had all hoped for, Jon.” King Zahr took his seat again.

“I second that, Zahr.” The president sat down and turned towards Dalharan. “I am sure you are thankful for that as well, Prince Dalharan.”

Dalharan looked from his father’s somber face to that of the president. “Yes, Mr. President, I am. I can see where Raeschel gets her statesmanship from, sir.”

“It certainly wasn’t from her real father. Jon-tu never wanted to become an ambassador.”

“I am sorry for your loss, Mr. President,” Dalharan said “She told me a few years after Raeschel's birth that Chieftain Viaad's sister Kreaah and my oldest son were Raeschel's real parents. But for the sake of keeping peace it is best left letting Almeagar Viaad believing Raeschel is his daughter. ”

“I must concur with that, my friend,” the Aldairian king commented.

“Perhaps that is best.” Dalharan stated, before changing the subject. “The Admiral told me how close you all were.”

“I’m sure my eldest child told you a lot, Prince Dalharan.” Jon Hahl said. “If what your father tells me is true, I’m expecting you to make Rieka happy, even if you two can not be legally married.”

“I beg your pardon, sir.” Dalharan was astounded by the L.A.W. leader’s words. He glanced over at this father, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“You were right, Zahr, he didn’t expect me to give my blessings,” Jon said. “However, Prince Dalharan, I demand you keep to yourself well after the Gehennans have left. Neither Aldairia nor L.A.W. needs the scandal. I hope I make myself clear.”

“You have been more than generous, sir.” Dalharan folded his hands in his lap. “I would not blame you for being extremely angry.



Know, though, that there is nothing I would not do to make Admiral Hahl happy.”

“Even if it meant letting her go, my son?” the king asked.

He looked upon his father. “I do not follow you, Father. Admiral.... Rieka has consented to leave Aldairia with me.”

“What if my daughter chooses to go with Chieftain Viaad back to Gehenn? Will you abide by that decision if she changes her mind or the Chieftain insists she does?” Jon asked.

“I sensed there was something Almeagar Viaad was holding back, but he did not mention anything,” Dalharan told Jon Hahl.

“I have a feeling he will meet with my daughter first and speak to her about today’s events,” Rieka’s father affirmed. “Rieka must handle him in her own way. I want your promise to not interfere.”

“And I shall demand it, Dalharan,” the king added.

“First, know that I trust Rieka implicitly.” Dalharan stood up. “I will not cause her, Aldairia or L.A.W. any embarrassment. I love her too much to see her suffer any more.”

The president stood up also and held his hand out to Dalharan. “I was angry when I first learned of your interest in my daughter. Now, I think perhaps you are what she needs to make her life complete.”

“Thank you, sir.” Dalharan shook the man’s hand. “I wish that I could have had the old-fashioned opportunity to ask for her hand in marriage.”

“I would have liked that, Dalharan.” Jon looked over at the king. “Zahr, you raised your sons well, even if one of them can’t beat my eldest at chess.”

“Give him time, he will.” The king chuckled and then looked matter-of-factly at Dalharan. “Son, I want you to stay in your quarters until dinner tonight.”

“As you wish, sire. Good day, Mr. President, Father.” Dalharan left the room then, intending to go straight to his own quarters.

\* \* \* \*

“It was incredible the way he just accepted everything, Rieka,” Raeschel exclaimed.

Rieka and Eilea had only been visiting with Lydea Hahl for under half an hour when Raeschel and Kaderick made their entrance into the president’s suite. Kaderick and Raeschel both told the other women what happened during the finalization of the contract. Rieka was sure it had been awkward for all concerned, but she was also sure that there was a deeper reason why Almeagar accepted things so readily.

This would mean she and Eilea didn't have to switch places for the bestowing ceremony.

"You did well in an uneasy situation, Raeschel." Rieka smiled upon the girl. "My sister will keep your world on its toes as their next queen, Kaderick."

Kaderick laughed. "Yes, she will. However, what am I to call you now. You are biologically Raeschel's aunt, supposedly her mother, but she was raised as your sister."

"I will always think of Lydea as my mother, Ked, and Rieka as my sister. Just call her Rieka." Raeschel stated. "I believe Rieka intentionally wants the Viaads and all of Gehenn to think I'm Almeagar's daughter and heir."

"That's true, Raeschel," Eilea put in.

"Very true. And do call me by my first name, Kaderick." Rieka got up. "I have to leave now. Eilea and I have a few things to take care of before dinner tonight. Tell Father I will speak with him later, Mother."

"You portrayed me excellently. I'm glad we finished the likeness exchange before they got there. And very thankful though that you don't have to pretend to be me now, anymore. They did not know the difference, Eilea. We do not have to keep up the guise then." Rieka said after they left her parents rooms. She adjusted the glittering cowl over her head and walked slowly beside Eilea. "However did you manage wearing these gowns? I always hated dresses."

Eilea tossed the dark auburn braid off her shoulder. "To me they are much more comfortable than these uniforms you always wear. You'll have to walk just a bit slower. I may be as tall as you, but you always walked faster. My soft sole sandals were much softer and much more comfortable than these flat soled knee boots you wear."

"You get use to them after awhile. If that multi-chan you made me didn't need regenerating, I'd have teleported us to your rooms, just so I could get out of this damn dress that much... Uh-oh." Rieka slowed her gait even more. "Eilea ahead."

Dalharan was coming towards them. Rieka had never been to his quarters, and realized the royal family's must have been near the rooms of extremely important visitors. Her own had been just down the other end of the long corridor from her parents. The Gehennans' must be down one of the other main wings. Meeting him like this did not bode well with Rieka.

“Admiral, Doctor Sairius.” He stopped before them. “I just left the president. The contract signing went well enough.”

“Yes,” Eilea made her voice deeper, like Rieka’s, “We just left my mother’s rooms and Raeschel told us what happened. If you please, Prince Dalharan, my cousin would like a word with you.”

“Rieka, I do not think that is wise.” Rieka was frustrated with Eilea. She noticed Dalharan was looking quizzically from one to the other of them. “We had best be going.”

“It cannot wait, Prince Dalharan. Eilea is in dire need of your help.” Eilea persisted, still trying to sound like Rieka.

Dalharan took hold of both their arms, quickly guiding them back down the corridor a short distance. He inserted a small box into the slot it was made for and then guided the two women into the room. Once inside, Rieka saw him push in a button on the incombell, locking the door.

“What the hell are you two doing, Rieka?” Dalharan moved over to her and jerked the cowl off her head.

“How did you know?” Rieka put her hands on her hips in frustration. “We went to great pains to come up with this. My mother, sister, and your brother did not know the difference.”

“I’m...damn slang... I am an empath, just like you two. I know your aura only too well, Rieka.” He looked from her to Eilea. “I did not know you and your cousin were identical twins. Or am I missing something?”

“I thought it would work.” Eilea sighed and sat down in the nearest chair in Dalharan’s waiting room. “I’m not usually wrong.”

“You talk like Deurke, Doctor Sairius.” Dalharan said.

“And you’re acting as sanctimonious as he can be at times, Dalharan,” Rieka said, and then wished she hadn’t when he scowled at her.

Funny, Rieka thought, at that moment, with his voice harsh and low, Dalharan did sound like the Watcher. She had no more time to dwell on that aspect as Dalharan took hold of her arm and guided her over to a small sofa.

“Sit down. I want an explanation, right now, Rieka,” he demanded.

Rieka pulled her arm from his, not sitting down. “I think it’s pretty obvious.”

“Do not be stubborn right now. I gave my word to your father and mine I would keep away from you until the Gehennans left. You

and Doctor Sairius are not making it easy,” Dalharan said in frustration.

“We had better go, Rieka.” Eilea stood up. “I did not mean to cause more problems for you two, Prince Dalharan. At the time it seemed a plausible idea. Thankfully though, Raeschel made it unnecessary.”

“I am not angry, Doctor Sairius.” Dalharan glanced from Eilea to Rieka. “Just concerned and still a bit confused.”

Rieka moved nearer to Dalharan and gently touched his arm. “I’m sorry about the deception, Dalharan. We tried the disguises on my mother to see if the idea was conceivable enough to help get me off Aldairia. Eilea and I have always been similar in looks, but with our psi-abilities heightened by the Sage Stone, we could enhance any dissimilarity.”

“Why did you not tell me you have new powers? No wonder you could speak with me telepathically.”

“You’re worried about more than this, Dalh.” Rieka reached up and caressed his cheek, opening her mind to him again. “Tell me.”

He pulled her closer into his arms as she felt him ease into her mind, answering her mental queries. “I should not have these thoughts.”

She now knew the main reason he was so edgy. “Did you really doubt that I would go back on my word about going away with you?”

“In my heart, no. But our fathers both thought your duty would drive you to consider going with Almeagar Viaad back to Gehenn.” He stroked her cheek fondly in return. “I did not want to believe that, love.”

“Then don’t.” She assured his mind and heart with psychic and empathic vibrations of her deep affection. “Later tonight after everyone has retired, we can meet aboard my ship and leave.

“Rieka, we had better go, I’m not feeling too well. I think the disguise is starting to wear off. I’m going to my rooms.” Rieka quickly broke away from Dalharan at Eilea’s abrupt interruption and spun around to see Eilea rush out of Dalharan’s quarters.

“My healing abilities should help her, Rieka,” Dalharan said then disappeared.

“Damn, I wish he would quit doing that.” Rieka tossed the cowl of the gown forwards over her head and quickly left Dalharan’s rooms.

Not caring if anyone saw her, she ran down the corridors in order to get to Eilea's quarters as quickly as she could. Rieka fumbled with inserting her key to fit into the incombell; jiggling and decoding it, until somehow she overrode the door's electronic code. The door finally slid open, but when she entered, no one was in the main area. Rieka heard a scream coming from the area of the bedroom. She raced into the other room and was horrified at what she saw. Almeagar shot a huge blast of energy toward Dalharan. Rieka saw Dalharan jump to avoid the shot, and at the same time, Eilea threw herself against Almeagar, knocking him off balance.

Rieka took a running jump, somersaulted in the air and landed next to Eilea. She reached out and jerked Eilea out of the way just as Almeagar threw another blast of energy. Dalharan intercepted it with one of his own, but Rieka knew that the Aldairian's powers were no match for Almeagar's. She pressed Eilea to stay down and spun around to help Dalharan.

"No." Rieka threw the hood back, screaming as Almeagar blasted Dalharan with an even greater bout of laser-like energy.

"You sought to trick me, Rieka. It will not work. Soon everyone will know about your affair, and he will be banished from Aldairia." Almeagar aimed another, harsher jolt of energy at Dalharan.

Dalharan groaned, shooting back charged beams at Almeagar. Rieka jumped towards Almeagar, but with one lucky and quick swing of his powerful arm he knocked her out of the way. She rolled over toward where a dazed Eilea was huddled.

"I curse thee, Prince Dalharan, into the Dark Robes of Loneliness. May you never know what you took from me." Rieka heard Almeagar barely mutter the words and then an ominous rage of energy shot forth from the Gehennan toward Dalharan.

Rieka screamed as she saw Dalharan's body become encompassed in an eerie gray glow and then slowly he dwindled into a blur of shadows. His shape changed into something flat and dark against the floor. Only for a second was she horrified by what happened before her terror turned to rage. Then from somewhere within, her instincts brought forth raw power. With all her might she wielded a large blast of energy and aimed it at Almeagar.

She heard Eilea wince as the energy beam hit Almeagar. Rieka didn't stop her attack. She reached and pulled a knife from her sleeve pocket and then charged at Almeagar. Almeagar was only mildly stunned by her assault. Rieka got near enough to him to thrust the

dagger into his chest. He staggered backwards, one hand going to his chest wound, the other directing an erratic jolt of energy at her. Rieka felt the wind knocked out of her as the blast sent her reeling backwards. Somewhere within her, she knew her own psychic energies must have saved her from being killed by Almeagar's blasts.

"Deurke..." Rieka cried out the Watcher's name as she hit the floor.

"Oh, my stars," Eilea shouted and pointed in the direction where Dalh vanished.

Though able to stay coherent, Rieka weakly turned to see the dark square lying eerily on the floor reshaped into something substantial. She gasped as she saw what was once Dalharan had been replaced by a familiar form, that of the Watcher.

The Aldairian scientist quickly got to his feet, took only a millisecond to assess what was happening, and then struck out at the Gehennan with psychic powers. Rieka realized Almeagar must have healed and regenerated his psi-energies when she saw him rush toward the Watcher, because there was no longer a wound in the Gehennan's chest. The Watcher thrust both hands forward. Ominous rays shot forth into Almeagar.

Deurke uttered words much like Almeagar had just before Dalharan disappeared. Almeagar shot deadly beams at Deurke. Though the Master Watcher reeled from the jolt, he never stopped his attack on the Gehennan. An eerie gray-yellow swirl of light encompassed the War Chieftain. He screamed out in agony and then slumped in a heap on the floor as the swirl of light thickened and darkened about him. Soon it encompassed his body until the energy cloud encompassed all of the Gehennan's body like a dark gray wool blanket.

The Watcher let out a guttural groan and dropped to the floor. Rieka got up immediately and went over to bend down next to the Watcher. Her hand shot out to touch him. "Deurke, please tell me you are all right, my love."

"I think their souls are solidified now, Rieka." Eilea mumbled.

The Watcher moved into a sitting position. He glanced up at Rieka. "I heard you call out to me, felt your desperation."

"I did, Deurke?" She knew that the shock of Dalharan's sudden, deathly disappearance was still clouding her cognizant thoughts, but Eilea's prior words echoed in her mind. She stood up and moved over

to stand near the L.A.W. scientist. “What do you mean their souls are solidified, Eilea?”

“You know whose auras I’m talking about, cousin. I think you knew theirs was the same before any of us did.” Eilea looked over to the huddled gray mass and inclined her head toward Almeagar. “What will happen to him now?”

Rieka’s mind refused to coherently think about what Eilea’s words meant. She glanced instead at Almeagar and her empathic senses picked up stray emotions emanating from him. “He is not dying. I sense a void of emptiness, perhaps sudden loneliness and distress...”

“I sense the same, Rieka,” Eilea said.

Rieka jerked her head in Deurke’s direction. “You’re still feeling some of those same emotions, Deurke. Just like I sensed when I first met you...and like I felt just after Dalharan disappeared.”

“Deurke, will he stay imprisoned for awhile?” Eilea edged closer to the cloud-imprisoned Gehennan, and Rieka heard the pity in Eilea’s voice.

“Yes.” Deurke got up and moved over towards her and Eilea.

Eilea knelt by Almeagar, but looked up at Rieka and the Watcher. “Almeagar thought I was you and I didn’t see him follow me to my rooms until I was at the entrance. He thrust me inside, thinking I was you, and demanded I go with him to Gehenn. He grabbed my hands when I refused and a burst of energy thrust us apart. I felt even worse and somehow got to my bedroom, but not quick enough to lock him out. “That’s when Deurke showed up and intervened.”

“That energy he emitted into you as I arrived looked similar to a Charj or a psychic energy repulser,” Deurke said.

“What do you mean it looked like Almeagar Charjed you, Eilea? I suspected the transference of the power from the Sage Stone is what made you ill, but has it caused something radical to you?”

“I’m not sure. For now, I’m stable.” She looked back down at the Gehennan. “What will happen to him now, Deurke. Rieka, I suppose we are going to have to come up with some story to explain to everyone.”

“Deurke can beam him aboard my ship, I suppose, and we can keep him in stasis until we figure out something to tell everyone. I think we should find Prince Vultar to aid us in coming up with a plausible story.”

“That is a good idea. You have excellent medical facilities aboard the *Odyssey*. At least in a deep freeze unit aboard it, we know he will not cause any more trouble until we can straighten out things,” Eilea said.

“Deurke, do whatever Eilea requests while I go find Prince Vultar.” Rieka did not wait for either of them to say anything else. She had to get out of Eilea’s quarters and get her own warring emotions together. Being around two other empath’s was overloading her thoughts at the present. That and Dalharan’s vanishing began warring with her. She’d seen people die awful deaths in war, but nothing hit her heart so thunderously as did the sudden loss of realizing he might be dead. She’d gone through years of agony when her twin died, but if Dalharan were really gone, she didn’t think she could stay sane.

She tried hard to keep her emotions composed as she went to her own quarters just a few doors away from Eilea’s. Not because of vanity, but because she knew she wanted to look more like herself before finding Vultar, she took off Eilea’s gown and looked into the mirror. She noted that her own natural features had been slowly phasing back to normal. She quickly dressed into her standard uniform and once more observed herself in the mirror. With some concentration, she managed to regulate the looks of her body. Back to her normal appearance, she started out of her room.

Deurke was waiting for her in the outer sitting room. “I mentally contacted Vultar and he’s aboard your ship with Eilea. We will transport there shortly, Rieka, but first we need to discuss what’s happened.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea right now, Deurke. I’m barely holding my self together right now. I just lost the man I love and I need more time deal with the agony that’s bleeding into my heart. Go away and let me think things through. ” Rieka started for the doorway.

“You’ve had plenty of years in which to think things over, Rieka. My curse kept us away from each other far too long. Now I’m whole again. Come to me, my love.”

Rieka felt herself gaping at him and Eilea’s words came back into her mind. Eilea said it was Deurke that came to her aid when Almeagar tried to attack Eilea. *They had solidified?*

*“You and Dalh...the same person?”*



“I think your heart always knew that, Rieka. “Why deny what you know to be true in your mind and soul?” He'd read her mind, and her heart. “Now that you know the truth why do you stall? Why do you keep denying what you're feeling for me right now? For what you denied me as the Watcher, but showed me as Dalharan?”

She was glad he had not halted her leaving with the use of his powers. The strength of his words, however, did make her stay. “Deurke...Dalh...I...I just can't even think coherently where you're concerned. You're dead, you're alive and I am relieved but...but...”

“You're still afraid of losing me. Afraid someone or some war will take away what we have found together again. I will not let anyone do so anymore.”

Rieka kept her back to him. “I can't go through with that fear again.”

“Ah, Rieka, do not keep me in stalemate forever. I would much rather be enjoying another spin-cycle bout with you.” His voice was less deep now and the heat of his aura seared into her whole being. “Love me, Charj me, just end this madness, my Admiral. Open your heart to me and know the truth, Rieka.”

Whose aura was she feeling now, Deurke's or Dalharan's? Deurke had been under a curse for a long time. He had sworn she was his cure. She had never believed him. Being afraid of her own emotions made her blind to what was in her heart all along. She let out a soft shiver of knowing. He moved up behind her. Slowly she turned around, but did not look at him right away.

Earlier, she went to him, calling him her love. She wanted to kill Almeagar for harming Deurke. No, she re-thought, Dalharan. She tilted her head to look up at him. She knew, within, that he would make no move until she did. Tentatively, she reached up into the cloudiness of his face and gently caressed his cheek. Then ever so slowly, she used both hands and outlined his face with her fingers. Was part of his curse what kept her from realizing the truth immediately or was it her own stubborn heart?

“Both, my love,” Deurke said softly into her mind.

“You were with me all along.” Rieka made to throw his hood back, but he grabbed her wrists, preventing her. “I do not understand.”

“Do you love me, Rieka?” She had the feeling the answer meant a lot to him.

“I have always loved you, Deurke....Dalharan.”

He groaned loudly and lowered his mouth over hers once more and kissed her fiercely. She pushed at his chest desperate for air. Deurke finally removed his mouth from hers. Rieka gulped in the air and her mind spun with the wonder and strangeness of what had happened.

Deurke/Dalharan took one hand and tossed back the hood of his robe. Dahl's handsome face, only etched with lines of being more seasoned from life, stared back at her. A face she had traced many times before as the Watcher and as Dalharan. Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks as her mind finally tuned into what her heart already knew.

"I was in agony when I saw Almeagar fell you and I could do nothing to stop him." Rieka looked up at him with all the love she could emanate. "I know now it was Almeagar who cursed you into those dark robes. But how is that possible? How could the two of you have co-existed?"

"I was two different and unhappy people, Rieka, until you brought our essences together. I believe when Almeagar captured you and kept you from meeting me as Dalharan that first time, he caused a rift in time. The rift is now closed and things righted when he and I fought earlier," he explained.

"I never wish to be parted from you again, darling, but why did you keep me from lifting back your cowl right away?" She asked.

"Rieka," Deurke explained, "when you first wanted to see my face it was to prove to yourself that Dalharan and I were one and the same. Yet, the curse would not have been lifted completely if you had not told me that you loved me as Deurke. I already knew you cared for the Dalharan part of me, but my heart needed to fully know."

"I always loved all of you...damn, what do you wish me to call you now..." She gave him a half smile of puzzlement.

"My full given name is Dalharan Deurkon Demmonarris," he said. "As long as you love me, and call me home to your heart, it does not matter. You know, Deurke Sol meant dark soul. My soul, though, is no longer darkened, my love, and neither is yours."

"For the longest time, Deurke, I let it stay miserable. Then when you Charjed me, the darkness within my own soul began to crack," Rieka admitted. "The light of your love showed through and freed the chains from my heart and soul."

"You have done the same for me." His arms tightened around her. "Will you mind coming to live with me on my planetoid, Rieka?"

“No, Dalharan...Deurke. I had planned to turn in my resignation anyway. Since Eilea no longer has to pose as me, we can say Morkruul killed me before he got away. I can wear a disguise similar to Eilea’s or yours if I’m ever out in public anywhere. Of course, you know I intend to go out on missions again with this very handsome Aldairian agent I met. You’ll have no choice but to put up with my gallivanting around the Tri-Galaxies.”

Deurke growled. “You’ll...dammit, you will not go on any missions unless it is with me, you wretch.”

“Love, as long as you are with me, that will be more than enough adventure for me from now on.” Rieka grinned up at him, “Just believe me now, that my heart, body, or soul will never belong to another but you.”

“And your devious mind, my admiral.” He chuckled.

“Well, I’m going need to retain part of my devious mind, so I can think of more places to tempt you into trouble.”

“My love, with you, temptation and trouble go together. I cannot wait to get the Gehennan mess straightened out because I have a terrific place in mind to make love to you. And yes,” his smile widened mischievously as he read her mind, “it will be much better than the spin-cycle bout we had aboard your ship or that time a few years ago on my planetoid when we made love in thin air or the time...”

The End

Look for more Aldairian Adventures to come. You can write the author at [maepowers@yahoo.com](mailto:maepowers@yahoo.com) or visit her website at [www.maepowers.com](http://www.maepowers.com) for more wonderful reads.